



Balancing Security and Humanitarian Responsibility: Reassessing the United States Policy Toward Yemen

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States policy on Yemen is sitting at a crossroads shaped by competing priorities of counterterrorism, humanitarian responsibility, and energy security. More modern legislative efforts, including Senate Bill 159 mandating the designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, and House Joint Resolution 87 which seeks to limit the United States military involvement, highlight the deep divisions across the aisle in Congress over establishing the appropriate strategy to proceed. While sanctions and military measures target and weaken the Houthis also while attempting to curb Iranian influence in the nation, they risk exacerbating the existing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and disrupting critical oil and shipping routes in the Red Sea. A consistently fragmented approach to these issues has limited the overall impact and efficiency of policy to this day when it comes to Yemen. This brief will argue for a comprehensive strategy on behalf of the United States that seeks to integrate diplomatic engagement, targeted sanctions on illicit oil networks, and support for Yemen's legitimate government while minimizing harm to civilians.

II. OVERVIEW

Yemen has been in turmoil since 2015, when the Houthi forces, also known as Ansarallah, seized control of large areas of the country. The conflict then escalated quite rapidly into a regional proxy war involving Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. The United States has played a multifaceted role in the conflict, providing sources of logistical intelligence, supporting coalition forces, conducting counterterrorism operations, and delivering humanitarian aid (United States Policy & Yemen's Armed Conflict). But more recently, U.S. policy has shifted toward directly targeting the Houthis' financial network, particularly their involvement in illicit oil trading and maritime operations, which help fund their activities. All the while, the Red Sea, one of the world's most critical energy transit corridors, has become increasingly exposed to Houthi attacks, prompting global concerns about oil supply disruptions and maritime security (Shankar, Sudan Kasturi).

A. Relevance

Yemen remains pertinent to United States foreign policy with its direct implications for regional stability and global energy markets. Sitting adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a strategic chokepoint through which a significant portion of the world's oil and

commercial shipping passes. 5% of the global total of barrels of crude oil and refined petroleum pass through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, roughly 4 million barrels daily (Shankar, Sudan Kasturi). Continued Houthi attacks on maritime vessels in the Red Sea have led to skyrocketing insurance costs, disrupted supply chains, and heightened the probability of regional escalation. Ensuring the security of these straits is not simply just an economic priority, but also a key component of maintaining a firm strategic influence in the Middle East.

Yemen represents one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, with one million people facing life threatening levels of hunger, 4.8 million are internally displaced, and access to basic services is extremely limited (Yemen). U.S. policy decisions have immediate and far-reaching consequences for civilian populations that have to be addressed. Life or death is not a figure of speech in this context, but rather a literal consequence to policy decisions. Measures targeted towards weakening the reach of the Houthis can inadvertently restrict the flow of essential goods and humanitarian assistance, complicating relief efforts that are so desperately needed for the Yemeni people who rely on them.

From a domestic standpoint, policy surrounding Yemen has become a large point of contention for the United States government, reflecting the broader debates on war powers, counterterrorism priorities, and finding a balance between military intervention and diplomatic engagement.

Ultimately, the stakes of this policy reach beyond the civil war in Yemen alone. The effectiveness of American engagement will, without a doubt, influence regional power dynamics, the stability of global energy markets, and the credibility the United States holds as

both a security partner and a humanitarian leader. A recalibrated approach that addresses both immediate threats and long-term structural challenges is therefore essential.

III. HISTORY

The United States involvement in Yemen had initially begun with counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda in 2002, but expanded significantly in 2015 and beyond with support for the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis when the civil war proceeded to escalate. Congress has repeatedly attempted to limit executive military authority through varying measures such as House Joint Resolution 87 and House Report 116-7, both emphasizing the need for authorization under the War Powers Framework. More recently, U.S. policy has shifted toward economic and strategic pressure. The Houthis were redesignated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2025, alongside the general expansion of sanctions targeting Houthi financial networks including oil smuggling operations. United States officials have emphasized cutting off resources used for Houthi activities as much as possible. At the same time, critics argue that sanctions and reductions in humanitarian aid risk worsening conditions for millions of Yemenis. Policy experts increasingly emphasize that a narrow focus on the Houthis is insufficient and that long-term stability requires a broader strategy that strengthens Yemen's internal governance and addresses economic drivers of conflict, including control over oil reserves.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Primarily, the stakeholders in the United States policy focusing on Yemen are the Yemeni civilian population, who continue to experience the direct consequences of conflict, food insecurity, displacement, and economic

collapse. Millions of Yemeni people rely on humanitarian assistance from other nations, making them especially vulnerable to shifts in U.S. sanctions, military strategy, and aid policy (Ziad). Another major stakeholder is the internationally recognized Yemeni government, which depends on foreign diplomatic and economic support to further maintain their legitimacy and resist Houthi territorial expansion.

Regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, are also deeply invested stakeholders due to Yemen's role in the broader geopolitical competition between the two states. Saudi Arabia views instability in Yemen as a direct national security threat along its southern border, while Iran has been accused of supporting the Houthis through weapons transfers and financial assistance in order to expand its regional influence. In addition, commercial shipping companies and global energy markets are stakeholders because instability in the Red Sea threatens international trade routes and increases the costs of transportation and insurance.

The United States government itself is another unique stakeholder, as policymakers must balance counterterrorism objectives, regional alliances, humanitarian obligations, and domestic political concerns. Congress and the executive branch often hold competing views on the extent of American involvement in Yemen, particularly regarding military engagement and sanctions policy. Finally, humanitarian organizations and international institutions, including the United Nations, are stakeholders as they coordinate aid delivery and advocate for resolutions aimed at reducing civilian costs and achieving long-term stability.

B. Risks of Indifference

Lacking a comprehensive shift in United States policy, the conflict within Yemen will likely continue to destabilize the region and worsen the overall humanitarian conditions. Continued instability threatens the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world's most important maritime checkpoints, where disruptions could significantly impact the global oil markets and commercial shipping routes used in the day-to-day (Shankar). Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have already increased security concerns and raised shipping costs, demonstrating further how regional conflict can quickly evolve into a global economic issue.

Humanitarian consequences would also intensify through continued inaction. Yemen already faces severe widespread famine and economic collapse like the initial collapse in 2016 during the civil war; insufficient diplomatic progress could leave millions without reliable access to daily necessities. Broad sanctions and prolonged conflict risk further damaging Yemen's economy while limiting the humanitarian organizations' ability to effectively deliver aid (Escalating Regional Conflict).

Additionally, failing to establish a coherent long-term plan may strengthen extremist organizations operating within Yemen, including Al-Qaeda within the Arabian Peninsula, which has historically exploited political instability and weak governance to expand its influence. Continued fragmentation within Yemen could create opportunities for terrorist groups to regain territory and threaten regional and international security threats.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

As the conflict in Yemen affects the humanitarian conditions, counterterrorism efforts, and energy security, is essential for creating effective and sustainable policy. The following are the benefits of nonpartisan cooperation:

Broader political support: A balanced strategy focused on regional stability, civilian protection, and national security can appeal to policymakers across contemporary ideological divides. Framing Yemen policy around shared interests, such as protecting shipping routes, creates greater opportunity for bipartisan consensus in Congress.

Effective policy: Nonpartisan policymaking encourages decisions based on strategic outcomes and evidence rather than short-term political considerations. A comprehensive approach is more likely to address the root causes of instability while avoiding unintended humanitarian consequences. Drawing from multiple perspectives also strengthens the overall policy framework and improves long-term effectiveness.

International credibility: Consistent and balanced U.S. policy increases trust among allies, regional partners, and humanitarian organizations. When American involvement is viewed as motivated by stability and humanitarian responsibility rather than partisan policies, the United States is better positioned to lead diplomatic initiatives and coordinate international response.

V. TRIED POLICY

United States policy toward Yemen has historically relied on a combination of military support, sanctions, and humanitarian aid. One of the earliest major approaches involved direct counterterrorism efforts against extremist groups. Following the September 11 attacks, the U.S. expanded drone strikes and intelligence operations in Yemen to target terrorist leadership and disrupt militant networks. While these operations succeeded in eliminating some active terrorist figures, critics have mentioned that civilian casualties and instability further generated anti-American sentiment and failed to truly address broader political conditions that fuel extremism (Crawford).

In 2015, the United States increased its involvement by supporting the Saudi-led coalition intervening

against the Houthis (Northam). The U.S. provided logistical assistance, intelligence sharing efforts, weapons sales, and militaristic coordination to coalition forces. Supporters argued that this partnership was necessary to counter Iranian influence in the region and support Yemen's internationally recognized government. However, critics contended that the American backing contributed to the civilian casualties, worsening humanitarian conditions, and infrastructure destruction (Craig). Congressional opposition grew over time, culminating in legislative efforts such as House Joint Resolution 87, which sought to limit unauthorized military involvement on behalf of the U.S. under the War Powers framework.

More recently, the U.S. has shifted toward economic pressure and maritime security measures. The Houthis were redesignated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2025, alongside expanded sanctions targeting financial networks tied to oil smuggling and weapons trafficking (Yemen: Terrorism). These measures aimed to weaken the Houthis' operational capabilities and reduce Iranian backed support. Although sanctions disrupted some financial activity, humanitarian organizations warned that broad economic restrictions risked limiting the delivery of everyday supplies citizens lacked when already facing severe shortages. This reflects a continuing challenge within U.S. policy: balancing strategic pressure against the Houthis while minimizing harm to Yemen's civilian population.

Additionally, the United States has remained one of the largest humanitarian donors to Yemen. While humanitarian aid has alleviated some immediate suffering, experts argue that aid alone cannot resolve the structural, political, and economic instability that drives this conflict. The mixed outcomes of past policies demonstrate that isolated approaches are insufficient on their own, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated long-term strategy.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

The most effective policy option is a comprehensive strategy that combines expanded diplomatic engagement with targeted sanctions on illicit Houthi financial networks while increasing humanitarian and economic support for Yemen's legitimate government. Unlike broader military escalation or sweeping sanctions this approach balances security objectives with humanitarian concerns and addresses both the immediate and long-term causes of instability.

Under this strategy the U.S. would work closely with the United Nations, Saudi Arabia, and regional actors to strengthen ceasefire negotiations and pursue a sustainable political settlement. At the same time, sanctions would focus primarily on oil smuggling operations, weapons trafficking, and financial channels tied to Houthi military activity rather than broad restrictions that risk harming everyday civilians. Increased humanitarian aid and investment in local governance would help stabilize communities and reduce the conditions that allow extremist organizations to expand.

While this approach does offer a more balanced and sustainable strategy, it is not without its challenges. Diplomatic negotiations may slowly progress and require cooperation from actors with competing interests, see Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. Targeted sanctions can also be a challenge to enforce, as illicit financial and oil-smuggling networks often adapt to avoid detection. We can see this with the Hawala system that terrorist organizations have adapted to use in the modern day after its introduction during the Silk Road. Additionally, increased humanitarian and economic assistance requires continued U.S. funding commitments and strong oversight mechanisms to ensure aid reaches intended recipients rather than being diverted by armed groups. Despite these limitations, the proposed strategy presents fewer risks than broad military escalation or complete disengagement, making

it the most practical option for advancing both U.S. security interests and long-term stability in Yemen.

This policy is more realistic and sustainable than large-scale military intervention because it limits direct U.S. involvement while still protecting critical interests like the Red Sea shipping security and regional stability. By combining diplomatic pressures, targeted economic measures, and humanitarian support, the United States can weaken destabilizing actors without worsening the humanitarian crisis or deepening long-term regional conflict.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Competing priorities in United States policy challenges the approach to the Yemen situation. Fragmented approaches have proven to be insufficient in creating long-term stability. Evidence suggests that policies relying exclusively on military intervention or broad sanctions risk prolonging instability and worsening civilian suffering. At the same time, complete disengagement would create opportunities for extremist organizations and regional actors to expand in their influence. Because of this, no single policy approach can fully resolve this conflict on its own account. A successful strategy requires a balanced combination of humanitarian assistance, targeted economic pressure, diplomatic engagement, and support for the legitimate governing institutions. Ultimately, the conflict in Yemen is not only a regional issue, but also a matter of international security, global stability in the economy, and humanitarian responsibility. The effectiveness of United States policy will shape regional power dynamics, influence the security of global trade routes, and determine whether long-term peace and stability in Yemen remain achievable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Taylor Beljon-Regen, Patrick Pickren, Tiffany Li, Asher Cohen, Paul Kramer, and other

contributors for developing and maintaining the *Fellowship Program within the Institute*.

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