



# U.S. Policies Toward the War in Yemen



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**Case Study**

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We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

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The American approach to Yemen serves as a blueprint for navigating the complex dynamics of a nation struggling with conflict and instability. This conflict can escalate into a multi-sided regional crisis, posing a threat to regional security and stability and potentially jeopardizing global interests. This paper seeks to assess the policies pursued by the United States toward the ongoing war in Yemen, focusing on the period from late March 2015 to the present day and examining how these policies have influenced the path of the conflict and its broader dynamics.

### **Prewar:**

Yemen, encompassing both its northern and southern regions, remained relatively low on the radar of American policymakers. The southern part, characterized by the political extremism of Aden's authorities and its close ties to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, was often labeled as a "terrorist" state. The geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War era led to greater American interest in the North compared to the South, a perspective shared even by Saudi Arabia.

The unification of Yemen and its adoption of some democratic elements initially sparked an uptick in American interest. However, this enthusiasm waned when Yemen rejected the decision to join the war against Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Subsequent events, such as the attack on the American destroyer USS Cole in the port of Aden on October 12, 2000, resulting in the deaths of 17 U.S. Navy personnel, and the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, further intensified American interest in Yemen. However, this interest primarily focused on security concerns, adopting a narrow and focused approach.

The United States has implemented a security-focused policy toward Yemen, centered on coordinating with Yemeni security authorities, pressuring them for information exchange, and reforming key institutions involved in the movement of people and goods in and out of Yemen. This includes departments such as the Personal Status and Passports Department, airport departments and the Coast Guard. Additionally, efforts have been made to establish direct relationships with certain tribes. At the same time, there has been a continuous presence in Yemeni airspace through the use of drones, with strikes targeting suspected individuals. Some of these strikes have resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians, as evidenced by the tragic missile strike on the village of Al-Majalah in Abyan Governorate on December 17, 2009, which claimed the lives of 41 civilians, including 14 women and 21 children. Moreover, political and social figures have been targeted, like the murder of Jaber Al-Shabwani, who was the deputy governor of Ma'rib and secretary-general of the local council in Ma'rib Governorate, on May 27, 2010.

These policies have had detrimental effects, undermining Yemen's sovereignty and the legitimacy of its political regime. Furthermore, they have provided extremist groups with justifications to attract and recruit young people and have led to a diversion in targeting the army, security forces and state institutions under the pretext of the regime's complete dependence on American policies.

In 2011, American involvement in Yemen's political crisis emerged amid widespread popular protests and subsequent events. However, its focus remained on pressuring for a transfer of power while maintaining policies and institutions aimed at combating terrorism. Additionally, the Yemeni file was handed over to the Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States.

Yemeni parties accused the American administration of colluding with the Houthi group during its armed advancement toward the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. They applied significant pressure on President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to prevent him from ordering the army to defend the capital and intervene in the battles of the Houthi group in Dammaj, Amran, Hashid and the outskirts of Sana'a itself.

Following the Houthi group's coup against the state on September 21, 2014, and its armed expansion to impose control over other regions, American drones were observed fighting alongside them and supporting their movement.

### **The Development of The American Stance on The War:**

The military intervention in Yemen by the so-called Arab Coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, commenced on March 26, 2015. Washington's initial response to this intervention was likely tepid, as it primarily served Saudi security interests, creating a divergence between the security needs of both countries. Even so, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama declared its political support for these operations and provided a level of military assistance consistent with the longstanding relations between the two countries. This assistance included the sale of weapons, the establishment of a

joint operations room to coordinate military and intelligence activities in Yemen, and the provision of fuel to coalition aircraft.

However, as time passed, errors in airstrikes and the significant humanitarian consequences affecting Yemeni civilians led to increased opposition to the war within international and American human rights organizations. Furthermore, members of Congress from both the Republican and Democratic parties voiced their concerns about the conflict.

Following the strike on a wedding party at the Great Hall in Sana'a, the capital, on October 8, 2016, which resulted in numerous civilian casualties, the Obama administration took several measures. These included suspending the sale of certain weapons to Saudi Arabia, reducing intelligence sharing and increasing training for the Saudi Air Force to enhance targeting practices. However, the American administration continued to provide air refueling for coalition aircraft, sell some weapons and share intelligence regarding border transgressions between Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

As the military resolution in Yemen slowed down and negotiations in Kuwait between the internationally recognized government and the Houthi group failed to bring about a settlement under international auspices, a shift occurred in American foreign policy circles toward seeking a political solution. On August 25, 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced an initiative aimed at settling the conflict in Yemen. This initiative proposed a ceasefire and the formation of a national unity government, excluding President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his deputy Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, while including the Houthis in the government as a minority. The initiative also includ-

ed measures such as the withdrawal of Houthi weapons from Sana'a, the withdrawal of Houthi forces from border areas with Saudi Arabia and the formation of security committees in conflict zones. However, the initiative was publicly rejected by the Houthi group and faced undeclared rejection from both the legitimate authority and Saudi Arabia.

The Yemen war featured prominently in Donald Trump's election campaign, reflecting his views on Saudi Arabia, which he criticized sharply, stating that the country did not treat the United States fairly and that Washington was losing a significant amount of money defending its ally. Despite Trump's tough rhetoric toward Saudi Arabia, his presidency ushered in a shift in American policy toward Riyadh and the Yemen conflict. Signifying the importance of Saudi Arabia in his foreign policy, Trump made Riyadh his first stop on his inaugural foreign visit.

Trump's administration opted to resume the sale of weapons that Obama had suspended in the final month of his term, prioritizing job creation over human rights concerns. Trump believed that halting or reducing these sales would only push Saudi Arabia toward alternative options, like Russia and China. At the same time, his administration continued to emphasize the need to end the war, address the humanitarian crisis and protect Saudi territory.

Moreover, the Trump administration viewed Iran and its allies as a common threat, aligning with Saudi Arabia on this issue. While the full extent of Saudi Arabia's influence in shaping Trump's stance toward Iran remains unclear, Trump took a firm stance against Iran.

He withdrew from the nuclear agreement that Obama had negotiated during his tenure and imposed stringent economic sanctions on Iran.

Trump's support for Saudi Arabia in its conflict with the Houthis led to increased opposition to the war from American and international media as well as human rights organizations. This opposition intensified due to ongoing errors in airstrikes, resulting in civilian casualties, exacerbated further by the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. At this peak of opposition to the war, the Trump administration demanded at the end of the same month that the coalition cease bombing civilian areas, a call for a ceasefire and engage in serious negotiations to end the conflict. However, the Houthis rejected this invitation. Two weeks later, the U.S. administration announced it would halt the supply of fuel to coalition aircraft.

The Saudi-Emirati coalition seemingly anticipated this move, officially requesting the U.S. to stop fueling its aircraft and asserting its capability to enhance its fueling capabilities independently during Yemen operations. The U.S. clarified that this decision was made in agreement with the coalition.

Despite these developments, Trump's policy remained largely unchanged. He vetoed a congressional resolution aimed at ending American support for the Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, nullifying the resolution passed by both chambers of Congress. The U.S. Senate failed to overturn Trump's veto.

Joe Biden, the former U.S. Vice President and Democratic Party's nominee for the 2020 presidential elections, advocated for ending American support for the Saudi campaign in Yemen. His spokesman, Andrew Bates, emphasized Biden's belief that it was time to terminate American backing for the Yemeni war and revoke what he termed as the "blank check" granted by the Trump administration to Saudi Arabia in managing the conflict. Biden affirmed that ending support for the Saudi war in Yemen was a key component of his presidential campaign platform.

Upon assuming office as U.S. President, Joe Biden announced a shift in policy toward the Yemeni conflict. This new approach focused on ending U.S. support for all offensive military operations and related arms deals, thus supporting UN efforts to resolve the conflict and appointing a special envoy to Yemen. In line with this, Biden appointed former diplomat Tim Lenderking as the American envoy to Yemen and removed the Houthi group from the "terrorism" list, a designation imposed by his predecessor, Trump, during the final week of his presidency. Biden promptly suspended military support provided to Saudi Arabia for its war in Yemen.

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan clarified that the decision affected American support for offensive operations in the conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, including the sale of precision-guided ammunition to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, this exclusion did not pertain to efforts against Al-Qaeda.

The newly appointed envoy, Lenderking, initiated his duties by engaging with the Houthi group through back channels, stating that Washington had effective methods to convey messages to the Houthis and

utilized these channels assertively. Additionally, Washington exerted pressure on Saudi Arabia and the legitimate Yemeni government to encourage them to sign a political agreement and achieve peace to end the war.

The war in Yemen became a propaganda target for the Biden administration, which sought to portray ending the conflict as an achievement. Washington exerted significant pressure on Saudi Arabia to bring an end to the war, capitalizing on growing discontent against Saudi Arabia amidst the backdrop of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the Khashoggi case. President Biden's administration's unfavorable policies toward Saudi Arabia likely played a crucial role in dissuading Riyadh from pursuing military action and instead hastening efforts to end the Yemeni conflict.

On March 22, 2021, Riyadh announced an initiative to resolve the Yemeni crisis, which included a comprehensive ceasefire under the supervision of the United Nations and the commencement of consultations between Yemeni parties to reach a political solution based on the UN Security Council resolution (2016), the Gulf Initiative, and the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue Conference.

In response to desperate attacks by the Houthi militia on Ma'rib and their control over three districts in the neighboring Shabwa Governorate, which houses vital oil wells and the Balhaf natural gas liquefaction station, opposing forces were compelled to withdraw from significant areas along the western coast of the Red Sea.

They regrouped and relocated military formations to Shabwa Governorate to reclaim the lost districts and contribute to the restoration of Harib District in the Ma'rib Governorate. This expanded the territory under Houthi control along the Red Sea coast, which was likely exploited for attacks on ships in the Red Sea following the conflict in Gaza.

Following the Houthis' seizure of the Emirati cargo ship *Rawabi* near Hodeidah and their attacks on Abu Dhabi on January 17, 2022, President Biden's administration moved to bolster support for the coalition by selling more combat aircraft to the Emirates. Biden also indicated a potential reclassification of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization. In response, the Yemeni government noted that this shift in American policy encouraged the Houthi group to escalate militarily, whether toward Ma'rib or through intensified drone and missile operations against Saudi airports.

Under American pressure, Riyadh sought to neutralize other parties, including the UN envoy, from influencing the Yemeni issue, with the role of the American envoy remaining limited. Despite this, Saudi Arabia continued its efforts to end the war, engaging in unannounced negotiations with the Houthi group. In April 2022, Saudi Arabia sent its ambassador, Muhammad Al Jaber, to Sana'a for dialogue. Additionally, it hosted Houthi delegations in Riyadh in mid-September of 2023, offering incentives such as a partial lifting of imports through the port of Hodeida.

Upon reaching an understanding with the Houthis, Riyadh presented the matter to the UN special envoy for Yemen to broker an agreement under the UN's auspices.

On December 23, 2023, the UN envoy announced that Yemeni parties had agreed to a comprehensive ceasefire, measures to improve living conditions and engagement in an inclusive political process led by the UN. However, the anticipated signing of the settlement agreement was overshadowed by developments related to the Al-Aqsa Flood operation in Palestine and subsequent Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip, leading to Houthi threats to navigation in the Red Sea.

### **An Independent Path to Deal With Terrorism:**

It's essential to highlight the distinct and independent approach of American policy toward Yemen concerning counterterrorism efforts. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have demonstrated a keen interest in addressing terrorism in Yemen through a unique framework, ensuring that developments within Yemen do not compromise American objectives in combating terrorism. Washington's strategies in this realm are guided by the plans of American security institutions, and they receive top priority in the initiatives and actions undertaken by American officials.

For instance, American ambassadors and security leaders have actively pursued engagements in Yemeni governorates, directly engaging with local authorities and security service leaders to coordinate counterterrorism efforts. Between 2019 and mid-2023, U.S. ambassadors conducted nearly 10 visits to governorates like Hadhramaut, Al-Mahra and Shabwa. Notably, these visits occurred amid a significant absence of government officials from the legitimate authority in these governorates.

It's worth mentioning that while these visits were publicly announced, there were likely additional visits that occurred discreetly, particularly those involving security and military delegations, which may not have been widely reported in the media.

### **Red Sea Attacks:**

Over the past eight years of war, the Houthi group has significantly enhanced its military capabilities, particularly in missiles and drones, largely due to Iranian support and smuggling operations. These smuggling activities occur along the coast extending from Al-Mahra and Hadhramaut governorates in eastern Yemen, traversing desert roads to reach Al-Jawf Governorate, where much of the territory is under Houthi control. Additionally, smuggling occurs through commercial ports after dismantling the equipment into parts and reassembling it upon reaching the group's hands, or via multiple small boats in the Red Sea. These military capabilities have been utilized in the past to target the strategic interests of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. During Israel's aggressive actions against the Gaza Strip in the second week of October of 2023, the Houthi group saw an opportunity to advance its goals at both national and regional levels. These events allowed the group to sidestep its internal obligations, such as paying overdue salaries to state employees and enhancing services and infrastructure. Furthermore, it provided a chance for the group to translate its rhetoric against Israel and America into tangible actions, bolstering its image as a significant regional player. On November 19, 2023, the Houthis seized the cargo ship *Galaxy Leader* and brought it to the Yemeni coast of the Red Sea, subsequently launching operations targeting commercial vessels traversing the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The American policy toward these attacks was initially cautious, with the administration attempting to downplay them, perhaps hoping they would cease. The focus remained on advancing peace efforts in Yemen. On November 13, 2023, the U.S. State Department announced that Tim Lenderking, the U.S. special envoy to Yemen, would travel to the Arabian Gulf to support ongoing peace initiatives led by the United Nations in Yemen and enhance regional coordination. The United States reiterated its commitment to achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Yemen, collaborating closely with its partners to support UN-led peace efforts and alleviate the immense suffering caused by the conflict.

Amid the escalating Houthi attacks, the United States condemned these actions and aimed to protect ships vulnerable to threats from the group. As the attacks persisted, Washington sought to establish an international coalition to address them, advocating for the formation of a multinational force and mobilizing as many countries as possible to participate. On December 19, 2023, the U.S. Secretary of Defense announced the formation of this coalition, naming it the Guardian of Prosperity, to safeguard international navigation in the Red Sea. However, its effectiveness was hampered by the reluctance of Arab and neighboring countries to join, primarily due to the United States' supportive stance toward Israel and those opposed to halting the conflict in Gaza.

### **Containment Strategy:**

Washington endeavored to avoid confrontation with the Houthis while persistently cautioning them about the potential consequences if they did not cease their attacks on ships. It engaged in back-channel communication with the Houthi group, leveraging intermediaries such as the Omani mediator, to convey messages that encompassed both incentives and warnings. This approach was adopted in response to the reluctance of Arab countries to condemn the actions of the Houthi group. The key aspects of the American policy were associated with:

1. Commitment to the central goal adopted by the American administration at the beginning of the war on Gaza, which was to limit the expansion of the conflict in the region.
2. Avoid the military option as much as possible and use it to a limited extent when necessary.
3. Neutralizing the conflict in Yemen from the repercussions of the war in Gaza.
4. Viewing the repercussions resulting from the Israeli war on Gaza as urgent and that they will not continue after the end of the war.

### **Political Pressure:**

The American administration has employed significant political pressure to deter the Houthis from conducting attacks on ships in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This pressure includes delivering implicit messages to the group, mobilizing the Omani mediator to exert influence, pressuring Iran, discouraging Saudi Arabia from pursuing peace negotiations with the Houthis and des-

ignating the Houthi group as a global terrorist organization. Washington actively encouraged the Omani mediator to intensify pressure on the Houthis and convey stern messages to them. Additionally, it sought China's assistance in increasing pressure on Iran to dissuade support for the Houthi movement. According to reports from Western media sources, American officials requested Beijing to urge Tehran to restrain the Houthi movement.

Most likely, the role of both Oman and China began to bear fruit after February 10, 2024, through a decline in the number of attacks by the Houthis. It is also likely that it was integrated with Iranian pressure also as the Biden administration was keen to direct as much pressure as possible toward Tehran and hold it responsible for the Houthis' behavior. The United States delivered a message to Iran regarding the Houthis' responsibility for attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea and asked Tehran to work to stop these attacks. British Foreign Secretary David Cameron also announced that he had asked his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, to stop providing the Houthis with weapons and intelligence, and to use its influence to halt Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

Washington spearheaded several resolutions in the UN Security Council condemning the actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea. Notably, Resolution No. 2722, issued on January 10, strongly condemned the Houthi attacks on commercial and transport ships. It demanded an immediate cessation of these actions and the prompt release of the ship *Galaxy Leader* and its crew. The resolution emphasized the importance of upholding navigational rights and freedoms for commercial and transport ships by international law. It also acknowledged the right of Member States to defend their ships against attacks that undermine these

rights. Furthermore, the Security Council resolution commended member states' efforts, in collaboration with the International Maritime Organization, to enhance the safety of commercial and transport ships in the Red Sea. It encouraged continued capacity-building efforts among member states and support for coastal and port states in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab to bolster maritime security. This resolution provided legitimacy for naval military forces and authorized strikes conducted by the United States and Britain shortly after its issuance.

Political pressures reached their peak with the designation of the Houthis as a global terrorist group by the U.S. State Department in a statement issued on January 17. This designation, while largely symbolic, carried significant implications. It formally included the group in the category of global terrorist groups with a special designation, albeit with less impact and penalties compared to being classified as a foreign terrorist group. Additionally, the decision specified that it would take effect within 30 days from its announcement. Furthermore, the resolution outlined that the United States would reconsider this classification if the Houthis ceased their attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The resolution also lays down that the U.S. administration will take steps to mitigate any negative impacts on the Yemeni people, as it "will conduct robust outreach to stakeholders, aid providers and partners who are crucial to facilitating humanitarian assistance and the commercial import of critical commodities in Yemen. The Department of the Treasury is also publishing licenses authorizing certain transactions related to the provision of food, medicine, and fuel, as well as personal remittances, telecommunications and mail,

and port and airport operations on which the Yemeni people rely.”

### Calculated Military Strikes:

As diplomatic efforts failed to influence the Houthis, American and allied forces prioritized intercepting Houthi attacks on ships and naval vessels. Initially, the U.S. administration refrained from military retaliation. However, due to the escalating attacks and disruption to maritime traffic, the United States eventually responded militarily. From January 12 until the time of writing this article, American and British forces, sometimes with support from other nations, conducted multiple strikes on areas controlled by the Houthi group, as detailed in the table below.

Below is a table showing the American-British strikes directed against the military targets of the Houthi group.

Date	Party responsible	Number of attacks	Goals	Shells	Targeted sites	Places
January 12	The U.S., in coordination with the UK, and with support from Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and Bahrain.	73	Radar and air defense systems, storage and launch sites for unmanned aerial systems, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles.	100 guided ammunition	16 sites	Sana'a, Al-Bayda, Al-Hodeida and Taiz.
January 22	The U.S. and the UK, with the support of Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands.	Not mentioned	Missile systems, launchers, air defense systems, radars and buried weapons storage facilities.	Not mentioned	8 sites	Sana'a and Al-Dailami Air Base.

February 1	U.S., UK	Not mentioned	A Houthi drone ground control station and 10 drones. A drone over the Gulf of Aden. A Houthi unmanned surface vehicle in the Red Sea.	Not mentioned	-	Houthi-controlled areas, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.
February 3	The U.S. and the UK, with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand.	Not mentioned	6 anti-ship cruise missiles, weapons storage facilities, missile systems, launchers, air defense systems and radars. 36 goals. Underground storage facilities, missile systems, drone operations, radars and helicopters.	Not mentioned	13 sites	Sana'a, Hajjah, Dhamar, Al-Bayda, Taiz and Al-Hudaydah.
February 4	U.S.	Not mentioned	An anti-ship cruise missile launched by the Houthis against ships in the Red Sea. Anti-ship cruise missile, Houthi ground attack. 4 anti-ship cruise missiles, ready for launch.	Not mentioned	-	-
8 February	U.S.	7	4 Houthi drone boats and 7 anti-ship cruise missiles.	Not mentioned	-	Sana'a, radar site at Al-Dailami base.
February 9	U.S.	Not mentioned	2 drone boats, 4 anti-ship cruise missiles and 1 land-attack cruise missile.	Not mentioned	-	-

Regarding the strikes on areas controlled by the Houthi group:

1. The strikes were launched “in response to the Houthi group’s attacks in the Red Sea,” as stated by the U.S. Secretary of Defense. This action is unrelated to the conflict among Yemeni parties. Similarly, the decision to designate the Houthi group as a “terrorist group” was made in light of these attacks and is not directly linked to the conflict in Yemen. The Foreign Ministry’s statement emphasized that this designation aims to hold the group accountable for its terrorist activities, and it will be re-evaluated if the Houthis cease their attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.
2. These strikes are defensive in nature, aiming to neutralize threats to ships and naval vessels. They include preemptive attacks on missile sites targeting ships and warships in the Red Sea, primarily focusing on radar sites, drone and missile launch pads and coastal monitoring sites.
3. As of the preparation of this paper, these strikes have not sought to significantly alter the Houthi group’s military capabilities, which would disrupt the existing military balance within Yemen.
4. It remains uncertain whether these strikes have effectively hit their intended targets. Given the decentralized nature of the Houthi group’s military formations and their past experiences, the lack of surprise in these strikes may limit their impact. Additionally, early Houthi preparations suggest a potentially weak impact of these strikes.

In previous instances, Washington's approach to the conflicts in Gaza and the Red Sea has introduced significant complexity to the Yemeni situation. It has hindered, and possibly delayed, progress toward achieving a roadmap for resolving the Yemeni conflict. The ongoing tensions in the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea are bound to impact the political and military dynamics among Yemeni factions, as well as the prospects for peace and war in Yemen, and the humanitarian situation.

### **Conclusions:**

- U.S. policies regarding Yemen have largely aimed to sidestep the complexities of the Yemeni situation, often deferring to regional actors or adopting a narrow perspective focused solely on American interests, rather than prioritizing Yemeni concerns.
- American reluctance to address the Houthi group's rise to power allowed Yemen to spiral into a prolonged and intricate conflict, contributing to a major crisis with enduring global repercussions.
- Washington has been careful to separate the conflict with the Houthi group in the Red Sea from Yemen's internal turmoil, managing its political and military actions to minimize impact on regional dynamics.
- The political and military strategies employed by the United States toward the Houthis, at least up to the time of writing this paper, have aimed to contain their actions in the Red Sea, deterring further escalation to prevent the conflict in Palestine from spreading to the region.

**Recommendations:**

1. The United States should recognize that fostering development and stability in Yemen is crucial for regional and global security, especially considering its strategic location near vital oil sources and international shipping lanes. It should advocate for broad regional and international collaboration to achieve this goal.
2. Washington must acknowledge the internal dynamics of the Yemeni conflict and refrain from imposing solutions that are not endorsed by Yemenis, particularly by the largest political and geographical bloc within Yemen. This is essential for establishing lasting peace.

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