Center for Sustainable Development at BROOKINGS

WORKING PAPER #189

HOW THE UNITED STATES COULD HAVE PREVENTED THE YEMEN WAR

AND WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT IMPROVING THE US ABILITY TO PREVENT CONFLICT

ALLISON MINOR

How the US could have prevented the Yemen War

And what it tells us about improving the United States' ability to prevent conflict

Allison Minor

Acknowledgements

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, its other scholars, or its funders.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government.

About the Center for Sustainable Development

The Center for Sustainable Development (CSD) generates cutting-edge research and empowers collaborative action to tackle the world's interwoven economic, social, and environmental challenges in all societies and at all scales. To learn more, visit: https://www.brookings.edu/sustainabledevelopment

Contents

Introduction

The Yemen conflict is widely seen as a case where the United States could and should have done more to prevent the outbreak of war. Such admonitions come not only from analysts, but also from precisely those senior officials overseeing U.S. policy in the region in the lead-up to the war. In 2018, thirty former senior officials wrote an open letter with that argument, including President Obama's national security advisor and CIA director.[1] In an interview shortly after leaving office, former Homeland Security Advisor Lisa Monaco also cited U.S. actions in relation to the Yemen conflict as one of her primary regrets during her time in office.[2] Ten years after the war began, it is clear the conflict has eroded U.S. and partner security in the region, creating one of the world's largest humanitarian crises and entrenching an actor now capable of disrupting freedom of navigation in a critical global waterway.[3]

The first objective of this paper is to rigorously explore this argument and assess whether there were credible pathways for the United States to mitigate or prevent the outbreak of the Yemen war in 2015, given U.S. political realities, dynamics inside Yemen, and a nuanced understanding of the nature of U.S. influence. But I also seek to understand what we can learn from the U.S. experience in Yemen. Therefore, the second objective of this paper is to use the Yemen case to help delineate the kinds of levers the United States has to prevent violent conflict abroad, to identify obstacles to the U.S. ability to use those levers, and to assess existing U.S. conflict prevention initiatives. In particular, I will look at the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA) and the degree to which it has enabled reforms that could have helped the United States prevent or mitigate the Yemen war.

The Yemen conflict provides a compelling case study for assessing U.S. capacity for prevention for multiple reasons. First are the strong policy imperatives for prevention, combined with the widespread assumption—even among policymakers—that the United States could have done more to prevent the conflict. In other words, if the GFA has not improved the U.S. ability to prevent a conflict like Yemen where there was a clear national security imperative and influence, it should raise serious questions about the effectiveness of the initiative. Second, the Yemen conflict shares important characteristics with many other recent wars, particularly the most catastrophic conflicts that are fueling a surge in violent conflict globally. In particular, Yemen is a civil war with significant external intervention.[4] This external intervention makes conflicts more complex

---

[1] Ryan, Missy. "Top Obama-Era Officials Urge Immediate End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War." Washington Post, November 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/top-obama-era-officials-urge-immediate-end-to-us-involvement-in-yemen-war/2018/11/10/ce8e8654-8d93-4dd2-9f68-822cb08b9f16_story.html. See the letter at : https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/yemen-statement-former-obama-officials-november-11-2018.pdf

[2] "Lisa Monaco: The Full Transcript - POLITICO Magazine." Accessed January 12, 2024. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/lisa-monaco-the-full-transcript-214974/.

[3] Congressional Research Service. "Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention." November 23, 2021, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43960

[4] "UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program." Accessed January 16, 2024. https://ucdp.uu.se/.

and difficult to resolve, leading to longer wars.[5] The Yemen conflict is also one of a growing number of examples where the United States is not a leading actor, but where it has significant leverage over various conflict actors. In this way, the toolset necessary for effective preventative action in Yemen is likely to be relevant for many other of the most destabilizing global conflicts.

My research draws from over 70 interviews with current and former U.S. government officials, congressional staffers, and other experts in addition to existing literature and media coverage. This case study serves as a companion piece to my report, "Implementing prevention: A practical guide for improving the U.S. approach to violent conflict in a changing world," which explores the inherent impediments to implementing prevention approaches in a complex bureaucracy like the United States, assesses GFA implementation and what it says about how to overcome those impediments, and provides recommendations for a calibrated crisis prevention approach that confronts current U.S. political and bureaucratic realities.[6] Because conflict prevention is an ambiguous term and because past U.S. efforts in fragile countries have been plagued by overly ambitious goals and assumptions about the nature of U.S. influence and leverage, this Yemen case study seeks to ground my analysis in a real-world setting and a more defined understanding of how the United States can shape the trajectory of conflict in other countries.

This case study is not intended to provide a detailed description of Yemen between 2011 and 2015. Literature already exists providing an effective overview of that period, including Ginny Hill's exceptional and accessible "Yemen Endures." Instead, this case study looks specifically at U.S. policy around key decision points on Yemen between 2011 and 2015.

I begin this case study by describing my approach, selecting three windows of opportunity where U.S. influence over the trajectory of the conflict was the greatest, and then developing counterfactual scenarios for those three windows.[7] After providing a general overview of U.S. policy in Yemen during 2011-2015, I conduct a more thorough analysis of the three identified windows and the steps that would have been necessary for the United States to pursue the counterfactual scenarios. I end with an analysis of the degree to which reforms associated with the GFA would have helped the United States take those steps and thus prevent or mitigate the outbreak of the Yemen war in 2015.

---

[5] Allansson, Marie, Erik Melander, and Lotta Themnér. "Organized Violence, 1989–2016." Journal of Peace Research 54, no. 4 (July 1, 2017): 574–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317718773 and "A New Agenda for Peace | Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs." Accessed October 31, 2023. https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace, 4. In 2021, nearly half of all conflicts were "internationalized," whereby an outside state intervenes on behalf of at least one of the conflict parties.

[6] Minor, Allison. 2024. "Implementing prevention: A practical guide for improving the US approach to violent conflict in a changing world." https://www.brookings.edu/articles/implementing-prevention/.

[7] To do so, I use a framework for counterfactual analysis developed by Jack Levy; see: Levy, Jack S. "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis." Security Studies 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 378–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602.

I conclude that the United States had at least three windows of opportunity where it could have prevented or at least mitigated a major war in Yemen, primarily through the United States' ability to shape the decisions of conflict actors (typically called operational prevention). These included: 1) U.S. influence over the terms of the 2011 transition agreement, which could have restricted former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's ability to support the Houthis; 2) U.S. ability to discourage then-President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi from pursuing decisions regarding Yemen's federal model in 2014 that triggered a direct conflict between Hadi and the Houthis and created the conditions for a major regional conflict; and 3) the terms of U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition offensive in 2015, which could have restricted the coalition's ability to pursue maximalist objectives and enabled an early negotiated solution to the conflict.

U.S. ability to prevent or mitigate conflict decreased over time as Yemeni and ultimately regional actors made successive decisions that brought them closer to large-scale hostilities. The policy decisions facing the United States were never easy—U.S. officials were consistently operating in a constrained policy space, choosing between a series of difficult policy options and competing priorities with extremely limited bandwidth. In all cases, the windows of opportunities were brief, and in one case, it was not immediately obvious that the country was facing an inflection point.

The decisions the United States made (or in one case, failed to make) during these windows reflected three persistent, problematic tendencies in U.S. policymaking that manifest in many other crises:

1) A failure to weigh the medium-term consequences of their decisions alongside short-term imperatives.
2) The difficulty of updating U.S. assumptions and corresponding policy positions in response to rapidly shifting dynamics on the ground, in part due to a bias toward wishful thinking.
3) Insufficient high-level attention to enable decisive U.S. policy action.

In other words, U.S. failures during this period were not the result of officials simply choosing the wrong policy option; they were the result of systemic impediments to effective preventative action. Overcoming these tendencies and seizing the opportunities the U.S. had to prevent the Yemen conflict would have required systemic change and greater prioritization of conflict prevention principles by policymakers.

Further, U.S. policymaking was characterized by a tendency to prioritize proximate policy goals—including counterterrorism, the Iran nuclear deal, and the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship—over considerations of Yemen's stability, and U.S. policy often relied heavily on a single individual, including Saleh prior to 2011 and Hadi after 2012. All of these problematic tendencies ultimately exacerbated threats to U.S. interests over the medium term and should provide lessons for U.S. engagement in similar contexts.

The GFA seeks to address some of these problematic tendencies, namely via its focus on longer-term planning and adaptive approaches. Unfortunately, GFA implementation to date is insufficient to overcome these tendencies due to a few shortfalls:

- The GFA lacks the tools and authorities needed to influence Washington-based foreign policy decisions.
- The GFA has primarily operated as a foreign assistance initiative.
- The GFA relies heavily on processes and timelines that were not well-suited to shaping the U.S. policy approach, especially in such a dynamic setting.

Unlocking the GFA's potential as a conflict prevention initiative would require a more comprehensive and flexible approach to learning and adaptation; more responsive, Washington-based policy processes in target countries; and significantly greater buy-in from foreign policy leadership. I offer recommendations for how an initiative could be structured to accomplish this in my paper on calibrated crisis prevention.

Background on Yemen

The war that escalated in Yemen in 2015 was closely connected to trends that emerged during the country's 2011 transition process, but its roots go back much further, to dynamics associated with the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 and northern Yemen's transition from an Imamate to a republic in the 1960s.

Yemen's long-time strongman leader, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, rose to power during the rocky period following northern Yemen's transition to a republic. He rose rapidly through Yemen's military ranks and became president in 1978. Saleh demonstrated a unique ability to forge and manage complex alliances that allowed him to assert control and centralize power within a highly fractious country defined by significant tribal and geographic divisions. Part of Saleh's strategy included reducing the political influence of a group that had dominated the country under the imamate—a Sayyid class that claims descendance from the Prophet Muhammed—and providing patronage to some parts of the country while marginalizing others. Saleh also oversaw the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 as South Yemen coped with the loss of support from the collapsing Soviet Union. Saleh sought to co-opt some leaders from South Yemen, including his long-time Vice President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, while keeping the south relatively weak. Frustrated southerners attempted to secede just four years after unification but were defeated by the northern army, further eroding the south's political posture. [8]

Saleh's hold on political power began to waver around the turn of the century, as revenues from Yemen's oil reserves—which are much smaller than its other Gulf neighbors—began to wane and poor political and economic decisions exacerbated the economic woes of the Middle East's poorest country. Saleh's rule was highly corrupt, with only the semblance of democracy—the U.N. estimates he amassed as much as $60 billion while in power—and he allowed Yemen's basic services and infrastructure to languish.[9] Elite frustration with Saleh grew over the 2000s as it became clear that an aging Saleh

[8] Edroos, Faisal. "Yemen: Who Was Ali Abdullah Saleh?" December 5, 2017. Al Jazeera. Accessed March 26, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/5/yemen-who-was-ali-abdullah-saleh.
[9] U.N. 2140 Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts." 10 February 2015, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/2140/panel-of-experts/work-and-mandate/reports, 44.

was preparing to hand power to his son. Saleh also faced growing opposition in both the far north and the south of the country. The opposition in the north was led by a religious revivalist movement turned armed group, the Houthis.

The Houthi movement, which now calls itself Ansar Allah, capitalized on popular frustration with marginalization under Saleh, as well as fervent anti-American sentiment. It is led by a Sayyid family, the al-Houthis, and was inspired by Iranian revolutionary ideology. The Houthis are Zaydi Muslims, a Shi'a sect that makes up roughly a third of the country. Traditional Zaydi beliefs differ greatly from the "twelver" Shi'a Islam of Iran and more closely resemble Yemen's predominant Sunni school. The Houthis have gradually developed an extremist Zaydi ideology that borrows from Iran, however.[10] Beginning in 2004, Saleh launched a series of military campaigns against the Houthis in their home province of Sa'adah, in the northernmost part of the country, neighboring Saudi Arabia. Government forces succeeded in killing the original leader of the movement, but he was quickly replaced by his father and then his younger brother, Abdelmalik al Houthi. The Saudis also entered the conflict in 2009 in response to reported Houthi incursions over the Saudi border. The fighting served largely to consolidate the Houthis as a movement. A ceasefire in February 2010 led to a halt in fighting, but the Houthis soon exploited Yemen's growing instability to expand their control in the north.[11]

It was in this tense environment that Yemeni students and activists began launching protests in January 2011, inspired by protests in Tunisia. These protests called for Saleh's resignation and democratic reforms. The Government responded with force, killing over 200 protesters. As long-time rulers in Tunisia and Egypt were toppled in January and February, respectively, some political and military elites recognized that the protests might provide an opportunity to finally unseat Saleh.[12] One such figure was Ali Mohsin al Ahmar, one of Saleh's closest and oldest allies. Ali Mohsin was a military leader who was seen throughout the 1990s as Saleh's most likely successor. In the 2000s, however, Saleh began restructuring the military to weaken Ali Mohsin, apparently as part of his plans to transition power to his son. When Ali Mohsin threw his support behind the protest movement, he brought a significant segment of the military with him, shifting the balance of power in a manner that eventually led to Saleh's resignation in November 2011.[13]

Under the terms of the transition agreement, Saleh handed power over to his long-time Vice President, Hadi, who was then elected President in a referendum in February 2011. Unlike Tunisia's Ben Ali or Egypt's Mubarak, Saleh was allowed to stay in Yemen following

[10] Minor, Allison. "How the Houthis Joined the Israel-Gaza Crisis." January 31, 2024. The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-houthis-joined-the-israel-gaza-crisis/
[11] See Boucek, Christopher, "War in Saada, From Local Insurrection to National Challenge." April 2010, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf
[12] See "Yemen's Hijacked Revolution | Human Rights Watch." 2011. September 26, 2011. https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/26/yemens-hijacked-revolution.
[13] Hill, 77-78, 190, 245.

his resignation and retained his position as the head of Yemen's dominant political party.[14] As will be discussed further in the paper, this provided Saleh with the means to seek revenge, disrupt the transition process, and reassert power. Beyond unseating Saleh, the transition process sought to establish stronger democratic systems and reverse the centralization of power in Sana'a. For a fractious country facing strong secessionist sentiment, federalism was seen by many as the most effective solution. The U.N. shepherded Yemen's transition process under the leadership of Special Envoy Jamal Benomar. This included leading Yemen's inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC).[15] Yemen's rich neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, were also closely involved in the transition process under the rubric of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It was the GCC that formerly brokered the agreement on Saleh's resignation and pivot to a transition process called the GCC Initiative. While Saudi leadership had grown frustrated with Saleh over the years, they were also worried about the wave of popular protests across the region and anxious about the uncertainty created by a democratic transition process in a country with whom they shared a long southern border. As Houthi power grew in the north over the course of 2011-2014, the Saudis became increasingly worried about the influence of a group they saw as an Iranian proxy. While the Houthis have had ties to Iran since their founding, Iranian support to the Houthis likely did not reach significant levels until the group seized power in 2015 and asserted itself as an effective means to challenge the Saudis. The Houthis, who are insistent on retaining command and control, are also better characterized as a partner of Iran, rather than a proxy.[16] Saudi concerns escalated through 2015, as the Houthis—backed by a disgruntled Saleh—seized control of the capital and asserted control over the government.

In January 2015, Saudi Arabia underwent its own major leadership transition, with King Salman assuming power after King Abdullah's death. King Salman immediately promoted his son, Mohammed bin Salman, to Minister of Defense and began granting him an increasingly influential role over Saudi policy. Mohammed bin Salman would play a central role in crafting the Saudi response to the Houthis. As then-President Hadi fled Sana'a and declared war on the Houthis in February 2015, Saudi Arabia was finalizing its plans for launching a regional military campaign against the Houthis.[17]

U.S. policy on Yemen 2011-2015

U.S. policy on Yemen between 2011 and 2015 was dominated by counterterrorism concerns. This focus reflected both the assessed threat from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) following three attempted AQAP attacks on the United States (including

[14] "Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) | UN Peacemaker." n.d. Accessed March 26, 2024. https://peacemaker.un.org/yemen-transition-mechanism2011.

[15] Gaston, Erica. "Process Lessons Learned in Yemen's National Dialogue." February 2014. United States Institute of Peace Special Report. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR342_Process-Lessons-Learned-in-Yemens-National-Dialogue.pdf.

[16] Minor, Allison. "How the Houthis Joined the Israel-Gaza Crisis." January 31, 2024. The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-houthis-joined-the-israel-gaza-crisis/

[17] "Saudi Arabia's Big Gamble | The Washington Institute." March 26, 2015. Accessed February 21, 2024. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabias-big-gamble.

the near-miss 2009 Christmas Day bombing) and the fact that Yemen had increasingly become the model for a new U.S. counterterrorism approach spearheaded by the White House.[18] John Brennan, President Obama's homeland security and counterterrorism advisor, was the architect of this approach, which established new procedures for targeted killings and centralized decisionmaking within the White House.[19] Brennan explicitly identified Yemen as a model for this approach.[20] In doing so, he also asserted himself as the leading administration official on Yemen.[21] Having a homeland security advisor as the most prominent senior official on Yemen was far from typical and is itself an indicator of the extent to which counterterrorism dominated over other foreign policy priorities at the time.[22] The center of gravity of U.S. policymaking on Yemen was so heavily weighted toward Brennan and counterterrorism that, in June 2012, 27 leading Middle East foreign policy experts wrote an open letter to President Obama urging him to place greater focus on economic and political issues in Yemen and to "change the primary face" of the U.S. government in Yemen via increased engagement from the Secretary of State.[23]

The United States had an active, interagency planning process during this time led by the National Security Council (NSC), including an integrated strategy for Yemen from 2012-2014.[24] Though counterterrorism was the top U.S. priority in Yemen, parts of the U.S. Government were also seeking to address the conditions driving extremism and vulnerability of populations to radicalization, namely through USAID. The USAID country strategy for 2010-12 was focused on promoting stability through improved livelihoods and governance, under the assumption that the United States needed to stabilize Saleh's regime to mitigate the threat of extremism. Following the GCC Initiative, the United States surged support behind the transition process and NDC.[25] While a significant portion of U.S. development assistance to Yemen was directed toward supporting the NDC,

---

[18] AQAP affiliated actors attempted to target the United States in 2009, 2010, and 2012; this included the 2009 near-miss Christmas Day bombing when an AQAP-trained individual nearly detonated a bomb aboard a plane to Detroit.

[19] "CIA Veteran John Brennan Has Transformed U.S. Counterterrorism Policy - The Washington Post." Accessed November 3, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-veteran-john-brennan-has-transformed-us-counterterrorism-policy/2012/10/24/318b8eec-1c7c-11e2-ad90-ba5920e56eb3_story.html.

[20] "The Efficacy and Ethics of U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy | Wilson Center." Accessed November 8, 2023. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-efficacy-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy.

[21] Brennan, 341.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Council, Atlantic. "Leading Experts Call for Recalibration of US Policy on Yemen in Letter to President Obama." Atlantic Council (blog), June 26, 2012. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/leading-experts-call-for-recalibration-of-us-policy-on-yemen-in-letter-to-president-obama/.

[24] U. S. Government Accountability Office. "U.S. Assistance to Yemen: Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Emergency Food Aid and Assess Security Assistance | U.S. GAO." Accessed November 20, 2023. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-13-310. 5-6.

[25] The United States also provided significant humanitarian assistance during this period but this assistance was provided based on assessed humanitarian need, *not* in support of U.S. policy objectives, in accordance with humanitarian principles, and thus should be considered separately.

stabilization in areas impacted by AQAP remained an important focus.[26] U.S. assistance programs during the time sought to educate communities on the NDC, reform Yemen's electoral system, increase access to basic healthcare, and improve livelihoods through microfinance and support to agricultural value chains.

While such assistance helped improve outcomes within communities, the scale and nature of this assistance was not capable of transforming Yemen's extremely weak social service systems or turning the tide for an economy that was in free fall, with overwhelming constraints to private enterprise. Even USAID's country strategy acknowledged these impediments, noting that the necessary legislative changes, measures to reign in rampant corruption, or steps to address fundamental constraints like lack of reliable electricity were unlikely in the near term and would have significant consequences for outcomes.[27] U.S. attention to Yemen increased as the transition process progressed, attracting visits from senior U.S. officials like the USAID administrator.[28] The United States also increased its development assistance in support of Yemen's transition process, providing $68 million in Fiscal Year 2012 compared to $54 million in Fiscal Year 2011.

U.S. development assistance paled in comparison to DoD and State Department security assistance, however, which amounted to $161 million in Fiscal Year 2012.[29] U.S. security assistance was primarily focused on helping the Yemen government combat AQAP. Most of this funding came from the DoD to train and equip Yemeni counterterrorism forces, specifically those led by Saleh's family members.[30] State Department funding also supported the reform of Yemeni law enforcement and judicial institutions. While the United States publicly affirmed its support for Yemeni efforts to restructure its armed forces under a single, unified, and professional leadership structure in accordance with the GCC Initiative (thus mitigating the ability of Saleh or other spoilers to co-opt portions of the Yemeni military), it is not clear how U.S. security assistance was adjusted to advance this goal.[31]

---

[26] "United States Provides Additional Assistance to Yemen | Archive - U.S. Agency for International Development." Accessed December 5, 2023. https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/united-states-provides-additional-assistance-yemen-0; interview with former USAID official, November 13, 2023.

[27] "Country Development Cooperation Strategy | Yemen | Archive - U.S. Agency for International Development," October 28, 2015. https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/yemen/cdcs. 14.

[28] "United States Provides Additional Assistance to Yemen | Archive - U.S. Agency for International Development." Accessed December 5, 2023. https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/united-states-provides-additional-assistance-yemen-0.

[29] U.S. Department of State. "U.S. Government Assistance to Yemen." Accessed November 20, 2023. //2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/09/198335.htm.

[30] U. S. Government Accountability Office. "Uncertain Political and Security Situation Challenges U.S. Efforts to Implement a Comprehensive Strategy in Yemen | U.S. GAO." Accessed November 20, 2023. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-12-432r, 4.

[31] U.S. Department of State. "U.S. Government Assistance to Yemen." Accessed November 20, 2023. //2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/09/198335.htm.

Approach for assessing U.S. influence

Hypothesizing about whether the United States could or could not have prevented the current Yemen conflict is a difficult exercise. As discussed in the previous section, in the years preceding the war, Yemen was undergoing major political, social, and economic upheaval. When Saleh ultimately agreed to step down from power in 2011, established elites as well as new groups like the Houthis scrambled to fill the space created by his departure, leaving the new balance of power unclear. This upheaval resulted in repeated outbursts of violence among a variety of groups in different parts of the country, though this conflict was limited in nature and never reached the scope or scale of the war that began in March 2015.[32]

In other words, Yemen was subject to a range of shocks between 2011 and 2015, and the instability of its economic and political systems undermined the country's ability to manage those shocks without violent conflict. Some degree of violent conflict to establish a new equilibrium was likely unavoidable. But the scale and scope of the conflict that has emerged since 2015 has been exceptional: almost 400,000 people killed, hundreds of Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, a third of Yemen's roads and other major infrastructure destroyed, and over 18 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.[33]

The United States exercised significant influence in Yemen in the years leading up to the outbreak of conflict, but there is a risk of exaggerating that influence in a manner that deprives Yemenis themselves of agency or dismisses the significance of dynamics occurring inside the country. This tendency is particularly common for those who paint the Yemen conflict as primarily a Saudi-Iran regional conflict.[34] To more carefully assess U.S. influence over the trajectory of the Yemen conflict between 2011 and 2015, it is helpful to pinpoint the factors that analysts have identified as being *necessary* for the outbreak of a major internal conflict with regional intervention and then to assess the level of U.S. influence over each factor, with a focus on where the international

[32] For a detailed discussion of this breakdown, see Hill, Ginny. Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia. Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 203-254.

[33] "Assessing the Impact of War in Yemen: Pathways for Recovery." n.d. UNDP. Accessed February 27, 2024. https://www.undp.org/publications/assessing-impact-war-yemen-pathways-recovery, 32; "Houthis Have Fired 430 Missiles, 851 Drones at Saudi Arabia since 2015 - Saudi-Led Coalition | Reuters." December 26, 2021, Accessed February 21, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthis-have-fired-430-missiles-851-drones-saudi-arabia-since-2015-saudi-led-2021-12-26/.Center, Sana'a. 2023. "The War on Yemen's Roads." Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies. January 16, 2023. https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/19304.

[34] This tendency to exaggerate the influence of outside actors while discounting dynamics inside of Yemen is present among those who are critical of the Saudi-led campaign and those who advocate for a stronger anti-Iran policy. For an example of the former, see Grim, Ryan. 2023. "The Yemen War Can Be Over — If Biden Wants It." The Intercept. May 18, 2023. https://theintercept.com/2023/05/18/yemen-war/.

community and specifically the United States exercised direct, tangible influence. Those factors include (in sequence): [35]

1. The growth of a militant group—the Houthis—with the intention and significant capability to use force to seize control of the government.
2. Saleh's continued access to significant resources and patronage networks between 2012 and 2014 that he could use to support the Houthis' takeover of the government and much of northern Yemen.
3. Limited effective control by President Hadi over the military and security forces that could have defended against the Houthi-Saleh offensive.
4. Hadi's miscalculation regarding his level of effective control and ability to force through a vision for a federal Yemen that marginalized the Houthis and other key opposition groups, increasing the Houthis' sense of urgency and triggering a direct Hadi-Houthi conflict.
5. Saudi Arabia's assessment that it was able to pursue maximalist policy objectives in Yemen following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a and had the international support needed to lead a sustained, large-scale air campaign.

It is unlikely that any one of these factors in isolation was sufficient to trigger the outbreak of a widespread, long-lasting regional and civil conflict, though some played a more significant role than others, and each exacerbated the conflict. In other words, it was only through the combination of all the above factors that the Yemen conflict reached the observed scale, scope, and duration. In that way, by removing any one of these factors, the international community could have at least mitigated the conflict.

The United States has the most direct leverage over factors two, four, and five:

Saleh's access to resources to support the Houthis: The United States was heavily involved in the negotiations over the 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative that outlined the terms for Saleh's resignation and Yemen's transition process from the beginning.[36] Given Saleh's reliance on U.S. military support, analysts saw the shift in the U.S. position toward favoring Saleh's departure in the spring of 2011 as essential to creating space for the GCC Initiative negotiations.[37] The leading U.S. policymaker working on Yemen at the time specifically credits the U.S. "prodding" with Saleh's decision to step down.[38] Additionally, the international community had significant leverage during 2011-12 in the form of sanctions on Saleh and/or a travel ban, as Saleh's vast wealth was still vulnerable to international sanctions, and Saleh himself was dependent on medical care abroad.[39] The United States declined to use this leverage out of fear of the consequences

[35] I developed these factors based on discussions with Yemen experts who were on the ground and/or closely monitoring events during this period, including Adam Baron, Mohammed al Qadhi, and Peter Salisbury, in addition to existing literature on Yemen, particularly works by Ginny Hill and Helen Lackler.
[36] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview by author, virtual, December 1, 2023.
[37] Hill, 210.
[38] Brennan, John O. Undaunted: My Fight Against America's Enemies, At Home and Abroad. Celadon Books, 2020, 341-2.
[39] Peter Salisbury, Interview with the Author, November 28, 2023, virtual.

for U.S. counterterrorism efforts, however, and the terms of the GCC-I allowed Saleh to retain all his wealth and effective political power, including continued leadership of Yemen's dominant political party, and hand power to his long-time vice president, Hadi. Officials closely involved in the negotiations acknowledge that the terms were exceptionally favorable to Saleh.[40]

Hadi's miscalculation on the federal model: The model for federalism advanced by Hadi, namely the six-region federal map, represented the most contentious element of his vision for a future Yemen state, as it was the document that divided up power and resources in the country. Hadi's map sought to marginalize the Houthis and posed a threat to their access to power and resources. As opposed to the more inclusive processes associated with the NDC and even the Constitutional Drafting Committee, the federal map was drawn by a small committee appointed and directed by Hadi.[41] The international community had significant influence on Hadi in 2014. They backed Hadi as Saleh's successor and, in the absence of a strong domestic power base—Hadi continued to rely heavily on international support and legitimacy. As Hadi struggled to secure control over military and security forces, U.S. security cooperation was particularly important to him.[42] This influence was more than sufficient to press Hadi to pursue a more moderate approach to the federal map over the course of 2014 that would not put him in direct conflict with the Houthis—a conflict which, by the summer of 2014 was increasingly clear that Hadi would lose. While the United States was aware of the controversy around the federal map, a lack of foresight, hesitancy to further delay the transition process, and a persistent underestimation of the Houthi threat and wishful thinking about Hadi's ability to marginalize them contributed to U.S. inaction.

Saudi space to pursue maximalist objectives: Saudi Arabia needed initial United States and U.N. support for the launch of the Saudi-led coalition campaign. The justification for the coalition campaign was restoring the legitimate Yemen government. And international community endorsement was critical to affirm this mandate, especially for a new Saudi king. U.S. tactical support, including intelligence sharing and aerial refueling was important to the Saudis, but it was the diplomatic top cover and ability to unlock broader international support that was most crucial.[43] The United States and international community not only provided this support, with U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2216, it endorsed objectives that would have been difficult to achieve even when it was passed in April 2015. Specifically, UNSCR 2216 invoked Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter

[40] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview by author, virtual, December 1, 2023.
[41] Salisbury, Peter. "Federalism, Conflict and Fragmentation in Yemen." Local Governance in Yemen: Resource Hub. Accessed January 22, 2024. https://yemenlg.org/resources/federalism-conflict-and-fragmentation-in-yemen/, 12, 22, 24-26.
[42] Hill, 260.
[43] Mazzetti, Mark, and Eric Schmitt. "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen." The New York Times, March 13, 2016, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-us.html.

and demanded that the Houthis unconditionally withdraw from Sana'a and hand over their weapons.[44]

Identifying alternative scenarios

Based on observed U.S. influence over the three critical factors impacting the outbreak of the Yemen war described above, I have developed three counterfactuals for U.S. policy between 2011 and 2015. While none of the counterfactuals would have prevented all violence and disruption to Yemen's transition process, each one would have significantly mitigated the scope, scale, and length of the conflict, with greater impacts at earlier stages in the conflict. [45]

Counterfactual 1

- Antecedent 1: Early in 2011, the United States calls for Saleh to step down, leave Yemen, and forgo any future involvement in politics, rather than seeking to negotiate more favorable terms with Saleh privately. The United States also demonstrates a willingness to deploy sanctions and a travel ban to support this position, including by seizing the moment in the summer of 2011 when U.S. leverage over Saleh was greatest.
- Causal chain 1: Given his exile, Saleh's ability to support the Houthis' military expansion is constrained. Hesitancy to incur greater costs, namely in the form of sanctions against himself or family members that would restrict his finances and future political prospects for his son, further deter Saleh from overt support for the Houthis.
- Consequent 1: While the Houthis retain the intent and some capability to enter Sana'a, the lack of support from Saleh results in significantly weaker capabilities and means they face stronger resistance from forces in and around Sana'a, resulting in less decisive Houthi control over the capital and a closer balance of power between Houthi-aligned and Hadi-aligned groups, creating space for a more meaningful and enforceable negotiated solution.

Counterfactual 2:

- Antecedent 2: The United States and its partners push Hadi to pursue an approach to a future federal Yemen state that is more consistent with Houthi demands articulated in the NDC and Constitutional Drafting Committee.
- Causal chain 2: The Houthis continue to assert control over Yemen's government, consistent with the approach they adopted following the Peace and National

[44] "S/RES/2216 (2015) | United Nations Security Council." Accessed November 20, 2023. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2216-%282015%29-0.

[45] For my analysis, I rely on a framework identified by Jack Levy that sets eight key rules for counterfactuals: clarity, minimal rewriting of observed events, cotenability, consistency with established theories, historical accuracy, temporal proximity in casual chains, consideration of "redirects," and use of comparative analyses. See Levy, Jack S. "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis." Security Studies 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 378–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602.

Partnership Agreement (PNPA), but do not have a compelling reason to overthrow it.
- Consequent 2: The United Nations continues to seek new agreements between the Houthis and the government during 2015. The Houthis continue to violate the terms of these agreements and seek to delay elections they fear they will lose but stop short of overthrowing the government, thus jeopardizing the legitimacy of a body they are effectively controlling. In the absence of a definitive coup, Saudi Arabia likely relies on measures short of a formal military campaign to influence the situation and protect its interests.

Counterfactual 3:

- Antecedent 3: The United States makes its initial support—including diplomatic support and provision of intelligence and in-air refueling—for the Saudi-led coalition campaign contingent on what the United States assesses to be a defined, viable end goal and exit strategy. Consistent with this approach, the United States supports text for UNSCR 2216 that includes a clear and realistic path to negotiations, rather than an assumption of a total Houthis surrender.
- Causal chain 3: Upon greater scrutiny from the United States and other partners, Saudi Arabia concedes that a decisive military victory over the Houthis is unlikely with the available coalition capabilities. In the face of limitations on U.S. and UNSC support, the Saudis moderate their objectives and eventually agree to begin developing a plan for transitioning to negotiations.
- Consequent 3: After striking all major Houthi military targets and liberating Aden in July 2015 and in the face of mounting U.S. pressure, Saudi Arabia seeks a negotiated settlement that moderates Houthi control over government institutions, as was recommended by leading Yemen analysts at the time.[46] The Houthis and Yemen government may resist or issue maximalist demands, and the Houthis will likely seek to evade their commitments under an agreement. Despite this, strong regional and international support for a negotiated settlement eventually leads to some sort of agreement and reduced conflict over the course of 2015 to 2016.

I have tried to root each counterfactual in causal relationships that can be empirically observed in actual events, to reduce the number of steps and assumptions between the antecedent and consequent, to identify realistic antecedents that differed as little as possible from observed events, and to consider intervening consequences from the antecedents or other factors that could have redirected the scenario back to large-scale conflict. As with all counterfactuals, however, these depend on several assumptions regarding the strength of the causal relationship: how vulnerable Saleh was to sanctions and a travel ban, the importance of Saleh's support to the Houthis, the Houthis' willingness to take a more gradual approach, and Saudi leadership's willingness to adjust their approach in the initial months of the coalition campaign. However, given what we do

[46] "The Battle for Aden Is a Tipping Point in Yemen's War | Crisis Group." 2015. July 25, 2015. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/battle-aden-tipping-point-yemens-war.

know about the causal relationship for each counterfactual, the resulting uncertainty is one of the degree of impact, not the existence of impact. Thus, while we cannot be certain about all the details of the consequents described above, we can be reasonably confident that each counterfactual would still result in significant lessening of the scope, scale, and/or duration of the conflict. In this way, the analysis affirms that the United States did have the ability to shape the trajectory of the Yemen conflict during at least three brief windows between 2011and 2015.

Yemen counterfactual assessment

2011 counterfactual

Background and observed U.S. policy in 2011

The United States was slower to announce its support for popular protests in Yemen than it had been in other countries in the region. Only after prominent military leaders withdrew their support for Saleh did the United States begin quietly advocating for his departure.[47] Even then, there were strong opponents within the U.S. Government who feared that removing Saleh could undermine U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the country in the immediate term—fears that Saleh sought to leverage.[48] At the time, Saleh's family members controlled the elite counterterrorism units that enjoyed the majority of U.S. security assistance and had been the primary U.S. security partner for years.[49] It was simply not clear to the United States whether its counterterrorism efforts in Yemen were possible absent Saleh, with former and current U.S. officials assessing at the time that everything the United States did in Yemen was dependent on Saleh and that his removal would mean starting over.[50] Concerns about the impact on U.S. counterterrorism activities were further aggravated by a bias toward the status quo in U.S. policy that makes it difficult to change established U.S. policy positions (in this case, U.S. support for Saleh). Attitudes toward Saleh and his family members at the time also reflected a pattern by which the "means" of diplomacy—U.S. relationships with influential actors—can assume such overwhelming importance that maintaining those relationships become almost as important as the national security "ends" they are supposed to support.

The U.S. approach to Yemen was also influenced by the exceptional, sudden upheaval facing the rest of the Middle East in 2011. By the time protests in Yemen had escalated, Tunisia was in the midst of a revolution, the future of Egypt—a major U.S. partner and the most populous country in the Middle East—was uncertain after power was handed to the military, and violence was spreading in almost every other country in the region.[51] This left U.S. officials in triage mode and anxious to mitigate any further instability. As senior officials overseeing policy in the region grappled with the implications of the "Arab Spring" on major foreign policy priorities and debated military intervention in places like Libya, there was very little time and diplomatic bandwidth available for Yemen.

---

[47] Sanger, Laura Kasinof and David E. "U.S. Shifts to Seek Removal of Yemen's Leader, an Ally." Wilmington Star-News. Accessed November 3, 2023. https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/2011/04/04/us-shifts-to-seek-removal-of-yemens-leader-an-ally/30857259007/.

[48] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.

[49] U. S. Government Accountability Office. "Uncertain Political and Security Situation Challenges U.S. Efforts to Implement a Comprehensive Strategy in Yemen | U.S. GAO." Accessed November 20, 2023. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-12-432r.

[50] Ahram Online. "Yemen Protests Have US Worried about Ally's Future - Region - World." Accessed November 20, 2023. https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/2/6772/World/Yemen-protests-have-US-worried-about-allys-future.aspx.

[51] "Timeline: How the Arab Spring Unfolded." January 2021. Al Jazeera. Accessed June 3, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/arab-spring-ten-years-on.

When the United States reluctantly shifted its position and supported Saleh stepping down, it took the form of a moderate approach, with Saleh handing power over to his long-time vice president (Hadi), receiving immunity from prosecution, and retaining his role as head of Yemen's ruling political party, which are exceptionally generous terms.[52] Saleh also escaped any restrictions on the vast wealth—estimated as high as $60 billion—that he accumulated as a result of corrupt and illegal practices during his time in power, according to the U.N.[53] The United States was heavily involved in the negotiations around this approach from the beginning, with then-U.S. ambassador Gerald Feierstein, working closely with Yemen's primary opposition leaders, regional partners, and the U.N. following the appointment of a U.N. special advisor in April 2011.[54]

Saleh spent much of 2011 vacillating between signaling his willingness to step down and belligerent actions, including blockading the U.S. ambassador in the UAE Embassy in Sana'a to prevent the signing of a transition agreement.[55] This approach strung the international community along, leading them to believe an agreement was imminent while asserting Saleh's control over the terms. The situation shifted dramatically in June 2011, when unknown actors placed a bomb in the presidential mosque in Sana'a that left Saleh gravely injured, with burns covering much of his body. Saleh was flown to Saudi Arabia for emergency medical treatment and remained there until September.

Saleh was in a highly vulnerable position following the bombing. He was dependent on medical treatment abroad at a time when many were advocating for sanctions and a travel ban. This was the point at which international leverage over Saleh was at its peak, with the greatest potential to enforce stricter terms on a transition agreement that could have more effectively removed Saleh from Yemen's political life. The U.S. ambassador leading negotiations in Sana'a recalls that there was some discussion of such a push at the time, including an attempt to get the Saudis to keep Saleh in Saudi Arabia as part of an exile agreement. [56] The Saudis resisted this idea, as did a handful of other Gulf and European partners. Those involved in the discussions also overestimated the impact of the bombing and Saleh's injuries, with many doubting whether Saleh would ever return to Sana'a. In this context, discussions around a transition process continued along much the same terms until Saleh's return to Yemen in September 2011.[57]

Saleh had many reasons to doubt the seriousness of the sanctions threat. Russia, which can effectively block any U.N.-issued sanctions, was reportedly opposed to sanctions against Saleh.[58] The United States had its own reasons to want to avoid sanctions,

---

[52] Paul Williams, Interview with the author, November 30, 2023, virtual.
[53] BBC News. 2015. "Yemen Ex-Leader Saleh 'amassed up to $60bn' - UN Probe," February 25, 2015, sec. Middle East. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31632502.
[54] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.
[55] Ibid. See also "British and American Ambassadors Seized | The Independent | The Independent." Accessed January 22, 2024. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/british-and-american-ambassadors-seized-2287790.html.
[56] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

namely the Saleh family's control over U.S. counterterrorism cooperation at a time when several top U.S. counterterrorism targets were still at large in Yemen. First among these targets was Anwar al-Awlaki, whom the United States blamed for the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, which at the time was the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11. In a transparent exertion of that leverage, Saleh's government finally provided intelligence that enabled the United States to kill Awlaki immediately following Saleh's return to Yemen in September 2011.[59] Such maneuvers may well have contributed to U.S. support for the highly favorable terms Saleh received, but they did not alter the U.S. or others' position on the need for Saleh to step down. In November 2011, following a call from the Saudi King, where he committed to host the signing ceremony for what became the GCC Initiative, Saleh finally agreed to step down.[60]

Steps necessary to pursue the counterfactual in 2011

A more rigorous assessment of the implications of the terms of the GCC Initiative combined with a willingness to prioritize longer-term stability in Yemen over short-term risks to U.S. counterterrorism efforts and expend U.S. political capital with key partners would have allowed the United States to more effectively block Saleh's support for the Houthis, significantly reducing the scale of the ensuing conflict and creating space for a negotiated solution.

U.S. officials understood that the terms of the GCC Initiative were extremely generous for Saleh, preserving his access to enormous wealth and vast connections that allowed him to exercise control over Yemeni politics.[61] Brennan reports that he knew that Saleh would continue to do whatever he could to reclaim power.[62] In this way, the United States was aware of Saleh's intention and capability to disrupt the transition process but failed to anticipate how disruptive Saleh's meddling could become. The failure to do so belies the difficulty of conducting forward-looking analysis during dynamic periods and translating that analysis into policy action.

Given the knowledge and assumptions shared by policymakers at the time, a rigorous, interagency strategic foresight analysis should have been capable of predicting that, under the proposed resignation terms, Saleh was likely to prevent any meaningful transition of power and accept extreme levels of instability and conflict in order to do so.[63] While such analysis may not have predicted the Houthi-Saleh alliance, it should have been sufficient to demonstrate that the terms of Saleh's resignation undermined the U.S. goal of Yemeni stability. The limited policymaker bandwidth at the time was an impediment to strategic foresight analysis, but it was still feasible given that much of the work could have come from dedicated Yemen experts. Stronger praxis around strategic

---

[59] "Yemen Says Tip-off Aided Awlaki Killing," October 2, 2011. https://www.ft.com/content/f5b71fca-ed11-11e0-be97-00144feab49a.

[60] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Brennan, 342 .

[63] International Republican Institute. "Beyond Political Transitions: Promoting Peaceful Democratic Openings Through Strategic Foresight," November 7, 2022. https://www.iri.org/resources/beyond-political-transitions-promoting-peaceful-democratic-openings-through-strategic-foresight/.

foresight and an established interagency process for conducting such analysis would have further mitigated these impediments.

Translating that analysis into actionable policy recommendations is more difficult, recognizing that there were no ideal policy options and limited policy space at the time. There was a credible risk that imposing harsher conditions on Saleh could have itself prompted near-term conflict in Yemen, leading Saleh's primary rival at the time, military leader Ali Mohsin al Ahmar, to seize the opportunity to assert greater control and expand the influence of his aligned military forces, resulting in further conflict inside of Yemen.[64] That immediate risk for limited conflict should be weighed alongside risks over the medium term, however. Such calculus could have enabled a more balanced approach that constrained Saleh's ability to disrupt the transition while retaining some leverage and incentives for Saleh to accept the new status quo. In particular, such an approach could have required Saleh to accept exile in exchange for escaping sanctions and any repercussions for his son. Whatever country hosted Saleh in exile would have been able to impose constraints on Saleh's communications and ability to send money to and from Yemen, consistent with the terms of the agreement. To mitigate the risk that his exile would stoke conflict with forces aligned with Ali Mohsin, similar constraints on political activity could have been explored for Ali Mohsin. Doing so would have had the further benefit of removing another spoiler and expanding the space for the transition process and Yemen's new leaders.

This more balanced approach would have required the United States to exercise greater political capital and leverage in key moments to expand the available policy space and accept short-term consequences for U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Given Saleh's resistance to even the relatively advantageous terms of the GCC Initiative, we can assume Saleh would have only accepted stricter terms if he believed there was a credible threat of sanctions against him and his family. That threat would have been most effective if delivered in the summer of 2011, when Saleh remained dependent on foreign medical care. Even if Saleh had been able to find ways to evade sanctions (though this would have been harder if the Gulf countries actively opposed such evasion), the travel ban alone would have been catastrophic given the devastating nature of Saleh's injuries. Securing international and regional support for a credible sanctions threat against Saleh in the summer of 2011 would have required quick, decisive U.S. action to build consensus, particularly with Saudi Arabia, which enjoyed significant leverage within Yemen but also with key U.N. Security Council (UNSC) actors like Russia.

While Russian opposition to sanctions and hesitancy among Gulf and European partners to house Saleh presented real policy obstacles, they are the kind of obstacles that can be overcome with effective use of U.S. political capital, particularly given the international consensus at the time regarding Yemen's transition process and the threat posed by Saleh. Leader-level engagement between the United States and Saudi Arabia could have helped secure Saudi support for Saleh's exile, given the alignment between U.S. and Saudi

[64] Peter Salisbury, Interview with the Author, November 28, 2023, virtual.

objectives in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's frustration with Saleh.[65] Saudi Arabia could have then secured Russian support for a sanctions threat—as they did with other sanctions in Yemen after 2015—and helped identify a regional partner willing to house Saleh in exile.

Imposing a sanctions threat on Saleh and demanding his exile would have almost certainly disrupted U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the immediate term, at a time when AQAP was expanding its control in Yemen. Saleh may have formally suspended counterterrorism cooperation in retaliation for U.S. pressure, or simply ceased providing intelligence and other support. Only once Saleh's control over relevant Yemeni military and security forces had eased was such cooperation likely to resume. The process of easing Saleh's control over those forces would have been a long and gradual one, likely taking at least a year to cope with internal power struggles and achieve a sufficient level of command and control necessary to conduct basic counterterrorism cooperation. For comparison, this process would have been much more effective than Hadi's attempt to gain control over security forces over the course of 2012 and 2013. At that point, Saleh was able to use his enormous wealth and continued leadership of Yemen's dominant political party to shore up loyalties within the military and coordinate with others seeking to undermine Hadi.[66] With Saleh in exile, the international community would have been more capable of constraining such behavior, creating a pathway for eventually resuming effective counterterrorism efforts.

Regardless, imposing stricter conditions on Saleh would have required the United States to prioritize Yemen's medium-term stability over short-term counterterrorism objectives. The kind of decisive action needed to seize the window of opportunity in 2011 likely would have required advocacy from a high-level policymaker, such as the national security advisor or secretary of state or one of their close advisors. Shifts in U.S. policy positions do not typically come easily or quickly, especially when there are few good policy options available. The U.S. ambassador at the time assessed that even the U.S. decision to support a transition process in early 2011, which seems like an obvious and essential conclusion in hindsight, was only possible because Brennan understood the strength of internal opposition to Saleh, including from the military, and was capable of pushing a bitter interagency debate forward.[67] Adopting an even more aggressive stance that came with greater costs to high-priority U.S. efforts (namely counterterrorism) in the summer of 2011 would have required even higher-level support, particularly because Brennan, as homeland security advisor, was unlikely to spearhead a policy position that posed such a significant and immediate threat to the counterterrorism efforts that he led. Similarly, mobilizing a series of high-level diplomatic engagements, including leader-level engagements, in the context of extremely limited bandwidth would have required strong senior-level support.

---

[65] Hill, 238-9.

[66] France 24. "Sanaa Airport Closed after Threats from Saleh Allies," April 7, 2012. https://www.france24.com/en/20120407-sanaa-airport-closed-after-threats-saleh-allies-yemen-ahmar-general.

[67] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.

The level of senior-level engagement and proactive planning from policymakers required to pursue the counterfactual policy approach would have been difficult to secure given the level of regional instability and resulting constraints on U.S. bandwidth, but they were not infeasible. With a greater emphasis on forward planning and analysis and limited engagement by senior officials at key moments, it was feasible, however. During the same interagency meetings where the United States affirmed its position on Saleh's departure, officials should have tasked experts with analyzing the implications of various transition agreement terms to inform the U.S. posture going forward. If the United States had adopted an affirmative position on specific terms in the Spring of 2011, including the need for Saleh's exile, it would have given officials already engaged on Yemen, such as Feierstein and Brennan, time to build support from international partners and helped them manage Saleh's attempts to control negotiations. One of the more difficult tasks would have been securing the kind of high-level engagement necessary to quickly forge a proactive, consensus U.S.-Saudi approach to Saleh following the mosque bombing. Given the nature of the decision, this likely would have required engagement by the secretary of state, national security advisor, or even the president with their Saudi counterparts. I detail how these steps could have unfolded in Box 1.

BOX 1: Illustrative steps necessary for the U.S. to pursue the counterfactual policy approach in 2011:

March - April 2011: U.S. Principals conclude Saleh must step down and direct the interagency to conduct a rigorous assessment of a variety of transition agreement terms and the impact on U.S. interests over the short to long term. This assessment confirms that the international community must limit Saleh from political engagement in Yemen in order to enable a transition process and effective control by a new president.

April - May 2011: Senior U.S. officials (including but not limited to Brennan) engage aggressively to secure support from other international partners for this approach and pressure Saleh to accept the terms. Saleh likely continues to resist.

June - July 2011: U.S. principals identify an opportunity to secure Saleh's agreement following the mosque bombing and prior to his return to Yemen. They secure a call between the U.S. president and Saudi king to gain Saudi support, including for a credible sanctions threat and Saleh's exile, building on engagement over the previous months.

August 2011: In the face of a credible threat of U.N. sanctions and his continued dependence on foreign medical care, Saleh accepts a GCC-mediated transition agreement that requires him to accept exile in exchange for immunity and escaping sanctions.

2014 counterfactual

Background and observed U.S. policy in 2014

Following the GCC Initiative and the transition of power from Saleh to Hadi in 2012, Yemen appeared to be—for a time—one of the few Arab Spring success stories. Compared to Syria, Libya, or Egypt, Yemen's NDC presented a bright spot: an inclusive process that brought youth protesters and civil society together with traditional elites to discuss the future of Yemen. The United States was anxious to support this bright spot, mobilizing significant assistance for the NDC and asserting itself as a leading actor in the process.[68] Experts participating in the NDC describe how the energy around the process created a sense of optimism that Yemen could only move forward.[69]

Other analysts, especially those who lived or traveled outside of the capital, warned, however, that international focus and enthusiasm for the NDC blinded the international community to events occurring outside of Sana'a and the five-star hotel hosting the conference.[70] Over the course of the NDC in 2013-14, the Houthis were expanding their control in northern Yemen, the south was becoming increasingly unstable, and there was a surge in AQAP attacks.[71] Outside of the capital, popular support for the NDC was eroding. Hadi's decision to suddenly remove fuel subsidies based on a condition from the International Monetary Fund further aggravated popular frustration, which groups like the Houthis were quick to exploit.[72] The United States was funding efforts to build support and awareness for the NDC around the country, but alongside significant economic and security woes and political grievances that the NDC could not fully address, support continued to wane. The dominant group representing southern Yemen, known as Hirak, had essentially boycotted the NDC because it did not offer a path to sufficient southern autonomy or secession.[73]

After months of debate, the diverse groups represented in the NDC were unable to reach a consensus on the specifics of a future Yemeni state. For this reason, the U.N. convened a smaller group called the "8+8," which included the major political groups but excluded civil society and youth activists, under the rationale that these actors were more likely to reach an actionable consensus. The 8+8 recommended that Yemen adopt a federalist model but similarly demurred on the details of that federal state, including the critical

---

[68] Finn, Tom, "Filling Saleh's Shoes." Foreign Policy Magazine. March 21, 2012. https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/21/filling-salehs-shoes/ Accessed November 3, 2023. https://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2107926-2,00.html.

[69] Paul Williams, Interview with the Author, November 30, 2023, virtual.

[70] Peter Salisbury, Interview with the Author, November 28, 2023, virtual; See also United States Institute of Peace. "Process Lessons Learned in Yemen's National Dialogue." Accessed December 20, 2023. https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/02/process-lessons-learned-yemens-national-dialogue, 5.

[71] Hill, 265

[72] "Yemen Rage Boils over 'Unliveable' Price Hike | News | Al Jazeera." n.d. Accessed June 7, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/8/1/yemen-rage-boils-over-unliveable-price-hike.

[73] Jalal, Ibrahim. "Yemen's Incomplete National Dialogue: Insights on the Design and Negotiations Dynamics." Yemen Policy Center, June 21, 2022. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/yemens-incomplete-national-dialogue/.

question of how power and resources would be divided.[74] The details of this distribution and specifically the federal map were instead decided by a small committee appointed by Hadi. This committee was reportedly directed by Hadi to endorse a six-region federalist map that would dilute the power of both the Houthis and Hirak and directly contradict both groups' demands during the NDC.[75] The Houthi heartland in the north would be combined with the heavily populated region surrounding Yemen's capital. Further, that region would be landlocked, depriving the Houthis of access to a port and the revenue and direct access to imports (including illicit ones) it provided. Hadi's six-region map also divided the south into two, cutting the dominant southern city and former South Yemen capital of Aden off from the lucrative oil resources in the east and undercutting the potential for a gradual transition to a single autonomous or independent southern region. The marginalization of Hirak and the Houthis was clearly intentional; one observer reported that after the map was announced, members of the committee bragged about having thwarted both groups with the six-region structure.[76]

The six-region map was announced in February 2014 to immediate protest.[77] It would be formally codified in the new constitution, which was drafted over the course of 2014 and finalized in January 2015. The Houthis understood that, of all the decisions in Yemen's political transition process, the six-region map posed the most significant threat to them and their future political power. They kidnapped Hadi's chief of staff in January 2015 because he was transporting the draft constitution for ratification, and they believed that doing so would codify the six-region model.[78] This triggered a series of events that led to them putting Hadi under house arrest a week later. The Houthis' initial goal when they placed Hadi under house arrest was the same as it was when they entered Sana'a: not to topple the government but to take control of it from within. The Houthis, having determined Hadi and his six-region approach was a serious threat to them, sought to force Hadi's resignation and create a new, power-sharing ruling council they could more effectively control. The Houthis' approach, of course, shifted when Hadi managed to escape from Sana'a and declared war on the Houthis, but they still refrained from formally declaring a separate government for over a year.[79]

Even at the time, some outside analysts criticized the NDC as serving as political theatre intended to paper over a behind-the-scenes elite bargain over the future of Yemen.[80] In reality, major decisions like the six-region map were not even an elite consensus—they

---

[74] Ibid.

[75] Salisbury, Peter. "Federalism, Conflict and Fragmentation in Yemen." Local Governance in Yemen: Resource Hub. Accessed January 22, 2024. https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1007-federalism-conflict-and-fragmentation-in-yemen, 12.

[76] Paul Williams, Interview with the Author, November 30, 2023, virtual.

[77] Middle East Centre. "Yemen's Negotiated Transition between the Elite and the Street," March 3, 2014. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2014/03/03/yemens-negotiated-transition-between-the-elite-and-the-street/.

[78] Salisbury, 21.

[79] Lackner, Helen. Yemen in Crisis: Road to War. Verso Books, 2019. 63-64.

[80] United States Institute of Peace. "Process Lessons Learned in Yemen's National Dialogue." Accessed December 20, 2023. https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/02/process-lessons-learned-yemens-national-dialogue.

were a unilateral decision by Hadi that was wholly inconsistent with his actual level of influence inside Yemen. Senior U.S. officials were reportedly aware that Hadi's six-region map went too far and was certain to anger the Houthis but were hesitant to push back too strongly for multiple reasons. First, Hadi's map was consistent with U.S. policy aspirations in Yemen: The United States was anxious about the growing Houthi influence and was strongly opposed to southern secession, which would isolate their established partners in Sana'a from the predominant AQAP areas in the south.[81] In other words, U.S. aspirations clouded officials' assessment of what was feasible in Yemen's transition. Second, the United States was anxious to keep the transition process moving forward. The map represented progress on that process and asking Hadi to revise it risked further delays. The United States measured progress in the transition process by predefined and faulty benchmarks: namely a new constitution and elections, rather than a more nuanced assessment of the substance of the process and the viability of the benchmarks themselves. Finally, the United States was sensitive to criticism that it was dictating the terms of Yemen's transition process, though this concern was less credible in the case of the six-region model since the map itself went against conclusions from Yemen's inclusive NDC process.[82]

By mid-2014, the United States had ample evidence that Hadi lacked the political influence to enforce a federal model opposed by both the Houthis and Hirak and that the Houthis were prepared to use force in response. By July 2014, the Houthis had seized control of Amran, just north of Sana'a, including a major military base and the significant arsenal it contained. Despite pressure on Hadi to respond, Hadi declined to mobilize a military response to the Houthi assault on Amran.[83] In doing so, Hadi effectively left the gates to Sana'a open to the Houthis. When the Houthis seized Sana'a in September 2014, almost without opposition, it definitively exposed Hadi's lack of political power. Following the Houthis' seizure, the U.N. negotiated the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), which granted the Houthis new political advisor positions within the government and input on the creation of a new cabinet.[84] The Houthis quickly used the PNPA to assert control, vetoing Hadi's choice of prime minister and placing supervisors in all the major government ministries to monitor operations.[85]

Hadi's inaction in response to the Houthis' assault on Amran in July 2014 was likely motivated by a major miscalculation: Hadi believed the Houthis' assault on Amran was primarily the result of a feud between the Houthis and forces loyal to Ali Mohsin, who had fought against the Houthis in the Sa'adah wars during the 2000s. Hadi also saw Ali Mohsin as a threat and viewed the Houthis as a convenient means to weaken Ali Mohsin and the units of the military loyal to him, failing to understand the Houthis' larger

[81] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview by author, virtual, December 1, 2023.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Salmutter, Kim. "Why Did the Transition Process in Yemen Fail?" Course, Islam and Politics in a Changing Middle East, Sciences Po, Spring 2017, 11.
[84] "The Peace and National Partnership Agreement | UN Peacemaker." Accessed January 11, 2024. https://peacemaker.un.org/yemen-national-partnership-2014.
[85] Lackler, 62-3.

ambitions or Saleh's alliance with them.[86] Mid-level USAID officials were issuing warnings about the Houthi ambitions as early as 2013, both at the embassy and to the NSC, pulling from observations during USAID programming around the country.[87] Senior U.S. officials largely failed to heed these warnings and similarly downplayed the implications of the Houthi assault on Amran. Had U.S. policymakers been more responsive to these warnings, it could have bought the United States a couple months of additional time to assess the trajectory and the most effective U.S. response. Regardless, by September 2014, it should have been clear to U.S. decisionmakers that the Houthis posed a major threat, that Hadi was wholly incapable of forcing the Houthis to accept a federal model that jeopardized the group's political viability, and that Yemen was on the path to an even more violent confrontation as a result. Unfortunately, competing priorities and a narrow focus on counterterrorism and advancing the political transition benchmarks obscured this reality among U.S. policymakers.

Steps necessary to pursue the counterfactual in 2014

While 2014 presented a less obvious inflection point than negotiations around Saleh's resignation and the Saudi request for military support, the 2014 counterfactual was arguably the easiest for the United States to pursue from a policy perspective. The United States had the leverage necessary to press Hadi to adopt a map that avoided direct confrontation with the Houthis and doing so would not have incurred significant costs to other U.S. objectives. As in 2011, the United States also had the evidence needed to anticipate the consequences of a confrontation between Hadi and the Houthis over the federal map by September 2014, leaving them at least three months to take action. However, doing so would have required a more adaptive U.S. policy approach grounded in greater realism and more regular processes for assessing developments on the ground and their impact on U.S. objectives.

International legitimacy and support were Hadi's primary—if not his only—source of power. Saleh had chosen Hadi as his vice president precisely because he lacked his own independent political influence and thus was not a threat. As a southerner, Hadi lacked support from influential northern tribes or other groups. Even in the south, Hadi's influence was crippled by the fact that he fled the south in 1986 after losing a feud with rival factions. His role in the government in the north during the 1994 civil war led many southerners to view him as a traitor.[88] Hadi's dependency on international support may have contributed to his miscalculation with the six-region map: Hadi was so confident in U.S. and international support that he believed they would come to his defense, even in armed conflict.[89] In this way, the six-region map was an illustration of a larger delusion Hadi held at the time that his international support was sufficient to subjugate rival groups and enforce his own vision for a future Yemeni state, absent substantial political

[86] Salmutter, Kim. "Why Did the Transition Process in Yemen Fail?" Course, Islam and Politics in a Changing Middle East, Sciences Po, Spring 2017, 11.
[87] Interview by the Author, former USAID official, November 13, 2023.
[88] Jamestown. "Yemen Without President Ali Abdullah Saleh." Accessed January 22, 2024. https://jamestown.org/program/yemen-without-president-ali-abdullah-saleh/.
[89] Mohamed al Qadhi, interview with the author, December 18, 2023, virtual.

power on the ground. The United States should have been capable of mitigating this delusion.

The criticism of Hadi's six-region map, when it was announced in February 2014, should have prompted an initial U.S. assessment of whether the map was viable and its potential to jeopardize support for the transition process or generate armed conflict. This assessment could have been conducted within the country team at the ambassador's request or in Washington as part of an interagency process. Following the Houthi's capture of Amran and certainly following the Houthis' seizure of Sana'a in September 2014, the United States would have logically updated this assessment and concluded that the map was definitively not viable, given the overwhelming evidence at hand regarding the Houthis' strength, Hadis' relative weakness, and the danger of a confrontation between the two. This should have triggered a formal policy decision to press Hadi to pursue an alternative approach to the federal map and development of a plan for engaging Hadi. Rather than directing a specific alternative to the six-region map, the United States could have pressed Hadi to work with a mediator (the U.N. envoy was highly active at the time) to reach consensus on a federal map that did not pose a direct threat to the Houthis and was consistent with the outcomes of the NDC and Constitutional Drafting Committee. Three months should have been sufficient time to conduct an interagency assessment, reach a policy consensus, and mobilize senior-level engagement.

Given the extent of political capital the United States enjoyed with Hadi, a request from a senior official in Washington regarding the six-region map would not have come with significant trade-offs. It is unlikely that tangible leverage (e.g., threatening to restrict assistance) would have been required. It is highly unlikely Hadi would have reacted to U.S. pressure by reducing counterterrorism cooperation in any way, as he saw this cooperation as essential to his political survival. Instead, clear warnings backed by assessments from the U.S. intelligence community combined with the overwhelming facts on the ground and direct U.S. pressure likely could have gradually convinced Hadi to pursue a different approach, especially because U.S. and Hadi's goals were generally aligned at the time.

While accepting a federal map that offered greater advantages to the Houthis may not have been an ideal outcome for the United States, it would have represented a pragmatic acceptance of the reality on the ground and provided a path to preserving the transition process, much as the United States did when it welcomed the PNPA.[90] This scenario would have allowed the Houthis and Saleh to gradually co-opt and disrupt Yemen's transition process over the course of 2015, including by delaying elections the Houthis were unlikely to win. In the absence of the direct and immediate threat posed by the six-region map, the Houthis and Saleh likely would have avoided drastic steps that could trigger a disruption in the international legitimacy of a government over which they were gradually gaining control. In the absence of such drastic measures, formal military

[90] Sana'a, U. S. Embassy in. "G-10 Statement." U.S. Embassy in Yemen, October 4, 2014. https://ye.usembassy.gov/g-10-statement/.

intervention from Saudi Arabia would have been much less likely. Saudi Arabia would have still taken steps to undermine what they viewed as an Iranian proxy on their southern border but would have lacked the clear legal justification for military intervention. While clearly not ideal, these conditions would have maintained space for negotiations between the parties, thereby averting a major regional conflict that has cemented the Houthis' power to a degree not possible under peacetime conditions, elevated Houthi military capabilities, empowered extremists within the Houthis and other militant groups, and devastated the country.

2015 counterfactual

Background and observed U.S. policy in 2015

By the time Hadi fled Sana'a in February 2015, a major escalation of violent conflict was almost inevitable. The Houthis had formally announced their control over the government in Sana'a, and Saudi Arabia and Hadi had resolved to fight the Houthis.[91] Over the next month, events unfolded rapidly, with the Saudi-led coalition preparing for war and the Houthis moving rapidly to expand their control southward. U.S. policymaking processes were unable to keep pace.

The posture of Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) played an important role in the evolution of the situation in early 2015. In January 2015, MbS was appointed the Saudi minister of defense, after his father became King. MbS saw the Houthis as Hezbollah on the Saudi southern border and sought to act decisively to address the threat. In doing so, he was not only addressing the specific threat posed by the Houthis, but also proving himself as an emerging leader and asserting a new, bolder Saudi foreign policy approach.[92] It was the promise of backing from Saudi Arabia that enabled Hadi to declare war on the Houthis. Saudi Arabia spent much of March engaged in preparations for launching a campaign against the Houthis, including building up a broad regional coalition and seeking support from other key partners, namely the United States. Saudi Arabia began by engaging the U.S. Department of Defense. Later that month, Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel al Jubeir visited the White House to formally request U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition campaign against the Houthis. After just 48 hours of discussions among senior officials and reportedly little debate, the United States decided to support the Saudi campaign.[93]

According to senior White House officials at the time, Saudi Arabia was already committed to launching a campaign against the Houthis by the time Jubeir visited the

[91] Hägglund, Helena. "Yemen's Houthi Rebels Announce Government Takeover." The Guardian, February 6, 2015, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/06/yemen-houthi-dissolves-parliament.
[92] "Saudi Arabia's Big Gamble | The Washington Institute." March 26, 2015. Accessed February 21, 2024. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabias-big-gamble.
[93] Mazzetti, Mark, and Eric Schmitt. "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen." The New York Times, March 13, 2016, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-us.html.

White House.[94] But U.S. support was critical, partly for the logistic and intelligence support but mostly for the sign of international legitimacy and diplomatic top cover the U.S. provided. In an indication of just how important U.S. support was, Saudi Arabia announced the coalition campaign from Washington soon after receiving a positive indication of U.S. support—a fact that led some observers in Yemen to view it as a joint Saudi-U.S. campaign.[95] Shortly thereafter, the United States announced its support for the campaign.[96] Three weeks later, the United States helped Saudi Arabia secure UNSCR 2216 that provided strong support for Saudi efforts to restore Hadi to power and endorsed maximalist objectives for the Saudi-led campaign, namely that the Houthis fully surrender, withdrawal from Sana'a, and hand over their weapons.[97] The terms of UNSCR 2216 complicated negotiation efforts in Yemen for years by setting unrealistic terms for any future agreement. Because the terms were memorialized in a formal U.N. document, they gave the Yemen government and the Saudi-led coalition an excuse to reject calls for negotiations on any lesser terms. Similarly, because the terms were so unacceptable, they gave the Houthis an excuse to reject any negotiations grounded in UNSCR 2216.

Senior U.S. officials describe the speed and assertiveness of the Saudi request, which had the effect of limiting space for strategic U.S. decisionmaking.[98] The comparatively slow U.S. response to deteriorating conditions in Yemen was due in part to the limited focus senior U.S. policymakers placed on Yemen at the time when other priorities dominated U.S. attention to the Middle East, namely negotiations around an Iran nuclear deal. Throughout February and March, the attention the United States did dedicate to Yemen was largely reactive, with even senior officials consumed by tactical measures to evacuate and reconstitute the U.S. Embassy and monitor the safety of American citizens residing in the country.[99]

The U.S. response in 2015 was impeded by a tendency to underestimate the threat posed by the Houthis and disregard evidence that undermined U.S. objectives. Even throughout the spring of 2015 as the Houthis rapidly seized control of Yemen's major cities, many saw the Houthis as a marginal actor—a ragtag militia who had simply exploited chaotic conditions in the country. This contributed to unrealistic U.S. expectations about the prospects for reversing the Houthis' gains.[100] Between 2013 and 2015, the United States

---

[94] Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Yemen Cannot Afford to Wait." The Atlantic (blog), April 5, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/us-culpable-yemens-tragedy/586558/.

[95] "Statement by Saudi Ambassador Al-Jubeir on Military Operations in Yemen | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." Accessed December 27, 2023. https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen.

[96] whitehouse.gov. "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen," March 25, 2015. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/25/statement-nsc-Spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-situation-yemen.

[97] "S/RES/2216 (2015) | United Nations Security Council." Accessed December 27, 2023. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2216-%282015%29-0.

[98] Former NSC Senior Official, interview with the author, Washington, D.C., November 21, 2023.

[99] ABC News. "140 Americans Flee Yemen as Country Sinks Deeper Into Chaos." ABC News. Accessed March 13, 2024. https://abcnews.go.com/International/140-americans-arrived-djibouti-yemen-sinks-deeper-chaos/story?id=30275507.

[100] Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.

was consistently hesitant to acknowledge that Yemen's transition process was faltering, that Hadi lacked effective authority to lead the process, and that the Houthis and Saleh posed a serious threat, demonstrating a pattern whereby the United States struggled to update its policy assumptions, even in the face of glaring evidence. While some officials, including at the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a and USAID, issued warnings about these assumptions, they were not integrated into U.S. policy decisions.[101] If not examined too closely, the Saudi-led campaign provided the United States an easy solution for getting Yemen back on track with U.S. objectives and assumptions about where the country was headed, further exacerbating the tendency to ignore evidence that undermined U.S. interests in Yemen.

The U.S. focus on an emerging Iran nuclear deal also detracted attention from Yemen and led to policy decisions that were expedient for the nuclear deal but not rooted in a careful assessment of what was most conducive for Yemen's stability. Obama saw an Iran nuclear deal as his most significant foreign policy accomplishment in the Middle East after the tumult following the Arab Spring disrupted many of his other ambitions in the region.[102] The Joint Plan of Action (JPA), under which Iran took initial steps to reign in its nuclear program in exchange for limited sanctions relief and a final agreement, was announced in November 2013. When Jubeir requested White House support for the Yemen campaign in March 2015, the administration was finalizing the full agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was ultimately announced in July 2015.[103]

Saudi Arabia was deeply opposed to the JCPOA, arguing that the sanctions relief it provided would lead to an increase in destabilizing Iranian behavior in the region. Saudi Arabia's fear over the prospect of growing Iranian economic power and the absence of any structures in the JCPOA to restrict Iranian regional behavior likely impacted their reaction to the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, as they assessed other proactive steps were needed to constrain Iranian regional influence, especially along Saudi Arabia's long southern border with Yemen.[104] Given the Saudi frustrations with the JCPOA, U.S. officials assessed that opposing the Saudi request for support in their campaign on Yemen could push the U.S.-Saudi relationship to a "breaking point."[105] Amid a "five minutes to midnight" Saudi request, fear of inciting consequences for the imminent JCPOA, and the absence of an alternative U.S. response to the Houthi takeover of Yemen, it would have been very

[101] Interview with former USAID official, November 13, 2023.
[102] Goldberg, Jeffrey. "President Obama: The Middle East Interview." The Atlantic (blog), May 21, 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/obama-interview-iran-isis-israel/393782/.
[103] Vakil, Sanam and Neil Quilliam. The Road to the JCPOA: A Brief History | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank." 2019. October 22, 2019. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/10/getting-new-iran-deal/2-road-jcpoa-brief-history.
[104] Jazeera, Al. "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel Oppose Iran Nuclear Deal." Al Jazeera. Accessed November 20, 2023. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/14/why-saudi-arabia-and-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal.
[105] Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Yemen Cannot Afford to Wait." The Atlantic (blog), April 5, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/us-culpable-yemens-tragedy/586558/ .

difficult for the United States to reject the Saudis' request for support for their Yemen campaign outright.[106]

While U.S. officials may have underestimated the Houthi threat at the time, policymakers—including those most capable of influencing the U.S. response to the Saudi request—were aware that the Saudi campaign lacked a realistic strategy or endgame. By 2015, Brennan had become the director of the CIA, the head of the U.S. agency responsible for anticipating threats and consequences emanating from global events. Brennan reports that he spoke with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) before the war began and found MbS's articulation of the campaign strategy so unrealistic that he recalled, "…wonder[ing] to myself what [MbS] had been smoking."[107] Even after the United States announced its support for the campaign, the commander overseeing the Middle East, General Lloyd Austin, admitted he did not know its goals or objectives.[108] The fact that these concerns from President Obama's top foreign policy advisors were not reflected in the U.S. response to the Saudis illustrates the extent to which U.S. decisionmaking was driven by the JCPOA and Saudi-U.S. bilateral relationship, not consideration of the Saudi campaign's impact on Yemen itself.

The failure of the United States to critically assess feasible outcomes of the Saudi campaign was perhaps most evident during the drafting of UNSCR 2216, which effectively laid out the terms for a Houthi surrender. Despite significant skepticism from leaders within the DoD and CIA regarding the Saudi campaign, the United States had apparently failed to develop its own assessment of what the campaign could viably achieve by mid-April 2015. The United States was heavily involved in the drafting of UNSCR 2216, though the United Kingdom was the formal penholder. A senior official involved in the drafting of the resolution at the time described how several officials realized only when it was too late that the demands for a full Houthi withdrawal and surrender of their weapons would likely make it considerably harder to secure a negotiated agreement.[109] As the summer of 2016 approached, the United States demonstrated an awareness that a negotiated outcome would require a larger role for the Houthis and not frontload Houthi concessions. Following months of dialogue between senior White House and State Department officials, then-Secretary of State John Kerry launched an attempt at mediation that colloquially became known as the "Kerry plan," which had been developed by the White House and State Department. The plan generated some progress, including securing Houthi support for a negotiating framework.

[106] Ibid.
[107] Brennan, 339.
[108] Oakford, Samuel, and Peter Salisbury. "Yemen Is the Graveyard of the Obama Doctrine." The Atlantic (blog), September 23, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/yemen-saudi-arabia-obama-riyadh/501365/.
[109] Former NSC senior official, interview with the author, Washington, D.C., November 21, 2023.

However, after Trump won the 2016 election, Yemeni government negotiators refused to accept any serious compromises to reach a peace deal or even a ceasefire.[110]

Steps necessary to pursue the counterfactual in 2015

Off the three windows of opportunity identified in this analysis, U.S. policy space was arguably most constrained in 2015 and least capable of preventing a major escalation, including both a large-scale civil war and significant regional intervention. In this way, the case of Yemen underscores the importance of engaging early and anticipating the medium-term impacts of U.S. policy on violent conflict.

While the United States' ability to prevent a major escalation of the Yemen conflict in 2015 was limited, a more deliberate U.S. approach in early 2015 could have set the stage for a much earlier negotiated solution to the conflict, greatly reducing the duration and scope of the conflict. In particular, the United States could have caveated its support for the Saudi-led coalition campaign with a request for a viable exit strategy and achievable objectives. Doing so would have required the United States to more quickly challenge its assumptions about the Houthis and expectations for Yemen's transition process in response to evidence on the ground and to prioritize Yemen's stability in the medium term alongside near-term consequences for the JCPOA and U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship.

U.S. leverage with Saudi Arabia was greatest in March 2015, when Saudi Arabia was anxious for the diplomatic top cover provided by U.S. support and before the Saudis had publicly committed to the maximalist objectives of the campaign. Doing so would have also provided the United States with the space to significantly moderate the terms articulated in UNSCR 2216, thereby setting a more realistic foundation for negotiations at some point during 2015 or early 2016 and lowering Saudi Arabia's demands in those negotiations.

The first step to realizing this counterfactual in 2015 would have been a more realistic U.S. assessment of Houthi capabilities and the potential for resuming Yemen's transition process in the initial weeks of 2015. If the United States failed to reassess its assumptions after the Houthi takeover of Amran and Sana'a, it should have done so following the rapid Houthi move southward in early 2015, when the depth of Houthi cooperation with Saleh became clear. This would have left the United States more prepared when Saudi Arabia began engaging the United States about its campaign in March 2015, namely by clarifying that an outright military victory over the Houthis was highly unlikely. Thus, any negotiated agreement would have to include a significant role for the Houthis.

There were limitations to the U.S. ability to anticipate the capabilities of the new Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis. The coalition was in many ways novel, and many of its forces were not tested in this kind of combat. But that very fact should have prompted skepticism from U.S. military analysts, and the comments from Brennan and Austin at the

---

[110] Eric Pelofsky, Former NSC senior director for Yemen, interview with the author, November 21, 2023. And "Kerry Announces Yemen Truce, FM Says 'Not Interested' | Government News | Al Jazeera." Accessed January 11, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/15/kerry-announces-yemen-truce-fm-says-not-interested.

time suggest it did. The precedent that did exist—limited Saudi-Houthi fighting along the border in 2009—failed to demonstrate a decisive Saudi military advantage, even before the Houthis gained access to the government's arsenal and Saleh's ample resources.[111] Additionally, the campaign plan from the beginning was largely limited to an air campaign, with ground fighting outsourced to an assortment of mostly Yemeni forces. This approach, which we can assume was briefed to the U.S. military in March 2015 as part of Saudi consultations with DoD, failed to provide a solution for overcoming the significant military assets and personnel acquired by the Houthis after they seized almost every major military base in Yemen and subsumed the units loyal to Saleh and his patronage network. Again, the U.S. challenge during this period appears to be less an absence of information and more a difficulty of using that information to update ingrained policy assumptions and positions.

While Saudi Arabia began engaging DoD regarding a potential campaign early in March 2015, serious policy conversations regarding the U.S. response only began after Jubeir's visit to the White House at the end of the month.[112] The initial Saudi outreach to DoD should have been sufficient to spark an interagency discussion on the prospect of a Saudi campaign, providing time for the lower-level officials most steeped in Yemen issues and capable of anticipating the likely trajectory of such a campaign to develop recommendations, especially when armed with the updated policy assumptions noted above. Traditional NSC processes begin with experts at lower levels, with the conclusions from these discussions documented into the papers and decision points crafted for progressively more senior NSC-led meetings, up to the level of the president or national security advisor. Reports suggest the discussions that did occur in late March 2015 were more informal and occurred amid a smaller group of officials, as is often the case with rapid decisions.[113]

An NSC process initiated earlier in March 2015 and that followed this traditional structure would have been more likely to incorporate considerations of the medium-term impacts of the Saudi-led campaign on Yemen, alongside short-term policy priorities already on the minds of decisionmakers, namely the JCPOA and U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship. In doing so, it may have resulted in clearer caveats to U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign and a U.S. plan for pivoting to a negotiated settlement.

While the Saudis may have balked at any caveats to U.S. support and may have amplified their public criticism of the JCPOA in response, this relatively moderate approach likely would not have resulted in major or irreversible consequences for the U.S.-Saudi bilateral

---

[111] Boucek, Christopher, and Marina Ottaway, eds. Yemen on the Brink. Brookings Institution Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wpjfk.

[112] Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Yemen Cannot Afford to Wait." The Atlantic (blog), April 5, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/us-culpable-yemens-tragedy/586558/.

[113] Former NSC Senior Official, interview with the author, Washington, D.C., November 21, 2023; Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Yemen Cannot Afford to Wait." The Atlantic (blog), April 5, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/us-culpable-yemens-tragedy/586558/; Mazzetti, Mark, and Eric Schmitt. "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen." The New York Times, March 13, 2016, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-us.html.

relationship or prevented continued progress on JCPOA negotiations. Still, reaching this more moderate policy consensus would have been difficult. The Saudi request touched on two of the highest U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East: the stability of a bilateral relationship that had underpinned the U.S. role in the Middle East for decades and Obama's most significant foreign policy accomplishment in the region. It is extremely difficult for considerations related to a country like Yemen, which rarely ranks among top U.S. foreign policy priorities and was at best a third-tier priority at the time, to secure space in a senior policy conversation related to such high-level priorities. Doing so likely would have required a more regularized process for anticipating the medium-term consequences of major U.S. policy decisions and a deeper appreciation for conflict prevention principles.

Learning from the Yemen case: Reforms to unlock more effective prevention and the role of the GFA

Between 2011 and 2015, three major trends characterized the U.S. failure to seize windows of opportunity for preventing or mitigating the Yemen war:

1. The challenge of weighing medium-term consequences of a policy decision alongside short-term costs, especially when short-term costs were associated with pressing policy priorities.[114]
2. An adaptability challenge, namely the difficulty of updating U.S. assumptions in a sufficiently timely manner during dynamic periods, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, in part due to a bias toward wishful thinking.
3. Insufficient high-level attention and bandwidth dedicated to Yemen even during periods of crisis, which compounded the adaptability challenge by undermining decisive U.S. policy action.

The reforms and processes currently associated with the Global Fragility Act (GFA) are insufficient to overcome these three challenges. Doing so would require far greater policymaker buy-in to the GFA and the principles of conflict prevention, more responsive Washington-based policy processes in priority countries, and a reimagining of how the GFA approaches learning and adaptation.

The GFA was passed in 2019 and represents an ambitious attempt to learn from past U.S. experiences in fragile settings, including Iraq and Afghanistan. The legislation authorized dedicated funding for assistance programs and mandated that the administration develop an integrated strategy and select at least five pilot countries for implementation.[115] The GFA and the resulting U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS),

---

[114] The Fragility Study Group also acknowledged this as a persistent challenge to the U.S. response to crises: Burns, William, Michele Flournoy, and Nancy Lindborg. "U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility." Fragile States Study Group, September 2016, 8.

[115] "22 USC Ch. 105: GLOBAL FRAGILITY." n.d. Accessed January 22, 2024. https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title22/chapter105&edition=prelim, 9803-4.

stress three core principles: the need for a more adaptive U.S. approach in fragile settings, the need for strong coordination across diplomatic, defense, and development interventions, and the need for longer-term planning. The administration released its strategy, the SPCPS, in December 2020 and implementation in the pilot countries began in March 2022 and is intended to last 10 years.[116] While it is still at an early stage, the SPCPS is already supporting reforms to U.S. foreign assistance in the pilot countries that could improve the effectiveness and efficiency of U.S. aid programs. However, its ability to shape U.S. diplomatic engagement and all relevant defense tools is limited. Further, the SPCPS currently lacks the authorities, resources, and structures necessary to change the broader U.S. foreign policy approach in the pilot countries, constraining its ability to meaningfully shape the trajectory of conflict in those countries.[117] The SPCPS currently provides the following tools in the pilot countries:

- Processes to encourage stronger coordination and information sharing between USAID, State Department, and DoD staff in the pilot country embassies.
- Space to conduct longer-term planning via the ten-year country plans.
- A process for evaluating U.S. programs and processes in the pilot countries at the country team level (the monitoring, evaluation, and learning, or MEL frameworks).
- Additional programmatic resources, typically $10-15 million per country in Economic Support Funds (ESF).[118]

During each window of opportunity, the core principles of the GFA were relevant to the U.S. ability to prevent or mitigate the escalation of conflict in Yemen: Across all scenarios, the principle of more adaptive U.S. policy was essential to the U.S. ability to mitigate emerging threats. In two of the scenarios, the focus on stronger interagency coordination and longer-term planning also could have been helpful. However, the way all three of those principles are currently being applied within the SPCPS would have been insufficient to enable the United States to seize the identified windows of opportunity (see Table 1). It is worth noting that the additional programmatic resources provided by the GFA, which is the most tangible element of the GFA and continues to be seen by some as the defining aspect of the initiative, would not have been impactful in any of the identified scenarios. In the following sections, I will assess the role of each of these principles in the Yemen case and the impact of existing GFA processes in greater detail.

---

[116] United States Department of State, "United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability: Country and Regional Plans," March 24, 2023, https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability-country-and-regional-plan-summaries/.

[117] For more information on the GFA and the SPCPS, see forthcoming paper: Minor, Allison, "Implementing prevention: A practical guide to improving the U.S. approach to violent conflict in a changing World. The Brookings Institution.

[118] ESF is a type of funding that can be used for a range of foreign assistance programs to support economic development objectives in a country but cannot be used for diplomatic or defense activities or standard government operational expenditures. See: Congressional Research Service. "Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations: A Guide to Component Accounts." May 2023. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R40482, 11.

Table 1. Summary of GFA impact on U.S. windows of opportunity to shape the Yemen conflict

U.S. window of opportunity	Stronger interagency coordination with embassies	Longer-term planning via 10-year strategies	Embassy MEL process for programs and processes	$10-15 million additional program funding
2011: U.S. influence over the terms of Saleh's resignation	Embassy likely unable to shape U.S. policy given strong CT priorities, good coordination already existed, and information sharing was not the challenge.	Greater consideration of medium-term consequences needed, but 10-year country plan not an effective means for addressing a highly dynamic situation with nearer-term consequences.	Existing GFA MEL process not equipped to question U.S. policy positions, which is what was necessary in 2011, and would not have been sufficiently timely.	No impact: foreign assistance not an effective tool to change elite decisionmaking.
2014 – U.S. ability to discourage Hadi from pursuing an approach to federalism that put him in direct conflict with the Houthis	Stronger interagency coordination may have improved understanding of the Houthi threat earlier, but the threat became obvious regardless by September 2014 and still failed to result in a change in U.S. policy.	Not relevant, as the threat was in the short term.	Existing GFA MEL process not equipped to question U.S. policy positions, which is what was necessary in 2014 and would not have been sufficiently timely.	Existing U.S. assistance helped identify the threat posed by the Houthis, but itself was not capable of addressing the threat and policymakers did not heed the warnings.
2015 – U.S. response to Saudi request for support for its military campaign in Yemen	Stronger NSC-led interagency coordination may have resulted in an earlier, more formal policy process, but coordination within the embassy alone insufficient, especially given the flux in the embassy team at the time.	Greater consideration of medium-term consequences needed, but 10-year country plan not useful in the context of a rapid and unexpected Saudi request.	Less relevant in the context of a wholly new policy questions (support for a Saudi offensive), but a learning process that challenged our assumptions about the Houthis and status of the transition process in 2014 would have been helpful.	Not relevant: non-humanitarian assistance was paused and nature of U.S. influence during this window was beyond the scope of foreign assistance.
Key: Yellow indicates that the principle could have been impactful if implemented differently; Red indicates no impact in the given situation.				

Learning and adaptation

Between 2011 and 2015, the United States consistently failed to align its policy with emerging threats, even when those threats were acknowledged by policymakers or were otherwise obvious. In 2011, the United States failed to sufficiently anticipate the threat Saleh would pose to any transition process and adjust its approach accordingly, even though the two leading policymakers on Yemen at the time reported knowing that Saleh would do whatever he could to regain power.[119] In 2014, the United States failed to anticipate that Hadi's six-region map would put him in a direct conflict with the Houthis that he would undoubtedly lose, even after the Houthis had taken over the capital, exposing Hadi's lack of effective power. The U.S. failure to anticipate the threat posed by the Houthis even in the face of overwhelming evidence continued in March 2015 and contributed to the U.S. failure to grasp the consequences of their response to the Saudi request for support for their campaign.

These failures stem in part from a bias toward wishful thinking: Optimism over Yemen's transition process combined with a hesitancy to acknowledge the extent of a new threat (the Houthis) consistently led the United States to adopt policy positions that aligned with a more friendly reality than the actual reality in Yemen at the time, which is a world where Yemen could undergo a major transition without any meaningful consequences for U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Yemen's existing elites; a world in which Hadi could banish the threat to U.S. objectives posed by both the Houthis and southern secessionists, absent any real power or influence on the ground; and a world in which an untested Saudi air force could somehow force a Houthi surrender after the Houthis had captured most of Yemen's military assets and proven themselves to be a formidable fighting force.

Overcoming this failure to acknowledge and/or react to emerging threats would have been difficult, especially with the level of resources and senior-level attention dedicated to Yemen at the time. It would have required a commitment to combining persistent reassessment of changing dynamics inside of Yemen with a serious review of existing and new U.S. policy decisions, including to learn from decisions that had not worked in the past. The current approach to learning and adaptation within the SPCPS falls short of this goal.

The GFA's learning and adaptation agenda is currently being realized through monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) frameworks. This data-focused effort is framed as measuring success and includes the development of detailed MEL frameworks along the lines of those typically used to monitor outcomes of USAID development projects.[120] MEL data collection will occur every few years, and embassies are encouraged but not required to hold annual pause and reflect sessions to assess progress.[121] The MEL

---

[119] Brennan, 342; Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023.
[120] United States Department of State. "U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability." Accessed January 5, 2024. https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/, 21-22.
[121] Interview with state Department Official, February 29, 2024, Washington, D.C.

process is being implemented via the same contractors who monitor USAID projects in the pilot countries and a handful of other experts at USAID and the State Department. The SPCPS MEL process differs from standard development assistance project monitoring in that it also includes process indicators for how the U.S. bureaucracy is working.[122]

The MEL process has struggled to incorporate indicators on foreign policy tools beyond development assistance, however, particularly diplomatic engagement. Even more importantly, the MEL frameworks are not currently designed to interrogate major U.S. policy positions (e.g., the terms around Saleh's resignation).[123] In other words, these MEL frameworks assess some aspects of how the United States is executing a given policy, rather than whether that policy is appropriate in the often-dynamic contexts of fragile countries, and which certainly characterized Yemen between 2011 and 2015.

Embassy-led pause and reflect processes may provide more effective platforms for reassessing the U.S. approach in the pilot countries than the formal monitoring and evaluation frameworks. While there are no requirements for these sessions, they could provide greater flexibility to examine U.S. policy positions and use of tools beyond development assistance, if ambassadors prioritize the processes and empower staff. Some of the GFA country plans commit to holding annual scenario planning exercises that could provide valuable strategic foresight tools for assessing the U.S. policy posture, and one acknowledges that more frequent sessions may be required in response to major events or inflection points.[124] At the time of writing, only one of the GFA pilot cases has conducted a pause and reflect session, so it is too soon to draw conclusions about the nature and capabilities of these sessions. However, the foreign-assistance-focused nature of GFA implementation thus far suggests these processes will also focus on assessing U.S. assistance projects, rather than U.S. policy decisions.

In addition to their limited scope, weak feedback loops between the embassy-led GFA MEL processes and policy and resource decisions in Washington would have constrained their impact in the Yemen case. Even if an embassy-led pause and reflect process had managed to overcome these limitations in the scope of the MEL frameworks and concluded that the United States needed to adapt its approach to Saleh in 2011, it is unlikely that would have resulted in a change in U.S. policy. The decision to prepare sanctions against Saleh and accept near-term consequences to U.S. counterterrorism efforts was only something senior White House officials could push through. It would have required an NSC-led process with support from the national security advisor and cooperation from the DoD and the intelligence community. In the case of Yemen, where

---

[122] U.S. Department of State, 21-22.

[123] Interview with State Department Official, October 26, 2023, virtual.

[124] U.S. Department of State, "The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Plan for Papua New Guinea 2022-2032," March 2024, https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/, 33.
U.S. Department of State, "The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Plan for Coastal West Africa 2022-2032," March 2024, https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/, 35.
U.S. Department of State, "The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability 10-Year Plan for Libya 2022-2032," March 2024, https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/, 25.

the U.S. approach was consistently being shaped by U.S. counterterrorism policy, Saudi policy, and Iran policy, the influence of a U.S. ambassador to Yemen over major decisions impacting those policies would be limited. In general, an ambassador's influence over policy or resource decisions is further constrained when those decisions involve equities from agencies beyond the State Department. By containing learning and adaptation processes to the embassy, current GFA processes reduce opportunities for buy-in from decisionmakers in Washington and undermine the ability to implement meaningful changes to the U.S. approach.

Additionally, embassy staff are sometimes susceptible to the bias toward wishful thinking that can reduce U.S. responsiveness to emerging threats. Those working on the NDC admit falling prey to this bias during 2013-14, which almost certainly impacted their resolve to keep pushing the transition process forward, even when it was clear Hadi's approach was flawed and dangerous.[125] It is human nature that those implementing a given task will be most likely to retain optimism about its prospects and assume that they can manage constraints—doing so is necessary to maintaining momentum. Those staff may also have bureaucratic or political incentives to provide positive reports on the task to their superiors. Both those tendencies run counter to an effective learning process and are precisely why evaluations are typically tasked to empowered, independent actors. In the case of Yemen, the intelligence community may have had the tools and training needed to help overcome such biases. The intelligence community's role in the SPCPS more broadly and in the learning and adaptation processes in particular is currently limited, however.

Finally, an annual pause and reflect process and semi-annual evaluations would have been insufficient in Yemen during this period, given the pace of change occurring in the country and the imperative to quickly adapt U.S. policy in response. The United States had just nine months between the major escalation of popular protests in Yemen and the signing of the GCC Initiative, less than four months between the Houthi takeover of Sana'a and the finalization of the draft constitution, and six months between the Sana'a takeover and the Saudi request for military support. A rigid timeline and structure for learning and adaptation almost certainly would have failed to capture these fairly rapid windows for adapting U.S. assumptions, shifting corresponding policy positions, and implementing those policies.

In summary, the current GFA approach to learning and adaptation lacks the kind of feedback loops with policymaking, responsiveness, and focus on U.S. policy positions that would have been required to overcome the adaptation challenges that undermined U.S. efforts in Yemen between 2011 and 2015. A more effective learning and adaptation approach capable of responding to dynamic conditions on the ground would need to be more flexible and comprehensive, integrate the tools of the intelligence community, and enjoy support and leadership from the NSC, as the body responsible for coordinating U.S.

[125] Paul Williams, Interview with the author, November 30, 2023, virtual.

policy processes. Programmatic-focused MEL and structured metrics could play a role in such an approach, but they should not be the primary element.

Stronger interagency coordination

Interagency coordination can take many forms, including better information sharing between different agencies regarding their activities, formal and informal means of collaboration between agencies to leverage their unique expertise and tools, and formal interagency policymaking processes managed by the NSC. The SPCPS has primarily focused on improving coordination within the embassies in the pilot countries. While coordination structures have also been established in Washington—namely the GFA Secretariat—these are largely focused on managing Congressionally mandated processes and other procedural elements of the initiative.

Gaps in interagency coordination were most impactful in Yemen during the 2015 window of opportunity. In that instance, the lack of an earlier, more formal policymaking process around Saudi plans to launch a military campaign may have contributed to the U.S. failure to consider the consequences of unrestricted U.S. support on Yemen's stability (alongside the pressing policy imperatives of the JCPOA and U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship). In this instance, the gap was not necessarily information sharing or informal collaboration: The evidence of Houthi military capabilities was apparent to all between September 2014 and February 2015. The challenge was translating that evidence into U.S. policy decisions around the Saudi-led campaign via formal policymaking processes.

Unfortunately, the GFA has not resulted in significant changes to NSC policymaking processes in most of the pilot countries, so there is little reason to believe it would have resulted in an earlier, more formal NSC process related to the Saudi military campaign plans in the spring of 2015 or altered the steps the United States took in March 2015.[126] NSC involvement in GFA implementation has been limited to date, and the attention the NSC has dedicated to the GFA has come from the functional directorate focused on international development (The Directorate for Development, Global Health, and Humanitarian Response), which does not have authority over policymaking processes in the pilot countries.[127]

In general, stronger field-based information-sharing and collaboration practices can significantly enhance existing U.S. efforts while reducing potential duplication. They are unlikely to alter the U.S. strategic approach unless they are complemented by and have effective feedback loops with strong interagency coordination in Washington and responsive NSC-coordinated policymaking processes, however. It is feasible that the stronger information-sharing practices the SPCPS has enabled within embassies could have alerted the United States to the threat posed by the Houthis earlier during the 2014 window of opportunity, prior to the Houthi takeover of Sana'a. USAID officials reported warnings of this threat both within Washington and at the embassy, based on information

[126] forthcoming paper: Minor, Allison, "Implementing prevention: A practical guide to improving the U.S. approach to violent conflict in a changing World. The Brookings Institution. 30.
[127] Interview with State Department official, October 26, 2023.

from their programming. However, this was unlikely to result in any change in U.S. policy regarding Hadi's approach to federalism, as the United States failed to adjust its approach during the four-month period between the Houthis' takeover of Sana'a—when the threat had clearly presented itself—and when Hadi moved to finalize the draft constitution.

Changing policies that impact multiple U.S. agencies with their own complex bureaucracies and equities is often a herculean effort that requires close collaboration among the working-level officials in Washington most deeply involved in day-to-day implementation and support from their senior bosses, who are most capable of pushing new policy decisions forward amid the inevitable obstacles they face. The dynamic nature of fragile countries—like Yemen between 2011 and 2015—means these processes need to be much more responsive and efficient than the processes used on more stable portfolios. Even though there was an active NSC policy process and strategy on Yemen during this period, it was not capable of triggering the kind of policy changes necessary to prevent escalation.

The example of Yemen in March 2015 highlights additional risks associated with strengthening field-based country coordination structures without supporting parallel structures in Washington. Between January and March 2015, the U.S. Embassy team was in disarray following escalating evacuations, which culminated with the closure of the embassy and the departure of all staff in February 2015. Throughout the first half of 2015, most embassy staff were consumed by the myriad bureaucratic tasks associated with closing an Embassy and setting up new structures, with many of them uprooted and living out of hotels.[128] This meant that any benefits that might have accrued as a result of improved country team coordination under the GFA were likely to have limited benefit during this crucial period. Unfortunately, the experience of Yemen in early 2015 was not unique. Since 2021, at least 14 countries have been under ordered departures, including three where embassy operations were suspended entirely.[129] These ordered departures happen in precisely the kinds of countries targeted by the GFA, including one GFA pilot country. If GFA structures are not resilient against such critical periods, it may significantly reduce their effectiveness for conflict prevention and mitigation. A more effective approach to bolstering interagency coordination in GFA pilot countries must also focus on improving coordination among the officials in Washington responsible for overseeing U.S. policy in the pilot countries and strengthening feedback loops with formal NSC-led policymaking processes.

[128] ABC News. "Americans Evacuate Yemen, Rebels Commandeer Their Cars." Accessed March 12, 2024. https://abcnews.go.com/International/americans-evacuate-yemen-rebels-commandeer-cars-weapons/story?id=28900439.

[129] These countries include Haiti, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Ukraine, Chad, Sudan, China, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Iraq, Burma, Afghanistan, and Belarus. Embassy operations were suspended in Belarus, Sudan, and Afghanistan. See https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html/ for further information.

Longer-term planning

The ability to weigh short-term imperatives against medium-term consequences was a persistent challenge undermining U.S. efforts in Yemen between 2011 and 2015. The hallmark of the current SPCPS approach to longer-term planning is the ten-year country plans. While framed as iterative documents, in practice, these have operated as static documents, and it remains unclear how they will be updated over time. It took embassies a year to draft and clear the country plans, and two years to finalize and release a public version. Practically speaking, it is simply not feasible to regularly update documents rooted in such a formal, time-consuming process. These country plans would not have helped overcome the Yemen policy challenge of considering medium-term consequences. The horizon for medium-term consequences for U.S. interests in the Yemen case was typically one to three years. Anticipating the impact of U.S. policy ten years out would have been an extremely difficult exercise in a context as dynamic as Yemen. For example, a ten-year strategy developed in 2010, before popular protests broke out and when the primary U.S. objective was supporting Saleh's regime to counter AQAP, would have been of little use to policymakers even in 2011, let alone by 2014 or 2015. Further, the idea of weighing decisions against an objective ten years away would be too abstract of an exercise for officials facing very tough, tangible, immediate trade-offs.

In contrast, the medium-term consequences of U.S. decisionmaking in Yemen between 2011-15 were both tangible and foreseeable at the time of relevant U.S. decisionmaking. All were realized within the span of a single administration: 1) Saleh's toppling of Yemen's peaceful transition process occurred three years following the GCC Initiative, 2) a direct confrontation between Hadi and the Houthis that Hadi was doomed to lose occurred less than a year after Hadi's six-region federal proposal was announced, and 3) a Saudi quagmire in Yemen that generated reputational consequences for the United States and exacerbated instability and humanitarian need in Yemen had manifested within a year following the Saudi request for support for the campaign.

It was not long-term thinking that the United States needed in Yemen between 2011 and 2015, but rather the ability to think beyond the immediate term. The idea of a ten-year strategy, while useful as a planning exercise, was not helpful in the kind of policymaking processes that had the greatest impact on U.S. ability to prevent or mitigate conflict in Yemen. In fact, any ten-year plan in Yemen would have likely been so disconnected from the realities of policymaking in Yemen at any given point that it may have even undermined the principle of longer-term planning in the minds of policymakers.

It is human nature to weigh near-term costs or gains more heavily than uncertain future ones. This tendency is often exacerbated by the fact that U.S. officials are often working in constrained policy environments with few good options and imperatives to act quickly. A ten-year country plan is not an effective tool for overcoming these tendencies. Instead, more practical, flexible processes are needed that challenge policymakers to consider the implications of major decisions or events on U.S. interests within manageable timeframes. If they are better integrated into policymaking processes in Washington, the scenario

planning exercises that some GFA pilot countries have committed to could provide a useful tool for medium-term planning.

Role of foreign assistance

U.S. foreign assistance did not play a significant role in any of the three windows of opportunity identified in this case study. We can safely assume that an additional $10-15 million in foreign assistance funding provided by the GFA would have been incapable of shaping the conflict trajectory, particularly because it represented a relatively small fraction of the U.S. foreign assistance budget in Yemen. This is not to say that U.S. foreign assistance itself was not impactful for Yemenis, or that foreign assistance cannot play an important role in conflict prevention, but rather that its relevance as a conflict prevention tool in this instance was limited, and the impact of U.S. foreign assistance under any circumstances is dictated by the policy environment it exists within.

In general, foreign assistance is most impactful during structural conflict prevention: shaping a community's resilience to conflict or the likelihood of shocks that can trigger conflict. Doing so is a long-term endeavor. In the case of Yemen, much of these investments would have needed to occur well before 2011, when the country entered a period of major instability. The windows of opportunity examined in this case study are largely forms of operational prevention: shaping the decisionmaking of elite actors related to the use of violence. Foreign assistance can be a source of leverage during these periods (e.g., promising additional assistance as a carrot or withdrawing assistance as a stick), but such leverage was not relevant during the three windows of opportunity identified in Yemen: Surging or restricting foreign assistance would have had limited impact on Saleh in 2011 since the demand was that he step down from the position that allowed him to personally benefit directly or indirectly from such assistance. In 2014, additional leverage was not important, given the ample leverage the United States already enjoyed with Hadi. Finally, in 2015, the conflict actors in question were Saudi, not Yemeni, and all U.S. non-humanitarian assistance to Yemen had been paused regardless.

Foreign assistance can also be a valuable tool for informing U.S. efforts during periods of operational prevention. Harnessing this tool is inherently a policy challenge, however, not a foreign assistance challenge. For example, if USAID's community outreach on the NDC during 2013 had enjoyed stronger feedback loops with decisionmaking and influence over policy, it could have led the United States to push back against the most overt forms of elite capture of the process, decreasing popular frustration with the process that the Houthis exploited in their takeover of Sana'a. Enhancing or surging USAID assistance during this period was not the issue; the issue was establishing those feedback loops. There are structural impediments to such feedback loops. Those who oversee assistance are often separated from policymakers by several bureaucratic layers and speak a different jargon. Policymakers—whether senior State Department foreign service officers or political appointees—typically have little to no training on how foreign assistance works, leading them to discount its usefulness as a tool or the information it garners. While stronger country team coordination under the GFA can begin to remove some of

those bureaucratic layers, more structural changes are likely necessary to durably remove the divisions that constrain the impact of foreign assistance and its role in informing U.S. foreign policy.

At both the structural and operational stages, the impact of foreign assistance is ultimately shaped by the policy-enabling environment within which it exists. During 2011, U.S. assistance was still centered around bolstering the capabilities of Saleh's government to counter AQAP, including by stabilizing those areas most vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. As such, it was simply not equipped to help respond to a popular protest movement or support the development of a transition process. If U.S. security assistance prior to 2011 had been focused on professionalization of Yemen's military and reducing the role of elite forces that can be most easily co-opted, it would have significantly reduced both the tools available to spoilers like Saleh and constraints on U.S. policy in 2011 while empowering Yemen's democratically elected leaders. In other words, the obstacles to the United States' ability to seize windows of opportunity to mitigate the Yemen conflict were not foreign assistance problems; they were policy problems.

For these reasons, it is essential that any conflict prevention initiative avoid the tendency to focus primarily on foreign assistance, rather than a more comprehensive change in the U.S. strategic approach. Unfortunately, the GFA has fallen prey to this tendency, with many in the U.S. government viewing the GFA as a foreign assistance initiative and in some cases equating it solely with the small funding account authorized in the GFA.[130] The case of Yemen between 2011 and 2015 underscores that doing so will almost certainly set the GFA up for failure.

[130] forthcoming paper: Minor, Allison, "Implementing prevention: A practical guide to improving the U.S. approach to violent conflict in a changing World. The Brookings Institution. 19-20

Conclusions

Nearly ten years after the Yemen conflict began, the policy consequences of the Yemen conflict for the United States are acute: The U.S. Navy is engaged in a maritime battle against the Houthis that officials say is the largest since World War II.[131] In the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict, Houthi attacks risk triggering a wider Middle East war and are jeopardizing the principle of freedom of navigation in ways that have both immediate and longer-term consequences globally.[132] It is important at this stage for U.S. policymakers to reflect on the fact that these consequences were avoidable. There were multiple, viable opportunities for the United States to prevent or mitigate the Yemen war between 2011 and 2015. This should serve as a reminder of the importance of preventative action.[133]

One must be specific about the levers the United States has to prevent conflict in foreign countries. Overly ambitious, broad assumptions about the U.S. ability to transform societies have fueled countless policy failures in crisis-prone countries—but those failures should not blind policymakers to the specific forms of U.S. influence that do exist. This case study provides an example of such levers and how to identify them, especially at the operational prevention stage.

This case study also provides guidance on what is needed for effective preventative action. In particular, it underscores the importance of a more adaptive, responsive, and forward-looking foreign policy approach. Seizing the windows of opportunity for the U.S. to shape the trajectory of conflict in Yemen was never easy. In the three windows I identified, the United States needed to be much better at weighing medium-term consequences alongside short-term imperatives, adapting U.S. assumptions and policy approaches in response to changing conditions, and mobilizing the high-level attention needed for decisive U.S. policy action.

The factors that did not impact the U.S. ability to prevent the Yemen conflict are also instructive. Many conflict prevention initiatives focus on foreign assistance, implying that aid is the most impactful foreign policy tool. This is the case with the GFA, despite its ambition to also integrate diplomatic and defense tools. The Yemen case study underscores that shaping the trajectory of conflict demands changing the U.S. foreign policy posture and policymaking processes, not how the United States wields individual tools like foreign assistance. That policy posture includes the decisions the United States makes during major inflection points and how it weighs competing policy priorities. Further, it illustrates that rigid procedures like the ten-year country strategies or MEL frameworks are often not effective means for changing the U.S. approach, especially in highly dynamic and unpredictable settings like Yemen. Given the diversity of different

---

[131] O'Donnell, Norah. 2024. "Navy Counters Houthi Red Sea Attacks in Its First Major Battle at Sea of the 21st Century - CBS News." February 18, 2024. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/navy-counters-houthi-red-sea-attacks-in-its-first-major-battle-at-sea-of-21st-century-60-minutes-transcript/.

[132] Minor, Allison. "How the Houthis Joined the Israel-Gaza Crisis." January 31, 2024. The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-houthis-joined-the-israel-gaza-crisis/

[133] Minor, Allison. 2024. "Implementing prevention: A practical guide for improving the US approach to violent conflict in a changing world." https://www.brookings.edu/articles/implementing-prevention/.

fragile settings—including the nature of U.S. influence, the drivers of conflict, and the pace at which conflict emerges, dictating such time-consuming, standardized processes may itself be a flawed approach.

Seizing the windows of opportunity the United States had to prevent the Yemen conflict required more systemic reforms that confronted the political and bureaucratic impediments to preventative action. I argue that a calibrated crisis prevention approach could help accomplish this goal: Narrow, more strategic targeting of prevention efforts around a compelling national security rationale can help secure the necessary support from foreign policy leaders; centering implementation around creating adaptive, responsive policymaking processes can help overcome the tendency to projectize initiatives and ensure the United States is prepared to seize the brief windows of opportunity that emerge; and a focus on operational resources can provide the appropriate incentives and tools necessary to sustain buy-in and support those responsive processes. For more information on these recommendations, please see my paper, "Implementing prevention: A practical guide for improving the U.S. approach to violent conflict in a changing world."

The Yemen case is not unique. It typifies the ways in which violent conflicts can threaten U.S. national security interests even when they occur in countries that are not traditional U.S. foreign policy priorities: They are used by revisionist actors to threaten the United States and the rules-based international order, they exhaust U.S. military, diplomatic, and financial bandwidth, and they undermine specific U.S. priorities such as global trade. While the level of U.S. influence and the specific levers it has to shape the trajectory of conflict will vary, the impediments to using those levers are likely to be similar. For this reason, the U.S. failure to prevent the Yemen conflict can provide valuable lessons for the many other crises around the corner.

BROOKINGS

1775 Massachusetts Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 797-6000
www.brookings.edu