

# Trump's Strategy in Yemen amid Shifting Dynamics in the Middle East

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## Introduction:-

On November 6, 2024, Donald Trump was declared the winner of the U.S. presidential election, defeating Vice President Kamala Harris by a significant margin. This victory marks his return to the White House after losing to Joe Biden in 2020. His win comes during ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, including attacks by Houthi group on international maritime routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Trump's first presidency from 2017 to 2021 gives some insight into his approach to Middle Eastern affairs. These include his policies toward Iran, the Gulf States, and the Houthis in Yemen. However, his recent nominations of government officials suggest that his policies during this term may change. The Houthis are likely to remain a key focus in Trump's Middle Eastern strategy. His handling of the Red Sea crisis and the supposed war against the Houthis will be a key indicator of his broader policies for the region and the world.

### This study examines four main themes:

First - :Trump's policy towards Yemen during his first term (2017–2021).

Second - :New developments during the Biden administration and the change in regional dynamics.

Third - :The outlines of Trump's potential policies in the Middle East.

Fourth - :Predictions about Trump's strategy for Yemen.

### First: Trump's Yemen Policy (2017–2021)

During his presidency from 2017 to ,2021 Donald Trump did not prioritize Yemen as a part of his foreign policy agenda .His approach to Yemen was closely tied to the broader strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East :focusing on counterterrorism ,strengthening ties with regional allies—particularly Saudi Arabia—and isolating Iran .This approach continued the trend of viewing Yemen's issues narrowly through the lens of Gulf Cooperation Council )GCC (relations and counterterrorism ,ignoring lessons from previous administrations.

Jared Kushner ,Trump's senior advisor and son-in-law ,heavily influenced the administration's Middle East policy .However ,Kushner's attention was directed toward initiatives like Arab-Israeli normalization deals and Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts ,which left Yemen as a low priority .Although Kushner occasionally commented on resolving the Yemen crisis ,he lacked a cohesive strategy to address it ,further marginalizing the issue within the administration's agenda ,overshadowed by other regional objectives.

The rise of a central figure leading U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East without having full authority over the administration's team resulted in negative consequences. Gulf States quickly realized that Jared Kushner had centralized control over Middle East policy within his domain. This has hampered broader diplomatic efforts, including an attempt by former Under Secretary of State Tom Shannon to bring the Yemen stakeholders back together for informal talks, which ultimately failed in part for this reason.[1]

The Trump administration's policy towards Yemen (2017-2021) can be summarized as follows:

### •Military Support:

Trump administration supported the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthis, reversing some of the decisions made by Barack Obama's administration. Trump reinstated the supply of arms and military equipment to the coalition, in addition to providing intelligence and logistical support.

In April, 2019 Trump vetoed a congressional resolution that would have ended U.S. support for the coalition's war in Yemen. [2] His administration enthusiastically backed Saudi Arabia's war effort against the Houthis, framing this support within a broader strategy of countering Iran's backing of the Houthis.

Despite his strong alignment with Saudi Arabia, Trump maintained his policy of withdrawing American forces from the region. While repairing relations with Gulf Cooperation Council countries that encountered challenges during the Obama presidency, Gulf countries harbored reservations about his tepid response to Houthi-attributed attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September, 2019 even as Washington accused Iran of orchestrating the assault.

### •Military Operations:

Trump ordered direct military actions in Yemen, including a controversial raid in "Yakla," an area located in Al-Bayda Governorate, in January, 2017. The operation resulted in dozens of civilian casualties, including women and children, [3] as well as the death of a U.S. Navy SEAL.

His administration conducted an unprecedented number of drone strikes against al-Qaeda and ISIS targets in Yemen 188—strikes during his tenure, with 131 of those occurring in 2017 alone. These operations successfully neutralized high-ranking al-Qaeda leaders and disrupted the group's operational capabilities.[4]

In, 2019 Trump issued an executive order rescinding an Obama-era mandate requiring public disclosure of civilian casualty estimates from U.S. military operations in active conflict zones such as Yemen

. [5] This decision followed his earlier relaxation of oversight rules for drone and special operations, granting the military greater autonomy to conduct strikes with reduced scrutiny.[6]



### • Financial Sanctions:

Trump's administration placed a strong emphasis on countering terrorism financing .Numerous sanctions were imposed on individuals and entities accused of supporting or funding the Houthis ,as part of a broader maximum-pressure campaign against Iran .One of Trump's final actions in office was to designate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization) FTO, [7] (barring U.S .citizens and entities from engaging in financial transactions with the group .This decision was supported by Saudi Arabia ,the UAE ,and Yemen's internationally recognized government[8].

However ,President Biden later revoked the FTO designation before reinstating it in 2024 following renewed Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea amidst the Israeli offensive on Gaza.[9]

### • Diplomatic Strategy:

During the Trump administration ,U.S .diplomacy on Yemen focused on supporting United Nations efforts and the UN Special Envoy to Yemen .The administration publicly advocated for a return to negotiations and pressured Saudi Arabia ,the Yemeni government ,and the UAE to stop the military operation to liberate the city of Hodeida from the Houthis .In December,2018 these efforts culminated in the UN-led Stockholm Agreement ,which ,though not fully implemented ,managed to stop active conflict in the region.[10]

### □ Humanitarian Concerns:

Despite supportive statements for humanitarian efforts, U.S. humanitarian aid to Yemen was significantly reduced during Trump's administration. In March 2020, the administration suspended funding for humanitarian assistance, exacerbating Yemen's dire humanitarian crisis [11].

### □ Position on Iran:

Trump administration viewed the war in Yemen as an extension of Iranian adventurism that needed to be confronted and defeated. Yemen was considered part of the broader effort to counter Iranian influence in the region. Iran's support for the Houthis was perceived as a direct threat to U.S. national security. As part of its maximum-pressure campaign against Iran, the administration imposed sanctions at the end of 2020 on Hassan Irlu, the Iranian ambassador to the Houthis at that time [12].

## Second: Biden and the Creation of a Shifting Regional Equation

Trump administration primarily focused on showing support for Saudi Arabia and opposing Iranian backing of the Houthis. In contrast, Biden administration announced early in its tenure that ending the war in Yemen was a "top priority."

It ceased support for the Saudi-led coalition [13] and appointed Timothy Lenderking as Special Envoy to achieve peace after years of devastating war. Biden's team believed that resolving this issue was achievable to fulfill one of Biden's electoral promises in foreign policy.

While Lenderking's appointment signaled a positive shift in U.S. attention toward Yemen as a domestic conflict influenced by regional powers, the administration underestimated the complexities of the situation. Sharp divisions between its allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had already spilled over into Yemen's internationally recognized government, creating a fragmented front. Soon after Biden took office and removed the Houthis from the U.S. terrorist designation list, the armed group escalated their activities. They attacked territories under the control of the recognized government, advanced militarily into key provinces such as Marib, Shabwa, and Hodeida, and intensified cross-border strikes targeting critical Saudi infrastructure. Early 2022 even saw the Houthis carry out their first attack on the UAE.

The Houthis positioned themselves as a direct threat to Saudi national security and a broader threat to neighboring GCC states. This position was made possible through ongoing Iranian support, including advanced weaponry and military advisement since the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war in 2014.

Biden's policy in Yemen proved hesitant and ineffective, undermining the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition while failing to grasp conflict dynamics and its reasons in the country. [14] The administration struggled to address rifts within the coalition, preventing the recognized government from presenting itself as a unified and strong party capable of deterring the Houthis. In this fragmented environment, the Houthis had little motivation to engage in negotiations [15].

A rivalry also emerged between the U.S. and UN envoys to Yemen, further complicating the mediation process. However, a notable breakthrough was achieved with the April 2022 UN-brokered truce. Lenderking also claimed the truce as a success for his efforts [16]. The agreement included a cessation of offensive military operations within Yemen and along its borders. Following the truce, significant changes occurred within the anti-Houthi camp, including the announcement of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), which replaced President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The council includes all forces on the ground.

Despite these shifts, the Houthis refused to engage in meaningful negotiations with the new council, which was hampered by internal divisions. With the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Yemen file was returned to Saudi Arabia, creating a completely new situation from Trump's first term or Obama's presidency.

Unifying anti-Houthi factions under the PLC proved difficult, but Saudi Arabia continued to offer incentives to the Houthis to pursue peace. These efforts culminated in a groundbreaking visit by Saudi Ambassador Mohammed Al-Jaber to Sanaa in April 2023.

Upon Donald Trump's return to the White House, his administration will need to address the evolving Yemeni and regional dynamics shaped by the following factors:

## •Saudi Arabia and the Yemen War

Saudi Arabia has largely succeeded in de-escalate the Yemen conflict ,prioritizing the security of its borders and ensuring that its strategic projects remain insulated from the consequences of tensions in Yemen .During Trump's first term ,the Houthis expanded their attacks to include civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia.

## •The Houthis :From Isolation to the Red Sea

The Houthis have transformed from a local militia—an identity that once informed U.S .policy toward them—into a force threatening regional and global security ,particularly through attacks in the Red Sea.

Recent developments highlight the group's ability to adapt and decentralize in response to the shifting dynamics on the battlefield .However ,they also reveal the Houthis 'ambitions to become a regional power with broader influence on Middle Eastern politics.

The Houthis see the current international shifts ,including the emergence of a new bipolar global order ,as an opportunity to solidify their role as Yemen's dominant rulers and exert influence alongside Iran ,the regional power ,as well as Russia and China .These powers ,with vested interests in drawing the U.S .deeper into Middle Eastern conflicts ,bolster the Houthis' confidence.[17]

During Biden's outgoing administration ,the U.S .has led a coalition of over 20 nations in Operation Guardian of Prosperity since December 2023 to protect international shipping in the Red Sea .Starting in early ,2024 the U.S .has launched strikes against Houthi positions in Yemen with limited UK support .On November ,28 Houthi leaders claimed that the U.S .conducted 844air and naval strikes on Houthi-controlled areas .Meanwhile ,Israel launched two waves of strikes on Houthi territories ,[18] citing retaliation for Houthi attacks from Yemen that killed an Israeli citizen.

## •Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement

A significant development has been the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement brokered by China in March .2023 This agreement facilitated high-level visits between the two countries and discussions of joint naval maneuvers .Trump's stance on this rapprochement will be pivotal in determining whether he adopts a less confrontational approach toward Tehran or reverts to the adversarial posture of his first term ,characterized by heightened security tensions between the two countries on the two banks of Gulf.

## □ Yemeni Peace Agreement

Despite reaching the Stockholm Agreement during Trump's term, the ceasefire in 2022 is the longest duration during the war, leading Yemen into a fragile state of peace, "neither peace nor war".

UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg remains optimistic about the prospects for peace, anchored in a roadmap he proposed to Yemen's warring factions [19]. However, the war in Gaza has complicated peace efforts in Yemen. Any reduction in regional tensions could improve the outlook for Grundberg's roadmap.

## □ Al-Qaeda's Activity and Its Relationship with Houthis

Trump's counterterrorism measures significantly weakened al-Qaeda in Yemen, disrupting its operational networks and its capabilities to launch attacks. However, Al-Qaeda has since resurged, developing enhanced cross-border offensive capabilities [20], including the use of remote-controlled suicide drones, and amplifying its anti-Western propaganda [21].

The Houthis have expanded their cooperation with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), engaging in prisoner exchanges and sharing expertise. This partnership appears aimed at strengthening their control over territories held by Yemen's internationally recognized government. [22] Furthermore, the Houthis have established ties with terrorist organizations such as Somalia's al-Shabaab and pirate groups, enabling them to escalate attacks on commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea. [23]

## Third :Outlines of Trump's Policies toward Yemen and the Region

Amid the evolving regional dynamics, Trump's second term is expected to shape U.S. policies toward Yemen and the Middle East in alignment with American interests. Since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli aggression in Gaza, regional conflicts have intensified. During his campaign, Trump promised to end conflicts in the Middle East. However, the credibility of this pledge will be examined after his inauguration on January 20, 2025. [24]

In January 2024, Trump criticized Biden administration for its military strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, accusing Biden of "dropping bombs all over the Middle East" "in response to Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping. [25] However, it is unlikely that Trump will reverse course, given widespread national and international support for efforts to deter Houthi attacks on international trade.

Nevertheless ,in October ,2024 Trump stated“ ,The Houthis must be stopped from targeting ships .There are more missiles hitting ships than people realize .The situation is so bad that navigation for trade is almost unusable ,and alternatives to this vital passage are costly and impractical.[26] ”

Trump's current approach to the region remains unclear ,particularly regarding ongoing conflicts in Gaza and the Red Sea crisis .However ,his mid-November 2024 nominations of government officials provide early indications about his administration's direction might take. Analysts believe these appointments not only shape policy but also serve as deliberate signals Trump's likely priorities and policies in the region .One of the main reasons for selecting government officials and ambassadors is to send a message about the policies the President is likely to adopt.

### □ **Marco Rubio (Republican) – Secretary of State**

Rubio, a senior member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, is one of Congress's most staunch supporters of Israel. He holds hardline views on Iran, advocating for a robust U.S.-Israel partnership. He described the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon as “a service to humanity”[27]. Despite being open to an agreement with Iran, he calling for the dismantling of Iran's proxies in Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. In June 2024, Rubio criticized Biden's approach to the Houthis as “misleading” and encouraging continued Red Sea attacks [28]. In 2022, he criticized Biden's shift towards Iran and the Houthis while neglecting Saudi Arabia and the UAE [29]. Rubio's unwavering support for Israel includes ensuring it is fully equipped to continue its current multi-front war efforts.

### □ **Elise Stefanik (Republican) – U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations**

Having served in Congress since 2014, Stefanik has gained a reputation as a fierce ally of Israel, supporting stronger sanctions against Iran. She called for a complete reinstatement of Trump's decision to classify the Houthis as a terrorist organization and to increase pressure on the Iranian regime [30]. Trump seems to have chosen her for the United Nations to tighten the noose on the Houthis and Iranians through Security Council resolutions and to confront Russia and China's veto power.

### □ **Steven Witkoff (Republican) – Special Envoy to the Middle East**

A billionaire and Trump confidant, Witkoff has no prior experience with the complexities of Middle Eastern affairs. He is an extremely right-wing Jewish billionaire who supports Israel's annexation of the West Bank and favors direct U.S. strikes on Iran and its proxies in the region [31]



## □ **Mike Waltz (Republican) – National Security Advisor**

Mike, chosen for the role in the upcoming administration, is another hardliner voice. He worked in defense during George W. Bush's presidency and served in Congress on defense, intelligence, and foreign affairs committees. He is outspoken about the need to re-designate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization amid their attacks in the Red Sea [32], advocating for U.S. military interdiction of Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis [33]. He also encouraged Israel to directly target Iranian oil production sites and nuclear infrastructure [34].

It is expected that one of Miller's first actions will be to cancel Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which removes temporary protection from nationals in war-torn countries like Yemen, exposing them to danger and currently allowing them legal residence in the United States, potentially forcing them to return to their home countries [35].

## □ **John Ratcliffe (Republican) – Director of the Central Intelligence Agency**

Ratcliffe, chosen by Trump as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), previously took the position from May 2020 to January 2021. He is known for his hardline stance on Iran [36]. He advocates for increasing pressure on Iran and its Middle Eastern proxies through sanctions and possible military responses, considering this as the way to protect American interests in the region.

## □ **Tulsi Gabbard (Democrat-Republican)- Director of National Intelligence (DNI)**

Former Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, who shifted from the Democratic to the Republican Party before the election [37]. She has been nominated as Director of National Intelligence. Despite lacking a background related to managing 18 American intelligence agencies including the CIA, she is known for openly disagreeing with intelligence analysts during her time in Congress. Concerns arise when Gabbard's potential new role is linked to Trump's stance on using and exchanging sensitive intelligence information, raising serious concerns about politicizing intelligence community conclusions in favor of the Trump administration [38].

## □ **Pete Hegseth – Secretary of Defense**

Trump's choice for Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth [39], served in the U.S. Army in Iraq and Afghanistan but did not rise to high ranks. A staunch Trump loyalist, Hegseth lacks the qualifications and experience typically expected of a Defense Secretary [40]. He transitions to this role from his position as a co-host on Fox News' Fox & Friends Weekend [41]. Hegseth aligns with the Christian nationalist movement in the U.S. and holds anti-Islamic views.

## □ Mike Huckabee – Ambassador to Israel

Another key indicator of Trump's Middle East policy is his appointment of Mike Huckabee as Ambassador to Israel. Huckabee, known for his extreme views, has denied the existence of Palestinians [42] and declared that the two-state solution “will never happen and should never happen” [43]. While Huckabee has stated that he will implement the president's policies rather than his own, the selection of ambassadors often signals the administration's policy direction.

This choice suggests that Trump plans to abandon the principle of “land for peace”—“a cornerstone of U.S. policy since UN Security Council Resolution 242 following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. This principle has underpinned peace initiatives such as the Camp David Accords (1978) and the Madrid Peace Conference [44] (1991)

## Fourth :Expectations for Trump's Yemen Strategy

Based on Trump's proposed nominations ,several key aspects of his administration's approach and policies towards Yemen and the Red Sea crisis can be anticipated .Trump is unlikely to withdraw forces from these critical waterways or halt strikes on Houthi-controlled territories without assurances that the Houthis will cease maritime attacks ,at least in the short term.

While Trump aims to reduce military spending on foreign wars and avoids launching large-scale conflicts ,a targeted and short-term military campaign against the Houthis remains plausible. Such a campaign would aim to limit their capacity to disrupt international shipping routes and deter future attacks.

The U.S. under Trump is unlikely to avoid another Vietnam-like War or getting embroiled in a prolonged involvement akin to Afghanistan .Instead ,Trump will likely strengthen partnerships with regional allies to reduce the need for direct American ground intervention ,while leveraging airstrikes ,intelligence ,and diplomacy to counter the Houthis ,such as:

### □ Targeting Houthi Leaders:

A hallmark of Trump's Middle East counterterrorism strategy has been eliminating key leaders of adversarial groups. During his first term, Trump claimed credit for defeating ISIS in Iraq by targeting its leaders. Similarly, his administration was instrumental in eliminating al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen and orchestrated the killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, in a high-profile drone strike.

### □ Re-designating Houthis as a Terrorist Organization:

One of the Trump administration's likely first actions will be to fully reclassify the Houthis as a terrorist organization, reversing the Biden administration's partial classification adjustment. This decision would compel UN agencies, international relief organizations, and the global financial system to tighten financial restrictions on Houthi-controlled territories, exacerbating their already dire economic conditions.

## □ **Maximum Diplomatic Pressure:**

The Trump administration views Houthi activities as an extension of Iranian adventurism. As such, it is expected to intensify pressure on Tehran, leveraging Houthi attacks in the Red Sea as a bargaining chip. This could force Iran to make significant concessions in future de-escalation arrangements aimed at preventing broader regional conflict, particularly given the ongoing exchange of strikes between Iran and Israel.

This strategy would also position the U.S. to demand an end to Iran's provision of advanced missile and drone technologies to the Houthis. At the same time, the U.S. is likely to exert substantial pressure at the UN Security Council, seeking resolutions condemning the Houthis and criminalizing maritime attacks targeting Western ships and U.S. forces in key international waterways. The tension within the council among permanent members regarding Yemen-related decisions is both negative and positive, particularly with the representation of the U.S. by Elie Stefaniec.

Therefore, Trump's strategy towards Yemen and the Houthis in the first two years may revolve around leveraging Republican control in Congress before the midterm elections, which will reduce legislative resistance to his Middle Eastern policies. However, success in this strategy hinges on three key factors:

## □ **Compelling Houthis to Lower Their Expectations:**

The Houthis currently view their maritime attacks in the Red Sea as a political tool to achieve local and strategic gains. They also aim to mobilize fighters to seize oil and gas fields in Marib, Shabwa, and Hadramout [45]. To counter this ambitions, the Yemeni government's defensive capabilities must be strengthened, creating a balance of power between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis.

Government forces must be unified under the Ministry of Defense's leadership, with a centralized chain of command and a cohesive General Staff. Political unity must be established within the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council, by developing policies and regulations for the Council and clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of its eight-member leadership. This cannot be achieved without understanding between Saudi Arabia and the UAE to compel Council entities to reach consensus. Pressure groups funded by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states play a significant role in shaping and challenging Trump administration policies in the region, with conflicting interests potentially impacting long-term stability in Yemen.

## □ Saudi Arabia's Position:

Based on Saudi Arabia's perspective during Trump's first term, the new administration will need to deliver a clear strategy for managing the Yemen conflict and ensuring stability in the Red Sea. This includes providing effective U.S. military and intelligence support to counter cross-border Houthi attacks, particularly in the event of heightened American action against the group.

Sustained coordination between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. will be essential to achieving mutual regional objectives and securing long-term American commitment to the region's security and stability. Importantly, the U.S. should not pressure Saudi Arabia to appease the Houthis; instead, the Trump administration must demonstrate that weakening and ultimately defeating the Houthis is a strategic priority for the United States.

## Cooperation between Red Sea States:

One of the main reasons for the failure of Biden's strategy to confront the Houthis is the lack of involvement of regional countries in the "Guardians of Prosperity" initiative. Politicians in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East believe that sending forces to regional waters is to protect Israeli occupation rather than safeguard navigation and commercial ships.

The Trump administration will need to reshape perceptions in the Arab world about U.S. military operations, addressing concerns that American forces are enablers of colonialism or complicit in crimes against regional populations. This shift in narrative is crucial for fostering cooperation among Red Sea nations.

## Conclusion :Yemen's Path

United States is unlikely will prioritize Yemen's sovereignty over the interests of regional powers, specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, the high cost of U.S. operations in the Red Sea during the first year –nearing two billion dollars –[46] to counter missiles and drones costing only a few thousand dollars. The airstrikes on Yemeni territories failed to stop Houthis' attacks in Red Sea. Therefore, this failure may compel the Trump administration to devise a strategy that deter Houthis and ensuring that they cannot launch future ship attacks.

While the regional and international community seems displeased of the Houthis' behavior and their growing influence as significant force in the region, several factors complicate efforts to counter them. These include internal divisions within the Presidential Leadership Council members and the forces under the Council, mismanagement and corruption in the internationally recognized government. Such challenges not only hinder efforts to weaken the Houthis' authority but may also inadvertently pave the way for them to take full control of Yemen.



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