

# How Yemen's Houthis' well-deserved terrorist label gives Biden important leverage

Thu, 2021-01-21 23:50

LONDON: Joe Biden, the newly inaugurated US president, is using his first days in office to review many of his predecessor's policies and executive orders. How his administration handles its strategic inheritance, particularly with regard to Iran and its proxies, notably the Yemeni Houthi militia, could well shape the Arab region's opinion of his nascent presidency.

On Jan. 10, Mike Pompeo, the outgoing secretary of state, announced the State Department would designate the Houthis (also known as Ansar Allah) as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization." Three Houthi leaders – Abdul Malik Al-Houthi, Abdul Khaliq Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi and Abdullah Yahya Al-Hakim – were declared Specially Designated Global Terrorists with effect from Jan. 19.

"The designations are intended to hold Ansar Allah accountable for its terrorist acts, including cross-border attacks threatening civilian populations, infrastructure, and commercial shipping," Pompeo said.

"The designations are also intended to advance efforts to achieve a peaceful, sovereign and united Yemen that is both free from Iranian interference and at peace with its neighbors."



A picture taken on June 19, 2018 shows debris of Iranian-made Ababil drones displayed Abu Dhabi, which the Emirati armed forces say were used by Houthi rebels in Yemen in battles against the coalition forces led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. (AFP/File Photo)

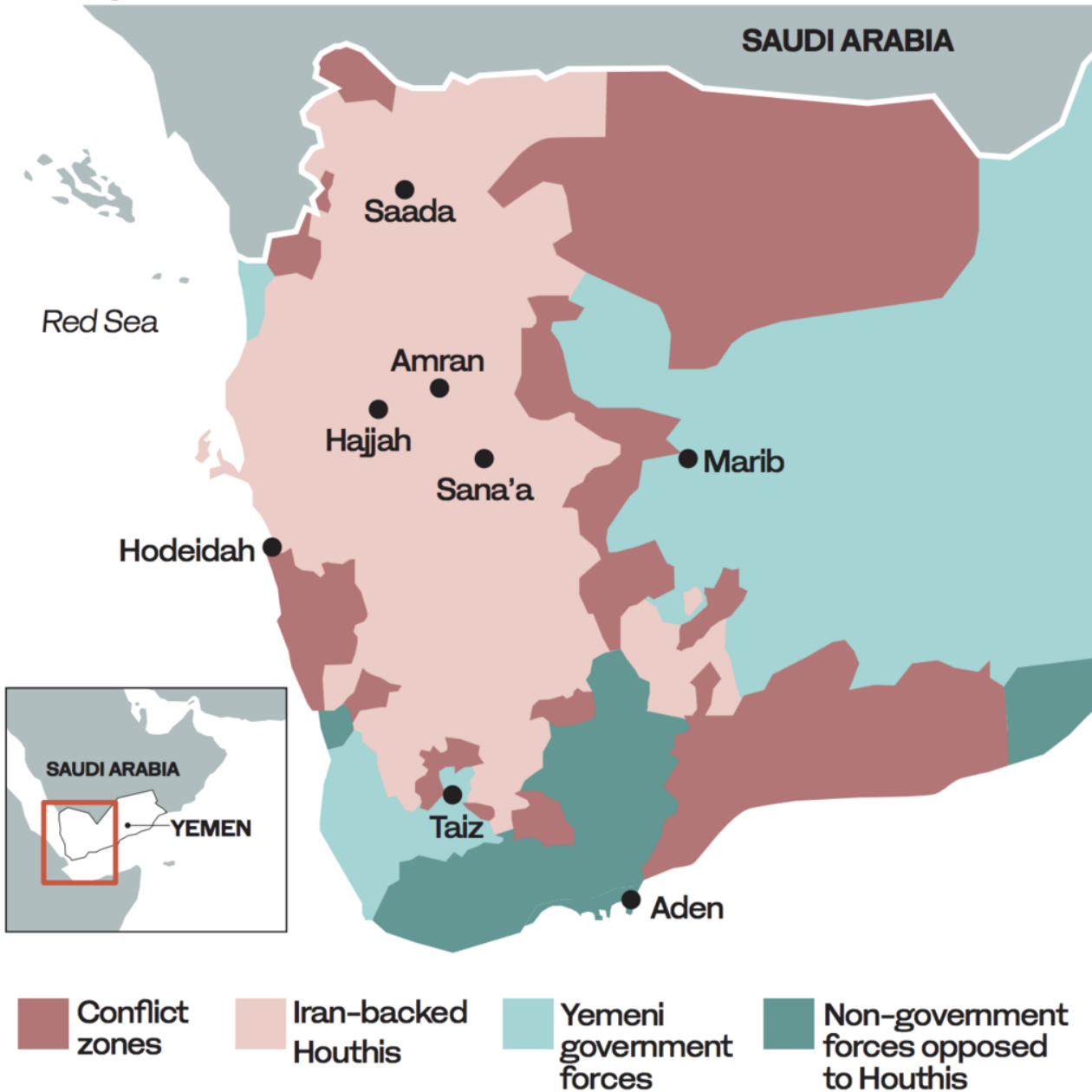
One reason why the Trump administration was able to achieve a lot in the Middle East was probably its readiness to call a spade a spade. The war in Yemen escalated in 2015 when the Iran-backed Houthis overthrew the UN-recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. A coalition of Arab states, backed by the US, Britain and France, launched a military campaign to restore the legitimate government to power.

Since then, repeated attempts to reach a peace settlement have foundered, with the militia's representatives failing to attend UN-brokered talks in Geneva in Sept. 2018 and its combatants willfully ignoring the terms of the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements.

An April 2020 ceasefire announced by the coalition at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly fell apart when the Houthis resumed cross-border drone and missile strikes targeting Saudi Arabia.

# WHO CONTROLS WHAT IN YEMEN

Houthis have controlled the capital Sana'a and much of the country since 2014



**SOURCE:** SANA'A CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, BBC

For the Yemeni government, any peace agreement with the Houthis would be contingent on the militia breaking its ties with Tehran – a development that is highly unlikely at present.

Iran's support for the Houthis has been an open secret since long before the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2015. It has caused the brutal war to rage on unabated and one of the world's worst humanitarian crises to fester.

The conflict, now in its sixth year, has left 112,000 dead and 24 million in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

The Houthis have repeatedly targeted civilian population centers in Yemen and

Saudi Arabia. Most recently, 27 people were killed when a Houthi missile targeting ministers of the newly established Yemeni government struck Aden's international airport on Dec. 30.



A picture taken March 26, 2018 in Um Al-Hammam district in Riyadh shows the pierced ceiling of a home hit by falling shrapnel from Houthi missiles that were intercepted over the Saudi capital. (AFP/File Photo)

In April last year, five women were killed in a suspected Houthi strike on a prison in the city of Taiz – an act forcefully condemned by aid groups. Houthi missiles have even hit civilian facilities in Riyadh, including its international airport in Nov. 2017.

The group has also routinely targeted Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure. A July 2018 attack hit two Saudi crude carriers on the Red Sea while a May 2019 strike on two oil-pumping stations near Riyadh damaged a key pipeline.

The most damaging of all Houthi-claimed attacks was a Sept. 2019 drone and missile strike on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities, which sent shockwaves through the global crude market.

Although the Houthis claimed responsibility, investigators suggested the strike involving Iranian-supplied hardware may have originated from the north.

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# CHRONICLE OF HOUTHİ CRİMES

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**Sept. 2014** Houthi militia (Ansar Allah) seizes Sana'a, begins Yemen takeover.

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**Feb. 2015** Houthis announce dissolution of Yemen's parliament.

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**March 2015** Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi flees Sana'a.

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**March 2015** Operation Decisive Storm begins against Houthis.

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**April 2015** UN Security Council votes to sanction Houthis.

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**Nov. 2017** Houthi ballistic missiles intercepted over Riyadh airport.

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**Dec. 2017** Deposed Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh killed by Houthis.

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**March 2018** Casualties reported in Houthi rocket attack on Riyadh.

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**July 2018** Houthis claim

attack on two Saudi crude carriers in Red Sea.

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**Jan. 2019** Houthi attack kills Yemeni military intelligence chief.

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**May 2019** Houthis attack two oil-pumping stations in Saudi Arabia, damaging key pipeline.

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**Sept. 2019** Drone attacks damage Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities in Saudi Arabia.

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**Jan. 2020** Houthis suspected behind military training camp

attack in Marib that kills 111 soldiers.

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**April 5 2020** Five women killed in Taiz's main prison in suspected Houthi attack.

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**Jan. 2021** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designates Houthi militia as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and declares its leaders Global Terrorists.

Biden's foreign-policy team may also recall three attacks on the US navy in 2016 when he was Barack Obama's vice president – by a militia whose actions matched the notorious words of its slogan "Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse on the Jews."

The USS Mason was targeted on Oct. 9, 2016, by two missiles fired from Houthi-controlled territory while deployed near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait off the coast of Yemen. The projectiles failed to cause any damage.

Three days later, the Mason was targeted again, with one missile falling short while the other was intercepted. USS Nitze, which was also deployed to the region, retaliated the following day, destroying three radar sites in Houthi-held territory.

On Oct. 15, the Mason was targeted a third time, this time in the Red Sea. All five anti-ship cruise missiles were neutralized or intercepted.



Houthi leader Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi delivers a speech in he Yemени capital Sanaa on November 9, 2019. (AFP/File Photo)

Given this behavior, it is surprising that the Houthis did not land the terrorist designation then, although historians would probably chalk it up to the Obama administration's wish to preserve the 2015 Iran nuclear accord at any cost.

Foreign military vessels have not been the only targets. The Houthis have launched repeated attacks on ports and ships in recent years, routinely planting marine mines in the southern Red Sea and in the Bab Al-Mandab Strait in the path of commercial shipping.

The militia has also repeatedly rebuffed UN pleas to allow an inspection team to enter the FS0 Safer, a 45-year-old oil tanker abandoned off the port of Hodeidah with 1.1 million barrels of crude on board, to conduct urgent repairs. In an extraordinary session, the UN expressed fears on July 15, 2020, of "catastrophe" if the vessel ruptured into the Red Sea.

Pompeo's boss, Donald Trump, had pursued a policy of "maximum pressure" against Tehran, withdrawing the US from the Obama-era nuclear deal and reimposing sanctions on Iran.



Members of displaced Yemeni families who fled battles between government forces and Houthi fighters near the Hodeidah airport share a meal on the balcony of of a school used as temporary housing inside the city. (AFP/File Photo)

The strategy was matched by a zero-tolerance approach to Iranian influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, as well as to its role in harboring leaders and operatives of Al-Qaeda.

Almost all the findings of an Arab News-YouGov pan-Arab survey conducted in late 2020 suggest that Biden would be wise to shed the Obama administration baggage. The most popular response (53 percent) was that Obama left the region worse off, with another 58 percent saying Biden should distance himself from Obama-era policies.

With Houthi attacks on civilian targets triggering condemnations from inside and outside Yemen and prompting calls for more pressure on the leadership, the State Department's "terrorist" designation gives Biden valuable leverage for future negotiations both with the Houthis and their patrons in Tehran.

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The Organization of Islamic Cooperation hails US designation of Houthis as FT0Yemen's government vows to mitigate effects of Houthi terrorism designation TWITTER POLL: US right to designate Houthis as terror group

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## [Months-old baby tests positive for COVID-19 in Lebanon](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-21 22:39

BEIRUT: A four-month-old baby boy has become the youngest person to test positive for coronavirus in Lebanon.

The infant returned the positive test alongside his six-year-old sister and both his parents.



The boy's father, Mazen Al-Muqaddam, revealed the test results, saying that his son's symptoms "are still tolerable" and that the family is receiving treatment while quarantining at home in the southern village of Toul.

"My son Mohammed started showing symptoms three days ago. He was coughing and unable to sleep," the father said.

"Doctors told us that we caught the virus a week ago. We still do not know how. For nine months we have been following all the necessary preventive measures."

Despite eight days of total lockdown, the number of coronavirus cases in Lebanon is still rising, with 64 deaths recorded on Wednesday.

A 24-year-old woman was among the latest victims.

The latest surge in cases has filled public and private hospital emergency wards, and stretched medical and nursing staff to the limit.

A Supreme Defense Council meeting led by President Michel Aoun on Thursday decided to extend the lockdown until Feb. 8.

Lebanon is expected to start receiving the Pfizer vaccine early in February, with Hassan Diab, the country's caretaker prime minister, confirming that "all financial and administrative procedures have been completed to ensure the arrival of the vaccine in the specified period."

Gen. Joseph Aoun, the armed forces commander, visited a military hospital in Beirut on Thursday, including a section dedicated to COVID-19 patients.

The hospital is also struggling due to the large number of infections among military personnel and their families.

Meanwhile, Dr. Abdul-Rahman Al-Bizri, head of the national committee for infectious diseases, outlined the strategy for distribution of the Pfizer vaccine to a meeting of the parliamentary health committee.

Assem Araji, head of the committee, said that Lebanon has agreements to receive 2.2 million vaccines from Pfizer and a further 1.5 million vaccines through the COVAX platform, while talks with AstraZeneca are continuing in order to secure an additional 2 million vaccines.

"This will bring our total to 6 million vaccines, which will allow us to vaccinate around 3 million citizens and residents," he said.

Araji said that Syrian and Palestinian refugees will be among those vaccinated.

"If we do not vaccinate between 70 and 80 percent of the population, we will not be able to contain the pandemic," he added.

"We will start with 250,000 Pfizer vaccines in the first quarter of 2021. We will have 350,000 vaccines for the second quarter and 800,000 for the third

quarter, while we will have 600,000 vaccines available during the last quarter of the year, bringing the total to 2.1 million vaccines.”

Health workers, including doctors, pharmacists, nurses and hospital staff, will be first to receive the vaccine. They will be followed by people over 75.

Individuals under 16 years of age will need parental approval to receive the vaccine, he added.

Araji said a health ministry platform will be launched on Monday allowing people to register for the vaccine. After registration, the platform will direct people to a vaccination center.

Inoculations will take place at 35 centers around the country.



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Lebanon extends lockdown into February as virus numbers rise  
Lebanon lockdown extension recommended as cabbies, soldiers clash at airport

# Tunisia rights groups say 1,000 arrested in 6 nights of riots

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-21 20:41

TUNIS: Tunisian security forces have arrested at least 1,000 people during six nights of urban unrest between disaffected youths and riot police, human rights and other non-government groups said Thursday.

The North African country, where the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened already acute economic pain, has seen young people hurl rocks and petrol bombs at police who have deployed teargas and water cannon at the crowds.

Wednesday night was relatively calm compared with previous evenings, although local media reported disturbances in the central town of Sidi Bouzid, where the Arab Spring pro-democracy uprisings started a decade ago.

Authorities said Monday they had made 600 arrests, then reported another 70 over the following two days – but a coalition of Tunisian groups said their own count was now much higher.

“There are 1,000 people arrested” including many minors, said Bassem Trifi of the Tunisian League for Human Rights, who charged that many arrests had been “arbitrary,” including of people inside their homes.

“Some were arrested without having taken part in the demonstrations,” he told a joint press conference of a dozen groups, also including the journalists’ union and young lawyers’ association.

Some activists had been detained for voicing support for the protests on Facebook and other sites, and at least one of them now faces six years prison if convicted, the groups said.

“We are asking the justice system to look closely into the cases,” said Trifi.

“We will not manage to resolve the crisis in this way. It can only deepen the gulf between the people and the government.”

In a joint statement, the groups called on the judicial system to investigate reports of violations by security forces, ill-treatment of detainees and breaches of their personal data privacy.

They warned that “violent security practices would only... aggravate the crisis of the rejection of the state.”

Unrest again shook several towns overnight into Thursday, though the clashes appeared to ease from their earlier peaks when angry groups set fire to tires to blockade streets.

In the central town of Sbeitla, clashes broke out following rumors that a young man had died of injuries he had sustained when he was earlier hit by a tear gas canister.

The interior ministry denied the young man’s death, saying he had been transferred to a hospital in the coastal city of Sousse, and that it had opened an investigation into his case.

Tunisia last week marked one decade since its long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country amid mass protests, ending 23 years in power.

The demonstrations were sparked by the self-immolation of young fruit seller

Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, triggering similar revolts across much of North Africa and the Middle East.



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Outreach by Tunisian leaders fails to quell youth unrest  
Tunisian premier announces major cabinet reshuffle

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## [UN: 43 Europe-bound migrants drown in shipwreck off Libya](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-21 00:34

CAIRO: A boat carrying migrants bound for Europe capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Libya, drowning at least 43 people, the U.N. migration agency said Wednesday.

The International Organization for Migration said the “tragic” shipwreck that took place a day earlier was the first maritime disaster in 2021 involving migrants seeking better lives in Europe.

In recent years, the EU has partnered with Libya's coast guard and other local groups to stem such dangerous sea crossings. Rights groups, however, say those policies leave migrants at the mercy of armed groups or confined in squalid detention centers rife with abuses.

The IOM said coastal security forces in Libya's western town of Zuwara rescued 10 migrants from the shipwreck Tuesday and brought them to shore. It said the dead were all men from West African nations, according to survivors. The migration agency said the boat left the town of Zawiya early Tuesday and capsized a few hours later after its engine stopped working amid rough seas. In the years since the 2011 uprising that ousted and killed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi, war-torn Libya has emerged as the dominant transit point for migrants fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East.

Smugglers often pack desperate families into ill-equipped rubber boats that stall and founder along the perilous Central Mediterranean route.

The Libyan coast guard Wednesday intercepted at least 48 migrants, including 11 children, and returned them to shore, the IOM said.

The U.N. migration and refugee agencies called for an "urgent and measurable shift in the approach" to the situation in the Mediterranean, including an end to migrant returns to "unsafe ports."

"Arbitrary arrests and arbitrary detention in the direst of conditions continue (in Libya). Many are victimized and exploited by traffickers and smugglers, held for ransom, tortured, and abused," they said in a statement Wednesday.

An Associated Press investigation in 2019 found that militias in Libya tortured, extorted and otherwise abused migrants for ransoms in detention centers under the nose of the U.N., often in compounds that receive millions in European money, paid to Libya's government to slow the tide of migrants crossing the Mediterranean.

The IOM said in November that some 500 migrants have died trying to cross the central Mediterranean, but the actual number of people who lost their lives could be much higher, due to "the limited ability to monitor routes."



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Fire, blast at ammunition warehouse in western Libya kills 3 Egyptian city hosts Libyan constitutional talks

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## [Outreach by Tunisian leaders fails to quell youth unrest](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-21 00:12

TUNIS: Tunisian youth clashed with police overnight, maintaining their protests and riots over economic difficulties despite efforts by the president and the prime minister to calm tensions.

"Your voice is heard, and your anger is legitimate, and it is my role and the role of the government to work to realize your demands and to make the dream of Tunisia to become true," Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi appealed to the protesters on national television Tuesday night.

Hours later, dozens of people throwing projectiles and setting barricades on fire faced off with police firing tear gas in the Tunis suburb of Ariana. Unrest was reported in other cities as well, the fifth straight night of protests that prompted Tunisia to deploy the army to try to keep order.

The unrest has shaken the country just as it marks 10 years since an uprising over similar frustrations that pushed out a longtime autocrat, ushered in a new democracy and unleashed the Arab Spring uprisings.

A third of the North African nation's young people are unemployed. This and Tunisia's prolonged economic crisis – aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic – have fueled the anger. Protests have notably rocked impoverished towns in the interior of the country but also reached bigger cities on the coast.

"I know that the economic and social situation is a crisis deepened by COVID and the necessary measures that we have taken to preserve the health of Tunisians, and that they (lockdown measures) have limited some personal freedoms such as the freedom of movement," the prime minister said.



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1,000 arrested, troops deployed as Tunisia erupts in new riots  
Violent youth protests hit Tunisia amid economic turmoil