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Middle Eastern politics & society

Biden's about-turn on Saudi war in Yemen

US hopes truce between Riyadh-backed coalition and Iran-supported rebels will take hold but prospects remain slim



Yemenis inspect the damage to buildings after an air strike on the Houthi-held capital Sana'a © Mohammed Huwais/AFP/Getty Images

Samer Al-Atrush in Dubai and **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington 8 HOURS AGO

When Joe Biden ran for the US presidency, he accused Saudi Arabia of “murdering children” in Yemen, where its forces led a military intervention against Iranian-backed Houthi fighters. But in a striking about-turn, just weeks ahead of a trip to the kingdom, Biden praised Riyadh’s “courageous leadership” in the conflict.

The president’s July visit comes as the US, agitated by high energy prices and inflation, tries to mend relations with Saudi Arabia, the world’s largest energy exporter. Biden will meet Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whom he had boycotted over the murder by Saudi agents of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in which Prince Mohammed has denied involvement.

[Khashoggi](#)’s killing and the war in Yemen severely tested relations between Biden and Prince Mohammed. Some of the president’s first decisions in office were to partly suspend weapons support for Saudi Arabia and reverse the designation of Houthis as a terrorist group. But, in a sign of how things have changed, Biden has praised the prince for his role in sealing a truce which was first declared in April, and extended in June for another two months.

“Yemen has been an enhancer for the relationship, certainly for the visit,” said Timothy Lenderking, US envoy to [Yemen](#). “The fact that there is a truce in Yemen has facilitated the president’s trip. I think it would be much more difficult for him to be

heading into Saudi Arabia if there were no ceasefire.”

Washington believes that the Saudis want to extricate themselves from the conflict as they embark on social and economic reforms. “Yemen is a real drag on those kind of goals that [Prince Mohammed] has of promoting economic development in the country and bringing the youth along,” Lenderking said.

The truce has provided respite from the seven-year war that has left hundreds of thousands dead from disease and malnourishment and created what the UN calls the world's worst man-made humanitarian crisis. Coalition air strikes, which UN reports say killed thousands of civilians as bombs struck homes, schools and markets, have been widely criticised in the US.

Western diplomats say the coalition has increasingly improved its targeting and become more transparent about mistakes. The Houthis, who control the north and the biggest city, Sana'a, have struck oil facilities and airports in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and have been accused of indiscriminate shellings in Yemen.



Displaced Yemenis receive shelter aids, tents, mattresses and blankets from the Danish Council for the Displaced © Khaled Ziad/AFP /Getty Images

Biden is expected to encourage the truce negotiations, which were partly mediated by the US and UN, when he visits [Saudi Arabia](#). He will find a receptive audience in Riyadh, a Saudi official said. “We continue to support the UN envoy's efforts in

Yemen,” the official said.

But western, Saudi, and Yemeni officials say that the chances of the truce turning into a formal ceasefire, ultimately followed by political talks are slim. A new Saudi and Emirati supported government, whose stronghold is in the south, has met Houthi demands on opening flights from the north, access to Hodeidah port and the acceptance of Houthi-issued passports. But the rebels have refused to provide concessions, a Yemeni government official said.

“The government has provided concession after concession in the interest of Yemenis, while the Houthi militia did not observe its part of the agreement and continued violating the truce and besieging [the city of] Taiz,” said Yemeni information minister Muammar al-Eryani, referring to the rebels’ refusal to open the roads to Taiz. Lenderking said he was “hopeful” of a compromise.

International observers have had little access to the Houthi’s innermost ruling circle, with one diplomat describing them as a “black box”. Houthi officials declined to comment. Saudi and Yemeni officials say they fear that the Houthis believe that they do not have to offer concessions, given Riyadh’s desire to quit the war and US impatience with the quagmire.



A Saudi Aramco oil facility in the Red Sea coastal city of Jeddah in flames after an attack in March © AFP/Getty Images

Biden's decisions, such as the partial suspension of arms sales and delays in supplying interceptors to the Saudis, had emboldened the Houthis, Saudi officials said. Biden's reversal of the Trump administration's designation of the militia as a terrorist group had a similar impact, the officials said, although it was welcomed by aid organisations as the designation complicated relief efforts in the country.

"The Houthis read the American stance mistakenly, and that is why they [initially] insisted on rejecting a ceasefire. They said the US is pressuring Saudi Arabia to end the war unconditionally and in the Houthis favour," said one Saudi official. The defeat of the Houthis in the Shabwa region persuaded them to accept a ceasefire. "They feared a move on [their capital] Sana'a," the official said.

Lenderking agreed that "early on the Houthis misread Washington when Biden came into office". He added: "The fact that the president is going to Saudi Arabia demonstrates our commitment not just to the defence of Saudi Arabia but to diplomatic solutions to regional crises."

The truce talks remain at a standstill for now, however. The Saudi official and Yemeni officials accuse the Houthis of using the truce to reorganise their forces after a string of defeats. Saudi, US and Yemeni government officials say Iran, which gave the Houthis the ability to strike within Saudi Arabia and UAE, continues to supply them with weapons.

Meanwhile some of the disparate factions in the coalition-backed government, including the Southern Transitional Council secessionists, have been mustering their own forces, said Yemeni analyst Raiman Al-Hamdani, raising questions on how long it could hold together without progress in the talks.

Short of a major breakthrough, the best that could be hoped for was the continuation of the truce, but without a political settlement, said one analyst.

"Even if the truce is extended, even if it becomes a permanent ceasefire, it won't solve the problem," said Maysaa Shuja al-Deen of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. "This is the tendency of most international actors . . . to at least make it a frozen conflict."

