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Biden admin ends Trump-era Houthi 'terrorist' designation

The 'foreign terrorist organization' designation threatened to stifle aid and the economy in war-torn Yemen.

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By Joseph Stepansky



16 Feb 2021

The administration of President Joe Biden has formally delisted Yemen's Houthi movement as a "foreign terrorist organization" and "Specially Designated Global Terrorists", undoing the last-minute move under former President Donald Trump that the United Nations and aid groups said threatened to further devastate the war-torn country.

The move comes as the Biden administration continues to change tack on the US approach to the war in Yemen, announcing on February 4 that it would end the US support for offensive operations for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition that intervened in Yemen's civil war in 2015, a year after the northern-based Houthis kicked President Abdu-Rabbu Mansour out of the capital Sanaa.

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Aid groups, the UN, and US legislators had decried the Trump administration designations, which froze any US-related assets of the Houthis, banned Americans from doing business with them and

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Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the plan to lift the 'foreign terrorist designation' last week [File: Carlos Barria/Reuters]

He said three Houthi leaders – Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Houthi and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim – will remain subject to US sanctions “related to acts that threaten the

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The UN, following the announcement, said the “revocation of the designations will provide profound relief to millions of Yemenis”.



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Shift towards diplomacy

The reversal of the designations, some provisions of which had already been [paused](#) by the Biden administration on January 25, is part of a larger shift away from the Trump administration’s approach to Yemen’s civil war.

The Houthi “terrorist” labelling came as part of a [final push](#) by the Trump administration in its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran and its allies. The Houthis are aligned with Iran but have denied working at Tehran’s behest.

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Saudi Arabia-backed government troops repel a Houthi rebel offensive on oil-rich Marib, some 120km (75 miles) east of Yemen's rebel-held capital Sanaa [AFP]

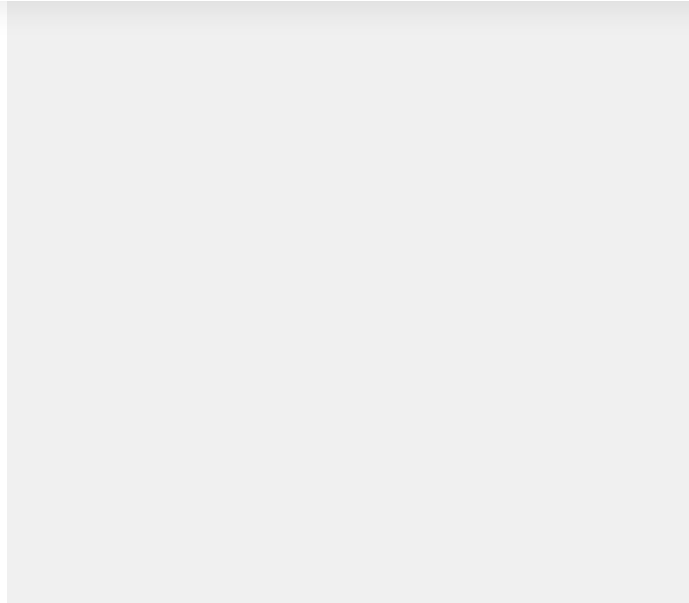
The Trump administration also maintained close ties with Riyadh, with Trump [vetoing](#) bipartisan legislation in 2019 that would have ended controversial US support of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, which largely consists of intelligence sharing, spare parts support, and training. Casualty trackers say that thousands of civilians have been killed by the US-supported Saudi air attacks since 2015.

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Biden's end of US support to the Saudi coalition and a halt to arms sales related to the offensive operations have been seen as a symbolic move indicating the US interest in ending the conflict, although many [questions](#) remain about the more practical implications.

The appointment of Tim Lenderking, a well-respected career diplomat, as special envoy to Yemen has also indicated that the US is prioritising finding a diplomatic solution to the fighting, which has remained elusive during several UN-led attempts at resolution.

However, Baraa Shaiban, the MENA caseworker for the legal aid NGO Reprieve, said he was concerned the "Biden administration is rushing and has quickly stripped itself from all of the leverage points they have".

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negotiations they should “cease all military advances and refrain from other destabilizing and potentially lethal actions”.

With the Houthis feeling they are “gaining ground”, Shaiban said, they will likely have little interest in an internationally-brokered peace agreement.

He added the Biden administration should focus on supporting internal reconciliation, arguing the Houthis would likely reject US-brokered talks.

“The problem is the Biden administration is not understanding that the Houthis consider themselves in a war with the US,” he added. “And so it doesn’t matter how much you try to show good signs, they still see [the US] as the big Satan.”

Former diplomat Khoury, for his part, said the Houthis have indicated they are open to a US-led mediation.

He added: “I’ve always thought that only the US can intervene as a big power from the outside and push on the parties towards peace.”

‘Cautiously optimistic’

NRC’s Begum said the aid organisation is “cautiously optimistic” in Biden’s “massive shift from the previous administration”.

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