

Lead Discussant Report on *No Good Options: The U.S. Dilemma in Yemen*

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According to Gregory D. Johnsen (2024), the United States has a limited strategic landscape in Yemen, where policy choices are all expensive, risky, and not likely to yield decisive results. His central claim is that the Biden administration's "deter and degrade" strategy represents not an optimal solution, but the least problematic choice among a series of flawed alternatives. The article *No Good Options: The U.S. Dilemma in Yemen*, therefore, illuminates the boundaries of U.S. power in dealing with non-state actors such as the Houthis in a complex regional system influenced by proxy politics and Iranian influence.

The article presents the dilemma of increasing Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping. The U.S. had initially gone with a defend-only strategy, where the ships were deployed to intercept missiles and drones. Even though this did not cause direct harm, it was not able to prevent constant attacks. According to Johnsen (2024), such persistence demonstrates that defensive strategies are not effective in altering the behavior of a capable and determined actor, which reveals the weakness of reactive strategies in asymmetric conflicts.

The U.S. has employed the "deter and degrade" approach, which includes a limited strikes on Houthi military installations without more extensive escalation. It is to reduce their capabilities of causing threats to shipping. Johnsen (2024), however, believes that this strategy will not be successful. It is hard to discourage the Houthis, since war can further their political aims. Moreover, they can rebuild their capabilities with the help of external sources, which further weakens the efforts of degradation and makes the strategy reliant on assumptions regarding the role of deterrence that is not always applicable here.

A third alternative was a broader military operation, or deter, degrade, and destroy. This strategy would entail attacking a wider set of Houthi properties, such as leaders. Though it can be

more effective in the short term, it is extremely risky due to the threat of regional escalation. According to Johnsen (2024), the apparent focus on Houthi leaders may trigger a broader struggle, particularly when the interests of Iran are involved. Consequently, the U.S. has not pursued this alternative, fearing a more general conflict.

The fourth alternative is to seek the overthrow of the Houthis by backing anti-Houthi factions in the Yemen civil war. The strategy has numerous disadvantages, though. The anti-Houthi alliance is disjointed and has no unity and therefore is not a dependable ally. Besides, there are numerous possible allies of concern in terms of human rights. Above all, this would probably engage the United States in a long-term, expensive ground war with questionable results, and in effect become a direct combatant in the civil war (Johnsen, 2024).

The fifth opportunity- to target Iran directly- is the most radical increase. Although Iran facilitates the Houthis' activities, attacking Iran will be considered the catalyst, therefore, precipitating a larger war. It is not merely a risk of escalation, as Johnsen (2024) believes, but this is a proactive inducement into escalation, which, as the administration aimed at preventing the wider war, is simply not a strategically viable choice.

With these limitations, the United States chose to use the “deter and degrade” strategy since it meets three main requirements: actionable, future strategy flexibility, and not escalating on a mass scale. Nonetheless, the persistence of Houthi attacks demonstrates that the plan has not yet brought its desired effect. This implies that it requires changes in order to make it effective.

According to Johnsen (2024), three main changes were suggested. First, the United States needs to maintain its restrained military attacks because sporadic attacks will hardly work. Second, it has to disrupt the movement of Iranian armaments to Yemen so that the Houthis

cannot restock their forces. Third, it must exert pressure on Iran by keeping it accountable through specific actions that are not a full-scale escalation.

The article has a strong point in its articulate description of trade-offs in strategy and the acceptance that U.S. policymakers are functioning in an environment of constrained options. Johnsen (2024) offers a more realistic view of the issue of asymmetric threat by casting it as a problem of limited choice. The interdependence of regional dynamics and the presence of external actors in the perpetuation of local conflicts are also well brought out in the analysis.

However, the argument has its drawbacks too. The analysis places a lot of emphasis on the external elements, especially the Iranian intervention, and less focus on the dynamics inside Yemen that have led to the continuation of the conflict. Also, the article criticizes the current strategies but does not provide as much discussion of non-military ones. This implies that the policy debate is still more concerned with military solutions, which have limited effectiveness.

Johnsen (2024) provides a rather nuanced analysis of the U.S. policy in Yemen and emphasizes the absence of effective and obvious alternatives. The deter and degrade strategy is a practical solution to a complicated problem, but its comparative failure indicates a more in-depth solution addressing not just the existing threats, but also the more abstract structural forces.

Discussion Questions

1. To what degree does the inefficacy of the deter and degrade approach indicate some constraints of deterrence in the case of non-state actors?
2. Does the United States have a justification for putting a priority on avoiding escalation instead of strategic effectiveness in Yemen?
3. What is the role of Iran in sustaining the Houthis' capabilities, and is this reason to pressure Iran more?

4. Does expansionary military policy make a difference, or would it contribute to increased regional instability?

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References

Johnsen, G. D. (2024). No Good Options: The U.S. Dilemma in Yemen. *AGSI*.

<https://agsi.org/analysis/no-good-options-the-u-s-dilemma-in-yemen/>

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