

Yemeni Reactions to revocation of Ansar Allah's FTO designation

March 2021

On 12 February 2021, the new U.S. administration confirmed its revocation of the designation of Ansar Allah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).¹ This February 2021 media scan captures the conflict parties' public reactions to the revocation, as well as the online reaction of Yemenis living in the areas controlled by them. In particular, it looks to capture statements made about: (1) how the revocation has influenced perceptions on the peace process; and (2) aid agencies and their role in the revocation, and what this means for perceptions of aid agencies. The scan was conducted to inform the Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform's briefings on the FTO and its revocation. It is being made available to Platform members as background to our FTO-related Briefings, and to assist planning for how to maintain political and public support for aid work.

This note uses the Platform's standard terms for describing the political groupings in Yemen, with those in Aden described as the 'Internationally Recognised Government' (IRG) and in Sana'a as the 'De facto authorities' (Dfa). 'IRG' is used as a catch-all term and it is recognised that there are significant differences in positions and actions in the IRG, especially given appointment of Southern Transitional Council (STC) members to it.

Headlines

- **Conflict parties:** Coverage of the designation by the Dfa and its supporters has demonstrated scepticism of the U.S.' motivation, and whether it will be delivered in practice. IRG and its supporters have blamed the U.S. for enabling terrorism in its revocation of the FTO designation. The escalation of violence in Marib from 8 February onwards is felt to have proved this analysis correct. The STC has remained mostly silent on the revocation in public, although privately it also argues the revocation has enabled the Dfa.
- **Peace process:** The revocation has become associated with the violence in Marib and the peace process. SESGY is accused of being a western puppet in Dfa areas, and of enabling Houthi violence in IRG areas. IRG leaders state the Dfa used the revocation as an opportunity to create a military advantage in Marib.
- **Aid agencies:** A good deal of public anger towards aid agencies is expressed on social media in IRG areas. Aid agencies are accused of having blackmailed the U.S. administration, of prolonging the war, and of undermining the IRG. There was no significant change in the narrative about aid agencies in Dfa areas, with consistent accusations of corruption and of being closely aligned with the U.S.
- **Conflict sensitivity guidance:** These results support the Platform's post-FTO recommendations that: (1) there is a need for the aid community to reposition messaging and advocacy, so that it is less likely to be accused of being partisan; and (2) this should be done via agencies establishing a collective process for rapid conflict sensitivity checks on advocacy campaigns.

Responses of conflict parties

Scepticism over motivation and delivery by Dfa and its supporters

The FTO designation provided an opportunity for the Dfa to encourage public anger at the U.S. and international community. For example, on 25 January 2021, the Dfa's supporters conducted a series of rallies against the designation and the U.S. in Sana'a and the capitals of Dfa-controlled governorates. Dfa-affiliated media outlets

(e.g., Al-Masirah TV, Al-Aalam TV, and Al-Manar TV) covered the rallies intensively.² This approach carried over into the response to the revocation by the Dfa and Dfa-aligned analysts, with most messages demonstrating scepticism of the U.S.' motivation. Dfa-aligned analysts also questioned whether the U.S.' statements would translate into action.³ Other influential individuals showed the same scepticism and stated that the Houthi religious teachings require that they should closely examine the U.S.' motivations.⁴ A statement given by the Dfa Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs represented a lone outlier to this messaging, stating that the FTO is a win for all parties.⁵

'The designation did not scare us, nor did the revocation deceive us. Our principles are firm. Our goal is clear. Designations and statements will not stop achieving our goals until the aggression is stopped and the siege is lifted.'

A Dfa loyalist on Twitter, <https://bit.ly/3urLrsG>

IRG and its supporters blame the U.S. for enabling terrorism

The IRG, IRG-aligned analysts and independent public figures in IRG areas reacted negatively to the revocation, viewing it as *de facto* endorsement of the Dfa and its actions; going as far as to describe the revocation as supporting 'terrorism' by the Dfa. For this group, the Dfa actions during the war are manifestations of terrorism and therefore the FTO designation was warranted. This perception was also widespread among IRG-aligned social media with hashtags such as *#BidenSupportsTerrorism*, *#HouthiTerrorismInYemen* and *#StopHouthiTerrorismInYemen* trending. Some IRG-aligned social media influencers launched a petition on Change.org calling on the U.S. to not revoke the FTO designation,⁶ while members of the Yemeni diaspora in Norway organised a vigil to support the FTO designation.⁷

'It is difficult to understand how this [FTO revocation] will encourage them [Dfa] to choose negotiations instead of terrorism, or stop Iran from transferring weapons or training Houthi militias.'

Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak – the IRG Minister of Foreign Affairs, <https://pmo-ye.net/post/1079>

The renewed Dfa attack on Marib on 8 February was felt to support the argument that the revocation enables 'terrorism', with some analysts arguing that the Dfa understood the revocation of the FTO as a green light to continue the assault on Marib.⁸ Others went as far as to blame the U.S. for 'participation' in the killing of Yemenis through the Dfa assaults on Marib, Taiz, and Al-Jawf governorates.⁹

STC remains silent in public on the revocation

The STC President stated that the STC supported the FTO designation,¹⁰ yet STC official accounts have remained largely silent on the issue of the revocation. In private conversations, STC affiliates argued that the revocation of the designation would only empower the Dfa and 'free' them to do more harm to the Yemeni people.¹¹

Perceptions of the peace process

SESGY accused of being a western puppet in Dfa areas

On 8 February, shortly after the FTO revocation, Dfa forces launched a fresh attack on Marib, with fighting ongoing at the time of writing. Reaction to the violence – and to the wider peace process – has become entwined with reactions to the revocation. In Dfa areas, coverage of the revocation was drowned out by coverage of the escalating violence. On the whole coverage of the SESGY was negative, accusing him of promoting a western agenda. For example, after the SESGY described the Dfa attacks in Marib as 'hostile', he was accused by a senior Dfa official of representing particular states, rather than the UN.¹²

Accusation that SESGY assists the Dfa war effort in IRG areas



Figure 1: A caricature depicting the SESGY's management of negotiations with the Dfa – Source: *Republican Yemen*

In IRG areas, observers tended to blame the SESGY for assisting the Dfa war effort. This argument was felt to be reinforced by the SESGY support for revocation of the FTO. It is claimed that whenever IRG forces are close to victory, the SESGY lobbies for peace and a ceasefire, thereby appearing to favour the Dfa over the IRG, or at the very least to enable the Dfa's battlefield successes. A few southern activists argued on Twitter that the SESGY's speech to the UN Security Council calling for the revocation of the designation was designed to provide legitimacy and protection to the Dfa.¹³

Dfa accused of using the revocation as an opportunity to launch offensive

Political leaders in IRG areas were united in accusing the Dfa of purposeful exploitation of the revocation in the ground war. For example, the IRG Spokesman stated that the Dfa misunderstood the U.S. revocation of the FTO designation when it launched an attack on Marib,¹⁴ while the IRG Prime Minister considered the attack on Marib a clear indication that the Dfa is not serious about seeking peace, and claimed that the Dfa continues to implement an Iranian agenda in Yemen.¹⁵ The Islah-backed IRG Governor of Marib was of the same opinion, stating that the Dfa's assault on Marib reflected the Dfa's misunderstanding of the 'peace message' signalled by the international community.¹⁶

Perceptions and views toward aid agencies

Anger towards aid agencies in IRG areas

There is a tendency among IRG-aligned social media activists to describe aid agencies' advocacy for the FTO to be revoked as 'blackmail' of the U.S. administration.¹⁷ Others accused aid agencies of short-sightedness, arguing that the suffering of Yemenis could only be eased by ending 'Dfa terrorism,' not appeasing it.¹⁸ Social media activists also tended to complain that aid agencies are enabling terrorism, and undermining the legitimacy of the IRG. For example, one Twitter user in IRG areas posted Figure 2 with the following text 'International organizations deliver aid to the terrorist Houthi group and people consider this as international recognition of this armed group, helping it gain legitimacy at the expense of the elected government. Thus, the United Nations contributes to fighting democracy and encouraging illegal groups in Yemen' [translated].¹⁹



Figure 2: A caricature of UN support for Dfa, Source – *Twitter/Republican Yemen*

No change in anti-aid narrative in Dfa areas

Most of the comments about international aid agencies coming from those in Dfa-held areas reflect pre-existing narratives about corruption of aid agencies and accusations of affiliation with the U.S. On 13 February, the Dfa official newspaper re-published an article accusing INGOs of 'moral degeneracy' and carrying out activities meant to have a detrimental effect on social values in Yemen.²⁰ One Dfa supporter argued that the UN should have spoken out more strongly about the SLC withholding oil shipments from the Hodeida port, accusing UN agencies of seeking to appease KSA in order to continue receiving funding.²¹

Endnotes

- ¹ 'Revocation of the terrorist designations of Ansar Allah,' U.S. Department of State, 12 February 2021. <https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah/>
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- ⁷ W. Bassundwah, Twitter, 6 2 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://twitter.com/wesamee/status/1358110541378707461>
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- ¹⁰ R. Arabic, 2 2 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://stcaden.com/news/13876>
- ¹¹ Anonymous interviews with STC affiliates.
- ¹² A.-M. Net, 9 2 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.almasirah.net/news/15641/%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%81%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D>
- ¹³ <https://twitter.com/PlwiUCJRpqI52VC/status/1350156662825504768> and <https://twitter.com/Moh90Musaid/status/1360922671157043200>
- ¹⁴ A. Net, 9 2 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2021/2/9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8>
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- ¹⁸ H. Almekhlafi, Twitter, 25 1 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://twitter.com/HeshamMekhlafi/status/1353615408738144256>
- ¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/AhsenNassir/status/1361051012899962880/photo/1>
- ²⁰ <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/411167>
- ²¹ Anonymous interview with a local council deputy in Dfa-controlled territory.