

POLICY BRIEF

U.S. Response to the Crisis in Yemen

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Executive Summary

This report outlines a proposed response by the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives to the humanitarian crisis faced by Yemen. Tens of millions of Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance due to many factors, but none greater than the ongoing war between the Houthi rebel group and a coalition backed by Saudi Arabia. We are currently supplying weapons to Saudi-led coalition, which are being used disparagingly against Yemeni civilians. This report outlines several policy proposals to mitigate these attacks and the subsequent suffering of the Yemenis. Finally, a recommendation is made that consists of restricting armaments to Saudi Arabia, providing humanitarian relief through various IGOs and NGOs, and forming a plan to ensure the sustainable development of Yemen.

Policy Problem

For the last six years, there has been a war in Yemen, which has caused the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today. This report is designed to adequately address this problem, and it is intended to be presented to both the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs.

There are numerous foreign relationships that our government should focus on, including escalating tensions with Russia, our economic sanctions on China, rising conflict with Iran after former President Trump ordered the assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, and the ever-present threat of ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. However, none of these relationships matter more than our current relationship with Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Our government has been supplying Saudi Arabia with weapons, which are being used to bomb Yemeni civilian areas. This situation has resulted in a humanitarian crisis where tens of millions of people, including 12 million children, are suffering and in need of assistance. This amount of civilian suffering is much greater than any of the conflicts mentioned above. These attacks, which are using U.S. made weapons, have been considered “war crimes” by many.

If we want to act in accordance with the American ideals of justice, peace, and liberty, then the United States should do everything in its power to attempt to reverse these actions and help the civilians of Yemen. Otherwise, we will continue to act in violation of these ideals that we hold so high, diminishing our reputation and relationships with the world.

Problem Context

Currently, the country of Yemen is facing the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. According to UNICEF, there are more than 24 million people – some 80 per cent of the population – in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than 12 million children. Two million children under the age of five are malnourished – 325,000 of which have severe, acute malnutrition. Nearly 18 million people, including 9.2 million children, do not have regular access to safe water, and only a third of the population has access to piped supplies. These harrowing statistics are the result of the coronavirus pandemic, a cholera outbreak, blocked aid, terror attacks, and a war that has ravaged the nation for five years.

The conflict in Yemen sparked in January 2011, when protests erupted all across the country in response to the high unemployment under the president at the time, Ali Abdullah Saleh. The protestors believed their poor economic conditions were caused by embezzlement in Saleh's government, and they also condemned Saleh's friendly relationship with the United States and our "War on Terror." Ansar Allah, or the Houthi movement, backed these protests. They felt as though they were being repressed by Saleh's government and wanted a return to the traditional Zaidi rulership that was in power before the 1960s. They therefore fought "for freedom from oppression by an autocratic ruler," which is how they perceived Saleh.

In response to the growing protests, Saleh stepped down in April 2011, giving his reign to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Hadi's interim rule became increasingly unstable as a separatist movement grew in the southern part of the country. In addition, Hadi failed to meet the demands of the Houthis, who despised his new rule even more than Saleh's government. The Houthis sought "to install a more effective interim government to implement the outcomes of the National Dialogue. But clearly, it also sought military dominance in the north." In 2014, Houthi forces took control of Sanaa, Yemen's capital, forcing Hadi to flee to neighboring Saudi Arabia in March of 2015.

Since then, in addition to sheltering Hadi, Saudi Arabia began a coalition to launch "an air campaign aimed at defeating the Houthis" because they believed that the Houthis are "backed militarily by regional Shia power Iran." However, this is a controversial claim, as "experts on Iran's network of proxies say the Houthis are among the least dependent on Tehran for financial and military support and decision-making." Our government has been supplying this coalition with intelligence, logistical support, and military armaments. According to the Human Rights Watch, "in November 2015, the US State Department approved the sale of 4,020 GBU-12 Paveway II bombs as part of a \$1.3 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia, but the US halted parts of the sale involving precision-guided munitions in December 2016. The Trump administration reversed that decision in March 2017. In June 2017, the US approved another arms agreement based on Saudi pledges to reduce civilian casualties." We started arming the Saudis since they were fighting "AQAP, al-Qaeda's most dangerous affiliate," who "has taken advantage of the

power vacuum in Yemen to rebuild its operations,” according to ABC News. As of September 2018, it has been confirmed that there have been “at least 11 separate incidents of coalition strikes on civilian areas using U.S. made armaments.” You most likely remember reading headlines of the attack that blew up a school bus on August 9, 2018. This attack, using a missile made by Lockheed Martin, “killed 40 boys aged from six to 11 who were being taken on a school trip.” Another one of these attacks killed 21 people, including 11 children, which used a missile made by Raytheon. Several of the attacks have hit hospitals and water supply systems, causing Yemeni civilians to live without proper healthcare or drinking water.

Out of fear that Iran is smuggling weapons to the Houthis, Saudi Arabia has also blocked aid necessary to alleviate these dire conditions, Last Summer, they barred 22 ships, which contained fuel, food, and medical supplies, from entering the Hodeida port. Saudis claim that they are counteracting this blockade by offering aid, however the aid they are providing is not enough. According to the UN Under Secretary General Mark Lowcock, Saudi Arabia is “arranging for 800,000 litres of fuel to be trucked from Aden daily. But this is compared to a daily requirement in the affected areas of 10.2 million litres...Only 47% of the [UN’s requested \$2.4 billion for Yemen] has actually been paid to the UN.” He also noted that “10,000 front line health workers have lost incentive pay. Water and sanitation projects serving four million people will start closing in weeks. By August malnutrition programmes will have to close.” In addition, in late March, our government cut aid benefits, including those from USAID, to the capital of Sanaa due to allegations that previous funds have been misappropriated.

According to Pentagon spokeswoman, Commander Rebecca Rebarich, “the final decisions on the conduct of operations in the campaign are made by the members of the Saudi-led coalition, not the United States,” Therefore, our government cannot work alone to end this bombardment. We need to work with the Saudi government, in addition to the leaders of the Houthi movement, in order to address this crisis, which is a responsibility that falls upon many sectors of our government.

In order to address our military aid to Saudi Arabia and our humanitarian assistance to Yemen, the President can sign an executive statement or executive agreement. Both houses of congress can create a joint resolution, or a legislative bill, “which is passed by both Houses and is signed by the president (or passed over the president’s veto) and becomes law” (Hastedt, 2011, 155). After all, Congress still relies heavily on resolutions to express its will, as evidenced by its attempts to influence U.S. foreign policy toward Iraq” (Hastedt, 2011, 155). In fact, in early 2019, Congress passed such a resolution. H. J. Res. 37, which would have stopped any U.S. military involvement in Yemen that has not been approved by Congress, passed the House and Senate with bipartisan support. Unfortunately, the bill was vetoed by former President Trump.

Additionally, the State department can advise the President and Congress to decrease military aid to Saudi Arabia and increase aid in Yemen as well. According to a report by the Congressional Research Service, “In February 2020, several Senators wrote a letter to former U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo asking him to take a more active role in "ensuring the

unimpeded, accountable, and impartial flow of assistance and commerce into Yemen." A month later, a bipartisan group of House Members demanded that, notwithstanding, Secretary Pompeo not suspend aid in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and other humanitarian considerations." Therefore, it is up to both Houses of Congress, the President, and the State Department, including the Secretary of State, to address this crisis in the proper manner.

Furthermore, congressional action on this issue is urgent, as former President Trump's administration spent its final days declaring the Houthi group as a foreign terrorist organization. Several House members denounced this designation, stating that it "will not help resolve the conflict nor provide justice for the violations and abuses committed during the war; it will only compound the crisis for millions of Yemenis fighting for their survival."

Finally, on February 4th, 2021, President Biden announced that our government is "ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen including relevant arms sales." However, many have suspected that, because of his specific phrasing, the Biden administration will still support the Saudi-led coalition in 'defensive' strikes in Yemen, a term that can be loosely applied to a multitude of attacks that can be used on Yemeni civilian areas. This suspicion is bolstered by Biden's statement that he made during the same speech, "[we] are going to continue to help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people." If the Biden administration feels that the Houthi forces are a threat to Saudi Arabia's "territorial integrity," they could aid the Saudis in an air-campaign targeted at Yemeni soil, which would not technically counteract the statements made in the president's speech.

Policy Alternatives

Our country must put an end to the suffering of the Yemeni citizens. As Mark Lowcock, the UN Under Secretary General with responsibility for Yemen's relief, explains, "there is a stark choice before the world today: support the humanitarian response in Yemen and help create the space for a sustainable political solution. Or watch Yemen fall off the cliff." Because of the complex nature of this issue, as with most issues, there are a few routes that you, as a member of Congress, can choose to follow.

The first proposal involves writing a bill that would call for multilateral diplomacy with the Houthis, Saudi government, and our allies working with the Saudi coalition. According to American foreign policy expert Glenn P. Hastedt, multilateral diplomacy is useful when "there is an underlying sense of conflict and distrust. As a result, much of the bilateral dialogue centers on finding formula-based solutions for problems" (Hastedt, 2011, 259). Because the Houthis "appear to lack a political strategy to unite Yemen's diverse political groups," a plan could be put in place for uniting these various actors under a single governing body. With your colleagues in your committee, you could propose a joint resolution that would encourage our Secretary of State to meet with the leaders of the Saudi Arabia coalition, as well as leaders from the Houthi movement. These diplomatic discussions would most likely also involve the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, Christopher Henzel. These discussions would involve finding an agreed solution that would mitigate the suffering of the Yemeni people, cease the aerial strikes coming from both sides, and help form a governing body that would satisfy the various Yemeni citizens. After all, "diplomacy remains the classic policy instrument and the one best suited to producing lasting and workable solutions to foreign policy problems" (Hastedt, 2011, 257).

The second proposal involves establishing a military peacekeeping operation throughout Yemen. As Hastedt explains, "Humanitarian military operations grew out of an earlier generation of efforts referred to as peacekeeping operations...Over time, the scope of these efforts was expanded to include interventions undertaken outside of the UN system and under conditions where fighting continues" (Hastedt, 2011, 341). Therefore, the U.S. government has recently begun setting up its own peacekeeping operations in war-torn areas to mitigate the ongoing conflict. The United States could set up one of these operations in Yemen, where our soldiers could be strategically placed in conjunction with UN peacekeeping officers. This action could result in both the Saudi coalition and the Houthi group to be fearful of our presence in the area and would therefore cease fighting. The Saudis would think twice before sending a missile into Yemen, and the Houthis would be prevented from continuing their violent tactics. However, this option has proven to be risky and "care must be taken that the mistakes made in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti are not repeated." Hastedt notes lessons that can be learned from these failures, including the fact that "international military interventions should be timely and robust"

(Hastedt, 2011, 342). Additionally, this policy will most likely face backlash because “opposition to humanitarian and peacekeeping undertakings has been expressed from across the political spectrum...Neoisolationist commentators have questions whether humanitarian interventions are really in the American national interest” (Hastedt, 2011, 341-342).

The third proposal involves placing sanctions on Saudi Arabia until they cease their attacks toward Yemen and open the ports for aid-carrying ships. As Hastedt explains, “Sanctions are penalties and thus are generally directed at adversaries...often the threat of a sanction may be enough to induce another state to adopt a more cooperative attitude” (Hastedt, 2011, 260). For example, your committee could write a legislative bill that would place a trade embargo on oil imports coming from Saudi Arabia. This action could incentivize the Saudi government to stop their attacks on Yemen so that the U.S. lifts the economic sanctions. In addition to economic sanctions, your committee could also propose a bill to restrict or outright cease armament sales to the Saudi government. Because the missiles that the U.S. has provided are the ones that are being used to destroy Yemeni infrastructure and kill civilians, this action would be immensely beneficial to the people of Yemen. Furthermore, it is not necessary for the U.S. to be supplying Saudi Arabia with weapons, as the Houthi rebels are not a direct threat to our soil.

The fourth proposed policy would include increasing economic aid to Yemen through USAID programs. As Hastedt points out, USAID programs “have a long-term development focus on strengthening the economy, environment, health care delivery systems, and political institutions of recipient states” (Hastedt, 2011, 302). This policy would normally be very well supported by other members of Congress, as “Bipartisan support for this type of aid has generally been high” (Hastedt, 2011, 302). However, because Houthi forces have allegedly misappropriated funds, this policy might prove to be more difficult to pass. According to the Congressional Research Service, “in May 2020, six Senators wrote a letter to former Secretary Pompeo and Acting USAID Administrator Barsa saying We recognize the challenge that Houthi obstruction poses to relief efforts in Yemen... We must ensure that development dollars provided to Yemen actually benefit the people most in need of help, and do not enrich Houthi forces or their partners, who have regularly imposed unacceptable constraints on common-sense measures to track and account for funds and supplies.” Additionally, this policy might not be effective, as it would create a state of dependency in Yemen. As Hastedt illustrates, “in 1989, Alan Woods, the head of USAID, asserted that U.S. development foreign aid had lost sight of its original rationale: providing transitional help to Third World states to meet their own development needs. Not only had this aid become permanent, it had created a dependency on it that was actually stifling development” (Hastedt, 2011, 302). Therefore, it will most likely be more effective to provide short term, tangible aid benefits rather than indirect financing. USAID programs that fund development projects on the ground would be advised over such financing programs. Such projects have already begun being implemented by USAID, which include “emergency food assistance, medical treatment and vaccination support for children, emergency obstetric services

for women, blankets and household goods for displaced families, and hygiene kits and water treatment supplies to reduce the spread of disease.”

This relates to the final proposal, which includes increasing humanitarian aid through various IGOs and NGOs. UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and Doctors Without Borders are all working in Yemen to provide tangible care to those in need. Yemen is in desperate need of healthcare workers, infrastructure for clean water distribution, food, and medical supplies. If members of Congress pass a joint resolution to allocate funds for these non-state actors, Yemeni civilians will be directly aided and receive needed care and supplies. This policy will most likely be taken well by the Saudi government and the Houthi group because “there are major advantages to using non-state actors to advance state objectives. By not being identified as part of a state, their actions may be better received by other actors.” Because the Houthi rebels despise our involvement, they will most likely respond better to non-state actors. Hastedt gives a great example of this in his textbook. As he explains, “decisions made by the International Monetary fund or the World Bank tend to be more readily accepted by Third World states than if they had come directly from the United States” (Hastedt, 2011, 42).

Policy Recommendation

It is recommended that the House Subcommittee on National Security, International Development, and Monetary Policy provides legislation that will lead to a ban on armaments given to the Saudi government, accompanied by an appropriations bill to USAID, IGOs, and NGOs that are aiding Yemeni civilians.

Total restrictions placed on arms sold to Saudi Arabia will stop the destruction of Yemeni infrastructure that is necessary to the health and well-being of civilians. In addition, these civilians will stop being unnecessarily killed by the reckless aerial strikes executed by Saudi Arabia. This is essential to fostering a peaceful, productive society in Yemen. Without the military support we have provided, the few attacks that would have occurred, if any, would have been far less deadly, prompting less escalation in the region. Therefore, our government must cease military support to the Saudi-led coalition. Additionally, further military intervention is not recommended because the Yemenis would despise our presence and because of the current neo-isolationist nature of the American public.

Congress should also allocate funds to the numerous NGOs and IGOs working in Yemen, especially to UNICEF, who are working to provide tangible aid to the Yemeni people in need, in addition to increasing USAID's programs that supply such aid. Simply passing money to various governing bodies in the area is too ineffective. Funds will be misappropriated, and that money will not provide long-lasting relief for the people of Yemen. If our government wants to lift more than 24 million people out of impoverished conditions, then we should seek to build their infrastructure, provide medical assistance, and distribute food and clean water in a sustainable manner. There are already organizations on the ground who know what forms of assistance will be effective, so funds should be distributed to them. Additionally, in order for local Yemeni businesses to remain functional, a plan must be put in place for the sustainable distribution of supplies. If food and supplies are imported into Yemen for too long, these businesses will be forced to close down since their usual customers will be receiving those supplies for free. Therefore, in addition to an appropriations bill, it is recommended that an official committee consisting of IGO members, NGO members, and local Yemeni leaders be formed in order to plan the sustainable development of Yemen. The organization of this committee can be managed by our embassy in Yemen, which can contact Yemeni leaders.

These actions will ensure that Yemeni civilians are properly aided in the specific ways that they need for now. For the future, it may be useful to consider the multilateral diplomacy option outlined in the policy alternatives section.

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