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Resolving the Conflict in Yemen: U.S. Interests, Risks, and Policy

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and Committee members, thank you for inviting me to testify and for holding a hearing on this critical issue. At the two-year mark of the war in Yemen, this testimony focuses on what should be the most urgent policy objective for the United States – ending this conflict – and how to get there. Ending this conflict is the most direct way to secure our priority national security interest in Yemen, which is to counter the threat from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other terrorist groups that directly threaten American citizens. We have other interests as well, including protecting Saudi Arabia's sovereignty, protecting freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, and deterring Iranian aggression.

Defining America's Interests in Yemen, and Designing a Strategy to Achieve Them

In order to best secure our interests, ending this conflict is paramount. Yet finding a strategy to achieve this objective has been challenging. The United States has supported the Saudi-led military Coalition in its efforts to restore the government of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi even as we have urged regional leaders, with the United Nations, to seek a negotiated settlement. At the same time, we have tried to confront the growing threat from terrorist groups in Yemen.

While the United States has not been a member of the Saudi Arabian-led Coalition in a formal sense, we have directly supported its military operations. Many aspects of the Coalition operations can be linked directly or indirectly to U.S. training, cooperation, and assistance, and certainly many Yemenis blame us for the conflict's tragic toll. In spite of this involvement, the United States has had uneven influence on the Coalition's strategic military decision-making throughout the war, and has been unsuccessful in convincing our partners to accept various power-sharing agreements.

Two years into this war, this strategy – offering a U.S. imprimatur and assistance without exercising meaningful influence – has not achieved the desired goals: ending the conflict and restoring to Yemen a sovereign government presiding over a unified security apparatus. In 2016, recognizing this fact, the former administration was re-evaluating the strategy, and wisely focusing more on defensive support to the Coalition coupled with shuttle diplomacy.

Yet some are now advocating that we significantly increase our assistance to the Coalition – including by directly facilitating new offensives into Houthi-controlled areas of the country such

as Red Sea ports, including Hodeidah. About 90 percent of UN food assistance and 70 percent of Yemen's pre-war commercial food imports have entered Yemen through Red Sea ports.¹

This would be a serious mistake. Pouring more fuel on the fire risks rapid escalation – for our partners, to be sure, but also for us. While some advocate an escalatory offensive to tame the Houthis, deter Iran, and end the war, the more likely scenario is a greater quagmire, with more lives lost and even greater Iranian support for the Houthis. Even if the Coalition were willing to use a strategy of punishment against the Yemenis living in the north, the Houthis would be unlikely to submit. They may come to negotiations in a weaker position in the short term; however, over time, as they always have, they will retreat and then re-emerge – more empowered and ready for the next round.

For the United States, our own direct involvement in an escalation could invite a classic security dilemma. While our intent may only be the defense of our allies, the Houthis and Iran may perceive such support as a direct threat, inviting the greater likelihood of attacks against our own ships in the Red Sea. Even to those who welcome an offensive U.S. military confrontation with Iran, this is not the most direct or wise way to challenge Iranian ambitions in the region.

Instead of supporting escalation, we should continue the difficult work of refining our strategy, putting America's goals, interests, and values first. We should:

- Prioritize the counter-terrorism fight against AQAP and other terrorists.
- Support the defense of Saudi Arabian territory by offering assistance and cooperation to protect Saudi's border along with other defensive needs.
- Dissuade the Coalition from escalating its operations in northern and western Yemen, particularly in the Hodeidah governorate and the Red Sea port region. Because of our country's lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, our military is a credible messenger to explain why punishment strategies rarely change hearts and minds or political outcomes.
- Review security assistance and cooperation elements intended for offensive purposes, particularly items that have caused the most civilian harm. When, for reputational, policy, or legal reasons, the risks to the United States outweigh the strategic necessity of these security assistance items, we should pause on certain sales in keeping with the letters of agreement governing these sales, the general intent of the Arms Export Control Act, and U.S. presidential policy precedent since the 1980s.
- Prioritize humanitarian assistance and humanitarian access.
- Facilitate dialogue to generate an immediate truce, followed by a new transitional government based on power sharing. Our most important work can then begin, as we invest in the new government's success, protecting its stability, credibility, and capacity

¹ Eric Pelofsky, "Escalation in Yemen Risks Famine, Collapse, Iranian Entrapment," *The Hill*, February 23, 2017, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/320840-escalation-in-yemen-risks-humanitarian-crisis>.

to govern. The end goal should be a more stable Yemen led by an even stronger counter-terrorism (CT) partner.

Ending the Conflict Is an Urgent Policy Objective: Three Consensus Conclusions

While there are divergent views about our strategic options, it is worth noting three analytic conclusions where there is general consensus: First, the human costs of this war are undisputed. As a direct result of the fighting, at least 10,000 Yemeni lives have been lost,² 80 percent of the country is in need of humanitarian assistance, and the country teeters on the brink of an official famine. While Yemeni citizens have borne the brunt of the conflict, the violence has spread over time; now many Saudis living in the border region are more endangered than they were two years ago.³ In Yemen, what was already the poorest country in the region has turned into a failed state where children are dying from malnutrition and preventable disease. It will take decades for the Yemeni people to rebuild their institutions and infrastructure.

Second, whatever the original motives behind Iran's support for Houthi military aggression in 2014-2015, the civil strife in Yemen has, over two years, increased Iran's opportunity to meddle in the Arabian Peninsula. Reasonable, evidence-based disagreement persists regarding the scope and depth of the Iran-Houthi linkage.⁴ However, it is clear that the longer this conflict endures, the more it benefits Iran's geopolitical ambitions.

Third, while the conflict inherently advantages Iran, the material winner is Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and associated terrorists, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁵ These groups thrive in ungoverned spaces wracked by population displacement and war. They are redoubling their efforts to plot, train, and threaten the United States and our allies.

Calibrating our Strategy

Because the endurance of this conflict is generating one of the world's greatest humanitarian crises, enabling Iranian meddling, and tangibly benefiting AQAP and other terrorists, investing in ending this war is an urgent national security interest and should continue to be our chief policy priority.

² In August 2016, the United Nations estimated that 10,000 civilians had been killed. See Jeremy Sharp, "Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention," Congressional Research Services, Report to Congress. November 16, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43960.pdf>.

³ "Saudi Border Guards Killed in Attacks," *Al-Jazeera*, January 5, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/01/saudi-border-guards-killed-attack-20151573425245939.html>.

⁴ Katherine Zimmerman, "Warning to the Trump Administration: Be Careful About Yemen," *Fox News*, February 28, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/02/28/warning-to-trump-administration-be-careful-about-yemen.html>. In April 2015, National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan remarked that "It remains our assessment that Iran does not exert command and control over the Houthis in Yemen." See, "Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover," *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2015

⁵ Nicole Gauoette, "US in Yemen: If you threaten us, we'll respond," *CNN Politics*, October 14, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/13/politics/yemen-us-strike-iran-houthis/index.html>.

In our role as partner and friend, we should voice strong perspectives and influence the Coalition members' decisions on military strategy, escalation, civilian protection, and cease-fires. This type of back and forth is the centerpiece of strong international relationships, and indeed we have had these types of honest, critical conversations with other key allies in the region. Our support and assistance to these partner militaries should allow us this type of influence. Convincing our partners to focus on mitigating civilian harm is particularly central; we know from our own military experiences over the past 15 years that when grievances turn from local issues toward anger at U.S. military intervention, our security and global standing suffer. Whether Yemenis are angry about the Coalition air war or Houthi aggression, or both, it is much simpler to blame U.S. involvement, fueling anti-American radicalization.

A strategy based on fine-tuning our support for the Coalition will be a dynamic process, reflecting the events on the battlefield and in the negotiation channels. Here are key organizing principles of such a strategy:

- **Support Saudi Arabia's and other partners' critical defensive needs:** We should be searching for new and concrete ways to protect Saudi Arabia's homeland defenses and to cooperate around defensive actions, including cooperation to protect international navigation through the Bab-el-Mandeb straits.
- **Use diplomacy to dissuade any new offensive:** New offensives in Hodeidah and other areas of Yemen are unlikely to lead to greater gains at the negotiating table for the government of Yemen and its allies. Counter-insurgency strategies predicated on punishing communities until they disassociate with insurgents rarely work. In most cases, such campaigns harden the political views of the communities under attack, driving the insurgents toward more maximalist positions. Instead, continuing to urge our partners toward de-escalation and conflict resolution sends a signal that the United States will accept a government of Yemen that includes Houthi interests and actors. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should be involved in this messaging, as our Generals' sound military judgment will continue to be respected in the region.
- **Ensure humanitarian access.** The United States invests heavily in humanitarian assistance to Yemen, but this investment demands that we also use private and public diplomacy to ensure that the Coalition continues protecting humanitarian access and transport. This is critical if there is a new round of fighting in the Red Sea port area, the transport hub through which most Yemenis receive food and assistance.
- **Continue U.S. civilian and military efforts to reduce civilian casualties and improve the humanitarian situation:** Since 2015, the State Department has led a diplomatic effort urging our Coalition partners to limit civilian casualties; this diplomacy contributed in part to the establishment of Saudi Arabia's Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT).

Our diplomacy in this area should continue, strengthening this emerging accountability mechanism and focusing on the following issues in Coalition operations: pushing the Coalition to adhere to the no-strike list (NSL) in all targeting; ensuring that the Coalition addresses the operational gaps in dynamic targeting capabilities that were reflected in the JIAT's August 2016 releases⁶; and encouraging the Saudis to hold accountable those involved in the civilian attacks that have occurred in 2015 and 2016.

The State Department's efforts must be complemented by rigorous, consistent Department of Defense diplomacy and training efforts, particularly with the Royal Saudi Airforce and other key security partners. The training must focus on winning counter-insurgencies, including by prioritizing civilian protection issues. This means that our standard laws of armed conflict training approaches may be insufficient. We will need new training modules in order to help our partners develop operational approaches that situate civilian safety and humanitarian access as a central element of counter-insurgency doctrine. This is an issue where values and interests clearly converge.

- **Evaluate proposed foreign military sales (FMS) cases and other forms of offensive operational support to the Coalition:** The Arms Export Control Act outlines how foreign policy considerations should be taken into account in arm exports decisions. Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama stopped foreign military sales – at times to our closest allies – when they were concerned about how these sales were being used, or simply because of a lack of visibility into the end use. Holding or pausing on isolated arm sales where there are questions represents good policy diligence and discipline, given the potential legal, reputational, and policy risks of the sales.
- **Focus on achieving a power-sharing agreement to form a stable new government:** If a new government is installed in Sanaa but is unacceptable to powerful stakeholders in the country, it will not survive. There is a high likelihood that cyclical government failure becomes the norm in Yemen. Because our national security interest in fighting AQAP, ISIS, and other groups demands that we have a counterterrorism partner in the Yemeni government, we need to ensure stability, built upon inclusive and effective governance. There are signs that some members of the Saudi government are becoming more flexible on the composition of the future Yemeni government, moving beyond the original demand for the restoration of President Hadi and his government. We must be prepared to offer economic support and humanitarian assistance to ensure that the new government can quickly provide services and oversee Yemen's reconstruction.

⁶ Saudi Press Agency, *Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) on Yemen Responds to Claims on Coalition Forces' Violations in Decisive Storm Operations*, August 5, 2016 <http://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1524799>

Conclusion: The Dangers of Escalation

Therefore, even if our partners request such support, choosing to aid an escalation in Yemen would be unwise. The strength of U.S. relationships with friends should not be measured by our willingness to acquiesce to their strategic and operational decisions, particularly when those decisions may lead to mistakes for which the United States will get blamed and that harm our interests. Working to influence threat perceptions, to urge restraint, to improve military conduct, to refine their overall strategy, and to decide ourselves which FMS items and other operational support we offer is an approach that reflects the strength of our friendship with Saudi Arabia and other partners.

Increasing our involvement would also be unwise because the war has evolved. In mid-2015, we lent our support to push back against an Iranian-backed Houthi insurgency that drove out a legitimate government. Today, different factions of Yemeni militias and security forces have joined in on either side, including forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The narrative has become more complex as the number of combatants has grown and with the Emiratis in particular fighting al-Qaeda and other terrorists, in addition to the Houthis. Furthermore, ISIS has gained some momentum in Yemen,⁷ increasingly complicating the environment. Given that our top-priority, urgent national security interest should be to focus on combatting the threat from AQAP and other terrorists, getting more involved in the Yemeni civil conflict on the side of the Coalition is both a distraction and could make matters worse.

Finally, increasing our support to back a new offensive runs the significant risk of regional military escalation. It could provoke an unintended confrontation with Iran. Any new offensive in the Red Sea port region and Hodeidah is likely to draw greater fire against our naval vessels and our partners' ships in the Bab-el-Mandeb straits, and increase the threat to the international freedom of navigation through this busy commercial passageway. U.S. support for an escalatory offensive by our partners would invite Iran and others to retaliate more directly against our interests. While the current administration may have legitimate reasons to confront Iran, doing so via increasing our military support to partners is unwise and unlikely to succeed. We run the significant risk of dragging the United States into a new war in the Middle East, but this one would occur on our partners' terms, with the United States in a supporting role and with limited U.S. influence over the strategy and the end game.

⁷ "Gulf of Aden Security Review," American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Projects, January 31, 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review/gulf-of-aden-security-review-january-31-2017>