

Secretary Mattis' Full Senate Briefing on Yemen
Capitol Hill, 28 November 2018

Thank you, Secretary of State.

Senators, I welcome the opportunity to discuss Yemen today. I recognize and respect the bipartisan concerns about this conflict, with all its political and humanitarian aspects.

As many here know, for decades Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) terrorists based in Yemen plotted attacks against the United States, our allies, our partners, and our interests, including the 2000 bombing of USS Cole, the attempted 2009 Christmas Day bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253 en route to Detroit, and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris.

AQAP further sowed its ideology of hatred and violence, birthing ISIS's off-shoot in Yemen.

Prior to Yemen's civil war, the U.S. saw success in our counterterrorism missions, targeting our enemy's efforts and denying them safe havens in Yemen. By keeping AQAP on the back foot, one of the FBI's primary terrorist group threats was prevented from conducting attacks on us despite their clearly stated intent and demonstrated capability.

Once the civil war broke out, we were forced to withdraw our counterterrorism elements working with Yemeni government forces, and we lost ground as terrorists used the resulting political vacuum to their advantage, expanding their control and plotting further violence against us.

Recognizing the danger, in April 2015 the Obama Administration began providing limited support to the Saudi-led coalition. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216 recognized the legitimate Yemeni government and demanded the Houthis withdraw and relinquish all seized weapons. The coalition was fighting the Houthi rebels who were enabled by Iranian support in the fight against the U.N.-recognized government. We provided intelligence sharing to assist in defending our partners' territory and populations, advice, logistics support and aerial refueling. While the refueling was adopted as a tactic to preclude hasty decisions by pilots caused by low fuel status, we have recently suspended this support.

Coming into office in 2017, this administration, including the Department of Defense (DoD), thoroughly reviewed the Obama Administration's past and ongoing operations to determine their relevance to our security and effectiveness. Based on that assessment, we re-engaged on the counterterrorism front, working largely by, with, and through the Yemeni government and United Arab Emirate special operations forces in Yemen, while fully supporting the U.N.'s efforts to resolve the civil war peacefully. Concurrently, we expanded specific efforts to prevent non-combatant casualties.

In particular, President Trump added measures to improve the coalition's deliberate targeting procedures designed to minimize civilian casualties in this conflict to the greatest extent possible. Every battlefield is also a humanitarian field, and this is clearly the case in Yemen where Houthis fire on Saudi and Emirati civilian targets and embed their missile launchers in residential areas.

Our additional measures include providing advisors and conducting extensive training and focused conferences for our partners to teach them best practices. Specific tactics and procedures are taught for identifying no-fire and restricted-fire areas, sharpening the Arab coalition's capability to mitigate to the maximum degree possible innocent lives lost. This is strict procedural training; we do not assist in actual target selection for attack by the Arab coalition.

We have made progress, and the commander of the Royal Saudi Air Force has gone face-to-face at every Saudi airbase to give strong command endorsement of our targeting procedures. While tragedies occur in war, we assess restraint and improved tactical judgment by Arab coalition pilots has reduced the risk of civilian casualties.

I want to be clear that your military has not grown complacent. We continuously reevaluate our missions and operations in Yemen to ensure they support our interests and protect our nation.

It is in our interests to end the civil war, to counter Iranian influence and stop Iranian-supplied Houthi rocket and unmanned aerial vehicle attacks on UAE and Saudi Arabia and their civilian populations.

Further we must restore our counterterrorism operations against AQAP, including its inspired off-shoot, ISIS in the Arabian Peninsula – while addressing the civil war's humanitarian disaster as an urgent international issue of the highest priority. The humanitarian crisis is driving our leadership of international efforts to end the civil war.

Let me clarify a key point about our support: the U.S. is not operationally involved in hostilities in Yemen's civil war or in situations where the threat of hostilities is imminent, other than in counterterrorism operations against AQAP and ISIS. Our military efforts are in accordance with the War Powers Resolution's provision that U.S. forces do not "command, coordinate, participate in the movement of, or accompany regular or irregular military forces of any foreign country or government when such military forces are engaged, or there exists an imminent threat that such forces will become engaged, in hostilities."

As noted, we do provide non-combat support to the Saudi-led coalition – such as intelligence sharing against limited threats (Houthi cross border attack preparation or attacks on Red Sea shipping, for example) and logistics.

Consistent with the previous administration, President Trump directed such support pursuant to his authority under Article II of the Constitution as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive, and his authority to conduct U.S. foreign relations.

DoD and the Department of State have implemented the president's direction through statutory authorities available to Secretary Pompeo and myself, including the Arms Export Control Act, through which the United States provides or licenses defense articles and defense services to Saudi Arabia and UAE, and 10 U.S.C. 2342, which authorizes DoD to provide logistic support, supplies, and services to the military forces of a country with which DoD has an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement in force.

I must note we are seldom free to work with unblemished partners. Long-standing relationships guide but do not blind us. Saudi Arabia, due to geography and the Iranian threat, is fundamental to maintaining regional and Israeli security, and to our interest in Mid-East stability.

Our security interests cannot be dismissed, even as we seek accountability for what President Trump described as the “unacceptable and horrible crime” of Jamal Khashoggi’s murder, a crime which “our country does not condone.”

We must maintain our twin requirements of holding those responsible for the murder to account, while recognizing the reality of Saudi Arabia as a necessary strategic partner. We cannot be deflected from using all our influence to end this war for the good of innocent people in trouble, and ultimately the safety of our own people, and this includes our military engagement.

Specifically, we actively facilitate diplomacy and the U.N.-brokered peace process led by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths to end this civil war. We have worked assiduously with the State Department to assist him in bringing all parties to the negotiating table to discuss substantive issues. I personally have had eight engagements with him in my office and overseas since he was appointed to the position in February of this year, intensifying our military collaboration to fully align with Martin’s efforts as guided by Secretary Pompeo in our weekly discussions.

Mr. Griffiths’ efforts are bearing fruit: in early December, he anticipates that President Hadi’s U.N.-recognized government, the Houthi rebels, Saudi Arabia and UAE will be in Sweden to negotiate the critical issues for ending this conflict. It will be hard work, but our military support is specifically designed to strengthen Martin’s efforts.

Senators, I know all too well the difficulty in reconciling human aspirations with war’s grim reality; but I also recognize that we cannot limit civilian casualties or advance the peace effort commencing early next month in Sweden by disengaging.

Pulling back our limited U.S. military support, our weapons sales to our partners, and our protection of the Saudi and Emirati populations would be misguided on the eve of the promising initial negotiations. It took us too long to get here, but at this key juncture, a change in our approach would work against Martin’s efforts by breathing new life into the Houthis’ combat operations, just when they are reluctantly engaging with the U.N. interlocutor.

Our withdrawal of limited military support would further remove any reason for the Arab coalition to hold up their operation against Hudaydah Port. Taken together, our disengagement and resultant loss of influence would have the opposite effect of mitigating the humanitarian crisis.

Thank you for your time. May we take your questions?

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