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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

SL: Real change in the U.S.-Saudi relationship is only a matter of time

[THE SENATE REBUKES SAUDI ARABIA AND DONALD TRUMP](#)

This week, we celebrate a major victory. On Wednesday, the Senate [voted](#) 63-37 to advance a joint resolution, S.J. Res. 54, that would cut off U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) intervention in the war in Yemen. In doing so, senators sent a clear message that **the U.S. should not be supporting Saudi Arabia's bombardment and blockade of Yemen's cities** which has resulted in tens of thousands of civilian deaths and helped drive the country to the brink of famine.

If passed into law, [S.J. Res. 54](#) would require Trump to withdraw all forces from "hostilities in or affecting Yemen" that have not been authorized by Congress. As a reminder, Congress has never authorized U.S. military involvement in the war against the Houthis in Yemen. But the extent of U.S. material and logistical support to the Saudi and UAE-led coalition makes the United States a co-belligerent in this war, and provides political legitimacy to a campaign that has helped create and perpetuate the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

The historic vote also serves as a bipartisan rebuke of Donald Trump's blind support of Saudi Arabia and the architect of Saudi's intervention in Yemen's civil war, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). In the days leading up to the vote, the Trump administration made clear that it would not be holding MbS accountable for his war crimes in Yemen, nor for his murder of U.S. resident and Washington Post contributor Jamal Khashoggi. From [op-eds](#) to [statements](#), the administration defended business-as-usual with Saudi Arabia. Thankfully, the Senate stepped up to finally sent the message that business as usual with Saudi Arabia cannot continue.

Senators who supported the measure not only spoke to this need for change with their vote, but they also made it clear in their public statements that reorienting the U.S.-Saudi relationship is only a matter of time. For example:

[Sen. Bernie Sanders](#): "The bottom line is the United States should not be supporting a catastrophic war **led by a despotic regime with a dangerous and irresponsible military policy.**"

[Sen. Mike Lee](#): "I'm feelin' the Bern."

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[Sen. Chris Murphy](#): “The Saudis are our ally, but we don’t blindly support our friends when their values and interests conflict with ours. The Saudi war in Yemen has gone off the rails and **their disregard for human life has become impossible to ignore.**”

[Sen. Richard Blumenthal](#): “If the White House refuses to hold the Saudis accountable for war crimes & premeditated murders, **the Senate must act.**”

[Sen. Ben Cardin](#): “**Saudi Arabia has shown a total disregard for international law** by leveling devastating attacks on civilians, including young children.”

[Sen. Tammy Duckworth](#): “The Saudis in Yemen **are responsible for perpetuating one of the worst humanitarian situations in the world.**”

[Sen. Tim Kaine](#): “From excusing Jamal Khashoggi’s murder to aiding this disastrous war in Yemen, **the Trump administration is essentially playing the part of Saudi Arabia’s defense lawyer.**”

[Sen. Amy Klobuchar](#): “Finally.”

[Sen. Robert Menendez](#): “When we do not send a message **to a country like Saudi Arabia** we tell an ally you can kill with impunity.”

[Sen. Rand Paul](#): “The Senate said we aren’t going to keep turning a blind eye to **Saudi Arabia abuses** or their war in Yemen.”

[Sen. Gary Peters](#): “**I’ve been very disturbed by Saudi Arabia’s actions:** from the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.”

[Sen. Jeanne Shaheen](#): “**Time to hold the Saudis accountable** for gross human rights violations.”

[Sen. Pat Toomey](#): “Sometimes, our national security interests require us to work with regimes, like that of Saudi Arabia, that do not share our values and our views on human rights. **This does not mean we can ignore atrocities committed by the governments of our allies.**”

[Sen. Tom Udall](#): “**It’s time to stop turning a blind eye** as the Saudi Kingdom carries out a relentless war targeting innocent civilians and children.”

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[Sen. Elizabeth Warren](#): “The ugly truth is that by continuing to **enable Saudi Arabia**, the US is complicit in the devastation in Yemen.”

[Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse](#): “**Saudi Arabia continues to take actions that undermine confidence**—not only with the brazen murder of Jamal Khashoggi, but in its continuing disregard for innocent human life in Yemen.”

[Sen. Ron Wyden](#): “...this bloody war **does nothing to make our country safer.**”

MATTIS AND POMPEO’S SENATE BRIEFING BACKFIRES

Wednesday’s vote came after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis’ briefing to dissuade senators from supporting S.J. Res. 54 [backfired](#) spectacularly. Instead of mitigating senators’ concerns, the subsequent vote makes clear that Pompeo and Mattis’ briefing only inflamed them by reiterating the administration’s position.

And not only was their presentation unconvincing, it was also riddled with falsehoods. [Here are a few examples](#):

1. [Pompeo](#): “*All we would achieve from an American drawdown [in Yemen] is a stronger Iran and a reinvigorated ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.*”

No. It was the Saudi-led intervention that really gave Iran a foothold in Yemen, and Iranian involvement has only increased during the course of the war. As Sen. Murphy aptly [tweeted](#), “Pompeo’s basic case is that we have to love Saudi Arabia because Iran sucks. This is a 3rd grade analysis of the Middle East.” And on countering extremism, the Saudi-led intervention has only empowered ISIS and AQAP. Ending that intervention is essential to ending the war and undermining extremist groups’ appeal in Yemen.

2. [Mattis](#): *An end to U.S. military support would undercut upcoming peace talks for a ceasefire in Yemen.*

Also no. The [only way](#) to end the war is for the Saudi-led intervention to end. Ceasing U.S. support would send a signal that the Saudi and UAE-led coalition must negotiate for peace and cannot maintain the current status quo.

3. [Pompeo](#): “*The kingdom is a powerful force for stability in the Middle East.*”

Again, no. From collectively punishing Yemen’s civilian population and the kidnapping and forced resignation of the Lebanese prime minister, to illegally blockading Qatar and

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funding extremist groups in Syria, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy under MbS has been unpredictable and [destabilizing](#). And as long as the U.S. continues to [grant MbS a blank check to act with impunity](#), MbS has no incentive to change this reckless behavior.

Pompeo and Mattis couldn't even win over previously predictable allies, as Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said of his reason for voting to advance S.J. Res. 54: "[I'm pissed](#)." Much of Graham's self-righteous ire stems from the administration's transparently obvious cover-up of MbS's involvement in Jamal Khashoggi's brutal murder and the White House's reported refusal to allow CIA Director Gina Haspel to brief Senators. Mattis and Pompeo followed Trump's lead in absolving MbS, with Mattis claiming that "[no smoking gun](#)" directly connects the Crown Prince to the crime. But with several members of the kill squad having well-known ties to MbS and the CIA's high-confidence assessment that MbS ordered the murder, the administration's position is only a blatant attempt to skirt accountability. As Sen. Dick Durbin [told reporters](#) following the briefing, "The most persuasive presence at today's security briefing on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was the empty chair meant for CIA Director Gina Haspel."

WHAT COMES NEXT

Thanks to public pressure and 63 senators, U.S. involvement in the war in Yemen will finally see real debate. Now, the public pressure that led to the Senate's action on S.J. Res 54 must continue, with Senate action on the measure coming as early as next week and ultimately carrying over to the House of Representatives. Just two weeks ago, the outgoing Republican House leadership blocked a vote on the Yemen war, but progressive leaders are already moving to force another chance should the Senate pass their legislation. And no matter what, Democratic leaders have promised to bring it back up again in the next Congress. The U.S. must also support peace talks in December to finally bring an end to this devastating war before it's too late for millions threatened with famine.

The Senate sent an important message with this week's vote. Now, it's time for those words to turn into action.

BURIED LEDES

Thirteen federal agencies and more than 300 leading climate scientists recently [issued a report](#) warning about the **catastrophic economic impact that climate change will unleash on the United States**. Trump's response? "[I don't believe it](#)."

Seemingly because the report doesn't fit with the Trump administration's line, Trump's EPA chief [suggested](#) this week that the **Trump officials might seek to get more involved in the next big climate change report**.

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The day-to-day absurdity of what is Trump and his administration has largely [obscured the fact](#) that **Trump's use of drone strikes has significantly outpaced Obama's**, and experts "point to Trump relaxing the [standards Obama put in place](#) to authorize a lethal attack [in Somalia](#) and [likely elsewhere](#) as the wellspring of an explanation."

We've known for a while that **Team Trump plans to use Syria as a launching pad to confront Iran militarily**. [This article](#) explains how that can happen.

Meanwhile, **Syria's civil war rages** on as Russian warplanes [pounded](#) rebel positions this week after an [alleged](#) chemical weapons attack on Syrian government-held Aleppo.

The VA has [said](#) **it will not reimburse vets** who were paid less than what they were owed for tuition under the GI Bill.

Peter Beinart [takes on](#) the Anti-Defamation League's criticism of Airbnb's decision to de-list rental properties from West Bank settlements: "when it comes to Israel, the ADL is a different organization. **Not just different, in fact, but morally unrecognizable.**"

[In the next Congress](#), House **Democrats will be looking to roll back Trump's plans to expand our nuclear arsenal** and perhaps [block some arms deals](#).

Sen. Elizabeth Warren [gave a big foreign policy speech](#) this week, noting that "**we need to end the fiction that our domestic and foreign policies are somehow separate**, and recognize that policies that undermine working families in this country, also erode America's strength in the world."

As [tensions again rise](#) between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine's president is [asking](#) NATO for help, **claiming that Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to annex the entire country**.

And finally, it sure wasn't a good week for Saudi Arabia. A Washington, DC local city commission [voted](#) **to rename the street outside the Saudi Embassy "Jamal Khashoggi Way."**