

**Press Call Transcript - Yemen - 11.28.2018**  
**[Recording - Yemen Press Call](#)**

**00:00 - 21:29** - On pause, waiting to start.

**21:30 [Ben Armbruster, Communications Director, Win Without War]**

Hey everybody, my name is Ben Armbruster. I'm the Communications Director at Win Without War. Thank you so much for joining us today.

As I'm sure you probably know by now, the Senate is likely to vote this week on a measure that would likely end US military involvement in the Saudi-led coalition war against Houthis in Yemen.

We have 3 experts to talk to you today about some of the key aspects of this particular vote. Namely, some form speculation about where we are in the whip count, the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen, and the larger US role in the war, and the impact of the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi has had on it.

First up today we'll have Win Without War Policy Director Kate Kizer who will talk about the view on the Hill with this issue. Next up we'll have Sarah Margon, Director of Human Rights Watch talk about the human toll of the conflict. And lastly, Ben Rhodes, Co-Chair of National Security Action and former Deputy Nat. Security Advisor to President Obama. Ben will talk about what this vote means to the parties involved in the conflict and how it fits into the broader Saudi problems of foreign policy. He'll also talk about a recent statement by more than 2 dozen former Obama officials calling on the US to end participation in, or any form support, for the Saudi/UAE War in Yemen.

We'll hold a Q + A after Kate, Sarah, and Ben have given their brief remarks--if you want to ask a question, please press 1 at any time and your name will go into a que.

And with that, we have Kate Kizer...

**23:10 [Kate Kizer, Policy Director, Win Without War]**

Hi everyone, thanks so much for joining the call today. I'm just going to give a brief overview of what things look like in the Senate right now in terms of the current dynamic.

So, this week's vote will be the 4th vote on Yemen in 2 years in terms of cutting off US assistance to the Saudi-led coalition in some fashion. No matter what happens with this week's vote, it's clear that congressional pressure is working and we are winning.

The administration has already moved to end US refueling to the coalition due to congressional pressure. They've recently called for an end to the war and a ceasefire due to congressional pressure--and they're also coming to brief the Senate tomorrow as well, hoping to shore-up votes of opposition because there's a clear signal that this bill could pass.

In terms of the vote count, it's hard to say, but there is a clear path to victory because over these 3 votes in the past 2 years, we've seen a bipartisan majority of the Senate vote to block assistance to the coalition in some fashion.

A key factor of uncertainty for the vote this week is the number of Dem senators who voted against the War Powers Resolution that was voted on this past March, but who are now lame duck senators (so this includes Donnelly, Heitkamp, Nelson, and McCaskill, as well as 2 Republican senators--Senators Flake and Heller).

Since the last vote, there have also been several key developments that have increased congressional opposition to continuing the blank check to the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen. This includes the August bombing of a school bus that killed 40 children, as well as the Saudi government's apparent murder of Washington Post contributor Jamal Khashoggi and the Trump administration's attempt to help assist in the coverup of Mohammad Bin Salman, the Saudi Crown Prince's culpability in that murder.

So, as we look past the vote that will happen this week, we know that the sponsors are using the War Powers Resolution to call into question on the unauthorized US involvement in the current war in Yemen. But I also think, in the future, we'll see a move to really reorient the security relationship with these two countries. Even senators who we think will vote against us, senators like Lindsey Graham who voted against the War Powers Resolution, have introduced comprehensive legislation to hold Saudi Arabia accountable.

And so what this means is that, with the new House Democratic Caucus leading, we're likely to see future legislation introduced and voted on to hold Saudi Arabia and the UAE accountable for what they're doing in Yemen as well as their own domestic human rights abuses at home and throughout the region.

So with that, I'll leave it there and turn it over to Sarah...

**26:08 [Sarah Margon, Washington Director, Human Rights Watch]**

Thanks Kate, hi everyone. I want to talk a little bit today about the civilian toll of this conflict and some of the findings from our research.

Although the conflict escalated in March 2015, it really began in 2014, and what we've seen time and time again is, not just humanitarian disaster of epic proportion, but significant civilian casualties. So we're looking at not only a serious and terrible civilian toll that has been exacerbated, or created by this conflict, but we're also looking at how that feeds into a geopolitical security crisis, not just in Yemen, but for the larger region.

In August 2018, the OHCHR, The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, verified 6,600 civilians killed and over 10,500 wounded since March 2015, but the actual number, of course, is likely to be much much higher. That same month, a UN group of [unclear] experts found that coalition airstrikes have caused the most direct civilian casualties in Yemen since March 2015. At this same time, 8.4 million people are on the brink of starvation, 3.5 - 4 million more could be if there's economic collapse (which seems highly likely), today 4 major US aid groups released a plea to stop the conflict, saying that 14 million people are on the brink of starvation. There are unprecedented outbreaks of cholera [unclear], over 2 million people are displaced. And it's important to note that the Saudi coalition and the Houthis have impeded the flow of aid and essential supplies to civilians. We have also documented unlawful coalition air strikes, some likely war crimes, cluster munition use, which I know seems to have stopped for now. But we had documented it for a number of years prior.

We've also documented UAE Roland torture and forced disappearances, as well as hostage taking by the Houthis, indiscriminate shelling, landmines, torture, the list goes on and on. Since March 2015, we've documented dozens and dozens of apparent unlawful coalition strikes, 18 different cluster munition attacks with weapons made in the United States and Brazil. In 2017, we documented six strikes immediately after the coalition reportedly promised to quote unquote Tighten It's rules of engagement. Those strikes killed 55 civilians, including 33 kids. And then in 2018 we documented the attack on the school bus of children and on a wedding party.

And I think what we're seeing time and time again, is that not only are these a coalition attacks ongoing, but there has been a complete and utter lack of accountability. There has been a lot of lip service paid, to any kind of coalition accountability, but members have failed to credibly investigate themselves--which is important when you think about the Saudi led coalition. Excuse me, when you think about the Saudi investigation into the murder of Khashoggi and claims of credibility there.

The Saudi-led coalition has failed to provide any redress to victims and it failed to come to end its attacks in Yemen. You may be aware that in 2016 they established something called the Joint Incident Assessment Team, and while they did begin to publicize some of their findings. They displayed the same problems that we've always seen; which is that they conduct investigations, but they leave out civilian casualty counts and they don't discuss broader issues related to harm. And so despite their promises, there's been no clear mechanism for civilian victims or relatives to obtain redress. And this is all of course within the context of the larger humanitarian crisis where people don't have access to food, to basic services and really are on the brink of a devastating catastrophe that is utterly and completely enhanced, and in many cases directly the result of the conflict that's ongoing.

The UN has warned that that Yemen could be facing the worst famine in a 100 years if the conflict does not end in the economy collapses, which we take very seriously and see as a strong likelihood if the situation persists.

So maybe I'll stop there. I shared a lot of information and numbers, but I'm happy to go into some of the details if there's interest during the Q & A, thanks.

**31:53 [Ben Rhodes, Co-Chair, National Security Action]**

I'll just make a few comments before we get in the questions. The first thing I'd say is I think that this vote is very important, even though obviously it would be difficult to pass a similar resolution with the current composition of the House. I think that this vote could send a very important message to the parties, that US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen is coming to an end and it will be closely watched by Saudi Arabia, by the UAE, by the UN. And passage would send a very clear message to the Trump administration as well as to the Saudis and Emiratis that there is a bipartisan group of senators who believe that the war must come to an end, and that, thus far, largely empty statements, emanating from the Saudi's about a political solution are not sufficient, and that the steps taken thus far by the Trump administration, while incrementally moving in potentially the right direction (in terms of a refueling support coming to an end) are also not sufficient and that the US needs to cease our support for the Saudi led war.

So again, I think it's very important that Congress take up this issue. The Senate can send a very important signal that can give momentum towards bringing the conflict to an end. As Sarah spoke about, the urgency for that could not be more acute, and with the Democrats poised to take control of the House of Representatives that will only further add to the momentum in the United States for a pressuring the Trump administration and its support for the war.

I think the context to that is worth noting, that this is a part of, I think, a broader, necessary assessment of the role of Saudi Arabia in our foreign policy. I'm coming on the heels of the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the bizarre and disturbing statement from president Trump, fully embracing Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. The reality is that over the last several years, we have seen belligerent policies pursued by a monarch, King Salman both within Saudi Arabia and beyond its borders. And the most tragic manifestation of that Saudi policy has been the war in Yemen and the millions of lives that are put at risk from famine in addition to the tens of thousands of lives that have been taken in the conflict.

You've seen the Trump administration essentially grant a blank check to Mohammad bin Salman's Yemen policy. You've seen president Trump wholly embrace the Saudi rhetoric about total responsibility for the conflict of being on the Iranian government, when in fact the Saudis have repeatedly escalated the war and compounded the human suffering inside of Yemen without any clear strategic objective that they are getting any closer to achieving, and indeed, if their stated purpose was to eliminate Iranian influence in Yemen, they have failed completely in so doing.

Again, this can be coupled with other actions that we've seen in the region. The Lebanese prime minister in Riyadh for our time, the rather pointless diplomatic fight with Qatar also supported by the Trump administration on top of the efforts internal to the kingdom by Mohammed Salman to punish his political opponents. And again, most disturbingly, the recent brutal murder of democracy.

So again, I think this can be an important part of signaling, that there is no longer support for a blank check to a foreign and domestic policies and Mohammad Salman from the US Congress--and it is a very badly needed message.

I would also just note that on November 11th, National Security Action, the group that I Co-Chair, published a letter, from a number over two dozen, a former senior Obama officials, including people like Susan Rice, and John Brennan, and myself, and Wendy Sherman, Jake Sullivan, and others, calling for an end to US support for the war in Yemen--expressing our belief that the Obama Administration's policy of essentially trying to pursue conditional support for Saudi actions while pressing where political solutions had failed, and that learning from that experience that the US role should be one of seeking to bring this war to an end, including by terminating our support, rather than through a belief that some form of conditional assistance can moderate Saudi behavior.

And I note that the Trump administration's assistance has been far less condition than the Obama administration's. Nonetheless, I think the purpose of the letter was to send a clear message from former policymakers that it's time to bring this support for the Saudi-led war to a definitive conclusion.

So with that I'll stop, so we can get the questions.

**37:42 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thanks a lot Ben. Just a reminder for those who would like to ask a question, you can press 1 at any time and your name will be in a queue. Um, just before we get to those, I just have one quick question. This is for Ben.

Ben, you mentioned that you know this is an opportunity to change the US relationship with Saudi Arabia. What are some other opportunities you see to change that relationship to greater align with American interests?

**38:17 [Ben Rhodes]**

Sure. Well, first of all I think Congress can begin by undertaking a comprehensive investigation of the Khashoggi murder and this is something that a democratic House should certainly take up. You know that should include establishing what our intelligence community knew about Mohammad Bin Salman's role, and the Saudi role in general, in the brutal murder of Khashoggi (when they knew it and what information was shared with president Trump). Again, I think the indications from the reporting are that we had information for some time, that pointed to the crown prince's role, even as the statements from president Trump, for some time, sought to deflect blame, sought dependence on rogue killers, sought to raise questions about Khashoggi himself. And it's important to establish for the record, both what we think happened, but also whether or not the administration was purposely misleading the American people and the world about what it knew about what had happened. I think that's important for accountability and important to send a message about how we view the role of a free press in countries like Saudi Arabia and around the world.

Relatedly, frankly, I think it is relevant to also examine whether or not there's conflicts of interest in the relationship between the Trump White House and Saudi Arabia--whether there are financial ties that might explain the difference that is paid towards Saudi policy. I think beyond that in addition to the war in Yemen there has to be a review of the type of military sales that we undertake to Saudi Arabia, particularly if they continue to pursue these types of policies.

And so I think it's incumbent on Congress to take a hard look at whether or not individual sales need to be suspended in the current context. And that, that thus far, there have been some close votes over the last several months. I think there's a place for Congress to assert itself related to military sales.

I think the issue of potential sanctions, magnitsky sanctions, has been appropriately raised and the Senate there clearly can be more done through sanctions policy to hold a Saudi officials accountable for the Khashoggi murder in particular.

So I think that's something else that should be on the table as we look at this. So you know, I think given the fact that the the administration itself, through President Trump's statements, indicated that it essentially wants to continue a policy of offering a blank check to Saudi Arabia. I think there's space for Congress to reassert itself on the conduct of the war in Yemen, on accountability for the Khashoggi murder, and on this question of our military sales to Saudi Arabia going forward (and that can be informed by what a democratic House determines in its

investigation of the Khashoggi murder, as well as its oversight of the war in Yemen and US foreign policy in the Middle East.

**41:42 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thanks Ben, that's helpful. Just a reminder, you can press 1 to put yourself in the question queue. And next step, have Bryant Harris from EI Monitor. Go ahead, Bryant.

**41:52 [Bryant Harris]**

Hi. Thanks so much for doing the call everyone. I have two questions. One for Ben and one for Kate. For Ben, obviously, you know, the Obama Administration started supporting this war as kind of a concession for the Iran deal, given where we are now, do you regret doing that? And you mentioned that the Obama administration support for the Saudis was more conditioned than the current administration. Can you kind of give us some more granular rundown of what conditions the Obama administration had on US support that no longer exists.

And for Kate, your coalition put out several targeted newspaper ads over the weekend targeting the key senators trying to persuade them to vote yes on the resolution. Can I just get the rundown of why you specifically targeted these senators? And I know some people who previously voted no (Democrats like Senator Menendez) you didn't take out ads for them. So if you could address that as well, that'd be very helpful. Oh, and you usually don't see this sort of ad campaign on foreign policy issues. So is there anything to indicate that their constituents particularly care about this issue? Thanks so much.

**43:06 [Ben Rhodes]**

Sure. I'll go first. You know, again, the context for our support was the Saudis expressing concern about the military advances that were being made by the Houthis inside Yemen--which are real--and they're a concern that was a part of a broader regional effort by Iran to assert its influence, including in Yemen, a country that borders Saudi Arabia. I think on the Huthi question, we at even at the time, expressed a different view of the Saudis in terms of the degree of control that the Iranians exerted over the Houthis. You know, our analysis at the time was that the Houthis were acting largely on their own initiative. The Iranians were opportunistic as the Houthis were making advances, to try to advance their relationship with the Houthis. Ironically, the Saudi intervention only created more incentive for the Houthis to potentially seek additional Iranian support.

So in a way it had the alternative affect. Our belief, as I said, was that by conditionally supporting Saudi efforts, while pressing for a political solution, we could both restrain the military campaign while helping to shape a political solution--that was wrong. And I've said this and, you know, if we had to do it over again, you know, I would recommend that that would not be the course taken.

You know, at the time, secretary Kerry was working this very energetically on a diplomatic track, in a way that basically ended at the conclusion of the Obama Administration. Um, so obviously we don't know what might've happened if a Clinton administration had come in and continued those diplomatic efforts. My suspicion is you would have seen a continuation of a much more robust effort to achieve a diplomatic solution, but instead what you had is kind of a full embrace of Saudi foreign policy and continued escalation of the war.

So again, what's represented in the letter signed by a number of very senior Obama officials is a belief that that policy failed and that we should terminate the support for the Saudi-led war. In terms of what we did, I mean a variety of things. Um, there were times during 2016 when we suspended the delivery or provision of certain munitions to the Saudi led coalition. We also counseled them against undertaking certain operations related to the war, and press them into a political track. So there was a combination of tools that we brought to bear that included, again, withholding certain munitions, counseling restraint around certain operations, and trying to press this into a diplomatic direction.

But again, candidly, those, those efforts did not succeed and particularly, when you had the shift in administration and a sense of the Saudis that they were no longer facing even anybody tapping the brakes at the beginning of 2017.

**46:53 [Kate Kizer]**

Great, thanks for the question Brian. Yes, our group, along with [inaudible] Vote Vets, the Yemen Peace Project, ran a series of targeted newspaper ads to senators around the country asking them to vote in support of the War Powers Resolution led by Senator Bernie Sanders, Mike Lee and Chris Murphy. You know I can send you a list of the specific target senators who were targeted, but one of the ways that we thought about choosing senators was those who have expressed that, on some level, morality should be involved in our foreign policy, and had expressed concern about the situation in Yemen.

And we certainly don't always see a focus on foreign policy amongst the American public. Um, but with the situation like Yemen, where many Americans don't even know that we're involved in this war, when they do find out, it becomes a clear values proposition for them--that they do not want their government supporting war crimes and the purposeful salvation of millions of people. And a new poll that was just released. A YouGov poll indicates that a majority of Americans polled in support of cutting off US military assistance to the coalition.

And so really, one of the reasons we did this series of ads is to increase public awareness of the situation in Yemen, the upcoming vote and the fact that their senator could actually have a really impactful say in how US policy develops moving forward. And so I think that along with all the earned media that those ads are, and as well as direct outreach and thousands of constituent calls that have been generated by a wide coalition through the website, stopthewar.us, we're on the verge of what could be a serious rebuke of Trump's foreign policy decisions.

**48:57 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thank you Kate. Next up, we have Lisa Mascaro from the Associated Press. Lisa, your line is unmuted.

**48:58 [Lisa Mascaro]**

Oh, hi. Great. Thanks a lot for doing the call. I also just had a question on your whip count, kate, and sort of how it looks. You know, there were 10 senators, 10 Democrats, on the last vote who did not join in that. And I'm trying to see if you have any sense of which senators may in fact be shifting and if you are able to bring any of the other Republicans (I think there were five on the last one) if able to bring anymore on board. Thanks.

**49:38 [Kate Kizer]**

What I can say is that there is widespread bipartisan interest and a lot of buzz in the Senate about this--about this upcoming vote, in supporting this vote. I think especially in light of the White House's statement last week that was seen as absurd and as something as Senator Bob Corker said, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, that Trump was now running PR for the Saudis, that this is the only piece of moving legislation that provides the Senate to essentially shut Trump down. Whether that's about his absolving MBS for the murder of Khashoggi. Or for the situation in Yemen and the blank check of support that this administration has really given. As you mentioned, there were 5 Republican senators who voted for the resolution last March, and part of that support I think, in addition to the situation in Yemen also comes down to the desire that is also, I believe through a bipartisan majority, that Congress needs to reassert its war-making authorities that it has not done so for nearly 17 years and we've seen a slow expansion of US wars around the world, and Yemen is just one instance of this. So I think that desire could also increase the support that we see. Um, and I do think that with a minority leader, Senator Schumer coming out in support of the resolution earlier last week on twitter, that will also have a positive effect on bringing the Dems together. As the House Democrats have come together, the majority are really almost all of democratic leadership cosponsoring H Con. Res. 138, the Yemen War Powers Resolution that the GOP leadership prevented a vote on last week.

**51:37 [Sarah Margon]**

Can I just make one addition to that? I think it's important as you sort of put together the Khashoggi murder and this Yemen vote, and why you may see changes in Kate's whip count from the last time around, but I think there's this link, right? Obviously MBS is the Minister of Defense--was Minister of Defense and architect of the Yemen war, but I think what's happened with Khashoggi is the circumstances surrounding his death have resonated so globally and brought home the level of brutality that is possible from Saudi officials; that he has opened the eyes of a number of members to what's going on in Yemen in a new way.

And they're looking at the US complicity in that. And so I think it really changes the game and it brings both what's happening in Yemen and the domestic situation to a new place where it gives members of Congress a chance to actually vote both with their conscious or what they realize maybe the right thing to do for national security and geopolitical security concerns.

**52:19 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thanks Sarah, Lisa and Kate. Next up we have Alex Emmons from the Intercept. Alex, you're unmuted. Go ahead.

**52:32 [Alex Emmons]**

Hey guys, thanks for doing this call. I just wanted to ask: in us going through our whip count, we're hearing that it's actually very possible that this could pass and if it does pass, what happens then? You know, what are the prospects of this? I'm moving in the House after January. Would that need to pass the Senate again? So just, just what happens if it does pass?

**52:59 [Kate Kizer]**

Happy to answer that Alex.

Um, so essentially if it passes the Senate, the House could potentially pass it during the rest of the lame duck. If that does not happen, there is already a commitment amongst Democrats to



bring up legislation to end US military involvement in the war in Yemen, in the new congress. So whether that is the War Powers Resolution or a standalone resolution, just defunding everything, I think we're likely to see something like that pass early on in the next Congress. Procedurally, what would happen then is either that could then move to the Senate where senators could try to bring it up under a unanimous consent, or centers could move again to introduce a War Powers Resolution if that's what their House [inaudible] also decided to do, and there could be yet another vote like we're going to have this week. And then if both of those resolutions pass, it would be up to Trump whether or not to sign them. It would likely be very politically costly for him not to do so, or to veto them. And it would, you know, probably create a massive backlash in Congress that the executive branch was moving against a coequal branch of government who moved to invoke their Article I power under the Constitution.

But frankly, that's quite something that this Congress needs to do in terms of reasserting its war-making authority and also sending the signal to the Trump administration and the coalition as well that US involvement in this war can not go on unconditionally. [inaudible] there needs to be a ceasefire and a negotiated political settlement.

**54:41 [Ben Rhodes]**

I'd just add to that, again, as I mentioned, that the passage of the resolution itself sends a message that could help both apply pressure on the Trump administration and shape some of the diplomatic context.

If, you know, the Trump administration resists that, and this goes into the next congress, I think what you have is Congress essentially beginning to lay down markers that is reassessing both the war in Yemen and the nature of our military support to Saudi Arabia generally. And that is an important context to consider here; in that Congress plays a role in the approval of certain military sales to Saudi Arabia; in that the Trump administration could be over in two years, and so the Saudis would have to think about their long-term position visa vi the United States in looking at Congress and evaluating what they do in Yemen.

So again, all of this holds the potential to reshape not just the nature of US support for the war in Yemen, but to demonstrate that Congress is going to play a more active role in the Saudi relationship given the current direction of the Saudi leadership. Um, it's also just worth noting to hear the importance of this military support from the US to the war in Yemen, which we had mentioned, but the Saudi capacity to carry out their war in Yemen, absent US logistical support, refueling support, intelligence support, is significantly compromised. And that's something that the Saudis and the Emiratis are certainly aware of as well. So this is, this goes beyond symbolism when we talk about a [inaudible] support for the war.

**56:41 [Sarah Margon]**

You know, Ben makes a really important point. And I think he talked about this incremental change in the centralization of Congress on this effort.

If you look at how Congress tried to play a role in redeploying the US troops from Iraq, that was over a period of years where they continue to offer similar Amendments and similar legislative language that ultimately was adopted in some form by President Obama when he went into office and I think it was a very important push, not just a globally, although it was certainly

followed globally and in the Middle East, but it also was a way to engage an incoming president over a period of time and that's a very important role of congress as they try to set some pace and reassert their authority.

**57:33 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thank you. Thanks Sarah. This is Ben again, and while we're waiting for some other questions, I do have one question for Sarah: I know that this is a hypothetical question, but if the war were to end today, how long would it take to reverse course and bring the humanitarian situation in Yemen to a more manageable place versus where it is now?

**57:57 [Sarah Margon]**

That's a tough question. I mean, life in Yemen before this most recent conflict began was very difficult. It's a very impoverished country, there's very weak infrastructure, they have real access to water problems, um, but the very fact that the coalition and the Houthis have impeded so much of the aid and distribution of supplies, that would stop--but I think that the bigger question is the destruction of infrastructure, and how that would be rebuilt and reconstructed because we've seen so much civilian infrastructure destroyed by the Saudi led coalition.

Everything from you know, water plants to potato chip factories. So it's not just a question of how do you get people food in the immediate term, but how is the international community and to play a role in helping rebuild the economy of Yemen, which was already in a difficult place.

It would certainly make it easier for groups to get in and address the potential starvation and famine concerns that would certainly be true. But if you look at countries that have come back from horrific conflicts, it is not a quick heal and people continue to suffer a over decades.

**59:20 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thanks Sarah. Next up we have Joshua Keating from Slate. Joshua, your phone is unmuted.

**59:51 [Joshua Keating]**

Hey guys, thanks for doing this. I guess the question for mostly for Sarah, but for anyone who wants to take it.

How sure are we that a withdrawal of, or I guess, to what extent would a withdrawal of US support lead to an end to the conflict? What prospects do the Saudi-led coalition have for continuing the war? What effect would this have on the Houthis calculations and their strategy going forward? How do you see, assuming this effort is successful, how do you see it playing out on the ground in Yemen itself?

**1:00:26 [Ben Rhodes]**

Sarah, I can take that if you want?

**1:00:28 [Sarah Margon]**

You can go for it then I'll back you up because I was actually going to build up something you'd said. So go ahead first.

**1:00:38 [Ben Rhodes]**

Yeah, just wanted to kind of reiterate, I'm [inaudible] of the Saudi military and the Emirati military is such that they are hugely dependent on the United States for essentially the logistical capacity, uh, to carry out airstrikes and to prosecute more complex operations in Yemen.

And again, that's everything from a refueling capacity for their planes, to intelligence support, if you get into military sales that things like munitions come into play, so they will be significantly hamstrung in their capabilities if the US were to withdraw support.

And again, that doesn't guarantee that they would cease hostilities, but it would be an incredibly important substantive blow to their capacity to continue to prosecute the war as they have done. Essentially, uh, thus far on the diplomatic side to, you know, you essentially have each side, you know, putting [inaudible] on the other to move towards any type of ceasefire. So the Trump administration and the Saudis and Emiratis put the [inaudible] entirely on the Houthis, and then as they continue to carry out the conflict that would be against the Houthis. The Houthis themselves, obviously put the [inaudible].

The US would be appropriate in insisting that the Saudis take the first step and create the conditions for a cease fire. And then, try to channel this into some type of, a more robust diplomatic process involving the UN. What form that would take, you know, I think you would aim for first and foremost for a ceasefire so as to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance.

And again, the war has not only, um, you know, lead to direct civilian harm, but as ports of entry or closed off and as areas are essentially no-go zones, that incapacity to deliver assistance is what's making the humanitarian crisis so acute.

So even if you could just put in place a ceasefire, you could immediately begin to see at least an effort from the international community to deal with some of the humanitarian concerns. Then I think, politically, you enter a more complex negotiation about how power is distributed in Yemen--regionally and among the different actors there.

But again, even as those questions are going to be difficult and going to require negotiation. Uh, I think the immediate onus should be on trying to bring about a ceasefire so that you can begin to address the humanitarian concerns. And if the US support is withdrawn for the Saudi-led war, I think the prospects of that type of ceasefire coming into place go up significantly.

**1:03:56 [Sarah Margon]**

I mean, I think Ben makes a really important point. Which is that, because of the comprehensive US role in supporting this conflict, you would see significantly less death if the US were no longer to play a role. It doesn't mean that there wouldn't be fighting, but because so much death and destruction and so many people have been wounded from the aerial strikes, that would change the dynamic.

But I think you'd also have to see restrictions on the naval and air blockade lifted--which have been in place since March 2015--because that's part of what has restricted the flow of food, and fuel, and medicine. So if you don't have these ongoing airstrikes but you have lower level ground altercations that is something that can be addressed in a political negotiation. And that's where the rubber really meets the road, in a sense, because it's one thing for the US to stop

supporting the coalition, it's another thing for there to be a real, genuine, full diplomatic push with a multi-phased approach to get down to some of that actual ground fighting.

And it is possible that some of the ground fighting in certain parts of the country would make it hard to access civilians and their needs. But it's so absolutely restricted in difficult now; you have coalition airstrikes hitting hospitals and water points and critical civilian infrastructure that it's based, it's becoming increasingly impossible. There's also, the closing off of the airport [inaudible] commercial, haven't been able to go for about two - two and half years, so that makes it more difficult for people to come into the country and provide urgent medical care.

So if those large scale changes were to happen and they were to be coupled by a mass influx of diplomatic support, it doesn't mean that the humanitarian picture would change. It doesn't mean that civilians still wouldn't be caught up in a crisis and suffering significantly. It doesn't mean that there wouldn't be ongoing human rights violations. I mean, as we know all too well peace doesn't necessarily mean that those types of things stop, but it does create an opening that would be significant given how grave the situation is now.

**1:06:28 [Kate Kizer]**

Yeah. Yeah this is Kate. If I could just quickly add to all of that, which is 100 percent accurate...

Um, I think the other thing about withdrawing US support is the political message that it sends to the coalition because in addition to the military support that Ben was outlining, the coalition really relies on to keep up the high tempo of airstrikes in the war. Um, the US backing, along with UK backing, really give this intervention international legitimacy--whether I'm in the public domain or at the UN. And withdrawing US support would be a significant blow to that political legitimacy for the intervention, that I think is extremely important to actually pushing the coalition and the Hadi government to the negotiating table, unconditionally, to actually make realize that they need to make concessions to the Houthis. These have to be part of some future negotiated unity government because otherwise they risk exacerbating the security concerns. They launched the war in the first place, by excluding the Houthis out of any future peace settlement.

Um, they would essentially create a long-term insurgency or reason for there to be an insurgency on Saudi Arabia's border.

And so we seen the Huthi fight various Yemeni governments over the last decade and various other wars, and the bottom line is that the Houthis also need security assurances in order to negotiate in good faith, and a ceasefire to end the intervention that could be pushed by US withdrawal, is really critical to moving that ball forward.

**1:08:09 [Ben Armbruster]**

Thank you. Kate. Um, one last item before we close this call: I just want to note that Senator Sanders will be speaking about this issue on the Senate floor today at 5:30 PM eastern time.

And with that, we'll close out the call. If anyone has any questions or further comments about your reporting going forward, don't hesitate to let us know. And thanks for calling in.