

**Secretary of State Mike Pompeo
Remarks to Congress on Yemen
November 28, 2018**

Distinguished members:

I want to use my time to walk you through American interests in Yemen. I know many of you think it's time to pack up and abandon the role we've been playing since the previous administration. I'm here to tell you why that's a bad call.

Shortly after the Trump Administration took office, we conducted a comprehensive strategic review of the war, and decided the best way forward was to maintain counterterror operations and support the UN's efforts at peace. Throughout 2018, we have pushed for all parties' full support for UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths' efforts to convene parties for talks. The Trump Administration has acted, and will continue to act in ways that reduce civilian casualties and improve the humanitarian situation on the ground in Yemen.

In fact, I've announced in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed this morning that we are providing an additional \$131 million in emergency food assistance, bringing total U.S. humanitarian assistance for Yemen to more than \$697 million in the past fourteen months.

I'm also here to tell you abandoning Yemen would do immense damage to U.S. national security interests and those of our Middle Eastern allies and partners.

To that end, the United States is currently carrying out three vital missions in Yemen:

The first mission is to assist the Saudis and the Emiratis in their fight against Iranian-backed Houthi fighters. This conflict isn't optional for Saudi Arabia, and abandoning it puts American interests at risk, too.

Iran wants to establish a version of Lebanese Hezbollah on the Arabian Peninsula so the mullahs in Tehran can control seaborne trade through strategic waterways like the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Iranian success in this regard would be bad for America and the world.

As it is doing in Syria to Israel, Iran wants a stronger foothold to threaten Saudi population centers with rockets, drones, and ground forces.

The U.S. interest in this first mission is to counter Iran's regional ambitions and to help our allies and partners protect themselves. Just as we must constrain Iranian expansion in Syria, in the Golan Heights, and in Iraq, we must also prevent Iran from entrenching itself in Yemen.

The second mission – the U.S. direct action mission – is to decapitate al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, the group that bombed the USS Cole back in 2000 while it was stationed in Aden's harbor.

In 2009, AQAP dispatched Nigerian-born terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to detonate an explosive device aboard a Northwest Airlines flight, the first attempted attack inside the U.S. by

an al-Qaeda affiliate since September 11th. In 2010, AQAP tried to send explosive-laden packages to the U.S.

In 2015, AQAP claimed it chose the target and financed the terror attack on Charlie Hebdo's office in Paris.

Veteran jihadist Qassem al-Rimi now leads AQAP, and the group continues to release propaganda reiterating its intent to attack the West.

We've had some big wins in the counterterrorism fight in Yemen, including the deaths of former emir Nasir al-Wahishi, and the death of American-born cleric Anwar al-Aulaqi by drone strike. But the fight continues, and it can't be won by air power alone.

Yemen also is home to an ISIS affiliate, which emerged in 2014. While the ISIS presence is small – with only a few hundred fighters – its ranks could grow quickly if we withdraw. I know you all don't want to fight another would-be Caliphate like we did in Iraq and Syria.

The third mission is to protect Americans working in Saudi Arabia or transiting the strategic waterways around Yemen.

With Iranian help, the Houthis have launched ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia, targeting, among other places, King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh and the Yamama royal palace. We are assisting the Saudis and Emiratis to counter these threats. The Houthis claimed last week [Nov. 19] that they'll cease these attacks, and I hope they mean what they say. But will they also

stop trying to blow up Saudi oil tankers with drone boats laden with explosives, which could just as easily target U.S. ships sailing through the strait?

Will Tehran stop providing the Houthis UAVs that threaten Saudi air defense systems? I'll believe it when I see it.

The Yemen war has been a bloody battle, and the humanitarian toll has been high. So far, tens of thousands of people have been killed.

Three-quarters of Yemen's people require life-saving assistance. More than 14 million are at risk of starvation.

About 50% do not have access to safe water and sanitation. It would take a heart of stone to ignore these statistics. But they would only get worse if we were not involved.

As we have done since the very beginning of this conflict, we have taken action to stop unacceptable things from happening, and we will continue to do so.

For example, when a Saudi-led airstrike in August hit a school bus and killed innocent children, Riyadh agreed to conduct an investigation of this incident through its Joint Incident Assessment Team (JIAT). Following the JIAT's assessment, the Saudi-led Coalition accepted its findings and pledged to hold those responsible to account, give compensation to victims, and implement additional procedural reviews. They are following up on these commitments.

Separately, the Coalition has stopped the use of cluster munitions and changed its rules of engagement to incorporate some U.S. recommendations. We continue to press Coalition partners at the highest levels to mitigate the conflict's impact on civilians. We are working with the Saudi military as they seek to remedy deficiencies in their targeting processes, and we are increasing training opportunities on the Law of Armed Conflict for Saudi officers.

Right now there is a diplomatic process, spearheaded by UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, that is gaining steam. On October 30, Secretary Mattis and I called for a ceasefire, including Coalition airstrikes, with the goal of causing all sides to take a step back from the fighting. The Houthis and the Republic of Yemen Government have committed to attending consultations in Sweden in December. If that diplomacy starts to make breakthroughs our hopes are high that hostilities will soon stop entirely.

The Saudis have been responsive to international concern about the humanitarian situation. To provide humanitarian relief in Yemen, the Saudis have donated at least \$3.2 billion, and that total may be as high as \$11 billion, because it is quietly given bilaterally. The UAE has given billions as well. The U.S. State Department has helped hundreds of NGOs deliver food, medical supplies and equipment.

We have supported the United Nations relief efforts. Through the Quad mechanism (U.S., UK, Saudi, UAE), we are ensuring Coalition humanitarian aid is coordinated with the UN and international non-governmental organizations for maximum impact. Since October 1st, 2016, the

United States government has provided more than \$1.2 billion in humanitarian assistance for Yemen.

What has Iran done? I'll tell you where their money goes.

It has spent hundreds of millions supporting the Houthis, who throw 15 year olds on the front lines and hide behind human shields when the bombs start falling. IRGC-Quds Force Unit 190, a 20-man unit headed by Hassan Moezzi ("Moe-ezzy"), is handing out guns, rockets, fuel, and missile engines to the Houthis like Halloween candy. Hassan also moonlights as a travel agent: he's busy making arrangements for IRGC officers and Hizballah fighters to come to Yemen, then giving them assignments.

Elsewhere, Iran has given at least \$16 billion combined to allies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It is devoted to undermining democracies, like the nascent new government in Baghdad. Most of all, the corrupt Ayatollahs are using Iran's wealth to line their own pockets. Iran has no interest in helping the Yemeni people.

More broadly, degrading ties with Saudi Arabia would be a grave mistake for U.S. national security, and that of our allies.

The Kingdom is a powerful force for stability in an otherwise fraught Middle East.

Saudi Arabia is working to stabilize Iraq's fragile democracy and keep Baghdad tethered to Western interests, not Tehran. Riyadh has helped manage the flood of refugees fleeing Syria's civil war by working closely with host countries, cooperates closely with our ally Egypt, and is establishing closer ties with Israel.

We want to keep Saudi Arabia in America's column, because the alternative is co-optation by China and Russia. China heavily depends on Saudi crude oil. They have signed a memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation. And Chinese state-owned enterprises tend to underbid competitors on key projects in Saudi Arabia. As for Russia – MBS and Putin have made agreements this year on oil and gas cooperation. Russia is very aggressive in offering S-400 missiles to Riyadh. And Russia is also competing for nuclear projects.

Saudi Arabia has also contributed millions of dollars to the U.S.-led effort to fight the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations.

Saudi energy production and economic stability is key to regional prosperity and global energy security.

Supporting Saudi Arabia's ability to defend itself and contribute to Middle East stability is central to U.S. interests and those of our allies around the world.

Defense exports can help Saudi Arabia deter and, when necessary, defeat acute threats in the region, from destabilizing governments like Iran to terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda. When Saudi Arabia and other partners operate U.S. equipment, it also ensures that they can operate effectively with U.S. forces and that we can share best practices with them. Advanced U.S. munitions also help our partners engage in more precise targeting and mitigate civilian harm.

Defense exports also help to create or sustain thousands of U.S. jobs.

Unfortunately, some Members of Congress have held billions of dollars of defense sales to our Gulf partners for many months beyond the informal review period, which impedes our national security imperatives and calls into question our reliability as a partner. These holds appear to be part of a broader strategy to deprive the Administration of the diplomatic wherewithal to pursue our interests across the world.

Our efforts would be much easier if the Senate would confirm an Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, an Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs and an Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, and an Under Secretary of Management, among other positions.

The suffering in Yemen grieves me, but if the United States of America was not involved in Yemen, it would be a hell of a lot worse.

What would happen if the U.S. withdrew from the Yemen effort? The war wouldn't end.

The Saudi-led coalition would not have the benefit of our advice and training on targeting, so more civilians would die. Yemen's terrorist groups would enjoy safer havens. Oil tankers and aid ships sailing in the Red Sea wouldn't be safe, nor would Americans landing in Riyadh airport.

The United States wouldn't have as strong a diplomatic hand in the region.

All we would achieve from an American drawdown is a stronger Iran and a reinvigorated ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

I know the conflict in Yemen is ugly. We are engaged in diplomacy all around the world to make it less so – and have actually made it less ugly. But it's important to remain involved. Talks are scheduled to happen soon.

Our hope remains that a peaceful solution to the conflict can be achieved. We need congressional support for that to happen.

The more support from you we get, the better chance we have of ending the conflict and stopping the suffering that none of us are happy about.

I'll now turn it over to Secretary Mattis.