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Yemen's Fate is in Trump's Hands



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

Congress has finally grown a spine.

For the first time in more than forty years, Congress has invoked the [War Powers Resolution](#) to demand that the US end its assistance to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in their war against Houthi rebels in Yemen. The US has been involved in the Saudi-led war without the authorization of Congress as mandated by the Constitution.

The [resolution](#) went to President Donald Trump's desk on Thursday. As I write this, Trump has not yet vetoed the resolution. Trump, however, has said that he will, and has been saying it since at least [March](#) of last year. The Administration argues that, contrary to the

resolution's language, the US is not involved in "[hostilities](#)" in Yemen because the US is not bombing the country. Nor are US troops on the ground. The US extends limited "non-combat support" by providing arms, intelligence, and targeting advice. (In November, the US announced that it would cease in-flight refueling of coalition warplanes.) Furthermore, Article II's "Commander in Chief" power gives the president Constitutional authority for these activities.

The UN calls Yemen the "world's worst humanitarian disaster." As many as 85,000 children may have died during the war from starvation and disease, according to the international NGO Save the Children. Seventeen million Yemenis are at risk of famine. A Saudi blockade keeps drastically needed food and medical aid from reaching Yemenis. US assistance makes the Saudi devastation of Yemen possible.

Congress does not share the president's doglike loyalty to the Saudis and to the kingdom's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman ("MBS," as he is called). Most members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, reached their limit with MBS last October when US resident and Washington *Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered and carved up in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Anonymous sources in the [CIA](#) say that the Agency has concluded that MBS personally ordered Khashoggi's murder.

On April 4, a bipartisan group of three Senators and six Members of Congress sent President Trump a [letter](#), urging him to sign the resolution.[\[1\]](#) The lawmakers draw on every ounce of their cunning in hopes of averting an almost certain Trumpian veto.

Step One: Tie Yemen to the hated Barack Obama. The April 4 letter emphasizes that it was President Barack Obama who took the US into Yemen in 2015. This is a transparent gambit to get Trump to withdraw from Yemen just as he withdrew the US from the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Climate Accord. (Trump hasn't yet destroyed Obamacare, but he's working on it.)

Step Two: Play on Trump's avarice. Trump gave a reason for his muted response to the Saudis' murder of Jamal Khashoggi: [arms sales](#). During a meeting with MBS at the White House on March 20, 2018, Trump boasted about a \$110 billion US arms sale to the Saudis.[\[2\]](#) [Trump](#) told reporters: "Saudi Arabia is a very wealthy nation and they're going to give the United States some of that wealth, hopefully, in the form of jobs, in the form of the purchase of the finest military equipment anywhere in the world." The April 4 letter takes care to say that the War Powers Resolution "has no bearing on U.S. weapons sales to the Saudi Kingdom."

The proper response to this argument is gritted teeth. What the Saudis do with US weapons is no secret. Senator [Bernie Sanders](#) has pointed out that the US has “been providing the bombs that the Saudi-led coalition is using....” Sanders added: “In too many cases our weapons are being used to kill civilians.” Sanders specifically mentioned an incident in August 2018 when a bomb manufactured by Lockheed Martin killed 40 Yemeni boys aboard a school bus.

The War Powers Resolution allows the US to continue to function as the arsenal of autocracy. Arms sales to the Saudis will continue. However, the US also wants to sell Saudi Arabia [nuclear reactors](#). Is Trump willing to endanger *that* multi-billion dollar deal? How about Trump’s own lucrative dealings with the Saudis? Will Trump jeopardize the millions of dollars the [Saudis](#) spend in Trump hotels?

Don’t expect to read any of this in Trump’s veto message to Congress, however. Instead, we will be treated to a sanctimonious assertion that the US must continue to assist our Saudi and Emirati allies in order to counter the spread of Iranian influence in the region. We will hear that this is certain to occur if the Iranian-backed Houthis are not defeated.

Trump vs. Trump

“Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast.”

—Goethe, *Faust, Part I*

The April 4 letter points out that Trump “has spoken out against costly and never-ending conflicts around the globe.” The lawmakers are appealing to the Trump who claims, accurately or not, that he opposed the Iraq war from the beginning. This is the same Trump who announced in December 2018 that he was pulling about 7,000 American troops out of [Afghanistan](#) and all US troops from [Syria](#) (some 2,000 troops).

That is one Trump. There is another. The other Trump bragged during his presidential campaign that he was the “[most militaristic person ever](#)” and swore to annihilate ISIS. Liberal interventionists and neoconservatives alike paint Trump as an isolationist, but Trump isn’t an isolationist. An isolationist doesn’t ask for a military budget of \$717 billion (and get it), as Trump did for FY 2019.

Moreover, under Trump, US armed forces are still involved in actions all over the world. As Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov retorted indignantly, in response to a US demand that Russia leave Venezuela: “The whole world is dotted” with US military bases (some 800, according to *Newsweek*, in a story which includes a map of US bases worldwide). I am very much afraid that this is the Trump who will decide whether to end US involvement in Yemen.

The War Powers Resolution passed in the Senate by 54 to 46. All Democrats and 7 Republicans voted in favor of the resolution. The resolution passed in the House by 247 to 175. Sixteen Republicans voted in favor and one Republican voted “present.” These numbers don’t come close to the two-thirds majorities in each chamber needed to override a presidential veto.

Congress should not have to stop a war that it never authorized. The Constitution entrusts Congress alone with the power to take the US into war. For too long, presidents have usurped this power. Unfortunately, the War Powers Resolution has the unintended effect of giving a president *carte blanche* to make war unless blocked by two-thirds majorities in both chambers of Congress. Nevertheless, the Yemen resolution is a welcome sign that Congress is taking its first steps towards reclaiming its Constitutional primacy over war.

Notes.

[1] Among the signers are Senators Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Rand Paul (R-Ky.), and Mike Lee (R-Ut.) and Members of Congress Pramila Jayapal (D-Wa.) and Barbara Lee (D-Ca.).

[2] Current and former US government officials say \$110 billion is a wildly exaggerated figure conjured up by Trump’s son-in-law [Jared Kushner](#). Also, the bulk of the sales Trump boasted about were negotiated under President Obama.

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