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## U.S. stepping up weapons shipments to aid Saudi air campaign over Yemen

By James Rosen

April 7, 2015



Yemenis gather as they search for survivors in the rubble of houses destroyed by Saudi-led airstrikes in a village near Sanaa, Yemen, Saturday, April 4, 2015.

The United States appears to be slowly but steadily deepening its involvement in the war in Yemen.

U.S. military officials said Tuesday that the United States has stepped up weapons shipments to the Saudi-led Sunni Muslim coalition of Arab countries that has been bombing Shiite Muslim Houthi rebels in Yemen for almost two weeks.

“It’s a combination of pre-existing orders to our partners and some new requirements,” said Army Col. Steve Warren, describing the arms shipments.

Warren told McClatchy that the weapons are mainly ammunition and bombs, likely including precision-guided weapons to compensate for the absence of Saudi or allied foot soldiers in Yemen to provide targeting information.

Additionally, the number of U.S. military personnel assigned to what U.S. officials have called a “joint fusion center” in Saudi Arabia to oversee the air campaign has risen to about a dozen, Warren said.

An official who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to disclose details said the American contingent is being led by Marine Maj. Gen. Sam Bundy, the deputy commander of Marine Corps troops at U.S. Central Command headquarters in Tampa, Fla. It is unusual for the Pentagon to choose a two-star general to lead a mission in which U.S. troops, warplanes or Navy ships are not directly involved.

On Monday, Warren told reporters that the U.S. had agreed to provide refueling services for the coalition’s aircraft, though it had not yet been called on to do so and would not do so over Yemeni territory.

He also said that U.S. military assets had been used to rescue two Saudi pilots March 26 from the Gulf of Aden after the engine of their F-15 fighter failed. Warren said an Air Force Pave Hawk special operations helicopter had been dispatched from Djibouti, on the eastern shore of the gulf, to carry out the rescue, which was coordinated by the guided-missile destroyer USS Sterett.

Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes against Iran-backed Houthi rebels on March 26 after the rebels began an assault on Aden, Yemen’s second largest city. The Houthis, followers of a religious sect of Shiite Islam, had taken control of the country’s capital, Sanaa, last fall and arrested the country’s president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, whose escape in February and flight to Aden triggered the Houthi advance.

The United States pulled its remaining military personnel from Yemen on March 21. Hadi, a close ally of the United States, fled Aden on the same day Saudi Arabia began bombing and surfaced in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, the next day.

Almost 200 people have died in Aden, Yemen's commercial hub, in ground fighting and airstrikes, and an estimated 500 people are believed to have died throughout the country.

Warren said the recent focus on Yemen has not weakened the separate U.S.-led air campaign against Islamic State jihadists in Iraq and Syria. Some of the same Arab countries now helping Saudi Arabia in Yemen also are providing aircraft to the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State effort.

"Gulf Cooperation Council participation in operations over Yemen have not had an impact on U.S.-led coalition efforts in Iraq and Syria," Warren said.

In Riyadh on Tuesday, Tony Blinken, the U.S. deputy secretary of state, reiterated American support for Saudi Arabia's campaign and acknowledged the U.S. weapons deliveries. He also said the United States was increasing its intelligence sharing with the coalition, which in addition to Saudi Arabia includes the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and Egypt.

"Saudi Arabia is sending a strong message to the Houthis and their allies that they cannot overrun Yemen by force," Blinken told reporters.

At the White House, Press Secretary Josh Earnest said the U.S. would continue its support for Saudi Arabia's bombing campaign, which, he said, "is dedicated to addressing legitimate security concerns that they have along their border with Yemen."