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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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07.03.2024

Despite Risks, US Presses to Extend War in Yemen



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With the Biden administration facing a legally binding deadline of March 12 to end its acts of war in Yemen, officials in Congress are preparing to grant the administration the legal authorization to continue waging war in the immediate future.

At a February 27 [Senate hearing](#), U.S. lawmakers indicated that they are working on a bill for the authorization of the use of military force, which would provide the Biden administration with the legal authority to continue airstrikes against the Houthis, a militant group in Yemen that has been attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea since the start of Israel's military offensive in Gaza.

“The Constitution requires Congress to authorize acts of war,” Senator Christopher Murphy (D-CT) explained. Citing his preference for “a tailored, time-bound

Congressional authorization,” the senator said that “I will be in discussions with my colleagues in the coming days to introduce such an authorization.”

Since January 11, the Biden administration has been directing airstrikes and other military operations against the Houthis, a militant group that controls much of Yemen. In several rounds of airstrikes, U.S. and British warplanes have attacked Houthi-controlled locations and infrastructure, including radars, air defense systems, and weapons storage facilities.

The Biden administration has notified Congress of some of its actions, but it has not requested military authorization. Administration officials have claimed that the president has the authority to direct military operations on the grounds that Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are a threat to the United States and its partners.

“It is fully within the president’s authority as commander-in-chief,” Defense Department official Daniel Shapiro told the Senate committee.

Several members of Congress disagree. Some have questioned whether the Houthis’ attacks on commercial vessels pose an imminent threat to the United States, while many have insisted that the Biden administration needs congressional authorization.

“I think we’ve all conceded that there is no congressional authorization for these hostilities,” U.S. Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) said, before commenting that it is “laughable” for the Biden administration to launch attacks on behalf of partner countries in the name of self-defense.

Now that the Biden administration has initiated hostilities against the Houthis, it is required to follow the War Powers Resolution, which limits the use of force to a period of 60 days. With a deadline of March 12 approaching, the administration’s options for legally continuing its military operations are for Congress to grant it authorization or for the president to exploit an option under the resolution to continue hostilities for another 30 days.

With members of Congress moving to provide the administration with authorization, some are questioning the logic of waging war against the Houthis. Ongoing U.S. military strikes against the Houthis, they warn, may fail to deter future attacks and could spark a wider war in the Middle East.

“President Biden himself has said that the actions that we are undertaking are not likely to deter Houthi escalation,” Senator Kaine noted, referring to comments made by the president that the airstrikes are not working.

Even senators who are moving to grant the Biden administration legal authority have expressed doubts. As Senator Murphy has noted, the Biden administration’s military

intervention follows years of failed efforts by a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia and backed by the United States to attack the Houthis with airstrikes.

From 2015 to 2022, the Saudi-led military coalition launched an estimated 23,000 airstrikes against the Houthis. When U.S. and British forces began their airstrikes in January, they targeted sites that the Saudi-led military coalition had hit hundreds of times. Citing these figures, Senator Murphy wondered how “our campaign of airstrikes is going to have a different outcome.”

Another factor causing doubts in Washington is the lack of U.S. military intelligence on the Houthis. As U.S. officials have acknowledged, they know very little about the Houthis’ military capabilities, which Western intelligence agencies spent little time tracking in recent years.

“We sort of have a good sense of the numerator,” Pentagon official Shapiro told the Senate committee, referring to “what we have been able to eliminate and what they’ve used.” Still, “we don’t fully know the denominator,” he said, alluding to the Houthis’ remaining military assets and capabilities.

Several U.S. officials have noted that the U.S. war in Yemen also poses a major risk to the people of Yemen. By going to war against the Houthis, the United States may reignite a war that has already resulted in the deaths of more than 377,000 people. Only an informal truce between the Houthis and the Saudi-led military coalition, which has held since April 2022, is preventing a return to a far deadlier conflict.

There is “no question that a broader escalation or continuation of the status quo undermines the peace effort,” U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking told the Senate committee. Both would “degrade our own interests in the region, which are solidly behind seeing a peace effort in Yemen.”

Still, the most divisive factor in Washington concerns the connection between the Houthis’ attacks in the Red Sea and Israel’s military offensive in Gaza. As U.S. officials are well-aware, the Houthis are attacking commercial vessels as a way of pressuring the international community into ending Israel’s siege of Gaza.

Although the Biden administration has downplayed the connection, some of its closest supporters in Congress have rebuffed its position by noting that the Houthis have established their intentions through their words and actions.

“The timing of it was related to Gaza, they’re saying it’s related to Gaza, and the only period of deescalation that we’ve seen was during the first hostage release,” Senator Kaine

said, referring to a reduction in Houthi attacks during a temporary humanitarian pause in November.

Taking the same position, Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) called on the Biden administration to “recognize that the Houthi action has been in response to the war on Gaza.”

Still, U.S. lawmakers have done nothing that will lead to a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. All they have done is acknowledge that a ceasefire would undercut the position of the Houthis, bring a halt to Israel’s military offensive in Gaza, and make it possible for negotiations to lead to the release of hostages.

Indeed, none of the senators called for a permanent ceasefire, despite its potential to establish a basis for a deescalation across the entire region.

“What you need to do is call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza,” a protester cried out, before being forcefully removed from the hearing.

This first appeared on Foreign Policy in Focus.

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CounterPunch 06.03.2024