

Trump now owns the Yemen war

Ishaan Tharoor

April 18, 2019

For a time, President Donald Trump could plausibly say this wasn't just his fight. The previous administration of Barack Obama tacitly greenlit the 2015 Saudi intervention into what was then a civil war in Yemen. Four years later, the conflict has metastasized into a grim regional conflagration, pitting a U.S.-backed Saudi and Emirati-led coalition against the country's Houthi rebels, whose ties to Iran have only grown tighter amid the fighting.

Accurate figures are hard to come by, but it is estimated that 50,000 Yemenis have been killed in the war so far, including dozens of civilians slain in Saudi airstrikes using U.S.-made munitions. The bombardments and an ongoing blockade have contributed to the wholesale collapse of the country's economy. Nearly 10 million Yemenis live on the brink of famine, while thousands have endured (and succumbed to) outbreaks of cholera, diphtheria and other diseases that have spread amid the catastrophe.

Efforts by the United Nations to reach a diplomatic solution to the war trudge on, but a limited cease-fire doesn't appear to have set the stage for a lasting peace. Instead, battles continue to rage between an array of warring parties, including militias affiliated with extremist groups such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State. The United States provides the Saudi-led coalition with intelligence, aerial targeting assistance and, of course, billions of dollars in weapons. All the while, my *Washington Post* colleagues reported, "the Saudi-led effort, which has targeted civilian facilities and prevented aid shipments from getting to Yemenis, has been faulted by human rights organizations for exacerbating what the United Nations has deemed the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe."

This month, Trump was handed a seemingly perfect out from this mess. A resolution that landed on his desk last week, which had bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress, invoked Vietnam-era limits on presidential war powers to force an end to American participation in the Yemeni war. Lawmakers contended that the continued American role in the conflict — which seemed strikingly outside the bounds of the post-9/11 authorization used to justify U.S. hostilities in multiple Middle East conflicts — required congressional consent.

"Without U.S. support, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman would likely be forced to end the war," noted a *Washington Post* editorial in March. "Unfortunately, the Trump administration is doubling down."

On Tuesday evening, Trump did just that, choosing to veto the measure. "This resolution is an unnecessary, dangerous attempt to weaken my constitutional authorities, endangering the lives of American citizens and brave service members, both today and in the future," he said in a statement, suggesting that U.S. servicemen posted in other gulf countries were at risk from

Houthi attacks outside of Yemeni territory. According to my colleagues, Trump also bristled at the implicit anti-Saudi line of the legislation, which picked up steam in the aftermath of the grisly murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Trump's critics on the Hill didn't hide their disappointment. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said the veto "shows the world he is determined to keep aiding a Saudi-backed war that has killed thousands of civilians and pushed millions more to the brink of starvation." House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., decried Trump's decision to "contravene a bipartisan, bicameral vote of the Congress and perpetuate America's shameful involvement in this heartbreaking crisis."

Though the resolution's impact was always largely symbolic, critics of the Trump administration argue his veto only encourages a Saudi regime that has shown a propensity for recklessness abroad. "We did not intend U.S. support to the coalition to become a blank check," 30 former Obama officials wrote in a letter last year. "But today, as civilian casualties have continued to rise and there is no end to the conflict in sight, it is clear that is precisely what happened."

Humanitarian organizations warned of bleak times ahead for Yemenis. The veto "sends a sobering message to Yemeni families caught in the daily hell of war: our administration simply does not care," Scott Paul of Oxfam America said in an emailed statement. "With a veto, they lose faith in the United States and see the end to their suffering a little further out of reach."

The irony in Trump's resolute support of the Saudis is the extent to which it clashes with his broader political message. In his State of the Union address earlier this year, he said "great nations do not fight endless wars" and reiterated his desire to draw down U.S. involvement in Middle East battlegrounds. But, as John Glaser, a foreign policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote in an email, Trump has given yet another "bold signal that his administration remains committed to aiding the Saudi regime in its brutal war in Yemen, to the detriment of basic humanitarian values and U.S. strategic interests."

What explains this commitment to Riyadh? Of course, there is the administration's deep hostility toward Iran and Iranian influence in the Middle East, as well as the White House's desire to keep the Saudis onside as it carries out its quixotic quest toward a peace plan between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Critics also point to the Trump administration's tendency toward brazen, unilateral action, from its retreat from the nuclear deal with Iran to its controversial recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Guardian columnist Simon Tisdall noted that Trump has displayed a "now systemic, vandalistic contempt for international law."

"Donald Trump's presidency makes plain that global supremacy has become an end in itself, unmoored from the interests of the American people and most of humanity," political historian Stephen Wertheim wrote last month. "'Our military dominance must be unquestioned,' Trump has declared, 'and I mean unquestioned.' Trump has stripped supremacy of ethical pretense and strategic justification. He values it for its own sake, as a gesture of brute domination."

And in his unflinching support for a disastrous war, it is ordinary Yemenis who feel the force of that brutishness.