



Republicans' First Big Post-Midterms Move: Keep U.S. In Yemen's Vicious Civil War

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With less than two months left at the helm of the House of Representatives, Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) on Wednesday won his first vote since the midterm elections — on behalf of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Almost all Republicans and a handful of Democrats voted with Ryan to strip privilege from a bill endorsed by top Democrats that would have ended U.S. support for the Saudis and their allies in the four-year civil war in Yemen. Without privilege, the House leadership can ignore the bill. In other words, it's now almost certain that the House won't deal with the legislation — and, more broadly, the conflict itself — until Democrats take charge next year.

Wednesday's vote is the best possible outcome for the Saudis and their friends in the Trump administration — who were worried about congressional anger over the war in Yemen and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi — and a boon for Republicans — who were scared of a vote that would force them to either break with President Donald Trump or endorse a military campaign that has been accused of thousands of war crimes.

But even before the vote, opponents of the war had issued loud reminders that they would not be giving up.

“January can't come soon enough,” tweeted Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), a leading anti-war figure who's expected to ascend to House Democratic leadership. The likely future speaker, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), blasted Ryan's move and Republicans' attempts to justify it by pointing to Trump's decision last week to end one aspect of U.S. assistance to the Saudis. “This step alone does not come close to addressing our concerns, or stopping the carnage,” she said.

A similar bill with privileged status is still alive in the Senate, where Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt) is expected to bring it to the floor for a vote later this month. “There's a clear path to victory, thanks to a bipartisan consensus to end the U.S. role in this misbegotten war,” said Kate Kizer of the advocacy group Win Without War, referring to Republicans critical of the war like Sens. Mike Lee (R-Utah) and Todd Young (R-Ind.).

Ahead of Wednesday's vote, Democrats tried to shame Republicans, accusing them of abdicating Congress' role in approving American military operations and thereby encouraging brutality and abandoning their own promises to respect the Constitution.

“I plead with my Republican colleagues: Please vote no. ... Let's have a debate about the starvation and the killing going on there and do the right thing for our Constitution and the world,” said Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), the lead author of the House bill. He noted that the

House had in the past allowed similar resolutions based on the War Powers Act to be considered on the floor even if they were ultimately defeated.

Ryan began the effort to strip privilege from the bill Tuesday in the House Rules Committee, stunning Democratic leaders and outside groups lobbying Congress on Yemen who had thought that the legislation would at least be considered. Even some conservatives joined the chorus of criticism: “This is despicable, gutless and wrong,” Christopher Preble of the libertarian Cato Institute wrote on Twitter.

Several Republicans in both chambers who are wary of American adventurism abroad and the legality of military action initiated without congressional approval have publicly supported the measures from Khanna and Sanders.

Two of them, Reps. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.), lobbied fellow GOP lawmakers to vote against Ryan’s effort in a Wednesday morning letter obtained by HuffPost. “This rule ... serves only to obstruct our constitutional right to decide questions regarding the use of military force,” they wrote in a message also signed by Reps. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.) and Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii). The hope was that they could persuade at least 19 Republicans to buck the party line and they targeted those who had in 2016 voted against the transfer of cluster bombs to the Saudis for use in Yemen.

Their ultimate failure closes off one of the routes to quickly ending U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign. Facing global pressure — particularly from American allies like the U.K. — Saudi Arabia and its partner the United Arab Emirates on Wednesday temporarily halted an offensive against Yemen’s most important port. International negotiators are pushing ahead with plans with peace talks.

But capturing the port remains a priority for the Saudis, experts say. For now, Washington is allowing the Saudis’ onerous restrictions on food imports into Yemen to continue — which means the price increases that have brought 14 million people to the brink of famine aren’t going away any time soon.