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The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn House Office Building

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Thornberry and Ranking Member Smith:

I want to thank you for holding the Member's Day forum and providing me with an opportunity to offer testimony about an issue that is important to our national security: U.S. strategy in Yemen.

As you know, Yemen has been engulfed in conflict since early 2015, pitting the Saudi Arabia-led coalition ("coalition") and the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi against the Houthi rebel movement. The war—which has left over 10,000 civilians dead and 70 percent of the population in need of aid—has had a significant impact on the people of Yemen, regional stability, and U.S. national security. As the fighting has dragged on, we have seen Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula exploit the chaos to grow its organization, a proxy battle develop as Iran has offered support to the Houthis, and the coalition repeatedly fail to avoid civilian casualties in what United Nations officials have deemed possible war crimes.

The U.S. has had direct involvement in this war by offering limited support to the coalition, including aircraft refueling, intelligence sharing, and arms sales. According to public reports and first-hand accounts from non-governmental organizations, Yemenis consequently hold the U.S. responsible for the widespread civilian casualties and dire humanitarian situation.

In December 2016, the Obama Administration made the decision to halt a planned sale of precision-guided munitions (PGM) to Saudi Arabia due to concerns over widespread civilian casualties and significant deficiencies in the Royal Saudi Air Force's (RSAF) targeting capabilities. This decision was the result of an internal review launched after the United Nations and a number of human rights organizations documented a series of RSAF airstrikes on civilian targets, including hospitals, markets, schools, a wedding and a large funeral.

According to reports in March 2017, the Trump Administration has decided to reverse course by lifting the suspension on PGM sales and indicating a desire to increase U.S. support for the coalition. While Defense Secretary James Mattis has publicly indicated that the conflict in Yemen can only be resolved by a political solution, he also reportedly sent a memo to National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster recommending U.S. support for a planned Emirati offensive against the Red Sea port of Hodeidah. Humanitarian groups have warned that this offensive would be “catastrophic” to the civilian population and plunge the country into famine.

Congress has repeatedly indicated substantial opposition to U.S. support for the Saudi-led bombings. In June 2016, 204 Members of the House on a bipartisan basis voted to block the transfer of cluster bombs to Saudi Arabia after reports of their use in Yemen. In September, 64 Members of Congress wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry, urging a delay in weapons sale to Saudi Arabia over concerns about civilian casualties and 27 Senators voted to halt a \$1.15 billion weapons sale to Saudi Arabia. These Congressional votes to block foreign weapons sales were the first in decades, demonstrating that the level of opposition to U.S. participation has risen to extraordinary levels. Furthermore, a recent letter from 55 Members of Congress to the President noted that the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force does not provide legal authority for the U.S. to battle the Houthis, a Shia group with no ties to Al Qaeda.

While the Administration’s strategy on Yemen remains unclear, it is evident that the lack of such a strategy sends dangerous mixed signals to our regional partners and enemies alike and undermines Congress’ ability to conduct necessary oversight. A decision on U.S. involvement in the conflict and support for the coalition simply must be tied to a clearly-articulated regional strategy and the necessary Congressional authority.

As you work on the Fiscal Year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, I encourage you to identify a mechanism that would direct the Administration to articulate a strategy on Yemen and the underlying legal authority for Congress to evaluate. While some of the details on a strategy are likely to be sensitive, I am confident it could be communicated in both classified and unclassified methods.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter and the committee’s tireless work to protect U.S. national security.

Sincerely,



Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress