

Statement for the Record
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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

On March 26, in response to a direct request from President Hadi, Saudi Arabia and a ten-plus member Arab coalition commenced an air campaign in Yemen to protect the unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Yemen. Saudi Arabia acted only after President Hadi, who had fled to Aden, asked for assistance from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and after it appeared that the Houthis intended to capture Aden.

Saudi Arabia shares a long and porous border with Yemen and has long been clear about the threat that widespread instability and chaos inside Yemen pose to Saudi territory, including through the expansion of extremist groups whose activities may spill over the border. In support of the Saudi-led coalition's efforts, the United States is providing logistical and intelligence support, including through the establishment of a Joint Combined Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm air strikes against Houthi targets continue. So far, the air campaign has focused on air assets, air defense systems and missile depots, and in some areas has forced Houthi forces into tactical retreats. However, the Houthis, with support from some military units aligned with former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, continue to aggressively push forward in several areas. The number of fighters killed in action continues to mount, and civilian casualties are also increasing.

Although the Houthis and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) are each other's sworn enemies, the destabilizing actions of the Houthis and their allies have created conditions that are beneficial to AQAP, which already has a significant presence in Yemen. Less than two weeks ago, AQAP overran a prison in Yemen's fifth largest city, al-Mukalla, freeing prisoners from a jail, including one of AQAP's senior leaders, Khaled al-Batarfi. Additionally, an ISIL-affiliated faction

has emerged in Yemen. This group claimed responsibility for suicide bombings on two mosques in March, killing at least 100 civilians.

The humanitarian picture is bleak, particularly given the already dire humanitarian conditions in Yemen before the crisis. Mass displacement of local populations is taking place from Aden, Lahj, Sana'a, and Sa'ada as people flee heavy fighting. The risk of large-scale internal displacement of Yemenis across the country is high. Humanitarian organizations are struggling to gain access to populations in need and to bring in additional supplies from outside Yemen. Hospitals – particularly in Aden – are often overwhelmed by casualties and are reliant on dwindling fuel supplies to ensure electricity and access to water and food, and constraining the ability of humanitarian actors to operate within the country. Sanitation at hospitals is becoming a concern. Fuel shortages are threatening access to water. UN partners in Aden estimate water services could soon be cut off unless more fuel is provided to power water pumps. UNICEF warned on April 9 that malnutrition rates could “explode” soon given given dwindling food supplies, rising supply prices and difficulties in accessing populations in need. Even prior to the recent violence, sixty percent of Yemenis were in need of humanitarian assistance. These basic humanitarian needs have only increased since the recent violence began.

We do not believe Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners intend to pursue an open-ended campaign. It will in fact be critical that all parties in Yemen, including the Houthis and the government of President Hadi, return as quickly as possible to political negotiations that remain the only viable long-term path to the stability and prosperity that the Yemeni people want and deserve. The United States remains committed to advancing a political transition process in Yemen that is based on the GCC Initiative and National Dialogue Conference outcomes to which we have been one of the largest contributors through our development assistance and diplomatic support. We support a reconciliation process that will create a stable, independent and inclusive government in Yemen which is capable of defending itself from internal and external threats.

I have just returned from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman, where I accompanied Deputy Secretary Blinken in his meetings with senior Gulf and Yemeni officials to map out a political way forward for Yemen. We continue to believe that in addition to regionally-sponsored efforts, UN-brokered talks at a mutually agreed venue remain the best way forward. The fact is, today's conflict in Yemen, often overly simplified as a conflict between Shia and Sunni forces, or a proxy battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, is really one with roots that are far more parochial and locally focused. Yemen – the poorest country in the Arab world with a long

history of weak central governance – has for many years struggled to meet the needs of its diverse constituencies and address their grievances. Those failures of governance led to the fall of the previous regime in 2011. The GCC initiative was put in place to help Yemen transition to a new, more inclusive government that would be responsive to the needs and aspirations of all Yemen's communities.

The Houthis participated in the key post-2011 Yemeni political processes, including the National Dialogue, and the constitutional drafting committee. They have been provided a place at the table, and it remains open to them. However, their decision to pursue a different path, to seek to overthrow by force the transitional government with help from elements of the former regime, derailed that process, jeopardizing not only the political transition but also the economic welfare and security of the Yemeni people. The United States, the UN Security Council, the GCC, and the G-10 and G-14 groups of countries have all repeatedly and consistently called on them to reverse this approach, and return to negotiations. Any other path is unacceptable.

At the same time, we remain deeply concerned about external support for the Houthis military ambitions, particularly from Iran. Iran does not control the Houthis; however, we know that the Houthis and Iran have a relationship. Iran is likely looking to take advantage of Houthi international isolation to expand its influence in Yemen. Iran has continued to provide financial support, weapons, and intelligence to the Houthis; this assistance has encouraged their destabilizing activities.

In addition, we are particularly concerned about the ongoing destabilizing role played by former President Saleh, who since his removal from power in 2011 has actively sought to undermine President Hadi and the political transition process. Relying on his network of tribal alliances amassed over three decades in power, it was Saleh who facilitated the Houthi expansion from the northwest in 2014, their takeover of Sana'a and their eventual arrival in Aden. Despite UN sanctions, U.S. sanctions and international condemnation of his actions, Saleh continues to be one of the primary sources of the chaos in Yemen. We have been working with our Gulf partners and the international community to isolate him and encourage him to leave Yemen and cease political activity. The departure of Saleh will go a long way to helping Yemen return to a credible political transition process.

We also remain focused on our counterterrorism objectives. We actively monitor threats emanating from Yemen and have resources and capabilities postured in the area to address them. We will not hesitate to act to protect the homeland from the

terrorist threat. As we have in the past, we will continue to take action to disrupt continuing, imminent threats to U.S. persons. We will continue to apply pressure against AQAP to keep the American people safe. We are also committed to working with our partners in the region and around the world to take the necessary steps to counter Iranian attempts to foment instability in the region.

Our life-saving humanitarian assistance in Yemen is continuing, when and where security allows. Humanitarian assistance programs are administered through grants by State and USAID, and implemented by various UN agencies as well as other international and non-governmental organizations. We also work in close coordination with the ICRC, the World Health Organization, UNHCR, and NGOs to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, gain access to vulnerable populations, and meet Yemen's immediate needs, which are mainly concentrated in the health, water and sanitation, food security and protection sectors.

Madam Chairman, as you know, as the former Ambassador I have a particular interest in Yemen, and this Committee, in particular, has shared that. My colleague, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security Greg Starr, and I have had the privilege of briefing you and your staff regularly. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon. I look forward to sharing more details from my meetings in the region with you all, and answering any questions you may have about the situation in Yemen and our policy responses.