

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing on the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen
November 17, 2016
Rep. Ted Lieu

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Chairman McGovern, Chairman Pitts, and the Lantos Commission for calling today's hearing on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

We are here today because for the past 20 months, Yemen has been ravaged by a bitter conflict that has left, according to UN estimates, at least 4,000 civilians dead, 3 million people displaced, and 80 percent of the population in dire need of humanitarian assistance. We are here today because for the past 20 months, both sides of that conflict have committed egregious human rights violations. And yet one of the sides, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, has received the continued military support of the U.S. government despite demonstrating a reckless operational conduct that routinely results in the death of innocent men, women and children. We are here today because for the past 20 months, Congress has managed to only hold a single hearing on this conflict; and it was 19 months ago.

In order to properly address a crisis, we must first understand its root causes. I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us this morning to help us answer some of those questions and begin to establish a record for future actions. Cumulatively, you and your organizations possess some of the best knowledge we have of what is happening on the ground in Yemen, and why. Before we leave here today, I hope we can explore three aspects of the conflict:

First, we must establish the scope of the humanitarian crisis and the human rights violations that have been committed by both sides. In the absence of an independent investigation, which the United Nations has thus far shamefully refused to establish, we are forced to piece together reporting from a variety of sources both on the ground and in the news. Going forward, what are the biggest obstacles to funneling in humanitarian aid? How confident are we in the reporting of human rights abuses?

I previously taught the Law of Armed Conflict when I served on active duty in the Air Force and am a graduate of Air War College. The frequency and scale of the civilian killings by the Saudi military coalition make it difficult to come to any conclusion other than that war crimes have been in Yemen. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented at least 70 unlawful airstrikes on civilians by the Saudi-led coalition. And that was before the latest air strike on civilians at a funeral. In order to move forward, we must have a comprehensive overview of what we know and what we don't.

Second, we must acknowledge and explore the moral and legal threats associated with U.S. involvement and complicity in this conflict. As the *New York Times* reported this week, and I quote, “Many strikes are carried out by pilots trained by the United States, who fly American-made jets that are refueled in the air by American planes. And Yemenis often find the remains of American-made munitions, as they did in the ruins after a strike that killed more than 100 mourners at a funeral last month. Graffiti on walls across Sana reads: ‘America is killing the Yemeni people.’”

According to data from the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Government has noticed Foreign Military Sales to Saudi Arabia totaling \$115 billion since 2009. Those sales have included F-15 Eagles, helicopters, tanks, and extensive munitions. The U.S. can and should support our allies, including with foreign military sales and assistance. But when that assistance is then used in a manner that runs contrary to our fundamental values, we cannot simply turn a blind eye. For supporters of a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship, the status quo harms both that relationship and the long-term stability of Saudi Arabia.

A troubling article by *Reuters* last month states that the State Department lawyers knew the U.S. could be liable for war crimes in Yemen, yet the Department continued to push for repeated arms sales to Saudi Arabia and provide direct assistance for Coalition airstrikes. It was only the latest air strike, which killed and injured hundreds of civilians at a funeral in Sanaa, that finally prompted the Administration to suspend its assistance to the Coalition and conduct a high-level review.

As a Member of the National Security Subcommittee of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, I am deeply concerned that U.S. actions in Yemen are undermining our national security. The Coalition’s operational conduct risks radicalizing a desperate population and has already allows the resurgence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the south. The threats to American national security cannot simply be brushed aside.

Third, and finally, we must consider our desired end-game and the path forward. International diplomatic efforts have thus far produced mixed results, with sporadic cessations of hostilities giving minor reprieve to the people of Yemen without any real hope of a political resolution. For the sake of U.S. national security, our Gulf Partners and the people of Yemen, we must be clear about what we hope to achieve and how.

With that, I yield back to Chairman McGovern to introduce our panel of witnesses.

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