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STATECRAFT

# The Yemen War in Numbers: Saudi Escalation and U.S. Complicity

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# Executive Summary

- Yemen's humanitarian crisis demonstrates the consequences and risks of the American decision to enable Saudi and Emirati military action against Yemen. This decision reflects a flawed calculus: the belief that by supporting Arab security partners, the U.S. can prevent them from moving into China's or Russia's orbit. As recent events have demonstrated, America's partners in the Middle East are hedging despite the Biden administration's extensive support: For example, when the U.N. Security Council voted in February to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the UAE abstained. America's Gulf partners hope to strengthen their relationships with Moscow and Beijing while continuing to reap the benefits of Washington's largesse.
- American involvement in supporting Saudi-led military action against the Houthis in Yemen, rather than helping to resolve the conflict as the Biden administration claims, is prolonging and escalating the violence. By continuing to support Saudi and Emirati aggression, the U.S. not only deepens its complicity in the slaughter of Yemen's civilian population; it also risks getting dragged into more active participation in the war on behalf of these two Arab security partners.
- Biden committed to ending support for offensive operations in Yemen. His administration alleges that the support America provides to Saudi Arabia and the UAE is merely defensive. Yet by selling weapons it designates as defensive, as well as servicing contracts for spare parts and maintenance for the Saudi air force, the U.S. actively helps the coalition wage its war. Further, this position ignores the billions of dollars in offensive weapons the U.S. previously sold to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which they continue to use on Yemen. The administration asserts that the U.S. must help Saudi Arabia and the UAE defend against transborder attacks; yet the data show that Houthi transborder attacks

pose a minor threat to the Saudis and Emiratis, especially compared with the scale of their attacks on Yemen.

- Instead of escalating U.S. involvement in defending the Saudis and Emiratis from the consequences of their aggression, the Biden administration should suspend all arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE until they end their military intervention in Yemen.

## Overview

The Biden administration asserts that American diplomatic engagement aims to end the war in Yemen, but its statements and actions suggest that the priority is to secure victory for the Saudi-led coalition, or at least to avoid a humiliating defeat. This pro-Saudi bias is apparent to Yemenis, who refer to the conflict as the “Saudi–American war.” Yet, most Americans remain unaware of their government’s role in destroying this impoverished country, where the effects of the war have killed almost 400,000 civilians and pushed 16 million to the brink of starvation. Despite seven years of active U.S. support for the coalition, the role of the U.S. and the appalling conditions for Yemeni civilians receive almost no American media attention.

*Most Americans remain unaware of their government’s role in destroying this impoverished country.*

After initially declaring that he would reverse President Trump’s support for the Saudis and instead hold them accountable, President Biden has returned to the decades-long status quo of almost unconditional American support for the kingdom. This shift reflects the administration’s apparent calculation that the U.S. must maintain close relations with its Persian Gulf security partners rather than risk these states pivoting toward China or Russia.

Despite this U.S. support, including massive weapons sales, security partners in the Middle East have demonstrated that they will continue to deepen their ties with China and Russia. The foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council states all traveled to China in January 2022. Saudi Arabia has considered pricing some of its oil in Chinese yuan rather than dollars.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the other GCC states, with the exception of Kuwait, refused to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the U.N. Security Council vote on February 26 condemning the Russian invasion two days earlier, the UAE abstained.<sup>2</sup> After Biden subsequently decided to ban Russian oil imports, the UAE and Saudi Arabia allegedly refused a phone call with the U.S. president, while they spoke the previous week to Russian President Vladimir Putin. They assert that if the U.S. wants them to increase oil introduction, Biden must do more to support their war on Yemen.<sup>3</sup> Such actions by U.S. security partners demonstrate that these governments are pursuing their own interests in the context of a multipolar world with little regard for U.S. preferences and concerns.

## *Just as the U.S. condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine, it should apply the same standard to Saudi and Emirati aggression against Yemen.*

Just as the Gulf states have adjusted their behavior to new realities, the United States must also adopt a new approach, one that no longer entails deferring to the objectives of increasingly fickle partners in the Gulf in a costly gamble to maintain military primacy in the region. U.S. interests in protecting the American homeland and supporting the free flow of commerce are not served by helping Saudi Arabia and the UAE destroy

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<sup>1</sup> Said, Summer, and Stephen Kalin. "Saudi Arabia Considers Accepting Yuan Instead of Dollars for Chinese Oil Sales." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-considers-accepting-yuan-instead-of-dollars-for-chinese-oil-sales-11647351541>.

<sup>2</sup> "Russia blocks Security Council action on Ukraine." *UN News*, February 26, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112802>.

<sup>3</sup> Nissenbaum, Dion, Stephen Kalin, and David Cloud. "Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls With Biden During Ukraine Crisis." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukraine-crisis-11646779430?mod=e2tw>.

Yemen. Just as the U.S. condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine, it should apply the same standard to Saudi and Emirati aggression against Yemen.

## The Biden administration's position on Yemen

Following President Biden's announcement in February 2021 that he was "ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales," it seemed that, after six years of U.S. complicity under Presidents Obama and Trump, the U.S. would end its involvement.<sup>4</sup> Biden lifted Trump's designation of the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization to prevent the humanitarian catastrophe that would have resulted from cutting off aid to areas under Houthi control. He appointed Tim Lenderking, a deputy assistant secretary of state in the Near East Bureau, as special envoy for Yemen to spearhead diplomatic efforts.

U.S. interests in protecting the American homeland and supporting the free flow of commerce are not served by helping Saudi Arabia and the UAE destroy Yemen. Just as the U.S. condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine, it should apply the same standard to Saudi and Emirati aggression against Yemen.

However, it is now plain that the U.S. continues to support Saudi operations in Yemen. John Kirby, the Pentagon spokesperson, stated last spring, "We have a military-to-military relationship with Saudi Arabia that is important to the region and to our interests, and we have a commitment to help them defend themselves against what are real threats." In this statement, Kirby affirmed that the U.S. continues to provide maintenance support to the Saudi air force, which, whatever the stated intention, allows Saudi Arabia to conduct offensive operations in Yemen.<sup>5</sup> This directly contradicts Biden's commitment to end support for offensive military action.

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<sup>4</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World." White House, February 4, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ward, Alex. "The US may still be helping Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war after all." Vox, April 27, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/2021/4/27/22403579/biden-saudi-yemen-war-pentagon>.

## *The Biden administration's distinction between offensive and defensive weapons is arguably meaningless, given that defensive capability converts directly to offensive advantage.*

Further, although the Biden administration paused two weapons sales to the kingdom, it announced three new arms sales worth more than \$1 billion within a year of the president's initial declaration.<sup>6</sup> The administration claims these weapons are intended solely to assist Saudi Arabia to defend itself against Houthi attacks. This claim relies on the possibility of distinguishing offensive from defensive arm sales to justify the decision to keep selling the Saudis weapons that allegedly contribute only to their defense. But this position does not hold up to scrutiny. Distinguishing offensive from defensive weapons is arguably meaningless, given that defensive capability converts directly to offensive advantage.<sup>7</sup>

By helping the Saudis defend themselves, the Biden administration allows them to attack Yemen with greater impunity. By continuing to sell the Saudis weapons that the administration deems defensive, they signal that the U.S. remains supportive of Saudi aggression. Further, the Biden administration's decision to limit certain weapons sales since early 2021 does not prevent Saudi Arabia or the UAE from using the offensive weapons the U.S. has sold them previously.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hartung, William. "Arming Repression: U.S. Military Support for Saudi Arabia from Trump to Biden," Center for International Policy, December 2021. [https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/uqd/3ba8a1\\_aea25cfed2454ee1ad62f272334a105e.pdf](https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/uqd/3ba8a1_aea25cfed2454ee1ad62f272334a105e.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Schelling, Thomas. *Arms and Influence*. New Haven. Yale University Press, 1966, 2008; Jervis, Robert. "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma." *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, January 1978. 167–214; Mearsheimer, John. "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 23, 1994–95. 3–39.

<sup>8</sup> See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 9, 2020. "Saudi Arabia was the world's largest arms importer in 2015–19. Its imports of major arms increased by 130 percent compared with the previous five-year period and it accounted for 12 percent of global arms imports in 2015–19... A total of 73 percent of Saudi Arabia's arms imports came from the USA." <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/usa-and-france-dramatically-increase-major-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-largest-arms-importer-says>.

## The coalition and Houthi transborder attacks

To justify its position that the U.S. must continue to support Saudi and Emirati defenses, the Biden administration has repeatedly called attention to the danger posed by transborder Houthi attacks. This has been a consistent theme in the administration's public statements since Biden's earliest months in office. On February 10, 2021, State Department spokesperson Ned Price described the Houthis as "continually demonstrat[ing] a desire to prolong the war by attacking Saudi Arabia, including endangering civilians. We remain committed to improving support for our partner Saudi Arabia to defend itself against threats to its territory."<sup>9</sup> In August 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that since the beginning of the year, Saudi Arabia "has endured more than 240 attacks by the Houthis."<sup>10</sup> On January 24, 2022, Tim Lenderking, the special envoy, emphasized "the U.S. government's condemnation of the recent Houthi attacks against the UAE and Saudi Arabia that killed civilians," while expressing only "deep concern" regarding civilian casualties caused by coalition airstrikes in Yemen.<sup>11</sup> On February 10, 2022, Price "condemned" the Houthis' "terrorist attack": "Repeated attacks of the last several weeks have harmed civilians and civilian infrastructure and undermine international efforts for a peaceful solution to the Yemen conflict and threaten the more than 70,000 U.S. citizens living in Saudi Arabia."<sup>12</sup>

The problem with these statements is one of proportion. While the administration's narrative consistently blames the Houthis and stresses their transborder attacks as particularly dangerous, transborder attacks carried out by the Saudi-led coalition far outnumber them and have been magnitudes more destructive.

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<sup>9</sup> Price, Ned. State Department press briefing, February 10, 2021.

<https://www.state.gov/briefings/state-department-spokesperson-ned-price-holds-department-press-briefing-on-february-10-2021/>.

<sup>10</sup> Blinken, Antony. "Condemning the Recent Houthi Attack Against Saudi Arabia." Department of State, August 31, 2021.

<https://www.state.gov/condemning-the-recent-houthi-attack-against-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>11</sup> "U.S. Special Envoy Lenderking Returns from Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat, and London." Department of State, January 28, 2022.

<https://www.state.gov/u-s-special-envoy-lenderking-returns-from-riyadh-abu-dhabi-dubai-muscat-and-london/>.

<sup>12</sup> Price. State Department press briefing, February 10, 2022.

<https://www.state.gov/houthi-terrorist-attack-in-saudi-arabia/>.

Figure 1

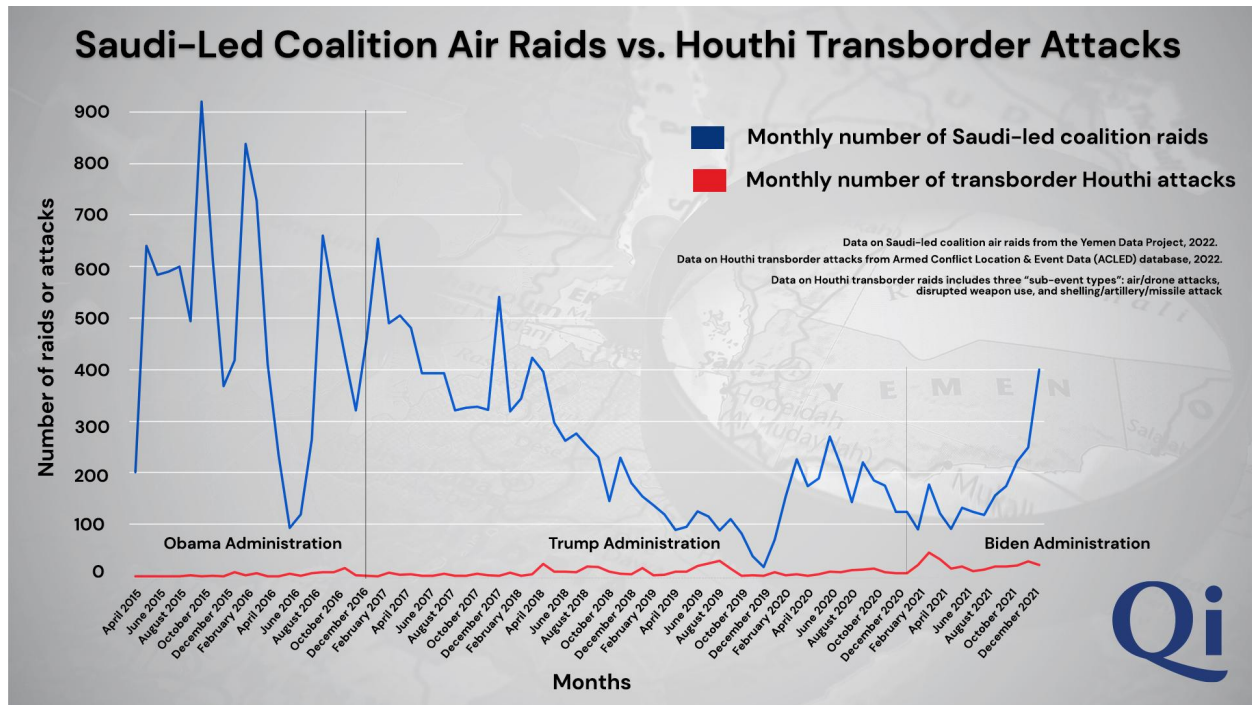


Figure 1 uses data from the Yemen Data Project, combined with data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, both nongovernmental organizations dedicated to data collection and analysis. The graph compares transborder attacks carried out by the Saudi-led coalition with the Houthis' transborder attacks. Note that the data for Houthi attacks include all categories of transborder attacks aimed at Saudi Arabia and the UAE: drone strikes, artillery shellings, and missile attacks, as well as incidents that were disrupted or deflected. Even combining all these distinct types of incidents, Houthi transborder attacks never surpass and rarely even approach the number of coalition air raids conducted on Yemen each month. Crucially, with the help of U.S.–made defense systems, Saudi Arabia successfully deflects 90 percent of the Houthis' transborder attacks.<sup>13</sup>

The Saudi-led coalition has carried out more than 24,800 air raids since 2015, when its campaign in Yemen began, an average of almost 10 each day.<sup>14</sup> The Yemen Data Project

<sup>13</sup> Price. State Department press briefing, January 24, 2022. "With the help of the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been able to prevent about 90 percent of these incoming attacks from Yemen, from the Houthis." <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-january-24-2022/>.

<sup>14</sup> Yemen Data Project. <https://yemendataproject.org/>.



defines one air raid as “includ[ing] all airstrikes on a single location within approximately one hour and therefore may comprise multiple airstrikes. Airstrikes per air raid can vary greatly from a couple to several dozen.” An average of 10 air raids per day translates to hundreds of individual airstrikes or bombs hitting Yemen daily. Coalition air raids have killed almost 9,000 civilians and wounded more than 10,000.

In contrast, the coalition’s spokesperson reported in December 2021 that the Houthis have launched 430 missiles and 851 drones at Saudi Arabia since the start of the war in March 2015, killing 59 civilians.<sup>15</sup> Added together, Houthi missile and drone attacks average approximately one attack every other day.

Coalition attacks were heaviest in the first months of the war. The month with the highest total air raids – 921 recorded in September 2015, an average of more than 30 per day – reflected a significant push by coalition forces. The drop in air raids in November and December 2015 corresponds to a short-lived truce and was followed by another peak in January 2016. The steep decline in coalition air raids in May and June 2016 indicates a ceasefire announced in April, ahead of talks scheduled to take place in Kuwait; those talks failed.<sup>16</sup> The decline in coalition air raids in November 2016 also reflects a temporary ceasefire, which likewise did not last.<sup>17</sup>

Air raids spiked again after President Trump took office in January 2017, although the overall decline in coalition attacks over the course of Trump’s presidency correlates with increasing media attention and congressional opposition to U.S. involvement in the war.

American public awareness began to increase in 2018, after several especially deadly coalition attacks. In April 2018, the coalition bombed a Yemeni wedding, killing the bride and 33 guests and wounding 45 others. In August 2018, a coalition strike hit a Yemeni school bus, killing 40 children; the bomb was manufactured in the U.S. by Lockheed

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<sup>15</sup> “Houthis Have Fired 430 Missiles, 851 Drones at Saudi Arabia Since 2015 – Saudi-Led Coalition.” Reuters, December 26, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthis-have-fired-430-missiles-851-drones-saudi-arabia-since-2015-saudi-led-2021-12-26/>.

<sup>16</sup> Shaheen, Kareem. “Warring Yemen sides vow to uphold ceasefire amid reports of clashes.” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/11/yemen-ceasefire-houthi-saudi-truce>.

<sup>17</sup> Milton-Edwards, Beverly. “Yemen: Ceasefires and Lost Opportunities.” Brookings Doha Center, November 29, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/11/29/yemen-ceasefires-and-lost-opportunities/>.

Martin. The brutal murder a few weeks later of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist and U.S. resident, and ensuing public disgust at Trump's embrace of the House of Saud correlated with an overall decline in coalition air raids. A notable dip in October 2018 followed Khashoggi's murder and a searing photo essay in *The New York Times* depicting starving Yemeni children.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the frequency of coalition air raids correlates so clearly with American actions and media attention demonstrates the obvious influence of the U.S. over Saudi and Emirati conduct.

*If the U.S. had genuinely withdrawn support for Saudi offensives, the rate of coalition air raids should have declined from the Trump era to the Biden era, but it has not.*

The decline continued through 2019. In April, Congress voted to end U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition by passing a War Powers Resolution. Although Trump vetoed the resolution and reiterated his support for the war, coalition air raids remained low during this period of uncertainty about the future of U.S. involvement.

The lowest number of air raids – nine in December 2019 – corresponded to the UAE's decision to withdraw most of its troops, which had occupied Yemen since the coalition launched its offensive in March 2015. Abu Dhabi continued to hold certain key territorial positions and to fund militia groups in southern Yemen but no longer wanted the negative publicity deriving from a robust troop presence.

Air raids rose again in 2020 but remained relatively low through the final year of Trump's presidency. The Saudis and Houthis almost immediately violated a Covid-related ceasefire declared in April 2020.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Walsh, Declan, and Tyler Hicks. "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War." *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-war-yemen.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Trew, Bel. "Saudi-led coalition bombs Yemen 'dozens' of times despite declaring ceasefire last week to combat coronavirus." *The Independent*, April 17, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/coronavirus-yemen-coalition-bombs-saudi-ceasefire-news-a9470801.html>.

Following Biden's election victory, coalition air raids declined again, probably in response to his campaign promise to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for the murder of Khashoggi and the war on Yemen. But they began to creep upward through 2021 as it became clear that Biden did not, in fact, intend to end U.S. support for the war or turn Saudi Arabia into a "pariah."

Based on Biden's post-inauguration declaration that the U.S. was ending support for offensive military action, it is surprising that coalition air raid levels remained relatively consistent from 2020 to 2021. The Saudi air force relies heavily on U.S. military contractors to provide maintenance, spare parts, and repairs for their planes. If the U.S. had genuinely withdrawn support for Saudi offensives, the rate of coalition air raids should have declined from the Trump era to the Biden era, but it has not.

Instead, coalition attacks began to increase dramatically in late 2021. Contrary to the characterizations of the Biden administration, this was not in response to Houthi transborder escalation, as Houthi attacks remained relatively stable. The Houthis may have escalated within Yemen, but not against Saudi territory.

Coalition escalation followed a trip to its principals by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, White House Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk, and Tim Lenderking, the special envoy for Yemen. Traveling to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in late September, the U.S. officials met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed respectively. Although the content of the meetings was not made public, discussions reportedly centered on Yemen.<sup>20</sup>

American officials have long asserted that the Saudis want to withdraw from Yemen, but only if they can avoid the humiliation of defeat.<sup>21</sup> As of fall 2021, Houthi advances appeared poised to further shame the Saudis.<sup>22</sup> During their meeting with the Saudi and

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<sup>20</sup> Madhani, Aamer. "US officials: Biden aide to meet Saudi crown prince on Yemen." *The Associated Press*, September 27, 2021.

<https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-general-assembly-joe-biden-iran-nuclear-jamal-khashoggi-saudi-arabia-c14452b0796a13b27065517973e1beee>.

<sup>21</sup> Kizer, Kate. "The U.S. is Wrong on Yemen. Again." *Foreign Policy*, February 3, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/03/us-yemen-policy-uae-saudi-arabia-houthis/>.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Iryani, Abdulghani. "The Houthis' Fatal Military Success." Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, October 13, 2021. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15224>.

Emirati crown princes, the three Biden administration officials signaled that the U.S. would support an enhanced coalition offensive – one final push to finally allow the Saudis to withdraw with some dignity, according to Senate sources close to the White House.

The first months of 2022 brought a substantial increase in coalition air raids: More than 400 were recorded in January, the most sustained heavy bombing in years. The administration neither condemned nor even noted the scale of this escalation, instead focusing on Houthi counterattacks. These rates of air raids had not been seen since early 2018, prior to the increase in media attention that led to congressional efforts to limit U.S. weapons sales, which corresponded to a decline in the frequency of coalition attacks.

## **The Houthi threat narrative and Saudi and Emirati objectives in Yemen**

The Biden administration frames the Houthis as the primary obstacle to peace in Yemen.<sup>23</sup> Yet Houthi transborder attacks, as noted, are clearly dwarfed by the scale of coalition air raids. In a press briefing on February 23, 2022, concerning efforts to sanction financial networks supporting Houthi activities, Ned Price stated:

We will use every appropriate tool to hold accountable those Houthi leaders who are responsible for the terrorist attacks against our partners in the region, for the violence in Yemen itself... to mitigate the threat that the United States and our partners face from the Houthis.<sup>24</sup>

The stated threat the U.S. faces from the Houthis is not apparent: No American has been killed or injured by a Houthi projectile. This tendency to view the Houthis as solely responsible for violence while ignoring the scale of destruction caused by the Saudi-led

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<sup>23</sup> “U.S. says Yemen’s Houthis have to stop attacking and start negotiating.” Reuters, March 8, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-usa/u-s-says-yemens-houthis-have-to-stop-attacking-and-start-negotiating-idUSKBN2B02J3>.

<sup>24</sup> Price. State Department press briefing, February 23, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-february-23-2022/>.

coalition risks dragging the U.S. into the conflict, as America persists in taking the side of the Saudis and Emiratis.

To be clear, the Houthis continue to use violence as the primary means of achieving their aims of repelling the Saudis and Emiratis and consolidating political control in Sana`a. The data in Figure 1 measure only transborder Houthi attacks aimed primarily at Saudi Arabia. They demonstrate the disconnect between the scale of Houthi transborder attacks and the Biden administration's narrative as to the threat these pose to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the U.S. They do not include attacks on targets inside Yemen. Yemeni NGOs and other conflict-tracking organizations document the scale of Houthi violence against Yemenis, which they condemn.<sup>25</sup>

Certain actions by Saudi and Emirati forces undermine their position that their primary interest in Yemen is combating the Houthis. For example, the Saudis and Emiratis retain control of key strategic sites in Yemen where the Houthis are not and never were present. The Saudis assert their opposition to having an Iranian-backed group on their southern border, yet they retain control of al-Mahra, Yemen's easternmost province, where the Houthis have no presence.<sup>26</sup>

Despite withdrawing most of its troops in 2019, the UAE retains control of Balhaf, a crucial industrial facility and port for the export of Yemeni fossil fuels. With its seizure of Mayun Island, the UAE effectively controls the Bab el-Mandeb strait, the southern access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.<sup>27</sup>

Through the Southern Transitional Council, a group of southern separatists funded and supported by Abu Dhabi, the UAE also indirectly controls the Socotra archipelago. UNESCO has designated Socotra a World Heritage site because of its biodiversity and unique ecology. The UAE allows tourists to fly to Socotra from Abu Dhabi on Air Arabia,

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., The Yemen Peace Project. "War Crimes Tracker." <https://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/warcrimes>; "Research Hub: War in Yemen." Armed Conflict Location and Event Data.

<https://acleddata.com/research-hub-war-in-yemen/>; Mwatana for Human Rights' Reports <https://mwatana.org/en/>.  
<sup>26</sup> Abuzaid, Yehya. "Has Saudi Arabia Woken Up from its Mahra Pipeline Dream?" Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, December 20, 2021. [https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/has-riyadh-awoken-up-from-its-al-mahra-pipe-dream/#\\_ftn2](https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/has-riyadh-awoken-up-from-its-al-mahra-pipe-dream/#_ftn2).

<sup>27</sup> Gambrell, Jon. "Mysterious air base being built on volcanic island off Yemen." The Associated Press, May 25, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/mysterious-air-base-volcanic-island-yemen-c8cb2018c07bb5b63e1a43ff706b007b>.

an Emirati airline, using visas granted by the UAE, thus bypassing Yemeni sovereignty entirely.<sup>28</sup>

These illegal seizures of Yemeni territories, especially areas that were never held by the Houthis, suggest that Emirati and Saudi objectives in Yemen extend beyond merely defeating the group. The U.S. should condemn efforts by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to annex Yemeni territory, yet by continuing to support their military actions, the U.S. effectively condones these actions.

## The humanitarian crisis

Yemen is experiencing the world's most severe humanitarian crisis. More than 377,000 civilians have died since the Saudi-led intervention began in March 2015. More than 16 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine.

The lethality of the conflict primarily reflects structural violence. While civilian deaths directly caused by coalition air raids are tragic and often receive more media attention, these account for about 10,000 individuals, or approximately 3 percent of total civilian deaths, according to the Yemen Data Project.<sup>29</sup> The extremely high mortality rate in Yemen partly reflects Saudi-led coalition bombings that target civilian infrastructure, which have destroyed access to food, water, and healthcare.

There is a misperception that coalition air-raids primarily target military facilities. In fact, the Saudi-led coalition has carried out more than 8,000 air raids targeting military facilities, and almost as many – more than 7,000 – targeting nonmilitary facilities. The remaining 9,000 air raids are documented, but the Yemen Data Project could not determine their targets. Therefore, among air raids whose targets could be determined, the coalition has struck almost as many nonmilitary as military facilities.

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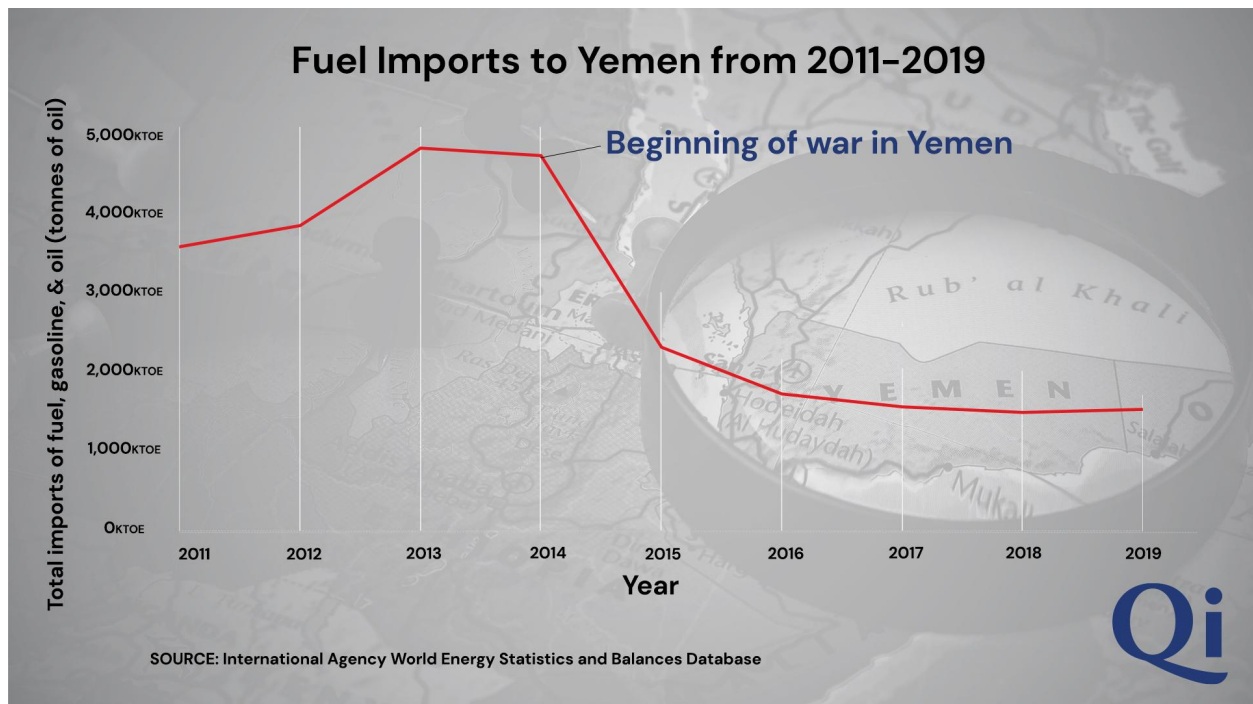
<sup>28</sup> McKernan, Bethan, and Lucy Towers. "Socotra island: The Unesco-protected 'Jewel of Arabia' vanishing amid Yemen's civil war." *The Independent*, May 2, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/socotra-island-yemen-civil-war-uae-military-base-unesco-protected-indian-ocean-a8331946.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Yemen Data Project. <https://yemendataproject.org/>.

Nonmilitary targets include airports, telecommunications towers, agricultural and food-processing plants, electrical infrastructure, water-treatment facilities, and residential areas. The systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure necessary for basic survival have made food, electricity, clean water, and healthcare increasingly difficult to access. Hunger and disease are rampant. Yemen is one of the few humanitarian crises wherein starvation is driven not by a lack of food, but by the population's inability to purchase what food is available.

Soon after launching its military intervention, Saudi Arabia imposed an air and sea blockade on areas controlled by the Houthis. This quickly escalated Yemen's humanitarian crisis. Figure 2 demonstrates the drop in Yemen's oil imports after 2014, using data from the International Energy Agency World Energy Statistics and Balances Database.

**Figure 2**



It is the precipitous decline in food and fuel imports that generated the humanitarian crisis. To address it, the U.N. established a Verification and Inspection Mechanism to inspect all international imports of goods to ports controlled by the Houthis to prevent

Iran from smuggling weapons into Yemen.<sup>30</sup> Saudi Arabia routinely blocks or delays ships that UNVIM has already approved to prevent the Houthis from profiting from the sale and taxation of fuel.

Unfortunately, the expense associated with delays caused by UNVIM inspections, as well as the additional delays imposed by Saudi Arabia, disincentivize international companies from sending fuel to Yemen. The Yemen Petroleum Company, which is based in Sana`a, says it incurs daily costs of \$20,000 due to Saudi delays, causing it to raise prices for consumers.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Yemen's fuel needs are consistently unmet. At the time of writing, no fuel had entered Yemen's Red Sea ports since January 3, 2022.<sup>32</sup>

*Hunger and disease are rampant. Yemen is one of the few humanitarian crises wherein starvation is driven not by a lack of food, but by the population's inability to purchase what food is available.*

Figure 3 depicts the disparity between Yemen's monthly fuel needs and the amount of fuel discharged at Yemen's Red Sea ports. According to the U.N.'s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Yemen needs 544,000 metric tons of imported fossil fuels per month.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "In Hindsight: The Story of the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism in Yemen." *Security Council Report*, September 2016.  
[https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-09/the\\_story\\_of\\_the\\_un\\_verification\\_and\\_inspection\\_mechanism\\_in\\_yemen.php](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-09/the_story_of_the_un_verification_and_inspection_mechanism_in_yemen.php).

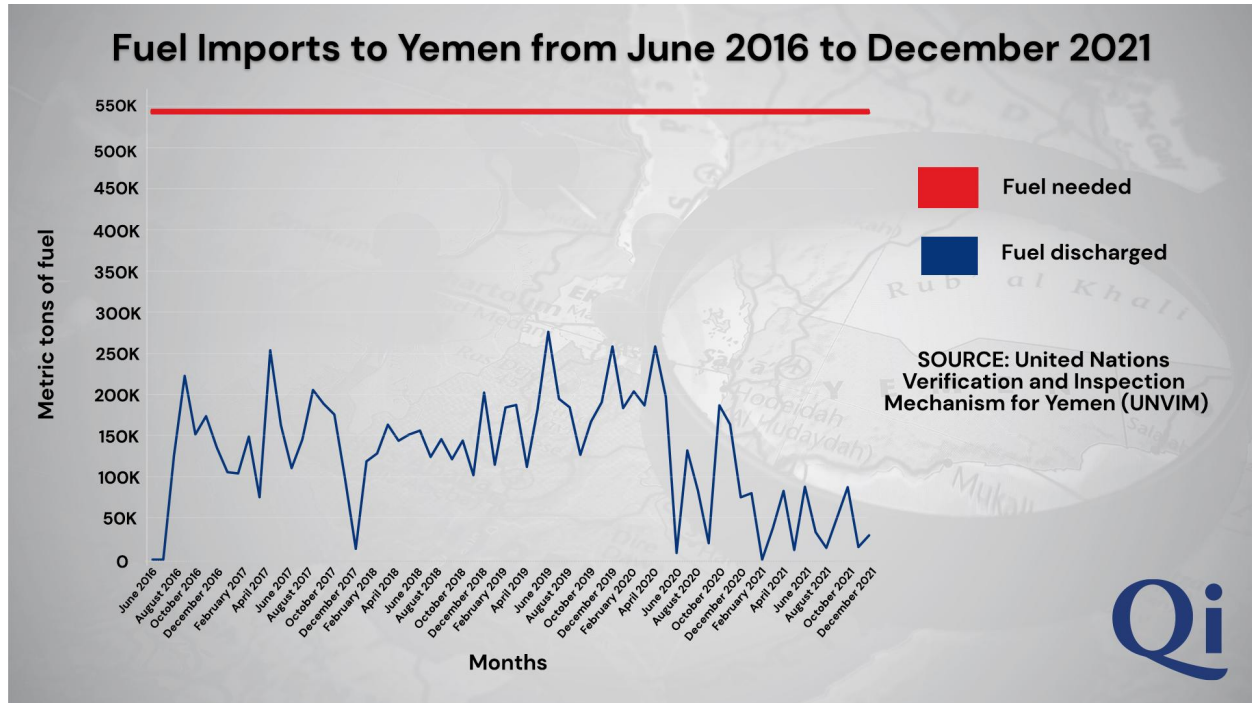
<sup>31</sup> Almosawa, Shuaib. "As U.S. Focuses on Ukraine, Yemen Starves." *The Intercept*, March 16, 2022.  
[https://theintercept.com/2022/03/16/yemen-war-biden-us-support-saudi-arabia/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_campaign=theintercept](https://theintercept.com/2022/03/16/yemen-war-biden-us-support-saudi-arabia/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=theintercept).

<sup>32</sup> "Scramble for transport as Yemen fuel shortage worsens." Reuters, March 7, 2022.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/scramble-transport-yemen-fuel-shortage-worsens-2022-03-07/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Yemen: Humanitarian Response Plan, January–December 2018." UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, January 20, 2018.  
<https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-january-december-2018-enar>.



Figure 3



The U.S. Navy sometimes intercepts *dhow*s (small sailing vessels) carrying weapons allegedly sent by Iran to the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>34</sup> While the Navy's reports of these weapons and their origin are plausible, the scale of Iranian weapons-smuggling is small due to successful efforts to thwart it. As with the disproportionality of Saudi air raids compared with Houthi attacks, the number of weapons Iran sends to the Houthis is dwarfed by the volume of U.S. arms sales to the Saudis and Emiratis – and the scale of these countries' assaults on Yemen.

## History of U.S. support for the war

### U.S. support for Saudi Arabia

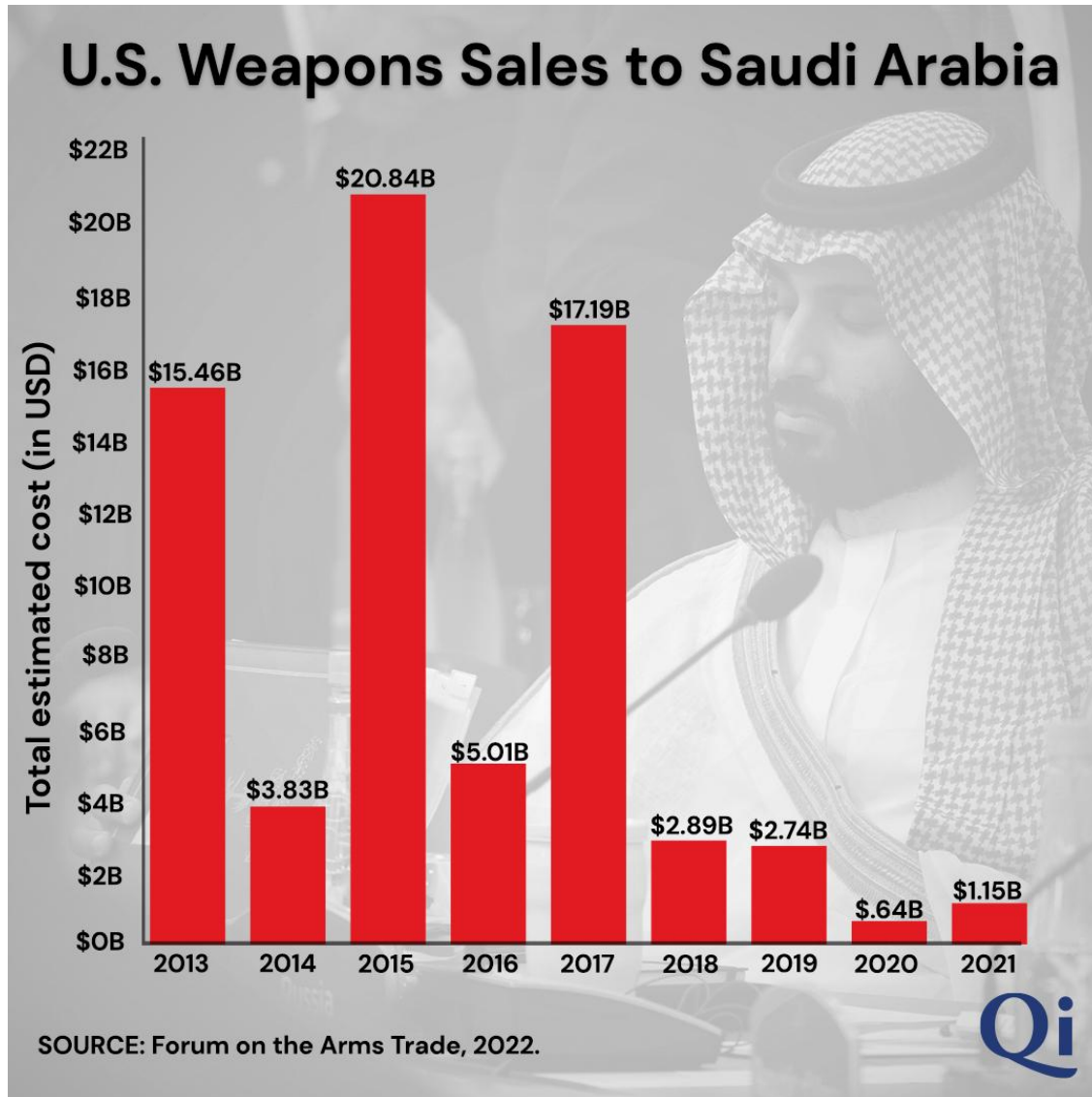
Support for Saudi Arabia has long been U.S. policy. But until the Saudi-led coalition launched the war on Yemen in March 2015, the U.S. determined that it could sell massive amounts of weapons to security partners in the GCC and they would sit

<sup>34</sup> Gambrell, John. "US Navy seizes weapons in Arabian Sea likely bound for Yemen." *The Associated Press*, May 9, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-middle-east-e4bde7250333a85445fe9a9f0f1c64a8>.

unused. The U.S. is the most significant supplier of weapons to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia is the largest purchaser of U.S.–made weapons, accounting for 24 percent of total U.S. weapons exports.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 4 depicts U.S. weapons sales to Saudi Arabia since 2013, according to figures from the Forum on Arms Trade, an international network of nongovernmental experts.<sup>36</sup>

Figure 4



<sup>35</sup> “International arms transfers level off after years of sharp growth; Middle Eastern arms imports grow most, says SIPRI.” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2021. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>.

<sup>36</sup> The Forum on Arms Trade. <https://www.forumarmstrade.org/>.

The Obama administration broke records by offering a total of \$117 billion in arms sales to the Saudis.<sup>37</sup> U.S. weapons sales to the Saudis increased significantly following the popular uprisings of 2011, when Al Saud and other Arab monarchies feared they would be overthrown. Sales spiked again in 2015, following the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, although the Obama administration tried to limit the types of weapons sold to mitigate harm to civilians.<sup>38</sup> The Saudis have used many of the weapons they bought from the U.S. in 2010 and 2011 in Yemen.

*After the Obama administration signed the Iran nuclear accord in July 2015, with the stated intention of supporting regional stability by curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. continued to flood the region with conventional weapons.*

President Obama's decision in 2015 to support Saudi military action against Yemen reflected his hope that by doing so, the Saudis might temper their criticism of the then-forthcoming Iran nuclear accord.<sup>39</sup> Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, who was defense minister at the time, the Saudis assured the U.S. and their Arab coalition partners that they would defeat the ragtag Houthi rebels in a matter of weeks. Obama was wrong: The Saudis and other Arab security partners condemned the Iran nuclear deal. MBS was also wrong: His war on Yemen is about to enter its eighth year.

Trump expressed no compunction about civilian casualties and lifted Obama-era restrictions intended to mitigate collateral damage in Yemen and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> While

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<sup>37</sup> Hartung, William. "U.S. Military Support for Saudi Arabia and the War in Yemen." Center for International Policy, November 2018.

[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1\\_5e9019d625e84087af647e6cb91ea3e2.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_5e9019d625e84087af647e6cb91ea3e2.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> Stewart, Phil, and Warren Strobel. "U.S. to halt some arms sales to Saudi, citing civilian deaths in Yemen campaign." Reuters, December 13, 2016.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-arabia-yemen-exclusive-idUSKBN1421UK>.

<sup>39</sup> Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Accomplice to Carnage: How America Enables War in Yemen." *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-09/how-america-enables-war-yemen>.

<sup>40</sup> Savage, Charlie, and Eric Schmitt. "Trump Eases Combat Rules in Somalia Intended to Protect Civilians." *The New York Times*, March 30, 2017.

visiting Riyadh during his first overseas visit as president, Trump announced \$110 billion in U.S. weapons sales. However, this figure primarily reflected existing U.S. sales in the pipeline: Because Obama had sold the Saudis such vast amounts of weapons, there were not significant additional weapons to sell beyond lifting limits on arms that could cause significant civilian harm.<sup>41</sup> Given the emphasis Trump placed on selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, it may seem surprising that new sales actually decreased during the Trump years.

Even more significantly, after the Obama administration signed the Iran nuclear accord in July 2015, with the stated intention of supporting regional stability by curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. continued to flood the region with conventional weapons. At the time, the explanation given for the increase in weapons sales in 2015 was the need to combat ISIS.

Biden sought to distinguish himself from Trump by claiming that he would hold the Saudis accountable, not only for their Yemen campaign but also for the grisly murder of U.S. resident and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi. Unfortunately, soon after taking office, Biden's determination to recalibrate the U.S. relationship with the Saudis seemed to dissolve. Concerns about competition with China and Russia took precedence over promises to prioritize democratic values and to shift U.S. attention away from costly and futile wars in the Middle East.

## U.S. support for the UAE

Under President Trump, U.S. weapons sales to the UAE increased dramatically. In November 2020, months after the UAE agreed to normalize relations with Israel, the administration notified Congress of \$23 billion in weapons sales. These included F-35 aircraft and MQ-9 drones.<sup>42</sup>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/world/africa/trump-is-said-to-ease-combat-rules-in-somalia-designed-to-protect-civilians.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Hartung. "U.S. Military Support for Saudi Arabia."

<sup>42</sup> Hartung. "U.S. Military Support for Saudi Arabia."

Figure 5



Figure 5 shows U.S. weapons sales to the UAE since 2013. The spike in 2020 followed the announcement that the UAE would formally normalize relations with Israel. The \$23 billion arms package to the Emirates was one of the largest deals offered during the four years of the Trump administration.<sup>43</sup> The UAE suspended the deal after the U.S.

<sup>43</sup> Hartung, William. "Fueling Conflict: U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates and the U.S.–UAE Military Alliance." Center for International Policy, January 2021. [https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1\\_822cf3a2aac41dd866f56f06e186715.pdf](https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1_822cf3a2aac41dd866f56f06e186715.pdf).

expressed concerns about Emirati security cooperation with China, on the basis that it would grant China access to U.S. military technology. The Biden administration has maintained its commitment to following through on the sale.<sup>44</sup>

The United States is by far the largest arms supplier to the UAE, accounting for more than 68 percent of all weapons delivered to that nation from 2015 to 2019, according to statistics compiled from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's arms-transfer database. Yet, as with the UAE's resistance to U.S. efforts to block China's access to sensitive U.S. military technology, the UAE has proven untrustworthy on another front: In 2019 evidence emerged that U.S. weapons sold to the Emiratis had ended up in the hands of al-Qaeda militants in Yemen.<sup>45</sup> Al-Qaeda, as an extremist Sunni organization, opposes the Houthis, who are Zaydi, a sect of Shi'a Islam. To combat the Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the UAE work closely with radical Sunni Salafist groups, including al-Qaeda.<sup>46</sup> America's initial concern in Yemen was the presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, considered the group's most dangerous branch. It is the height of irony that by supporting Saudi and Emirati aims in Yemen, the U.S. is indirectly helping to arm al-Qaeda.

Houthi drone attacks on Abu Dhabi in January 2022 underscored additional potential risks in the military relationship between the U.S. and the UAE. These attacks followed increased Emirati involvement in offensive actions in late 2021 and early 2022. While the UAE had withdrawn most of its forces from Yemen in 2019, it continued to support militia groups, including the Southern Transitional Council and the Amaliqa ("Giants") Brigades. In January 2022, the Amaliqa Brigades, with Saudi air support, seized territory in the Yemeni provinces of al-Bayda and Shabwa that the Houthis had captured a few

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<sup>44</sup> Merchant, Nomaan. "UAE suspends talks on \$23B weapons deal with US." *The Associated Press*, December 15, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-middle-east-donald-trump-united-arab-emirates-persian-gulf-tensions-3445e79b7e937e0048c361f3f99e429b>.

<sup>45</sup> Elbagir, Nima, Salma Abdelaziz, Mohamed Abo El Gheit, and Laura Smith-Spark. "Exclusive Report: Sold to an Ally, Lost to an Enemy." CNN, February 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>.

<sup>46</sup> Johnsen, Gregory. "Trump and Counterterrorism in Yemen: The First Two Years." Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, February 2019. [https://sanaacenter.org/files/Trump\\_and\\_Counterterrorism\\_in\\_Yemen.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/Trump_and_Counterterrorism_in_Yemen.pdf).

months earlier. The Houthis launched drones at Abu Dhabi in response, after having not targeted the UAE since the latter's withdrawal.

After Houthi drones killed three civilians in Abu Dhabi, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and "reiterated his strong condemnation of these attacks and his commitment to the U.S.–UAE strategic partnership."<sup>47</sup> Austin announced that the U.S. would send the Navy destroyer USS Cole as well as F–22s, some of America's most advanced aircraft, to assist with the UAE's defense.

*By reiterating the U.S. commitment to Emirati and Saudi security, the Biden administration increases the danger to U.S. troops stationed in the region as well as the risk of involving the U.S. in a war on behalf of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.*

After the initial attack on January 17, the UAE successfully deflected subsequent Houthi drones and missiles with U.S. assistance. Yet despite the UAE's ability to defend itself, the incident damaged its reputation as a bastion of stability and peace in a volatile region, an image the UAE relies on for its lucrative role as a hub for travel, tourism, commerce, and investment.

As Figure 5 indicates, the UAE has spent billions of dollars on U.S.–made weapons and military technology over the past decade. With a powerful lobby in Washington, the UAE has tried to pressure the Biden administration to redesignate the Houthis a terrorist organization following the drone attacks in January. Although the White House coordinator for the Middle East, Brett McGurk, expressed support for the move at the

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<sup>47</sup> "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Call With Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE." Department of Defense, February 1, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2919785/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-call-with-crown-prince-moha/>.

National Security Council, at the time of writing Biden has not reversed his earlier decision to lift the designation.<sup>48</sup>

In the context of the U.S.–UAE military partnership, the Biden administration’s tendency to conflate U.S. security with Emirati security escalates the risk of increased U.S. involvement in the war. Two thousand U.S. forces are stationed at the al–Dhafra Air Base in the UAE. During the drone attacks in January, American service members were forced to take shelter in bunkers and deflect the attack with Patriot antimissile defenses. The attack could have killed U.S. soldiers and dragged the U.S. directly into yet another war in the Middle East.

By reiterating the U.S. commitment to Emirati and Saudi security, sending additional military assets, and selling additional weapons, the Biden administration increases the danger to U.S. troops stationed in the region as well as the risk of involving the U.S. in a war on behalf of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. It is time to abandon this policy – as the president committed to doing when he took office.

## Conclusion

There are no “good guys” in this war: All parties to the conflict have been credibly accused of war crimes by U.N. experts. In contrast to the Biden administration’s narrative that it is committed to supporting the resolution of the conflict, the U.S. nonetheless signals its ongoing support to the Saudis and Emiratis for their war on Yemen. By consistently reiterating U.S. support, the Biden administration risks escalating U.S. involvement in the war.

Competition with Russia and China has prompted Biden to prioritize close military ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is this calculation that has caused him to renege on his pledge to end the war. This not only risks dragging the U.S. deeper into the conflict; it also prolongs the war, so compounding the destruction of Yemen. The Saudi and

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<sup>48</sup> Gramer, Robbie, and Colum Lynch. “U.N. Pressures Biden Against Adding Yemen’s Houthi Rebels to Terrorist Blacklist.” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/16/un-biden-houthis-terrorist-blacklist/>.



Emirati military aggression that the U.S. supports is little different from Russian actions in Ukraine.

*Competition with Russia and China has prompted Biden to prioritize close military ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is this calculation that has caused him to renege on his pledge to end the war.*

The Biden administration should instead adopt a strategy that takes American national interests as its starting point. This would mean not deferring to Gulf partners on matters that undermine U.S. interests and could plunge it into yet another military confrontation in the Middle East. Deferring to Gulf partners as a means of countering China and Russia is also a questionable strategy, as these governments have already demonstrated that they will hedge their bets on U.S. competition with other great powers.

Rather than providing the Saudis and Emiratis with ever more assistance, the U.S. must end its support for the war on Yemen.

## About the Author

**Annelle Sheline**, Ph.D., is the Research Fellow in the Middle East program at the Quincy Institute and an expert on religious and political authority in the Middle East and North Africa. Sheline's book manuscript focuses on the strategic use of religious authority in the Arab monarchies since 9/11, highlighting the cases of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman: the manuscript is currently under review. Her non-academic writing has appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Foreign Policy*. She earned her Ph.D. in political science from The George Washington University and is a nonresident fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

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## About the Quincy Institute

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