

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 2, 2017

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We write to applaud your public comments, made on April 18th, indicating your intent to put the two-year-old, U.S.-backed Saudi war in Yemen “in front of a UN-brokered negotiating team and try to resolve this politically as soon as possible.” We were encouraged by your resolve, en route to Saudi Arabia, to “work with our allies” to have the crisis “brought to an end” in light of “the number of innocent people dying inside Yemen.”¹

Yet one week after your departure from Saudi Arabia, the Saudi-led coalition of militaries reportedly “dropped thousands of leaflets” from fighter jets over the Yemeni port city of Hodeida, a lifeline for a country on the brink of famine. The leaflets warned residents of an “impending offensive,” and encouraged local support for a military assault. Press accounts considered this measure a “countdown” for an attack.²

In light of these provocative Saudi actions, we wish to raise to your attention a recent letter to President Trump and Attorney General Sessions sent by a bipartisan group of 55 U.S. Representatives, which insisted that any direct U.S. involvement in the escalating war between the Saudi military coalition and Yemen’s Houthi rebels be brought to Congress for debate and authorization before being carried out.³ That letter specifically questioned the legal basis for a proposal you were reported to have made in March: the provision of direct U.S. assistance for a Saudi coalition assault on Hodeida.⁴

As you know, the UN Special Envoy to Yemen has stated, “We are definitely, unequivocally against any military operation” against Hodeida, which would have “very, very disastrous consequences” and could “tip the country into famine.”⁵ Indeed, shipments imported through Hodeida amount to over 60 percent of all of Yemen’s food, although “the Saudi navy is blockading” the port currently, “letting only a trickle through.”⁶ For this reason, we concur with Senator Todd Young (R-IN), whose principal demand—“refrain from bombing the port of

¹ Corey Dickstein, “In Saudi Arabia, Mattis to push for political solution for Yemen war,” *Stars and Stripes*, 4/18/17. <https://www.stripes.com/news/in-saudi-arabia-mattis-to-push-for-political-solution-for-yemen-war-1.464130>

² Saeed Al Batati, “Coalition drops leaflets on Hodeida promising liberation,” *Gulf News*, 4/26/17. <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/yemen/coalition-drops-leaflets-on-hodeida-promising-liberation-1.2017703>

³ Mark Pocan, “Bipartisan Effort: 55 U.S. Representatives Call on Trump to Come to Congress Before Taking Military Action in Yemen,” 4/11/17. <https://pocan.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/bipartisan-effort-55-us-representatives-call-on-trump-to-come-to>

⁴ Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan, “Trump administration weighs deeper involvement in Yemen war,” *Washington Post*, 3/26/17. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-weighs-deeper-involvement-in-yemen-war/2017/03/26/b81eecd8-0e49-11e7-9d5a-a83e627dc120_story.html

⁵ Nafeesa Syeed, “UN Says Military Action on Key Yemen Port Would Be ‘Disastrous,’” *Bloomberg Government*, 3/31/17. <https://www.bgov.com/core/news/#%21/articles/ONONUN6JIJUZ>

⁶ Max Bearak, “A child in Yemen dies every 10 minutes as humanitarian aid funding falls short, U.N. says,” *Washington Post*, 4/25/17. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/25/a-child-in-yemen-dies-every-10-minutes-as-humanitarian-aid-falls-short-by-85-u-n-says/>

Hodeida”—was one of a number of sensible requests he directed to “our Saudi partners.”⁷

We are deeply disturbed by the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres, who warned that in Yemen “we are witnessing the starving and the crippling of an entire generation.” And yet as children die in “the world’s largest hunger crisis,” he argued, “all those deaths could have been prevented.” He concluded, “Only a cessation of hostilities and a political settlement can bring about a permanent end to the conflict and the suffering of the Yemeni people.”⁸

While we welcome your comments pressing for a diplomatic solution to the Yemen war, we note with concern that Pentagon officials continue to advance “logistical and intelligence support” for a Saudi coalition attack on Hodeida.⁹ As the administration weighs whether to “provide additional targeting help and other military aid” to the Saudis, some U.S. officials have alarmingly justified an assault on Hodeida to the press by claiming that “both sides would be more likely to compromise after one more military fight,” and that “the Saudis need a face-saving way to justify a two-year war that has damaged their image abroad.”¹⁰

Due to the conflicting comments coming from the administration, we cordially invite you to come to Congress to brief us in person on the White House’s overall strategy in Yemen at your earliest opportunity. In particular, we seek clarification on whether the administration is pursuing an immediate end to the violence by advocating multilateral negotiations—as we may infer from your comments—or if it is the case, as press reports seem to indicate, that the White House is “sympathetic” to the view that further “military pressure can force the Houthis to return to the bargaining table.”¹¹ We also seek urgent answers regarding the Saudi leafleting of Hodeida, and whether this prelude to an attack was performed after securing U.S. approval and assistance for an assault. In light of previous reporting of administration deliberations, any Saudi operation to seize Hodeida would be perceived as a U.S. effort.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker (R-TN) has publicly made clear that the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force to counter al-Qaeda would not apply to the Shia Houthis in Yemen. “Certainly engaging in a war” against the Houthis, he told the press, “is a step beyond the current authorization.”¹² As we await a response from the White House and the Office of Legal Counsel regarding their rationales for a U.S. escalation of hostilities in Yemen absent Congressional authorization, we ask for your cooperation in upholding the Constitutional

⁷ Todd Young, “Following Mattis Visit, Young Calls on Saudi Government to Help Alleviate Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen,” 4/19/17. <https://www.young.senate.gov/content/following-mattis-visit-young-calls-saudi-government-help-alleviate-humanitarian-crisis-yemen>

⁸ United Nations Secretary-General, “Secretary-General’s opening remarks to Yemen Pledging Conference,” 4/25/17. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-04-25/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-yemen-pledging-conference>

⁹ John Hudson, Paul McLeod, “Pentagon Clashes With Civilian Aid Workers Over Planned Military Assault In Yemen,” BuzzFeed News, 4/17/17. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/johnhudson/pentagon-clashes-with-civilian-aid-workers-over-planned>

¹⁰ Helene Cooper, “Jim Mattis, in Saudi Visit, Calls for Political Solution in Yemen,” New York Times, 4/19/17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/world/middleeast/jim-mattis-yemen-saudi-arabia.html>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Julian Pecquet, “Congress raises alarm over US confrontation with Yemen’s Houthis,” Al-Monitor, 3/30/17. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/congress-raise-alarm-us-confrontation-yemen-houthis.html>

principle of Congress's war powers by briefing us on the administration's plans.

In the face of Yemen's senseless humanitarian tragedy, where 19 million people need emergency support, we are committed to using our Constitutional authority to assert greater oversight over U.S. involvement in the conflict and promote greater public debate regarding U.S. military participation in Yemen's civil war, which has never been authorized by Congress. Should the administration remain unresponsive to our repeated inquiries into the nature of U.S. engagement in a potentially catastrophic Saudi attack on Hodeida, we will pursue legislation to explicitly prohibit U.S. involvement in any such assault.

Sincerely,



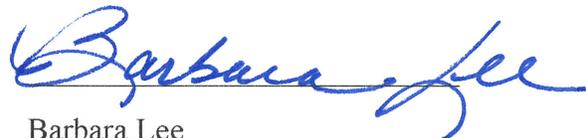
Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



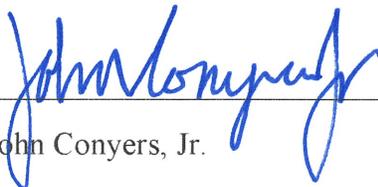
Justin Amash
Member of Congress



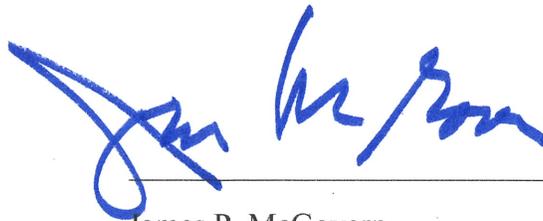
Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



John Conyers, Jr.
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Tulsi Gabbard

Tulsi Gabbard
Member of Congress

Bonnie Watson Coleman

Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress

Peter DeFazio

Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress

Debbie Dingell

Debbie Dingell
Member of Congress

Darren Soto

Darren Soto
Member of Congress

Colleen Hanabusa

Colleen Hanabusa
Member of Congress

Zoe Lofgren

Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress

Peter Welch

Peter Welch
Member of Congress

Pramila Jayapal

Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress

Karen Bass

Karen Bass
Member of Congress