

What the US has wrought in Yemen

Biden's announcement of the end of American involvement is refreshingly clear and straightforward—assuming it pans out.

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An aerial bombardment on Sana'a, Yemen. (Photo by fahd sadi via Creative Commons license)

Last month the Biden administration announced an end to US support for the war in Yemen. Few Americans probably remember when we began to support this war or what that support has meant. This was intentional on the part of the Obama administration (of which Biden was a part), which emphasized its counterterrorism goals in Yemen but obscured the basic facts of US participation. With its clarity and openness, Biden's announcement comes as something of a breath of fresh air.

[The origins of Yemen's current conflict are long-standing and complex.](#) But the civil war began in 2014, when Shi'ite rebels attacked Yemen's Sunni government and took over the capital. In 2015 a Saudi-led coalition of Gulf states began a campaign against the rebels. From the beginning, the United States provided logistical and

intelligence support, along with arms sales. It also literally fueled the conflict, delivering tens of millions of pounds of jet fuel to the Saudis.

The conflict has been devastating for the Yemeni people. Yemen is experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with almost 80 percent of its people near starvation. There are 30 active military fronts. All sides have violated human rights and international humanitarian law, and civilians have paid much of the price. US-made bombs have killed or injured thousands of Yemenis. In Yemen, the United States is rightly seen as an instigator and perpetuator of the conflict.

Biden's announcement highlights three significant developments. The United States has held up arms sales to Saudi Arabia specifically for review of its role in the conflict. It has appointed a high-level diplomatic envoy to make ending the conflict a visible priority for the administration. And it is once again allowing humanitarian aid to reach desperate Yemenis.

That said, it's possible that Biden's announcement will turn out to be largely symbolic. Arms sales to Saudi Arabia might continue uninhibited, and US drone strikes on Yemen may proceed with counterterrorism as the excuse. If so, this will further undermine trust in the United States in the region. The next stage for the country remains unclear. Divisions have only widened over the last six years of civil conflict, and US-sponsored actions have created deep wounds. There remains only a shred of real hope.

In 2016 Connecticut senator Chris Murphy warned that the United States was, once again, "all too quietly" entering another war in the Middle East. US warfare has long been troubled by this lack of clarity. The United States no longer declares war. Instead it fights endless battles with grave human consequences and rarely tells the truth about it. But Biden's acknowledgment of the US role in "creat[ing] a humanitarian and strategic catastrophe" presents an opportunity to chart a new course. As James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A change in Yemen?"