

Biden ends US support for Saudi-led offensive against Iran-backed terror group in Yemen



A speed boat strapped with explosives near Saudi Royal Navy vessels in the Red Sea. (Saudi Interior Ministry via AP)

The Saudis have used the offensive to confront a terror proxy backed by Iran, which is attempting to develop nuclear bomb-grade uranium.

President Joe Biden announced Thursday the United States was ending support for a five-year Saudi-led military offensive in Yemen to confront the Iran-backed Houthi Islamic extremist group.

President Donald Trump's administration designated the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization.

Biden said the was move part of restoring a U.S. emphasis on diplomacy.

“This war has to end,” Biden told diplomats in his first visit to the State Department as president, saying the conflict had created a “humanitarian and strategic catastrophe.”

The Yemen reversal is one of a series of steps Biden laid out Thursday that he said would mark a major change in direction for U.S. foreign policy. That’s after Republican and Democratic administrations sided with the Saudis.

The Biden administration also says it will help Saudi Arabia boost its defenses against outside attacks, as part of maintaining key security, counterterrorism and military ties with Saudi Arabia, a strategic partner, and global oil giant.

Saudi state media focused on that part of Biden’s announcements Thursday.

“We welcome President Biden’s stated commitment to work with friends and allies to resolve conflicts, and deal with attacks from Iran and its proxies in the region,” Saudi Prince Khalid bin Salman, a son of King Salman and the kingdom’s deputy defense minister, tweeted.

In addition to its attempts to develop a nuclear bomb, Iran funds, trains, and fights alongside a group of terror proxies that menace the Middle East, including the Houthis in Yemen.

Iran’s other terror proxies include Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

Recent reports also revealed Iran’s role in assisting the Al-Qaeda, the terror group that perpetrated the 9/11 terror attacks on America in 2001.

According to former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Iran is the jihadist network’s “new home.”

Yemen, the biblical kingdom of Sheba, has one of the world’s oldest constantly occupied cities — the more than 2,000-year-old Sanaa — along with mud-brick skyscrapers and hauntingly beautiful landscapes of steep, arid mountains.

But decades of Yemeni misgovernment have worsened factional divisions and halted development, and years of conflict have now drawn in increasing intervention by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran.

The Obama administration in 2015 gave its approval to Saudi Arabia leading a cross-border air campaign targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels, who were seizing ever more territory, including Sanaa. The Houthis have launched multiple drone and missile strikes deep into Saudi Arabia.

U.S. targeting assistance to Saudi Arabia's command-and-control was supposed to minimize civilian casualties in the Saudi-led airstrikes. But bombing since then has killed numerous Yemeni civilians, including schoolboys on a bus and fishermen in their boats. Survivors have displayed fragments showing the bombs to be American-made.

The stalled war has failed to dislodge the Houthis and is helping deepen hunger and poverty. International rights experts say both the Gulf countries and Houthis have committed severe rights abuses.

Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman, a co-winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her role in Yemen's unsuccessful Arab Spring popular uprising, urged Biden to stay involved in Yemen peace efforts.

"Deeper U.S. engagement — and a refusal to side with dictators who have chosen bloodshed over democratic change — is vital so that the Yemeni people can return to the project of democracy" that warring parties inside and outside of Yemen interrupted, Karman said in a statement.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the U.S. action will give more space and more hope "not only to the talks but, more importantly, more hope to the people of Yemen."

Biden called Thursday for a cease-fire, an opening of humanitarian channels to allow more delivery of aid and a return to long-stalled peace talks.

Biden also announced an end to "relevant" U.S. arms sales but gave no immediate details on what that would mean. The administration already has said it was pausing some of the billions of dollars in arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's main partner in its Yemeni offensive.

The ending of U.S. support for the offensive will not affect any U.S. operations against the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, group, national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

In what was seen as the latest in several Saudi gestures toward Biden, the State Department said Thursday the kingdom had conditionally released two dual Saudi-U.S. citizens detained in a crackdown on civil society there, and reduced a sentence for a third, Dr. Walid Fitaihi, convicted of “disobedience” to the government.

The weeks-old Biden administration has made clear that shifting its stance toward the Yemen war, and toward Saudi Arabia over the Yemen offensive and other rights abuses, was a priority. Other measures have included a review of the Trump administration’s categorization of the Houthis as a terror group. Critics say the designation hinders delivery of humanitarian aid to Yemenis.

Biden also announced the choice of Timothy Lenderking as special envoy to Yemen.

Lenderking has been a deputy assistant secretary of state in the department’s Middle East section. A career foreign service member, he has served in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

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