

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 19, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

We write to you regarding the Saudi Arabia-led coalition's use of blockade tactics in Yemen that has prevented food, medicine, and other crucial supplies from reaching millions in dire need during this senseless and protracted conflict. We applaud the attention that your Administration has given to ending the conflict in Yemen, but immediate and decisive action must be taken to end the ongoing blockade of fuel imports that is exacerbating the growing humanitarian crisis. The United States has diplomatic and economic leverage to compel Saudi Arabia to end its callous blockade of Yemen and we must use it before more lives are needlessly lost.

For nearly seven years, Yemen has been embroiled in a devastating civil war that has completely destabilized the country.¹ After Houthi and rebel forces loyal to the former president overthrew the transitional Yemeni government in 2014, Saudi Arabia led a multinational military intervention into the conflict in 2015.² Since then, the two sides have been locked in a conflict that has consumed the entire nation and spiraled into the world's leading humanitarian crisis.³ The United Nations (UN) estimates that close to 80 percent of Yemen's 31 million citizens – more than 24 million people – are in need of assistance and protection.⁴ More than three million people have been displaced, and experts estimate that more than 230,000 people have died during the war, including tens of thousands of civilian casualties and at least 130,000 who have died as a result of a lack of health services, disease, and the growing risk of widespread famine.⁵

¹ Council on Foreign Relations, "Global Conflict Tracker: Yemen," April 15, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>.

² *Id.*

³ United Nations, "Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in world, warns UN," February 14, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ United Nations, "UN humanitarian office puts Yemen war dead at 233,000, mostly from 'indirect causes,'" December 1, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1078972>

The war has also led to the collapse of much of Yemen's infrastructure, compounding the nation's suffering. Indiscriminate warring from Houthi and Saudi coalition forces have destroyed schools, hospitals, businesses, and public services, disrupting all aspects of life in Yemen.⁶ Failing health, water, and sanitation systems have cut off 14.5 million people from regular access to clean water and sanitation, leading to a cholera outbreak that has infected more than 2.5 million people and killed at least 3,900.⁷ The outbreak, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, has overwhelmed the nation's already strained health care infrastructure and now many Yemeni people are cut off from any form of healthcare access.⁸ Widespread food insecurity has compounded the consequences of these outbreaks. Targeted bombings of farms, fishing boats, ports, and other businesses at the outset of the conflict by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition have caused food shortages for millions of Yemenis.⁹

A leading driver of the suffering in Yemen, which has exacerbated all other existing issues, has been the air and sea blockade by the Saudi-led coalition.¹⁰ In 2015, Saudi Arabia began positioning warships in Yemeni waters and shut down access to the nation's air and land access ports shortly after.¹¹ Blockade tactics have been used repeatedly over the years, preventing vital food, medicine, fuel, and all other essential supplies from reaching sick and starving Yemeni people that could mitigate some of the negative effects of the war.¹² Instead, civilians have been cut off and left to contend with the dire consequences. The UN estimates that 16 million Yemenis will face hunger this year and 400,000 children younger than five years old are at risk of dying of starvation if the conflict continues and these war tactics persist.¹³ The most recent iteration of this back-and-forth between the warring actors has halted the importation of commercial fuel into northern Yemen needed by nearly two-thirds of the Yemeni population and has negatively impacted food transporters and processors, hospitals, schools, and businesses. The

⁶ Washington Post, "Saudi-led attacks devastated Yemen's civilian infrastructure, dramatically worsening humanitarian crisis," February 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/22/saudi-led-attacks-devastated-yemens-civilian-infrastructure-dramatically-worsening-humanitarian-crisis/>

⁷ World Health Organization, "Cholera Situation in Yemen," December 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Cholera%20situation%20in%20Yemen%2C%20December%202020.pdf>

⁸ Human Rights Watch, "COVID-19 in Yemen," April 14, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/14/covid-19-yemen-perfect-storm>

⁹ World Peace Foundation, "The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial bombardment and food war," Martha Munday, October 9, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Strategies%20of%20Coalition%20in%20Yemen%20War.pdf>⁹

¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, "Global Conflict Tracker: Yemen," April 15, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "Yemen can't wait: More than 16 million people will go hungry this year," March 1, 2021, <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/yemen-cant-wait-more-16-million-people-will-go-hungry-year>.

UN Secretary General confirmed this crisis in February noting, “no commercial fuel imports were allowed through Hodeidah Port,” exacerbating an already dire situation.¹⁴

Nations and experts from across the globe have decried these blockade tactics since they began in 2015. In 2017, the UN urged Saudi Arabia to end its use of blockade tactics immediately, calling it “catastrophic,” and a threat to millions of people.¹⁵ Seven humanitarian organizations including the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the UN Human Rights Council also called for a full cessation of blockade tactics, citing the tremendous humanitarian impact.¹⁶ Congress has also repeatedly called on White House to take action in Yemen and act to end these blockade tactics.¹⁷ We share their concerns and urge you to pressure Saudi Arabia to cease these tactics that disproportionately and unfairly impact millions of innocent Yemenis.

Since taking office, your Administration has taken several positive steps to address the conflict in Yemen. In your first weeks in office, you reversed the Trump administration’s hasty designation of Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization, which would have prevented the delivery of urgent humanitarian aid.¹⁸ In February, you announced an end to U.S. support for Saudi-led “offensive” operations.¹⁹ And in March, you resumed critical humanitarian assistance to northern Yemen, paused by USAID under the Trump administration.²⁰

These are welcome steps, but we must now address the serious harm caused by ongoing blockade tactics. While your Administration maintains that “[this] is not a blockade,” Saudi action is undoubtedly preventing much needed fuel from reaching those in need and is

¹⁴ Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary General, “Highlights of the noon briefing by Stephane Dujarric,” March 12, 2021, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/noon-briefing-highlight?date%5Bvalue%5D%5Bdate%5D=12%20March%202021>

¹⁵ United Nations, “‘Catastrophic’ humanitarian blockade in Yemen putting millions at risk, UN warns,” November 7, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/11/570122-catastrophic-humanitarian-blockade-yemen-putting-millions-risk-un-warns>

¹⁶ United Nations, “United Nations Leaders Call on The Saudi-Led Coalition to Fully Lift Blockade of Yemeni Red Sea Ports,” December 2, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/STATEMENT%20-%20UN%20leaders%20call%20on%20the%20Saudi-led%20coalition%20to%20fully%20lift%20blockade%20of%20Yemeni%20Red%20Sea%20ports%20-%202002.12.17.pdf>

¹⁷ The Hill, “Senators demand answers on Trump Administration backing of Saudi coalition in Yemen,” October 10, 2018, Rebecca Kheel, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/410764-senators-demand-answers-on-trump-administration-support-for-saudi-coalition-in->; Letter from Members of Congress to President Biden,” April 6, 2021, https://debbiedingell.house.gov/uploadedfiles/yemen_blockade_letter_with_signers_final.pdf?utm_campaign=1069-404

¹⁸ New York Times, Biden Reverses Trump Terrorist Designation for Houthis in Yemen,” Lara Jakes, Eric Schmitt, February 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/us/politics/biden-houthi-yemen-terrorist-designation.html>

¹⁹ Associated Press, “Biden ending U.S. support for Saudi-led offensive in Yemen,” Ellen Knickmeyer, February 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-end-support-saudi-offensive-yemen-b68f58493dbfc530b9fcfdb80a13098f>

²⁰ ABC News, “US to resume aid to Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen amid desperate need, intensified fighting,” Conor Finnegan, March 11, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-resume-aid-houthi-controlled-areas-yemen-amid/story?id=76395980>

exacerbating an already grave humanitarian crisis; the United States must work to put an end to it.

Specifically, we request that your Administration demand that Saudi Arabia allow the unfettered delivery of food, fuel, and other humanitarian aid through the Hodeidah port, under United Nations auspices to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Yemeni people. Failure to provide such access should have a direct impact on our relationship with Saudi Arabia, to include pending weapons sales, military cooperation, the provision of maintenance for war planes and spare parts, as well as U.S.-Saudi ties more broadly. The current commercial fuel import standoff must end today and be decoupled from ongoing negotiations. Yemen was already the Middle East's poorest country prior to the war, but the conflict and resultant blockade tactics have worsened the situation exponentially. The United States must make clear that these cruel and senseless blockade campaigns imperil millions of innocent Yemeni people, are counterproductive to peace, and will do great harm U.S-Saudi bilateral relations should they continue unabated.

We appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Patrick J. Leahy
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

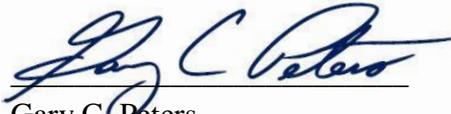
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

_____/s/_____

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator