

U.S. to stop refueling Saudi-coalition planes in Yemen, officials say

By Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce

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The U.S. military currently re-fuels about 20 percent of all Saudi aircraft that fly as part of the operation in Yemen.



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The United States will soon suspend its mission to re-fuel Saudi Arabia's military aircraft flying in Yemen, according to two U.S. officials and one Senate staffer.

A Senate staffer said the decision is a means to pre-empt a potentially damaging debate and vote in Congress. The political climate on the Hill has turned hostile to Saudi Arabia over [the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi](#) and the war in Yemen, the staffer said, adding that some Republican lawmakers who opposed suspending refueling now favor the move.

Saudi Arabia said later Friday, in a statement carried by state-run media, that "in consultation with the United States" it has requested the end of in-flight refueling — placing the decision for the change on Riyadh rather than Washington.

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the member countries of the Coalition to Support legitimacy in Yemen, continually pursue improvements to military professionalism and self-sufficiency," the Saudi statement said.

The U.S. military was re-fueling about 20 percent of all Saudi aircraft that fly as part of the operation in Yemen.

But the U.S. will not curtail intelligence sharing with the coalition, and will continue "limited intelligence support in defense of Saudi Arabia," a defense official said.

The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's partner in the coalition fighting in Yemen, is also looking for ways to end its role in the fight in Yemen, according to three officials familiar with the discussions. The Emiratis have asked the Trump administration for help winding down their presence in the [war-ravaged country](#), but have also asked the U.S. to help with a diplomatic process that will eliminate the Houthi missile threat.

The U.S. maintains that Houthi rebels in Yemen do threaten Saudi Arabia. On Thursday, Houthis fired an anti-ship cruise missile from Yemen into the Red Sea, targeting a Saudi tanker. The Saudi ship was unharmed but a defense official said the action proves the Houthis present a serious threat to Saudi Arabia and to commerce in the busy waterway.

The U.S. believes Iran is supplying the Houthis with missiles.

The fighting between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government of Yemen being backed by the Saudi coalition has raged for almost four years, with civilians often caught in the crossfire. A Saudi airstrike on a school bus in August [killed over 40 children](#).

In the meantime, the country has fallen into the grips of a [desperate humanitarian crisis](#), with three quarters of Yemen's population in need of aid, and one third of the population on the brink of starvation.

Late last month, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for an end to the fighting.

"The time is now for the cessation of hostilities, including missile and UAV(unmanned aerial vehicle) strikes from Houthi-controlled areas into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates," [Pompeo said in a statement](#) on Oct. 31.

"Subsequently, coalition airstrikes must cease in all populated areas in Yemen," he added.

Deputy State Dept. spokesman Robert Palladino said Friday the U.S. is still pushing for peace.

"As the Secretary said, we've been urging all parties to come to the table and to recognize that there's no military victory that can be achieved in Yemen. And we continue to call for a cessation of hostilities and for all parties to support United Nations Special Envoy Martin Griffiths in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict," Palladino said.

A U.N. official aware of the discussions said that November is still the target for talks between the parties in Yemen although they are allowing some breathing space.

The U.S. decision to stop the aircraft refueling was first reported by the [Washington Post](#), and comes amid growing criticism of Saudi Arabia's actions in Congress in the wake of the Khashoggi murder. Khashoggi was an outspoken critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the kingdom has repeatedly shifted its account of what happened to him after he entered its consulate in Turkey last month.

[The New York Times](#) reported Friday that the Trump administration is also looking to impose sanctions against individuals linked to the Khashoggi killing in an apparent bid to stave off congressional action. The sanctions would not target the crown prince, The Times reported.

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