[Exclusive](http://foreignpolicy.com/category/exclusive/): [Inside Saudi Arabia’s Push to Silence Criticism of Its Brutal War in Yemen](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/25/inside-saudi-arabias-push-to-silence-criticism-of-its-brutal-war-in-yemen/)

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By [Colum Lynch](http://foreignpolicy.com/author/colum-lynch)

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Saudi Arabia and its Sunni-majority Persian Gulf allies don’t hold a single seat on the U.N. Security Council. But you’d hardly know it: Over the past year, they have wielded their diplomatic clout like a major power, shaping the 15-nation council’s diplomatic strategy for Yemen and effectively suppressing U.N. scrutiny of excesses in their 13-month air war against the country’s Shiite rebels.

The United States and Britain, two of the U.N. Security Council’s five veto-wielding powers, have largely delegated Yemen crisis management to the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council. But both have grown increasingly concerned in recent months that Arab armies are pursuing a reckless war that has contributed to the widespread destruction of the Middle East’s poorest country and planted the seeds for greater extremism.

An examination of Saudi Arabia’s Yemen diplomacy provides rare insights into the ways a vital U.S. ally has been granted a privileged perch at the world’s most powerful security body. Working through its military allies — principally the United States, Britain, and Egypt — Saudi Arabia has succeeded in blocking actions to restrain its military conduct and highlight humanitarian costs of the conflict.

“They are able to shape discussion on Yemen even when they are not in the room,” Akshaya Kumar, the deputy director of U.N. affairs at Human Rights Watch, said. “They are able to really maintain a one-sided approach to the Security Council’s handling of the situation in Yemen and particularly relating to their abuses on which the council has been silent.”

The council’s treatment of Yemen contrasts sharply with Syria, where the United States and its Western and Arab allies have sponsored resolutions demanding the Syrian government and armed rebels provide access to relief workers. Washington and its allies have also pushed for an International Criminal Court investigation into Syrian atrocities.

But when New Zealand urged the Security Council this year to adopt a resolution demanding access for humanitarian aid workers in Yemen, it encountered stiff resistance.

Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United Nations, Abdullah al-Mouallimi, publicly dismissed the proposal as unnecessary. Behind closed doors, Egypt placed the initiative on the back burner by urging the council to withhold action until Saudi Arabia was consulted.

Britain, which initially supported New Zealand’s initiative, reversed course and put the plan on ice. London persuaded Wellington to hold off, arguing the initiative might interfere with confidential Saudi peace talks this year with anti-government Houthi rebels. In the end, the council shelved a decision.

The current phase in Yemen’s civil war has its roots in an uprising by Shiite Houthi separatists, who seized the capital, Sanaa, in January 2015. The rebels deposed Yemen’s internationally recognized president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and placed him under house arrest before he fled to Saudi Arabia in exile. Shortly after arriving in Riyadh, Hadi appealed to the kingdom and other Gulf countries to intervene militarily to restore him to power.

The scale of violence escalated in March 2015, when the Saudi-led coalition — backed by U.S. logistics and intelligence support — launched an air war to defeat the Houthis and their allies and restore Hadi to power. The conflict has been marked by egregious violations of the laws of war, killing more than 6,400 people, about half of them civilians, and displacing more than 2.8 million, according to the United Nations.

Restrictions by the Saudi-led coalition on the import of fuel, food, and other supplies have further impoverished Yemenis, the vast majority of whom depend on vital aid and mainstays from abroad. In the past year, more than 10,000 children under the age of 5 have [died](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ASG%20Kang%20Statement%20on%20Yemen%20SecCo%2015Apr2016%20CAD.pdf) from preventable diseases, according to estimates by UNICEF.

Shortly after entering the war, Riyadh and its Gulf allies sought Security Council support for a [resolution](http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm) reinforcing their demands that the Houthis lay down their weapons and recognize the Saudi-backed Hadi government.

The United States and Britain, which at the time were seeking Saudi support for landmark nuclear negotiations with Iran, let Riyadh take the lead.

The initial draft resolution, which was written by Saudi and other Gulf diplomats, was presented to the council by Jordan, a member of the coalition that at the time served as the only Arab government seated on the Security Council. Amman also led the initial round of negotiations, and the United States, Britain, and France advised the draft. But when the negotiators reached an impasse with Russia, it was Saudi Arabia’s ambassador who negotiated directly with Russia’s U.N. envoy, Vitaly Churkin.

Critics inside and outside the council believe the resolution was tilted too strongly in favor of the Saudi-backed Yemeni government and that it since has become a major sticking point in political talks. The Houthis believe it amounts to an unconditional surrender. But Saudi Arabia and its Gulf state allies say their approach would rightly prevent the Houthis from achieving through the use of force what they could not obtain through negotiations.

Recent Saudi talks with the Houthis resulted in an April 10 cessation of hostilities in Yemen and paved the way for peace-seeking political negotiations currently underway in Kuwait. But the cease-fire has not brought an end to fighting by the Saudi-led coalition, which has recently opened a new military front against al Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia maintains it has shown a greater commitment to responding to its neighbor’s humanitarian plight, picking up a $274 million tab last year for the U.N. relief effort in Yemen. The kingdom believes the first priority should be ending the war and persuading its Shiite Houthi rivals to recognize Hadi’s government and surrender the weapons they captured from government forces.

Riyadh has argued that a new resolution that focuses on humanitarian relief — like the one proposed by New Zealand — would only encourage the Houthis to ignore obligations to put down their arms, as required in the earlier proposal by Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis also note there is nothing unusual about their high-profile role at U.N. headquarters in New York, underscoring how key regional players generally are active negotiators in neighborhood trouble spots. They are frustrated there has been too little global concern about the Houthis’ siege of Taiz and resent they receive so little gratitude for efforts to [dislodge](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/war-in-yemen-takes-a-major-turn-with-offensive-against-al-qaeda/2016/04/24/b8e73a3e-0a2c-11e6-bc53-db634ca94a2a_story.html) al Qaeda from a series of key strategic towns, including its stronghold in the port city of Mukalla.

While both sides have committed [war crimes](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_125.pdf), the Saudi-led coalition, with its superior firepower, has committed the most abuses, according to U.N. estimates.

Saudi Arabia also has successfully blocked efforts at the U.N. to scrutinize excesses in the course of the conflict. Last September, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates effectively [killed](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/23/saudi-arabia-launches-charm-offensive-to-describe-yemen-assault-before-u-n-summit/) an effort by the Netherlands to establish a U.N. Human Rights Council investigation into [violations](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/23/saudi-arabia-launches-charm-offensive-to-describe-yemen-assault-before-u-n-summit/) of international humanitarian law by both sides in the Yemen conflict. The initiative initially drew support from Britain’s envoy in Geneva. But the United States and U.K. later urged Amsterdam to pursue an agreement that Hadi and his Gulf state backers could support. In order to secure such an agreement, the inquiry was finally dropped.

The United States and Jordan also derailed an effort to send a Security Council envoy to meet with representatives of Yemen’s warring parties. That [initiative](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/15/u-s-support-for-saudi-strikes-in-yemen-raises-war-crime-concerns/), in October 2015, would have urged the combatants to honor obligations to “respect and uphold international humanitarian law and human rights law” and cooperate with a U.N. panel of experts delving into human rights, according to a Security Council diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive negotiations.

That plan garnered broad support in the 15-nation council, including from America’s allies Britain and France, as well as from rivals like Russia and China, according to council diplomats. But the United States registered reservations, and Jordan, then serving as the lone Arab government on the council, formally blocked the proposal.

Some of the most intense diplomatic pressure surrounding the war in Yemen has been applied on U.N. investigators to overlook alleged war crimes by members of the Saudi-led coalition.

In 2014, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies pushed the council to impose sanctions on Yemen’s former leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the ethnic Houthi separatists who formed an alliance with him. The Security Council established a panel of experts to monitor enforcement of the sanctions, which included an asset freeze and travel ban. The panel’s main mission was to trace [billions of dollars](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31632502) in illicit funds spirited out of the country by Saleh and his family and supporters. The panel was also empowered to investigate violations of international humanitarian law by all belligerents.

At the time, the experts’ investigations were directed at Saudi Arabia’s enemies.

But over the last year, the panel has sought to examine abuses by the Saudi-led coalition, a position that has infuriated Gulf countries. In January, Gulf diplomats held a closed-door meeting with the panel to detail their grievances: The panel, they protested, had no authority to scrutinize the coalition’s conduct.

Riyadh and its Gulf allies criticized the panel for sloppy reporting and faulted it for failing to highlight rebel attacks across the Yemeni border into Saudi Arabia. The panel’s job, according to Mouallimi, Saudi Arabia’s U.N. ambassador, should be to “deal with the obstructers of the political process.” He called it unqualified to provide an accurate assessment of the coalition’s conduct.

“They don’t have the necessary resources; they don’t have the necessary people; they do not have the presence on the ground,” Mouallimi told reporters at a March press conference. The same message also was reinforced by Egypt in closed-door Security Council consultations.

In March, Algerian human rights advocate Said Boumedouha, a deputy director at Amnesty International, was selected by the United Nations to replace one of the panel’s outgoing experts. Boumedouha, a frequent critic of the human rights records of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states, was [blocked](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/19/egypt-extends-campaign-against-dissent-to-turtle-bay/) for the post by Cairo. And this year, two indelendent specialists on the U.N. Security Council panel of experts– Virginia Hill and Lucy Mathieson — stepped down from the panel, telling colleagues they felt constrained from reporting vigorously on coalition atrocities.

The two Yemen specialists, according to sources who spoke to them, had bridled over what they saw as two apparent and separate standards of evidence required for reporting on abuses. Abuses by Houthi separatists required less stringent verification than those committed by the coalition, which typically demanded ground proof. That proved impossible since the U.N. panel’s members have not entered Yemen since the Saudi-led coalition joined the war.

And reporting on the coalition’s use of cluster munitions has proved especially contentious.

Last year, the panel received extensive documentation of the coalition’s use of cluster munitions, including photos, GPS coordinates, and video detailing exploded U.S.- and Brazilian-made cluster munitions. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also [documented](http://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16923&LangID=E) the alleged use of cluster munitions by the coalition in Yemen’s Hajjah province and the towns of Hairan and Bakel al-Meer.

But, in January, the panel included in a 51-page report only a [paragraph](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_73.pdf) on cluster munitions, which are banned by 118 countries because they disproportionately harm civilians. Though members of a newly constituted panel have told colleagues that they intend to continue the investigation into cluster bombs.

Meanwhile, the panel’s inability to verify officially the use of such weapons has made it easier for Saudi Arabia and its allies to deny they are being used. “We do not use cluster bombs in Yemen, period,” Mouallimi said last month.

The U.K. also pushed back on the panel’s findings. Since the early stages of the war,the Saudis and their allies have blocked some commercial ships from entering Yemeni ports, leading to massive shortages of food and fuel. Saudi Arabia claims the Houthis use some of those ships to deliver weapons and other supplies. This year, British diplomats in New York challenged the panel’s conclusion that the Saudi-led coalition’s restriction on commercial vessels in Yemeni ports amounted to a naval blockade.

Britain still holds that view.

“The U.K. did not share the panel’s assessment that there was a maritime blockade imposed by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition,” a U.N.-based British diplomat said this week, speaking on condition of anonymity. “A number of parties are responsible for the conflict in Yemen, which led to the restrictions on commercial shipping.”