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The Saudi-UAE Alliance is the Most Dangerous Force in the Middle East Today

Doug Bandow

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Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have conducted a murderous campaign to reinstall a pliable regime in the desperately poor country of Yemen. This campaign is based on a lie intended to gain American support: that the two authoritarian monarchies are responding to Iranian aggression. Now the UAE is preparing a military offensive that could split Yemen apart and create mass starvation.

The Saudi-Emirati alliance is the most dangerous force in the Middle East today. Sometimes acting alone, but usually in tandem, the two dictatorships have promoted intolerant Wahhabism around the world, backed brutal tyranny in Egypt and Bahrain, supported radical jihadists while helping tear apart Libya and Syria, threatened to attack Qatar while attempting to turn it into a puppet state, and kidnapped the Lebanese premier in an effort to unsettle that nation's fragile political equilibrium. Worst of all, however, is their ongoing invasion of Yemen.

To demonstrate support for its royal allies, America joined their war on the Yemeni people, acting as chief armorer for both authoritarian monarchies and enriching U.S. arms makers in the process. America's military has also provided the belligerents with targeting assistance and refueling services. And our Special Forces are on the ground assisting the Saudis.

The result has been both a security and humanitarian crisis. Observed Perry Cammack of the Carnegie Endowment: "By catering to Saudi Arabia in Yemen, the United States has empowered AQAP, strengthened Iranian influence in Yemen, undermined Saudi security, brought Yemen closer to the brink of collapse, and visited more death, destruction, and displacement on the Yemeni population."

The Yemeni people have done nothing to harm the United States. So why is Washington treating them as the enemy?

Yemen, both as one and two states, has been almost constantly at war over the last half century, as its more powerful neighbors have sought to meddle in its affairs. Once, Egyptian and Saudi troops battled each other on behalf of separate Yemeni states. The two Yemens united in 1990, but that resulted in neither peace nor stability.

The latest round of violence grew out of the Arab Spring. Long-ruling President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who cooperated with both the U.S. and the Saudis, was ousted. But he soon united with his old enemies, the Houthis, a political and tribal militia whose members are Zaydis, a moderate, Shia-related sect that also shares some Sunni characteristics. Together they defenestrated Saleh's successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Area specialists agree that Iran had little to do with these maneuvers, while U.S. intelligence reports that Tehran even advised against the anti-Hadi coalition's march on the capital of Sanaa.

The resulting conflict little affected America except in disrupting some operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). But the Saudis and UAE created a "coalition" supplemented with de facto mercenaries—from Sudan, for instance—in March 2015 to restore Hadi. That military operation, which was supposed to take a few weeks, continues more than three years later.

Today the Yemeni nation and state no longer exist. The UN has termed the conflict "the largest humanitarian crisis in the world" where "Yemenis are facing multiple crises, including armed conflict, displacement, risk of famine and the outbreaks of diseases, including cholera." Some 30,000 civilians are estimated to have died since January 2017 alone. In March, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported: "Conflict in Yemen has left 22.2 million people, 75 per cent of the population, in need of humanitarian assistance and has created a severe protection crisis in which millions face risks to their safety and are struggling to survive."

The Houthis share the blame for Yemen's hardship. But the coalition, by employing airstrikes termed "indiscriminate or disproportionate" by Human Rights Watch, has caused at least two thirds of the infrastructure damage and three quarters of the casualties. Yemeni American Rabyaah Lthaibani was blunt: "For three years now, the Saudi Coalition has bombed hospitals, schools and wedding parties. They have systematically targeted roads and farms and blocked ports so lifesaving aid and other goods could not reach people facing famine and the world's fastest-growing cholera outbreak." Amnesty International concluded that the coalition deliberately hit civilian targets to create a crisis.

On Wednesday, the Saudis and Emiratis launched their planned assault on the port of Hodeida, which will only exacerbate this humanitarian horror. Pleas by the UN and U.S. that upwards of 250,000 people's lives will be at risk have gone unheeded. But then why would Abu Dhabi listen, since Washington's support for the coalition has thus far been total? The U.S. is enabling an aggressive war with all of its horrendous human consequences.

Washington's complicity in Yemen's destruction hasn't promoted regional stability. Over the last two decades, misbegotten American intervention has spread conflict, loosed Islamist furies, imperiled religious minorities, and expanded Iran's influence throughout the Mideast and beyond. Inflaming the Yemeni war has proved similarly destructive.

Hadi may be Yemen's "legitimate" ruler, but he sacrificed what little popular support he had when he called in airstrikes on his own people. Nor is he a friend of America: journalist Laura Kasinof observed that Hadi had "cozied up to the Islamists" before his ouster, even sometimes cooperating with AQAP. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also have armed radical forces. AQAP may be the greatest inadvertent beneficiary of the overall conflict.

U.S. officials sound like Saudi propagandists when they falsely claim that the Houthis are Iranian proxies. Gabriele vom Bruck at London's School of Oriental and African Studies explains: "The Houthis want Yemen to be independent, that's the key idea, they don't want to be controlled by Saudi or the Americans, and they certainly don't want to replace the Saudis with the Iranians."

As noted earlier, Yemen has rarely not been at war. According to Thomas Juneau of the University of Ottawa, the present fight "is at its root a civil war, driven by local competition for power, and not a regional, sectarian or proxy war." The Houthis turned to Tehran out of necessity, after being attacked by their wealthy neighbors backed by America. Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution observed: "A major consequence of the war is to push the Houthis and Iran and Hezbollah closer together." Tehran has opportunistically helped bleed the aggressors, rather like U.S. policy against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

While Riyadh still pays lip service to the idea of maintaining a united Yemen, the Emirates is actively promoting secessionists in the south. Indeed, the UAE may hope to grab Hodeidah for its own geopolitical and commercial advantage. Reports *The Economist*: "the UAE's actions in Yemen appear part of a larger strategy to gobble up ports along some of the world's busiest shipping routes." For this, thousands more Yemenis could die.

The worst argument for the U.S. to back Saudi and Emirati atrocities is that doing so reduces civilian casualties. The claim is risible. Americans are helping the coalition kill civilians to stop it from killing more civilians? Seriously?

In fact, American officials admit they do not monitor Saudi attacks, so they have no means of judging the impacts of the strikes. Anyway, the best way to end coalition attacks on the Yemeni people would be to stop subsidizing coalition attacks on the Yemeni people. Make the royals pay for their own war.

Especially now. Hodeidah accounts for perhaps 70 to 80 percent of the aid, food, and fuel reaching Yemen. Observers fear that an Emirati assault would kill thousands and displace much of the city's 600,000-strong population. Worse, such an attack would almost certainly interrupt vital shipments to Yemen's civilian population. Abdi Mohamud, country director for Mercy Corps, warned that "Any disruption to this critical lifeline could be a death sentence for millions of Yemenis." Mark Lowcock, UN undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, said that "if for any period Hodeidah were not to operate effectively the consequences in humanitarian terms would be catastrophic."

Foreign Ministers from Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE meet with then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in July 2017. (State Department photo/ Public Domain)

Humanitarian concerns did not stop Abu Dhabi from assaulting Hodeidah. Nor will the sort of cautious statements issued by the Trump administration. Unnamed officials recently told the *Wall Street Journal* that the administration light was yellow on the matter: "What we are scrambling to do is, if there's an inevitability to this, we want to ensure that it causes the least amount of damage and make sure things are set up on the humanitarian side in the best way we can."

Last weekend the Red Cross began removing its staff from the city to avoid the coming assault. And on Monday, the UN began evacuating its personnel from the port. That should make it clear: only a cut-off in U.S. assistance will get the UAE's attention. But that Washington refuses to do.

Yemen continues a tragic pattern in American policy. Washington has intervened promiscuously throughout the Mideast, fomenting radicalism, creating chaos, promoting aggression, and subsidizing tyranny. The humanitarian costs of the Yemen war continue to climb. It's time for the Trump administration to stop supporting tyrannical regimes like the Saudis and Emiratis as they assault both our interests and our values.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.