



Withdraw US Support From Saudi Arabia

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After five years of bloody, inconclusive war, Saudi Arabia declared a ceasefire in Yemen. Although hailed as a possible breakthrough for peace, Riyadh's de facto admission of defeat did not stop the fighting. Moreover, even an effective ceasefire would be at best a halfway measure.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia should end its invasion and withdraw its forces. To encourage the KSA to halt a cruel campaign which has killed hundreds of thousands, created millions of refugees, and left most of the population hungry and impoverished, Washington should terminate its support for the needless Saudi war, including sale of weapons and munitions, as well as intelligence sharing.

Modern Yemen has been in crisis since it – originally in the form of two separate states – was born around six decades ago. Saudi Arabia has meddled in its neighbor's affairs since the beginning, at one point squaring off against Egypt when a royal regime was resisting an ultimately successful military revolt. Riyadh later bribed tribal leaders and spread hateful Wahhabist teaching in Yemen. The Kingdom also aided President Ali Abdullah Saleh after the Ansar Allah ("Supporters of God") movement, dominated by the al-Houthi tribe, revolted against his government. In contrast, Iran's involvement was minimal.

The two Yemens united in 1990, but since then the single state has been rent by political discord, civil conflict, and regional separatism. Saleh's luck ran out in early 2012 when he was ousted after the Arab Spring hit Yemen. But three years later he joined with the Houthis to oust President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, his successor. None of this had much to do with Riyadh and nothing to do with Washington.

However, Saudi Arabia's ruthless and reckless Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman believed he could reinstall Hadi in a brief campaign, leaving a compliant regime in Sanaa. This policy was just one of many which turned the once quiescent KSA into the most dangerous and destabilizing regime in the Middle East.

The Kingdom supported jihadist insurgents in Syria, kidnapped Lebanon's prime minister, underwrote the al-Sisi coup and dictatorship in Egypt, used troops to back Bahrain's authoritarian minority Sunni monarchy against the majority Shia population, financed civil war in Libya, and sought to overthrow the Qatari monarchy. Domestically the crown prince increased political repression while leaving intact totalitarian religious controls which ban all faiths but Islam. The latest State Department human rights report takes 58 pages to describe the Kingdom's crimes against its own people. Freedom House gives Riyadh a lower rating for political and civil liberties than Yemen.

Riyadh expected its impoverished neighbor to be an easy target. However, unlike the effete Saudi military the Yemeni people were used to hardship and combat. Under attack by the Saudis backed by Washington, the Houthis turned to Tehran for support, which was eager to bleed the Kingdom.

Even worse for America, the war interrupted Yemeni operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the most dangerous of the local affiliates, and other radical groups. Saleh's government had cooperated with the U.S. against them; the Houthis also battled AQAP. However, both the nominal Hadi government and Saudi-Emirati coalition accommodated and even armed these extremist movements, including with American weapons.

Unfortunately, President Barack Obama continued decades of truckling to the Saudis. Having dismissed their opposition to negotiations with Iran over the nuclear accord with Iran, the president decided to reassure the Saudi royals by supporting the crown prince's murderous misadventure. Washington sold aircraft and weapons to the kingdom, provided intelligence for targeting, and even refueled Saudi planes (a practice the Trump administration finally ended).

Unfortunately, the result was to make Americans accomplices to murder.

Humanitarian groups figure that upwards of two-thirds to three-quarters of civilian deaths and damage in Yemen have been caused by the coalition's air campaign, which has hit marriages, funerals, apartments, and hospitals with equal avidity. The country's commercial and social infrastructure also has been destroyed. The Emiratis even have backed southern separatists active against the Hadi government, threatening to dismember the nation.

As a result, Yemen scarcely exists anymore. Human Rights Watch reported: "Across the country, civilians suffer from a lack of basic services, a spiraling economic crisis, abusive local security forces, and broken governance, health, education, and judicial systems." About 80 percent of Yemen's almost 30 million people need outside aid of some sort. Roughly two-thirds of Yemenis lack adequate access to clean water and adequate health care and suffer from food insecurity. A third of the population is at risk of famine. In 2017 a cholera epidemic hit more than a million Yemenis. Some 20,000 noncombatants have died as a result of combat and another 130,000 from effects of the war.

The Houthi movement is no friend of the West and rules brutally over the territories it controls. But the harm caused by the continuation of internal strife going back years was a lesser magnitude than that which resulted from the Saudi invasion, which internationalized the fighting,

made Yemen into a sectarian battleground, and turned the conflict into a Saudi-Iranian proxy war.

The only constructive role that Washington can play is to end military assistance, as proposed by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith (D-Wash.), leaving Riyadh to bear the full cost of its folly. The administration claims to help moderate the Kingdom's conduct, a gelastic argument given the ongoing carnage. America has no leverage so long as the president adopts a Saudi-first policy and refuses to criticize even Riyadh's worst crimes.

The Saudi ceasefire is the Kingdom's first public acknowledgment that its aggression has failed. The crown prince finally had to recognize brutal reality. Some analysts write of the complex issues that now must be negotiated. The only talks necessary are over the amount of reconstruction aid from Saudi Arabia necessary to rebuild the nation that it callously destroyed.

Riyadh should end its invasion. Washington should stop aiding and abetting the KSA's criminal war.

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