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Washington's Hypocrisy In Yemen

Washington criticizes Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine but enables the UAE and Saudis to wage war in Yemen.

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In response to the invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration is leading a global campaign against Russia. Washington is making it a moral crusade, backed by a popular upsurge in America and especially Europe. So strong is our current Russophobia that even Paralympians are being cancelled for simply being Russian.

The Biden administration also has led a global campaign to support Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates as they continue their brutal seven-year-old assault on Yemen. Washington has again made it a moral crusade, denouncing the Houthi-led insurgents for daring to fight back against the privileged Gulf monarchies. By and large, the world's governments and peoples have stood mute, happy to profit from their connections to oil-rich Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

The United Nations Security Council was unable to denounce Moscow's invasion because of a Russian veto. However, the body approved a resolution, pushed strongly by a belligerent UAE, condemning Yemeni insurgents as terrorists. The Emirates bought Moscow's support by abstaining on the Ukraine vote.

In an almost hysterical example of hypocrisy, the U.N. body—with the backing of the Biden administration—denounced the insurgents for firing drones and missiles at Saudi Arabia and UAE after the latter two had spent more than seven years bombing Yemeni cities. Despite having already caused thousands of deaths, the royal regimes continue to deliver death from the air without criticism from Washington. According to the Yemen Data Project:

January 2022 was the most violent month in the Saudi-led air war in Yemen in more than five years. Yemen Data Project recorded 139 civilian deaths and 287 civilians injured in Saudi coalition airstrikes in January, taking the casualty toll to over 19,000 civilians killed and injured since Saudi Arabia launched its bombing campaign in Yemen in March 2015. Not since October 2016 have more civilian casualties been recorded in a single month in the air war. Saudi-led coalition airstrikes caused more civilian harm in the first month of 2022 than in the two previous years combined.

Who are the true terrorists?

President Biden should be embarrassed at his conduct. As a candidate, he criticized the Saudis and promised to put human rights and democracy at the center of his foreign policy. His subservience to Saudi and Emirati interests in the White House shows Biden's approach to be similar in substance to the Trump administration's—but significantly more hypocritical.

Washington's participation in what the Yemenis call the Saudi-American war demonstrates the U.S.'s systemic foreign policy problem. Three successive American administrations have backed an aggressive war, waged by ruthlessly repressive states that have killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced millions, and left their populations suffering from malnutrition and disease. Far more people have suffered in Yemen than have suffered and are likely to suffer in Ukraine.

For instance, as reported by the United Nations, UNICEF's Henrietta Fore warned that "2.6 million children are now internally displaced, deprived of health care, education, sanitation and safe water. Yemen's gross domestic product ... has dropped 40 [percent] since 2015, and despite the availability of food, 21 million people—including almost 11 million children—require humanitarian aid." Even more ominous, according to Martin Griffiths, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: "5 million people are one step away from succumbing to famine and the diseases that go with it, and 10 million more are right behind them."

Were any other nation—especially an adversary like China or Russia—responsible for this hardship, Washington would be issuing denunciations of and imposing sanctions on the perpetrators. Indeed, there would be cries to haul the villains before the International Criminal Court. Washington, which doesn't recognize the ICC's authority, has avoided that indignity, but in September 2020 the New York Times noted the embarrassing connection between American policy and war crimes:

The civilian death toll from Saudi Arabia's disastrous air war over Yemen was steadily rising in 2016 when the State Department's legal office in the Obama administration reached a startling conclusion: Top American officials could be charged with war crimes for approving bomb sales to the Saudis and their partners. Four years later, more than a dozen current and former U.S. officials say the legal risks have only grown as President Trump has made selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Middle East nations a cornerstone of his foreign policy.

The Obama administration took the U.S. into the conflict without the slightest pretense that important American interests were at stake. Even in a city inclined to meddle everywhere, Yemen seemed too far away for Washington to intervene. Instead, President Barack Obama hoped to buy Saudi and Emirati acquiescence to the Iran nuclear deal. The pampered royals were frustrated that Obama was putting U.S. interests first, rather than fighting the Iranians to the last American, as they wished. So he backed their war, initiated to put a pliable government back in power in neighboring Yemen. Obama might have believed the coalition's claim that it would take only a few weeks to suppress the Houthis, but seven years later the royals have lost most of the population, and only with great effort have they prevented insurgents from seizing the critical city of Marib in the north.

Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration was far more cynical. Although President Donald Trump had previously criticized the Saudis, he appeared to leave Middle East policy to his profit-minded son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Trump made no pretense of concern for human rights and celebrated weapons sales as a jobs program. The New York Times described this major change in approach: “Where foreign arms sales in the past were mostly offered and withheld to achieve diplomatic goals, the Trump administration pursues them mainly for the profits they generate and the jobs they create, with little regard for how the weapons are used.”

Biden pretended to be better, complaining that his predecessor gave the Saudis “a blank check.” After he took office he called the war a “humanitarian and strategic catastrophe” and promised to end “all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales.” However, he interpreted away his pledge. Weapons sales continued, along with US servicing of planes used to attack Yemeni targets. Moreover, he called Saudi-Emirati coalition’s response to Yemeni retaliation for seven years of royal attacks on civilians “defensive.” He apparently believed that victims of the Gulf monarchies were not supposed to fight back.

Ansar Allah (the official name of the Houthi movement) is no friend of America. It rules oppressively over those under its control, has hit civilians with indiscriminate artillery fire, and seized foreign assistance. However, humanitarian groups uniformly affirm that the greatest harm to the Yemeni people has resulted from the coalition’s air war and de facto blockade.

And the coalition’s weapons come from America. Reported the New York Times: “Year after year, the bombs fell—on wedding tents, funeral halls, fishing boats and a bus, killing thousands of civilians and helping turn Yemen into the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Weapons supplied by American companies, approved by American officials, allowed Saudi Arabia to pursue the reckless campaign.”

Last fall, the U.N. Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, issued its final report, which described the accumulated carnage:

Since March 2015, over 23,000 airstrikes have been launched by the coalition in Yemen, killing or injuring over 18,000 civilians. Living in a country subjected to an average of 10 airstrikes per day has left millions feeling far from safe. Although the frequency and intensity of airstrikes have fluctuated over the last four years, the Group of Eminent Experts has continued to observe their devastating impact on civilians.

Among the cases investigated by the panel were “civilians shopping at markets, receiving care in hospitals, or attending weddings and funerals; children on buses; fishers in boats; migrants seeking a better life; individuals strolling through their neighbourhoods; and people who were at home.” The group’s tenure was not renewed in an authoritarian-heavy negative vote before the (misnamed) Human Rights Council.

The answer is to end the war in Yemen. However, the Biden administration continues to sell weapons to the aggressor powers. It has increased direct support for the UAE, deploying ships and planes to help defend the Emirati royals when Ansar Allah shoots back. Diplomatically, Washington has only attempted to place pressure on the Houthis,

with whom it has no leverage. After all, for more than seven years Washington has been effectively a co-belligerent in the conflict, seeking to subjugate Yemen to its murderous neighbors.

The president's special envoy, Tim Lenderking, is acting as consigliere for the Saudi and Emirati royals, pushing an old U.N. resolution advancing their position. Abdulghani al-Iryani of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies observed that the "UN council resolutions condemning [the Houthis] and demanding that they must surrender before they go into any serious peace negotiations has made it impossible for them to consider peace negotiations as an option." In addition to supporting the UN resolution calling the Houthis terrorists, the administration is debating re-listing Ansar Allah as a terrorist organization, even though Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have conducted far more attacks on civilians.

If the U.S. wants to play moral leader in decrying Russian depredations in Ukraine, Washington should stop supporting even worse crimes by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates in Yemen. Hypocrisy may be an inevitable aspect of any foreign policy. Aiding mass murder should not be.

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