



A Ceasefire in Yemen After Seven Years: Are US-Backed Saudi/Emirati Aggression and War Crimes Finally Over?

Doug Bandow
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As Russia's war against Ukraine rages, there is hope that the even deadlier war in Yemen might finally end. The warring parties have agreed to a ceasefire which, unlike previous pacts, so far has held.

This is surprisingly good news, most importantly for the Yemeni people, but also for America's international reputation. Even as Russia faced global censure for its unjustified aggression against Ukraine and brutal attack on Ukrainian cities, the US and other Western governments continued to back the deadlier Saudi and Emirati campaign against their impoverished neighbor.

Despite Washington's support for the wealthy Gulf monarchies, they were unexpectedly bested by an indigenous Yemeni insurgency led by the group Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthis. Although not viewed as sympathetically as Ukraine in the West – the former are Islamists unfriendly to America – they largely prevailed against equally brutal aggressors while facing equally dismal odds.

After years of attacks on civilians, the Saudis and Emiratis are guilty of manifold war crimes. The United Nations Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, subsequently disbanded under Saudi pressure, last fall described the horror: "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." Victims included "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 neighborhoods; and people who were at home."

Support for the royal aggressors made US officials into coconspirators. Reported the *New York Times* in September 2020: "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."

Washington should never have gotten involved in the royal regimes' war against Yemen.

Modern Yemen, once two states, has a tempestuous history. Sixty years ago Saudis, Egyptians, and others intervened in a Yemeni civil war. The Houthis first rose against the central government nearly two decades ago. The present crisis was triggered when they joined with the previous president, who they once opposed, to oust his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. That prompted Mohammed bin Salman, then Saudi defense minister and today crown prince, to organize an invasion of Yemen.

The campaign proved to be a disaster. Backed by US aircraft serviced and armed by American contractors and manufacturers, the Saudis and Emiratis predicted victory within weeks. Instead, the Houthis, aided by Iran, which avidly exploited its Allah-sent opportunity to bleed the especially incompetent Saudi military, steadily expanded their control of Yemen.

Like Russia, the Gulf royals promiscuously killed civilians, bombing weddings, funerals, school buses, and apartment buildings. The blockade was even deadlier, contributing to disease and malnutrition which killed hundreds of thousands of people.

Last November the United Nations Development Programme estimated Yemen's death toll at 377,000, 70 percent of whom were children under five. Indirect causes, especially malnutrition and disease, took the majority of lives. Last August the United Nations reported that an incredible 20 million people needed outside assistance to survive. Martin Griffiths, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, briefed the Security Council that "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."

A similarly dire warning came from UNICEF's Henrietta Fore. The UN reported on her testimony: "2.6 million children are now internally displaced, deprived of health care, education, sanitation and safe water. Yemen's gross domestic product (GDP) has dropped 40 per cent since 2015, and despite the availability of food, 21 million people – including almost 11 million children – require humanitarian aid."

Through it all Washington acted as uncomplaining enabler. What the royal aggressors wanted US administrations provided. The Obama administration offered assistance as payback for pushing the Iran nuclear deal. US negotiations with Tehran upset Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which had expected to fight Iran to the last American. The Trump administration even more compliantly did as instructed by the royals, unabashedly subordinating US interests to Saudi and Emirati preferences. President Donald Trump abandoned the nuclear pact and launched economic war on Iran – which turned out to be the administration's biggest foreign policy failure. Tehran responded by reviving its nuclear activities and destabilizing its neighbors. Trump was reduced to publicly begging the Iranian leadership to negotiate.

Nevertheless, he went all in for the royals. Indeed, he and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo acted more like mob consiglieri than US officials in attempting to protect from accountability MbS, as the Saudi crown prince is known, after he had critic Jamal Khashoggi murdered and dismembered, and increased domestic political repression.

Candidate Joe Biden promised a change, but as president continued arms sales and even sent additional US military forces, including F-22s, to protect the Saudis and Emiratis from retaliation for years of attacks on Yemeni civilians. The Biden administration pushed for peace negotiations, but on Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's terms. As the Biden administration effectively morphed into the Trump administration, ala the pigs turning into men in George Orwell's *1984*, royal war crimes continued. This year attacks on Yemeni civilians increased.

Reported 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.**"

Even as the current administration covered for Saudi and Emirati war crimes, MbS and Mohammed bin Zayad al Nahyan, crown prince of Abu Dhabi (and thus de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates), treated Biden with contempt, refusing to take the latter's calls in which he apparently planned to beg them, if necessary, to increase oil production. Rather than respond to such a calculated insult as one would expect for a representative of a superpower – for instance, threatening to designate the Kingdom rather than Ansar Allah as a state sponsor of terrorism – Secretary Antony Blinken went to Abu Dhabi to abase himself, apologizing for being so slow to do MbZ's bidding.

However, despite Washington's shameful backing for Saudi/Emirati aggression and attacks on civilians, the royal regimes appear to have tired of their endless wars. Indeed, Ansar Allah's strikes on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, though limited in effect, seriously embarrassed both governments. The Emiratis were particularly vulnerable since further attacks on Dubai could wreck its role as a hub for commercial activity and air travel.

In a dramatic move, the Saudis forced Yemen's nominal president, Hadi, to yield his authority, after spending seven years justifying war to restore him. Reported *The Wall Street Journal*: "Saudi authorities have largely confined him to his home in Riyadh and restricted communications with him in the days since, according to Saudi and Yemeni officials." The Houthis dismissed the move and some analysts speculated that Riyadh hoped to unite factions opposed to Ansar Allah to better wage war. However, the move effectively cleared the deck for negotiations. Peter Salisbury of the International Crisis Group opined that this was the "most consequential shift in the inner workings of the anti-Houthi bloc since war began."

More significant – and generating more hope – is the two-month ceasefire that began on April 2, the first day of Ramadan, a month of fasting and reflection for Muslims. For the first time in

more than seven years, the royal air war against Yemeni civilians halted. If respected, the suspension of hostilities, which was announced by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg, could lead to a more durable settlement. Needed is a political compromise among Yemenis providing broad representation in a new government.

Still, any optimism must be tempered. Past ceasefires have collapsed and reaching agreement, especially given outside interference, will be difficult. The Biden administration lauded the reprieve but continued to favor the warring royals, stating that "The United States of America will work to deter threats to our friends and partners," even though those threats reflected Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's barbaric seven-year campaign against Yemen. The monarchies apparently still believe waging war without consequences is a privilege of royalty and the Biden administration evidently agrees, even as it criticizes Russia for similarly targeting civilians.

After seven years Washington should unequivocally end its military support for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and back Yemeni efforts to reach a peaceful settlement. The Biden administration should indicate that it will block any resumption of the air war, refusing to sell more munitions and withdrawing support for aircraft maintenance.

Moreover, Congress should pass a War Powers Resolution to end US involvement in the conflict. Progressives have renewed their support for such a measure, with backing from across the aisle. Congress passed similar legislation three years ago, but Trump, always shilling for the Saudis and Emiratis, vetoed the measure. It would be more difficult for Democrat Biden, who had criticized Riyadh, to play a similar role when facing a Democratic Congress.

Finally, international activists seeking to target Russia for war crimes should broaden their effort to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as US, British, and other governments which backed the murderous campaign against Yemen. The *New York Times* described what amounts to a succession of criminal atrocities: "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." If Vladimir Putin is to blame, then surely MbS and Barack Obama, MbZ and Donald Trump, and others also belong in the dock.

Although it will be difficult to bring anyone to justice for such acts, a willingness by Western governments to consider the once unthinkable might create a small disincentive against future misbehavior. And perhaps set the groundwork for eventual accountability.

The war in Yemen must end. The ongoing ceasefire finally offers hope, however uncertain, of a diplomatic resolution. To make that happen, however, Washington must firmly back peace for all rather than victory for the aggressors. And stop subordinating US interests and Yemeni lives to the machinations of Saudi and Emirati lobbyists.

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.