



Counterpoint: President Trump Should Stop Killing for Saudi Royals

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President Donald Trump arrived in Riyadh bearing gifts: \$110 billion in arms sales, enhanced aid for Riyadh's brutal war in Yemen, and increased political support for the royal regime. Yet the royals run what is essentially a totalitarian state, respecting neither political nor religious liberty.

Despite previously criticizing the Saudis for relying on America for their defense, President Trump obsequiously endorsed the monarchy. Worse, his administration continues to help the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia kill innocent civilians in neighboring Yemen, who have done nothing against America.

Riyadh's foolish war turned a local conflict into a regional sectarian struggle, drove Yemenis toward Iran, and encouraged a revival of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP. Yet the Trump administration is considering even greater U.S. involvement.

Until recently America's main security concern in Yemen was the rise of AQAP. Long-ruling Ali Abdullah Saleh, a U.S. ally, was ousted in 2012. He then united with the Houthis, a quasi-Shia political movement, to oust his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, in 2014.

This game of musical chairs in Sana'a was of little interest to Washington, but the KSA wanted pliant leadership in Yemen and attacked in March 2015. Area specialists uniformly dismiss self-serving Saudi attempts to blame Iran for the conflict.

The relationship between Iran and Houthis always has been loose at best. Thomas Juneau of the University of Ottawa observed that "the war in Yemen is driven by local grievances and competition for power among Yemeni actors." Yezid Sayigh, of Beirut's Carnegie Middle East Center, criticized "propaganda about Iranian expansionism in Yemen."

Saudi Arabia's aggression left the Houthis with little choice but to look to Tehran for additional assistance. Such efforts pale in comparison to Saudi Arabia's extensive air war.

Houthis have not turned decision-making over to Iran. Gabriele von Bruck at London's School of Oriental and African Studies concluded "It's not a relationship like that between Iran and Hezbollah."

Why should America get involved? Former Secretary of State John Kerry claimed that the shipment of Iranian weapons to Yemen was “not just a threat to Saudi Arabia, it is a threat to the region, [and] it is a threat to the United States.” But Houthis struck beyond Yemen’s borders only in response to Saudi aggression backed by America.

That is not to say the Houthis are tolerant liberals who like the U.S. But their theology is far more moderate than the Wahhabist teachings funded by the Saudi royals and promoted around the world, including in America.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration became an active combatant. The reason, apparently, was to reassure Riyadh, which was angry that Washington was not doing its bidding elsewhere--for example, ousting Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

Washington should quit this immoral war.

First, Washington is rewarding a totalitarian dictatorship for its repression. Riyadh simply wants a puppet neighbor.

Second, the conflict has diverted attention from the most destabilizing and dangerous force in the Mideast, the Islamic State. The U.S. should not underwrite counterproductive Saudi efforts.

Third, the UN called Yemen “the largest humanitarian crisis in the world.” More than 10,000 civilians have been killed and 40,000 wounded. Saudi airstrikes, described as “indiscriminate or disproportionate” by Human Rights Watch, caused at least two-thirds of infrastructure damage and three-quarters of the deaths.

Fourth, Hadi’s restoration would not offer political stability. His support was limited even before Riyadh’s intervention, coming more from the West than his own people; backing a brutal foreign attack on his nation has won him no friends.

Fifth, support for KSA brutality has turned America into an enemy of the Yemeni people. There should be no surprise, let alone shock, if angry Yemenis turn to terrorism.

Sixth, the Saudi war effort aided the rise of the Islamic State as well as AQAP. The Crisis Group recently warned that the latter “is stronger than it has ever been.” Noted a recent report from the State Department, AQAP has been “significantly expanding its presence in the southern and eastern governorates” while ISIL has gained “a foothold in the country.”

Why is President Trump doubling down on an unnecessary Middle Eastern war on behalf of an authoritarian regime guilty of promoting Islamic radicalism? Washington should not sacrifice U.S. interests to benefit the Saudi royals. American officials should not enable the killing—murder, really—of people who have never harmed this nation.

Riyadh’s policy is at a dead-end. America is losing its moral soul. Washington should quit Yemen’s civil war.

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