



Humanitarian Crisis Ravages Yemen: Yet Biden Administration Continues To Service Saudi War Machine

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September 27, 2021

President Joe Biden began his presidency with a promise to confront Saudi Arabia and treat the murderous regime as a “pariah.” In particular, he pledged to end “all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales.”

Yet nearly eight months later little has changed. The president undercut his initial promise when he said “We’re going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people.”

The reason Houthi insurgents battling for control of Yemen are attacking the Kingdom is because it continues offensive operations – after spending more than six years slaughtering Yemenis with attacks on weddings, funerals, school buses, apartments, and myriad other civilian targets. Even worse may be the Saudi blockade of Yemen.

This, too, is an offensive weapon of war, but the U.S. continues to support the Kingdom as it limits Yemeni access to food and fuel. (A recent report by two human rights groups accuses the Saudis and Houthis alike of using “starvation as a method of warfare.”) Washington’s failure to press Riyadh is shocking, not just because of the breadth and depth of Saudi human rights violations at home, but because the regime committed blatant aggression against Yemen, intervening in a civil war to reinstate a pliant regime. Yemenis call the expanded conflict, which multiplied the suffering many times over, the Saudi-American war. Obama and Trump administration support for the Saudi royals turned Americans into accomplices to war crimes.

Although the Biden administration has held up some weapons sales for review, in mid-September it approved a \$500 million maintenance contract for attack helicopters used in Yemen. This highlights America’s extensive involvement in the war: selling and servicing aircraft, supplying munitions, providing intelligence, and initially refueling aircraft. Continuing these activities so that Saudi Arabia can “defend” itself from retaliation for more than six years

of brutal aggression is not defense as any normal person understands it. The Saudi royals could protect their spoiled lifestyle by simply ending their attacks on Yemen, including the cruel air and naval blockade. They do not need US aid and encouragement.

The result has been a humanitarian horror. Nearly a quarter of a million people have died, the majority civilians. Some from military action, most due to indirect causes, including disease, starvation, and other consequences of the destruction of civilian industry, agriculture, and infrastructure.

Those still living also suffer greatly. The United Nations described a briefing last month by Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: “With 20 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, he said a decimated economy is pushing the country to the brink. He stressed 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.”

Reinforcing his testimony was Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF (the United Nations Children’s Fund) who “said 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. Twenty million lack access to health services.”

There never was any reason for US involvement. Yemen holds no geopolitical importance for America. Yemen’s modern history runs back several decades, during which it was constantly in turmoil, as it went from two states to one. The latest round of fighting began with the 2011 Arab Spring and ouster of the long-standing dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh. He then regrouped and made common cause against his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, with the movement Ansar Allah (“Supporters of God”), which had previously revolted against *his* rule. Also known as Houthis, they, like Yemen’s official leaders and the Saudis, are cruelly authoritarian, with little patience for political opponents or religious minorities.

In 2015 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which long had meddled in Yemen’s affairs, intervened to restore the ousted president, whose credibility suffered after calling for airstrikes on his own people. (The Saudis worked with the Emiratis, who have since backed away; the two monarchies bought a “coalition” highlighted by use of Sudanese mercenaries.) Then Minister of Defense, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expected victory within a few weeks. The Obama administration went along with his reckless plan hoping to win the KSA’s acquiescence to the Iran nuclear deal. The Trump administration even more enthusiastically backed Riyadh’s murderous campaign, essentially renting out US military services to a criminal regime.

The Kingdom's carelessly brutal war triggered congressional opposition, but the last refuge of the well-heeled Saudi lobbying machine, backed by the Trump White House, was the incantation "Iran." Yet regional specialists aver that Tehran's influence over the Houthis always has been limited. They have long protected their independence. In fact, in 2014 Iran discouraged Ansar Allah from taking Sanaa, to no avail. The movement turned to Tehran out of necessity after the Kingdom, backed by the world's greatest military power, attacked. Having supplied Riyadh's every military wish, Washington can hardly complain about Tehran's modest weapons transfers. The best way to reduce Iran's influence would be to end KSA aggression, which turned Yemen into a sectarian proxy war.

Backed by Trump's veto, the Saudi royals fended off bipartisan attacks on support for their air campaign. However, as noted earlier, candidate Joe Biden offered a very different approach. Alas, only on his promise of intensified diplomacy has the president delivered, but that effort, headlined by special envoy Timothy Lenderking, has failed because it pushed UN Security Council resolutions that require the Houthis to disarm and essentially surrender.

That was not a realistic position in 2015. It is even less serious today since Ansar Allah is winning despite Riyadh's overwhelming military superiority. Telling the Houthis to surrender is a nonstarter. Indeed, Washington's position only encouraged them in their effort to seize Marib, which dominates Yemen's oil-rich north. Possession would improve the movement's leverage in eventual negotiations.

Observed Abdulghani al-Iryani of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies: "As it stands now, the calculus of the Houthis with UN council resolutions condemning them 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." He added: "So, we need to level the playing field for peace negotiations by replacing the existing UN Security Council resolutions with resolutions that are equally supportive of peace negotiations and equally punitive of the violations that are committed by all sides."

Of course, it would be best for all parties to agree to a ceasefire and enter into serious political negotiations to find the solution best for the Yemeni people. However, none of the combatants think beyond their own interest and are prepared to yield. The US forfeited any leverage over the Houthis by subsidizing murderous Saudi conduct for more than six years. The best Washington can do is stop inflaming the conflict and lengthening the casualty lists. Which means leaving the Saudis to bear the full cost of the war, including retaliatory Yemeni drone and missile strikes.

The best hope today comes from Congress. Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Ca.), leader of the Capitol Hill campaign against U.S.-subsidized Saudi aggression, won narrow approval of an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act to cut funds for any operations in Yemen, including logistics, intelligence, and maintenance support. However, Saudi Arabia's advocates, amply funded by the KSA, will push to get the amendment dropped in conference, as in 2019. The

Kingdom's lobbyists do their best work in the back rooms in which the conference committee meets, in contrast to the public arena where Congress votes.

Ultimately, the Yemeni conflict shows the importance of Washington staying out of conflicts not its own. After even the Trump administration demonstrated its reluctance to do the KSA's bidding, refusing to go to war after Iran targeted Saudi oil facilities, Riyadh started talking with Tehran. If the Biden administration can revive the JCPOA nuclear accord – having walked out, Washington should come back into compliance first – proposals for more general talks and diplomatic contacts could follow, further easing regional tensions. That would also encourage negotiations over Yemen.

The administration cannot credibly promote human rights and democracy while aiding one of the world's worst autocracies in an aggressive war against its impoverished neighbor. Both President Biden and Congress should cut US support for Saudi aggression against Yemen. Only then will diplomacy have a reasonable chance to find a path to peace.

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