

Yemen And Its Consequences

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President Biden should uphold his campaign promise to end all American support for the war in Yemen, including arms sales.

Schadenfreude is an emotion both terrible and inevitable. So it is when reading reports of Yemeni drone attacks on Abu Dhabi, in return for the United Arab Emirates' murderous aggressions against the poorest nation in the region. In war, karma sometimes makes an angry appearance.

Seven years ago, Saudi Arabia and the UAE formed a "coalition," made up mostly of base hirelings, such as Sudanese mercenaries, to reinstall the ousted president of Yemen. The conflict was not about them—modern Yemen has suffered through chaos and conflict for decades—but the privileged royals wanted a more pliable client state.

The war was supposed to run a few weeks, but continues seven years later, with the Yemeni insurgents generally advancing. The opposition movement, Ansar Allah, otherwise known as the Houthis, is home-grown, and began fighting the previous government headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh a decade before the coalition invaded. Then Saleh was ousted during the Arab Spring. In the ever-complex maneuvering of Yemeni politics, he combined with the Houthis to capture the capital in late 2014.

None of this had much to do with the Saudis and Emiratis, or the U.S., which backed their military operations hoping to win support for the nuclear deal with Iran. Nor did Tehran have a significant stake in the poor neighbor of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Rather, the war turned into an Allah-sent opportunity for Iran to gain influence with the Houthis and bleed the incompetent KSA legions in the ensuing conflict.

Saudi Arabia's culpability for war crimes and civilian deaths was soon evident to all. The Emirates were responsible as well, launching air raids and enforcing the naval blockade. The consequences were catastrophic. Thousands of civilians killed from combat and hundreds of thousands from the consequences of war, with mass malnutrition and starvation, infrastructure destruction, and widespread disease. The U.N. reported that UNICEF's Henrietta Fore "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.” None of these horrors seemed to much bother the Obama, Trump, and, surprisingly, Biden administrations. So the humanitarian crisis continues.

Saudi aggression was relatively straightforward. UAE added several twists of its own. Before backing away from combat, noted the Guardian, Abu Dhabi played “a more forceful role on the ground—and its allies in the south, including local militias, Salafi fighters, and south Yemen separatists who want to break away from [the official, coalition-backed government], have been known to fight against the Saudis' own proxies in the country.” The Emirati influence lives on, especially through UAE-backed groups.

Abu Dhabi promoted separatism in the South (Yemen once was divided into two states). The Emirates also occupied the Yemeni island of Socotra, apparently planning to colonize it for future use. UAE aided and armed, with U.S.-supplied weapons, al-Qaeda and other radical jihadists, including militias which routinely violate human rights. This unauthorized distribution of weapons to potential enemies of America could cost U.S. lives in the future. The Emiratis backed secret prisons run by local allies in which people were disappeared, detained, and tortured. Amnesty International warned: “The proliferation of these fighting forces is a recipe for disaster for Yemeni civilians who have already been killed in their thousands, while millions more are on the brink of famine as a direct result of the war.”

After the Yemeni attack, Abu Dhabi argued that these activities were largely in the past. However, Ansar Allah spokesman Mohammed Bakhiti explained that the movement had “abstained from attacking the UAE for a long time because it appeared that Abu Dhabi was in the process of pulling its forces out of Yemen.” He argued that the situation had changed with UAE's involvement in ground operations in Shabwa province. Fahmy al-Yousifi, the Houthi regime's deputy information minister, said the insurgents would “continue to retaliate against the United Arab Emirates so long as it remains involved in supporting combatants inside Yemen.”

Until now, Abu Dhabi avoided paying much of a price for its many crimes. Saudi Arabia always was a more convenient target. However, the Houthis have demonstrated increased reach, triggering much wailing and gnashing of teeth in UAE. The Emiratis joined the KSA in retaliatory strikes. But little was achieved in the first strike other than hitting a youth football (soccer) game and killing more than a dozen civilians. The second coalition attack was worse, bombing a prison holding foreign migrants, killing at least 80.

What happens next? Abu Dhabi might jump back into the quagmire of conflict. The Houthis might multiply attacks on the UAE. If the Biden administration turns Trumpian in more tightly backing the coalition, Iran might respond with greater assistance for Ansar Allah. There is even wild talk of the Houthis expanding the war to Israel.

However, there also is a chance the combatants will shift in the other direction. The Emiratis might recognize that they were not able to achieve victory even when more

fully involved and further attacks on its home territory could have significantly negative economic consequences. In which case, all parties might become more serious about reaching a political settlement, the only realistic way to end today's horror show.

So far, Riyadh has been pushing for Houthi concessions, despite having lost the war. Abdulghani al-Iryani of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies explained that "the calculus of the Houthis, with U.N. 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." The Houthis have been brutal and intolerant, but the Saudis and Emiratis bear greater responsibility for the tragic war. Thus, the latter should take the lead in deescalating and ultimately ending the conflict.

Necessary, contended al-Iryani, is influencing "the calculations of the various parties so that they would see that peace is more profitable for them than war. That would involve influencing the various incentives that are created both by U.N. Security Council resolutions and the incentives provided by regional actors and the incentives created by the war economy."

The best way for the Saudis and Emiratis to stop Houthi attacks would be to end their own. Halt the war. Leave Yemenis to sort out their own future. So long as the Gulf royals continue to wage war on Yemen they are legitimate, even deserving, targets.

Unfortunately, the U.S. continues to play a malign role. Washington criticizes attacks by Ansar Allah—fair enough, since civilians should not be targeted—without acknowledging that such strikes were retaliation for *years of coalition assaults on Yemen, underwritten by the U.S.* After the latest round of attacks, Secretary of State Antony Blinken issued a cowardly statement that failed to name the perpetrators and ignored America's responsibility: "The escalation in fighting and attacks across Yemen must come to an end. We urge all parties to commit to a peaceful, diplomatic solution to ending the conflict. The Yemeni people deserve to live in peace and determine their own future."

President Joe Biden promised to confront the Kingdom and treat Riyadh as a "pariah." He also committed to end "all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales." Alas, those pledges quickly went aglimmering as Biden went native, embracing the royals. The Biden administration is now following its two predecessors as shameless toady to the Kingdom.

The administration is reportedly considering returning to the Trump administration's policy of designating Ansar Allah as a state sponsor of terrorism. It would make more sense to tag the Kingdom and UAE as terrorists for starting the war and ravaging the civilian population. Surely seven years of killing deserves some recognition!

The U.S. also should stop all military aid to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi used directly or indirectly against its impoverished neighbor. This includes protecting against retaliatory attacks. The aggressors are more likely to negotiate seriously and realistically if they bear the full cost of the war.

After seven years, even the Kingdom's Mohammed bin Salman appears to realize that it is time to cut his losses. Abu Dhabi's partial retreat suggests that it holds similar views. These regimes need a helpful shove from Washington. Biden & Co. should end Washington's complicity in KSA/UAE war crimes.

A desire to end the Yemen imbroglio also should encourage the administration to reach an accommodation with Tehran on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Reducing tensions with Iran might make possible deeper diplomacy within the region, most notably among Iran on one side and UAE and KSA on the other. It is unrealistic to expect Tehran to cut off military supplies for the Houthis so long as the U.S. arms Saudi Arabia to attack them. However, a decision by Washington to step back would allow a stronger push for Iranian disengagement.

The president need not treat the KSA as an enemy. But he should stop treating it as an ally.

The Yemeni people desperately need peace. The best way to help bring that about would be for Washington to stop underwriting Saudi and Emirati aggression. The recent attack on UAE should be treated as a call for negotiation. All parties need to end the war. Now.

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