



Biden's Continuing Shameful Policy Regarding Yemen

Ted Galen Carpenter

January 25, 2022

In his first major foreign policy speech as president, Joe Biden pledged to end U.S. involvement in Yemen's bloody war. Beginning in the summer of 2015, the United States actively aided the military intervention by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), against the rebel Houthi faction, which received backing from Iran. The US military refueled coalition warplanes and provided Saudi and UAE forces with intelligence information, thereby assisting those countries with their bombing missions. That collusion became ever more shameful as coalition forces repeatedly struck civilian targets, orchestrated a blockade that created famine conditions, and committed a mounting number of war crimes. A growing chorus of critics pressured both the Obama and Trump administrations to cease abetting the Saudi alliance's ugly conduct. Their efforts had little success, although the Trump administration did finally stop refueling Saudi warplanes.

Biden appeared to take a different approach from that of his two predecessors. In his February 2021 speech he stated that we are "stepping up our diplomacy to end the war in Yemen, a war which has created humanitarian and strategic catastrophe. I've asked my Middle East team to ensure our support for the United Nations led initiative to impose a cease fire, open humanitarian challenges and restore long dormant peace talks." "This war has to end," Biden emphasized, "and to underscore our commitment, we're ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales."

Such comments were encouraging and seemed to be a refreshing contrast to the knee jerk US support for Saudi Arabia's position during the Obama and Trump years. But astute observers should have spotted some troubling conditional language in Biden's speech. Directly after his pledge to end US support for "offensive operations," he stated that "At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces missile attacks, UAV strikes, and other threats from Iranian supplied forces in multiple countries. We're going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty, and its territorial integrity and its people." That was a potential loophole large enough that an 18-wheel truck could drive through it. And the potential loophole soon became an actual one.

There appeared to be continuing assistance from Washington regarding indisputably offensive coalition operations. The indifference of those forces to civilian casualties from such operations also continued unabated. Nevertheless, in December 2021, the administration pushed another

major US arms sale to Saudi Arabia through Congress, despite strong bipartisan opposition in the Senate led by Rand Paul (R-KY) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT). The latest sale was a whopping \$650 million package, consisting primarily of missiles and missile launchers.

A statement from the Pentagon when the administration signed-off on the transaction in November deserved a prize for Orwellian cynicism. "This proposed sale will support US foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a friendly country that continues to be an important force for political and economic progress in the Middle East." The December deal followed a \$500 million "helicopter maintenance" agreement that the administration signed in September. So much for reducing Washington's support for the ongoing Saudi-led intervention and helping to bring the tragic conflict in Yemen to an end.

Writing in the *New Republic* in January 2022, Quincy Institute scholars Trita Parsi and Annelie Sheline condemned the Biden administration's rank hypocrisy. Noting the onset of a new coalition offensive, they charged that "This latest round of violence demonstrates that US support continues to embolden the Saudis, Emiratis, and the Hadi government [in exile], perpetuating a war that has already claimed 377,000 Yemeni lives. The Biden administration remained silent on the Saudis' Christmas bombing campaign and even echoed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud's talking points about Iran." Parsi and Sheline scorned the State Department's assertion that Iran's arms sales to the Houthis were the main source of Yemen's violence. If "1,400 AK-47 assault rifles and 226,600 rounds of ammunition from a vessel originating from Iran" prolong the war and civilian suffering, as the State Department claims, what does \$650 million worth of advanced American weapons, which Biden just sold to Saudi Arabia, do? Bring peace?"

The coalition's latest offensive on January 21 should deepen criticism of the Biden administration's policies regarding Yemen. A series of airstrikes on the Houthi-held cities of Saada and Hodeida killed at least 60 civilians and injured 100 more, according to the relief organization Save the Children. *Eunomia* columnist Daniel Larison notes that "this is a picture that we keep waking up to over and over because the coalition governments are never held accountable and pay no penalty for their outrages. They still receive US support and weapons, and they evidently have no need to worry that relations with the US will worsen if they keep pummeling Yemen with U.S.-made weapons."

It is past time for President Biden to make good on his commitment to change Washington's Yemen policy. His administration must stop supporting Saudi Arabia's war of aggression and enabling Riyadh's egregious human rights violations. Biden needs to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international affairs.