

NATIONAL REVIEW

Understanding U.S. Involvement in Yemen's 'Forgotten War'

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In the past month, the alliance between the U.S. and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has drawn skepticism and condemnation from many in the American public and some lawmakers, bringing a festering controversy to the surface. The sudden interest in the alliance was sparked by the October murder of *Washington Post* columnist and Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey. However, as the story surrounding Khashoggi's death developed, another story emerged, one that implicated the alliance in an ongoing conflict that has cost thousands of innocents their lives. On Wednesday, the Senate voted 63-37 to advance a measure that would end U.S. involvement in the Yemen conflict, suggesting that a growing number of Americans are paying attention to the Yemeni civil war as it approaches its fourth year.

Before the war began in 2015, Yemen, located south of Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Peninsula, was already the poorest country in the Arab world. It has very limited natural resources, has endured years of violent conflict, and lost its foreign aid from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia after a 1990 vote in the U.N. Security Council against authorizing force in Iraq, which had just invaded Kuwait. After the 1994 civil war, the economy deteriorated as investor confidence decreased and reconstruction expenses mounted.

In 2011, the Arab Spring had dominoed across the North African Arab states to Yemen. Bloodshed and conflict would follow, with clashes between the military and tribal militias. Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled Yemen for 33 years, stepped down in the face of an uprising against him that included civilian Yemenis and the Houthi rebels, who had gained

control of key provinces in northern Yemen. In a transition of power supported by the surrounding Persian Gulf states, Saleh's deputy, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, became president. Saleh was killed by Houthi rebels in 2017.

The Houthis would become Saudi Arabia's fixation — they're Zaydi Shiites, a minority community in the Muslim world, who sought to form a resistance movement to Saleh's corruption and alleged theft from Yemen's people to benefit himself, along the same lines as the accusations by civilians in other Arab Spring countries toward their leaders. The Houthis receive limited support from Iran, Saudi Arabia's Shiite rival; the Saudis support the Hadi government that the Houthis oppose, while the Houthis become allied with forces loyal to Saleh.

In March 2015, only a few months after the Houthis captured Yemen's capital with help from Saleh (against Iran's warnings not to), Saudi Arabia would impose a naval blockade to stop the alleged smuggling of weapons by Iran to the Houthis, and began its bombing campaign in an effort to blunt any Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula and prevent the Houthis and Saleh from consolidating their control of Yemen. The U.S. and U.K. would lend their support to the KSA, following the Iran nuclear deal that the Saudis vehemently opposed, in order to assuage concerns about the Obama administration's warming relations with Iran.

The war has since assumed the moniker "The Forgotten War" by Yemenis because public knowledge in the West has been low and media coverage has been scant, despite the magnitude of the calamity. The discussion of the war following Khashoggi's death has seemingly unearthed the bombardment led by the Saudi coalition — made possible by American-supplied weapons and refueling. The war has spiraled into a famine that worsens with each passing day, thanks to the airstrikes and naval and air blockades of critical Yemeni ports. With the transition from Obama to Trump, the alliance between the KSA and the U.S. has shifted from one that was cast as a necessary diplomatic evil to serve geopolitical and economic interests to one that, increasingly, appears amicable.

Since the Obama era, the U.S. has provided the KSA with arms: F-15 fighter jets, armored vehicles, missile-defense systems, bombs, and missiles. Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia would soon reach the top of the list of the largest customers of American weapons. The defense contractors selling weapons include Lockheed Martin, one of the U.S.'s largest arms contractors, which manufactured the bomb found at the scene of an airstrike that destroyed a school bus in August, killing 40 children. In October 2016, an American-made bomb hit a funeral hall and killed 155 people. In March 2016, a U.S.-supplied precision-guided MK-84 bomb killed 97 people. American officials have grown concerned that the U.S. could be implicated in war crimes led by the Saudi regime. A State Department official, asked if there's any explanation for the indiscriminate nature of Saudi airstrikes, told Amnesty International in 2016 that the KSA was inexperienced with "dropping munitions and firing missiles."

By the end of the Obama administration, more than 4,125 Yemeni civilians would be killed. Sixty percent of them were the victims of airstrikes. American bombs would continue to fall on civilians at markets and on school buses throughout President Trump's administration, which had overturned the Obama-era ban of sales of precision-guided military technology prompted by the 2016 funeral-hall bombing. President Trump would also announce the sale of nearly \$100 billion in weapons to the regime over a ten-year period, a deal that was

negotiated with the help of senior advisor Jared Kushner, a friend of Mohammad bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince.

Those critical of U.S. support for the Saudi-led intervention have pointed to both the Khashoggi assassination and the Yemeni civil war, and there is growing pressure to act from members of Congress and the public. Defense Secretary James Mattis recently called on the belligerents in the war to agree to a ceasefire in the 30 days following October 30, in the midst of the ongoing investigation of Khashoggi's death (which intelligence officials have determined was a murder at the hands of the crown prince).

On multiple occasions, defense and security officials have insisted that the U.S. doesn't write the KSA blank checks. Still, Defense Secretary Mattis has expressed concern that the Saudis have not improved their airstrike targeting, and have continued to kill civilians. In August, Mattis warned the KSA following the airstrike that hit the school bus that American support wasn't "unconditional." In December 2017, Mattis said that he's "never okay with any civilian casualty" after a reporter suggested that the effort to mitigate civilian casualties in Yemen wasn't working. He also said that the U.S. military would continue assisting Saudi pilots in improving their bombing and targeting identification, and in August following the school-bus bombing, Trump signed a defense-spending bill that included a clause certifying that the KSA and its Gulf ally, the United Arab Emirates, would do their best to prevent civilian deaths.

Yet the Yemen Data Project has released statistics that show a higher rate of airstrikes that hit civilian vehicles and buses in the first half of 2018 than in 2017. Out of 18,000 strikes from March 2015 to April 2016, 31 percent of targets were civilians or civilian infrastructure, 36 percent were military, and the remainder were unknown. Human Rights Watch also released a report in 2018 that disparaged the U.S.'s claims that targeting efforts were improved.

Despite American efforts to help the Saudi military improve its targeting, civilians are still being killed, and the famine is worsening. Cato Institute scholar A. Trevor Thrall, a critic of U.S. involvement in the war, writes that "by supporting Saudi Arabia's military action, we are a party to serious war crimes and are indirectly at fault for the devastating humanitarian crisis the people of Yemen now face." With the bleak on-the-ground situation and the escalating questions surrounding the U.S.-Saudi alliance, criticism of a war whose objectives most Americans do not understand is likely to mount.