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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by JARED KEYEL
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No More Forgotten Wars: End US Support for Saudi Coalition War Crimes in Yemen



Photo Source Felton Davis | [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/) Yemen's starving mothers — Staff measure the middle upper arm of Salima Ahmed Koryat, a 6-month-old Yemeni girl, to test how malnourished she is at the main hospital in Mocha, Yemen

If the US were to follow the rules of warfare written into US military law and treaties to which the US is a party, the US must immediately end its support for the Saudi Arabia-led war in Yemen. We should also marshal all of its diplomatic tools to end the conflict. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia, and allies such as the United Arab Emirates, have been waging a devastating war in support of the Government of Yemen against a Houthi insurgency.

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Amnesty International has called the conflict a “forgotten war” because its deadly consequences have failed to rise to the level of international crisis in media or government agendas. However, under former President Barack Obama and now Donald Trump, the US has been complicit in war crimes and the creation of a completely preventable humanitarian nightmare for the people of Yemen.

On August 28, 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report detailing the brutal conduct of the war. As of June 2018, at least 6,475 civilians had been killed and more than 10,000 injured in the conflict. The report notes the “real figure is likely to be significantly higher.” While evidence “strongly suggests” that all parties to the conflict have violated international law, the report is clear that Saudi-led coalition airstrikes are responsible for the largest numbers of civilian deaths and injuries. Moreover, there is significant evidence that the Saudi-led coalition has repeatedly bombed civilian neighborhoods, medical facilities, markets, weddings, funerals, and even a school bus full of children. Intentionally attacking civilians is a war crime.

The United States has provided targeting support, intelligence, and mid-air refueling to Saudi fighter jets, enabling its continued bombardment. The US has also sold billions of dollars of sophisticated weaponry to Saudi Arabia, including cluster bombs, a weapon banned by UN treaty and outlawed by the majority of countries in the world. America’s actions have been lethal for Yemeni civilians. In the most recent example, news outlets reported in August 2018 that US-manufactured bombs killed 40 children, and others, in a single Saudi strike on a school bus. No matter how it is portrayed in media or by government representatives, aerial warfare is not clean and it is not precise.

On the ground, the situation is dire. The UN reports that arbitrary detention and torture in prisons controlled by UAE-affiliated forces is widespread, and government security forces have made a “common practice” of abduction and rape of women in order to extort money from victims’ families. In the careful language of human rights reporting, the UN states that there are “reasonable grounds” to believe that Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the government of Yemen have committed war crimes including rape and torture. Saudi Arabia and its allies have also blockaded Yemen by air and sea, preventing food and lifesaving medical supplies from entering the country. As a result, 8.4 million Yemenis were on the brink of famine as of April 2018. The collapse of healthcare infrastructure caused by the blockade has led to the largest series of cholera epidemics in modern history, affecting more than one million people.

The conditions in Yemen are unbearable and entirely man-made. Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the United States, are causing massive suffering for millions of civilians. In March, US Senators Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Mike Lee (R-Utah) and Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) introduced a bill that would have ended US support for the war. The bill was defeated 55-44 with 10 Democrats joining the Republican majority. Before the vote, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell stated that withdrawing US support would increase the risk to civilians. This argument strains credulity given that it is Saudi Arabia and its allies that are causing the majority of casualties. Furthermore, if McConnell were concerned about civilian safety, he would push congress and the Trump Administration to bring conflicting parties to a negotiating table.

Pursuing peaceful negotiations to end the conflict is an important diplomatic effort the United States should take immediately. It must also end its support for states and groups committing war crimes. The preponderance of evidence suggests Saudi Arabia is regularly violating the laws of war, and the US is complicit as long as it continues to enable Saudi actions. It must stop refueling Saudi jets and providing targeting intelligence. Crucially, the United States should initiate, and pressure other governments to support, an arms embargo on warring parties. At minimum, it must immediately suspend all weapons sales to Saudi Arabia. Finally, if US leaders claim to care about civilians in Yemen, they should drastically increase humanitarian aid for Yemenis whose suffering they have caused and the United States must reopen its refugee resettlement program to displaced Yemenis.

From 2015 to late 2016, the Obama Administration did not push for this moderate set of diplomatic initiatives and Trump is even less likely to take these actions. It is therefore incumbent upon Americans to call and write to their elected representatives to pressure them to end our support for the decimation of Yemen. If Americans care about human rights and international law, the bare minimum we can do is stop abetting war crimes against the people of Yemen.