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## ***US Calls for a Yemen Ceasefire is a Cynical Piece of Political Theatre***

The UK appears now to be gearing up towards authoring a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Yemen, following years of blocking any resolutions on the issue. The UK has been the official ‘penholder’ on Yemen, meaning that it has been up to the UK to table resolutions, which it has steadfastly refused to do, whilst simultaneously blocking anyone else’s attempts to do so. The apparent about-turn is a response to last week’s statements from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary James Mattis calling for a ceasefire in Yemen within 30 days, to be followed up with UN-facilitated peace talks. The UK dutifully followed suit shortly afterwards, expressing their support for the initiative. This was somewhat ironic given that minister Alistair Burt, obviously not privy to the seeming about-turn, had just spent the day providing MPs with excruciatingly contorted explanations of why calling for a ceasefire was not a good idea in the circumstances. “Passing a ceasefire resolution risks undercutting the UN envoy’s efforts to reach a political deal and undermining the credibility of the Council” he told the House of Commons at midday; yet within 36 hours, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt was telling Newsnight that the US call for a ceasefire was “an extremely welcome announcement because we have been working towards a cessation of hostilities in Yemen for a long time.” In the parallel universe of British double-speak, it is of course natural that unrelenting support for what is fast turning into a war of national annihilation gets recast as “working towards a cessation of hostilities”.

Yet this latest call does appear to be at odds with the hitherto existing strategy; it was only in June, after all, when the US and UK torpedoed a Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in the face of impending famine. Many commentaries (such as this one in the Telegraph, for example), have suggested that the US is now taking advantage of pressure on Saudi Arabia following the murder of Saudi insider-turned-dissident Khashoggi to push the kingdom towards a less belligerent position in the disastrous Yemen war. The ever-more desperate humanitarian situation is giving the war a bad name and – so the story goes – the US are now keen to end it. David Miliband, former UK foreign secretary and now president of the International Rescue Committee, even called the US announcement “the most significant breakthrough in the war in Yemen for four years”.

Unfortunately, it is likely to prove nothing of the sort. The detail of the announcement makes clear that, far from representing some kind of Damascene change of heart, the ‘call for a ceasefire’ is little more than yet another rebranding exercise, a cynical attempt to whitewash escalating carnage with the rhetoric of peace.

With every passing day, the war in Yemen becomes harder to defend. The airstrike on a bus full of schoolchildren in early August briefly caused international outrage, but it was sadly not exceptional; indeed, at least 55 civilians had been killed during the bombardment of a hospital and fish market just the week before, and the bus itself was but one of over fifty civilian vehicles targeted by Saudi airstrikes during the first half of this year. For most of the war, around a third of coalition airstrikes have hit civilian sites; but according to the Yemen Data Project, this ratio reached 48% in September.

More grim news emerged on 29th October, when a detailed research project concluded that over five times as many people have met violent deaths in the conflict than previously estimated. For years, the media have consistently claimed a death toll of 10,000, but the true figure is closer to 56,000 since the start of 2016 according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, as the earlier estimate only covered deaths reported to official medical centres. The death toll from the start of the bombing campaign until the end of this year is expected to lie between 70,000 and 80,000.

Yet even this number, horrific as it is, is dwarfed by the deaths from the starvation and disease which have been the coalition’s weapon of choice against the population of Houthi-controlled areas. The bombing of water treatment systems, fishing boats, roads and bridges, the naval blockade of the country’s imports, and the coalition regime’s decision to stop paying salaries to health and sanitation workers in Houthi areas two years ago have combined to create mass starvation and the world’s biggest cholera outbreak since the end

of WW2. An average of 130 children die of disease and malnutrition every day (Although “they are not starving”, noted a tweet from the Norwegian Refugee Council, “they are being starved”), with around 150,000 people thought to have died from such causes last year alone. And this aspect of the conflict is set to deteriorate exponentially.

On 15th October, the UN’s humanitarian coordinator for Yemen Lise Grande warned that Yemen could face the world’s worst famine for one hundred years if the airstrikes are not stopped, with 12 to 13 million at risk of starvation. Nine days later, the agency’s undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs Mark Lowcock said that the risk was actually worse than they previously predicted with 14 million close to “pre-famine conditions” – half the country’s population. He noted that the UN was currently only able to feed 8 million of these, although these too would be at risk if the country’s main port Hodeidah – responsible for over 70% of imports – is attacked by the coalition.

Earlier this week, just as Mattis and Pompeo delivered their soothing words, 30,000 troops began massing to launch precisely that attack. The problem for the war’s backers in London, Paris and Washington is how to justify the holocaust this is almost certain to unleash on Yemen’s population in the delusional pursuit of reimposing an impotent and discredited quisling.

The ceasefire announcement, then, is about providing cover for the impending attack. Just at the moment the aid agencies have been warning against its devastating consequences, and calling for an immediate end to the bombing, the ‘ceasefire proposal’ gives the Saudis a month’s free pass to conduct their famine-inducing operation on Hodeidah. Rather than demanding the offensive be halted or delayed, the ‘30-day’ call eggs it on. Nor is the 30-day timeframe any kind of limit on the operation. Pompeo stated that “The time is now for the cessation of hostilities, including missile and UAV strikes from Houthi-controlled areas into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Subsequently, Coalition air strikes must cease in all populated areas in Yemen”. The term ‘subsequently’ is crucial, implying that the Saudis continued bombardment – including in “populated areas” – would be perfectly justified unless the Houthis had implemented a unilateral ceasefire first. This is little more than a call for unconditional surrender by the Houthis, dressed up as a peace initiative. By the same token, it sets the scene for laying all the blame for any continued fighting at the door of the Houthis

The reality is that the US and UK could end the war tomorrow, simply by threatening to cut off military supplies, intelligence, and training to the Saudis until the airstrikes stop, a point made by Jan Egeland of the Norwegian Refugee Council to a UK Parliamentary

Select Committee earlier this week. Yet the US are precisely NOT calling for an end to the bombing, nor threatening to use their leverage to bring it about. Instead, this so-called initiative is yet another cynical PR exercise designed to justify, rather than to reign in, this brutal war.

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