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Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and the hypocrisy of imperialism

No Russian military operation in the invasion of Ukraine goes by without a torrent of denunciations from the Biden administration and the corporate media in the most strident of terms, portraying Putin as the new Hitler and the Russian military as a modern version of the hordes of Genghis Khan. But when a US ally and major supplier of oil to world capitalism carries out a barbaric massacre, Washington does not make even the mildest protest.



Defense Secretary James N. Mattis meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz at the Pentagon in Washington D.C., Mar. 22, 2018. (DoD photo by Navy Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Kathryn E. Holm)

Neither the White House nor the State Department has issued any statement on the execution of 81 prisoners Saturday in Saudi Arabia, which was widely condemned by human rights and Saudi exile groups. Even when the issue was raised Monday at the regular State Department press briefing, spokesman Ned Price would say nothing more than “we are continuing to raise concerns about fair trial guarantees,” although he said he “can’t speak to the timing of that, but we have raised these concerns.”

In plain English, this means that the administration has said nothing about the executions to the Saudi monarchy and its murderous ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who dispatched a hit squad to murder and dismember Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Turkey in 2018. The State Department flack could only point to past statements about giving prisoners a “fair trial” (after they have been brutally tortured and denied access to legal representation) before the executioner does his bloody work.

Beheading is the standard method of execution in Saudi Arabia. The majority of the victims of this medieval barbarism were young men from the eastern region of Saudi Arabia, where the majority of the population is Shi’ite—regarded as heretical by the Wahhabite Sunni clergy which sets the rules for daily life in the kingdom.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, 41 of the victims of the mass execution had taken part in antigovernment protests in 2011-2012. Another seven were Yemenis, allegedly linked to the Houthi rebellion in Yemen which ousted a Saudi-backed regime. “Implementation of death sentences following trials that do not offer the required fair trial guarantees is prohibited by international human rights and humanitarian law and may amount to a war crime,” she said.

It requires little effort to imagine the reaction in Washington if the Russian military had executed 81 prisoners of war in Ukraine claiming they were “terrorists.”

The entire policy of the Saudi monarchy in Yemen is a war crime, targeting the civilian population of that country, the poorest in the Arab world, for starvation and murder. According to a report issued Monday by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, associated with the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF),

538,000 children in Yemen are already severely malnourished, and that figure will rise to 2.2 million by the end of this year.

Around 1.3 million pregnant women or nursing mothers will be acutely malnourished by the end of the year, while 161,000 people are likely to experience famine, the most acute deprivation of food, five times the current figure. “These harrowing figures confirm that we are on a countdown to catastrophe in Yemen and we are almost out of time to avoid it,” said David Beasley, head of the World Food Program, adding that action was urgently needed to “avert imminent disaster and save millions.” More than half the population of Yemen, 19 million out of 30 million, will be unable to meet minimum food needs during the second half of this year, according to the IPC report, up from 17.4 million now.

According to another UNICEF statement issued Friday, March 11, the UN has verified the killing or injury of at least 10,200 children since the Saudi military intervention began in 2015. Nearly all the casualties came from Saudi bombs and missiles, most of them delivered by US-supplied warplanes and using targeting information provided by US specialists.

There is an obvious element of racism in the selective outrage of imperialist governments and the corporate media, expressed in saturation coverage of the suffering of the Ukrainian people, accompanied by virtual silence over the equally terrible suffering of the population of Yemen.

This was summed up in the comment by CBS correspondent Charlie D’Agata, who blurted out that victims who “look like us” are more likely to evoke a sympathetic response. He was only one of many. Daniel Hannan of Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* remarked, “They seem so like us. That’s it. That is what makes it so shocking. Ukraine is a European country. Its people watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts, vote in free elections and read uncensored newspapers. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations.”

Government officials followed suit. Ukraine’s chief prosecutor, David Sakvarelidze, told the BBC, “It’s really emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blonde hair being killed, children being killed every day with Putin’s missiles.” Kiril Petkov, prime minister of Bulgaria said, “These are not the refugees we are used to. They

are Europeans, intelligent, educated people, some are IT programmers ... this is not the usual refugee wave of people with an unknown past. No European country is afraid of them.” Retired British general Richard Barrons, former assistant chief of the general staff, said, “I think one of the issues ... is how does public opinion in the UK and other countries react to seeing people who look and live like us being slaughtered.”

The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) issued a statement condemning this racist double standard. “AMEJA stands in full solidarity with all civilians under military assault in any part of the world, and we deplore the difference in news coverage of people in one country versus another,” the organization said. “This type of commentary reflects the pervasive mentality in Western journalism of normalizing tragedy in parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. It dehumanizes and renders their experience with war as somehow normal and expected ... “

Race is, of course, not the determining factor. There were tears aplenty in the imperialist media for Syrian victims of repression by the Assad regime. The decisive issue is whether the government carrying out the slaughter is allied with American imperialism. Hence the silence over atrocities in Saudi Arabia, Colombia, India and the Philippines—to say nothing of the millions of victims of the Pentagon and CIA in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and across North Africa—in sharp contrast to the screaming headlines and nonstop coverage of the victims of Putin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine.

The working class should not be swayed by any of the campaigns in the capitalist media, aimed at mobilizing public opinion in support of the foreign policy of American imperialism and its European allies.

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