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The Destructive U.S.-Backed Campaign in Yemen

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The killing earlier this week of at least 131 civilians at a wedding party was only the latest and deadliest event in a campaign of airstrikes in Yemen by a foreign coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reports that during a six-month period from late March until last week (even before the incident involving the wedding) at least 2,355 civilians had been killed in the fighting in Yemen, with almost two-thirds of the deaths caused by airstrikes conducted by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies. The same Saudi-led coalition is maintaining a blockade of Yemen's main seaports that has further exacerbated a humanitarian crisis in which, according to OHCHR, four out of five Yemenis require assistance.

This carnage and associated suffering are being largely overlooked and even excused in the United States. In fact, according to official White House statements, the Obama administration is providing "logistical and intelligence support" to the Saudi-led military intervention. Insufficient attention to what is really going on in Yemen can be partly explained by the distractions of what is going on elsewhere in the Middle East. Most recently this has included the Russian military intervention in Syria, which has received far more attention than the Yemeni war but, especially with this week's Russian airstrikes, is remarkably similar in both nature and purpose to what the Saudis are doing in Yemen. Another major reason for the inappropriate American attitudes and posture toward what is going on in Yemen is a habit of rigidly thinking of all events especially in the Middle East in terms of a fixed line-up of "allies" and foes, without regard to any consistency

in upholding standards of international behavior or to any careful consideration of where U.S. interests do and do not lie.

The single biggest member of this perceived, mind-numbing line-up is Iran, the focus of the politically correct habit of thinking of it as nothing but a foe, and the arch-foe in the region at that. The required ritual references to “nefarious” Iranian activity that is “destabilizing” the Middle East flow off lips so automatically they probably could flow in one’s sleep, and are routinely uttered with no reference at all to what Iran actually is or is not doing in the region.

The Iranian connection to the Yemeni conflict is Tehran’s sympathy, and some undetermined degree of material support, for the Houthis, who have been one of the most significant and successful players in that multidimensional conflict. The Houthi movement has been a major player in Yemen for over a decade and has needed no instigation from Iran to assert itself. For the Houthis, who are Zaidi Shiites, the motivations for assertion include concern over the rise of Sunni extremism—including in the form of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—as well as longer-standing issues of distribution of political and economic power within Yemen. Iran’s perspective is based partly on sectarian sympathy, although amid a region and a wider Muslim world in which Sunnis outnumber Shiites, Tehran does not have any strong incentive to exacerbate sectarian conflict. Iran tried to dissuade the Houthis from moving against the Yemeni capital Sana, but the Houthis ignored that advice and captured the city anyway. In any event, whatever material aid Iran has given to the Houthis pales in comparison with the direct air, ground, and naval role that Saudi Arabia and its allies are playing in Yemen.

The Houthis’ activity is only a part of a bigger and more complex set of conflicts in Yemen, a country where no one has ever really controlled the whole thing and that was not even officially a single country until North and South Yemen merged in 1990. Southern resistance to what is seen as northern domination of the merged state has ever since been a major part of Yemeni instability. The instability of more recent years was initiated not by anything the Houthis did but instead by an Arab Spring-style uprising that pushed out the longstanding president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was replaced by Saleh’s former vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, whose claim to legitimacy was an “election” in which he was the only candidate, who himself later became the target of demonstrations for not carrying out promised reforms, and whom the Saudis wound up taking under their wing. Perhaps the most significant development leading to the current level of violence and suffering in Yemen was the accession to power in Riyadh of King Salman and his young son the defense minister and aspirant to the throne, who decided to use Yemen to make a statement about who’s boss in the Arabian Peninsula.

To appreciate the inconsistency in the application in Yemen of standards of international behavior, imagine that Iran had been doing anything like what the Saudis have been doing in Yemen, including using its air force to conduct strikes like the one against the wedding party. The uproar in this country would be deafening, perhaps enough to derail the recently completed nuclear agreement.

There is no good justification for the United States to be identifying itself with, much less materially supporting, the Saudi intervention in Yemen. It is supporting the cause of most of the destruction and suffering in the country, rather than reducing the destruction and suffering

(although the United States is furnishing some humanitarian aid for Yemen). It is earning opprobrium and resentment for being associated with the Saudi campaign. It is making matters even worse for itself by knuckling under to the Saudi preference to prevent even an impartial United Nations inquiry into wartime excesses by all sides in the Yemeni conflict, including the Houthis.

The United States does not have a direct stake in the internal contests for power and influence in Yemen. Even if it did, it would be hard to explain the side it is taking now. Saleh was considered a U.S. partner during his long time in power, and now he is allied with the Houthis.

The United States does have a stake in how instability in Yemen can reverberate in the form of transnational terrorism and extremism, but again it is on the wrong side. The Houthi movement does not do international terrorism. AQAP certainly does, and it has tried to do it repeatedly against the United States. In the otherwise confused lines of conflict within Yemen, the Houthis and AQAP are each other's clearest enemies.

And the United States certainly does not have a good reason to take sides in sectarian conflicts in Yemen or anywhere else in the Muslim world.

Mistaken policies such as the U.S. posture toward Yemen will continue as long as U.S. policy is made in a domestic political climate in which prevailing sentiment automatically labels some foreign states as "allies" and others as practitioners of "nefarious" behavior, and insists that the United States always align itself with the former and always oppose anything having to do with the latter.