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US steps up Mideast military interventions

Missile strikes in Yemen, weapons to Syria

By Patrick Martin

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American drone missile attacks and air strikes killed more than three dozen people in southern Yemen over the weekend. The carnage coincided with press reports that the Obama administration is moving to ship advanced weapons to “rebel” groups fighting the Assad government in Syria.

Washington is waging a nonstop campaign of political and media vilification of Russia for its alleged intervention in Ukraine—where a handful of people have died—even as it intensifies its decades-long military intervention in the Middle East, where US wars and US-instigated civil wars have killed millions.

The death tolls are well known: more than one million in Iraq (1990-1991, 2003-2011); approaching 200,000 in Syria (2011-2014); well over 100,000 in Afghanistan (2001-2014); over 50,000 in Libya (2011); thousands in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Niger, Mali and other countries hit by US drone missile strikes. These figures do not even take into account the thousands killed by US-backed Israeli violence in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza during the same period.

The first American drone missile strike to target Yemen in 2014 killed at least 13 people on Saturday, according to the US-allied Yemeni government. The missile hit a vehicle traveling in the Sawmaa area of al-Bayda province, blasting the car and propelling it 20 meters, while destroying a passing car as well.

The country's Supreme Security Council described the attack as an air strike carried out by the Yemeni armed forces, the usual cover story for a missile fired by an American-controlled drone. The Obama administration did not publicly acknowledge the attack, its normal practice for drone missile operations conducted by the CIA.

A second round of attacks, carried out on Sunday, killed another 25 people in al-Mahfad, Abyan province, also in southern Yemen, according to Reuters. The news service cited local tribal sources reporting that "unmanned drone aircraft had been circling the target areas beforehand" and that "at least three separate strikes had taken place after dawn prayers."

Again, the Yemeni government claimed that it had carried out the air strikes, purportedly because "terrorist elements were planning to target vital civilian and military installations," the same self-defense rhetoric used to disguise the previous day's US attacks.

Yemeni and US government sources invariably claim that those killed in drone missile strikes are "terrorists" and "militants" of Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, the local affiliate of the Islamic fundamentalist group founded by Osama bin Laden and now headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The drone strikes came only two weeks after a federal district judge dismissed a damages lawsuit against US government officials over the killing of three US citizens in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki, his son Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, and Samir Khan, all incinerated by US cruise missiles in 2011.

The judge ruled that US officials could not be found personally liable for violations of the Fourth and Fifth Amendments to the US Constitution, even violations as extreme as execution, without trial or judicial hearing of any kind. She also ruled that there was "no available remedy under US law for this claim." In other words, US officials and military operatives cannot be sued for acting under orders from President Obama, while the president is himself also immune from being sued.

On Saturday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Obama administration has begun to funnel advanced American antitank missiles to Syrian "rebels." The story was initially reported last week by the British journal *Jane's Defence Weekly* and also subsequently confirmed by the *Washington Post*.

The *Journal* said that the shipment of TOW antitank missiles by the US and Saudi Arabia, the first provision of such advanced weapons since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, was "a pilot

program that could lead to larger flows of sophisticated weaponry.” The newspaper attributed the shift in policy by the Obama administration to “recent regime gains on the battlefield.”

The Assad regime has successfully cleared the Qalamoun region along the Syria-Lebanon border, severing a key rebel supply line, and last week launched an offensive against remaining “rebel” strongholds in Homs, the country’s third-largest city and a heavily contested battleground in the civil war.

The *Journal* quoted a spokesman for a “rebel” group called Harakat Hazm to the effect that “The first step is showing that we can effectively use the TOWs, and hopefully the second one will be using antiaircraft missiles.”

The *Post* reported that the Pentagon has shipped TOW missiles to both Turkey and the Persian Gulf states in recent years, and late last year sent 15,000 to Saudi Arabia.

The White House has to this point blocked the shipment of antiaircraft missiles by US client regimes in the Persian Gulf out of concern that these weapons could be used by Washington’s radical Islamist allies in Syria against civilian airliners elsewhere. But in the run-up to last month’s visit by Obama to Saudi Arabia, the administration apparently began to shift its position.

The *Journal* observed, “After the visit, senior administration officials said the two countries were collaborating more closely on material support for the rebels and the Central Intelligence Agency was looking at ways to expand its limited arming and training program based in Jordan.”

The US escalation in the various Middle East battlefields is just as reckless as its conduct in Ukraine. It also exposes the fraud of the so-called “war on terrorism.” In Syria, one of the most powerful “rebel” groups is the al-Nusra Front, which has publicly sworn allegiance to Al Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The Obama administration is targeting Islamic fundamentalists in Yemen for drone missile strikes in the name of the struggle against Al Qaeda, while providing antitank weapons for groups allied with similar jihadist elements in Syria.