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Yemen Has Become the Graveyard of the Obama Doctrine

By Samuel Oakford and Peter Salisbury

September 23, 2016

This past Tuesday, President Barack Obama delivered his final speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Though he tried to sound optimistic, he couldn't help but strike a rueful tone. Gone was the global media darling who electrified world leaders in 2009—that Obama was "determined to act boldly and collectively on behalf of justice and prosperity at home and abroad." The graying, deliberate Obama of 2016 could offer only limited aspirations of a "course correction" in world politics, while pondering why cycles of conflict and suffering persisted. Though the president advocated for the "hard work of diplomacy" in places like Syria, he also elaborated on one of his recent, common refrains, cautioning that in the Middle East "no external power is going to be able to force different religious communities or ethnic communities to co-exist for long." Across the region, "we have to insist that all parties recognize a common humanity and that nations end proxy wars that fuel disorder," Obama said.

A day later, the U.S. Senate held a rare debate on the sale of arms destined for another war in the Middle East. The deal, for $1.15 billion in weaponry to Saudi Arabia, including over 150 Abrams tanks, is a drop in a bucket: more than $100 billion in arms sales to the kingdom have already been approved by the Obama administration. But a year and a half into the kingdom's relentless war in Yemen, opponents of the new sale see it as an outright affirmation of Washington's involvement in a deadly, strategically incoherent war that the White House has kept largely quiet about. What's more, it is at odds with Obama's apparent distaste for regional proxy wars.

Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia has targeted Yemen's Shia Houthi militias and their allies**,** loyalists of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who two years ago seized the Yemeni capital Sanaa by force. Several months later, they drove the Saudi-backed President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi into exile. When Saudi King Salman announced the intervention in Yemen—an intervention the kingdom has painted as a proxy war with Iran, its regional foe—the White House immediately authorized a support package that included intelligence-sharing and logistical support for military operations. That package has seen the United States deliver more than 40 million pounds of fuel to Saudi jets over the past 18 months, according to U.S. Central Command. The Saudis would be crippled without direct U.S. military assistance, particularly aerial refueling, which continues unabated.

Supporters of the new arms package portrayed it as necessary support after the Obama administration's landmark nuclear deal with Iran. To them, Yemen is a proxy war, and the United States must side with the Gulf—never mind the absence of direct evidence of wide-scale Iranian meddling in the Houthi rebellion. "Blocking this sale of tanks will be interpreted by our Gulf partners, not just Saudi Arabia, as another sign that the United States of America is abandoning our commitment in the region and is an unreliable security partner," Arizona Senator John McCain said, depicting the very dynamic Obama appeared to warn against the day before. "That's what this vote is all about."

Those opposing the deal, including Republicans like Kentucky Senator Rand Paul and Democrats like Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy, urged their colleagues to reconsider the costs of enmeshing the United States in another war. "Let's ask ourselves whether we are comfortable with the United States getting slowly, predictably, and all too quietly dragged into yet another war in the Middle East," Murphy said from the floor. Ultimately, the Senate voted to table the resolution opposing the deal. But 27 senators voted against the motion to table—coming out against the arms deal in a considerable, if symbolic, rebuke to the Saudis, the Obama administration, and their largely Republican backers.

Earlier this year, *The Atlantic*'s Jeffrey Goldberg published "The Obama Doctrine," in which the president described a Middle East populated by unreliable "free-rider" allies constantly drawing the United States into their petty rivalries, fueled by avarice, tribalism, and sectarianism. Key among those free riders were the Sunni Arab states of the Gulf, Goldberg wrote. The Saudis, along with the Iranians, Obama said, "need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood." Yet despite the Obama White House's misgivings about Saudi Arabia, it backed its campaign in Yemen, enabling perhaps the chief free-rider's war.

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At times, the Obama administration's support for the Saudis has thrown diplomatic efforts to end the war into confusion. In August, Secretary of State John Kerry flew to Jeddah to meet with officials from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Britain, and the United Nations. Some Yemenis were cautiously optimistic that Kerry—who says the war in Yemen does not have a military solution—would use his leverage with Riyadh to push for an easing of airstrikes. Instead, he left them with a vague "roadmap" for peace that offered the Houthis certain concessions, angering some in Riyadh, but did little to pressure the Saudis to implement

the plan. Within 24 hours, the Saudi-led coalition had intensified its aerial campaign, while its allies on the ground launched a renewed offensive on the Houthi-controlled northwest of the country. The Houthis responded by escalating their own attacks over the border into the kingdom.

Farea al-Muslimi, a Beirut-based Yemeni political analyst and cofounder of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, said underwhelming diplomatic efforts by the United States like this have left Yemenis feeling like a beleaguered afterthought. "It is quite disappointing, especially because Yemen is easily solved compared to Syria," where a political revolution morphed disastrously into sectarian cleansing, he said. Yemen's war, by contrast, is still largely a matter of local rivalries. "But there is simply no interest or concern" from the United States, al-Muslimi said.

In Yemen, where Washington has outsized influence due to its political and military relationship with Gulf nations, the White House is unlikely to take the kind of gamble Kerry recently took on Syria: a ceasefire between the Russian and Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad and the rebels supported by the United States and its regional allies. That deal now lies in tatters, in the wake of the U.S. bombing of Assad's forces and a apparent Russian air strikes against a UN-coordinated aid convoy. It has severely diminished hopes for any similar attempt to end the conflict in Yemen.

Even if Yemen cannot be solved via diplomatic miracle, it is puzzling that Obama's apparent distaste for the kingdom has had remarkably little influence. A critic of the U.S.-Saudi alliance as a senator, the president's White House has had a troubled relationship with the absolute monarchy since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011—which saw a number of Saudi allies, including Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, ousted from power—and more so since the Iranian nuclear deal. The once-improbable now seems imminent: unless the Obama administration ends refueling and logistical support for the Saudis, it appears all but certain to hand off the war in Yemen to his successor.

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The Pentagon's view of the Saudi war in Yemen is mixed. Some officials have been openly enthusiastic: For the first time, a regional ally is taking the lead in a military campaign, a scenario one senior Pentagon official described as "something we've dreamed of." But among the top brass, there's uncertainty as to what, exactly, is at stake in Yemen. Shortly after the United States announced its support for the Saudis, Gen. Lloyd Austin, commander of U.S. Central Command, which oversees operations in the Gulf, told lawmakers that he didn't "know the specific goals and objectives of the Saudi campaign."

Realism, or Obama's version of it, perhaps still wins the day. Stephen Seche is the executive vice president of Washington's Arab Gulf States Institute and a veteran U.S. diplomat who worked on the Gulf states. He served as U.S. ambassador to Yemen from 2007 to 2010. "I don't think we went into this enthusiastically at all, but Saudis were in such a lather," over the Iran deal, Seche said.

The Saudis' long-term plan for Yemen also remains unclear. Speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic, officials from both the State and Defense Departments questioned how well the Saudis had thought through their war in Yemen, and how skilled they were at executing airstrikes while avoiding unnecessary collateral damage. According to the UN, more than 2,200 civilians have been killed by coalition airstrikes since the beginning of their war in Yemen. Bombs dropped by Saudi coalition planes have hit schools, markets, factories, and hospitals. A CENTCOM spokesperson said that U.S. tankers offload fuel regardless of what a jet's target is, or whether the mission has been preplanned and extensively vetted. A recent project to track all Saudi airstrikes since the war began estimated that a full third have hit civilian sites. Accused of violating international law in Yemen, the Saudis have blocked efforts at the UN to establish an independent human-rights investigation. When they were listed on a UN annex for killing children in airstrikes, Riyadh threatened to cut funding to the UN.

Some in the Obama administration are unsettled by its position on Yemen. In August, after Saudi jets bombed a bridge that brought nearly all UN aid to Sanaa, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power tweeted out a picture of the rubble, and wrote "Strikes on hospital/school/infrastructure in #Yemen devastating for ppl already facing unbearable suffering&must end." According to U.S. officials, the Pentagon had put the bridge on a no-strike list, reflecting its importance to the humanitarian response there, only to be ignored. Their plight worsened by a suffocating Saudi blockade, more than 21 million Yemenis are in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance and people in many areas are verging on starvation, as the BBC has shown. A few days after the bridge strike, a spokesperson for CENTCOM said that the United States continued to refuel Saudi jets like the ones that hit the bridge. If the Saudis decided on more bombing missions, the spokesperson said, they would refuel more.

And yet at the UN, Power has had to publicly stand behind an unrealistic and one-sided resolution drafted by the Saudis, introduced by the British and passed last April with U.S. support. The text calls for the Houthis to essentially retreat and lay down their arms—a non-starter, but one that the administration still considers the basis for negotiations.

Obama has said little about the war in Yemen. With mere months left in his presidency, there is scarce indication that he will. Increasingly skeptical of America's ability to shape events on the ground in the Middle East, Obama sees little incentive to overturn the status quo, even if that means supporting the apparently reckless military forays of a government he disdains.

A U.S. official who briefs the White House on regional national security matters summed up the Obama administration's prevailing attitude. Yemen was already a "complete shit show" before the war, he argued, echoing Obama's use of a phrase he is said to use privately to describe Libya. The Houthis are a nasty militia who deserve no favors and Yemen would be a "shit show" whatever the United States does. So why further degrade a sometimes-unpleasant, but necessary relationship with the Saudis to produce the same end result?

After a joint U.S.-Russian press conference held in Geneva to announce the abortive Syria ceasefire this month, journalists were served vodka from the Russians and pizza courtesy of the Americans. Yemen wasn't even worth the takeout order, al-Muslimi said: "There is no pizza or vodka when it comes to Yemen. Only cluster bombs and arms deals."