

Breaking the Silence on the Destruction of Yemen

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No matter how you boil it down, the script is as sad as it is predictable. Once again international powers are using a conflict in a strategically located country to advance their own agendas and enrich their military contractors at the expense of the ordinary Yemeni.

It seems one of the riskiest things you can do in Yemen these days is get married. This past Wednesday two Saudi airstrikes on a wedding in Dhamar province, 50 miles south of the capital, Sanaa, killed between 23 and 30 people (depending on the report).

This just one week after Saudi airstrikes targeted a wedding party in Taiz province, killing 131. That strike was the deadliest single incident since the start of Saudi airstrikes against Yemen's Houthi-led rebels in March.

But as horrifying as the civilian death toll numbers are — with the UN estimating 5000 civilian deaths since fighting began earlier this year, including 500 children — these numbers are only the most visible symptom of a much deeper problem. Many of the 131 civilians that died at the wedding in Taiz last week, died, according to Hassan Boucénine of Doctors Without Borders, “because the Mokha hospital is closed because of supply — no drugs, no fuel, no electricity, no nothing, so the staff left.” Instead, the injured had to be transported to Hodeida province in trucks typically used for transporting livestock, with many dying en route.

This problem is not isolated to Taiz. Across the country, more than 1.4 million people have had to flee their home due to the fighting and up to 10 million Yemeni children are at risk of death from preventable diseases due to lack of basic medical care.

Despite this unfolding disaster, the war in Yemen has been met with virtual silence in the west. Coverage of the latest deadly incidents are consigned to isolated, context-free reports and are generally confined to the back pages of the newspaper and the “world in brief” newsflashes on TV network news.

Amidst this deafening silence, at least a short form summary of the conflict is necessary for many in the west who have never had the story properly explained to them.

From the formation of modern-day Yemen in 1990 until the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011, the country was formally ruled by Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Colonel in the North Yemeni Armed Forces who became president of the predecessor Yemen Arab Republic (the former North Yemen) in 1978. Informally, the actual running of the country came to settle on three men: Saleh; Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, an influential army general who helped set up the Islamist “Islah Party” with Saudi support; and Abdullah ibn Husayn al-Ahmar, the head Sheikh of the

Hahsid tribal federation and main bagman for Saudi patronage payments to the Yemeni tribes.

The system they created was inherently corrupt, relying on patronage payments and a divvying up of the country's economic benefits, but it remained relatively stable until the early 2000s, when Saleh began trying to steer some of the country's lucre toward his son. As the delicate balance of power destabilized, factions formed not just within Yemen's ruling elite, but outside it, too, with (Shiite) Houthi rebels and southern separatists emerging to vie for power.

By 2011 Yemenis certainly did have a lot to complain about: living in the poorest country in the Middle East, the average Yemeni faced a bleak future with little hope of advancement, perpetual corruption among the ruling class, and Saleh's new proposal to loosen presidential term limits, presumably so he could become President For Life. This culminated in an uprising that became part of the "Arab Spring" narrative, and like the rest of that narrative, here, too, the genuine rage of the Yemeni people was directed and channeled by key figures with help from foreign powers.

An example of this phenomenon is helpfully highlighted by the Royal Institute for International Affairs in their September 2013 report on the country. They point to the story of Atiaf al-Wazir, whom they refer to as "One of the voices of the uprising," who just happened to be an ordinary, everyday Yemeni protester...who was flown to London by the British Government just before the uprising began to speak at a conference on online activism alongside co-speakers like Hillary Clinton and Carl Bildt. There she was given a tour of the ongoing Occupy London encampment and sent back to Yemen to tweet the play-by-play of the social media Twitter revolution "Day of Rage" as @WomanFromYemen for a foreign, English-speaking audience. Oh, and she worked for several years as a "Program Officer" for the National Endowment for Democracy. Yes, that National Endowment for Democracy.

Whatever the agenda behind the uprising, the end result was a transfer of power in early 2012 to Saleh's deputy, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Interestingly, Obama specifically pointed to the Yemeni transition as the "model" for what the US wanted to see happen to Assad in Syria.

But this nice, heart-warming, US State Department-approved Color Revolution-style fairy tale of oppressed-people-spontaneously-rising-up-against-a-dictator-and-appointing-an-American-approved-dictator was not to last. The country continued unraveling, with Houthi rebels, Islah members, and al-CIAda all vying for power. In September 2014 the Houthis attacked and captured Sanaa, forcing Hadi out of power and causing General Ali Mohsen to flee the country. In February of this year Hadi declared a provisional government in Aden, and in March of this year Saudi Arabia began their bombing campaign against Yemen, a country with no air defenses.

Let's be clear: this conflict, like all conflict between would-be ruling warlord chieftains (aka politicians) does not have a "good" side and a "bad" side so much as two "bad" sides. Arguments over lesser-of-two-evils notwithstanding, one thing is certain: the Saudi bombardments are destroying the infrastructure of the country, displacing millions, and threatening the lives of an entire population. Whatever solution is going to come to this crisis, any rational observer can understand it is not going to come through bombing weddings, disrupting hospitals, ravaging cities and forcing millions to relocate.

The question, of course, is why the Saudis are leading this “coalition” against the Houthis and how they are able to do so.

The first question is best answered with slightly more nuance than the “Iran-Saudi Proxy War” narrative pumped by the mainstream western press. Although there are certainly ties and affinities between the Shiite Houthis and the Shiite Iranian government, and while the Houthis are from the northern area of Yemen on Saudi Arabia’s doorstep and have fought battles in Saudi’s southern Jizan Region, to say that this is simply an extension of Iranian-Saudi rivalry is too simplistic. After all, as Gareth Porter points out, the Houthis main source of arms and military support is not Iran, but deposed ex-dictator Saleh, who was himself armed by (who else?) the US. The west’s desperation to see the Houthis as Iran’s puppets is just another ploy to paint Iran as a dangerous threat to the region.

Instead, as Narwine Sharwani argues, it is more fruitful to consider this conflict as an extension of an overall regional struggle between two power blocs: the Neo-Colonial Axis of US/Israeli/British/France-backed governments and monarchies, and the Resistance Axis of the post-Iranian Revolution anti-imperialists. This power bloc thesis helps explain how forces are shaping up in the Syrian war (with Russia and China teaming up with Iran, Iraq and Syria to tackle the Saudi/Qatar/Turkey/US/Israeli ISIS boogeymen) and the conflict between the Saudis and Houthis in Yemen. Certainly one of the big winners in this bombardment of Yemen is the Saudi-spawned Al-CIAda, which continues to act as the terror boogeyman requiring US military involvement in the region and/or the CFR’s best friend as circumstances require.

Martha Mundy, an anthropologist with extensive experience in Yemen, muses in CounterPunch that the Yemen bombardment is a test run for a new type of conflict to emerge in this competition of the power blocs. In this thesis, the attempt is to run a “Neo-Colonial Axis” led Israeli-style aerial bombardment war without the bad press that followed Tel Aviv’s last bloodbath in Gaza.

If the results so far are anything to go by, they’ve certainly been successful at keeping their blatant war crimes under the table. Just last week the Saudis managed to squash a Dutch attempt for an independent probe into war crimes in the ongoing Yemen conflict and replace it with Saudi Arabia’s own plan. The move is particularly brash for the country that is directly responsible for the ongoing carnage, but was predictably supported by the US, who are the main underwriters of the Saudi bombardment.

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If there is any hint of a ray of hope on the horizon for those beleaguered Yemenis, it’s that the Houthis have reportedly agreed to accept the terms of peace talks with the Saudis. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has yet to respond.

Let’s not hold our breath. The last attempt at a brokered peace agreement ended with the firing of the UN representative overseeing the plan and the cutting out of the Houthis from further talks. The Saudis are still calling the shots in this conflict, and now, as chair of the Orwellian UN Human Rights Council that lent “moral legitimacy” to the destruction of Libya, they are likely content to continue bombing weddings for the foreseeable future.

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