

Hiding America's Role in Yemen Slaughter: US Bombing of Civilians Portrayed as "Self-Defense"

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To hear US corporate media tell it, the US was dragged into a brand new war on Wednesday.

US destroyers in the Gulf of Aden [launched airstrikes](#) against Houthi rebels, a Shia insurgent group currently withstanding a massive bombing campaign from a Saudi-led coalition in a year-and-a-half conflict between largely Shia rebels and the Saudi-backed Sunni government in Yemen. The Pentagon insisted that cruise missiles had been fired onto the USS Mason on Sunday and Wednesday from Houthi-controlled territory, and called the airstrikes a "limited self-defense" response.

Needless to say, US media followed the Pentagon's lead. The fact that the United States has been literally fueling Saudi warplanes for 18 months while selling weapons and providing intelligence support to the Gulf monarchy—acts which even the US State Department [believes could expose](#) the US to war crimes prosecution—was either downplayed or ignored. Nor did media recall the US's long history of [drone warfare in Yemen](#), where the military and CIA have been carrying out long-range assassinations since 2002, killing more than 500 people, including at least 65 civilians.

So far, most print media reporting has at least bothered to briefly put the attack and counterattack in broader context, noting the US role in the brutal bombing campaign that has left over 4,000 dead, including over 140 [bombed at a funeral](#) in Sana'a last week—even as the stories' framing downplayed the US's history in the conflict. The **New York Times** ([10/12/16](#)), for example, said in the second paragraph of its report on the airstrikes (emphasis added):

The strikes against the Houthi rebels **marked the first time the United States has become involved militarily in the civil war** between the Houthis, an indigenous Shiite group with loose connections to Iran, and the Yemeni government, which is backed by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni nations.

But the **Times** story went on to acknowledge, somewhat contradictorily, that the US had been "quietly providing military support to a Saudi Arabia-led bombing campaign against the rebels since last year." The story noted that the US had been

providing intelligence and Air Force tankers to refuel the coalition's jets and bombers. The American military has refueled more than 5,700 aircraft involved in the bombing campaign.... More than 4,000 civilians have been killed since the bombing began, according to [the United Nations' top human rights official](#).

TV news reports, on the other hand, kept the spin and left out the context. They mostly

failed to mention that the US has been assisting the Saudi assault on the Houthi rebels for a year and a half, and framed the incident as a US warship being attacked while simply minding its own business in international waters.

CBS's David Martin, fresh off his [14-minute Pentagon commercial](#) last month, didn't mention the Saudi bombing campaign or explain the US's role in the war for his segment for **CBS This Morning** ([10/13/16](#)). In fact, Martin never uttered the word "Saudi" or named any of the other countries involved in Yemen, only noting that the rebels are "trying to overthrow the government." The average viewer would come away thinking the US Navy ship just happened to be in the neighborhood when it was randomly fired upon.

ABC's Martha Raddatz (**Good Morning America**, [10/13/16](#)) likewise didn't inform the viewer that the US has been a party to the civil war for 18 months. She also never used the word "Saudi" or referred to the brutal bombing campaign; she barely even alluded to there being a conflict at all.

CNN's Barbara Starr (**CNN**, [10/13/16](#)) joined the club, omitting the US and Saudi roles in the conflict entirely. She went one step further and repeatedly speculated about "direct" Iranian involvement in the *Mason* attack and what that would entail, despite there being zero evidence and no suggestion from the Pentagon of Iranian participation. Starr even conflated Al Qaeda and Iran, despite their being on opposite sides of the conflict:

The Yemeni missiles were fairly old but had been outfitted with highly lethal warheads, the kind Al Qaeda and Iran know how to make.

The implication was that Al Qaeda might have somehow provided Houthi rebels with missiles, but this, of course, is absurd: The Houthis and Al Qaeda are sectarian enemies and have been fighting each other throughout the civil war. Never mind; Starr needed to raise the stakes and throw out as many boogeymen as she could.

MSNBC's Rachel Maddow ([10/13/16](#)) delivered the worst of the batch. Not only did she too omit the Saudi bombing campaign and the US's role in it (again, leaving the viewer to believe the attack was a total non sequitur), she spun the issue in tedious partisan terms, recalling Trump's statement he would attack Iranian warships that threatened the US:

You might remember Republican candidate Donald Trump said in an off-handed remark during the campaign that if Iranian ships got too close to American ships and if Iranian sailors made rude gestures towards our American sailors under President Trump, we'd blow those Iranian ships out of the water. Well, Iranian ships and American ships are now in the same waters, off the coast of Yemen in the middle of war, with Tomahawk missiles and cruise missiles already flying. Steady on.

Why are American ships in those waters? Why are Tomahawk missiles "flying"? The conflict is never explained; it's only brought up so that Maddow can warn that the GOP nominee could make things worse. Of course, it isn't Trump who backed the Saudis in an air campaign that's left thousands dead, but Obama—and it's Hillary Clinton who as secretary of State enthusiastically pushed to sell warplanes to Riyadh (**The Intercept**, [2/22/16](#)). But such facts would messy up the election-season narrative.

Maddow, like the other reports, used the loaded modifier "Iran-backed" to describe the Houthis (even though experts and Pentagon officials think Iran's support is [overblown](#)). This

is a stark asymmetry, considering that none of the reports referred to the Yemeni government as “US-backed” or “Saudi-backed.” She also said that the Navy blamed the attacks on the Houthis, when the Pentagon only claims the missiles came from rebel territory, and could very well be from other allied groups (**New York Times**, [10/13/16](#)).

Not only is the US’s backing of Saudi Arabia omitted from all these reports, the word “Saudi” isn’t uttered in any of them. The viewer is given the impression that the war, aside from Iranian meddling, is an entirely internal affair—when it actually involves over 15 different countries, mostly Sunni monarchies propping up the Yemeni government—and that the rebels just randomly decided to pick a fight with the largest military in the history of the world.

The Houthis, for their part, [vehemently deny](#) having carried out the attack on the *Mason*, and there is no publicly available evidence it was them or allied forces. It should be noted, however, that Houthi forces [took credit](#) for sinking a United Arab Emirates supply ship two weeks earlier.

As is often the case with war, the issue of “first blood”—or who started the fighting—gets muddied. Governments naturally want global audiences and their own citizens to view their actions as defensive—a necessary *response* to aggression, not aggression itself. US corporate media are aiding this official spin in their reporting on the US bombing of Yemen.

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