

Saudi Arabia Killing Children: United Nations Complicit in Crimes against Humanity

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"It appears that political power and diplomatic clout have been allowed to trump the UN's duty to expose those responsible for the killing and maiming of more than 1,000 of Yemen's children." Sajjad Mohammad Sajid, Oxfam Director in Yemen, Jun 7, 2016

It is such cases that give the United Nations a bad name. And if heads and decay say something about the rest of the body, Ban Ki-Moon says all too much in his role as UN Secretary General. Always inconspicuous, barely visible in the global media, his presence scarcely warrants a footnote. This has been a point of much relief for various powers who have tended to see the UN as a parking space for ceremony and manipulation rather than concrete policy.

A most sinister feature of the latest UN reversal is the role played by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia behind the move. Other powers have previously attempted to prejudice the various organs, and functions of the UN, exerting various pressures. In March, Morocco made its position clear when it expelled 84 UN staffers from a UN peacekeeping mission in the Western Sahara region after Ban deemed the disputed territory "occupied".

The Kingdom is engaged in an enthusiastically bloody campaign in Yemen against the Shia Houthi insurgents, one that can scant be described as compliant with the laws of war. This was one of the subjects of a 40-page report, written primarily by the UN chief's special representative for children and armed conflict Leila Zerrougui.

In an expansive document spanning several countries and regions, it was found that the Saudi-led coalition had been implicated in the deaths of some 60 per cent of the 1,953 child deaths and injuries in Yemen last year.[1] A policy of systematic targeting of hospitals and schools was also noted. In Aden alone, six facilities were attacked 10 times.

On Monday, the UN announced that the Saudi-led coalition had been removed from the child's rights blacklist. This sent a flurry through various diplomatic channels. The Secretary-General found himself red faced and crestfallen. According to Ban's spokesman Stephane Dujarric, "Pending the conclusions of the joint review, the secretary-general removes the listing of the coalition in the report's annex." [2]

Ban expressed a sense of helplessness. Before reporters at UN headquarters, he explained how, "This was one of the most painful and difficult decisions I have had to make." Before him was the "very real prospect that millions of other children would suffer grievously if, as was suggested to me, countries would de-fund many UN programmes."

Hoping to salvage tattered credibility, Ban still insisted that he stood by the contents of the

report, warning that the coalition might make an ignominious reappearance depending on the findings of an investigation. In UN-speak, those findings can always be tinkered with. Given that Saudi Arabia will front that investigation along UN officials, the result is as good as decided.

The response by Saudi Ambassador Abdullah al-Mouallimi on Thursday gave a true sense of implausible deniability. “We did not use threats or intimidation and we did not talk about funding.” A slew of aggressive calls from coalition countries suggested otherwise. On Tuesday, *Foreign Policy* reported that the Kingdom had dangled the threat of severing ties with the UN and cut hundreds of millions of dollars in counterterrorism and humanitarian aid if it was not removed from the list.[3]

The Monday warning involved senior Saudi diplomats threatening UN officials with their powers of conviction, stretching across other Arab governments and those in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to similarly sever ties.

What, then, could Ban have done? From the start, the role of the secretary-general was unclear. A US Department of State meeting prior to the Preparatory Commission in London (Aug 17, 1945), recorded that the SG “should be a man of recognized prestige and competence in the field of diplomacy and foreign office experience. He should be between forty-five and fifty-five years of age and be fluent in both French and English.”

In 1985, that noted doyen of international law, Thomas Franck, emphasised that the SG was an official best disposed to fact-finding, peacekeeping initiatives and good offices. He surmised in a Hague Academy of International Law workshop that, till that point, the office had been occupied by those “completely successful in drawing a line between their role and the role played by political organs at the behest of member States.”

All in all, combative, engaged UN secretary-generals remain a distant murmur, one initially built by such figures as Dag Hammarskjöld and Trygve Lie. The last of any note to push the buttons of various powers, notably that of the US, was the late Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who brought a sustained arrogance to the office.

It was, to a degree, a fair call. The Cold War had thawed, thereby providing the body the prospect for a more active role. It was not to be, though Boutros-Ghali became one of the main celebrity hates for US politicians.

What we have gotten since is weak will and pliability, best reflected by Ban’s decision. To be fair, the organisation’s effectiveness has tended to suffer at stages because of an inability to collect back dues, or keeping the line of revenue flowing. The greatest violator of that tendency has been Washington itself. Again, the money card has been played, with all too predictable results. Human rights remain the playthings of the powerful.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/360&referer=/english/&Lang=E

[2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/saudi-arabia-denies-claims-child-blacklist-160609170624957.html>

[3] <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/07/saudi-arabia-threatened-to-break-relations-with-un-over-human-rights-criticism-in-yemen/>

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