

Saudi Intervention in Yemen Is a Clear Violation of International Law

Interview with Conn Hallinan

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Saudi Arabia is surrounded by controversies these days, and its role in different conflicts in the Middle East has challenged its global reputation and standing. The Kingdom's year-long military assault on Yemen has been called into question both by its close allies and conventional detractors, as the international community grows more concerned over the staggering civilian casualties in the impoverished Arab country, largely blamed on the Saudis, and partly laid at the Houthi rebels' door.

The cross-party International Development Committee at the UK Parliament has recently released a report, implicitly accusing the Saudi-led coalition forces of breaching the international humanitarian law (IHL).

The British MP Steven Twigg has called on the Parliamentary Committees on Arms Exports Controls to consider a temporary ban on further arms exports to the kingdom, already accused of using the British weapons against the non-combatants in Yemen.



At the same time, the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was caught off-guard before the questioning eyes of the global observers when he recently revealed that he was left with no choice but to make a painful decision and remove the name of Saudi Arabia and its allied nations active in Yemen from a blacklist of children rights violators under the undue pressure by the Saudi diplomats and some GCC and OIC member states. According to a June 2 UN report on children and armed conflict, Saudi Arabia-led coalition was responsible for 60% of child deaths and injuries in Yemen in 2015, killing 510 and wounding 667.

A Foreign Policy In Focus columnist and anthropologist tells Truth NGO that the UN's decision to de-list Saudi Arabia and the coalition countries "does make the UN look vulnerable to pressure, not a good thing when the need for an effective international organization has never been greater."

Dr. Conn Hallinan believes the American public doesn't view Saudi Arabia very favorably, even though the Saudi lobby in the United States is working strenuously to boost up the Kingdom's public image.

"The American public does not think highly of Saudi Arabia. The monarchy's repression of women is well known, and there is growing knowledge of the Saudi's perverse influence on Islam. Where the Saudi's have influence is through lobbying of Congress and they have

generally been successful in that endeavor,” he said.

Mr. Conn M. Hallinan is a noted columnist and writer penning op-eds on such issues as the U.S. foreign policy, EU politics and Middle East current affairs. He holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. He oversaw the journalism program at the University of California at Santa Cruz for 23 years, and won the UCSC Alumni Association’s Distinguished Teaching Award.

In the following interview with Conn Hallinan, we discussed Saudi Arabia’s military expedition in Yemen, its future relations with the United States and its involvement in the recent UN scandal.

Q: It was recently reported that the United Nations removed the name of Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces in Yemen from a blacklist of children rights violators under pressure from Riyadh and its GCC partners. What impacts would the UN’s decision, publicly revealed by Mr. Ban Ki-moon, have on the international body’s credibility? Won’t it impart the message that the Secretary General is vulnerable to pressure?

A: The demand by Saudi Arabia and some of its GCC allies to remove the country from the list was really a scandal. It also put the U.S. and the United Kingdom in an uncomfortable spot because the Saudi-GCC air campaign and naval blockade [as] the source of most of the damage being inflicted on Yemeni children could not be carried out without the active help of both western powers. Ban Ki-moon certainly looked weak, though hardly for the first time. The UN Secretary General had invited Iran to the first round of talks aimed at ending the Syrian civil war and then reversed himself 24 hours later because the Americans and Saudis objected.

It does make the UN look vulnerable to pressure, not a good thing when the need for an effective international organization has never been greater. On everything from climate change to rising tensions in Ukraine, the South and East China seas, and Central and South Asia, the UN has an important role to play. It can’t play that role if it is seen caving in to Saudi Arabia or the U.S.

Q: The U.S. Senate endorsed the “Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act” on May 18, allowing the victims and families of victims of the 9/11 attacks to sue Saudi Arabia over its possible role in the tragedy. The bill is still pending the House of Representatives’ decision. Saudis have warned that they would sell off \$750 billion in the U.S. Treasury securities held by the Kingdom if it is passed, and the White House said it would block the Congressional action. Have the Saudi warnings paid off and compelled the Obama administration to veto the bill? What does the whole episode signify about the Saudis’ influence on the U.S. government?

A: So far, President Obama is holding firm on his threat to veto the bill, but Hillary Clinton – most likely the next president – has endorsed it, so this is still up in the air. Certainly the Saudis have influence in the U.S., but most of that is strategic rather than financial. The threat to divest their holdings and \$750 billion would probably hurt Saudi Arabia more than the U.S. Saudi Arabia would lose its strategic investments in their recently purchased oil refinery at Port Arthur, Texas and 26 distribution centers to sell the oil under the Shell label. Most of that \$750 billion is in Treasury securities, but that amount of money would not have a profound impact on the more than \$14 trillion owned by other investors, not counting the securities owned by the U.S. government. The Saudis would depress the value of their

investments with such a move, something they can't do right now with oil at historic lows and Saudi debt on the rise.

Saudi Arabia needs that money to placate its own growing population, a population that is among the youngest in the Middle East. Young people cannot find jobs in Saudi Arabia, and the Kingdom's largest construction company, the Binladin Group, just announced it was laying off 77,000 workers. The Saudis like to use foreign labor because it tends to be more docile than the native workforce. Over 10 million non-Saudis work in the Kingdom. That means fewer jobs for young Saudis and restive young people scare the monarchy, as well they should. As long as the Kingdom shovels out money to keep them quiet - \$130 billion in the aftermath of the Arab Spring - and uses its repressive police, the monarchy hopes to keep the lid on. Cut that budget, a task the International Monetary Fund has strongly recommended, and it's not clear how firmly that lid is on. To show how low the mighty are fallen, Moody's, Standard & Poor's and Fitch just downgraded the Kingdom's credit rating and the monarchy has had to borrow money.

The U.S. supports Saudi Arabia because support of the monarchy is in its strategic interests. Washington might not get a lot of oil from Saudi Arabia anymore, but its allies do, and the Americans fear who would take the monarchy's place.

So Saudi Arabia has influence, but not because of its money. For instance, in spite of strong lobbying efforts by the monarchy and Israel, it could not block the Iran nuclear agreement, an agreement that fits with U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. The U.S. recognizes that you can't keep Iran's 80 million people, huge energy supplies, and strong industrial base under lock and key forever, and the U.S. would love to get in on the growing European stampede to invest in Iran. Boeing looks like it just landed a multi-billion dollar deal to sell commercial airliners to Tehran. The Saudi monarch fears Iran, and not just because it is Shiite. The Saudi monarchy got along just fine with the Shah. What the Saudi royal family fears the most is the word "republic" in Iran's title.

Q: The Saudi military intervention in Yemen since March 15 has resulted in massive civilian deaths and destruction of urban infrastructure. The UN Security Council had not approved this unilateral engagement. Is the Saudi-led war on Yemen a legitimate action? What's your assessment of the international responses to this year-long conflict?

A: Saudi intervention in Yemen is a clear violation of international law. A country can only take military action if it is attacked, or there is imminent danger. The Houthis don't like the Saudis - they have fought them before, but they pose no threat to the Saudi regime, and they were certainly not about to march on Riyadh. The Saudis made up an excuse that the Houthis threatened them with Scud missiles. But the Houthis only got the missiles after the Yemeni army fled and Saudi Arabia intervened. And the Scuds never posed a danger in any case. Now the Saudis are saying they have ended the "Scud threat," which is code for "We are getting out butts kicked, spending \$200 million a day, have isolated ourselves from our allies Pakistan and Egypt, and there is a growing chorus of international criticism. Maybe we should rethink this whole intervention thing."

In a sign of how badly the Saudis misjudged the situation in Yemen, their strongest military ground force, the United Arab Emirates, just announced they would be withdrawing from major military activities and concentrating on counter-terrorism operations. Translation? The ground war was a debacle and no air war wins without a ground war. The Saudi army is

useless for anything but beating up on Shiites in south and eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The GCC armies are aimed at their own people. When they came up against the battle-hardened Houthis they got whipped. The Pakistanis warned the Saudis, but the current Riyadh leadership is a combination of over-the-top aggressive and totally inept. They got involved in a quagmire in Syria and Yemen; totally bungled the plan to pump more oil in order to lower its price, and thus drive off foreign competition and regain market supremacy. The Saudis thought oil would go to \$80 a barrel, but they failed to take into account the slowdown in the Chinese economy and instead oil dropped below \$40; [and they] stonewalled the Mecca stampede that killed thousands of pilgrims.

The international community has disgraced itself in Yemen. It has largely remained silent in the face of an endless string of war crimes, civilian casualties, widespread destruction of civilian houses and hospitals, not to mention the growing hunger by upwards of 12 million people. Partly the lack of response is that countries do not want to criticize the U.S. and the United Kingdom, who have made the war possible. The international community is ready to be outraged by Kosovo, Ukraine and Libya, but somehow Yemen doesn't come up on the radar.

Q: For quite a while, the role of foreign interest groups and advocacy organizations in swaying the U.S. government's policies has been subject to a hot debate. While there's been much talk about the power of Israeli lobby in the United States, there are reports of the growth of an extensive network of law, lobby and public relations firms tasked with improving Saudi Arabia's public image in the United States. Do such investments by Saudi Arabia have an impact on the broader U.S. public's perception of the Arab Kingdom and its role in the Middle East? Do you consider the Saudi lobby as much influential as the Israeli lobby is?

A: The American public does not think highly of Saudi Arabia. The monarchy's repression of women is well known, and there is growing knowledge of the Saudi's perverse influence on Islam. Where the Saudi's have influence is through lobbying of Congress and they have generally been successful in that endeavor. However, they suffered a setback on the Iran nuclear pact, and there is a rising chorus of editorials and columns on how Saudi Arabia's extreme version of Islam, Wahhabism, has sparked terrorist groups all over the world.

The Saudi lobby works best when it works in the shadows, because, as I said, the Kingdom is not popular with most Americans. The Israeli lobby is different. Israel is well thought of by most Americans, although that is changing somewhat, and the lobby has strong support among Jews and non-Jews. However, even that lobby got a bloody nose over the Iran deal. However, Clinton is far more pro-Israel than Obama. If she is elected, one suspects she will be more supportive of Tel Aviv. Originally she opposed the Iran deal but later came around to support it.

Q: Saudi Arabia's human rights record and its strict interpretation of Islamic texts have compelled some commentators to draw an analogy between the Kingdom and the self-proclaimed Islamic State. In an op-ed in The New York Times, Algerian journalist Kamel Daoud described Saudi Arabia as "an ISIS that has made it." Do you see any connection between the ideology and worldview sustained by Saudi Arabia and Daesh? Are there authentic links binding them financially, militarily or politically?

A: Ideologically, they are identical. The Islamic State practices Wahhabism, including its war on the Shiites, which doesn't mean they are allies. Daesh hates the Saudi monarchy and has

called for the liberation of Mecca and Medina from the House of Saud. There have been some 20 Daesh bombings in Saudi Arabia, most aimed at the monarchy's Shiite population. Daesh is a direct outgrowth of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Wahhabism. The Saudis don't claim they have created a caliphate - in this they differ from the Islamic State, but otherwise they are the same.

I am sure there are Saudis who support Daesh; indeed a recent poll demonstrated that, and money does flow from Saudi Arabia to the Islamic State. But the two are enemies. Daesh wants the House of Saud out, and the monarchy sees IS as a real threat. In a formal sense there are no military, political or financial ties, but clearly some Saudis support Daesh. And Wahhabism is the glue that links the two together. There is no little irony in that.

Q: Finally, what do you think of the future of U.S.-Saudi relations, especially now that the tensions seem to be simmering between the two allies? Will the next U.S. president be committed to developing the economic and political connections with Saudi Arabia, given the Kingdom's frustration at the White House over its persistence in securing the nuclear deal with Iran, which the royal family believes will weaken the seven-decade-old partnership between Riyadh and Washington?

A: I do not foresee a major rupture, although the current Saudi leadership is quite unstable, making bad choice after bad choice. However, the Middle East is a major strategic concern for the U.S., and we don't intend to throw that overboard. The partnership is weakened, in part because the U.S. no longer relies on Middle East oil, and in part because the Saudis keep doing things that annoy us and create problems. But in the end, the U.S. wants a Middle East that it can influence - "control" is no longer an option, plus we have our own problems in Asia with a rising China, and Saudi Arabia is part of that formula, along with the other monarchies of the Gulf, and Israel.

Clinton will be friendlier to the Saudis than Obama, because the latter resented Saudi Arabia's efforts, as well as Turkey's, to pull the U.S. into the Syrian civil war and Yemen. Clinton was all for attacking Assad and getting directly involved in Syria. She still wants to set up a "no fly zone," something that would directly challenge the Russian air force. If Trump gets elected? Well, besides me moving to Mars, who knows?

Republicans, not all, but most, like the monarchy and hate Iran and many of them follow a version of Christianity that is a little like Wahhabism, so I imagine relations would be good. But with Trump's out-of-control Islamophobia, and his general "bull in a china shop" approach to foreign policy, who knows? As I said, Olympus Mons is looking pretty good these days. And as the movie "The Martian" demonstrated, you can always grow potatoes. We Irish are good at that.

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