

The War on Yemen: Where Oil and Geopolitics Mix

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Everything about the war on Yemen is a smokescreen. Concealed behind the smoke is a tale of geopolitics and petro-politics that aims to control the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden.

The House of Saud and a military coalition that consists mostly of anachronistic monarchies are claiming to bomb Yemen as a means of saving the Yemenite people and their transition to democracy. The irony should not be lost on observers that recognize that the Saudi-led coalition — consisting of the Kingdom of Morocco, UAE, Kuwait, Kingdom of Bahrain, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Qatar, Pakistan, Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia itself — is comprised of an unhealthy mixture of backward family dictatorships and corrupt governments that essentially are the antithesis of democracy.

Just as important to note, the Saudi-led war on Yemen is a criminal act. The military attack on Yemen was not authorized by the UN Security Council. Nor can the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia justify its bombing campaign under Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, because Yemen and Ansarullah (the Houthi movement) pose no threat of war to Riyadh and never had any intentions of igniting a war in the Arabian Peninsula. This is why the Kingdom's war on Yemen is categorically a violation of the Charter of the UN and international law.

The Houthis never wanted to aggravate Saudi Arabia let alone start a war against the Kingdom. Days before the Saudi-led war on Yemen, the Houthis had stealthily sent a delegation to Riyadh to establish an understanding with the Saudis and to calm them down.

Instead of opposing the illegal war on Yemen, Washington and its allies, including Britain, have thrown their political support behind the bombing of Yemen by the malfeasant Royal Saudi Air Force, which has committed war crime by intentionally bombing civilian infrastructure, including [refugee camps](#) and [children's schools](#).

It is no coincidence that most of the victims in Yemen are civilians. This is part of a Saudi strategy of establishing rapid military dominance, which is colloquially called “*shock and awe*.” Ring any bells? This is a strategy taken right out of Uncle Sam's playbook that intends to demoralize resistance and scare the opponent into surrendering.

Pentagon's not-so-hidden bloody hands

Not eager to reveal their roles in another illegal war on another sovereign country, the US and undoubtedly several of its NATO allies have decided to keep low profiles in the attack on Yemen. This is why Washington has opted to publicly present itself as only providing

logistical and intelligence support to the Saudis for the war on Yemen.

The war on Yemen, however, would not be possible without the US. Not only have countries like the US and Britain provided military hardware to Saudi Arabia, but they are providing it with bombs for the attack, refueling its warplanes, providing intelligence, and giving the Kingdom logistical support.

Does this sound like non-involvement? Can the US really be considered a non-combatant in the war?

History — and very recent history at that too — is repeating itself in Yemen.

Observers should recall how Washington deceptively claimed that it did not want to go to war with the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 2011. The US publicly let the British and French take the lead in the NATO war on Tripoli while the Pentagon was actually the main force behind the war. US President Barack Obama called this a strategy of "[*leading from behind.*](#)"



A Saudi soldier loads ammunition at their position at Saudi Arabia's border with Yemen April 6, 2015.
(Reuters/Faisal Al Nasser)

The US strategy in Yemen is not too different from that of the NATO war on Libya. It is another case of cloak and dagger where the US does not want to be seen pulling the strings behind the aggression and violation of international law.

The Saudis would never have dared attack Yemen without Washington's green light or help.

The Pentagon is even selecting the bombing targets in Yemen for the Kingdom. *“American military planners are using live intelligence feeds from surveillance flights over Yemen to help Saudi Arabia decide what and where to bomb,”* the Wall Street Journal casually [reported](#) when the war began. National Security Council Spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan, even stated that the US had established *“[a joint planning cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate](#)”* the attack on Yemen.

This is why it should not come as a surprise that Saudi Arabia used Washington as the platform to announce the launching of its war on Yemen. The Associated Press even noticed the weird podium that the Kingdom had selected. *“In an unusual tableau, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States announced the rare military operation by his country at a Washington news conference about a [half-hour after the bombing began](#),”* the Associated Press reported on March 25.

Double standards: Remember EuroMaidan in Ukraine?

One ugly double-standard after another ugly double-standard sticks out. While the House of Saud argued that it has intervened militarily in Yemen to restore Abd-Rabbuh Manşour Al-Hadi, who Riyadh claims is the legitimate president of Yemen, it has pushed for a war on Syria and worked with the US to topple Bashar Assad’s government.

Washington’s reaction is even more lopsided. When EuroMaidan was underway in Kiev and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was forced to flee in 2014, the US and its allies claimed that Yanukovich had lost all legitimacy because he fled Ukraine. Even as recently as February 2015, US officials have maintained this argument. *“Well, let’s all refresh ourselves on the facts here. President — former President Yanukovich abdicated his responsibilities by fleeing Kiev during a political crisis,”* the US Department of State’s spokesperson, Jennifer Psaki, [told](#) reporters during a press briefing.

Well Mr. Al-Hadi also fled his country. Nevertheless, the same measuring stick that was used in Ukraine is not applied to assess Al-Hadi’s legitimacy. Unlike its position on Ukraine, Washington claims that Al-Hadi is still the legitimate leader of Yemen.

The US is even willing to put aside its differences and work with Sudan, which the [US Department of State](#) claims is a state sponsor of terrorism, to bomb Yemen into accepting Al-Hadi back.

The basis for all of these contradictory positions is really a marker of US interests and Machiavellianism. It has nothing to do with legitimacy, democracy, or human rights.

Al-Hadi’s (il)legitimacy

While there some parallels between the two, there are key differences between Ukraine and Yemen. These key differences set Yanukovich and Al-Hadi apart and are what made Yanukovich legitimate and Al-Hadi illegitimate.

Firstly, unlike President Yanukovich, Al-Hadi resigned from office. For arguments sake, however, we will not dwell on this. There are much more important points for evaluating Al-Hadi’s legitimacy.

Unlike Yanukovich, Al-Hadi’s term had actually expired. While President Yanukovich was elected into office by the Ukrainian people for his term, President Al-Hadi’s term was

extended through an administrative process. To quote [Reuters](#): “Yemen’s political factions extended the president’s term by a year” on January 21, 2014. Al-Hadi was only kept in office to execute reforms, and this is the criterion for his legitimacy.

Under the above context, it has to be remembered that Al-Hadi was selected as a transitional figure. He became the president of Yemen to usher democracy and his term was extended in 2014 for this purpose. Instead, Al-Hadi dragged his feet on the democratic reforms — the fundamental basis for his legitimacy — that he was supposed to institute in Yemen. He was not fulfilling his mandate to share power and to enfranchise Yemen’s different political factions.

President Al-Hadi actually tried to concentrate power into his own hands while working to weaken Yemen’s other factions, including the Houthis, through gerrymandering by redrawing Yemen’s administrative regions.



People gather on the wreckage of a house destroyed by an air strike in the Bait Rejal village west of Yemen’s capital Sanaa April 7, 2015. (Reuters/Khaled Abdullah)

Petro-politics & Bab-el-Mandeb Strait: Another war for control of oil?

The geopolitical significance of Yemen has weighed heavily in the equation. This war is as much about oil as it is about Saudi suzerainty and the House of Saud’s objectives to make Yemen a vassal state. Alongside Djibouti, Yemen forms part of an important maritime chokepoint, called the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (also known as the Gateway of Tears/Anguish), which connects the Indian Ocean’s Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

It is no exaggerations to call the Mandeb Strait one of the world’s arteries. As a maritime chokepoint, the strait is just as important as Egypt’s Suez Canal — which connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea — and the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, because Bab-el-Mandeb overlooks one of the most strategic and important global corridors for the transportation of energy and international commerce.

Preventing US and Saudi rivals from gaining a strategic foothold over the Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden is a major objective of the war on Yemen. The US and the House of Saud see control over the Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden as strategically important in the scenario of a conflict with Iran where Tehran closes the Strait of Hormuz to oil shipments and international shipping. As the New York Times [points out](#), “Nearly all Saudi commerce is via sea, and direct access to the Arabian Sea would diminish dependence on the Persian Gulf — and fears of Iran’s ability to cut off the Strait of Hormuz.” Plan B in such a scenario for the Kingdom includes [using Aden and other Yemeni ports](#).

Support for the balkanization of Yemen chimes with this and ideas about dividing Yemen have been floating around since the Arab Spring. In 2013, the [New York Times](#) had this to propose about a Saudi takeover and annexation of southern Yemen: “Arabs are abuzz about

part of South Yemen's eventually merging with Saudi Arabia. Most southerners are Sunni, as is most of Saudi Arabia; many have family in the kingdom. The poorest Arabs, Yemenis could benefit from Saudi riches. In turn, Saudis would gain access to the Arabian Sea for trade, diminishing dependence on the Persian Gulf and fear of Iran's virtual control over the Strait of Hormuz."

Houthi control over Yemen, however, complicates and obscures US and Saudi plans.

Mandeb Strait and control of strategic chokepoints

As Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah has rightly pointed out, the Houthis and the Yemeni military are capable [of closing the Mandeb Strait](#). One of the reasons that Saudi Ambassador to Washington Adel Al-Jubeir stressed that the Houthis should not have control over ballistic missiles, heavy military hardware, and Yemeni bases is because the US and Saudi Arabia want to neutralize the potential of Yemen to close the Mandeb Strait, especially if Yemen should coordinate with Tehran as an Iranian ally in the future. In this regard, the Saudis have attacked Yemen's missile depots. The aim of the air strikes include not only preventing Yemen's missile arsenal from being used to retaliate against any exertions of Saudi force, but to also prevent them from being on hand to a Yemeni government aligned to Tehran or other US rivals.

Moreover, it has to be remembered that control over Yemen is not only important for mitigating the effects from a scenario where the Strait of Hormuz are closed by Tehran. Control over Mandeb Strait is also important for tightening the noose around the Iranians and in the scenario of a war with Iran. The same can be argued about a US strategy in the Indian Ocean against the Chinese.

Back in 2011, when Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin was serving in Brussels as Moscow's envoy to NATO, he noted that Washington was not only planning on taking over Syria as a beachhead for a war with Iran, but that the US and its allies would later try to control Yemen as the next step in preparing the [grounds for an attack on Iran](#). At the time, RIA Novosti (now renamed Sputnik) [reported](#) that *"Rogozin agreed with the opinion expressed by some experts that Syria and later Yemen could be NATO's last steps on the way to launch an attack on Iran."*

Why did Netanyahu warn US Congress about Yemen?

Reports that Israel is a not-so-secret member of the Saudi-led coalition that is bombing Yemen need to be read, understood, analyzed in the above context about the Mandeb Strait too. Netanyahu's unspoken concern is that Yemen could cut off Israel's access to the Indian Ocean and, more specifically, its ability to easily deploy its Dolphin class submarines to the Iranian coast in the Persian Gulf.



Netanyahu (L) acknowledges applause at the end of his speech to a joint meeting of Congress in the House Chamber on Capitol Hill in Washington, March 3, 2015. (Reuters/Gary Cameron)

Who is threatening who? According to the Sunday Times and Israeli sources, [three nuclear-armed Israeli](#) submarines are deployed near Iran's shores at all times waiting on standby for orders from Tel Aviv to bomb Iran. In part, this is why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was ringing the [alarm bells about Yemen and the Mandeb Strait](#) in the Washington Beltway when he went to speak on Capitol Hill on March 4.

Israel is concerned about Yemen because an independent Yemeni government could inhibit Israel's nuclear-armed submarines from easily deploying from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf to menace Iran with the threat of an attack.

Iran and the Houthis

Just like the case with Ukraine, all the problems in Yemen are also being blamed on a nearby country. While Russia has been blamed as the scapegoat for the plethora of problems in Ukraine, Iran has been blamed for the Saudi war on Yemen.

The Saudis are falsely depicting the Houthis as Iranian proxies or allies, because the movement is composed of Zaidi (Fiver) Shiites. The Houthis, however, are independent from Tehran and have agency as political actors; they are not Iranian proxies whatsoever. A common faith has not brought the Houthis and the Iranians, who are predominately Jaffari (Twelver) Shiites, together. Politics is what has brought the two together.

The sectarian language that falsely depicts Yemen as a battleground between Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims is ill informed or intended to mislead people by design about the actual

politics and history of Yemen. This type of sectarian language was never used when the House of Saud supported King Mohammed Al-Badr's Zaidi imamate against the republicans or Ali Abdullah Saleh, who himself is a Zaidi Shiite, against the Houthis.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah is very accurate when he points out that different regional players are turning to Tehran for help, because either Saudi Arabia will not help them or is pushing them in the direction of Iran through its foolish policies. This has been precisely the case for the Houthis. If it was not for the flawed policies of the US and Saudi Arabia, the Houthis would never have turned to Iran in the first place.

The Houthis also sent delegations to Moscow and Beijing to overcome US and Saudi efforts to isolate and weaken them internationally.

Will Yemen become Saudi Arabia's Vietnam?

Historically, foreign intervention in Yemen has largely proven to be a disaster. Yemeni terrain is rugged and the elevated interior topography is perfect for guerilla warfare. Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt lost many soldiers in North Yemen during its civil war, which was a major liability for Cairo.

When Ibn Saud was conquering Arabia, he was stopped in Yemen by King Yahya.

In more recent history or times, when Saudi Arabia invaded Yemen to fight the Houthis in 2009 and 2010, it was effectively defeated again in Yemen. The Houthis even ended up capturing towns inside Saudi Arabia.

Ground operations will not be a walk in the park for Saudi Arabia. Any invasion and occupation of Yemen will prove to be a disaster for the Kingdom. There are also complex tribal links between southern Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In the chaos a Pandora's Box could be ignited that would result in rebellions inside the Kingdom itself.

The House of Saud seems to be cognizant of the dangers. This may be why it is pushing Pakistan and Egypt to send their troops.

Someone should tell the House of Saud that according to the Chinese general Sun Tzu, *"The best war is the one that never has to be fought."*

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