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Yemen: America's Shame

By Justin Raimondo
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The ridiculous truth is that the imposition of a travel ban on Yemen – in addition to six other countries – has evoked more anguish than America's major role in making that country unlivable. Here's a very sad story about the plight of a young Yemeni girl who is being blocked from entering the US – but where is the outrage about what's being done to her homeland with our tax dollars and in our name?

And make no mistake: the Saudi invasion of Yemen on behalf of a “government” that has no popular support and was kicked out of office by its disgusted citizens is one of the worst atrocities in recent history. More than 25,000 have died, many more have been grievously wounded, and the country is being swept by famine. The result has been the empowerment of America's worst enemies – and by that I mean not just al-Qaeda.

Yemen has been in turmoil since the end of the cold war, with a many-sided civil war making normal life nearly impossible. Yet things have gotten much worse since the 2015 Saudi invasion, which aims at installing a puppet government and crushing the Houthi insurgency in the north. The Saudis and Yemeni government troops have generally ignored al-Qaeda, which controls a swathe of territory in the southeast, instead concentrating their efforts on bombing civilians in Houthi areas.

The Houthis are adherents of the Zaydi faith, a dissident sect of Islam, often likened to the Shi'ites – a facile comparison, since there are significant theological differences. They have long

maintained their autonomy in the face of successive (and notoriously unstable) central governments, but were pushed to the brink when the Saudis sent in Sunni fundamentalist preachers who challenged the authority of local religious and tribal authorities. This led to the rise of the “Believing Youth,” a Zaydi revivalist group that eventually coalesced into a military force.

As the so-called Arab Awakening swept through the Middle East, destabilizing longstanding governments, Yemen was no exception: massive demonstrations eventually forced President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had reigned as undisputed despot for thirty years, to resign in favor of his Vice President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi – whose “election” in 2012 was made possible by the fact that he was the only candidate.

Yet this did not appease the various tribal and factional groups that had been unleashed by the end of Saleh’s rule: it only emboldened them. It wasn’t long before Hadi, too, was driven out of office, and forced to flee: the Houthis took over the capital, Sana’a, and declared the establishment of a “Revolutionary Committee.” Hadi fled to Aden, while the former President Saleh denounced him and demanded that he go into exile: troops still loyal to Saleh allied with the Houthis.

In 2015, the Saudis invaded, declaring their support for Hadi and bombing Sana’a and the Houthi strongholds in the north. Hadi and his Saudi masters say that the Houthis are being funded and trained by Iran and Hezbollah, but in the past US government officials have been dubious about this claim.

Hadi has received unconditional support from Washington in spite of his inability to either control the country or confront the growing influence of al-Qaeda. Last week, the US launched an attack on an al-Qaeda redoubt, killing a number of civilians – including the young daughter of US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who was himself killed by the US along with his teenage son in 2011. One US soldier was killed, and three were injured.

The irony here is that the Houthis are militant opponents of the Sunni supremacist al-Qaeda, and are the only military formation indigenous to the country capable of confronting and defeating them. Yet the US is aiding the Saudis and the Hadi regime in their merciless war against the Houthis and allied tribes, while al-Qaeda continues to make gains.

All of which raises a larger issue: the US-Saudi relationship under President Donald Trump. Despite a recent conversation between the Saudi king and the President, Trump has never said a good word about the Kingdom or its rulers. He vocally supported the campaign to release the famous “28 pages” of a joint congressional report on the role of foreign governments in aiding the 9/11 hijackers, which exposed the part played by Saudi officials in facilitating the attack. Indeed, fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were Saudi citizens. Highlighting the danger posed by “radical Islamic terrorism” was a major theme of Trump’s presidential campaign, and it continues to be the overarching theme of his administration. The Saudis have long been the main perpetrators of this ideology, funding radical mosques and their demagogic imams, and setting up madrassas that spread the doctrines that energize al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

In trying to imagine what Trump's policy toward the Saudis will be, I'm reminded of a passage from a recent essay by Branko Milanovic, a visiting professor at City University of New York's Graduate Center, in which he wrote:

"The Western elites treat Trump as they would treat a tiger with whom they are unwillingly locked in a cage: they try to be friendly to the tiger hoping to avoid being eaten, but they hope that the tiger would soon be taken out of the cage."

This applies to the Middle Eastern elites as well. The Saudis hope to deploy Trump as a battering ram against their Iranian archrivals, but the fear is that they will also be battered in the process. Riyadh is quite justified in this fear. The Saudi foreign minister has decried the seven-nation travel ban as "very very dangerous," in part because it applies to Sudan, one of their allies in the Yemen war, and in part because, if applied across the board, it could very well wind up being applied to them.

Trump's foreign policy predilections are fraught with contradictions: on the one hand, he's a critic of the decision by the Bush administration to invade and occupy Iraq, but on the other hand he claims we left "too soon." He inveighs against the Obama administration's efforts to overthrow Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad, and his National Security advisor, Mike Flynn, was fired from his post as head of Obama's Defense Intelligence Agency for his criticism of our Syrian policy. And yet Flynn – and Trump – are also hot under the collar about the alleged growth of Iranian influence in the region, denouncing the Iran deal to limit their nuclear program as a "bad deal" (while saying they wouldn't ditch it). Yet the Iranians have been fighting ISIS alongside the Iraqis, who are, in turn, our allies – at least they *were* our allies, until the Trump administration barred Iraqi nationals from the US for three months.

Another contradiction is Trump's often-stated desire to repair relations with Russia, and even to enlist their help in eradicating ISIS. Yet the Russians are in cahoots with the Iranians in Syria, and have defended Tehran against American attempts to strong-arm them. The present balance of forces in the Middle East pits the Saudis and their Sunni allies against Iran, Syria, and, standing behind them, Russia, with Turkey (moving away from Washington) and Egypt standing on the sidelines.

A Trumpian rapprochement with Moscow would mean a seismic shift in the delicate balance of Middle Eastern forces – away from the Sunni-centric policy that motivated our support for Syria's Islamist "rebels" and our appeasement of Riyadh.

As this shift takes place, a reconsideration of our policy in Yemen is an absolute necessity – on strategic *and* moral grounds. Washington's support for the Saudi Kingdom's vicious war in Yemen is unconscionable. The Saudis have been committing war crimes with impunity – and with our help. How is it in America's interests to reduce Yemen, one of the poorest nations on earth, to a pile of rubble? How does it serve us to give unconditional support to Saudi Arabia, a country that has birthed more terrorists than any other in the Muslim world?

Is that putting "America first," or is it putting the Saudis first?