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The Trump Administration May Increase the U.S. Role in the War on Yemen

By Daniel Larison
February 4, 2017

The Trump administration is considering ^[1] even deeper involvement in the indefensible war on Yemen:

On Thursday, the United States diverted a destroyer to the Yemeni coast to protect shipping from Iranian-backed rebels, and **is weighing tougher steps including drone strikes and deploying military advisers to assist local forces** [bold mine-DL], according to officials familiar with the discussions.

“There’s a desire to look at a very aggressive pushback” against Iran in Yemen within the administration, a source advising the Trump national security team said. Given the public rhetoric and private deliberations in the White House, **the United States could “become more directly involved in trying to fight the Houthis” alongside Saudi and Emirati allies** [bold mine-DL], said the source, who asked not to be named as he had not been authorized by the White House to comment.

President Donald Trump’s aides see Yemen as an important battleground to signal U.S. resolve against Iran [bold mine-DL] and to break with what they consider the previous administration’s failure to confront Tehran’s growing power in the region.

As if it weren't bad enough that the U.S. has enabled the Saudi-led wrecking and starvation of Yemen for the last twenty-two months, Trump may make the U.S. even more complicit in a reckless, unnecessary war that has nothing to do with U.S. security. Worse still, this is being justified as sending a "signal" to Iran, which is not a party to the conflict and offers the Houthis negligible support. It isn't possible to "push back" against Iran in Yemen because Iran's involvement in the war is minimal to non-existent. Ideologically-driven analysis that invents ^[2] an Iranian "empire" spreading across the region has been misleading Americans for years, but thanks to the many Iran hawks in the Trump administration it is now in danger of driving terrible policy decisions.

Contrary to the delusions of Iran hawks and the propaganda of the Saudis, the Houthis are not Iranian proxies ^[3] and are not under their control. Iran won't perceive a larger U.S. role in Yemen as proof of our "resolve." They will probably see it as proof of the administration's ignorance and bad judgment. Giving more aid to the Saudi-led coalition in its attack on Yemen to show "resolve" against Iran is therefore pointless. It will do nothing to Iran while inflicting additional harm on the people of Yemen and increasing the costs to the U.S. in this disgraceful war.

Increasing support for the war on Yemen in the name of combating Iranian influence would be to attack the wrong target because of a stupid ideological preoccupation and because of a serious misunderstanding of both Yemen and the conflict happening there. It would be akin to invading Iraq in the name of fighting jihadism. Perversely, the Trump administration may be about to compound one of Obama's gravest errors while pretending to break with Obama's policies. U.S. backing for the coalition's disastrous military campaign has been a shameful, inexcusable policy for almost two years, but this would make things much worse.