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Why Trump Should Stay Out of Yemen

By Patrick Cockburn
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in the Middle East by escalating American involvement in the civil war in Yemen. Wrecked by years of conflict, the unfortunate country will supposedly be the place where the US will start to confront and roll back Iranian influence in the region as a whole.

To this end, the US is to increase military support for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and local Yemeni allies in a bid to overthrow the Houthis – a militarised Shia movement strong in northern Yemen – fighting alongside much of the Yemeni army, which remains loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

If ever there was a complicated and unwinnable war to keep out of, it is this one.

Despite Saudi allegations, there is little evidence that the Houthis get more than rhetorical support from Iran and this is far less than Saudi Arabia gets from the US and Britain. There is no sign that the Saudi-led air bombardment, which has been going on for two years, will decisively break the military stalemate. All that Saudi intervention has achieved so far is to bring Yemen close to all out famine. “Seven million Yemenis are ever closer to starvation,” said Jamie McGoldrick, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen in an appeal for more aid this week.

But at the very moment that the UN is warning about the calamity facing Yemen, the US State Department has given permission for a resumption of the supply of precision guided weapons to Saudi Arabia. These sales were suspended last October by President Obama after Saudi aircraft

bombed a funeral in the capital Sana'a, killing more than 100 mourners. Ever since Saudi Arabia started its bombing campaign in March 2015, the US has been refuelling its aircraft and has advisors in the Saudi operational headquarters. For the weapons sales to go ahead all that is needed is White House permission.

A bizarre element in Trump's decision to take the offensive against Iran in Yemen is that the Iranians provide very little financial and military aid to the Houthis. Saudi propaganda, often echoed by the international media, speaks of the Houthis as "Iran-backed", but Yemen is almost entirely cut off from the outside world by Saudi ground, air and sea forces.

Even food imports, on which Yemenis are wholly reliant, are more and more difficult to bring in through the half-wrecked port of Hodeida on the western coast.

The resumption of the supply of precision-guided munitions is not the first indication that the Trump administration sees Yemen as a good place to put into operation a more hawkish strategy in the region. On 29 January, days after he took office, Trump sent some 30 members of US Navy Seal Team 6, backed by helicopters, to attack an impoverished village called al Ghayil in al-Bayda province in southern Yemen. The purpose of the raid, according to the Pentagon, was intelligence-gathering – though it may well have been a failed attempt to kill or capture Qassim al Rimi, the head of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Whatever the aim of the attack, it swiftly turned into a bloody fiasco, with as many 29 civilians in al Ghayil killed along with one Seal, Chief Petty Officer William Owens. The Pentagon's explanation of what happened sounds very much like similar attempts to explain away civilian killed and wounded over the past half century in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. The head of the US military's central command, General Joseph Votel, told a Senate hearing that between four and 12 civilians might have died in the raid, adding that an "exhaustive after-action review" had not found incompetence, poor decision making or bad judgement.

For its part, the Trump administration tried to shut down any investigation into what had really happened at al Ghayil by saying that an inquiry would be an affront into the legacy of the fallen Seal, William Owens. This stance was swiftly criticised by the father of the dead man, Bill Owens, who said the government owed his son an inquiry. "Don't hide behind my son's death to prevent an investigation," he said.

In the event, the White House and the Pentagon have so far hidden fairly successfully from any real examination of the destruction of this remote Yemeni village, perhaps calculating that no independent journalist could make the dangerous journey to the site of the attack. But a lengthy on-the-spot report by Iona Craig, entitled "Death in al Ghayil" and appearing in the online investigative magazine *The Intercept*, convincingly rebuts the official version of events, little of which appears to be true.

Craig quotes surviving villagers as saying that the Seal team came under heavy fire from the beginning and attack helicopters were sent in. She writes: "In what seemed to be blind panic, the gunships bombarded the entire village, striking more than a dozen buildings, razing stone dwellings where families slept, and wiping out more than 120 goats, sheep and donkeys." At

least six women and 10 children were killed in their houses as projectiles tore through the straw and timber roofs or were mown down as they ran into the open.

The Trump administration says this was a “highly successful operation” and there had been an assault on a fortified compound – except that there are no such compounds in the village. Trump claimed that a “large amount of vital intelligence” had been obtained and the Pentagon released video footage seized in al Ghayil only to later admit that the footage had been around for 10 years and contained nothing new.

Ironically, the villagers who fought back against the Seal team actually belonged to the forces opposing the Houthis and the pro-Saleh forces and, on the night of the assault, “local armed tribesmen assumed the Houthis had arrived to capture their village”. It was only when they saw coloured laser lights coming from the weapons of the attacking force that they realised that they were fighting Americans. As the Seals retreated, with one dead and two seriously wounded, the MV-22 Osprey that was to extract them crash-landed and had to be destroyed by other US aircraft.

The Trump administration’s first counter-terrorism operation was a failure for the US and much worse for the Yemeni villagers who are dead, wounded, homeless and have seen their livestock, on which they depended for their livelihoods, all killed. But when Senator John McCain, who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that the raid has been a failure he was promptly denounced by Trump who said that Owens “had died on a winning mission” and to debate its outcome would “only embolden the enemy”.

International media coverage tends to focus on the wars in Syria and Iraq, but in those countries Trump and the Pentagon are largely following the policies and plans of Obama.

It is in Yemen that new policies are beginning to emerge as the Trump administration carries out its first counter-terrorism operation against al Qaeda – if that was what it was – leading to the slaughter of civilians and a botched cover-up. Yemen may soon join Afghanistan and Iraq as wars in which the US wishes it had never got involved.