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## As Yemen war enters third year, Pentagon moves to escalate slaughter

By Bill Van Auken

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The Pentagon has formally asked the Trump White House to lift limited restrictions imposed by the Obama administration on US military aid to the Saudi Arabian monarchy's near genocidal war against the impoverished people of Yemen.

The *Washington Post* reported Monday that Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis, a recently-retired US Marine general, had submitted a memo earlier this month to Trump's national security adviser H.R. McMaster, an active duty US Army lieutenant general, for the approval of stepped-up support for military operations being conducted in Yemen by both the Saudi regime and its principal Arab ally, the United Arab Emirates.

The memo, according to the *Post*, stressed that such US military aid would help to combat "a common threat."

This supposed "threat" is posed by Iran, US imperialism's principal regional rival for hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. Both the Saudi monarchy and the Trump administration have repeatedly charged, without providing any significant supporting evidence, that Iran has armed, trained and directed the Houthi rebels who seized control of the Yemeni capital and much of the country, toppling the US-Saudi puppet regime of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in 2014.

A major escalation of the US intervention in Yemen will be directed principally at provoking a military confrontation with Tehran, with the aim of weakening Iranian influence throughout the region. Trump himself campaigned in the 2016 election denouncing the Obama administration for being too “soft” on Iran and for joining the other major powers in negotiating what he characterized as a “disastrous” nuclear agreement with Tehran. His advisers, including his ousted first national security adviser, Gen. Michael Flynn, and Defense Secretary Mattis, have all voiced bellicose hostility to Iran.

The immediate impetus for the call for increased US aid to the Saudi-led war is reportedly a proposed Emirati operation to seize control of the key Red Sea port of Hodeida. The effect of such an offensive would be to cut off the large portion of the country and its population under Houthi control from any lifeline to the outside world. Fully 70 percent of the country’s imports now come through the port. Even before the war, Yemen was dependent upon imports for 90 percent of its food. Aid agencies have warned that a military offensive on the port could tip the country into mass starvation.

The proposed US escalation in Yemen coincides with the second anniversary of the Saudi war on the country, launched on March 26, 2015 in the form of an unending bombing campaign directed largely against civilian targets, along with a halting offensive on the ground.

The anniversary was marked in the capital of Sanaa and other Yemeni cities by demonstrations of hundreds of thousands denouncing the murderous Saudi military campaign. The Houthis have won support that extends far beyond their base in the country’s Zaidi-Shia minority because of popular hatred for the Saudi monarchy and its crimes.

As the war enters its third year, Yemen is teetering on the brink of mass starvation, confronting one of the worst humanitarian crises anywhere on the planet. This war, waged by the obscenely wealthy royal families of the gulf oil sheikdoms against what was already the poorest nation in the Arab world, has killed some 12,000 Yemenis, the overwhelming majority of them civilians, and wounded at least 40,000 more.

Saudi airstrikes have targeted hospitals, schools, factories, food warehouses, fields and even livestock. Coupled with a de facto naval blockade, the aim of this total war against Yemen’s civilian population is to starve the Yemenis into submission. A US-backed campaign to seize the port of Hodeida would serve to tighten this deadly stranglehold.

In a statement issued Monday marking the beginning of the war’s third year, the United Nations emergency relief agency reported that “nearly 19 million Yemenis—over two-thirds of the population—need humanitarian assistance. Seven million Yemenis are facing starvation.”

UNICEF, the UN’s children’s agency, reported that roughly half a million children are suffering from acute malnutrition in Yemen, while 1,546 have been killed and 2,450 have been disabled by the fighting. The agency said that the rate of child deaths had increased by 70 percent over the past year, while the rate of acute malnutrition had increased by 200 percent since 2014.

The deliberate Saudi bombing of hospitals and clinics has left 15 million people without any access to health care, while the destruction of water and sanitation facilities has led to epidemics of cholera and diarrhea. It is estimated that as many as 10,000 children have lost their lives due to the lack of clean water and medical services since 2015.

Washington, under both the Obama and the Trump administrations, has been fully complicit in the war crimes being carried out by the Saudi regime and its allies against the Yemeni people. Washington poured a staggering \$115 billion worth of arms into the Saudi kingdom under the Obama administration, resupplying bombs and missiles dropped on Yemeni homes, hospitals and schools. It set up a joint US-Saudi logistical and intelligence center to guide the war and provided aerial refueling by US planes to assure that the bombing could continue round the clock.

While a part of this decisive military aid was curtailed for public relations purposes following the horrific October 2016 Saudi bombing of a funeral ceremony in Sanaa that killed over 150 people, the US Navy entered directly into the conflict that same month, firing Tomahawk missiles at Houthi targets based on unsubstantiated charges that missiles had been fired at US ships.

Nonetheless, the request by Mattis would mark a qualitative escalation of the US intervention. While the *Post* reported that an Emirati request for US Special Operations troops to participate directly in the siege of the port of Hodeida was not part of Mattis's proposal, it went on to warn that the Gulf sheikdom's military "may not be capable of such a large operation, including holding and stabilizing any reclaimed area, without sucking in US forces." Indeed, the Emirati army is in large measure a mercenary force, having recruited former members of the Colombian, Salvadoran and Chilean military to do the ruling royal family's dirty work.

The *Post* goes on to report: "A plan developed by the U.S. Central Command to assist the operation includes other elements that are not part of Mattis's request, officials said. While Marine Corps ships have been off the coast of Yemen for about a year, it was not clear what support role they might play."

As numerous reports have indicated, the Trump White House has essentially given free rein to Mattis and the US military commanders to conduct armed operations as they see fit. The result has been the more than doubling of the number of US troops on the ground in Syria along with an escalation of the US intervention in Iraq, as well as a request for another 5,000 troops to be deployed in Afghanistan.

In Yemen, they are preparing to drag the American people into another criminal war against one of the world's most vulnerable populations, threatening to hasten the deaths of millions of starving people. The strategic aims underlying this vast war crime are the imposition of US imperialist hegemony over the Middle East through a military confrontation with Iran and the preparation for a global conflict with Washington's principal rivals, Russia and China.