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Aiding Saudi Arabia's Slaughter in Yemen

By Dennis J Bernstein
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Saudi Arabia continues to escalate its war against Yemen, relying on the strong support of the U.S. government even as the poverty-stricken Yemenis are pushed toward starvation, according to investigative reporter/historian Gareth Porter.

Porter says the U.S. corporate press has failed to report the Saudi slaughter in a way in which it could be fully understood.

I spoke with Porter, an independent investigative journalist who wrote *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare* and whose articles on Yemen include “Justifying the Saudi Slaughter in Yemen.”

Dennis Bernstein: Is Saudi Arabia using starvation as a weapon of war against Yemen where there is mass hunger bordering on a famine? Gareth Porter has been writing extensively about this for Consortiumnews and other sources. I want to ... begin with a bit of an overview because a lot of people don't really understand the level of suffering, and the situation in Yemen. So, just give us a brief overview of what it's like on the ground now. How bad is it? And then I want to talk to you about this new policy about starvation as a weapon.

Gareth Porter: Sure. Well, unfortunately the way this war in Yemen has been covered, thus far, with a few exceptions, of course, the public does have the impression that this is a war in which a few thousand Yemenis have been killed, and therefore, it's kind of second to third tier, in terms

of wars in the Middle East. Because people are aware that Syria is one in which hundreds of thousands of people have died. So, and I think that's the frame that most people have on the conflict in Yemen.

And that's very unfortunate, because maybe it's true that it's only been several thousands, or let's say ten thousand plus people, who have been killed by the bombs, directly. But what's really been happening for well over a year, I think it's fair to say a year to a year and a half, is that more people are dying of starvation-related or malnutrition-related diseases and starvation, than from the bombs themselves. And this is a fact which I'm sorry to say simply has not gotten into the press coverage of the war, thus far.

And, of course, the Saudis launched the war in late March, 2015 with the full support of the Obama administration. They had that agreement ahead of time, before they started, that the United States would provide the logistical support, the bombs, help in targeting, not explicitly targeting but sort of technical assistance in making decisions about how to approach the war.

And, more important than any of those things, in some ways, was the assurance the United States government would provide the political/diplomatic cover, for this war. And I think that's really the crucial problem here. That the Saudis have felt that they could get away with not just continuing to bomb civilian targets, and infrastructure targets, and, essentially establishing a thorough going blockade, economic blockade of the country, preventing the fuel, the food, and the medicine from coming into the country that this poor... really the poorest nation in the Middle East have to have in order to survive. But now, as you suggested in your intro, is actually trying to impose, to use starvation as a weapon.

DB: And, just to be clear, how bad is the situation on the ground? How many people are at risk? Who's at risk? What do we know about that, before we get into this other stuff?



GP: Well, I've been trying to get through to somebody in the United Nations, specialized agencies, or volunteer agencies who could speak more precisely to that than has been the case up till now, publicly. And so far, at least, I have not succeeded in getting anyone to say...to go

beyond the formal position of the U.N. system, of the humanitarian system of the United Nations, which is that as many as 462,000, I believe, is the most recent figure.

Yemenis face a sort of Status 4 of the situation as far as malnutrition, severe malnutrition is concerned. That is, as you indicated, the closest stage to actual famine to starvation. Meaning that people are going to die of starvation.

And it means that they are ... at the tipping point. It could happen anytime. And, may already be happening. In fact, I would venture to say from what I have been able to pick up, it is probably already happening that thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, are right now in the process of dying of starvation in Yemen.

And so this is a problem of... a humanitarian crisis that... by which, in comparison to which the Syrian situation pales, or what we were told about the Syrian situation, during the height of the bombing, the Russian-Syrian bombing of Aleppo last year. This is many, many times worse. Far more serious in terms of the number of deaths that are at stake, lives and deaths.

DB: I want you to talk about, it's rather troubling to see this, and entertain this notion of using food and starvation as a weapon of war. But now we see a troubling collaboration in which the Saudis are trying to break the Yemen Central Bank which is sort of standing between this, where they are now, and absolute famine. You want to talk about that policy? I know the U.S. is deeply engaged.

GP: Sure. Absolutely. I mean the point here is that, as you say, the Central Bank of Yemen was, last year, the last refuge, if you will, the last thing standing between many hundreds of thousands of people and potential famine, because it was providing what little liquidity was available in that country, for the purchase of food stuffs. Very, very few food stuffs still getting into the country. But what there was, you had to have money in order to purchase it. And liquidity was very, very scarce. So the Central Bank was the only thing that was guaranteeing a minimum of liquidity in the Yemeni economy.

And I'm sorry to say that now it's too late. The Yemeni government, really the Saudis behind them, of course, manipulating the Yemeni government, decided, in their wisdom, that they were going to break the Central Bank. They were going to eliminate it as a factor, in order to basically cause the population of Yemen such suffering, such starvation, that they would, somehow, turn against the government, the authorities, the Houthis and Masala forces, who have now formed their own government in Sana'a. So that was the strategy.

And they did, in fact, eliminate the Central Bank of Yemen by fiat. They supposedly, they moved it to Aden, which is controlled by the Saudis, and their puppet government, the Hadi government. But it doesn't function, it's simply a non-functioning Central Bank. And it promised to actually provide the pay for millions, not millions, but 1.2 million civil servants on the payroll, but who are not being paid. Who have not been paid for many months now. But it hasn't done it.

And as a result of that, of course, you then had that many more people, as of last September, which is when all this happened, it was August and September [2016] when it happened. None of

those 1.2 million people now have any source of income. And so that is clearly adding to the distress, to the hunger, and the potential starvation in Yemen.

DB: And, say a little bit more about the U.S. role, and why is the United States so deeply engaged in what really could turn out to be a troubling war crime in Yemen.

GP: You are asking precisely the right question, Dennis. And that is a question that I have been trying my best to penetrate. Of course, you're not going to get anyone in the U.S. government, whether it was the Obama administration, or now the Trump administration, to ever say anything that will reveal the truth about this.

And the Trump administration, let's face it, has no interest whatsoever in doing anything to help the people of Yemen. All they care about is to support the Saudis because the Saudis are anti-Iranian. But that was really the M.O. of the Obama administration as well.

And so, if you really are going to answer that question based on the available evidence, you have to say that the reason that the United States has allowed the Saudis to essentially establish, or to impose a regime of starvation on the people of Yemen, is because of the U.S. de facto alliance, the political and military relationships, between the United States and Saudi Arabia. And then, if you go to the next obvious question: well why is it that we have to do that, or that we should do that?

You basically have to admit that it is a matter of the military bases, and military relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and close ally, Qatar, who control two of the major military bases of the United States, the base in Bahrain.

And, of course, the Saudis have allowed the United States, with the NSA and the CIA, to have a very lucrative set of deals over arm sales, which have reached as much as \$200 billion over – if you add in all the possible additional fees that can be charged on these deals – more than \$200 billion over two decades. That is real money for those in the Pentagon. And the NSA and the CIA have their own sweetheart deals with the Saudis to provide various intelligence services.

This, I'm quite sure, based on my own research, is the real reason why the United States is so wedded to Saudi interests here. Because there is no other reason, it has nothing to do with oil. That may have been the case in 1945, when the U.S. first established its political relationship with the Saudi government, but it hasn't been the case for many years now, that we have such interest in oil that it would mandate anything like this kind of policy.

DB: And is there sort of a common interest here? Is Israel in support of the U.S. policy in favor of the Saudis?

GP: Yes, of course. There is a common interest between the United States and Israel, in this regard. I would not be willing to say, however, that it's the controlling factor, but it is a controlling factor in U.S. policy. I simply don't think it ascends to that level. I think it's far more relevant that the very powerful world bureaucracies clearly have very powerful vested interests in continuing the status quo of U.S. chummy relationship with Saudi Arabia. And I don't think

that's going to change until there's a real citizens' movement, a powerful citizens' movement that says "No." And that of course, is a long ways off, at this moment.

DB: Is there a way to separate, is there an inter-relationship we should be thinking about in terms of what's going on in Syria, and the role that the U.S. government is playing there, and what appears to be an expanded role that Trump wants to play in the Middle East, in Iraq, in Syria, in Yemen?

GP: Well, there is a relationship, and by the way, I think I omitted the second military base in my previous answer, which is the base in Bahrain. Bahrain, of course, is where the U.S. Navy has its Fifth Fleet. And it's regarded as an extremely important U.S. interest there.

Qatar is a very close Gulf ally of the Saudis and, of course, part of the Saudi coalition in Yemen, carrying out the bombings. So, the two of them together really provide the two major bases in the Gulf for the United States. And those are interests which clearly have been relevant to what was going on in Syria, as well as the U.S. policy in Yemen.

Because it was the Qataris, the Saudis, and the Turks who urged the Obama administration, who pushed the Obama administration to basically carry out the policy of supporting the armed opposition to the Assad regime, starting in 2011. And we know that President Obama was extremely reluctant to do that. He regarded it as extremely dangerous when it was first proposed. But he went along with it, as presidents have done in many situations including the Obama administration, despite the risks that it entailed, starting with the covert CIA operation to provide the logistics, to get the weapons into Turkey, to be provided across the border to the Syrian armed opposition, in 2011-2012.

But that's a long story, but the short of it is that the United States did not want to disturb its relations with its Gulf allies, or with Turkey. Turkey being a NATO ally which, again, controls a major base that the [...] U.S. military holds as one of its jewels of its crown in the Middle East, Middle East and the larger Middle East region.

So, I think that this is really all about how these political military interests in the Middle East have become an end in themselves, and have taken over U.S. policy, rather than serving U.S. interests. And I'm afraid that the U.S. public has not caught on to that fundamental problem, in U.S. policy in the Middle East.

DB: Trump expressed some sort of different look, talked about a bit of a different policy, in Syria, working with the Russians. We have seen where that has gone, but Trump, really, he now seems to have fallen in line, and he's in line on steroids, wouldn't you say? It doesn't look good there.

GP: Well, I think that's a pretty good way of putting it. Yes. He seems to be almost trying to compensate for the impression that he was somehow at odds with the military and the whole National Security Complex by calling for a \$50 billion [\$54 billion] increase in the defense budget, by calling for more troops in Syria, and generally talking about upping the ante, militarily, in the entire region.

So, he clearly has caved in. I don't think he has a clear enough idea, himself, to support any resistance to the kinds of pressures that all presidents have been getting over the years from these very powerful bureaucracies. And so, it was really naive to believe that Trump was going to offer any real resistance.

DB: And, in terms of drone attacks and related attacks, and killing civilians, he's sort of up now, he's up to scale. Right? There are more attacks now.

GP: Well, I think he has. I think he's given more freedom to the CIA clearly. That's been announced that he's given the CIA freedom to decide when to use drones for attacks on... when they believe, or when they say they believe it's Al Qaeda or ISIS. And, so, that is, indeed, that's how the system works.

That's what the CIA fought for in both the Bush administration and the Obama administration, to get more freedom of action. That's the coin of the realm for them. To have greater freedom of action means that they have more power, and that means that they can justify more operations easily, get more money, and the system rolls on.

DB: And, just finally, sort of a sweeping look at the region. What are your concerns now? Do you see things getting more and more risky? Do you see a possible confrontation with the Russians? How are you looking at this now?

GP: Well, I think that, certainly, the White House does not want a confrontation with the Russians. But, they are playing a dangerous game here, in Syria, by becoming more deeply involved. And it's very difficult to see how this situation is going to evolve. It's very complicated with Turkey, and the Russians being on different sides in some ways. With the United States playing in-between. Nobody knows exactly how that's going to play out. But it is, by its very nature, it's dangerous.

And that's the flashpoint, in Syria, but, of course, we also have this ongoing war in Iraq. The whole idea that the United States is going to continue to fight wars in both Syria and Iraq for the foreseeable future is not a prospect that one should take lightly.

And, on top of that, again we are complicit in crimes that have to do with potentially hundreds of thousands of people starving to death in Yemen. And the issue has not hit us, yet, in a sense that it's being fully reported, but this is something that seems to me the public really needs to be up in arms about. And, it's in some ways, far more serious than any military involvement by the United States at present, or in the foreseeable future in the Middle East.

DB: Is there any indication of the kind of human rights investigation, international investigation that begins to hold the Saudis accountable, and those who arm the Saudis accountable? Where is that?

GP: A very important question. What happened last year in the United Nations was, or more than a year now, in the United Nations was that the Dutch proposed an independent investigation of war crimes in Yemen, because of the Saudi bombing. At that point it was not so much the

imposition of starvation through an economic weapon. It was precisely the bombing, hitting of infrastructure and civilian targets.

But, of course, as many of your listeners may know, the Saudis, with U.S. support, control the U.N. Human Rights Commission. And they managed to change that into a resolution which would welcome the Hadi government, that is, the Saudi sort of puppet government, in Yemen carrying out its own investigation.

And that is as far as it's gotten in the United Nation's system. So, I'm sorry to say that the United States exercises so much control over all of the major organs of the United Nations, particularly anything that has to do with U.N. Security Council, that they're not going to allow any independent investigation through that route. And the Amnesty International/Human Rights Watch, as far as I know are still not... they have called the bombing itself a serious violation of the laws of war.

But, nobody, thus far, has really come out saying that this policy of blockade, plus getting rid of the Central Bank of Yemen, and in many other ways trying to impose starvation on the Yemeni people is in itself a crime of war. And that's what needs to happen, obviously.