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Report charges US-Saudi arms sale ignored civilian casualties

In its invoking of a phony state of emergency to ram through an \$8.1 billion weapons deal that included precision-guided missiles (PGMs) for Saudi Arabia in May of last year, the US State Department “did not fully assess risks and implement mitigation measures to reduce civilian casualties and legal concerns associated with the transfer of PGMs,” a report released Tuesday by the department’s Office of Inspector General charged.

The emergency was declared by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on May 24, 2019 as a means of circumventing congressional opposition to arms sales to the Saudi monarchy and the United Arab Emirates. Pompeo claimed at the time that the weapons were needed urgently to “deter Iranian aggression.”



Saudi airstrike in Yemen (Credit: Saba)

The report, requested by the Democratic-controlled House Foreign Affairs Committee, came amid fresh reports from Yemen of atrocities caused by US-supplied Saudi warplanes and munitions.

At least nine children were among 20 killed in an August 6 Saudi airstrike against a four-vehicle civilian convoy in northern Yemen. A local health official said that the majority of the dead were women and children, as were seven others who were critically wounded.

The UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, said the attack came “as the victims were traveling by road.” She added, “Like all senseless acts of violence against civilians, this is shocking and completely, totally unacceptable.”

The British charity Save the Children also confirmed the civilian casualties. “In less than a month at least 17 children have lost their lives as a result of indiscriminate attacks in Yemen,” said Xavier Joubert, the charity’s director in Yemen.

On July 14, the UN reported another airstrike in Yemen’s Hajjah province that killed seven children, some as young as two years old.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the US-backed, Saudi-led war against Yemen has killed over 100,000 people since it began in 2015. The Saudi bombing campaign would be impossible without US weapons and logistical support, which has included targeting intelligence as well as aerial refueling for Saudi warplanes.

The devastating impact of the estimated 257,000 Saudi airstrikes has been compounded by a naval blockade mounted by the UAE with US naval support for the express purpose of starving the Yemeni population into submission. Many thousands more Yemenis, including at least 75,000 children under the age of five, have died of starvation, while the worst cholera epidemic on record has infected 1.2 million. Fully half of Yemen’s 28 million people are living on the brink of starvation.

The US State Department held a press briefing the day before the OIG’s report was released, claiming that the “big takeaway” was that the report confirmed that the State Department and Pompeo acted in “complete accordance of the law and found no wrongdoing in the administration’s exercise of the emergency authorities.”

This claim was echoed by Pompeo at a press conference in Prague Wednesday. “We did everything by the book,” he said. “I am proud of the work that my team did. We got a really good outcome. We prevented the loss of lives.” He failed to specify which “lives”

he had in mind. Clearly they were not those of the thousands killed by US munitions in Yemen.

The OIG report does not exonerate Pompeo. It states at the outset that it did not “make any assessment of the policy decisions underlying the arms transfers and the associated emergency.” It notes that the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) of 1976 merely requires that the executive branch declare that “an emergency exists,” which requires that the sale be made immediately “in the national security interests of the United States” in order to override Congress.

The publicly released report was heavily redacted, with the acting Inspector General Diana Shaw invoking in a cover letter “executive branch confidentiality interests, including executive privilege.”

In addition to its indictment of the State Department for failing to concern itself with the civilian casualties caused by the weapons being fast-tracked to the House of Saud, an unredacted copy of the OIG’s report leaked to the media also provides a timeline that makes clear the claim of an “emergency” was entirely fraudulent. It establishes that discussion on the use of the AECA emergency clause began nearly two months before it was actually invoked, and that when the report’s findings were issued to the State Department, just \$20 million of the billions of dollars in arms sales involved had been implemented.

Far from Washington having to rush weapons to a beleaguered ally, the emergency declaration was made for the dual purposes of fueling the US war buildup against Iran and safeguarding the billions of dollars in profits from Saudi arms sales accruing to Raytheon and other major US weapons manufacturers.

Congressional opposition to arms sales to the Saudi monarchical regime increased in the wake of the October 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident journalist and former regime insider, who was killed and dismembered at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul, Turkey.

The Democrats’ profession of concern over the Saudi atrocities carried out with US weaponry in Yemen was belated, to say the least. American arms sales to Riyadh soared under the administration of Barack Obama, which provided the Saudi military with cluster bombs, fighter jets, white phosphorus, targeting lists, midair refueling and around-the-clock maintenance, without which the slaughter of Yemenis would have been impossible.

In any case, for Washington and both US capitalist parties, Yemen and its US-backed war crimes are merely a sideshow in the greater game of struggle for hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East.

The drive to war against Iran has not been blunted by the exponential spread of the coronavirus pandemic in the US and internationally. On the contrary, the crisis which it has unleashed has only intensified American militarism, which provides a means of directing uncontrollable domestic tension outward.

Washington's determination to effect regime change in Iran has only escalated in the face of Beijing's cementing last month a far-reaching agreement with Tehran, providing \$400 billion of investments in Iran's oil, gas and transport sectors, in exchange for cheap oil supplies. In addition to Chinese investments in other sectors, it will allow China to deploy up to 5,000 troops to protect its interests in Iran.

The danger of a US war against Iran, made plain with Washington's drone assassination at Baghdad's international airport on January 3 of Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of the most senior officials in the Iranian government, is bound up with US preparations for war against nuclear-armed China and Russia and the threat of a nuclear holocaust.

This threat can be answered only through the political mobilization of the international working class in struggle against war and its source, the capitalist profit system.

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