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BY MEL GURTOV

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The US and Yemen: Putting a Disreputable Policy Right

In Yemen, Saudi and Iranian interests collide, a civil war involving multiple parties has devastated the country, a humanitarian crisis has been going on for several years, and important issues of international law need to be resolved. Common to all these elements is the US-backed Saudi intervention over the last six years, which has rained destruction on Yemen's civilian population and reduced cities to rubble.

In a word, Yemen is a humanitarian catastrophe in which the US has long had dirty hands. For a number of years, going back to the Obama administration, the US has been Saudi Arabia's silent partner in war-making in Yemen. The proclaimed national interests that guided US support included confronting Iran's presumed proxy force in Yemen, the Houthi, and being a faithful ally to the Saudis.

US military assistance has been central to the Saudi intervention. At the start of the Biden administration, military aid to Saudi Arabia comprised \$27 billion in the Foreign Military Sales program (not counting about \$100 billion in pending FMS cases), more than \$8 billion in commercial sales, and a variety of military training programs .

Bombing Yemen has been the order of the day: By one account, between 2015 and 2020, the US-allied Saudi air force and drones dropped more than 65,000 bombs on Yemen—roughly half the total number dropped over all other Middle East countries. As the authors of that study point out, the actual total is likely to be much higher, since the US military: published those figures in regular, monthly Airpower Summaries, which were readily available to journalists and the public. But in March 2020, the Trump administration

abruptly stopped publishing U.S. Airpower Summaries, and the Biden administration has so far not published any either.

To some critics, US military support of Saudi Arabia raises the question of war crimes.

The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis

The humanitarian crisis—the world's most severe according to the United Nations—shows no sign of alleviating. UNICEF estimates about 80 percent of Yemen's population is in need of assistance.

Healthcare resources—sanitation, clinics, equipment, workers—are in very short supply. Contagious diseases such as dengue fever and diphtheria are widespread and are particularly acute among children.

Malnutrition has devastated Yemen's next generation. The UN humanitarian coordinator in Yemen said late last year: "Yemen is on the brink of a catastrophic food security crisis. If the war doesn't end now, we are nearing an irreversible situation and risk losing an entire generation of Yemen's young children." Last year an estimated 12 million Yemeni children were considered in danger if aid were cut off, their futures probably permanently damaged by lack of healthcare and education.

Tragically, international aid to Yemen is actually declining as the UN membership has failed for two years running to provide the amount (currently, \$3.8 billion) called for by the secretary-general. The US has only pledged \$19 million.

Some additional specifics:

- * 13 million people face starvation.
- * Only about one percent of the population (about 300,000 people) has received one vaccination for COVID-19.
- * Four million people are internally displaced and in dire need of basic provisions.

Some, But Not Enough, Policy Changes

The Trump administration viewed the Yemen crisis in predictably narrow terms: "maximum pressure" on Iran and friendly, money-oriented ties to the Saudi kleptocracy. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo decided to designate the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who control most of the populated areas, as a terrorist organization and terminated about \$700 million in US aid to Yemen. The UN World Food Program pleaded with Pompeo not to do that since ending aid, including aid from US-based NGOs, would accelerate the humanitarian crisis by denying Yemenis vital food and medicine. That appeal went nowhere.

Under Biden, significant policy changes have been made. But they don't go far enough.

He has ordered a pause and review of military sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—these included a whopping \$23 billion sale of jets, drones, and other equipment to the UAE and a \$290 million sale of bombs to the Saudis—arguing that the Saudis’ offensive has “created a humanitarian and strategic catastrophe.”

He has appointed a career diplomat as special envoy to help bring an end to the fighting in coordination with the UN.

Biden has also removed the designation of terrorist group from the Houthis, and restored humanitarian assistance to Houthi-held territory, where most of the population lives.

The administration is clearly distancing itself from Saudi Arabia—criticizing its human rights policies, indicating its preference for dealing with the ailing king rather than Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), releasing a previously classified report on the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi that nailed MBS to the wall for his responsibility, and most recently agreeing to declassify documents on the 9/11 attack that may answer some questions about Saudi government support of the terrorists.

But the distancing is well short of where it should be. The administration may be sitting on a good deal of additional information concerning the Khashoggi murder—information about who in the US government knew about it ahead of time, what role Egypt played in the killing, and why the state department approved training of four Saudis who became part of the murder hit squad. Late last month MBS’s brother, though implicated in the Khashoggi killing, met in Washington with senior Biden officials. It seems that the Saudi regime has somehow become less of a “pariah,” as Biden once called it.

Not all military sales to the Saudis have been cut off, moreover. Meantime, their bombing campaign reportedly has targeted points of distribution for food and medicine.

Whether that information is current, all US military aid should cease. Senator Bernie Sanders and Congressman Ro Khanna have announced that they are “introducing again a War Powers Resolution to stop any... military support for the Saudis in their campaign in Yemen.” Passage is unlikely, but even if the resolution does pass, humanitarian assistance to the Houthis may not be able to get through given the Houthis’ anger at the US for its support of Saudi bombing.

The depth of the crisis may be gauged by the following assessment from a researcher for Human Rights Watch earlier this year:

Even if the weapons are put down, there are deeply rooted disputes, grievances, tensions and divisions in Yemen today and more than 30 fronts of armed fighting between different

factions. It was the responsibility of the U.S. to have a strong stance on its role, but we need a comprehensive approach to ending the conflict.

So far, such an approach is nowhere in sight, and the children will continue to suffer most.

***Mel Gurtov** is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University, Editor-in-Chief of Asian Perspective, an international affairs quarterly and blogs at In the Human Interest.*

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