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Beyond Signalgate: Understanding the Real Scandal in Yemen

US striking Houthi positions in Yemen. Image Source: U.S. Air Force – Public Domain

On March 24, the country learned that a group of senior Trump administration officials (including the Vice President, Secretary of Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence, among others) accidentally sent classified details of military strikes against Yemen to Jeffrey Goldberg, editor of *The Atlantic*. Since Goldberg broke the story, there has been a steady stream of commentary about "Signalgate," most adding little but sound and fury. The public discourse about Signalgate reveals something important about American politics—far more important than the incompetence at the center of the scandal. What has rarely been mentioned during the national conversation is the elephant in the room: the United States' attacks on Yemen violate international law and contribute to one of the world's most significant humanitarian crises.

The nightmare of the Washington ruling class is that we might finally open our eyes to the real, documented crimes going on in a country most Americans can't find on a map. It would be difficult to overstate the degree of brutality and suffering that the United States has foisted upon the people of Yemen. And it is impossible to separate the United States' strategic approach to Yemen from its support of the genocidal onslaught in Palestine. In the first year of the brutally one-sided terror campaign in the Gaza Strip, the U.S. gave billions in arms and other support to Israel, no questions asked. According to Brown University's Costs of War project:

U.S. spending on Israel's military operations and related U.S operations in the region total at least $22.76 billion and counting. This estimate is conservative; while it includes approved security assistance funding since October 7, 2023, supplemental funding for regional operations, and an estimated additional cost of operations, it does not include any other economic costs.

William Hartung, a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, adds that arms offers during this period (that is, beyond the $17.9 billion in military aid, including items that have yet to be delivered) are worth more than $30 billion. Yemen's Houthis have harried shipping lanes in response to the U.S.-supported genocide in the Gaza Strip, prompting the Biden administration to re-assign the group to its spurious terror list. Washington has frequently justified its crimes against the people of Yemen by pointing to the threat of Iran, treated as a state sponsor of terror. The first Trump administration, citing a national security emergency created by Tehran, rushed weapons to the Saudis against widespread concerns about the safety of civilians—members of the Trump government were sacked for raising concerns. It is worth asking: what is a state sponsor of terror? As it has been applied to real-world events, the notion itself is incoherent and unintelligible—that is, it is propaganda aimed at confusing and misleading comfortable Americans. To give meaning to this standard requires that we grapple with uncomfortable facts, and particularly after its illegal actions against Palestine and Yemen, the United States must be regarded as the world's foremost sponsor of terrorism.

The U.S. has killed no less than 61 people since it began a new round of strikes on March 15, but its reckless attacks and disregard for civilian life go back more than two decades. The U.S. first began drone operations and airstrikes in Yemen in 2002, causing "significant civilian harm, and no one has been held to account for these actions." According to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, coalition airstrikes alone have killed almost 20,000 civilians, more than 2,300 of whom were children. At least 4 million people have

been forcibly displaced. Today, Yemen is among the world's poorest and most war-torn countries. We must be clear about what is happening in Yemen, because our media are committed to obscuring the truth: the intentional policy of the United States has been to starve Yemen—and to bomb its people when they cannot be starved to death. When Washington wants to kill massive numbers of innocent people without military action—to make sure they don't have food, medicine, energy, and the other necessities of life—it uses a global-scale program of economic blockades, rationalized with vague gestures to "terrorism." For years, the U.S. government has cut Yemen's people off from the bare minimum necessary to survive, while attacking and destroying critical infrastructure. According to the UN Refugee Agency, over "18.2 million people are in dire need of humanitarian assistance and protection services," with 5 million in conditions of acute food insecurity. About 10 million children in Yemen need humanitarian assistance of some kind. The U.S. supported war and the blockade have created an economic disaster in Yemen. Last summer, a World Bank report stated that in the years between 2015 and 2023, Yemen lost more than half (54 percent) of its real GDP per person, putting most people in the country in dire poverty.

The language around "terrorism" is central to Washington's attempts to control the narrative and to conjure public support for—or at least public ignorance of—its patently illegal campaign in Yemen. As Phyllis Bennis recently pointed out, the U.S. attacks on Yemen are "always referred to as 'bombing the Iran-backed Houthi rebels' to avoid acknowledging that, like in Gaza, the bombs are dropping on civilian infrastructure and civilians already facing devastating hunger."

Yemen and Palestine have tested the limits of the imperial system—how many innocent women and children can we liquidate before self-absorbed, mindlessly scrolling, Netflix-watching, garbage-eating Americans will bat an eyelash? Lots of them apparently. The Signal story is the perfect apparently anti-Trump narrative for the chattering classes: they need not even pretend to stake out a progressive position contrary to Trump. As legal residents who have broken no law are disappeared from our streets for opposing a genocide in Palestine—fully supported by both wings of the ruling class—the ruling class can focus our attention and loyalties on America's righteous military mission.

Imperialism is the shared faith of the ruling class because the entire American economic and social system depends on it—the cheap treats that pacify us and hide the true features of the system of production: the land theft, the slave labor, the extraction of natural resources, the oppressive "intellectual property" regime that gives the very ideas themselves to privileged

corporate rentiers. If the forever wars are ever questioned, the whole governing ideology and political paradigm are thrown open to scrutiny. And they cannot survive a closer look, because they represent criminal behavior at its most shameless.

Washington's savagery in Yemen, and the corporate press's bizarre reaction thereto, points to a deep moral crisis and loss of direction in the United States. We seem to be incapable of confronting the government's malign influence in the world and its near-constant violations of the most fundamental principles of international law. But we will not understand MAGA fascism as a social and political phenomenon until we see clearly its connection with American empire and its crimes against innocent people, including those of Yemen.

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