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U.S. Backing for the Disastrous War on Yemen Continues

By Daniel Larison

April 17, 2015

The good news is that some U.S. officials are reportedly worried about the Saudi-led war's awful consequences, but that doesn't seem to have caused anyone to question continued U.S. support for the operation:

Concerned about reports of hundreds of civilian casualties, Obama administration officials are increasingly uneasy about the U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led air war against rebel militias in Yemen, opening a potential rift between Washington and its ally in Riyadh.

The article quotes one official who privately describes the Saudis' war as a "disaster," but that criticism hasn't translated into a reduction or elimination of U.S. assistance. There doesn't seem to be any confidence in the administration that the attack they're supporting will achieve any of its ostensible goals, but that doesn't lessen the support. On the contrary, U.S. support has continued to increase as the harmful effects of the Saudis' attack have become harder to ignore. The article portrays this as an attempt to improve Saudi targeting in order to reduce civilian casualties, but this misses the point that all of the civilian casualties yet to be caused by the bombing campaign could be avoided by halting it. The U.S. might be able to help make Saudi bombing slightly more precise, but that can't change the fact that the war itself is wrong and unnecessary.

Our officials keep repeating that the U.S. “goal is to try to bring about a political resolution to the conflict,” but no one can explain how battering Yemen from the air for weeks and wrecking the country’s infrastructure is going to bring that about. The U.S. has hitched itself to a war it doesn’t control and can’t explain, and it has done this for the sake of pleasing one of the worst clients the U.S. has in the region. It is debatable whether the Saudi war advances some Saudi interest (it is usually not good for a state to launch a reckless intervention in another country), but there is no question that no U.S. interests are being served here.

Kelley Vlahos notes in her article today that when the Saudi campaign began the administration was coming under fire from McCain and Graham for being *too slow* to back the attack. Perversely, the main criticism that Obama has been getting from Congress on this issue is that it hasn’t been doing enough to help inflict death and destruction on Yemen:

But that Obama should be admonished for a perceived laggardness in the Sunni Gulf states’ swift intervention in Yemen, in what has been called a battle for sectarian dominance in the region, shows how little these men think of the American public. After 14 years of fighting Sunni insurgencies with no end in sight (Iraq and Afghanistan, al-Qaeda everywhere, now ISIS), the idea the U.S. could be shamed into joining a coalition of countries espousing highly questionable motives and human rights records, in an intervention no one can rightly explain, should raise a few red flags.

No one can explain this intervention without resorting to propaganda because there is no coherent argument for how a bombing campaign is going to “restore stability” to the country being bombed. The justifications that have been offered are not at all persuasive. The Saudis defend the war as an effort to stop “expanding” Iranian influence, but as I’ve mentioned before claims about significant Iranian involvement are untrue.

Iranian influence in Yemen is “trivial,” said Gabriele vom Bruck, a senior lecturer in anthropology and Yemen specialist at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

“The Houthis want Yemen to be independent, that’s the key idea, they don’t want to be controlled by Saudi or the Americans, and **they certainly don’t want to replace the Saudis with the Iranians** [bold mine-DL],” vom Bruck said. “I don’t think the Iranians have influence in their decision-making. It’s not a relationship like that between Iran and Hezbollah.”

This wouldn’t be the first time that the U.S. mistakes a local movement for an extension of some monolithic international threat, but one would think that by now U.S. officials wouldn’t be so easily tricked when American hawks and regional clients make such obviously self-serving claims to justify a senseless military intervention.