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U.S. and U.K. Continue to Actively Participate in Saudi War Crimes, Targeting of Yemeni Civilians

Glenn Greenwald

10/10/2016

From the start of the hideous Saudi bombing campaign against Yemen 18 months ago, two countries have played active, vital roles in enabling the carnage: the U.S. and U.K. The atrocities committed by the Saudis would have been impossible without their steadfast, aggressive support.

The Obama administration “has offered to sell \$115 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia over its eight years in office, more than any previous U.S. administration,” as The Guardian reported this week, and also provides extensive surveillance technology. As The Intercept documented in April, “In his first five years as president, Obama sold \$30 billion more in weapons than President Bush did during his entire eight years as commander in chief.”

Most important, according to the Saudi foreign minister, although it is the Saudis who have ultimate authority to choose targets, “British and American military officials are in the command and control center for Saudi airstrikes on Yemen” and “have access to lists of targets.” In sum, while this bombing campaign is invariably described in Western media outlets as “Saudi-led,”

the U.S. and U.K. are both central, indispensable participants. As the New York Times editorial page put it in August: “The United States is complicit in this carnage,” while The Guardian editorialized that “Britain bears much responsibility for this suffering.”

From the start, the U.S.- and U.K.-backed Saudis have indiscriminately and at times deliberately bombed civilians, killing thousands of innocent people. From Yemen, Iona Craig and Alex Potter have reported extensively for The Intercept on the widespread civilian deaths caused by this bombing campaign. As the Saudis continued to recklessly and intentionally bomb civilians, the American and British weapons kept pouring into Riyadh, ensuring that the civilian massacres continued. Every once and awhile, when a particularly gruesome mass killing made its way into the news, Obama and various British officials would issue cursory, obligatory statements expressing “concern,” then go right back to fueling the attacks.

This weekend, as American attention was devoted almost exclusively to Donald Trump, one of the most revolting massacres took place. On Saturday, warplanes attacked a funeral gathering in Sana, repeatedly bombing the hall where it took place, killing over 100 people and wounding more than 500 (see photo above). Video shows just some of the destruction and carnage:

Saudi officials first lied by trying to blame “other causes” but have since walked that back. The next time someone who identifies with the Muslim world attacks American or British citizens, and those countries’ leading political voices answer the question “why, oh why, do they hate us?” by assuring everyone that “they hate us for our freedoms,” it would be instructive to watch that video.

The Obama White House, through its spokesperson Ned Price, condemned what it called “the troubling series of attacks striking Yemeni civilians” — attacks, it did not note, it has repeatedly supported — and lamely warned that “U.S. security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check.” That is exactly what it is. The 18 months of bombing supported by the U.S. and U.K. has, as the NYT put it this morning, “largely failed, while reports of civilian deaths have grown common, and much of the country is on the brink of famine.”

It has been known from the start that the Saudi bombing campaign has been indiscriminate and reckless, and yet Obama and the U.K. government continued to play central roles. A U.N. report obtained in January by The Guardian “uncovered ‘widespread and systematic’ attacks on civilian targets in violation of international humanitarian law”; the report found that “the coalition had conducted airstrikes targeting civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law, including camps for internally displaced persons and refugees; civilian gatherings, including weddings; civilian vehicles, including buses; civilian residential areas; medical facilities; schools; mosques; markets, factories and food storage warehouses; and other essential civilian infrastructure.”

But what was not known, until an excellent Reuters report by Warren Strobel and Jonathan Landay this morning, is that Obama was explicitly warned not only that the Saudis were committing war crimes, but that the U.S. itself could be legally regarded as complicit in them:

The Obama administration went ahead with a \$1.3 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia last year despite warnings from some officials that the United States could be implicated in war crimes for supporting a Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen that has killed thousands of civilians, according to government documents and the accounts of current and former officials.

State Department officials also were privately skeptical of the Saudi military's ability to target Houthi militants without killing civilians and destroying "critical infrastructure" needed for Yemen to recover, according to the emails and other records obtained by Reuters and interviews with nearly a dozen officials with knowledge of those discussions.

In other words, the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner was explicitly advised that he might be a collaborator in war crimes by arming a campaign that deliberately targets civilians, and continued to provide record-breaking amounts of arms to aid their prosecution. None of that should be surprising: It would be difficult for Obama to condemn "double-tap" strikes of the kind the Saudis just perpetrated — where first responders or mourners are targeted — given that he himself has used that tactic, commonly described as a hallmark of "terrorism." For their part, the British blocked EU inquiries into whether war crimes were being committed in Yemen, while key MPs have blocked reports proving that U.K. weapons were being used in the commission of war crimes and the deliberate targeting of civilians.

The U.S. and U.K. are the two leading countries when it comes to cynically exploiting human rights concerns and the laws of war to attack their adversaries. They and their leading columnists love to issue pretty, self-righteous speeches about how other nations — those primitive, evil ones over there — target civilians and commit war crimes. Yet here they both are, standing firmly behind one of the planet's most brutal and repressive regimes, arming it to the teeth with the full and undeniable knowledge that they are enabling massacres that recklessly, and in many cases, deliberately, target civilians.

And these 18 months of atrocities have barely merited a mention in the U.S. election, despite the key role the leading candidate, Hillary Clinton, has played in arming the Saudis, to say nothing of the millions of dollars her family's foundation has received from its regime (her opponent, Donald Trump, has barely uttered a word about the issue, and himself has received millions in profits from various Saudi oligarchs).

One reason American and British political and media elites love to wax eloquently when condemning the brutality of the enemies of their own government is because doing so advances tribal, nationalistic ends: It's a strategy for weakening adversaries while strengthening their own governments. But at least as significant a motive is that issuing such condemnations distracts attention from their own war crimes and massacres, the ones they are enabling and supporting.

There are some nations on the planet with credibility to condemn war crimes and the deliberate targeting of civilians. The two countries who have spent close to two years arming Saudi Arabia in its ongoing slaughter of Yemeni civilians are most certainly not among them.