

Saudi Arabia bombards Yemeni rebels in policing role for US imperialism

Brian Smith
20 November 2009

Saudi Arabia is now openly bombing Huthi rebel positions on either side of its border with Yemen in support of the Yemeni government's "Operation Scorched Earth." Whilst these aerial bombardments have reportedly been taking place for the last month, the Saudis initially denied them, and then admitted to only bombing on the Saudi side of the border.

The Saudis have undertaken an air and ground bombardment of Huthi positions and villages deep into Yemen, with rebels reporting that 145 missiles recently hit areas in al-Malahid, Shada and al-Hasama districts of Saada province, which are some 5 kilometres from the border.

Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khaled bin Sultan said, on a visit to Saudi troops in Jizan province, that his forces "are not going to stop the bombing until the Huthis retreat tens of kilometres inside their border."

The announcement coincides with Yemen's official Saba news agency reporting that Yemen and the United States had signed a military cooperation agreement after two days of talks in the capital Sanaa. While the Pentagon contradicted this, denying that an actual agreement had been signed, spokesman Bryan Whitman confirmed that talks had taken place and said: "The US values its relationship with Yemeni military forces and remains committed to improving the relationship." Saba quoted Yemen's Chief of Staff Ahmed Ali al-Ashwal as saying that the deal aims to strengthen cooperation in the "extermination of terrorism, smuggling and piracy."

Since Operation Scorched Earth began on August 11, the Yemeni government has been accused of attacking civilian targets, such as markets and camps for internally displaced people. A recent Huthi statement said that this strategy continues with military planes having targeted residential areas and three markets, destroying many buildings and leaving dozens killed and wounded.

Over 175,000 Yemenis have fled their homes in the fighting, according to UNICEF, and many more are trapped, unable to move. Hundreds of refugees who had fled across the border to Saudi Arabia have now been forced back across the border by the Saudis. The Saudi government, to facilitate its bombardment of the border region, has now also evacuated some 240 villages and closed 50 schools on its side of the border, with residents being forced into tent cities, according to UNICEF regional director for the Middle East Sigrid Kaag.

Kaag believes that malnutrition in Yemen is reaching "alarming levels," while tens of thousands remain at risk as winter approaches.

Following a recent pounding of rebel positions on the 2,000-metre Jebel al-Dukhan mountain which straddles the border, there are allegations that the Saudi Arabian air force dropped phosphorus bombs which are high incendiary weapons that pose enormous risks to civilians. Some 300 families are reported to have fled the area.

Amnesty International wrote to Saudi Arabia's Defence Minister, Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, the day after the bombing raid, to inquire whether phosphorus bombs were used and, if so, in what manner and what precautions were taken to ensure that civilians were not put at risk, but has not yet received a response. Since the Yemeni government has more or less sealed off the area, it is difficult to obtain independent information about events in the region.

Yemeni government officials have expressed growing confidence that the rebellion will be crushed now that the Saudis are openly involved. Riyadh has reportedly also been giving Yemen about \$1.2 million per month since the beginning of Operation Scorched Earth, as well as intelligence support. This has enabled the Yemeni government to intensify the assault on the rebels, kill three of the Huthi leaders and force their supporters to retreat.

Despite a lack of credible evidence, Yemen and Saudi Arabia have accused Iran of arming or financing the Huthi rebels, who are Shia, though of a completely different sect from that in Iran, which is orthodox Shiite. Saudi Arabia has its own minority Shiite population concentrated in the south-western provinces of Najran and Jizan near the border.

The lack of evidence does not worry Christian Koch, the director of International Studies at the Gulf Research Centre, a Saudi-leaning think tank in Dubai, who argues that the rebels could become “a bridgehead into which the Iranians can funnel money and arms” and that “the Iranians try to promote themselves as protectors of Shia everywhere.”

The rebels’ leader, Abdul Malik al Huthi, has denied a link with Iran, saying, “We do not have any links with any foreign political agenda regarding our position in the current confrontation.” He added, “We affirm that whoever tries to add a sectarian dimension to our position is a liar and tries to sow sedition. We respect all the sons of our nation in the Arab region ... irrespective of the school of thought or ideology.”

Iran has also denied supporting the rebels, and Iran’s foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, has countered Saudi accusations by declaring that no nation should “interfere” in Yemen’s internal affairs. “Those who pour oil on the fire must know that they will not be spared from the smoke that billows,” Mottaki declared.

The following day Mottaki called for a “collective approach” and said that “Iran is prepared to cooperate with the government of Yemen and other nations in order to restore security [in Yemen],” adding, “Any measure in contrast of such approach will serve the enemies of Islamic and Arab states. We believe that any approach other than this will not serve the interests of regional nations.”

Riyadh has reportedly imposed a naval blockade on Yemen’s northern Red Sea coast, ostensibly to stop Iranian weapons from reaching the rebels, and let it be known that its navy has orders to search ships suspected of ferrying arms to the Huthis, according to Reuters.

“If it’s true, it’s a very large escalation and if the Saudis are playing it smart, they are going to try and ... find a smoking gun” to prove that Iran is supplying the rebels with arms, said Theodore Karasik, director of research and development at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis in Dubai.

The naval blockade, the bombarding of Shiite rebels and

the unfounded accusations against Iran amount to a provocation by US client states, and must be seen in the context of the phoney “war on terror” and the escalating rhetoric and threats made against Iran by the US and its other client states such as Israel. The Western press have attempted to portray the conflict as an emerging proxy struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for control of the Gulf to reinforce accusations that Iran constitutes a regional predatory threat.

The underlying causes of the conflict are the historical marginalisation and endemic under-development of the region, which are the legacy of British imperialism. The city of Aden in the south became a British base in the 19th century. Initially it was a coaling station on the route to India and later was the site of an oil refinery and tanker port.

The Huthis, known also as the Zaidis, were the elite in northern Yemen prior to the coup by army officers who deposed the royal leader in 1962 and created the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) under the protection of Egypt. During the long civil war that followed, when Saudi Arabia and Jordan with Western support backed the deposed royalists against the Egyptian backed government, Saada was the main opposition stronghold.

After 1967 when the British were driven out of Aden, Aden was incorporated into South Yemen, which was renamed the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and aligned with the Soviet Union, becoming a theatre in the Cold War.

North and South Yemen were only joined in a united republic with the north’s ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, as president in 1990, although there followed another civil war based in the south of the country in 1994.

Yemen is under severe duress due to the global economic meltdown, and depleting oil and water resources. The global drop in oil prices has severely affected Yemen’s economy, with oil revenues down by 40 percent this year. Oil revenues had comprised 70 percent of overall revenue and 90 percent of export receipts. It is the Arab world’s poorest nation, with population growth amongst the highest in the world and unemployment at more than 40 percent.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact