

In wake of airline incident: Drumbeat for US war in Yemen

Bill Van Auken
29 December 2009

In the wake of the abortive Christmas Day attempt by a 23-year-old Nigerian, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, to detonate a bomb on a Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam, there has been an escalating drumbeat for a wider US military intervention in Yemen.

While US officials initially said they believed that the suspect acted alone and had no formal ties to any terrorist organizations, this did not deter leading politicians of both political parties and much of the US media from immediately raising the prospect of war in Yemen, where Abdulmutallab has family ties (his mother is Yemeni), and where Al Qaeda has a presence.

Media reports have subsequently cited unnamed US officials as saying that Abdulmutallab has told interrogators that he had attended an Al Qaeda camp in Yemen, while a web site claiming to speak for the organization claimed credit for the failed bombing.

Whatever the truth of the Yemeni connection to the incident, it has proven highly fortuitous for the Obama administration, which—parallel to its Afghanistan escalation—has already launched a secret military intervention in the impoverished Arab country.

As the *New York Times* reported Monday, “In the midst of two unfinished major wars, the United States has quietly opened a third, largely covert front against Al Qaeda in Yemen.”

Citing unnamed US intelligence and military officials, the *Times* reports that the US Central Intelligence Agency has dispatched “several of its top field operatives with counterterrorism experience to the country,” while “some of the most secretive Special Operations commandos have begun training Yemeni security forces in counterterrorism tactics.”

US military aid to Yemen has been raised to \$70 million under the Obama administration, compared to virtually nothing in 2008.

The reports on increased activities by CIA operatives and Special Operations military commandos in Yemen follow a series of covert US airstrikes. On December 17, US warplanes firing cruise missiles targeted what officials in Washington claimed were Al Qaeda training camps in the provinces of Sana’a and Abyan. Officials in Yemen, however, said that the attacks claimed the lives of more than 60 civilians, 28 of them children.

A second airstrike was carried out on December 24 in the remote region of Shabwa against what US officials described as a meeting of Al Qaeda operatives. Again, Yemenis in the area said that there had been no such meeting.

US intelligence officials indicate that one of the intended targets of the December 24 airstrike was Anwar al Awlaki, a Muslim

cleric who is a US citizen born in New Mexico. While Awlaki has been linked to the US Army major, Nidal Malik Hasan, who is charged in last month’s mass shooting at Fort Hood, he has himself been accused of no crime. The attempt to carry out his extra-judicial execution has provoked not a hint of criticism from any section of the media or the political establishment in the US.

US warplanes have also reportedly been used, along with Saudi military action, against an internal rebellion in northwestern Saada province near the border with Saudi Arabia. The attacks are aimed at an armed movement known as the Houthis, named for their former commander, which was formed to defend the Zaydi Shia population. The dominant group in the country until 1962, when a Nasserite coup overthrew the ruling monarchy, the Zaydi population has faced repression and discrimination at the hands of the present government.

The Houthi fighters charge that US warplanes have launched some 30 attacks on Saada since last August, when the Yemeni regime launched a military offensive dubbed “Operation Scorched Earth.”

US foreign policy circles have tried to cast the war against the Houthis as a struggle against Iranian influence in the region. At the same time, the Yemeni regime has made the improbable claim that the movement is backed by Al Qaeda, which is based on Sunni fundamentalism and has engaged in terror attacks against Shia populations.

The US military intervention in Yemen is being carried out in support of the dictatorial regime of Field Marshall Ali Saleh, who has been head of state for more than 30 years—first as president of North Yemen until 1990, and then, after the post-Cold War unification, as president of the unified country.

Yemen, with 23.8 million people, is the poorest country in the Arab world. More than half of the population lives below the poverty line. More than 40 percent are unemployed and 54 percent are illiterate.

In addition to the Houthi movement in the northwest of the country, the Saleh regime confronts a separatist movement in the south. It has sought to quell these opposition movements with extreme brutality. In addition to carrying out military operations of a collective punishment character that have claimed the lives of thousands of civilians and turned tens of thousands more into refugees, it has systematically suppressed political dissent.

Last month, the United Nations Committee against Torture issued a stinging report on conditions in Yemen, citing “hostage

taking, reports that family members were abducted and held to ensure that persons sought would give themselves up, as well as arbitrary detention and forced disappearances.”

“Kidnappings and extrajudicial killings,” were common, according to the report, including against minors.

“Children of seven or eight years old were imprisoned, held with adults, and frequently abused,” the report said. “Children were also sentenced to death and executed.”

The report said that security forces and prison authorities carried out torture with impunity. A document submitted to the UN committee by a group of Yemeni human rights organizations listed a number of opposition activists who have been tortured to death, while describing detainees—including children—being beaten with cables, burned, suspended from their hands and arms, raped and threatened with rape.

This is the character of the regime with which, according to the *Times*, the Obama “White House is seeking to nurture enduring ties.” The dispatch of Special Operations commandos and CIA operatives to Yemen will only intensify this hideous repression.

As the *Times* article makes clear, the more that Washington aids in this repression, the more intense and lethal the repression must become. “The problem is that the involvement of the United States creates sympathy for Al Qaeda,” a Yemeni state official told the newspaper. “The cooperation is necessary—but there is no doubt that it has an effect for the common man. He sympathizes with Al Qaeda.”

Similarly, the Associated Press quoted Gregory Johnsen, a Yemen expert at Princeton University, as saying that the increased US military intervention in the country was “probably counterproductive.” The bombing raids and the resulting video and photographs of women and children slaughtered by US missiles, he said, provided “a recruiting field day for Al Qaeda.”

Such concerns appear to carry little weight in Washington or the US media, as the Obama administration continues to build up for a third US war in the oil-rich regions stretching from the Middle East to Central Asia.

The Northwest Airlines incident has provoked calls for more direct military action from both Democratic and Republican politicians.

Senator Joseph Lieberman, the so-called “independent Democrat” who heads the Senate Homeland Security Committee, called Sunday for a “preemptive” military intervention in Yemen.

“Somebody in our government said to me in Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, Iraq was yesterday’s war,” Lieberman said in a Fox News interview. “Afghanistan is today’s war. If we don’t act preemptively, Yemen will be tomorrow’s war. That’s the danger we face.”

Appearing on the same program, Senator Arlen Specter, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, agreed, saying that a military attack on Yemen is “something we should consider.”

“Yemen is the new FATA, or it will be,” said Representative Jane Harman, a California Democrat who chairs the House Homeland Security subcommittee on intelligence. She was referring to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan, where the CIA and US military have been conducting increasingly frequent missile attacks as well as ground incursions by Special

Operations troops.

The US media, as in every other drive toward war, has fallen into line. The *Washington Post* published a front-page article Monday headlined, “Al-Qaeda Group in Yemen Gaining Prominence.”

While acknowledging that the claim that Al Qaeda organized the failed plane bombing had yet to be proven, the *Post* article continued, “If the claim is true, it represents ... the emergence of a major new threat to the United States, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.”

Characteristically, the cable news outlets were even more blunt and bellicose. “So are we missing the boat here?” CNN anchor Kyra Philips asked a counterterrorism “expert” Monday afternoon. “We’re at war in Afghanistan; we’re at war in Iraq. Should we be at war in Yemen?”

If the US is preparing for yet another war, this time in Yemen, it is not to eradicate terrorism or protect the American people. The claim that such methods can accomplish these purported goals can be used to justify US military intervention virtually anywhere, from Pakistan, to Somalia, to Indonesia, to the Philippines and the entire Middle East.

The real aim of US imperialism is to impose its hegemonic control over the world’s strategic energy supplies and the pipelines and shipping routes that deliver them to the world’s major powers. Yemen commands the Bab-el-Mandeb strait connecting the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea and providing access to the Suez Canal, a vital chokepoint through which tankers carry some three million barrels of oil every day.

The Obama administration was swept into office on the slogan of “change,” thanks in large measure to the American people’s hostility to the two wars launched under the presidency of George W. Bush. Now, rather than ending these wars, the Obama White House is continuing the occupation of Iraq, sending at least 30,000 additional US troops into Afghanistan and initiating yet another American military intervention in Yemen.

These military actions will spell increasing death and destruction for the peoples of these countries, a growing number of dead and wounded among the US military, and the increasing likelihood of a far wider and potentially global conflict.

The growing threat of a US war in Yemen demonstrates the impossibility of opposing American militarism within the framework of the capitalist two-party system. This struggle requires the independent political mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration on the basis of a socialist program to put an end to the profit system, which is the driving force of imperialist war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact