

Britain lines up behind US aggression in Yemen

Ann Talbot
6 January 2010

Once again, the British ruling class has become the first to line up full-square behind the latest military provocation being prepared by Washington. After its participation in the wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as its support for attacks inside Pakistan, Britain has joined with the US in making Yemen the next target.

Washington is intent on utilising the failed attempt to explode a bomb on Detroit-bound Northwest Flight 253 on Christmas Day as a pretext for further intervention in this poverty-stricken country. On the basis of reported links between Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab and Al Qaeda elements in Yemen, President Barack Obama has pledged that “all elements of US power” will be brought to bear against the country, amidst reports that military targets are already being selected.

UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown responded most eagerly to this US belligerence. He immediately ordered UK airports to introduce full body scanners, despite the fact that Europe has declared these devices to be in breach of human rights.

Brown also announced an international meeting in London at the end of this month to discuss Yemen and said that Britain will participate in a joint US-UK anti-terror programme in the country. The meeting is to run in conjunction with a planned conference on Afghanistan, aimed at deepening the military involvement of the European countries in the increasingly bloody US-led occupation.

The prime minister’s readiness to back Washington’s threats against Yemen comes despite serious questions over the attempted airline bombing. Not least of these is how it was that Abdulmutallab managed to board the flight, given that he was on a security watch list and his father had reported him as a potential terrorist threat to

Nigerian and American authorities.

Brown’s response confirms that no real change in policy was involved in the transfer of power from Tony Blair to himself. The UK continues to function as something akin to a European proxy of Langley, Virginia, and the White House.

More is involved than mere electioneering on the part of Brown in advance of a national election, or simply bowing to the demands of the UK’s more powerful ally. What has been exposed by Brown’s flurry of announcements is the extent to which Britain and the US are already involved in Yemen.

The prime minister initially claimed he had decided to participate in a joint anti-terror programme with Washington after a personal phone conversation with Obama. Interviewed by the BBC’s Andrew Marr on Sunday, Brown conceded that the operation was already underway. “The truth is we’ve been doing this for some time,” he admitted.

When asked about the joint programme, an unnamed Washington official told the Associated Press that there was no new initiative. American and British forces were already assisting Yemeni security forces in “anti-terror” operations. US Senator Joseph Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, was reported in the UK-based *Telegraph* as saying, “We have a growing presence there—and we have to—of special operations, Green Berets, intelligence.”

The implication of Brown’s admission is that there are also British special forces on the ground in Yemen alongside those of the US.

Days before the failed airline bombing, it was revealed that Obama had personally given the order for US air strikes on the Abyan village of al Maajala in Yemen. The December 17 strikes, which killed some 120 people, were apparently coordinated with the US-

backed dictatorship of Yemen President Ali Abdallah Saleh.

Brown, like Blair, does not intend to be left out of “tomorrow’s war.” While it may seem astonishing that Britain, more heavily mired in debt than any other developed country and already over-extended militarily, should get embroiled in yet another war, for the ruling elite there is no choice but to follow the US lead. In fact, Britain’s desperate economic and financial condition is driving it into new military adventures.

Britain can plausibly bring some highly relevant experience in Yemen to the table. Under the Labour government of Harold Wilson in the 1960s, it fought one of its last colonial wars in part of the territory that became Yemen. And a savage war it was.

BBC correspondent Brian Barron, who covered what was known as the “Aden Emergency,” recalled, “One steamy morning in the Crater district [the Arab district of the port of Aden] I arrived to find Colonel Colin Mitchell—known to the media as Mad Mitch because of his gung-ho style—directing a group of squaddies who were stacking, like a butcher’s delivery, the corpses of six Arabs on the pavement. They’d been shot as they tried to ambush a patrol. ‘It was like shooting grouse,’ said the Colonel, ‘A brace here and a brace there. It was over in seconds.’”

This casual attitude to colonial brutality characterised the British occupation. What Brown and Obama now describe as a “failed state” is in large part the creation of that colonial experience.

Britain’s involvement is also dictated by Yemen’s geo-strategic importance. Aden, a valuable deep water port, sits directly on the main world shipping lane that links the Far East to Europe and America. It controls access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. That is why it was so crucial to the British and why, when Britain was eventually forced to withdraw in 1967, the US took over efforts to maintain control of Yemen through its proxy in the region, Saudi Arabia.

Between 1962 and 1970, Saudi Arabia backed royalist forces against the Republic of Yemen, which had the support of Egypt and the Soviet Union in the North Yemen civil war. After British withdrawal, South Yemen aligned itself with the Soviet Union. A united Yemen did not come into existence until 1990.

When Yemen refused to support the First Gulf War in

early 1991, Saudi Arabia responded by expelling one million Yemeni workers, adding to the country’s poverty and instability. The legacy of colonialism and Cold War conflicts ensures that, despite having one of the finest harbours in the world, Yemen remains the poorest Arab state. Most of the country’s population of 25 million live on less than \$2 a day.

The real target of the US and UK military is not Al Qaeda, but the Yemeni civilian population. The use of air power against civilians is a modern version of the British tactic of bombing the villages of rebel tribes. This state terror has been taken to a new level of destructiveness, but the purpose is strikingly similar. The intention of the US is to extend its colonial control over this strategic region. Britain, the former colonial power, is intent on securing its share of the spoils.

The opening of a new front in the so-called “war on terror” will have incalculable consequences. Brown stated specifically that Britain would assist Yemen in developing its coastguard. Last October, the Yemeni coastguard seized an Iranian vessel which was alleged to be carrying weapons to Houthi rebels in northern Yemen. With the world’s shipping passing through the Gulf of Aden, such a naval policy has explosive global implications. The prospect of Yemen impounding merchant vessels with British and US-backing threatens to spark any number of international conflicts.

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