

US airstrike kills 40 in Yemen

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Three US airstrikes killed over 40 alleged Al Qaida affiliated militants on Tuesday at a former government military base west of the southern Yemeni city of Mukalla. Local officials estimated that another 25 militants were wounded in the attack.

The Pentagon reported that the site of the attack was a “training camp” containing “more than 70 AQAP [Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula] terrorists.” This was the second mass-casualty US airstrike this month, after a March 5 airstrike killed over 150 people in Somalia, whom the US claimed were linked to al-Shabaab, the major jihadist militia in Somalia.

The US airstrike on AQAP forces comes after a series of significant territorial gains by the jihadist militia. AQAP has come back from a position of considerable weakness, following a devastating military campaign by the Yemeni government in 2012 and repeated drone strikes by the US government.

However, since having their forces crippled four years ago, AQAP has made large advances in the past year due to the chaos fomented by the US-backed Saudi war against Houthi militias.

Both the United States and Saudi Arabia are seeking to prevent the Houthis from coming to power, after they quickly seized control of the capital and much of the country in 2014. The Houthis are a Shiite group politically close to Iran and have been supported by elements in the Yemeni military who are loyal to former US-backed dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Since the beginning of the Saudi-led air campaign on March 25, 2015, at least 6,200 civilians have been killed by Saudi bombers, according to the United Nations. Amnesty International estimates that at least 2.5 million people have been displaced from their homes. In 2013 the population of Yemen was approximately 25.4 million people—meaning that about 10 percent of the population has been driven from their homes.

Earlier this month, on March 15, Saudi warplanes killed 119 people at a market in the Hajja province of Yemen. The UN estimated that 22 children were killed and another 47 people wounded. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein stated that the Saudi-led coalition may have perpetrated “international crimes” with the bombing and added that all in all the coalition was “responsible for twice as many civilian casualties as all other forces put together.”

It is in this context of bloodshed, aerial bombardment and mass displacement that AQAP has been able to regain significant amounts of territory. Last March it captured the southeastern port city of Mukalla, acquiring an oil terminal, money from the central bank and a weapons depot. In December of last year it took control of the capital of Abyan province, near Aden—Yemen’s major port city. Several other towns were taken shortly after, making AQAP a dominant force throughout southern Yemen.

The most recent strike by the US military was the largest airstrike in Yemen by the US in five years. Because it also follows another mass airstrike earlier this month in Somalia, some analysts have suggested this represents a change in strategy of the US. Typically US airstrikes have focused on taking out leaders of AQAP rather than broadly killing its members at large gatherings.

Adam Baron, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, speculated that the US could be concerned about AQAP’s rapid growth in southern Yemen over the past few months. “These are areas where Al Qaeda has really managed to get unprecedented amounts of control in Yemen,” Baron reported to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

Micah Zenko, an analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations who studies US airstrikes in the Middle East, told the *Guardian*, “The Somalia and Yemen strikes

suggest that the White House has authorized a significant opening of the aperture to target gatherings of suspected terror groups, rather than named individuals who pose imminent threats.”

Both in Syria and Libya the United States has funded and abetted similar Al Qaeda backed forces in order to topple Bashar al Assad and Muammar Gadhafi, respectively.

Similarly, in Yemen, AQAP was reported to be fighting alongside Saudi-backed forces in order to take back Yemen’s large port city of Aden from Houthi Rebels in 2015. Far from being a one-off event, BBC journalists later filmed Al Qaeda forces fighting alongside Saudi Arabian and UAE forces in late 2015 near the southern city of Taiz.

The fact that the United States is now bombing these same forces is a testament to the recklessness and hypocrisy of the so-called War on Terror. The US and its biggest ally in the region, Saudi Arabia, are comfortable funding, supporting and fighting alongside Al Qaeda, insofar as it suits their aims, and dispensing with them when they are no longer needed or threaten blowback against Western interests. Tuesday’s attack is yet another testament to this rotten policy.



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