Saudi airstrike on motel in Yemen kills at least 41

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At least 41 civilians were killed early Wednesday morning when missiles fired by a Saudi-led coalition jet fighter slammed into a motel on the northern outskirts of Yemen's capital, Sanaa. The official death toll is expected to rise as more bodies are pulled from the rubble.

Reports indicate that approximately 100 farmers were sleeping in the two-story building in Arhab at the time that it was blown up. Journalist Saad Abedine reported on Twitter that the motel was located near a Houthi camp, and reports indicate that Houthi rebels were also among those killed by the airstrike.

The head of the nearby Umrah hospital, Fahd Marhab, told reporters that his facility had not received any wounded, as everyone in the building had been killed in the attack. Pictures of the massacre posted on social media show corpses sandwiched between collapsed slabs of concrete.

The attack was just one of dozens of airstrikes that hit in and around Sanaa early Wednesday, claiming more than 100 lives.

"It is probably the biggest massacre Yemen has witnessed by the Saudi-led coalition," journalist Hakim Al Masmari told *Al Jazeera*. "The air strike targeted a motel late early this morning. It was part of at least 25 air strikes that targeted Sanaa and the outskirts of the city since midnight. The air strikes attacked every part of Sanaa. It was a deadly night."

Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have been waging an unrelenting war from the air and on the ground in an effort to push back the Houthi rebels and forces loyal to former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The war that began in 2015 with the backing of then-US President Barack Obama is being ramped up under President Donald Trump, who traveled to Saudi Arabia in May and signed a $110 billion weapons deal, greenlighting a dramatic escalation in the onslaught.

The effort to dominate Yemen is seen by military planners in Washington as crucial to curbing Iranian influence in the region and for setting the stage for a possible war against Tehran. Without providing any hard evidence, officials in both the Obama and Trump administrations have routinely accused the Houthis of being proxies for Iran.

The number of airstrikes in the first half of this year has already far exceeded the number recorded in all of 2016, according to a report released by the Protection Cluster in Yemen, a group of humanitarian organizations headed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. There were 5,767 airstrikes between January and the end of June, compared to 3,936 in all of 2016.

Now in its third year, the offensive, which is fully backed by the US, has killed more than 10,000 civilians, displaced millions from their homes, sparked a deadly cholera outbreak that has infected more than half a million and pushed millions to the brink of famine. A no-fly zone and naval blockade have been established by Saudi Arabia with the support of the US, cutting the country off from critical food and medical imports.

Residential areas, hospitals, schools, markets, cranes used to unload ships and funeral halls have all been targeted for airstrikes made possible by refueling flights and targeting information provided by the US military. US military and intelligence forces have also reportedly been working with the UAE to interrogate detainees at a series of torture chambers in Yemen and on ships off the coast.

Despite the brutal onslaught, the contentious alliance between the Houthis and Saleh, who once waged a war

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against the Shiite minority, has maintained control over much of the north, including Sanaa, since an uprising in early 2015 forced President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to flee for Riyadh.

The Saudis' ostensible goal has been to return Hadi to power as a puppet in the country on the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula that borders the Strait of Bab el Mandeb, a strategic waterway connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden through which much of the world's oil supply flows. A ground invasion led by the UAE managed to wrest significant portions of the south from the Houthis, including the port city of Aden, but has largely stalled in the face of stiff resistance.

The bloody attack came the same day that General Joseph Votel, the head of US Central Command, made a visit to the Saudi-Yemen border to assess the state of the Saudi-led war. The US has been waging a war in the deeply impoverished country against Sunni militants belonging to Al Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula (AQAP) since at least 2011. Votel is responsible for directing US wars and military operations across the Middle East and Central Asia, including in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Yemen.

While journalists were not allowed to accompany Votel on his trek, US Central Command spokesman Air Force Col. John Thomas assured reporters that the general never crossed into Yemeni territory. According to Thomas, Votel was there to tour a military command center, review Saudi troops and "develop a better understanding of the Saudi challenges with security at the border."

Trump authorized the military to wage a much more aggressive campaign against AQAP soon after he took office in January, leading to a marked increase in the number of drone strikes and Special Forces raids in the first few months of this year. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, as many as one third of those killed by US drone strikes and raids so far this year have been civilians.

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