

Washington calls for Yemen ceasefire as Saudis escalate siege of Hodeidah

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Despite calls by the US secretaries of state and defense for a ceasefire in Yemen, the US-backed, Saudi-led coalition is carrying out a massive buildup of troops laying siege to the country's critical Red Sea port of Hodeidah, threatening an offensive that could kill many thousands while plunging millions more into outright starvation.

The developments came as the United Nations issued fresh warnings that some 14 million people in Yemen are threatened with a famine that is eclipsing anything the world has seen for the past century.

Speaking at the US Institute of Peace in Washington on October 30, Pentagon chief Gen. James Mattis stated in relation to Yemen, "We have got to move toward a peace effort here, and we can't say we are going to do it sometime in the future. We need to be doing this in the next 30 days."

Mattis' peace appeal was laced with lies placing the principal blame for the near genocidal war that has been raging in Yemen for the last three and a half years on the Houthi rebel movement that overthrew the US and Saudi-backed puppet regime of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. He repeated unsubstantiated US allegations that the Houthis are a proxy force for Iran, and that Tehran is supplying them with missiles, something for which the US and its allies have presented not a shred of evidence.

The US defense secretary insisted that the peace talks would be aimed at "demilitarizing the border so that Saudis and Emirates [sic] do not have to worry about missiles coming into their ... homes, and cities and airports."

He went on to denounce Iran, declaring that its alleged shipment of missiles to the Houthis had "interrupted freedom of navigation" and charging that: "They are the ones who keep fueling this conflict and

they need to knock it off. They may do it through proxies as they do so often in the Middle East, but they do not escape accountability for what they're doing through proxies and surrogate forces. We still will hold them accountable."

This belligerent nonsense turns the situation in Yemen inside out. Saudi Arabia recently claimed that a little over 100 of its civilians—a grossly inflated figure—had been killed by Houthi missiles. No one has died in the UAE. Meanwhile, the estimates of the number of Yemenis killed—the vast majority of them by Saudi airstrikes—ranges between 50,000 and 80,000.

While there is no evidence that Iran is "fueling" the conflict, Washington is literally doing just that. US Air Force tanker planes have been deployed over the Arabian Peninsula to enable Saudi bombers to carry out continuous strikes against Yemen. US military intelligence officers help run a joint command center in Riyadh providing the Saudi military with targeting information and other intelligence and the US Navy provides crucial support for a Saudi-led blockade that is starving the country of food, medicine and other essential supplies. Meanwhile, virtually all of the billions of dollars' worth of bombs, warplanes and other military equipment being use in the war on Yemen is supplied by the arms manufacturers of the US, the UK and other NATO allies.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo echoed the statement by Mattis, declaring that the "time is now for the cessation of hostilities." He added that "America stands by the kingdom" of Saudi Arabia.

The state-run media in Saudi Arabia portrayed the statements by Mattis and Pompeo as support for Riyadh. "America stands by the kingdom against the Houthi's Iranian ballistic missiles," was the headline of the major daily *Al Riyadh*.

Even as these duplicitous calls for a ceasefire were being made in Washington, the Saudi-led coalition was reportedly bringing as many as 10,000 fresh troops, including Sudanese regulars, mercenaries and Saudi and Emirati troops to the outskirts of Hodeidah for a fresh offensive that is expected to unfold within days.

The size of this buildup makes clear that it could not have been carried out without US knowledge and logistical backing.

Washington gave the greenlight for the siege of Hodeidah, which is aimed at cutting off the lifeline for food, medicine and other basic supplies to the majority of the population who live in areas of the country controlled by the Houthi rebel movement. The Red Sea port is the entry point for 70 percent of the country's food imports and international aid.

Despite continuous airstrikes, the Saudi-led forces have until now been unable to break the resistance of the Houthis and the city's residents. Aid organizations have reported that food is running out in the city, while thousands of families have been driven from their homes with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The aid groups and the United Nations have warned that the overrunning of the city by the Saudi-led forces would entail massive civilian casualties, while threatening millions of Yemenis with death by starvation by cutting off the flow of food aid.

The Western media has largely blacked out reports of the Yemen war, while the meager reporting that has appeared repeats a years' old estimate of 10,000 civilians killed. The UN has since raised this estimated death toll to 16,000.

However, a new report issued by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a nonprofit conflict-research organization, has established that the Saudi-led war has claimed the lives of at least 56,000 Yemenis.

That figure is itself a significant underestimate. Andrea Carboni, who researches Yemen for the ACLED, told Patrick Cockburn of the *Independent* that it includes only those killed between January 2016 and October 2018. Adding the victims claimed from the start of the Saudi-led war in March 2015 until the end of that year, he said, would likely bring the real toll to between 70,000 and 80,000.

The death toll from hunger and preventable diseases like cholera caused by the US-backed blockade of the

country and the systematic destruction of basic infrastructure, including water and sewer systems and healthcare facilities, is far higher.

The aid group Save the Children has released an estimate that 100 children on average are dying every single day in Yemen from preventable causes like extreme hunger and disease. At least half of the 14 million Yemenis threatened with famine are children. UNICEF reports that 1.8 million children under the age of five are facing acute malnutrition, and 400,000 are affected by severe acute malnutrition.

This massive human catastrophe is the product of policies pursued under both Obama and Trump, without which the war in Yemen would have been impossible. The aim under both the Democratic and Republican administrations has been to further US imperialism's drive for hegemony over the Middle East, by assuring that Yemen remained under the control of a US-Saudi puppet regime and preventing any expansion of Iranian influence in the region.

The calls for a ceasefire—while giving a 30-day deadline to allow the murderous siege of Hodeidah to proceed and continuing US arms shipments and logistical support—signals a tactical shift in this imperialist policy. Washington is attempting to utilize the crisis provoked within the Saudi monarchy by the exposure of the brutal assassination in its Istanbul consulate of journalist Jamal Khashoggi to put a tighter leash on the House of Saud and its de facto chief, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

There are also reports that the US government is pressing Riyadh to end its economic blockade of Qatar, which hosts the largest US military facility in the Middle East, the Udeid airbase, from which US warplanes have carried out their bombardments of Syria and Iraq.



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