

The siege of Hodeidah: Washington doubles down on its war crime in Yemen

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One of the bloodiest events in what constitutes the world's largest ongoing war crime is beginning to unfold in Hodeidah, the Red Sea port that serves as the principal lifeline for food, fuel and medicine upon which at least 70 percent of Yemen's impoverished and starving population depend for survival.

The Saudi-led coalition that has waged a devastating war against Yemen's population for the past three and a half years reports that it has mobilized some 30,000 troops to surround the city. These include Emirati and Sudanese regulars, Al Qaeda militiamen and Yemeni mercenaries, all being massed on Hodeidah's outskirts.

The city is being subjected to non-stop bombardment from both the air and sea, with the aid group Save the Children reporting that its staff counted some 100 airstrikes just over the weekend, a five-fold increase compared to the first week in October.

Among the latest civilian victims of this onslaught are two people killed and 24 wounded in a strike on a residential neighborhood, a worker left dead and five other wounded in the bombing of a Yemeni factory, a young girl wounded in an artillery attack on a mosque and five inmates injured in the bombing of Hodeidah's central prison.

The bombings have come ever closer to the Al Thawra hospital, the last functioning medical facility treating children on the brink of death from malnutrition. It has made it impossible for those seeking aid to reach the hospital, and there is growing concern that it will be targeted, as have the majority of hospitals and clinics throughout Yemen.

Some 570,000 people in the port of Hodeidah and the surrounding province of the same name have been turned into homeless refugees, often fleeing bombardments and violence with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

That the renewed siege has the blessing of Washington is indisputable. The massing of troops, the naval blockade

and the endless bombing would all be impossible without the close collaboration of the Pentagon, which supplies aerial refueling for Saudi bombers, naval support for the stranglehold over access to Hodeidah from the sea and even intelligence assistance for selecting targets in the port city.

Yet the escalation of the siege comes just one week after extensive reports in the US media of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and US Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis calling for a "ceasefire" in Yemen and indicating a 30-day deadline for the resumption of peace talks.

Even as the siege of Hodeidah was building, the *New York Times* published a hypocritical November 5 editorial titled "End Yemen's Agony", praising Pompeo and Mattis for having "urged all sides to stop the killing" and proclaiming that "the secretaries have taken a first step."

Events on the ground make it abundantly clear that this is all nonsense, a cover-up for continuing and intensifying slaughter that is reaching a near-genocidal scale.

Urging "all sides to stop the killing," as if the US-backed Saudi-led coalition and its victims are equally responsible for the mass murder in Yemen, is designed only to create an alibi for war crimes.

According to the latest estimate by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, some 56,000 Yemenis have died since the US-backed Saudi assault began in 2016. Together with the deaths in the first nine months of the war, the death toll is thought to be between 70,000 and 80,000, the vast majority of them caused by Saudi bombs and missiles.

The death toll from hunger and preventable disease, caused by the Saudi blockade of the country and the systematic leveling of water, sewage and other basic infrastructure, is far greater, with an estimated 50,000 victims last year alone.

As many as 14 million people, nearly half the country's

population, are on the brink of starvation, with the siege of Hodeidah and the cutting off of relief supplies threatening to claim the lives of millions.

A close examination of the statements made by Pompeo and Mattis makes clear their real intent. Pompeo's call for a "ceasefire" read, "the time is now for the cessation of hostilities, including missile and UAV strikes from Houthi-controlled areas into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. *Subsequently*, Coalition air strikes must cease in all populated areas in Yemen. [emphasis added]"

In other words, the onus is on the Houthi rebels who control Hodeidah, the capital Sana'a and the most populous area of the country, to halt missile attacks, none of which have done any significant damage to either Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Only "subsequently," after this unilateral act of surrender, will US-backed Saudi forces halt air strikes in "populated areas," presumably continuing them in areas deemed not to be populated.

In an interview on Fox News Sunday, Pompeo, asked about his and Mattis' statements, responded, "Frankly, it's nothing new," while claiming that the starvation in Yemen was caused by Iran supplying "weapons and missiles to the Houthi rebels that are fighting there in Saudi Arabia." Even government lies should make some sense. While Washington has yet to present any credible evidence that Iran is arming the Houthi rebels, the idea that the Houthis are fighting in Saudi Arabia—presumably making them the aggressor—is a fantasy that turns the world on its head.

It is now clear that the supposed 30-day deadline for a Yemen ceasefire was used to telegraph a message to the Saudis to get on with the slaughter and capture Hodeidah as speedily as possible, no matter what the human cost. Should Riyadh need an extension for this massive bloodletting, one will no doubt be forthcoming.

Washington views the mass murder in Yemen through the prism of its attempt to curtail Iran's influence throughout the Middle East and effect regime change in Tehran. It is no accident that the escalation of the siege of Hodeidah coincides with the imposition of punishing unilateral and illegal US sanctions against Iran that are tantamount to an act of war. Saudi Arabia is seen as the linchpin of imperialist reaction in the Middle East, the key ally in the conflict with Iran and the source of billions of dollars in profits for US arms manufacturers. To preserve these interests, Washington is prepared to see millions die.

In the wake of the grisly October 2 political murder of

journalist and former Riyadh insider Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, the US media, which had largely blacked out the mass killing in Yemen, provided a brief spurt of coverage as it appeared that it might be useful in Washington's attempts to use the crisis over this political murder as leverage in securing a more advantageous relationship with the House of Saud.

A month later, coverage of both the Khashoggi assassination and the slaughter in Yemen has largely abated, suggesting that some kind of accommodation has been reached between Washington and Riyadh. For most of the population of the United States, news of the siege of Hodeidah, in which the American military is a full partner, is blacked out.

Moreover, in the midst of the supposedly decisive midterm election, no candidate of either of the two big business parties has chosen to make Washington's indispensable support for the mass murder of Yemeni men, women and children an issue in the campaign. And for good reason. Both major parties are fully implicated in this war crime, with all the instruments of support for the Saudi-led war—midair refueling, intelligence sharing, targeting assistance, support for the naval blockade and massive US arms sales—having been implemented under the Democratic Obama administration and continued and deepened under the Republican administration of Trump.

Whatever tactical differences exist between Democrats and Republicans over the issues of Yemen and the steadily escalating confrontation with Iran, both capitalist parties are committed to a policy of imposing unchallenged US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East, a policy that is claiming Yemeni lives as "collateral damage" on an unspeakably horrific scale.



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