

Senator Warren Calls for End of US Support of War Crimes in Yemen

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Yemen is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. In 2018, an estimated 22.2 million people – 75 percent of the population were in need of humanitarian assistance. A total of 17.8 million people were food insecure and 8.4 million people did not know how to obtain their next meal. Conflict, protracted displacement, disease and deprivation continued to inflict suffering on the country's population. Disruption to commercial imports, inflation, lack of salary payments to civil servants and rising prices of basic commodities exacerbated people's vulnerability. Despite a difficult operating environment, throughout the year, 254 international and national partners actively coordinated to assist people with the most acute needs in priority districts across Yemen's 22 governorates. Together they assisted over 7.9 million people monthly with some form of humanitarian assistance. – [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), February 7, 2019

That sanitized United Nations assessment above, horrific as it is in its abstract body-counting way, only begins to describe the terrible reality that foreign countries have inflicted on the poorest country in the region.

A starker reality is that the US has aided and abetted a criminal, genocidal war against Yemen, mostly carried out by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and several allies. From the beginning, this war has been a nexus of war crimes that included using cluster bombs on civilian targets, such as weddings, funerals, hospitals, and schools. The US was involved from the start in selecting those and other targets. The US provided intelligence, maintenance, mid-air refueling, and support for a naval blockade (an act of war) that helped starve a country that has always needed to import food to survive.

There has never been any justification for the US to unleash this carnage on Yemen. In 2014-2015, the native Houthis won a civil war and regained control of that part of Yemen they had previously controlled for hundreds of years. The internationally-imposed "legitimate" government fled to Saudi Arabia. Further Houthi expansion was limited by a variety of forces that included government loyalists, al Qaeda and ISIS enclaves, independent militias, and tribal resistance. Yemen might have been left to sort itself out (the Houthis did eliminate al Qaeda and ISIS from their area of control). In 2015, Yemen posed no serious threat to anyone other than itself.

But the Saudis were sulking, not only because they lost their puppet government in Yemen, but more so because the US was actually treating Iran as a sovereign nation capable of behaving responsibly under the proper circumstances. The US was joining in the multilateral agreement that has so far halted Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

So when Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) floated the idea of low-risk bombing of helpless people, the Obama administration collectively shrugged and said in effect: sure, why not, and we'll even help you commit the international crime of waging aggressive war against a neighboring country in the midst of a civil war. And that's what the US did. And that's what the US is still doing. And the US thinks so little of its criminal bloodletting that the president doesn't even mention it in his state of the union address, and most of Congress and the media and the public have no strong objection to a permanent state of war criminality. Well, 30 former Obama officials last fall [said Trump should end all US support for the Saudi war](#) on Yemen, without seriously taking responsibility for their own actions that could put them in a war crimes dock (if such a thing is still imaginable):

The statement by the former senior officials attempts to acknowledge that America's participation in the war — providing intelligence, refueling, and logistical assistance to the Saudi-led coalition — was now clearly a mistake, given the coalition's failure to limit its myriad violations and end the war. But they justify the Obama administration's initial decision to support the war as based on "a legitimate threat posed by missiles on the Saudi border and the Houthi overthrow of the Yemeni government, with support from Iran."

Iran's involvement in Yemen has always been largely imaginary, and still is. But the Trump administration sees Iranian ghosties and ghoulies everywhere, without ever managing to demonstrate that they actually exist. Unfortunately for the Houthis, they are Shiite Muslims of their own sect – Zaydi – who have been targeted by Saudi Wahhabism for the past 40 years. Imagining Iran was just an excuse for the Saudis to continue their religious war by other means. In 2015, Iran "supported" the Houthis minimally, mostly diplomatically and politically. There has been no evidence that Iranian involvement has exceeded the scale described by Robert Worth, longtime reporter on Yemen, in the current New York Review:

Houthis have also benefitted – militarily at least – from their alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, which have provided training on infantry tactics, anti-tank fighting, mine-laying, and anti-ship attacks in the Red Sea. Iran has provided ballistic missiles that the Houthis have fired across the border into Saudi Arabia

That's the whole load of Iranian "support" as iterated by Worth, who is no Houthi apologist. He gives no timeframe nor any measure of the extent of this support. Everything he lists is arguably defensive, including the missiles if they followed the Saudi bombing. But the Iranian strawman is rigidly fixed in the minds of US officials and media reporters, even Worth, who ignores his own later evidence and reflexively writes: "Huge obstacles to peace remain, above all the Houthis' military alliance with Iran, which is what led the Saudis to launch the war in the first place." So at least he acknowledges the Saudis waging aggressive war and even uses an apt Nazi reference to describe the Saudi mindset: "They consider the Houthis an Iranian dagger aimed at their heart."

Southern Yemen is subject to something much more like a real Nazi occupation. Some uncertain amount of southern Yemen, including Aden, is titularly under the control of the "official" Yemeni government. The same area and beyond is more effectively under the control of the UAE military, whose shock troops include thousands of child soldiers from Somalia. The UAE works closely with US advisors on the ground. The UAE is reliably reported to run black sites, a network of secret prisons where they torture and kill prisoners at will. The US military officially testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 5

that the US has not observed such activities. The official US see-no-evil written statement on Yemen and the rest of the region is [predictably optimistic and opaque](#).

[Senator Elizabeth Warren questioned](#) the US regional commander, Gen. Joseph L. Votel about UAE prisoner abuses reported by the United Nations, the Associated Press, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. The general's response was one of official ignorance or deniability: "I think what I'm saying to you is that we have no observations of our own – our people that have actually seen this.... I have not reached any kind of conclusion that they are conducting these activities...." By omission, the general made clear that the US has made no effort to determine the truth. This is the first rule of any cover-up: "I don't want to know and you don't want to know." (Votel was equally oblivious to [reports that Saudi and UAE military](#) were illegally transferring US [arms to militias and other third parties](#) in Yemen.)

"Turning a blind eye is not acceptable," was Warren's response. Earlier in the hearing, following up on the US support for Saudi bombing missions, Warren said:

I'm asking you questions about the details of the help we give the Saudis because they continue to conduct bombing runs. They continue to perpetuate one of the worst man-made humanitarian disasters of the modern era. During this civil war, more than 85,000 children under the age of 5 have starved to death, and tens of thousands of civilians have been killed. This military engagement is not authorized. We need to end U.S. support for this war now.

If this is the first time you're learning about [a US senator and presidential candidate](#) publicly calling for the end of US involvement in the illegal war on Yemen, what does that tell you about American media and politics?

Meanwhile, the December [ceasefire brokered by the UN](#) continues to hold shakily, without significant US support, and the civilian death toll from hunger and disease mounts.

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