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US/Middle East

Open and Hidden Horrors

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Even before Donald Trump dynamited the corpse of the “peace process” with his December 6 pronouncement of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the full horrors of the United States’ wars in the Middle East and Africa were beginning to emerge from the fog of official obfuscation. The furor over Trump’s speech on Jerusalem has reduced the coverage of calamities unfolding in Yemen, in Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan, in Mali and in places we don’t yet know about. It bears mentioning that these interventions were inherited from the Obama administration, even if the Trump presidency has escalated them to new levels of atrocity.

To begin with a simple exercise in translation, which applies almost without exception to modern warfare: When military officials proclaim that “our forces take extreme care to avoid civilian casualties, even when this risks the safety of our own soldiers,” it means “we are killing lots of civilians, particularly to avoid casualties to ourselves.”

That’s the strategic logic of drone warfare and reliance on air power. The “enemy” is targeted with no risk to the remote-control operators hundreds or even thousands of miles distant, or pilots flying high above the kill zone “while civilians blown to bits in the vicinity, deliberately or by accident, are discarded as “collateral damage.” The family of Basim Razzo in Mosul, Iraq in September 2015, wiped out by a U.S. air strike, chronicled in the stunning investigative report by Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, is one wrenching example. (“The Uncounted,” New York Times Sunday magazine, November 19, 2017, [here](#).)

The military reported that “89 of its more than 14,000 airstrikes in Iraq have resulted in civilian deaths.” The reporters’ on-the-ground survey of U.S.-led coalition bombings of supposed “Islamic State” targets concluded instead: “The rate we found on the ground “one out of every five “is 31 times as high” as the official claim. The numbers of civilian deaths are indeed “uncounted,” but “31 times as high” would extrapolate from some 466 admitted civilian deaths to well over 10,000. No one knows.

The liberation of Mosul from ISIS forces has destroyed much of Iraq’s second largest city. Similarly catastrophic conditions prevail in post-ISIS Raqqa in Syria “where the United States is now admitting to more than 2000 U.S. troops on the ground, not the fictional previous claim of only 500 in “non-combat advisory roles.” That’s in addition to 9000 in Iraq.

The Destruction of Yemen

All this pales in light of the near-destruction of the country of Yemen. With direct U.S. support, Saudi Arabia’s bombing and blockade of Yemen has brought about a civilian holocaust. According to the al-Jazeera website, “Two years of conflict have killed more than 10,000 people, wounded tens of thousands and displaced millions.”

Following the collapse of health and sanitation services, “There are more than half a million suspected cases of cholera in the country and on average 5,000 new cases are recorded a day.” Diphtheria is also ravaging the country’s children. The United Nations reports that famine in Yemen threatens seven million people with starvation. (For some additional background see, for example, New York magazine, [here](#).)

All this was before Saudi Arabia induced former president Ali Abdullah Saleh to switch his allegiance, leading rapidly

to his assassination by his former Houthi allies and the collapse of any prospect of negotiations. And unlike the Syrian catastrophe, Yemen hasn't produced a massive refugee exodus because most of its people have no way out.

This massive crime against humanity remained almost uncovered by U.S. corporate media during the Obama presidency, during which Washington uttered occasional muted criticisms of the Saudi kingdom's behavior. Some of the facts about Yemen are now appearing in the press, especially those outlets critical of Donald Trump "reflecting the traditional U.S. policy elite's embarrassment by the big twit's full-Monty fawning over the Saudi rulers.

How deep the distrust of Trump's stability and sanity runs is shown by the U.S. military command making it publicly known that it would refuse presidential illegal orders to initiate nuclear hostilities (against North Korea).

Toward Regional War?

The strategic calculations behind the Trump-Saudi lovefest go beyond mere grotesque spectacle. There's a real emerging danger of a major regional war.

U.S. and Iranian forces have been tactically allied in the military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but the rout of ISIS is bringing that cooperation to an end. (See Joseph Daher's analysis in this issue of how Kurdish forces have been used on the ground, and how Kurdish aspirations are betrayed by the various powers.)

Yemen's internal civil conflict, which was destructive enough in the wake of the failed hopes of the "Arab Spring," has been overlaid by a vicious proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi rulers are openly looking to the United States and Israel to roll back Iran's political-military regional power, which grew following the disastrous 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Yemen's 28 million people are pawns to be sacrificed.

The Saudi regime, now controlled by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, appears to have triggered a major political crisis in Lebanon by forcing the "resignation" of prime minister Saad Hariri, possibly after effectively kidnapping him. After Hariri came back home and rescinded his resignation, it is unclear whether Lebanese political forces can sort this out "but the Saudi goal is to eliminate the power of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah ("Party of God") in the country.

This raises the almost-unthinkable prospect of another civil war in Lebanon, which was almost torn apart by the previous one that lasted from 1975-90. Saudi Arabia has no military forces to coerce Lebanon, but it does have vast economic assets and leverage over Lebanon's banks, which it could withdraw causing the collapse of Lebanon's economy although at some cost to the Saudis themselves.

Direct military muscle, of course, is where the United States and Israel come in. The Israeli press is full of its military's preparation for the next war against Hezbollah, with the message that this would not be a "limited" campaign but a full war against the Lebanese state.

For its part Hezbollah, although it has suffered heavy casualties in its intervention on the side of the murderous Syrian regime, is not only battle-hardened but is believed to have missile stockpiles large and powerful enough to penetrate Israel's defense systems.

In the event of full-scale war, particularly if there were also a new Palestinian uprising, the Israeli government might

see the opportunity for a third historic mass expulsion (following 1947-9 and 1967) of the Palestinian population (although this might be tempered by the threat of disrupting Israel's growing friendly relations with Arab states).

Although these are extreme and improbable scenarios, nothing can be ruled out in the context of the chaos that imperialism has created. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia, with the Trump gang's eager encouragement, also lined up its allied Gulf states to blockade Qatar "demanding that Qatar's rulers cut ties with Iran and shut down al-Jazeera broadcasts" adding another front to the conflict.

Topping it off is Trump's decertification of the nuclear deal with Iran, arduously negotiated by the P5+1 (UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany) during the Obama presidency, even though Washington admits that Iran has abided by its terms.

Trump's war threats against Iran, backed up by new sanctions voted by the "bipartisan" U.S. Congress, have resulted "among other things" in wrecking the huge reservoir of pro-American good will among the Iranian population, fuelling a fresh wave of Iranian nationalism even among the regime's opponents, and increasing China's prestige and investment opportunities there.

Fawning Punditry

Amidst the spreading Trumpster fire of U.S. Middle East policy, in fairness it must be admitted that this president "forgive the expression" is not the only huge fan of the new Saudi strongman Mohammad bin Salman (often known as MBS) and his internal purge of potential rivals in the elite in the name of fighting corruption.

On November 24 the New York Times featured an extraordinary essay titled "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," taking up three-quarters of the op-ed page, by the Times' veteran apostle of globalization Thomas Friedman. Among all the pieces of nonsense from Friedman over the years, [this one stands out.](#))

"M.B.S. is on a mission to bring Saudi Islam back to the center," Friedman gushes, citing the pending legalization of women driving and the undoubted popularity of his "shakedown" of assorted princes and tycoons forced to give back some of what they've stolen through corruption (a loss the cash-strapped kingdom can't afford with the fall of oil prices).

"The most significant reform process underway anywhere in the Middle East today is in Saudi Arabia. Yes, you read that right...and, if it succeeds. It will not only change the character of Saudi Arabia but the tone and tenor of Islam across the globe."

Yes, "you read that right." What you don't read in Friedman's punditry is a mention of Saudi Arabia's slaughter in Yemen, or its malicious mischief in Lebanon, its siege of Qatar "even though Friedman himself once upon a time hailed al-Jazeera as the Middle East's great new thing" much less the United States' active backing of these brutal interventions.

The implied claim is that Saudi Arabia's new dispensation will end its support for al-Qaeda and ISIS-type jihadist forces, but no serious evidence is offered. As for the internal repression including mass beheading of dissidents and leaders of the Shia minority, Friedman doesn't mention it and apparently didn't broach the subject during his long evening of feasting on "different lamb dishes" and conversation with MBS and the crown prince's close associates.

It's almost a caricature of the longtime Western infatuation with "modernizing dictators," especially for those supposedly benighted regions where the people are too backward to bring about reform themselves. (In a subsequent column, Friedman appeared to be walking back some of his extreme enthusiasm for the crown prince.)

The Rest of the Story...

There's more going on than this brief summary can cover, of course. The deaths of four U.S. Special Forces supposedly "non-combat" personnel in Mali in a botched pursuit of jihadist forces was highlighted when Trump went out of his way to humiliate Myeshia Johnson, the widow of Sgt. La David Johnson. In fact U.S. military involvement in Africa is larger and deeper than has been acknowledged.

Meanwhile, amidst the daily noise of Trump's latest poisonous buffooneries lies the question that the media won't yet openly ask: Does Donald Trump need a war or a major war scare in the Middle East, or Korea, or somewhere like Venezuela, to salvage his collapsing, plutocratic, about-to-be-indicted presidency?

That's the great unknown, and we don't particularly want to find out. What's all too clear is that a crisis-ridden imperial order has put the world in a dangerous place; that the behavior of the Trump regime enhances the instability and the craziness already embedded in the situation; and that the United States capitalist ruling class, whether through pure greed, slothful indolence, blindness or a combination of all three, is enabling the slide toward potential catastrophe.

The majority of the people of the United States "and the world" do not support this course of action. That opposition remains to be forged into a global mass movement against the madness.

(A statement by the Solidarity Steering Committee, "Standing Up for Palestine: BDS More than Ever!," is online [here](#) and was originally published [here](#).)

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