

Washington considers direct intervention in siege of Yemeni port city

By Bill Van Auken
5 June 2018

In what would constitute a major escalation of the US role in the near-genocidal war waged over the last three years by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) against Yemen, US officials were in discussions yesterday on the Pentagon taking a direct role in the siege of the country's Red Sea port city of Hodeidah.

Saudi and UAE-led forces came within 10 km of Hodeidah on Monday, having pushed north up Yemen's western coast with the aid of relentless air strikes against Houthi rebel forces, which control the city as well as the country's northwestern provinces, including the capital of Sana'a, which is 230 miles to the north.

The *Wall Street Journal* Monday cited US officials reporting that "The Trump administration is weighing an appeal from the United Arab Emirates for direct US support to seize Yemen's main port. ..."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a strong proponent of global US military intervention, has asked American officials to come up with a "quick assessment" of the prospects for a direct US military role in the siege of Hodeidah.

The *Journal* report cited one official raising doubts that the US-backed forces "would be able to do it cleanly and avoid a catastrophic incident." Another senior American official, however, told the *Journal*: "We have folks who are frustrated and ready to say: 'Let's do this. We've been flirting with this for a long time. Something needs to change the dynamic, and if we help the Emiratis do it better, this could be good.'"

A battle for control of Hodeidah poses a direct threat to the city's civilian population of 400,000, with the potential of a Saudi blitzkrieg combined with a direct US intervention recreating the kind of mass slaughter unleashed by the Pentagon in Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria.

More broadly, such a siege threatens the lives of millions of Yemenis in the Houthi-controlled highlands, for whom Hodeidah is the sole aid lifeline in a country historically reliant on imports for 90 percent of its food.

Even before taking into account the catastrophic impact of closing down this port, the chief aid official at the United Nations, Mark Lowcock, warned last week that by the end of this year, another 10 million Yemenis will join the 8.4 million who are already on the brink of starvation in what the UN has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Hundreds of foreign aid workers have reportedly evacuated the city, and it was reported on Monday that a UN aid vessel came under direct attack by Saudi warplanes. The city is already under bombardment from both the air and the sea.

"Thousands of civilians are fleeing from the outskirts of Hodeidah which is now a battle zone," Jan Egeland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told Reuters. "We cannot have war in Hodeidah, it would be like war in Rotterdam or Antwerp, these are comparable cities in Europe." He added that such a war would mean "nothing coming through" in terms of food and other aid for the country's starving population.

It was reported Monday that a UN mediator, Martin Griffiths, had arrived in Sana'a to present a proposal for a Houthi withdrawal from Hodeidah and the placing of the port under UN supervision. It was not clear, however, whether either the Houthi-led administration or the Saudi and UAE-led forces would adhere to such a settlement.

The Saudi-led "coalition" wants to secure its grip over Hodeidah in order to starve into submission the entire population in the areas under Houthi control.

Sharpening the tensions and creating the conditions for even greater slaughter, the Saudi and UAE monarchies are pursuing conflicting interests in their military interventions in Yemen, with Riyadh attempting to re-install the puppet government of Abd-Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the UAE supporting secessionists who are seeking to revive the former state of South Yemen.

Saudi Arabia launched the war in March 2015, carrying out relentless airstrikes ever since that have devastated civilian neighborhoods, vital infrastructure, factories and even farms. Mass civilian casualties have resulted from the bombing of funerals and weddings, with the death toll from these attacks now over 13,000, with many more dying from hunger and disease. More than 2,200 people have lost their lives to a cholera epidemic that has infected 1.1 million people, while the country has seen its first outbreak of diphtheria since 1982

From the beginning of the Saudi onslaught, the Obama administration provided indispensable US military support, selling Saudi Arabia and the UAE bombs (including outlawed cluster munitions) and warplanes used to strike Yemen, providing mid-air refueling to Saudi jets to assure continuous bombardment, and setting up a joint US-Saudi command to render logistical aid, including intelligence used in selecting targets. At the same time, US special forces units and armed drones have been deployed in Yemen for assassination missions against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The Trump administration has escalated US involvement, with not only massive new arms sales to the Saudi monarchy, but also the deployment of US special operations troops to fight directly alongside Saudi forces. Revealed a month ago, this deployment was carried out behind the backs of the American people and without informing Congress, much less gaining its authorization. While explained as a mission to protect Saudi Arabia's borders with Yemen, the purpose of the US troop deployment appears to be far broader.

Driving the US toward increasingly direct intervention in a war that has pitted the obscenely rich oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf against the poorest nation in the Arab world is the broader strategy elaborated by the Trump administration in preparation

for a military confrontation with Iran.

The US and its allies have cast the war in Yemen as a so-called proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Washington making unsubstantiated allegations that Iran has supplied the Houthi rebels with arms. The reality is that both Washington and Riyadh see the domination of Yemen by any government that is not a US-Saudi puppet regime as an unacceptable threat.

The discussions in Washington on an escalation of direct US intervention in Yemen are unfolding in the context of the sharp ratcheting up of US sanctions and threats against Iran following President Trump's unilateral May 8 withdrawal from the nuclear agreement reached in 2015 between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the US, UK, France, Germany, China and Russia.

A more direct US military intervention in Yemen may prove the stepping stone to a region-wide war aimed against Iran and at the securing of US imperialism's unfettered control over the energy-rich and strategically vital Middle East.

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