

SAUDIS CONTINUE TO LEAD US BY THE NOSE INTO ILL-CONSIDERED APPROACH IN YEMEN

Last Thursday, LAT had an article voicing the concerns of national security types who think our support for the Saudi assault on Yemen is ill-considered. In part that's because the Saudi assault is helping AQAP.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, widely regarded as the terrorist network's most lethal franchise, has capitalized on the chaos by sharply expanding its reach. Fighters loyal to the group claimed control Thursday of a military base and other key facilities near Mukalla, an Arabian Sea port in southern Yemen.

In part, that's because the Saudis – as has been true for years – aren't very good at avoiding civilian casualties.

Pentagon officials, who pride themselves on the care they take to avoid civilian casualties, have watched with growing alarm as Saudi airstrikes have hit what the U.N. this week called "dozens of public buildings," including hospitals, schools, residential areas and mosques. The U.N. said at least 364 civilians have been killed in the campaign.

[snip]

The U.S. role was quietly stepped up last week after the civilian death toll rose sharply. The number of U.S. personnel was increased from 12 to 20 in the operations center to help vet targets and to perform more precise calculations of bomb blast areas to help

avoid civilian casualties.

The obvious problems with the assault led one anonymous source to label it a disaster, and another source to explain we're helping Saudi Arabia bomb Yemen to placate them about the Iran deal.

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in discussing briefings on the air war, called it a "disaster," saying the Saudis don't have a "realistic endgame" for the bombing.

[snip]

"We're doing this not because we think it would be good for Yemen policy; we're doing it because we think it's good for U.S.-Saudi relations," said Ilan Goldenberg, a former Obama administration official who is now with the Center for a New American Security.

Amid this growing concern about the Saudi clusterfuck of their own back yard, Obama chatted with King Salman last Friday.

Today, the President spoke with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia to discuss recent developments in Yemen. The President reaffirmed the strong friendship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and underscored our commitment to Saudi Arabia's security. The President and King Salman discussed the recent adoption of a resolution on Yemen in the United Nations Security Council and next steps in the effort to resume the political transition in Yemen, including talks facilitated by the United Nations. The President and King Salman agreed that our collective goal is to achieve lasting stability in Yemen through a negotiated political solution facilitated by the United Nations and

involving all parties as envisioned in the GCC Initiative. The President and King Salman also discussed the importance of responding to the humanitarian needs of the Yemeni people.

John Brennan snuck off to meet with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (which follows a Saudi visit to discuss an Arab military force; there are reports el-Sisi is getting cold feet).

In short, that concern reflected in the LAT piece seemed to translate into an increased effort to get the Saudis to stop bombing so wildly.

Then the Saudis bombed an Oxfam warehouse.

Oxfam has vehemently condemned yesterday's Coalition airstrike on one of its storage facilities in Saada Governorate in northern Yemen.

Grace Ommer, Oxfam's country director in Yemen said: "This is an absolute outrage particularly when one considers that we have shared detailed information with the Coalition on the locations of our offices and storage facilities. The contents of the warehouse had no military value. It only contained humanitarian supplies associated with our previous work in Saada, bringing clean water to thousands of households. Thankfully, no one was killed in this particular airstrike although conservative estimates put the death toll in the country as a whole, since the conflict began, at around 760 – the majority of which are civilians."

To be sure, the Saudis have bombed plenty of civilian targets (including milk factories!) as have the Houthis. But coming as it did in the wake of this escalation of US concerns about civilians, it struck me as particularly telling.

Yet, in spite of what appears to be out complete inability to rein in the Saudis, we're still deploying more ships to the region, on top of what we've already got in place, on the premise of stopping Iranian arms trafficking (which Josh Earnest said last week we have no evidence of, and where do we get off complaining about arms trafficking?!?!).

And all those ships are doing nothing to ameliorate the growing humanitarian disaster.

Why are we doing this?

Update: Forgot to link this AJAM piece reporting concern on the part of the Generals about this.

And a number of CENTCOM and SOCOM officers believe the Saudis are in over their heads in trying to reverse Houthi gains in Yemen through military intervention.

"We had a great opportunity to engage with the Houthis on this, but we gave in to the Saudis," Horton said, "and frankly, they cannot begin to manage this. They have all the toys but few people who know how to effectively use them. Their NCO and officer corps are largely untested, and their enlisted men are drawn from the lowest rungs of Saudi society. If they get bogged down in Yemen, I wonder about the loyalty of many of the soldiers and NCOs. The Egyptians will not fare much better."

Update: See also Paul Pillar.