



Biden's Yemen betrayal: US continues backing Saudi-led war

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Aaron Maté (AM): Welcome to Pushback. I'm Aaron Maté. Joining me is Shireen Al-Adeimi, assistant professor of education at Michigan State University. Shireen, thank you for joining me once again.

Shireen Al-Adeimi (SA): Thanks for having me back.

AM: I interviewed you more than a year ago, right after Biden won, and the question was, Was Biden going to end the war in Yemen that he helped start while serving under Obama? And the answer so far, more than a year later, is a resounding no. Let me ask you first just to respond to the latest massacre in the town, the northern town of Saada. The death toll at this point has been increased to more than 90 people hitting a detention facility. What do we know about what happened?

SA: We know that it was another airstrike on a prison, this is not the first time the Saudi-led coalition has attacked a prison or a migrant detention centre. Saada is a northern province that borders Saudi Arabia, so they've actually gotten the worst airstrikes out of any other province. It's where the Houthis originate as well. And so they've basically pummelled that province and continued these massacres in that area, whether we hear about it in the news or not. And this particular attack, there was a fragment that was Raytheon, a bomb fragment that was found in the rubble. There are just horrendous pictures and videos coming out of, that people, I mean, literally just body parts and people trying to identify individual human beings through that. So it's just an atrocious attack that is significant in the sense that it highlights how much the war has escalated in the last few months.

AM: And this came shortly after the Saudi led coalition knocked out the internet to virtually the entire country. Can you talk about what happened there and what's it been like for you of late trying to speak to relatives and friends that you have there?

SA: So the internet has been our lifeline to our family and our loved ones in Yemen. On Twitter, I mean, I created my Twitter account the day the war began so that I can hear from Yemenis on the ground telling us what's been happening in Yemen, what's happening around them. And they've been doing that even when sometimes it feels like nobody's been listening or paying attention or few people have. But, you know, anytime there's an airstrike, they let us know what's happening. They come online. They say this is where the airstrike is happening. Here's how we're feeling. Here's what we're going through. And the attack that occurred last Thursday in the province of Hudayda, in the city of Hudayda, where I actually have a lot of family members, and it was actually across the street from a family member's apartment and this telecommunication centre was targeted. There were some employees who passed away, who were killed, and then there were three children playing in a nearby soccer field who were also killed in the attack. And it disabled the country's internet for four days, four entire days. NetBlocks, this is a group that was tracking this, and it just shows zero activity because what's happening in Yemen is that it's basically a state owned monopoly, TeleYemen, and so when that was targeted, it essentially wiped out all communications from Yemen, and it was really difficult to hear from family members. I mean, we had to go back to the traditional way of calling cards and trying to contact them through landlines and cell phones that way. I have a cousin who works for an aid agency, and he had access to a satellite phone, and so we were getting updates eventually from that source. But it was really difficult to hear from other family members. It took a couple of days before we could verify that everybody was OK.

AM: Is most of the internet back available now?

SA: Yeah, it seems like the structure, it was structural damage and they were able to repair it, and it seems to be back right now. As of yesterday, they seem to be back online.

AM: Let me ask you about the role of the UAE. They made a big deal about pulling out of the Yemen war. And the Biden administration, when it pushed through a lot of new weapons sales to them, justified it on the basis that the UAE was no longer involved in the war. But now they are making no secret that they are back in. There was recently a Houthi attack that hit the UAE and the UAE claims to be responding to that, and that's why it's operating. Talk to us about their role and really whether they ever actually left the war in Yemen.

SA: I mean, it was one big PR move that the UAE got a lot of public interest from, this was I believe in the summer of 2019, and they announced that they're pulling out troops. What they did was that they pulled out their ground troops. And, you know, Saudi Arabia never had ground troops in Yemen, and they're leading this war. And the US doesn't have ground troops in Yemen, and they're leading this war. The UAE had some ground troops, but this was after a series of articles that highlighted the kind of police state that the UAE was running in South Yemen, which the coalition controls. So they were running these secret prisons. They were

torturing people in various ways. And so I think as a response to that, almost, it seems to me that they made this announcement that they're pulling the ground troops. But the war continued as usual. This Emirati pilots are bombing alongside the Saudi pilots. The Emiratis are cooperating on many levels, and they actually have interests in various areas as well. Like the islands of Socotra, for example, they have all but annexed this island and other Yemeni islands. So they've had a much more an interesting role than the Saudis in Yemen, much more nefarious role than just bombing. So they didn't really leave. They're trying to position this as a counter attack right now, where the reality is that they haven't stopped bombing Yemen or being involved in this war against Yemen since 2015.

AM: Joe Biden was very clear when he ran, he promised to treat Saudi Arabia as a pariah state. He talked about ending US support for the Saudi led war on Yemen-

President Biden: And I would make it very clear we were not going to, in fact, sell more weapons to them. We were going to, in fact, make them pay the price and make them, in fact, the pariah that they are. There's very little social redeeming value in the present government in Saudi Arabia. And I would also, as pointed out, I would end, end the subsidies that we have, end the sale of material to the Saudis, who are there going in and murdering children and they're murdering innocent people. And so they have to be held accountable.

AM: What has been his record since coming into office? What has he done?

SA: So about a year ago, February 4th, he made his first foreign policy announcement and it was about the war in Yemen. And he said, reiterated what he said on the campaign trail with one exception. And I was listening very closely because of course, people were celebrating. And you know, this matters to probably me and Yemeni Americans more than most because there are real consequences on the ground for our loved ones. And he made this interesting distinction for the first time to say that we're ending offensive operations in Yemen.

President Biden: This war has to end. And to underscore our commitment, we're ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales. At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces missile attacks, UAV strikes and other threats from Iranian supplied forces in multiple countries. We're going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people.

SA: And I co-wrote an article in these times with Sarah Lazare at the time kind of highlighting, Where's this coming from? Where is this language coming from and what could it mean? Could it mean a rebranding of this war, which is what you and I talked about more than a year ago. Biden could just come in and rebrand this war and continue business as usual because all US presidents have had very positive relationships with Saudi Arabia, even when they seem to criticise them. So Obama, for example, was much more critical of Saudi Arabia than Bush was. But he was very willing to support them in this war in Yemen. So when it

comes to their defence strategies and waging war in that region, they tend to be allies. And I was worried that Biden would be no different. And he so far has proven to be no different than the Trump administration and the Obama administration, with the exception that he seems to have convinced a lot of people that he's ending the war. That he has stopped weapons sales, he hasn't. There were moments where he paused weapons sales and then renewed them. He said that he stopped intelligence sharing, but he's only really sharing intelligence for defensive purposes. Again, defending home from what?! The Houthis have no capabilities compared to Saudi Arabia. And the loss of civilian life is just not comparable when you look at how many hundreds of thousands of Yemeni civilians have already been killed, so this commitment to supporting Saudi Arabia's goals and the US's own goals in Yemen, we continue to see that with Biden.

AM: Just to put some numbers on this. Last year, the Biden administration pushed for approval of \$23 billion in new weapons sales to the UAE. And just a few months ago in November, pushed through a \$650 million weapons deal for Saudi Arabia for mostly air to air missiles. And Biden said that these were defensive missiles.

SA: Again, defending from whom?! The Saudis and the UAE don't manufacture their own weapons, they rely almost entirely on the US weapons and then also Canada, the UK, other countries, but mostly the US support and not just with weapons by the way. The US provides spare parts, maintenance, advising, guiding, training, logistical support, all sorts of things. And now they're just saying, Yeah, we're doing this, but it's for defensive purposes and not offensive purposes. Meanwhile, when you see what's happening on the ground, nothing has changed and the Saudis have proven to be incompetent along with the Emiratis in leading this war. And so they continue to enjoy US support, except that now it's called something different.

AM: When I interviewed Rob Malley, who's now Biden's top envoy for Iran, for re-entering or stalling the re-entering or scuttling the re-entering of the Iran nuclear deal, depending on what Biden plans to do, back I interviewed him a few years ago. This was during the Trump administration. Malley justified or explained the US's, Obama's decision, to back the Saudi led war in Yemen by saying that the Obama administration was worried about losing Saudi support for the Iran nuclear deal.

Rob Malley: But we did suspect the war could go on for a very long time at great human cost. So there was, on the one hand, a number of voices expressing concern about that. But on the other hand, many people saying the relationship with Saudi Arabia is almost at a breaking point. They believe we betrayed their trust for a number of reasons. But Iran, the Iran negotiating, the Iran deal or the negotiations over the Iran deal, was one of them. We needed to protect that deal and make sure that we could get it done because if we didn't have a deal, there was a risk of a war with Iran. And so I think the decision was made in the end by President Obama to say, we're going to support parts of this war. Which is to say we will

support Saudi Arabia as it's defending its national sovereignty, its territorial integrity. So we'll continue to help them in that respect. But we're not going to participate in the war against the Houthis. We're not going to be helping them directly wage that war. I think, as you already suggested in what you said, that was a distinction that was pretty hard to maintain in practice. If you support Saudi Arabia by providing them with weapons, by refuelling their aircraft, which they then use in whatever way they use, or if you sit with them, as we did, to try to tell them here are areas that you shouldn't bomb because of humanitarian considerations, you become complicit, you know, by necessity. And we did get more involved because we continued to refuel their aeroplanes, we continued to sell them large arms sales, which was done partly because we needed to protect that relationship and partly because there was a view while they are being threatened by this non-state actors supported by Iran on their southern border that had toppled the legitimate government. But the more this lasted, the more number of us, I would say, and obviously the president himself, but others as well, were having concerns about, What are we getting involved in here? And you just described the situation, it is the worst humanitarian situation currently confronting the world. So it's not an episode I'm particularly proud of, and I think we have to learn from it.

AM: The US needed Saudi Arabia's support for the Iran nuclear deal, which is an odd way to speak about a client state that is totally reliant on the US for so many different things- that somehow the US needed to convince Saudi Arabia. And the trade-off was authorising this massive war in Yemen. What they also say and this was said for an article in The New Yorker once is that the reason Obama also gave a green light and became involved is because they, with their involvement, can help reduce civilian casualties.

SA: Yeah, that's been the biggest- I mean, it's such a joke. They created the world's worst humanitarian crisis. And how on earth did they prevent any casualties when there seem to be no red lines to what they would target? I mean, a coalition that could target a school bus knowing that it's a school bus full of children going on a field trip and killing them all along with people around in the market where the school bus was travelling through, the coalition who targets the school bus has no red lines. And that's what they've shown over and over and over in Yemen, under Obama, Trump and now Biden. I sat in a meeting when Biden was trying to get Yemeni-American votes before the election, and I was in an online meeting, November of 2020, and it was with one of his security advisers. And he said the same thing about Iran, this person had been advising Obama as well, and they said that, well, we had the Iran deal and the Saudis were very unhappy about the Iran deal. And so we felt like we can give them this support to essentially destroy an entire country, Yemen. Because they felt upset that we excluded them and we passed this Iran deal. I mean, think about how nefarious this is. Think about how criminal this is to wage war illegally, unconstitutionally and immorally on an entire country because you feel like you want to placate your allies. I think the other thing that narrative does is it obfuscates the role of the United States in that region. The US is just as interested in suppressing the Houthis as the Saudis are. Yemen has an interesting and important strategic location with controlling Bab al-Mandab strait. Yemen has been the target

and the focus of much of the war on terror with, you know, drone bombings happening before this war even began. And so they have this interest in maintaining a puppet government as they had in previous decades. And the Houthis have made it known that they will not be a puppet government to either Saudi Arabia, or the United States. And so it's very important for these countries to assert their dominance in that region, which is why they're really continuing to wage us, despite all of what we've seen transpire with the famine and everything else.

AM: So Biden has continued backing the war in Yemen, just under a new name, calling it defensive, not offensive. What about Congress? Because under Congress, there was some momentum for a bit passing measures to limit Trump's support for the Saudi led war in Yemen. How has Congress been under Biden?

SA: Disappointing in a word. On January 25th, 2021, so just over a year ago, we had a global rally, and the rally was coming together, where people were saying "No", no to war in Yemen and no to Western complicity in the war in Yemen. And Congressman Ro Khanna kind of mentioned that he would continue pushing for a war powers resolution along with Bernie Sanders in the Senate, just as they did when this was under Trump's presidency. And it feels like they seem to have given up and taken Biden for his word when he made the announcement a week later that he's ending offensive operations in Yemen. And it's been very difficult to build interest. There was an NDAA that kind of sponsored to try to prevent weapons sales to the coalition back in the summer, in the fall. But it's been a year, where have they been? They've spent a lot of letters to the Biden administration about their support for the blockade, about opening Sanaa airport, about clarifying the defensive versus offensive. There's so many letters that Congress has been sending to the administration, and the administration has not responded. They've not made clear anything. And so where are the hearings, where are the verifications that this is in fact happening, that we are now only providing defensive versus offensive support, whatever that means. Where is the evidence, why have they just taken Biden's word for it and not pushed for another war powers resolution that would force the administration to abide by this. And then if it gets vetoed of course, it looks terrible for the guy who said that he's ending the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth. And so it's been disappointing, but we are trying to continue to build support. There has been interest from some members of Congress, and I hope that we continue to push them to do their job, to be held accountable, hold the president accountable, because if they're not doing that, then they too are complicit in the war crimes that are happening in Yemen.

AM: Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who is known as a critic of the Saudi war, he was one of the senators who voted to approve that weapons deal we discussed earlier, that \$650 million in new air-to-air missiles for Saudi Arabia, was by Chris Murphy described as, just like Biden, defensive weapons.

SA: Yeah, he did, and Chris Murphy is unique in that he was one of very few, if not the only Democrat under Obama willing to push back against this war back in 2015, when no Democrat was talking about this. He partnered with Rand Paul at the time, and they tried to get support for a weapons bill that would have ended US weapons support to Saudi Arabia. So for him to then turn around after all of these years and then co-sponsoring the war powers resolution and to say, Yeah, well, it's defensive and not offensive, it's just hypocritical. It's criminal. He is complicit in war crimes now by virtue of approving these weapons sales, knowing fully well that it's going to be used on Yemenis. I mean, where else are the Saudis? Why else would the Saudis buy it? They're not stockpiling. They've been using our weapons for the past seven years. And, you know, for Chris Murphy to then come on Twitter and to say that this attack is not proportional- proportional to what?!- that they've been carrying out this asymmetrical warfare in Yemen, genocide, really trying to blockade the entire country and starve them to death. And you expect them to use these weapons responsibly, whatever that means. So I think it's been very disappointing. I've called him out on Twitter, but it's just, you know, and Mehdi Hasan has called him out on his interview with him not too long ago. But it just kind of highlights what we're working against here. It feels like it was a bit easier, feels like it was much easier to work with Congress on this issue when it was Trump's war, because of course, everything Trump did was awful. But where is that? You know, where is that fire now that Biden is president? Because Yemenis are still dying, they're still being starved to death, they're still getting bombed, and it's just business as usual.

AM: Well, you know, I'm someone who argued that there was a greater chance of Biden ending the US support for the Saudi led war in Yemen than there would be if Trump were to be re-elected. But so far, I think I've been shown to be wrong. As Biden basically continues the war with a kinder, gentler face. Let me ask you about one related aspect, so one of the few positive things I think you can say that Biden has done when it comes to Yemen is that when he came into office, he reversed this last minute order from Trump that would designate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation. And as aid groups warned that designation would have basically cut off aid to all the territory that the Houthis control, which is a large part of Yemen. But now there is talk in Washington, the Biden administration is considering reversing his decision and reimposing the designation that Trump imposed on his way out the door.

SA: This designation would be absolutely catastrophic for the people of Yemen and would literally spell out the starving of millions and millions of people. Many are already starving. This would just ensure that they will all die and that more will starve. And I wish I'm being extreme here and exaggerating- I'm not. And it's because while the Houthis control a smaller portion of Yemen, if you see it on the map, about 70 to 80 percent of the population lives there. And so it's the most populous area. And once you designate them, they are the de facto government of Yemen, in northern Yemen, whether we like them or not, whether people like them or not, that is the reality on the ground. They are the de facto government. And when you designate them as a terrorist group, then aid organisations aren't going to be able to

operate in those regions. Those of us sending money back home are not going to be able to do that because banks won't work in those regions. And so people are left without salaries because of the war, because the Hadi government switched the central bank to the south and then refused to pay people in the north their salaries. So government workers have not been receiving salaries. People are reliant on aid. The aid is trickling through because even though the port is functional in northern Yemen, the Saudis just hold the fuel and they hold the food and hold the water, and then they don't allow everything to come in as it should. And so designating that would just spell a death sentence for all of these Yemenis and for Biden to even mention that casually, you know, just to casually mention, Oh yeah, this genocidal war crime I'm considering it, is horrendous. It's horrific. He's just doing exactly what Trump did, like he's saying that I will use this as a way to escalate the war, as a way to get the Houthis to surrender and who cares what happens to the rest of the Yemeni population?

AM: We wrap any words you want to leave us with about Yemen and any suggestions for what people can do if they want to get involved in stopping the war?

SA: I mean, it's absolutely still a US led war in Yemen, and we can't forget that no matter what the headlines say, no matter what CNN or MSNBC, when they do choose to cover this issue, no matter what they say, this is a US sponsored war. This war cannot continue in Yemen without the participation of the United States. And we really have to push our representatives in Congress and to hold them accountable and to really be explicit about what their inaction means for Yemenis. Inaction means that people are starving to death. There's a website called every75seconds.org, every 75 seconds a child is dying in Yemen because they're being starved. A child under the age of five by the way- so older children are dying as well- because they're being starved to death. And we continue to support this genocide against the Yemeni people. So I think we really have to understand our responsibility, not just feel pity for what's going on, but to think of it as our responsibility to end this war and to show up in town halls and to question our lawmakers and to send letters and to write op-eds and to really question Biden's support and not let him off the hook and not let Congress off the hook.

AM: Shireen Al-Adeimi, assistant professor of education at Michigan State University, thank you very much.

SA: Thanks for having me.

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