

Yemen: the 'forgotten war'

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For weeks, the horror of Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine has dominated the news. Alongside this carnage, there has also been the ongoing civil war in Yemen. However, this merciless war in Yemen, and all the hypocrisy surrounding it, has been side-lined. Yemen is the forgotten war.

Bordered by Saudi Arabia and Oman, Yemen is strategically important as it is located on the strait which links the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, through which most of the world's oil shipments pass. The crucial nature of such routes was highlighted by the chaos caused, and billions of dollars lost each day, by just one container ship blocking the Suez Canal last March.

Yemen had been under Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence. However, the Arab Spring of 2011 lit up the sky, for a while giving working people and those living in dire poverty a glimpse of an alternative to the rotten authoritarian regimes in north Africa and the Middle East.

Inspired by these uprisings, mass pressure from people in Yemen forced the country's Saudi-backed President Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand power over to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Both these regimes had been mired in corruption, but the lack of a workers' alternative left a political vacuum, which led to the Iranian-backed northern Yemen Shia Houthis ousting the Saudi-backed Hadi. This prompted the formation of a Saudi-led coalition, which included the UAE and other North African and West Asian countries, moving against the Houthis. This has fuelled an ongoing civil war and triggered a major humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Double standards

In recent weeks Joe Biden has called Putin a "murderous dictator" and "pure thug", who is "waging an immoral war against the people of Ukraine". He has even gone off-script and seemingly urged those around Putin to oust him from the Kremlin, while at the same time enabling the Saudi regime to wage a terrible war in Yemen.

Biden, as a candidate in the 2020 presidential election, spoke out against the dire situation in Yemen. He criticised former US president Donald Trump for giving Saudi Arabia a blank cheque, and promised to end all American support for offensive operations in Yemen, including relevant arms deals. In his first address as president, he underlined: "This war has to end".

But like Boris Johnson, criticism of the brutal Saudi regime of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud by Biden has been tempered by the needs of the West to increase Saudi oil production, having imposed sanctions on Russian oil exports, which have increased inflationary price pressures.

Since the conflict escalated in March 2015, life in Yemen has been described as a daily struggle for survival. The UN estimates around 30 million people, nearly 80% of the population, are in need of humanitarian aid.

The economy has been crippled, and escalating food prices have left more than 13 million people in danger of starvation. Moreover, the war in Ukraine, which is a major exporter of wheat (collectively Russia and Ukraine account for 29% of the global wheat trade) will further impact on Yemen. Although it is a wheat exporter, Yemen gets around a third of its wheat from Ukraine.

From the onset of the conflict, Yemen has been subjected to a 'dirty war'. Similar to Putin's attacks on Ukraine, the Saudi regime has been castigated for killing civilians in air strikes. According to the United Nations agency Unicef, 10,000 children have been killed or maimed since fighting began. That's equates to four children, every day.

In office, Biden's pledges on Yemen were quickly and quietly dropped. Sales of weapons, alongside the servicing of planes used to attack Yemeni targets, have continued to Saudi Arabia.

In November 2021 the State Department notified Congress of a further \$650 million arms deal to Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration claims that the arms being sold are 'defensive' in nature. However, Dr Natalie Goldring, who is the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy's UN representative for conventional weapons and arms trade issues, argues that the weapons have both defensive and offensive capabilities.

In Ukraine, Yemen, and other war-torn regions of the world, there can be no trust in politicians and institutions. Their allegiances and foreign policies are tightly bound to their own imperialist interests and profits. In Yemen and beyond, the embers of the Arab Spring can be re-ignited, with valuable lessons from the revolutions of 2011 preparing the masses for future struggles; most importantly, the necessity of building independent workers' parties with a programme for ending an exploitative system.