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USA

Trump and the Middle East

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Its amazing to see what 60 or so Cruise missiles (price tag \$1.6 million apiece) and one \$16 million 22,000-pound “Mother of All Bombs” (MOAB) can do for a floundering White House.

Suddenly Donald Trump’s image became so very seriously “presidential.” Overshadowed at least for the moment were the Republicans’ internal civil war over health care, infighting between the Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner power centers in the West Wing, Trump’s “budget blueprint” wiping out every government program that actually helps people, and “tax reform” to stuff the pockets of the rich and super-rich at the expense of everyone else.

Many peace activists, understandably, were horrified by Trump’s twin display of military muscle in Syria and Afghanistan. Republicans, with the exceptions of Rand Paul and a few hardline “America First” nationalists, are generally thrilled. John McCain, along with quite a few Democrats, immediately urged that the hit on the Syrian airbase should be “only the first step.” A first step toward exactly what? Not clear, to say the least.

There’s little doubt that in Trump’s mind at least, dropping the huge tunnel-busting bomb on ISIS in Afghanistan is supposed to send a warning, notably to North Korea and Iran. One suspects that the military chiefs know better: ISIS has no anti-aircraft capacity to bring down the giant transport plane that delivers the MOAB, but significant “enemy states” most certainly do.

In any case, this writer’s own estimate is that these strikes are not really a matter of Trump going rogue, but signs of his global stance becoming “normalized” — which is not necessarily less scary. Raining Cruise missiles on the Syrian air base that presumably launched the poison gas attack on the village Khan Sheikhoun seems very much what Hillary Clinton would have done. (A statement by the National Committee of Solidarity responding to these events is posted [here](#).)

The affair seems to be the occasion for the Trump team to pivot toward a more conventional antagonistic stance toward Moscow, to the approval of most U.S. foreign policy “thinkers.”

Despite activists’ understandable skepticism, whatever small doubts might have existed over the reality of the Assad regime’s criminal chemical weapons attack should have dissipated by now. Some antiwar critics have questioned why the Syrian regime would resort to such an act when it already has a military upper hand, and immediately after the U.S. statement that removing Assad “is not our priority.”

But equally, if Washington believed the Russian claim that the poison gas came from stockpiles of al-Qaeda or other forces of “radical Islamic terror” (in Trump’s favorite phrase), it would surely have served Trump’s agenda to say so.

The antiwar case, in my view, is poorly served by clinging to threadbare doubts that the Assad regime, either at the top or perhaps by some midlevel commander’s decision, was responsible for this atrocity.

More importantly, if Trump’s Cruise missile strike was just a one-time action, it doesn’t change the situation in Syria at all — planes were again flying bombing runs from that same base a day or two later — and if it’s the start of a big U.S. escalation as leading Republicans and Clintonian Democrats advocate, it has the potential to make everything even worse.

Instead of looking at the actions in Syria and Afghanistan as turning points, it makes sense to view them against the backdrop of an ongoing and spreading catastrophe that imperialism has done so much to cause and can do so little to solve.

Well before Assad's latest poison gas crime and Trump's Cruise and MOAB strikes, a cascading series of global disasters and imperial war maneuvers were unfolding. Although these were largely inherited from the Obama administration and earlier, there's every indication that the Trump gang will make them even worse whether by intervention or neglect.

Twenty million people are facing starvation from war and drought-induced famine in Nigeria, across eastern Africa and in Yemen. The United Nations says it's received around two percent of the funding needed to meet the crisis.

Threats and counter-threats are escalating on the Korean peninsula, where as China's leadership is warning war could break out by miscalculation more than intent, with catastrophic and uncontrollable potential consequences.

Before the Cruise missiles hit, more U.S. troops were already heading into Syria, with no evident strategy for "victory" or exit. The goal appears to be preventing Turkey and U.S.-allied Kurdish forces from violent conflict as much as it is to fight ISIS.

Meanwhile Afghanistan melts down (the MOAB strike has nothing to do with fighting the Taliban), and the assault on Mosul in Iraq grinds on with large-scale civilian deaths.

The Botched Yemen Raid

A recent U.S. military operation serves as a window on one particular underreported catastrophe the destruction of Yemen. A February 9 raid on an outpost of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was a great success, according to Trump and press secretary Sean Spicer, capturing a "trove" of intelligence in computers, thumb drives and cell phones, although "what was actually captured has not been mentioned." [\[1\]](#)

At what cost? The women and children who were killed included the eight-year-old daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen killed by a 2011 U.S. drone strike on the claim that he was a high-value terrorist target. After initially denying reports from Yemeni sources on the ground, the Pentagon admitted 25 civilian deaths. A U.S. Navy SEAL, William "Ryan" Owens, was killed and four other SEALs wounded in the firefight when the noise of low-flying drones tipped off the AQAP forces that the raid was coming.

A \$75 million MV-22 Osprey came down hard and was destroyed by a Marine jet bomber to prevent it being captured. All told, it was quite a "success" as Senator John McCain caustically remarked. Trump, according to reports, was not watching these events in the situation room; he was tweeting about an interview to air later that evening on "The Brody File."

When Trump made his February 28 address to the joint session of Congress which the Democrats did not boycott, for reasons they should be too embarrassed to explain he got a standing ovation by introducing Carryn Owens, widow of Ryan Owens. The networks interpreted this as Trump "becoming presidential," setting that bar about as low as it can get. Ryan's father Bill Owens said he holds Trump responsible, refused to meet with him, and demanded an investigation.

This debacle is just a slice of the Yemeni tragedy, as Saudi Arabia bombs the country with U.S.-supplied aircraft indiscriminately and with no regard for the consequences:

“More than 30 Somali migrants, including children, were killed in the Red Sea on Friday when a military helicopter fired on their boat, according to Yemeni and United Nations officials.

“The boat’s Yemeni captain was shot in the leg [he subsequently bled to death] but piloted the boat toward the Yemeni port city of Al-Hudaydah, where rescue workers were so overwhelmed that they put the dead in coolers normally used for fish...” (New York Times, March 18: A5)

The refugees from Somalia were trying to escape from Yemen to Sudan and then Egypt, Libya and eventually to Europe.

Washington supplies not only the planes but in-flight refueling services for the Saudi aircraft to carry out bombing runs against allegedly Iranian-backed Houthi fighters in Yemen’s civil war. Saudi pilots never bothered to check whom they were bombing.

With an estimated 80% of the Yemeni population desperately dependent on international food aid, the Al-Hudaydah port has been bombed to the point where goods can no longer be received there. Only the port at Sanaa, at much greater distance from the worst affected areas, remains available.

The politics of the horror in Yemen “a proxy Saudi-Iran conflict superimposed on a more-than-two-sided civil war” are endlessly tangled, but the bottom line is this: It’s conventional to refer to a place like Yemen as a “failed state,” but more accurately for imperialism it’s a throwaway state. Donald Trump has made the disaster worse, but he didn’t create it.

The Obama administration effectively sacrificed Yemen and its people for the sake of the U.S. strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia, the fundamentalist state that’s the actual godfather of what Trump repeatedly calls “radical Islamic terrorism.”

Continuity

In this respect there is continuity between Trump’s policy and his predecessors Obama and Bush. As Phyllis Bennis, an expert analyst and author of a recent study of the region, explains:

“(I)n 2011, documents released by Wikileaks indicated that the U.S. was launching drone attacks against both Somalia and Yemen from a base in Djibouti on the northwest African coast, and the U.S. was planning another drone base in Ethiopia.

“Obama’s expansion of the drone war was not only geographic. It also included expansion of potential targets. Originally aiming drones at specific, identified targets “extra-judicial assassination, already way outside the bounds of international law” the administration soon created a particularly frightening version known as “signature” strikes. This meant that any person or group of people acting in a certain way, or present in a particular area, would be considered appropriate targets for drone strike because of their “signature” actions.” (Understanding ISIS and the New Global War on Terror. A Primer, 82. Olive Branch Press, 2015)

The main difference with Obama is that Trump boasts of giving the military a free tactical hand, as in dropping the MOAB. That way Trump can claim “success” while the commanders in the field will take the blame for failures and

losses.

Meanwhile Trump tweets about keeping refugees out of the United States, and zeroes out the grossly inadequate U.S. humanitarian aid budget. It all poses the question: Which is the real “failed state”?

[Against the Current](#)

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[1] [Letsfixthiscountry.org/2017/02/09](https://letsfixthiscountry.org/2017/02/09), “Trump Team’s Offhand Approval Leads to First Military Blunder”