



What Is the UK Doing in Yemen?

Abigail Watson

30 November 2016

This article was first published on Real Clear Defense on November 30, 2016

As the situation in Yemen quickly spirals into a humanitarian disaster, the UK must clarify its role in the conflict.

Yemen is the site a devastating civil war, in which foreign intervention at best is doing little to stem the violence – and at worst is making the situation worse. After mass protests broke across Yemen in February 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh was replaced by his deputy Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who oversaw a power-sharing government and the start of reforms. However, the situation deteriorated when Saleh formed an alliance with the Houthi rebels, a political movement dominated by Zaydi Shia Muslims, and forced Hadi out of the country. In defence of Hadi, a Saudi-led coalition began airstrikes against the Saleh-Houthi alliance in March 2015.

Britain, like the U.S., is intimately involved in the conflict. However, because it is providing capabilities to the Saudi-led coalition, rather than offering direct military engagement, public acknowledgement of this role is minimal. Until recently, the UK completely denied any presence in the country, despite reports that the UK was playing a “critical” role supporting U.S. drone strikes. While both countries now admit to being in the control rooms in Riyadh, it has maintained that it has no operational role. Instead, it is focussed on training “to make sure that countries actually do obey the norms of humanitarian law”.

Provision of capabilities, unlike direct military engagement, is not subject to the same levels Parliamentary or public scrutiny, even when weapons and training

Latest

An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme

Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham

A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind

Related

PS21 Event Podcast: What Does “Security” Mean in 2020?

WarPod Ep #21 | Dissecting the Overseas Operations Bill

are being provided to a party in an active conflict. In the UK, following the controversies surrounding Iraq and Afghanistan, it is now expected that Prime Ministers will publicly present the case for intervention before committing conventional troops to a conflict zone, as was the case in Syria. However, the Government has rejected calls for a debate over the UK's support of the Saudi-led coalition, especially with regards to weapons sales, even though those have gone through the roof since the bombing in Yemen started. While it seems clear that UK military assistance to Saudi Arabia is feeding directly into the crisis in Yemen, the British public remain largely unaware of the situation in the country.

There must be greater scrutiny and debate of this type of intervention, not least because it is increasingly obvious that it is not delivering the UK's aims. Initially, in the wake of 9/11 the UK was involved in Yemen because of the threat Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) posed to the UK. In 2010, the Chief of MI6 claimed that AQAP in Yemen poses "real threats to the UK" and developments in bomb making by Ibrahim al-Asiri represented a real concern for Western governments. Now, the UK Government argues that maintaining good relations with Saudi intelligence is essential for national security, for example it was this that foiled the attempted Christmas Day bomber in 2009.

It is also clear, albeit less readily acknowledged, that the UK Government hopes training Saudi forces will help it to maintain its arms trade with Saudi Arabia. UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia amount to \$3.9 billion, 45% of UK arms exports. This is before recent deals are taken into account. The provision of training appears to be an attempt to manage the fallout of increasing pressure (for example in the UN) to declare Saudi actions in Yemen as contravening human rights, ensuring the sustainability of UK-Saudi arms sales. The conflict of interest that this creates is significant. Indicative of these tensions, the

WarPod Ep #20 | Incorporating the Protection of Civilians into UK Policy

Questions for the Integrated Review #3: How Should the UK Measure Success?

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

Committee on Arms Export Control had to resign itself to publishing two separate reports, by different factions (the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee) on the use of UK-manufactured arms being used in Yemen.

The UK's intervention in Yemen is failing to achieve its aims. First, AQAP is much stronger. Bruce Riedel, director of the Intelligence Project at the Brookings Institution, argues, "the biggest beneficiary of the war has been AQAP." Worse, some argue that drone strikes and, now, U.S. and UK assistance to the Saudi-led coalition have stoked more anti-Western sentiment and aided the group's recruitment. Second, the Saudi-led coalition continues to be criticised for acting illegally. For example, it has hit a number of civilian sites – such as hospitals, schools and mosques. On the 8th October, 140 people were killed when a funeral procession was hit in the capital city of Sana'a. Worse, Saudi Arabia has pointed to the involvement of the UK and U.S. as a defence of their actions, claiming "British officials and American officials and officials from other countries are in our command and control centre".

The UK will continue to intervene in Yemen. The rise of AQAP and the value of exports to the coalition mean the Government will be reluctant to withdraw; however, it is hard to see the UK's current course of action leading to any sort of success. There must be greater transparency and debate about what the UK is doing to ensure its operations abroad are actually working. Only then can lessons be learned, and failing strategies prevented.

Abigail Watson is a research officer at the Remote Control Project, a London-based policy unit analysing the rise of remote warfare in the West's counterterrorism strategy.

Image by US Air Force/Public Domain

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Useful links

[Login](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[Accessibility](#)
[Terms & Conditions](#)
[Privacy policy](#)