Yemen Strikes, Israel, and Double Standards in the Middle East

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The [Saudi-led Arab coalition conducted airstrikes this weekend against Houthi rebel-controlled  government buildings and residential neighborhoods in Yemen’s capital](http://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-led-coalition-ramps-up-airstrikes-against-rebels-in-yemen-1442771819) that [killed dozens](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/world/middleeast/arab-coalition-bombs-yemens-capital-killing-dozens.html). But in contrast to reactions to Israeli actions in Gaza, the international community–including the U.S.–has largely ignored civilian casualties in the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, including when it involves bombing urban areas.

It’s impossible to draw strict analogies between the two situations, not merely because the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is decades older than the Houthi-Saudi fight. But there’s still a double standard here.

During the Hamas-Israel conflict in Gaza last summer, Israel killed [an estimated 2,100 Palestinians](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404). The Israeli government says that 750 to 1,000 of those were Hamas fighters. Since March of this year, the United Nations estimates that the Saudi-led airstrikes and artillery strikes in Yemen have [killed more than 2,000 civilians and wounded 4,000 others](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/middleeast/un-yemen-rights-abuse.html), the New York Times reported last week. There have been several humanitarian cease-fires, but the military campaign has continued. The coalition has retaken the port city of Aden and made other gains, but this has come with the destruction of entire neighborhoods and historic sites and [deaths of innocents within that wreckage](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/world/middleeast/airstrikes-hit-civilians-yemen-war.html). The Saudi campaign has created a humanitarian crisis in the region’s poorest Arab state: An estimated 21 million people (roughly 80% of Yemen’s population) need assistance, the Times reported.

In contrast to Gaza, where the Israelis were able to accomplish their limited objectives in 50 days, the Saudi-led coalition hasn’t defeated the Houthis in six months and seems in no rush to stop trying. A Saudi spokesman for the Arab coalition said in June that “[We shouldn’t be in a hurry](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-arabia-houthis.html)” and noted that it took the U.S. and NATO more than a decade to try to establish a stable government in Afghanistan. The Saudi campaign is orchestrated by Deputy Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, and it has become a litmus test of his credibility–and perhaps key to his ascent to succeed his father, **King Salman**. And with their Shiite regional rival Iran supporting the Houthi rebels, the Saudis are likely to be in this for the long haul.

Last week, the chief of the U.N. human rights council, a Jordanian, called for an independent investigation of both Saudi and Houthi attacks on civilians. But that’s small potatoes compared with the intense U.N. and international criticism of Israeli-Hamas wars  in Gaza–including Israel being charged with war crimes and willful targeting of civilians. When it comes to politically irrelevant Yemen, there have been no efforts to take Saudi Arabia to the International Criminal Court, no calls for boycotts or divestment, and no U.N. Security Council or General Assembly resolutions.

The Saudis confront in Yemen the same challenge Israel has faced in Gaza: how to deal with combatants who fire from urban areas using civilians for cover. But Riyadh seems to have less regard for civilian casualties and hasn’t been held accountable the way Israel is for such injuries and death, whether the issue is errant airstrikes, incompetence, or willful targeting of homes, markets, hospitals, and refugee camps. Last week, UNICEF reported that a coalition airstrike had targeted a warehouse used for water distribution, jeopardizing 11,000 Yemenis.

All of this puts the Obama administration in an untenable position. Yes, Washington is Israel’s key supporter and has defended Israel at the United Nations over Gaza. But when it comes to Yemen, the U.S. is supporting the Saudi coalition  airstrikes with targeting information, logistics, and other intelligence. Washington has advised the Saudis to set limits on their targets, and [U.S. officials expressed concerns as early as April](http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-widens-role-in-saudi-led-campaign-against-yemen-rebels-1428882967) about the campaign’s open-ended nature. Still, [the Obama administration has avoided public criticism](http://www.npr.org/2015/08/20/433257736/un-critcizes-saudi-backed-operations-in-yemen-but-u-s-stays-silent).

The issue is less defending Israel than recognizing this double standard in the Middle East.

The Saudis escape consequences for their actions in Yemen in part because the Arab coalition is nine countries deep and rich too. The Arab League–of which Yemen is a member–supports the coalition campaign. And a majority of U.N. members appear to be happy to ignore distant, poor Yemen while they support the Palestinian cause and fault Israeli human rights abuses. And unlike the Israelis, the Saudi military doesn’t investigate the accusations against it.

The next time Israel–or the U.S., for that matter–is accused of killing civilians while operating in urban areas against legitimate military targets, it would be nice if critics, the Saudis in particular, held their fire. But I’m not holding my breath.