

# Justifying the Saudi Slaughter in Yemen

**Exclusive:** Official Washington insists Iran is the main Mideast troublemaker when clearly that isn't true, but the "group think" explains why a few intercepted arms shipments to Somalia where linked to Iran and Yemen, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The Obama administration has carried out a deliberately deceptive campaign accusing Iran of covertly sending arms to the Houthis by sea, a claim that Washington cites to help justify the Saudi massive air attack against the Houthis that began last year.

By repeating the accusation over and over, the administration has been largely successful in turning a dubious allegation into accepted fact, even though it is contradicted by evidence that is well-documented on the public record.

Secretary of State John Kerry introduced the new variant of the Obama administration's familiar theme about Iran's "nefarious activities" in the region two weeks after Saudi Arabia began its bombing in Yemen on March 26, 2015. Kerry told the PBS NewsHour, "There are obviously supplies that have been coming from Iran," citing "a number of flights every single week that have been flying in." Kerry vowed that the United States was "not going to stand by while the region is destabilized."

Later, the administration began accusing Iran of using fishing boats to smuggle arms to the Houthis. The campaign unfolded in a series of four interceptions of small fishing boats or dhows in or near the Arabian Sea from September 2015 through March 2016. The four interceptions had two things in common: the boats did have illicit weapons alright, but the crews always said the ship was bound for Somalia – not Yemen and the Houthis.

But instead of acknowledging the obvious fact that the weapons were not related to the Iran-Houthi relationship, a U.S. military spokesman put out a statement in all four cases citing a U.S. "assessment" that the ultimate destination of the arms was Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen.

The choice of wording was significant. The intelligence community says that it "assesses" that something is true only when it does not have clear-cut proof on the matter. In the case of the alleged Iranian use of fishing dhows to smuggle arms to the Houthis, the U.S. spokesmen did not cite a single piece of evidence for that "assessment" in any of the four cases. In fact, when asked for some

justification for it, the military spokesman refused.

The first fishing dhow was intercepted in the Arabian Sea on Sept. 25, 2015, by a member of a 31-nation coalition called the Combined Maritime Forces patrolling the Arabian Sea and nearby waters for piracy. The coalition ship found the dhow to be carrying 18 Konkurs anti-tank missiles, 71 other anti-tank shells and 54 missile-launchers.

### **Blaming Iran**

The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet later issued a statement that said, "Based on statements from the dhow's crew the port of origin of the dhow and its illicit weapons cache is believed to be Iran." It also said the anti-tank missiles were thought to be of Iranian and Russian origin, and that the papers on the ship had indicated that it had been checked by ports and customs officials in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province.

But the crew of the vessel had said that it was bound not for Yemen but for Somalia, as the spokesman for the U.S. Fifth Fleet acknowledged to The Associated Press. A Saudi military spokesman suggested that Iran intended to reroute the arms later from Somalia to Yemen, but offered no evidence.

On Feb. 27, 2016, an Australian ship intercepted a second fishing dhow off the coast of Oman. The Australians found 1,989 AK-47 assault rifles, 100 rocket-propelled grenades and 40 PKM machine guns on board. The Australian Defense Force issued an official statement on the seizure that did not mention Iranian involvement. It said the boat appeared to be "stateless" and that its cache of weapons was "destined for Somalia." The Australian Defense Force spokesman explained to CNN that the conclusion was based on interviews with crew members.

But a spokesman for U.S. Naval Forces, Central Command, Lt. Ian McConnaughey gave an entirely different political slant to the interception. In an e-mail to NBC News, McConnaughey said. "Based on the dhow's course, Iran is believed to be its port of origin and the source of the illicit weapon," he said. McConnaughey said the crew was "assessed" to be Iranian – implying that the crew itself had not indicated that.

McConnaughey acknowledged to NBC and The Telegraph, "According to coalition forces it is believed that the vessel's destination was in the vicinity of Somalia." But the CENTCOM spokesman indicated that it didn't matter; the U.S. was insisting on its narrative about covert Iranian arms to the Houthis.

"[T]he initial U.S. assessment is the weapons' final destination was likely to be the Houthis in Yemen," McConnaughey told NBC and The Telegraph.

When this writer asked McConnaughey by e-mail why the U.S. “assessed” that the weapons were intended for Yemen, despite the evidence to the contrary, he responded, “We are not going to discuss the intelligence and other information that led us to our assessment.”

### **A Third Shipment**

On March 20, a French navy destroyer intercepted a third fishing dhow off the Island of Socotra in the northern Indian Ocean and found several hundred AK-47 assault rifles, machine guns and antitank weapons. The official statement on the seizure from the Combined Maritime Forces stated categorically, “The dhow was spotted heading toward Somalia.”



And because the weapons were “deemed to be destined for Somalia,” it explained, they “were seized under the United Nations Security Council mandated arms embargo in accordance with UNSCR 2244(2015).” That Security Council resolution mandates an embargo on Eritrea.

Australia and other states participating in the Combined Maritime Forces were thus challenging the U.S. propaganda line. But again the U.S. military used the news media to reinforce the line about Iran smuggling arms to the Houthis. Commander Kevin Stephens, a spokesman for the Fifth Fleet, told CNN that “according to a U.S. assessment,” Yemen was the “likely destination” of the arms.

A fourth interception – the third in three weeks – occurred on March 28 by a U.S. Navy ship that was not operating as part of Combined Maritime Forces but directly under U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. That allowed the Naval Forces Central Command to issue its own news story on April 4.

In its lead paragraph, the report said the United States “assessed” that the shipment of illicit arms on board the dhow “originated in Iran and was likely

bound for Houthi insurgents in Yemen.”

### **An Earlier Ruse**

The Obama administration also had sought to promote the charge that Iranian was covertly sending weapons to the Houthis by sea more than two years earlier. In January 2013, the Yemen client government backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia had claimed that its forces had intercepted a ship with a large cargo of weaponry that came from Iran and was on its way to Yemen to deliver them to the Houthis.

The Obama administration supported that charge in briefings to journalists. After the Saudi air war against Yemen began in 2015, the U.S. pushed for a report by an experts group on sanctions against Iran that would give the charge credibility.

But the 2013 claim was soon exposed as a ruse. A Security Council Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea revealed in a June 2013 report that the crewmembers had told diplomats who interviewed them that ship’s cargo of diesel fuel was bound for Somalia, not Yemen. And, since the weapons were hidden under the diesel fuel tanks, the weapons could be accessed only after those tanks had been emptied, in other words after the ship docked in Somalia.

The monitoring group learned from authorities in the Puntland region of Somalia, where most of the smuggled weapons have entered the country, that this was a widely used method of smuggling arms into the country.

Furthermore, the monitoring group determined that the wide range of types of weapons on board the ship, which was intercepted in January 2013, as well as of their original sources indicated that the weapons cache had been assembled by arms merchants. Authorities in Puntland provided data to the monitoring group showing that most of the shipments of weapons into Puntland in the months before January 2013 had come from politically well-connected arms merchants in Yemen.

Some of the fishing boats that were intercepted with illicit arms on board in 2015-16 had Iranian owners. But the monitoring group report reveals that the real reason is the role of such Iranian fishing vessels in illegal fishing in Somali waters. The vast majority of the hundreds of fishing vessels involved in such illegal fishing networks were either Iranian or Yemeni. As many as 300 were believed to be Yemeni-owned, while Iranian-owned 180 of them.

The monitoring group said it was investigating unconfirmed reports that some of those illegal fishing vessels were also being used to carry out arms smuggling and that it had established “other connections between the illegal fishing networks and networks involved in the arms trade and connected to al-Shabaab in

northeastern Somalia.”

But the Obama administration has no interest in the considerable evidence gathered by the monitoring group that provides a more credible explanation for the arms found on those four fishing dhows.

Such an explanation isn't political useful, whereas the accusations of Iranian smuggling of arms to the Houthis fulfilled multiple political and bureaucratic interests, justifying Saudi Arabia's bloody U.S.-backed air campaign over Yemen and endless Washington alarms about “Iranian aggression.”

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## How the West Provoked the New Cold War

The mainstream U.S. media portrays the New Cold War as “white-hatted” Americans standing up to “black-hatted” Russians to stop aggression against NATO and to save children in Syria, but the reality is much more gray, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

How did the “growing trust” that Russian President Vladimir Putin once said marked his “working and personal relationship with President Obama” change into today's deep distrust and saber-rattling?

Their relationship reached its zenith after Mr. Putin persuaded Syria to give up its chemical weapons for verified destruction, enabling Mr. Obama at the last minute to call off, with some grace, plans to attack Syria in late summer 2013.

But at an international conference in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi last week, Mr. Putin spoke of the “feverish” state of international relations and lamented: “My personal agreements with the President of the United States have not produced results.” He complained about “people in Washington ready to do everything possible to prevent these agreements from being implemented in practice” and, referring to Syria, decried the lack of a “common front against terrorism after such lengthy negotiations, enormous effort, and difficult compromises.”

A month earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who chooses his words

carefully, told Russian TV viewers, “My good friend John Kerry ... is under fierce criticism from the U.S. military machine. Despite [Mr. Kerry’s] assurances that the U.S. commander in chief, President Barack Obama, supported him in his contacts with Russia (he confirmed that during his meeting with President Vladimir Putin) apparently the military does not really listen to the commander in chief.”

Do not chalk this up to paranoia. The U.S.-led coalition air strikes on known Syrian army positions killing scores of troops just five days into the September cease-fire – not to mention statements at the time by the most senior U.S. generals – were evidence enough to convince the Russians that the Pentagon was intent on scuttling meaningful cooperation with Russia.

### **A New Nadir**

Relations between the U.S. and Russian presidents have now reached a nadir, and Mr. Putin has ordered his own defense ministry to throw down the gauntlet.

On Oct. 6, ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Russia is prepared to shoot down unidentified aircraft – including any stealth aircraft – over Syria, and warned ominously that Russian air defense will not have time to identify the origin of the aircraft.

It seems possible that the U.S. air force will challenge that claim in due course – perhaps even without seeking prior permission from the White House. Last week, National Intelligence Director and former Air Force General James Clapper commented offhandedly, “I wouldn’t put it past them to shoot down an American aircraft ... if they felt it was threatening their forces on the ground.”

Injecting additional volatility into the equation, major news outlets are playing down or ignoring Russia’s warnings. Thus, Americans who depend on the corporate media can be expected to be suitably shocked by what that same media will no doubt cast as naked aggression out of the blue if Russian air defenses down a U.S. or coalition aircraft.

Meanwhile in Europe, as NATO defense ministers met in Brussels on Wednesday, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told reporters the U.S. is contributing “a persistent rotational armored brigade combat team” as a “major sign of the U.S. commitment to strengthening deterrence here.”

“This was a decision made by the alliance leaders in Warsaw,” he explained, referring to NATO’s July summit meeting in the Polish capital. “The United States will lead a battalion in Poland and deploy an entire battle-ready battalion task force of approximately 900 soldiers from the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, which is based in Germany.”

On Thursday, at the Valdai Conference in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, President Putin accused the West of promoting the “myth” of a “Russian military threat,” calling this a “profitable business that can be used to pump new money into defense budgets ... expand NATO and bring its infrastructure, military units, and arms closer to our borders.”

Myth or not, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was correct to point out last spring that military posturing on Russia’s borders will bring less regional security. Mr. Steinmeier warned against “saber-rattling,” adding that, “We are well advised not to create pretexts to renew an old confrontation.”

Speaking of such pretexts, it is high time to acknowledge that the marked increase in East-West tensions over the past two-and-a-half years originally stemmed from the Western-sponsored coup d’état in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, and Russia’s reaction in annexing Crimea. Americans malnourished on the diet served up by “mainstream” media are blissfully unaware that two weeks before the coup, YouTube published a recording of an intercepted conversation between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and the U.S. ambassador in Kiev, during which “Yats” (for Arseniy Yatsenyuk) was identified as Washington’s choice to become the new prime minister of the coup government in Kiev.

This unique set of circumstances prompted George Friedman, president of the think-tank STRATFOR, to label the putsch in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, “really the most blatant coup in history.”

It’s time for Western politicians and media to learn their lesson and pay attention to the statements coming out of Russia. Ask yourselves: Why all this hype now?

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