

By Jeremy Varon

From [Voices From Creative Nonviolence](#) | Original Article



I sifted through the children's backpacks laid at the Isaiah Wall, across from the United Nations, looking for one labeled with the name of an 11 year-old boy. That's the age of my son, and carrying it would help me feel closer to the lives we were mourning. I found one.

Abd al-Ilah Abdullah Hussein al-Raza, along with 39 other school children, was killed in a Saudi airstrike on August 9, 2018, in Yemen's Saada province. They were traveling on a celebratory end-of-year field trip when a bomb hit their bus, killing eleven adults as well as the children. The United States supplied the bomb, manufactured by Lockheed Martin. In press photos, heaps of the children's bloodied, blue backpacks anchored the grotesque tableau of a massacre.

It should not have taken the murder of school children to at last focus the world's attention on the war that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates having been waging on Yemen since March 2015. Merciless bombardments, the sealing of ports, disease, mass starvation, and the suffering of children have been its hallmarks. Since the war's start, more than [85,000 children](#) under the age of five may [have died from hunger alone](#)

. Any purported justification of the war as a means to thwart Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels has vaporized long ago in this ferocious depravity.

Nor should it have taken Saudi Arabia's savage murder of U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi to give urgency to American concern about the U.S. role in the conflict. Saudi Arabia is the biggest importer of U.S. arms. The leader of the anti-Houthi coalition, it has fought the war with American blessings, weapons, training, and, [up until a few weeks ago](#), the refueling of its warplanes.

But here we were on November 8 — 100 or so activists with blue backpacks and the names of the murdered children, stepping off for a short trek to Saudi Arabia's New York City consulate. Our silent hope was that some good might yet come from the children's deaths, if the lives of others could be spared.

“Stop the Starving! Stop the Bombing!”

Calling itself Voices for Yemen, a grassroots coalition of peace groups held the demonstration. Among them was Voices for Creative Non-Violence, led by the intrepid, Chicago-based activist, Kathy Kelly. Kelly has spent decades protesting U.S. military aggression, sometimes from within the war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq. She has organized national efforts to awaken America about the Yemen conflict, while a New York City contingent has held a weekly vigil in Union Square for the last year and a half.

Led by puppet figures of weeping mothers, the mourners curled their way through the noontime crowds, who were visibly puzzled or moved by the spectacle. The protest's purpose was as serious as its mood: to physically block entry, at risk of arrest, to the Second Avenue building that houses the unmarked Saudi consulate. Two dozen or so demonstrators, backpacks on display, took their positions at separate entrances. Some delivery men honored the grim

picket, while a few indignant office-goers pushed through the linked arms.

Kneeling before the center entrance, David Barrow broke the hypnotic recitation of the names of the dead to bellow slowly, “Stop the bombing! Stop the starving! Stop the killing of the children of the children of Yemen!” The words felt like an ancient injunction, at once otherworldly and deeply human — a calling out of elemental evil, and a plaintive defense of life itself.

Tensions rose with the harassing presence of plain-clothed embassy thugs, of the sort employed by autocrats all over the world to guard their foreign outposts. Dozens of New York City police officers soon arrived, ready with their plastic cuffs. The protesters sang and chanted, conducted impromptu interviews with *Democracy Now* and *Al-Jazeera* (the sole news outlets to cover the demonstration, despite its ample promotion in a press release), and held their ground.

Encounters like this are mistaken as simply rituals of speaking truth to power — here with bodies, as well as words. Equally much, these encounters elicit the response of the powerful when confronted by truth. Mostly fortified in their offices, the Saudis of course knew we were there and why. The Saudis’ calculated reserve, and reliance on the NYPD to clean up our trespass, bespoke both cowardice and contempt at the idea of being held to account, no matter by whom.

Fear inside the consulate of more bad press for the Yemen war may have forestalled what seemed like imminent arrests. After an hours-long standoff, the police refused to move on the blockaders, as sometimes happens. By whose decision remained unclear.

At the scene, Kathy Kelly spoke with Detective Frank Bogucki, who recalled having arrested some of those present in the wake of the 2003 “Shock and Awe” bombing of Iraq. “Detective Bogucki said we are preaching to the choir,” Kelly wrote in her post-demo email wrap up on November 8, “when we tell him about crimes happening inside the consulate. . . We believe ‘the choir’ must unite by resisting child sacrifice, child slaughter.”

Weapons Sales and Child Slaughter

Since the August 9 bombing, and the murder of Khashoggi especially, establishment Washington has been scrambling to do something about Yemen. All of a sudden, the self-professed choir has gotten bigger, with some new voices promising to restrain the Saudi war. Recent talk has ranged from requiring Congressional approval for U.S. military involvement in the conflict, to sanctioning Saudi Arabia, to cutting off arms sales to the oil kingdom.

In congress, there have been some well-meaning voices all along, as well as near misses in efforts to at least limit the conflict. Early in 2018, Senators Chris Murphy (D-CN), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and Mike Lee (R-UT) sponsored a Senate resolution to “remove United States Armed Forces from hostilities” in Yemen, besides those directed at Al Qaeda. The measure failed by a narrow [55–44 margin](#). In truth, the bill sought only to restrict “[aerial targeting assistance, intelligence sharing, and mid-flight aerial refueling](#)” by the U.S. military. The CIA, which directs the notorious drone strikes in Yemen and could fill in for a scaled back military, is exempt. The proposed bill hardly ends the war, nor disentangles the United States from it. American-made bombs can still kill Yemeni civilians, whether guided by U.S. planners or not.

In response to the August bus bombing, a bipartisan group of legislators attached conditions for continued military assistance to Saudi Arabia in its assault on Yemen to the annual defense appropriations bill. The conditions required that the Trump administration certify that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are taking “demonstrable actions” to limit civilian casualties, and pursuing in “good faith” an end to the conflict. Citing unbroken rates of death and disease, aid groups challenged that these conditions had been remotely met. But on September 12, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [filed the necessary certifications with congress](#), later endorsed by Defense Secretary James Mattis.

The press soon reported that Pompeo overrode State Department staff concerned with the war’s civilian death toll. Pompeo had been advised by the head of the legislative affairs team at the State Department, Charles Faulkner. Prior to joining State, Faulkner had been a lobbyist with the weapons manufacturer Raytheon. Failing to certify, [Faulkner warned Pompeo](#), would jeopardize two billion dollars in arms sales from Raytheon to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In the tug of war between war profiteering and human rights, weapons sales and child slaughter won.

The most ambitious legislation yet, H.Con.Res.138, invokes constitutional prerogatives under the War Powers Resolution to order the president to stop a war Congress had never declared.

Post-Khashoggi, it gained real momentum, including the support of powerful Democrats who had opposed similar, earlier measures within their caucus. But in a barely reported move, [Republican House leaders maneuvered](#) on November 13 to have the bill die without consideration from the full chamber. A spokesperson for Speaker Ryan explained that the legislation was now superfluous, given the Trump administration's revised stance on the refueling of Saudi aircrafts. Whether the bill can be revived in the fading days of the current congress, or may roar to life when the Democrats take control of the House in January, remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the Sanders-Lee-Murphy bill — [newly supported in a letter](#) to Mitch McConnell (R-KY) signed by former Secretary of State Collin Powell, a Nobel Laureate, and other eminences — came for reconsideration by the Senate. If passed, to become law it would still need a matching bill from the House, and then to override a possible presidential veto. As yet, the votes exist for neither.

The Trump administration bitterly opposes the measure, as [Secretary Pompeo made clear](#) in a closed-door, morning meeting with Senators on November 28. In it, he stressed the vital role of the U.S.-Saudi alliance and the war in Yemen in checking Iranian hegemony. ---Lapsing into doublespeak, he urged, "The more support from you we get, the better chance we have of ending the conflict and stopping the suffering that none of us are happy about." The prospects for peace apparently depend on defeating a measure opposing war. Rejecting this non-sense, the Republican-led Senate passed later that afternoon by a 63-37 vote a resolution advancing the bill towards

[full debate by the Senate](#)

. It is a stunning rebuke to President Trump, though of no immediate relief to the people of Yemen.

Handwringing and Senate votes aside, the United States government remains for now committed to the war in Yemen. Even the best legislation falls far short of the protestors' call that the United States fully and permanently withdraw from the war. With evasion and duplicity, the war's backers somehow choke back the embarrassment that it has not even achieved its objective of breaking the Houthi rebellion. For this meager result, the United States has joined in unleashing violence and suffering all but unparalleled in the world today. Ending wars is not easily left to the war-makers.

"A Mean and Nasty World"

This legislative wrangling, unknown in its detail to all but the fraction of Americans who closely follow such things, has been overtaken by Trump's outrageous defense of Saudi Arabia. Excusing Khashoggi's murder, Trump reminded us that it is " [a mean and nasty world out there](#) ." Greatness, he suggests, lies in turning this dismal reality to one's advantage, not seeking to change it.

For Trump, this dispiriting insight is something of a cosmic first principle, whether in business or in life. Now it appears elevated to the center of a Trump foreign policy doctrine, where it is used to exonerate oligarch assassins with lots of oil and a ferocious hatred of Iran. The implications are terrifying. If the very public death of Khashoggi — a well-connected journalist, backed by powerful media institutions and a formidable nation like Turkey — only emboldens Trump's tough guy realism, what chance do the children of Yemen stand? How might any vulnerable population fare, should the president deem their suffering acceptable or even useful?

It has been depressing to watch Trump's backers rally around this rot. Support generally comes from two camps. The first comprises his sycophants, deep into the derangement of the cult of personality that Fox News and Trump himself have carefully crafted. To this group, anything Trump says or does, no matter how obnoxious, offensive or dangerous, is lauded as some norm-busting bit of genius, a master move in a game only Trump knows how to play. They credit him for choosing expedient devils as bedfellows, and for pressing for the right deals with them.

Greg Gutfeld, the pinhead pundit on Fox's largely unwatchable "The Five," epitomizes this flattery. Cheap gas prices, peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, and stability in the region, Gutfeld [clucked in a recent blog](#) , is the haul that Trump is poised to win. In truth, Saudi Arabia alone can deliver none of these things. But truth has no necessary place in the magical thinking of the true believer. The lives of Yemeni civilians are sacrificed for a mirage.

The second camp are opportunist-insiders, of flagrantly neo-conservative vintage. They use Trump as a potent vehicle for crusades they have long championed. Witness here the recent *New York Times* column by Iran hawks Michael Doran and Tony Badran, titled, like eye candy for the president, "

[Trump is Crude. But He's Right About Saudi Arabia](#)

."With breathless concision, they excuse Trump's obfuscation about who ordered Khashoggi's death because it serves a sound national strategy; rail against Tehran's evil as a way to diminish Riyadh's; and puzzle out how any U.S. punishment of Saudi Arabia would only empower the real enemy, Iran, who had bewitched Trump's feckless predecessor. Trump's

critics, they conclude, err by favoring “abstract morality” over “strategic wisdom.”

Such is the cynical alibi — given a new, populist prestige by Trump — of self-professed wise men, as they condemn others to death by their hard-headed geo-political calculations. Yet there is nothing abstract about weeping mothers, pulverized children, bloodstained backpacks, and bomb fragments with insignia from an American manufacturer. If nothing else, the demonstration at the Saudi consulate sought to convey just that.

Save the Children

There, is of course, a frightful candor to Trump’s transparent preference for weapons sales and strategic alliances over human rights and the defense of global democracy. For decades, other presidents have made the same bargain. By these terms, the ends of “national security” justify the repellent means often used to achieve them. President Obama, after all, green-lighted the Yemen war to curry further favor with Saudi Arabia. Every president since the start of the Cold War has backed dictators and thuggish insurgents, and burnt villages to save these “allies” from America’s enemies.

Trump, his supporters gush, simply dispenses with the self-serving niceties other presidents have used to cloak their sound and prudent motives. It would be a mistake, however, to consider this refreshing honesty. To recognize the legacy of American hypocrisy should not be to excuse or celebrate it, nor to transcend it by becoming an unapologetic brute. If Trump’s cavalier acceptance of child sacrifice in Yemen further discloses the endemic corruption of American imperial power — so often driven by weapons lobbyists and think tank zealots, no matter the president — then his venal bluster will have taught us something valuable.

What we do with that knowledge may one day save some other busload of children, in some other distant country where American bombs have no place being.