

How Washington Adds to Yemen's Nightmare

Exclusive: Tangled in corrupt old alliances, such as with the Saudi monarchy, the Obama administration has now joined a war in Yemen that pits some of the region's most anti-democratic forces and Al-Qaeda against a home-grown rebel movement with limited backing from Iran, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

"So often, when we insert ourselves in ways that go beyond persuasion, it's counterproductive, it backfires," President Barack Obama told a recent news conference held at the Summit of the Americas. It's a powerful insight he would do well to remember when he next takes stock of America's latest intervention in Yemen.

Joining a growing list of U.S. foreign policy failures in the Middle East, including Iraq, Syria and Libya, Yemen is fast becoming a humanitarian disaster. Its indigenous conflict, cruelly fueled by Washington and Saudi Arabia, has killed hundreds of people, wounded more than 2,000, and displaced more than a quarter million people, according to the United Nations. All this at a time when 16 million of its desperately poor inhabitants are critically short of food, water and fuel.



Good luck trying to find any good guys among the various warring factions in Yemen; you certainly won't find a single good actor among any of the intervening foreign powers.

On the one hand, you have the Houthi rebels, named after the former religious leader of a minority Shiite sect known as the Zaydis. Earlier this year they overran most of the country after years of resisting oppressive central

government rule. Their key issues are political, not religious, including how to divide the country's energy revenue between regions.

Backing the Houthi rebels, for now, are army units loyal to Washington's previously favored strongman, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. (Saleh previously fought the Houthis but switched sides to undermine his successor as president.) The Houthis also enjoy support from the Tehran regime, which sees an opportunity to meddle in Saudi Arabia's backyard.

Lined up against them is the Yemen branch of the Islamic State; Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies; the military junta in Egypt; and an indicted war criminal, the president of Sudan.

Oh yes, and the Obama administration, which once again is directly or indirectly allied with Islamist extremists and the region's most anti-democratic forces. Following Saudi Arabia's airstrikes, the *New York Times* reported, local al-Qaeda fighters seized control of the capital of Yemen's "oil-rich Hadhramaut Province," while "al-Qaeda's strongest opponents, the Houthis and Yemen's American-trained counterterrorism troops, have been busy fending off attacks from the Saudi military."

As usual, the administration isn't sending any "boots on the ground," to avoid political backlash at home. But it is providing "logistical and intelligence support" for bombing runs by Saudi Arabia, including refueling operations and rescue missions to save Saudi pilots who ejected from their American-supplied F-15 fighter-bombers. Washington is also stepping up weapons deliveries to members of the Saudi-led coalition.

This naked aggression against a sovereign state has never been approved by the UN Security Council and stands in apparent violation of the United Nations charter. Congress has not approved this latest act of war either. "Right now (the operation) does not have any foundation in international law," complained Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, not that anyone in the United States cared what he had to say.

American disregard for international law is so complete that hardly anyone cared what UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had to say about the war in Yemen, either.

"The coalition air raids, and the continuing attempts by the Houthis and their allied armed groups to expand their power, have turned an internal political crisis into a violent conflict that risks deep and long-lasting regional repercussions," he declared. "The last thing the region and our world need is more of the chaos and crimes we have seen in Libya and Syria."

The Obama administration barely even bothered to justify its support for outside

military intervention into Yemen's civil war. Depending on whether you believe the National Security Council, the State Department or the White House press office, the administration is either seeking to "defend Saudi Arabia's border," to support "the legitimate president of Yemen," or to promote negotiations among the warring parties.

In a typical example of unconscious doublespeak, Secretary of State John Kerry told an interviewer that Washington was "not going to stand by while the region is destabilized," as if bombing will somehow stabilize Yemen.

What really motivates Washington was probably best explained by Rep. Adam Schiff, D-California, who said U.S. support "may give the Saudis some comfort that, even if we do reach an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program, that doesn't mean that we're not going to be willing to confront Iran as it tries to expand its quite nefarious influence."

Although the Houthis are an authentic home-grown force, and has important doctrinal differences with Iran, Saudi Arabia sees Iranian puppet masters behind every Shiite-led movement in the Middle East, just as Washington saw Soviet control behind every Third World rebellion during the Cold War.

Since Iran replaced Israel as Saudi Arabia's chief bête noir, Riyadh has openly questioned whether the Obama administration can be trusted any longer as an ally and even threatened to downgrade its relations with Washington. Obama has sought to reassure the oil kingdom by approving \$46 billion in new arms sales, and by insisting that his administration will resist the spread of Iran's influence, by force if necessary, everywhere in the region.

Decades before Iran became an enemy, however, Saudi Arabia began intervening in its southern neighbor. Besides grabbing land, the Saudis poured vast sums of money into Yemen to promote its extreme brand of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism. In 2009, it invaded northern Yemen to attack the Houthis, unsuccessfully.

Washington has also inserted itself in Yemen's civil conflicts for decades. In 1962, the Kennedy administration and the Saudi monarchy backed a bloody tribal insurgency against a pro-Egyptian regime in what was then North Yemen (the "Yemen Arab Republic"). Joining them in this covert operation were Israel and Iran, then ruled by the Shah. And among the insurgents they supported were Yemeni followers of the Zaydi sect, who would later be known as the Houthis. Few Yemenis probably care to savor the ironies.

President Obama's interventions in Yemen until recently could be summed up in one word: drones. He directed an infamous drone strike in December 2009, which killed 41 civilians, many of them women and children; later, Obama later

prevailed on the president of Yemen to jail the Yemeni journalist who exposed that drone attack. Another drone strike in 2013 wiped out members of a wedding party. U.S. drone strikes have continued to kill innocent civilians into 2015.

Washington's single-minded focus on counter-terrorism not only created new recruits for al-Qaeda but predictably helped set the stage for the latest crisis. As Brandeis University researcher Aaron Zelin warned in 2010:

"The politics are treacherous. Launching drone strikes could hinder efforts to solve the northern and southern conflict peacefully. . . . If the United States tried to target an AQAP operative in a Huthi stronghold in northern Yemen and accidentally killed individuals who sympathize with the Huthi cause, it would most likely break the fragile peace and lead to a resumption and major escalation of war between the Huthis and the Yemeni government.

"Further, in the past round of battle from August, 2009 to February, 2010, Saudi Arabia , which collects a large amount of American military aid , overtly entered the war. A small counterterrorism operation could quickly spiral into a regional war that has nothing to do with AQAP, but could further destabilize the security situation in Yemen and detract from the fight against AQAP."

Zelin recommended that Washington shift its focus from military aid to leading an international donor initiative to reduce poverty, diversify Yemen's economy and help the country's swelling refugee population, as well as encouraging the country to peacefully resolve conflicts with the Houthis and other aggrieved groups.

Instead, as documented by Human Rights Watch, Yemen's government repeatedly used U.S. military aid to support an all-out assault against the Houthis ("Operation Scorched Earth"), causing extensive civilian casualties. The latest round of conflict, leading to Houthi victories, began in September 2014, just after the White House declared that the success of America's counterterrorism strategy in Yemen was a "model" for dealing with militants everywhere.

If Washington had instead listened to Zelin and other experts, the United States might today be helping to heal the country, reducing the appeal of Islamist extremists and rebel insurgents alike. Instead, we find ourselves supporting bombing runs by a Wahhabist regime against the enemies of al-Qaeda in Yemen, in the name of containing Iran. Is it any wonder that U.S. foreign policy is in such shambles?

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