

The Secret Behind the Yemen War

Exclusive: A recent PBS report about the war in Yemen exposed the secret connection between the U.S.-Saudi alliance and Al Qaeda, a reality that also underscores the jihadist violence in Syria, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

PBS Frontline's "Yemen Under Siege," which aired on May 3, makes for powerful viewing. A first-hand look at the devastation that the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and other powers have visited on one of the poorest countries in the Middle East, the 35-minute documentary shows families struggling amid the rubble, children dying from mortar attacks, surgeons operating without anesthesia, and other such horrors.

But the most important revelation comes almost as an aside. Interviewing pro-Saudi fighters near the central Yemeni city of Taiz, journalist Safa Al Ahmad suddenly hears shouting. "What's wrong?" she asks. "Who are they? They don't want me to be here?"

A soldier explains that the people making a ruckus are Ansar al Sharia, i.e. fighters for shari'a. "And he just says quite casually, these are Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," Al Ahmad says later of the local Al Qaeda affiliate often referred to as AQAP. "And he referred to them by their local name, which is Ansar al Sharia. He revealed what is considered an open secret in the front lines, that they [AQAP] had been fighting with all the different factions, the [pro-Saudi] Yemeni factions and the [U.S.-Saudi] coalition against the Houthis."

"We don't accept you," the Al Qaeda members cry out. "On religious grounds, we do not accept you." A non-Al Qaeda fighter says dismissively, "They are ISIS." But a second corrects him: "No, they're not. They're worse than ISIS. We can't coexist with them."

But coexist they do, as the film makes clear. Yet another non-Al Qaeda fighter explains: "Islam does not allow for people to be overly strict. We must be moderate. But we have a group here who are strict."

"But you fight together at the front line?" Al Ahmad asks.

"For sure. At the front, we are together."

With that, the documentary lifts the lid on perhaps the single most incoherent aspect of U.S. policy in the Middle East. On one hand, the United States claims to be fighting Al Qaeda, and indeed AQAP, regarded as one of Al Qaeda's most

aggressive franchises, has been a prime target of U.S. drone strikes ever since the war on terror began.

At the same time, though, the U.S. provides military backing for forces led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Persian Gulf petro-states that welcome AQAP fighters into their ranks as full and active participants in the anti-Houthi crusade.

The U.S. opposes Al Qaeda, on one hand, but supports elements that ally with it, on the other.

Explaining the War in Yemen

As Al Ahmad – a heroic Saudi dissident who has been effectively banished from her homeland for reporting on the plight of the kingdom’s Shi’ite minority – puts it:

“This is why it’s so difficult to explain the war on Yemen, because there are so many enemies that find themselves on the same front lines fighting the other enemy. A lot of people who wanted to fight the Houthis, that didn’t necessarily agree with Al Qaeda, did join them because that was a ready front for them to go out and fight. And that grew with the ranks of Al Qaeda. And so the situation only got worse from 2012 until now.”



Where formerly Al Qaeda “controlled huge parts of South Yemen,” she adds, the group’s reach over the last four years has grown to the point where it now constitutes a veritable state within a state.

All of which runs directly counter to the official line in Washington, which holds that if AQAP has expanded, it is only because it has taken advantage of the disorderly conditions that the Houthi uprising has imposed. As a U.S. counterterrorism official told The Daily Beast last summer:

“It is now clear that AQAP has been a significant beneficiary of the chaos unleashed by the Houthi takeover. While the Saudi-led coalition has started to push back the Houthis, they are not able to simultaneously fight AQAP. The net result is that AQAP continues to make inroads and exploit the situation.”

This vision holds that the Houthis are the prime cause of Al Qaeda’s expansion, they created the conditions that have allowed it to expand, and poor Saudi Arabia is now struggling valiantly to set things right. It’s all quite heartwarming except that “Yemen Under Siege” shows that the opposite is really the case.

Rather than rolling Al Qaeda back, it makes clear that, whatever their misgivings, pro-Saudi forces have come to rely on it as a useful asset in the anti-Houthi struggle and that, consequently, they have encouraged its growth. Since the Saudis are backing the anti-Houthi forces, this makes them complicit in AQAP’s expansion. And since the U.S. is backing the Saudis, this makes America complicit, too.

Indeed, America’s role is even worse. By subjecting AQAP to periodic drone strikes, it not only winds up killing civilians – such as the 14 members of a wedding party that the U.S. mistakenly targeted in December 2013 – but fairly encourages AQAP members to intermingle with other anti-Houthi forces by making it clear that is the one place it will not bomb.

The result, in effect, is a highly effective machine for fueling apocalyptic fervor, spreading Islamic militancy, and encouraging AQAP to extend its tentacles throughout the broader anti-Houthi movement. The only ones who are in the dark as to why AQAP can prosper under such conditions are the foreign-policy experts back in Washington.

A Broader Pattern

None of this is unique to Yemen, meanwhile. To the contrary, it takes place wherever the U.S. pretends to combat Al Qaeda while in fact doing the opposite. The original model was Afghanistan where Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid estimates that the CIA, the Saudis and others poured a total of \$10 billion into the anti-Soviet jihad over a ten-year period beginning in mid-1979.

Since Islamic militants generally proved to be the most dedicated fighters, the money flowed to extremists such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a notorious fanatic who got his start in the 1970s throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women at Kabul University.

His reign as prime minister in 1993-94 and again briefly in 1996 was so brutal and destructive that the Taliban were hailed as liberators when they finally

took over and sent Hekmatyar fleeing to Pakistan.

The same happened in Libya when the Arab Spring touched down in early 2011 and the White House urged Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, emir of Qatar, to contribute to a growing swarm of anti-Gaddafi rebels. Obama described Al-Thani at a Democratic fundraiser as “a big booster, big promoter of democracy all throughout the Middle East,” but then confessed: “Now, he himself is not reforming significantly. There’s no big move towards democracy in Qatar. But you know part of the reason is that the per capita income of Qatar is \$145,000 a year. That will dampen a lot of conflict.”

In fact, it did the opposite. Happy to oblige, Al-Thani, a major supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, funneled \$400 million in the form of machine guns, automatic rifles, and ammunition to Salafist rebels who proceeded to do to Libya what an earlier generation of U.S.-backed jihadis had done to Afghanistan, i.e. reduce it to chaos. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Obama’s Risky ‘Mission Creep’ in Syria.”]

Once again, Washington’s clueless foreign-policy establishment was left scratching its head as to how it had all gone so wrong.

Finally, there is Syria, where such perverse policies have generated a tidal wave of violence resulting in millions of refugees and as many as 470,000 deaths. The Bush administration began making threatening noises toward Damascus weeks after invading Iraq in March 2003, although it quickly pulled back once events in its new protectorate began spinning out of control.

But three years later, then-U.S. Ambassador to Syria William V. Roebuck suggested that fostering religious conflict might be an easier way to bring down the Assad government. Even though Sunni fears of Shi’ite proselytizing are “often exaggerated,” he advised in a diplomatic cable made public by Wikileaks, “[b]oth the local Egyptian and Saudi missions here (as well as prominent Syrian Sunni religious leaders) are giving increasing attention to the matter and we should coordinate more closely with their governments on ways to better publicize and focus regional attention on the issue.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Obama Tolerates the Warmongers.”]

Exploiting Religious War

Religious war was too good an opportunity to pass up. In June 2012, *The New York Times* revealed that the CIA was relying on the arch-Sunni Muslim Brotherhood to help channel arms to rebel forces that had already taken the field against Assad.

In August, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Al Qaeda, the

Salafists, and Muslim Brotherhood were “the major forces driving the insurgency,” that the likely outcome was the establishment of a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria,” and that “this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition” – i.e. the U.S., Turkey, and Arab gulf states – “want in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion...”

In August 2014, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes assured Americans that ISIS posed no danger since its “primary focus is consolidating territory in the Middle East region to establish their own Islamic State” rather than striking out at Western targets abroad.

Hence, Americans could count on the violence remaining safely self-contained as Islamic State made life miserable for the Damascus government – an assessment, needless to say, that proved woefully incorrect when ISIS hitmen shot up the Bataclan theater and other Paris targets last November, killing 130 people in all.

Thereafter, U.S. policy wobbled ever more unsteadily. Washington still tilted toward Islamic State when it came to combatting Syrian government forces, which is why it refrained from bombing ISIS fighters as they converged on Palmyra in May 2015 even though they would have been perfect targets as they traversed miles of open desert.

But it otherwise tilted toward Al Nusra Front, as Al Qaeda is locally known, which it now regarded as less dangerous, or toward groups with which Al Nusra is closely aligned.

“Moderate these days is increasingly becoming anyone who’s not affiliated with ISIL,” Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. explained in March 2015 – and indeed the White House made no objection a month later when so-called moderates joined with Al Nusra to launch a major offensive in Syria’s northern Idlib province. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda.”]

Covering for Salafists

Similarly, the U.S. resisted classifying a Salafist army known as Ahrar al-Sham as terrorist even though it collaborates closely with Al Nusra and its ideology is virtually identical, as Stephen Gowans recently noted at the Global Research website.

The same goes for a Free Syrian Army unit known as the 13th Division, which the US has long backed even though it maintains “a tacit collaboration with Nusra” according to *The Wall Street Journal* “and even shared with the group some of its ammunition supplies.”

Mohammad Alloush, who enjoys strong US backing as the chief rebel negotiator at the Geneva peace talks, is a leader of yet another Salafist group called Jaysh al-Islam, which issued a blood-curdling call to exterminate Syria's Alawite community in July 2013. Jaysh al-Islam, it informed the Alawites, "will make you taste the worst torture in life before Allah makes you taste the worst torture on judgment day." But while one might think this would place Jaysh al-Islam beyond the pale, former Ambassador to Syria Robert S. Ford praised it a year later as one of the "moderate" rebel forces that were making life "particularly painful" for the Damascus government.

Genocide is permissible, apparently, as long as it's not too extreme. More recently, Secretary of State John Kerry assailed Assad for bombing rebel positions in Aleppo even though it is clear that so-called "moderates" have intermingled with Al Nusra fighters to the degree that it is impossible to attack one without affecting the other. After Colonel Steve Warren, spokesman for US military forces in Iraq, conceded in a press briefing that "it's primarily al-Nusra who holds Aleppo," Kerry reportedly pushed to include it among the non-terrorist groups exempt from Syrian government attack under the terms of an Aleppo ceasefire agreement that went into effect on May 5.

"This was absolutely unacceptable," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov said, "and at the end we managed to strike it down."

While the U.S. was happy to see ISIS attack Syrian government forces in Palmyra, it was none too pleased to see Syrian forces attack Al Qaeda in Aleppo, which pretty much tells us where its sympathies lie.

If ISIS, Al Nusra, and Al Qaeda-clones like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam continue to grow, it is not hard to figure out why. The more the Sunni political spectrum shifts in a Salafist direction as sectarian warfare deepens and spreads, the more the advantage goes to a hard core composed of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

They are the best fighters, the most dedicated, the best financed thanks to years of support by wealthy gulf contributors, and the best armed thanks to weapons that other groups have relinquished voluntarily or not. Despite friction, the Saudis and Qataris cannot say no to such forces because they see them as increasingly important in a fight against a "Shi'ite crescent" stretching from the Houthis in Yemen to the Alawites in Syria.

They are allies whose help they cannot afford to forego, which is why the various Sunni forces are coming together at this point rather than pulling apart. Hence the intermingling of "moderates" and Al Qaeda that we see from Taiz to Aleppo.

As for the U.S., it is locked in a dysfunctional marriage with the Saudis from which it is unable to escape. As a result, it winds up in bed with the same forces as well. Like a character in a Somerset Maugham novel, it finds itself returning again and again to the same sordid love affair no matter how hard it tries to resist.

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