

# Making Sense of the Mess in Yemen

In August 2014 the U.S. State Department ordered all nonessential U.S. personnel to leave the capital of Yemen for fear of terrorist attacks. A month later, on September 10, 2014, President Barack Obama declared that Yemen was a success story in the war on terror. He claimed that the “strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us... is one we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for some years.”

No such claim was made at the United Nations Security Council meeting on December 22, 2015 when another resolution, following many similar ones, called for an immediate and unconditional end to violence, the careless and indiscriminate bombings of civilians in the ongoing civil war, and the increasing Islamist terrorism in Yemen.

It is unlikely in the near future that any unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the country can be established. The country is a complicated mess with two capitals because of the variety of forces involved in the fighting. The Houthi rebels, who control about half of the country, are loyal to former President Saleh and have a capital, Sanaa, of their own. The Houthis, Shiites, are close to and are aided by Iran, and have continued to intensify their military action against the government regime. Even more menacing is their slogan, “Death to America, death to Israel, curses to the Jews, and victory to Islam.”

Saudi Arabia with a coalition of nine countries and the armies of the Gulf Emirates, fearing Shiite power, support the present President Hadi who rules from the other capital, Aden. The two dominant Islamist terrorists, al-Qaeda and ISIS, the Islamic State, compete for influence.

Yemen, once called "Arabia Felix" is one of the saddest stories in the world. A country about the size of the state of Nebraska, and a population of 26 million, it is the poorest country in the Middle East, with a per capita income of \$1,500 a year, an importer of most of its food, and with declining oil and water resources. Barely half the county is literate, but the vast majority are said to be high on khat, the green leaf narcotic, on which more money is spent than on food.

The fundamental problem for Yemen, the Middle East, and the United States is that it is not really composed of a people or a nation, but a divided area and population. The area was long divided between control by the Ottoman Empire and the UK. It only became one kingdom in 1962 but the separated again in 1994. Its population, 99 per cent Muslim, is 55 per cent Sunni living in the south and southeast and 45 per cent Shia, mostly the Zaidi sect of Shia in the north and northwest with a sprinkling of Hindus, 3,000 Christians and 100 Jews.

The country is the scene of an increasingly bitter and cruel war between the feeble government forces helped by Saudi Arabia, which has been supported in this effort by the United States with military assets and intelligence, and the promise of an arms deal worth \$129 million, and the Houthi insurgents who captured its capital Sanaa in September 2014. It dissolved the existing parliament, put the president and his cabinet under house arrest for a time. They claim authority over the territory they have captured and set up an alternative polity, a transitional revolutionary council. The president fled to Aden and war between those loyal to him and the rebels began.

As a result, at least 5,700 have been killed, and schools, health facilities, and hospitals have been destroyed. As the meeting of the UN Security Council on December 22, 2015, called to prepare the way for peace negotiations, made clear, it is "our friends" the Saudis who have inflicted most of the casualties and damage.

However, the Houthi rebels have been using an arsenal of weapons, including ballistic missiles, which have been intercepted by the Saudi Patriot missile batteries.

Yemen is important for two reasons. One is its strategic position, and the use made of it by terrorists. Whoever controls Yemen can threaten two points: the Gulf of Aden, Bab al Mandab, which connects to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal; and the Gulf of Hawf and the Straits of Hormuz. The other is that has become an outsource of Islamist terrorism since a former group of al-Qaeda was present in the 1990s.

For the U.S., the turmoil in Yemen is a dilemma not only because of the indiscriminate behavior of the Saudis, which is needed to settle the war in Iraq and Syria, and the ruthlessness of the Houthis. For years Yemen has fed foreign fighters into Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Above all, it is important in the necessary fight against Islamist terrorism, because both al-Qaeda and ISIS are present in the area and in the fighting.

At the moment, al-Qaeda, more specially AQAP (a-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) is the more dominant of the two, being strong in the eastern province, including its capital, the port Mukalla. It was founded in January 2009 by Nasir al-Wuhayshi, secretary of Osama bin Laden for a number of years, who as killed by a drone strike in June 2015. Its most notorious member is Ibrahim al-Wuhayshi, the chief bomb-maker, who has been responsible for a number of plots, including the Christmas Day 2009 underwear bomber plot, and who used his own brother as a suicide bomber. AQAP has been linked to the bombing of the USS *Cole* in 2000, and may have been implicated in the massacre at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015.

ISIS is prominent in a number of provinces in the south and center of Yemen, and competes with AQAP for influence. In November 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for attacks on government army positions in southeast Yemen, but the army

itself claimed al Qaeda for the attack, near Shibam. It should be a concern of UNESCO that the terrorist group controls this area, which includes a world heritage site of high-rise mud brick buildings popularly known as Manhattan in the Desert.

The complex set of parties in Yemen makes it confusing. Who's on first? Al-Qaeda, a Sunni group, is carrying on a jihad against Shiites, Houthis, and others. Houthis are linked to Hizb'allah in Lebanon. but ISIS has carried out a number of attacks on the Houthis, including bombing a mosque in Sanaa.

Meanwhile the group known as al-Islah, a Yemenite Sunni Islamist group, essentially a coalition of tribesmen and religious elements, founded in September 1990 but divided on key issues seeks reform on the basis of Islamic principles and teachings. It stems from the Islamic Front, an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, funded by Saudi Arabia to fight Marxist groups present at that time. However, the groups appear to take a neutral stand in the struggle against Shia and has been blackballed since 2014 by Saudi Arabia.

The civil war has already brought in non-Muslims. A former Australian senior army officer is now commander of the UAE Presidential Guard of 5,000 soldiers, a military unit that reports directly to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince al-Nahyan, commander of the UAE armed forces. The U.S. has been involved in the training of the unit that has played a key role in restoring Hadi to power, and in recapturing the port city of Aden in July 2015. The unit has probably been more important than Saudi Arabia in the fight against ISIS.

Yemen is another issue in which the Obama administration must play a role in order to prevent the increase in support for al Qaeda and ISIS, and the use of Yemen to spread the Islamist threat. It is evident today that the Gulf states are troubled by the rapid decline in the price of oil that has cost them more than \$360 billion in oil exports. Yet even if it is necessary for them to retrench at this point, it is even more

important that the Gulf Cooperation Council attempt to end the costly war and oppose the Islamist threat in Yemen. That is the role of the Obama administration, to encourage and press the GCC to do this.

First published in the