

The Saudi-UAE Coalition Has Cut Deals with Al-Qaeda in Yemen (Part Two)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Meanwhile, AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) continues to operate in Yemen, and its ranks are replenished, both from local converts and from AQAP members who have flocked to the country from outside. AQAP, whose members are uber-Sunnis, have been fighting the Shi'a Houthis, even as they continue to denounce and threaten their most important enemies, the Western Infidels. The Saudis and the Emiratis now buy the seasoned Al-Qaeda fighters off with cash, so that they will leave certain areas, with their weapons, equipment, and loot intact. The Saudis and Emiratis see AQAP not as an implacable enemy, but as a useful ally against the Houthis. They are not wrong, but it is still, for the Americans, disturbing when they discover their supposed allies – the Saudis and Emiratis – not only letting AQAP forces get away, but actually bribing them to leave, and still worse, even hiring some of its members to fight alongside their own troops. The Americans think both the Houthis and AQAP can and should be fought, as happened in Syria, where the Americans and their allies fought both ISIS and Assad's forces.

These payments to Al-Qaeda, and allowing the AQAP fighters to hold onto all their weapons, equipment, and stolen cash, have several consequences. First, they eliminate the need for the Saudis and Emiratis to fight Al-Qaeda on the ground. They are not eager to do so, for their own troops are not nearly as competent as the fanatical and battle-hardened members of Al Qaeda. The Saudis, as we have seen, prefer to do most of their

fighting by bombing from afar. And they do not share the American view of Al Qaeda, which is that AQAP in Yemen may be a temporarily useful ally against the Houthis, but remains a permanent menace to Unbelievers. The fact that Saudi and Emirati commanders allow the AQAP soldiers to withdraw unopposed from an area, with their weapons, while giving them large sums to boot, furthers the perception, among the troops of the Saudi-led coalition, that AQAP is not as threatening as the Americans insist. Second, such arrangements strengthen Al Qaeda, for the large sums provided if its fighters agree to withdraw from certain areas can pay for both more weapons and soldiers. Third, Al Qaeda has become – as the Americans now realize, to their chagrin – a de facto ally for both the Saudis and the Emiratis, as it battles their common enemy, the Houthis. It has even supplied volunteers to fight alongside Saudi and Emirati forces.

The Americans have known that the Saudis and Emiratis have been un-eager to take on Al Qaeda, but the full extent of their collaboration with AQAP has until now been under-appreciated in Washington. If AQAP in Yemen continues to grow in size, and with the cash infusions from the Saudis and Emiratis helping it to buy more, and more lethal, weapons, it will emerge even more menacing, assuming that the Houthis are eventually defeated, and AQAP again turns its attention to fighting the Western Unbelievers. And how likely is it that Saudis and Emiratis, with the Houthis defeated, would – with hundreds of AQAP members in their ranks – then turn on AQAP forces in Yemen? Isn't it more likely that they will leave the forces of AQAP in place to make sure that the Houthis do not re-emerge in Yemen, perhaps hiring them to guard the southern marches to Saudi Arabia. Good for them, perhaps, but bad for us.

Is it really so important to American interests that the Houthis be defeated, and the Iranians be forced to retreat entirely from Yemen? Wouldn't it make more sense, from our

point of view, for this intra-Muslim war in Yemen to continue for as long as possible, using up men, money, materiel, and morale on both sides? We should want both Iran and Saudi Arabia to continue fighting, directly or through proxies, in Yemen, for many years to come. Some may think we have a dog in this fight, but our dog is the fight itself. Ideally this proxy war would be like the war between Iran and Iraq that went on for eight years (1980-1988), and during that time used up the aggressive energies of both parties. In what their clerics teach and preach about the Infidel, there is not much to choose between the Iranians and the Saudis. The only difference is that Saudi Arabia now has a mediagenic Crown Prince, a master at presenting himself as an "exciting young reformer," waiting in the wings to take over from King Salman, even though it's mostly a cosmetic change, while the Iranians, less adept at public relations than the Saudi Crown Prince, offer only the same dull hatred, from the same ayatollahs, and the same Revolutionary Guard generals, with no hint of any modification in their hostility to the West.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have put so much of their prestige on the line in this war in Yemen, which has already gone on for three years, that neither side is likely to back down. The Saudis simply cannot tolerate what they understandably fear would be, should the Houthis prevail, an Iranian outpost running threateningly along much of their southern border. The Iranian government has been pleased with the outcome in Syria, where victory for the Shi'a government of Bashar al-Assad is within sight, partly because of aid from Iran and Iranian-supported Hezbollah. Flush with that victory, Iran cannot now afford to be seen to lose to the hated Saudis in Yemen. It would undo the significance of their Syrian triumph. They have to keep on supporting their fellow Shi'a in Yemen, even if it means introducing their own troops. If the Americans end their own military involvement in Yemen, victory will remain elusive for the Saudi-led coalition. The Houthis have proven remarkably resilient, even under repeated Saudi bombing. The

conflict remains open-ended. And that's just what we should want. We ought to welcome such quagmires for Muslim countries that do not wish us, or other Unbelievers, well. We need not try to hasten defeat or victory for either side. Let Yemen become a tarbaby for both Iran and Saudi Arabia. And devoutly wish that that war should continue for a long, long time.

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