

Yemen, the United States, and Al-Qaida

By Stephen Zunes

There has been increasing attention on Yemen as the possible next major focus in the U.S. campaign against terrorism. Yemeni government forces have begun a crackdown against suspected Al-Qaida members and supporters, and a number of armed clashes have ensued. This comes just weeks after the November 26th meeting in Washington between President George W. Bush and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in which the Yemeni leader promised cooperation in the struggle against terrorism and President Bush promised additional security assistance to support that effort.

Yemen has almost as large a population as Saudi Arabia, yet lacks much in the way of natural resources. Indeed, it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite this, the Saudis have attacked Yemen on several occasions along their disputed border, seizing one of the very few small oil fields under Yemeni control. Despite this rather brazen act of greed by the world's largest oil producer and the widespread discrimination and repression against Yemeni migrant workers within Saudi Arabia, Washington has generally sided with the Saudis in their ongoing disputes with this poor republic on the southwestern corner of the Arabian peninsula.

The country was divided into North and South Yemen until 1990. South Yemen received its independence from Great Britain in 1967 after years of armed anti-colonial resistance, joining the British colony of Aden and the British protectorate of South Arabia. Declaring itself the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, it became the Arab world's only Marxist-Leninist state and developed close ties with the Soviet Union. As many as 300,000 South Yemenis fled to the north in the years following independence.

North Yemen, independent since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, became

embroiled in a bloody civil war during the 1960s between Saudi-backed royalist forces and Egyptian-backed republican forces. The republican forces eventually triumphed, though political instability, military coups, assassinations, and periodic armed uprisings continued. In both countries, ancient tribal and modern ideological divisions made control of the armed forces virtually impossible. Major segments of the armies would periodically disintegrate, with soldiers bringing their weapons home with them. Lawlessness and chaos have been common for decades, with tribes regularly shifting loyalties in both their internal feuds and their alliances with their governments. Many tribes have been in a permanent state of war for years and almost every male adolescent and adult routinely carries a rifle.

In 1979, in one of the more absurd episodes of the cold war, a minor upsurge in fighting along the former border led to a major U.S. military mobilization in response to what was depicted by the Carter administration as a Soviet-sponsored act of international aggression. In March of that year, South Yemeni forces, in support of North Yemeni guerrillas, shelled some North Yemeni government positions. In response, President Carter ordered the aircraft carrier *Constellation* and a flotilla of warships to the Arabian Sea as a show of force. Bypassing congressional approval, the administration rushed nearly \$499 million worth of modern weaponry to North Yemen, including 64 M-60 tanks, 70 armored personnel carriers, and 12 F-5E aircraft. Included were an estimated 400 American advisers and 80 Taiwanese pilots to pilot the sophisticated warplanes that no Yemeni knew how to fly.

This reaction led to widespread international criticism, given that the Soviets were apparently unaware of the border clashes and it appeared to be a gross overreaction to a local conflict.

Indeed, the fighting died down within a couple of weeks. Development groups were particularly critical of this U.S. attempt to send sophisticated weaponry to a country with some of the highest rates of infant mortality, chronic disease, and illiteracy in the world.

The communist regime in South Yemen collapsed not long after a fratricidal conflict led to rival factions of the Politburo and Central Committee killing each other and their supporters by the thousands. With the southern leadership decimated, the two countries merged in May 1990, creating a democratic constitution which gave Yemen one of the most genuinely representative governments in the region.

When Yemen, serving as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, voted against the U.S.-led effort to authorize the use of force against Iraq to drive the country's military from Kuwait, a U.S. representative was overheard declaring to the Yemeni ambassador that it was "the most expensive vote you have ever cast." The United States immediately withdrew \$70 million in foreign aid to Yemen while dramatically increasing aid to neighboring dictatorships that supported the war effort.

Ideological and regional clan-based rivalries led to a civil war in 1994, with the south seceding. Ironically, despite being led by some former communists, the Saudis actually supported the secessionists as an effort to destroy what they saw as a dangerous democratic experiment on their southern border. However, northern

forces succeeded in forcefully reuniting the country within months.

Banditry and lawlessness continues to be widespread in rural areas. There has been a series of kidnappings of Westerners in recent years, though these have been more for ransom than for political reasons and—with one tragic exception—all have been released unharmed.

Also in recent years, the United States has raised concerns about major operations by the Al-Qaida network within Yemen's porous borders. Many Yemenis participated in the U.S.-supported anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan during the 1980s, becoming radicalized by the experience and developing links with Osama bin Laden, a Saudi whose father comes from a Yemeni family. In October 2000, the U.S. Navy ship *Cole* was attacked by Al-Qaida terrorists while in the Yemeni port of Aden, killing seventeen American sailors. Various clan and tribal loyalties to Bin Laden's family have led to some support within Yemen for the exiled Al-Qaida leader in the face of U.S. attacks this fall, even among those who do not necessarily support his reactionary interpretation of Islam or his terrorist tactics.

A moderate Islamist Party serves as a junior member of Yemen's coalition government. Yemen serves as an example of how Islamist movements will tend toward moderation when allowed to organize openly, in contrast to countries where repression can lead to violence and radicalization. The presence of a large number of Al-Qaida members and sympathiz-

ers within the country is a reflection not of government support or complicity, but the general lawlessness of this impoverished society, where clan and tribe often carry more authority than the state. Most Al-Qaida activists in Yemen are believed to be foreigners.

With the U.S. threatening direct military intervention in Yemen to root out Al-Qaida, the Yemeni government's decision to crack down may be less a matter of hoping for something from Washington in return for its cooperation, than a fear of what may happen if it does not. The Yemeni government is in a difficult bind, however. If it is unsuccessful in breaking up the terrorist cells, the likely U.S. military intervention would probably result in armed resistance and a bloody counterinsurgency campaign by foreign forces. If the government casts too wide a net, however, it risks tribal rebellion and other civil unrest for what will be seen as unjustifiable repression at the behest of a Western power and a threat to the country's shaky experiment with political pluralism. Either way, it would only increase support for extremist elements, which both the U.S. and Yemeni governments want to see destroyed.

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