

Yemen: The Latest U.S. Battleground

The United States may be on the verge of involvement in yet another counterinsurgency war which, as is the case in Iraq and Afghanistan, may make a bad situation even worse. The attempted Christmas Day bombing of a Northwest Airlines flight by a Nigerian man was apparently planned in Yemen. There were alleged ties between the perpetrator of the Ft. Hood massacre and a radical Yemeni cleric, and an ongoing U.S.-backed Yemeni military offensive against al-Qaeda have all focused U.S. attention on that country.

Yemen has almost as large a population as Saudi Arabia, but differently lacks much in the way of natural resources. What little oil the country has is rapidly being depleted. Indeed, Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per-capita income of less than \$600 per year. More than 40 percent of the population is unemployed and the economic situation is increasingly deteriorating for most Yemenis as a result of a U.S.-backed structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

The country is desperate for assistance in sustainable economic development. The vast majority of U.S. aid delivered to the country, however, has been in the form of military assets. The limited economic assistance made available has been of dubious effectiveness and has largely gone through corrupt government channels.

Al-Qaeda's Rise

The United States has long been concerned about the presence of al-Qaeda operatives within Yemen's porous borders, particularly since the recent unification of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of the terrorist network. Thousands of 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. Various tribal loyalties to bin Laden's family have led to some support within Yemen for the exiled al-Qaeda leader, even among those who do not necessarily support his reactionary interpretation of Islam or his terrorist tactics. Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis have served as migrant laborers in neighboring Saudi Arabia. There, exposure to the hardline Wahhabi interpretation of Islam dominant in that country combined with widespread repression and discrimination has led to further radicalization.

In October 2000, al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the U.S. Navy ship Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden, killing 17 American sailors. This led to increased cooperation between U.S. and Yemeni military and intelligence, including a series of U.S. missile attacks against suspected al-Qaeda operatives.

Currently, hardcore al-Qaeda terrorists in Yemen — many of whom are foreigners — probably number no more than 200. But they are joined by roughly 2,000 battle-hardened Yemeni militants who have served time in Iraq fighting U.S. occupation forces. The swelling of al-Qaeda's ranks by veterans of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Iraqi insurgency has led to the rise of a substantially larger and more extreme generation of fighters, who have ended the uneasy truce between Islamic militants and the Yemeni government.

Opponents of the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq correctly predicted that the inevitable insurgency would create a new generation of radical jihadists, comparable to the one that emerged following the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the Bush administration and its congressional supporters — including then-senators Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton — believed that a U.S. takeover of Iraq was more important than avoiding the risk of creating of a hotbed of anti-American terrorism. Ironically, President Obama is relying on Biden and Clinton — as well as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, another supporter of the U.S. invasion and occupation — to help us get out of this mess they helped create.

Not a Failed State

Yemen is one of the most complex societies in the world, and any kind of overreaction by the United States — particularly one that includes a strong military component — could be disastrous. Bringing in U.S. forces or increasing the number of U.S. missile strikes would likely strengthen the size and radicalization of extremist elements. Instead of recognizing the strong and longstanding Yemeni tradition of respecting tribal autonomy, U.S. officials appear to be misinterpreting this lack of central government control as evidence of a “failed state.” The U.S. approach has been to impose central control by force, by a large-scale counterinsurgency strategy.

Such a military response could result in an ever-wider insurgency, however. Indeed, such overreach by the government is what largely prompted the Houthi rebellion in the northern part of the country, led by adherents of the Zaydi branch of Shia Islam. The United States has backed a brutal crackdown by Yemeni and Saudi forces in the Houthi region, largely accepting exaggerated claims of Iranian support for the rebellion. There is also a renewal of secessionist activity in the formerly independent south. These twin threats are largely responsible for delay in the Yemeni government’s response to the growing al-Qaeda presence in their country.

With the United States threatening more direct military intervention in Yemen to root out al-Qaeda, the Yemeni government’s crackdown may be less a matter of hoping for something 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 doesn’t break up the terrorist cells, the likely U.S. military intervention would probably result in a greatly expanded armed resistance. 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. Either way, it would likely increase support for extremist elements, which both the U.S. and Yemeni governments want destroyed.

For this reason, most Western experts on Yemen agree that increased U.S. intervention carries serious risks. This would not only result in a widespread armed backlash within Yemen. Such military intervention by the United States in yet another Islamic country in the name of “anti-terrorism” would likely strengthen Islamist militants elsewhere as well.

Cold War Pawn

As with previous U.S. military interventions, most Americans have little understanding of the targeted country or its history.

Yemen was divided for most of the 20th century. South Yemen, which received its independence from Great Britain in 1967 after years of armed anti-colonial resistance, resulted from a merger between 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 have made control of these disparate armed forces virtually impossible. Major segments of the national 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 the Carter administration called a Soviet-sponsored act of international aggression. In March of that year, South Yemeni forces, in support of some North Yemeni guerrillas, shelled some North Yemeni government positions. In response, 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 for the sophisticated warplanes that no Yemeni knew how to fly.

This gross overreaction to a local conflict led to widespread international criticism. Indeed, the Soviets were apparently unaware of the border clashes and the fighting died down within a couple of weeks. Development groups were particularly critical of this U.S. attempt to send such expensive high-tech 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 in the 1980s, when rival factions of the Politburo and Central Committee killed each other and their supporters by the thousands. With the southern leadership decimated, the two countries merged in May 1990. The newly united country's democratic constitution gave Yemen one of the most genuinely representative governments in the region.

Later in 1990, when serving as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Yemen voted against the U.S.-led effort to authorize the use of force against Iraq to drive its occupation forces from Kuwait. A U.S. representative was overheard declaring to the Yemeni ambassador, "That was the most expensive 'no' vote you ever cast." The United States immediately withdrew \$70 million in foreign aid to Yemen while dramatically increasing aid to neighboring dictatorships that supported the U.S.-led war effort. Over the next several years, apparently upset with the dangerous precedent of a democratic Arab neighbor, the U.S.-backed regime in Saudi Arabia engaged in a series of attacks against Yemen along its disputed border.

Renewed Violence and Repression

In 1994, ideological and regional clan-based rivalries led to a brief civil war, with the south temporarily seceding and the government mobilizing some of the jihadist veterans of the Afghan war to fight the leftist rebellion.

After crushing the southern secessionists, the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh became increasingly authoritarian. U.S. support resumed and aid increased. Unlike most U.S. allies in the region, direct elections for the president and parliament have continued, but they have hardly been free or fair. Saleh officially received an unlikely 94 percent of the vote in the 1999 election. And in the most recent election, in 2006, government and police were openly pushing for Saleh's re-election amid widespread allegations of voter intimidation, ballot-rigging, vote-buying, and registration fraud. Just two days before the vote, Saleh announced the arrest on "terrorism" charges a campaign official of his leading opponent. Since that time, human rights abuses and political repression — including unprecedented attacks on independent media — have increased dramatically.

Obama was elected president as the candidate who promised change, including a shift away from the foreign policy that had led to such disastrous policies in Iraq and elsewhere. In Yemen, his administration appears to be pursuing the same short-sighted tactics as its predecessors: support of a repressive and autocratic regime, pursuit of military solutions to complex social and political conflicts, and reliance on failed counterinsurgency doctrines.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen represents a genuine threat. However, any military action should be Yemeni-led and targeted only at the most dangerous terrorist cells. We must also press the Yemeni government to become more democratic and less corrupt, in order to gain the support needed to suppress dangerous armed elements. In the long term, the United States should significantly increase desperately needed development aid for the poorest rural communities that have served as havens for radical Islamists. Such a strategy would be far more effective than drone attacks, arms transfers, and counterinsurgency.