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How the U.S. Contributed to Yemen's Crisis

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4/20/2015

As a Saudi-led military coalition continues to pound rebel targets in Yemen, the country is plunging into a humanitarian crisis. Civilian casualties are mounting.

With U.S. logistical support, the Saudis are attempting to re-instate the country's exiled government — which enjoys the backing of the West and the Sunni Gulf monarchies — in the face of a military offensive by Houthi rebels from northern Yemen.

None of this had to be.

Not long ago — at the height of the Arab Spring in 2011 — a broad-based, nonviolent, pro-democracy movement in Yemen rose up against the U.S.-backed government of dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. If Washington and Saudi Arabia had allowed this coalition to come to power, the tragic events unfolding in Yemen could have been prevented.

The movement had forged an impressive degree of unity among the various tribal, regional, sectarian, and ideological groups that took part in the pro-democracy protests, which included mass marches, sit-ins, and many other forms of nonviolent civil resistance. Leaders of prominent tribal coalitions — as well as the Houthis now rebelling against the government — publicly supported the popular insurrection, prompting waves of tribesmen to leave their guns at home and head to the capital to take part in the movement.

These tribesmen, along with the hundreds of thousands of city dwellers on the streets, were encouraged to maintain nonviolent discipline, even in the face of government snipers and other provocations that led to the deaths of hundreds of unarmed protesters.

The Obama administration, however, was more concerned about maintaining stability in the face of growing Al-Qaeda influence in rural areas. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates acknowledged that Washington had not planned for an era without Saleh, who had ruled the country for more than three and a half decades. As one former ambassador to Yemen put it in March 2011, "For right now, he's our guy."

"That's How It Is"

Though the pro-democracy movement largely maintained a remarkably rigorous nonviolent discipline in its protests, some opposition tribes and rebel army officers added an armed component to the resistance movement. An assassination attempt against Saleh that June forced the severely wounded president to leave for Saudi Arabia for extended medical treatments.

John Brennan, Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser and future CIA director, visited Saleh in a Saudi hospital in July and encouraged him to sign a deal transferring power. Not only was the mission unsuccessful in convincing Saleh to resign, however, the regime — in a continuation of its efforts to use Saleh's close relationship with the United States to reinforce his standing — broadcast images of the surprisingly healthy-looking president and emphasized his statesmanlike demeanor in meeting with a top U.S. official as a signal of continued U.S. support for the regime.

As the pro-democracy struggle tried desperately to keep the movement nonviolent in the aftermath of the assassination attempt and a growing armed rebellion, the United States escalated its own violence by launching unprecedented air strikes in Yemen, ostensibly targeting Al-Qaeda

cells. The Pentagon acknowledged, however, that Al-Qaeda operatives often intermingled with other anti-government rebels.

Indeed, U.S. policy allowed the CIA to target individuals for drone strikes without verifying their identity, resulting in some armed Yemeni tribes and others allied with pro-democracy forces apparently being attacked under the mistaken impression they were al-Qaeda. This scenario was made all the more likely by U.S. reliance on the Yemeni regime for much of its intelligence in determining targets. Complicating the situation still further during this critical period of ongoing protests, teams of U.S. military and intelligence operatives were continuing to operate out of a command post in the Yemeni capital.

It's entirely possible, then, that the Yemeni government may have used the pretext of al-Qaeda to convince the U.S. government to take out its rivals.

U.S. officials insisted that the violence between the pro- and anti-regime elements of the Yemeni armed forces did not involve U.S.-trained Yemeni special operations forces, and Brennan initially maintained that the unrest had not affected U.S.-Yemeni security cooperation. By the end of the year, however, he acknowledged that the "political tumult" had led these U.S.-trained units "to be focused on their positioning for internal political purposes as opposed to doing all they can against AQAP."

That meant that Yemeni forces trained by the United States for the purpose of fight al-Qaeda were instead directly participating in the squelching of a democratic uprising. "Rather than fighting AQAP," an exposé in *The Nation* noted, "these U.S.-backed units — created and funded with the explicit intent to be used only for counterterrorism operations — redeployed to Sanaa to protect the collapsing regime from its own people."

According to the well-connected Yemeni political analyst Abdul Ghani al-Iryani, these U.S.-backed units exist "mostly for the defense of the regime." For example, rather than fighting a key battle against Al-Qaida forces in Abyan, al-Iryani told reporter Jeremy Scahill, "They are still here [in Sanaa], protecting the palace. That's how it is."

"Keeping Enough of the Regime Intact"

At the end of July 2011, despite the ongoing repression of pro-democracy forces, a congressional committee approved more than $120 million in aid to the Yemeni government, primarily in military and related security assistance. The aid was conditional on the State Department certifying that the Yemeni government was cooperating sufficiently in fighting terrorism, but there were no conditions regarding democracy or human rights.

As the repression increased, U.S. officials praised the Yemeni regime's cooperation with U.S.-led war efforts, with Brennan declaring in September, "I can say today the counterterrorism cooperation with Yemen is better than it's been during my whole tenure."

Meanwhile, the United States and Saudi Arabia, joined by the other monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), presented a plan whereby Saleh would step down. According to the

deal, he and other top officials in the regime would be granted immunity from prosecution, and a plebiscite would be held within 60 days to ratify the transfer of power to Saleh's vice-president, Major General Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Pro-democracy protesters largely rejected this U.S.-Saudi mandate for Hadi. It soon became apparent that despite occasional calls for Saleh to step down — such as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice's strong statement in early August — the Obama administration was deferring to its autocratic GCC allies on the peninsula to oversee a political transition.

In mid-August, opposition activists formed a National Council, which they hoped would form a provisional government until multiparty elections could be held. It consisted of 143 members representing a broad coalition of protest leaders, tribal sheiks, South Yemen separatists, opposition military commanders, former members of the governing party, and the Houthi militia representing the Zaydi minority in the north.

The Saudis and the U.S. government, however, kept pushing for Saleh to transfer power to his vice president. Supporters of the National Council denounced these foreign efforts as "only a plot to foil the revolution."

Following a meeting with Hadi in September, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman said, "We continue to believe that an immediate, peaceful, and orderly transition is in the best interest of the Yemeni people. …We urge all sides to engage in dialogue that peacefully moves Yemen forward." Pro-democracy protesters pushed ahead in their campaign of civil resistance, insisting that the National Council representing a broad array Yemenis not be circumvented.

Shortly thereafter, government security forces fired into crowds during a massive pro-democracy protest in Sanaa. Dozens of protesters were killed and hundreds more wounded.

The U.S. embassy, however, appeared to blame both sides for the killings, saying the United States "regrets the deaths and injuries of many people" and calling "upon all parties to exercise restraint. In particular, we call on the parties to refrain from actions that provoke further violence." Similarly, U.S. ambassador Gerald Feierstein criticized a peaceful pro-democracy march from Taiz to Sanaa in December as "provocative."

Soon afterwards, 13 more pro-democracy demonstrators were killed by government security forces, leading many activists to accuse the ambassador of preemptively giving Saleh permission to shoot civilians. *Time* magazine, summarizing the view of pro-democracy activists, noted, "The early intercession of foreign powers with a transition plan distracted attention from popular demands, they say, and allowed the president to cite ongoing talks in delaying his resignation. Many Yemenis believe the key interest guiding the U.S. has been keeping enough of the regime intact to combat al-Qaeda, and that this has distorted the outcome."

"This Revolution Has Been Stabbed in the Back"

Eventually, U.S. officials bowed to international concerns and put forward a threat of United Nations sanctions against the regime, which finally forced Saleh to formally resign.

In January 2012, the Obama administration allowed Saleh into the United States for medical treatment, rejecting calls for his prosecution. U.S. officials believed that doing so was the best way of finally forcing him to step down as president and finally make a peaceful transition of power possible.

Pro-democracy activists in Yemen were outraged.

Protest leader Tawakkol Karman, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the previous month, called on the United States to "hold Saleh accountable." She also observed, "There shouldn't be any place for tyrants in the free world. This is against all international agreements, laws, and covenants. The entry of Ali Saleh into America is an insult to the values of the American people. This was a mistake by the administration, and I am confident he will be met with wide disapproval in America. This will tarnish the reputation of America among all those who support the Arab Spring revolutions."

Saleh returned to Yemen the following month to oversee the transfer of power to his vice-president and has remained the country ever since. Now, he's making a bid to retake control, having formed an alliance with his former Houthi adversaries and, with the support of some allied army units, playing a critical role in their rise to power.

This has greatly angered the pro-democracy movement, whose leaders twice petitioned the Obama administration for support but were rejected in favor of negotiations led by the Saudi regime and other autocratic GCC monarchies. This greatly set back the hopes for a genuine democratic revolution and alienated the very liberal youth who would otherwise be the West's most likely Yemeni allies.

As Francisco Martin-Royal, an expert on counter-radicalization in the region, wrote at that time, "The lack of U.S. support means that these young men and women, who effectively ousted Saleh and continue to call for democratic institutions, have broadly failed to have a voice in the formation of Yemen's new government or have their legitimate concerns be taken seriously."

He continued, "Yemen's pro-democracy activists largely blame the U.S. for failing to live up to its rhetoric — a disillusionment that potentially makes them vulnerable to recruitment by other well-organized forces that are against the existing regime, namely extremist groups like AQAP and separatist movements. From their perspective, the only real changes in Yemen — the establishment of a semi-autonomous region by the Houthis and the propagation of sharia law in various cities in southern Yemen by Ansar al-Sharia — have come through violence."

U.S. Ambassador Feierstein kept pushing the vague idea of a "national dialogue" among elites and criticized ongoing protests within the government institutions, particularly military units, on the grounds that "the problems have to be resolved through this process of dialogue and negotiations." By contrast, he castigated the pro-democracy activists, saying "We've also been

clear in saying we don't believe that the demonstrations are the place where Yemen's problems will be solved."

In February 2012, President Obama publicly endorsed Hadi, claiming — despite Hadi's service as vice-president in a repressive regime and his distinction as the only candidate in the subsequent plebiscite — that his subsequent election was "a model for how peaceful transition in the Middle East can occur."

The pro-democracy movement thus largely gave up on the United States, with prominent young pro-democracy activist Khaled al-Anesi fuming, "This revolution has been stabbed in the back."

What Could Have Been?

This marginalization of Yemeni civil society — which had struggled for so many months nonviolently for democracy — and Washington's failure to accept the broad-based National Council to head an interim government created the conditions that led to the dramatic resurgence of the armed Houthi uprising, which until last year had only operated in the Zaydi heartland in the far northern part of the country.

The Houthis were helped along by the Hadi government's lack of credibility, ongoing corruption and ineptitude at all levels of government, a mass resignation of Yemen's cabinet, and controversial proposals for constitutional change. They also received support from armed groups allied with the former Saleh dictatorship, which enabled the Houthis — who represent only a minority of Yemenis — to nevertheless emerge as the most powerful force in Yemen. They surprised the world by seizing the capital of Sanaa in August, consolidating power in January, and subsequently expanding southward.

Most Yemenis strongly oppose the Houthi militia and, in Taiz and other parts of the country, have challenged their armed advance through massive civil resistance and other nonviolent means. Yet the Houthis have actually expanded their areas of control in some key regions, even where they've faced armed resistance and Saudi air strikes.

It would be much too simplistic to blame the current crisis in Yemen entirely on the United States. However, one still has to wonder: If instead of allying with Saudi autocrats to install another strongman in the name of stability, Washington had supported that country's nonviolent pro-democracy movement, what might have been?