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Saudi Arabia's Yemen Strategy: Divide and Destroy

A Dire Situation

by MICHAEL HORTON

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“Donkey breeders and solar panel dealers are the only one’s making any money at the moment,” says Salim, a resident of Sana’a. Salim is eluding to the fact that most of Yemen, a country of 26 million, is without gasoline and electricity. “We are back to using donkeys to move supplies but I guess the solar panels are a step forward,” he says with a laugh.

While eleven weeks of airstrikes and a punitive naval blockade have laid waste to much of Yemen, most people remain resolute and what is a distinctly Yemeni sense of humor is intact. This is despite the fact that more than 2000 people have been killed, over half of which are civilians, and billions of dollars of infrastructure have been destroyed since the Saudi led “Operation Decisive Storm” began on March 25.

The World Health Organization estimates that 8.6 million Yemenis are now in urgent need of medical help as hospitals struggle to operate without medicines and without electricity. Oxfam estimates that two thirds of Yemen’s population of 26 million do not have access to clean drinking water. The streets of Yemen’s cities are choked with mountainous piles of trash due to the lack of fuel for garbage trucks. The severe conditions in Yemen could lead to a nationwide outbreak of disease.

The Saudis and their coalition partners—and this includes the US military which is providing intelligence and logistical support—have, in the space of eleven weeks, erased fifty years of progress in Yemen. Airstrikes have destroyed roads, bridges, universities, museums, historical sites, factories, and hundreds of homes and even entire villages. Yet, despite the destruction, many Yemenis are determined not to let their country become another Iraq, Syria, Libya, or Afghanistan, all of which have been on the receiving end of the disastrous interventionist foreign policies of the US and Saudi Arabia.

“Talking is the only way out of this quagmire,” explains a former Yemeni MP. “No one group in Yemen has the power to defeat the other. We have two choices: to go on fighting for the next decade and give the world another Syria, or talk. Our history favors the latter. But I don’t think our Saudi friends have any interest in letting us solve our own problems.”

There is some hope that Yemen and its people will learn from what has transpired in Syria, Libya, and Iraq and draw on their own rich traditions that favor conflict mediation and negotiated settlements. According to former UN Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, Yemen’s major factions—including both the Houthis and representatives from south Yemen—were near signing off on a power sharing agreement before Saudi led airstrikes brought the negotiations to an abrupt end.

The Zaidi Shi’a Houthis, who control much of northwest Yemen, were, before the start of Operation Decisive Storm, on relatively good terms with much of the leadership of Yemen’s various southern secessionist movements. However, partly as a result of the Saudi led aerial campaign, the Houthis went on the offensive in south Yemen, largely in order to prevent Saudi Arabia from installing and backing an alternative government in the southern port city of Aden.

The Houthis, whose membership is largely drawn from northern based tribes, are now locked in a deadly battle with southern militias who are mostly fighting for an independent south Yemen, not for the exiled government of President Hadi. Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen has not only led to the wholesale destruction of much of Yemen’s already fragile physical and social infrastructure, it has also ignited a long simmering civil war between northern and southern based forces that neither side can win.

“The Saudis bait us like dogs, pitting one side against the other,” explains a former colonel who served in the army of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). “This has always been their game in Yemen: get us to fight one another so that we’re never a threat to them. So far it has worked. The last thing that they want is for us to negotiate and unite.”

Saudi Arabia has a long history of playing all sides in Yemen. For much of the last fifty years the Saudis have maintained a largely covert program whereby leading tribal, military, and government figures in Yemen receive regular payments from the Saudi government in exchange for loyalty. While many of these men are drawn from northern Yemen, the Saudis have also, at times, supported southern based Marxist hardliners who opposed unification. However, up until the commencement of Operation Decisive Storm, Saudi policy in Yemen was largely covert and even careful. Now, with the change in leadership in the Kingdom, Saudi policy in Yemen is anything but covert or careful.

Rather than letting UN led negotiations continue, Saudi Arabia and its partners have opted for a policy whose only clear outcome looks to be the impoverishment and eventual destruction of an entire country. If the war in Yemen continues, the as yet unverified Iranian involvement with Yemen's Houthi rebels may be the least of Saudi Arabia's worries.

While Operation Decisive Storm has failed to defeat the Houthis or reinstall the exiled government of Yemeni President Hadi, it has allowed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—and now the Islamic State—to rapidly expand the territory under their control. Saudi efforts in Yemen effectively neutralized the two forces fighting AQAP and IS: the Houthis and the US equipped and trained Yemeni counter-terrorism forces. While a resurgent AQAP and IS may be useful temporary proxies in Saudi Arabia's war with the Houthis, both groups will—and in the past have—turn on the House of Saud.

In addition to indirectly enabling the expansion of AQAP and IS in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners are arming a host of disparate militias and tribal forces. The only prerequisite for receiving arms and cash is a pledge to fight the Houthis. A popular joke in Sana'a describes the latest get rich quick scheme: get a few of your friends together, claim you are the leader of an anti-Houthi militia, collect the money from Saudi Arabia, and promptly buy a qat farm in the countryside, far away from the falling bombs. Despite the dire situation, humor and hope persist.

“When the bombs stop falling, I think all sides in this conflict will return to the negotiating table,” says a long-serving Yemeni MP. “I think the Saudis know this. That's why they're still bombing us. They don't want a negotiated settlement to this conflict. But we have a history of defying invaders and going our own way. I'm hopeful we'll turn away from the abyss that we face.”