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The Empire Discovers Yemen

By Philip Giraldi

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It was another one of those Orwellian moments that have occurred so frequently over the past eight years. On January 4th Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that "... we see global implications from the war in Yemen and the ongoing efforts by al-Qaeda in Yemen to use it as a base for terrorist attacks far beyond the region." As in Orwell's *1984*, one almost expected Clinton to intone "We have always been at war with Yemen" during a two minutes of hate rally held on the White House lawn. The Clinton statement was widely reported in the media as a call to arms by the Obama Administration because Yemen has become a "global threat." The White House's identification of a new enemy was good news for those who had become concerned that the war on terror, now called overseas contingency operations, was not expanding quickly enough.

So what do we do about the central front in the fight against terrorism? It had recently moved from Iraq, where 130,000 US soldiers still sit around playing gin rummy, to Afghanistan. Soon there will be 100,000 American soldiers supplemented by even more contractors and nation builders in that unhappy land bringing democracy and freedom. If Yemen becomes the new central front, President Hamid Karzai will undoubtedly lament no longer being number one and demand a recount.

Yemen, who would have thought of Yemen as the new front? Somalia for sure, maybe Mauretania, Mali, or Chad. And it all happened because of a Christmas surprise on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit. Good thing a couple of guys in Sana'a were able to fit a confused Nigerian with an underwear bomb that failed to go off otherwise we Americans would not have been alerted to the Yemeni threat. Why, by some reports there are as many as two or three

hundred al-Qaeda supporters in the country. Time to land a couple of Marine divisions, if we had them to spare.

Yemen's sudden emergence makes you wonder a bit about the \$70 billion annual intelligence budget. I realize that they are somewhat preoccupied in dodging suicide bombers while wiping out Afghan wedding parties with hellfire missiles, but didn't they know Yemen was there? It admittedly is a bit hard to find on a map, tucked away as it is on a corner of the Arabian Peninsula, but surely there were some smart guys in Washington who knew that al-Qaeda in Yemen was doing a lot of searching in websites advertising underwear. Now that Yemen has been discovered it changes the way we should think about the security of the United States. Al-Qaeda, which only a couple of weeks ago was slinking around in caves, is suddenly possessed of infinite guile and resourcefulness. How else would those fiends incarnate have come up with an underwear suicide bomber?

And Yemen will surely be another fun imperial adventure for America's all-volunteer army. It is a country dominated by heavily armed tribesmen who are fiercely independent, frequently engaged in activities that most observers would regard as criminal, deeply conservative in religion and culture but further divided along sectarian lines, and ruled over by a highly corrupt government that is fighting both a civil war and an insurgency. Throw into the hopper crushing poverty, high unemployment, extremely rugged trackless terrain, porous borders, and security forces incapable of exercising jurisdiction outside of the capital city and it is a perfect place to spend a long vacation especially if you like to blow things up. Yemen used to export oil but it is running out and is short on water so long hot showers after a day trekking through the desert are definitely out. Of course, the Pentagon could ask Halliburton to truck some water in at \$300 per gallon. Intelligence officers who are familiar with Yemen agree that coming to grips with the country's tribesmen in an attempt to root out al-Qaeda will make Afghanistan look a Sunday stroll in Central Park.

As is frequently the case in the imperial capital city of Oz referred to as Washington, the Obamas see another Yemen that is divorced from reality. It is an opportunity for nation building, to strengthen institutions and the economy and support an ostensibly friendly government to suppress terrorism. But it doesn't take much to see what's wrong with that approach. The Yemenis themselves are fearful of the consequences of too tight an embrace by Washington and have already announced that they will accept American dollars but no foreign soldiers. They have even indicated their willingness to negotiate with al-Qaeda, a thumb in the eye for Clinton and Obama. They see gangsterism and tribalism as their greatest internal security threats, not terrorism. They know that many of the several hundred citizens who call themselves al-Qaeda are likely the grapes of wrath, bitter fruit from Guantánamo Bay, where the United States successfully confined Yemenis who were completely innocent, radicalizing them and turning them into terrorism proselytizers upon their return home.

As if picking on Yemen is not enough, the US is also redefining its relationships with a basket of fourteen countries that are defined as "state sponsors of terrorism and countries of interest." Citizens of those countries will be required to undergo special security screening that might include invasive body and cavity searches. Twelve of the countries in question are overwhelmingly Muslim. One is half Muslim (Nigeria) and one is communist (Cuba). The

inclusion of Cuba is bizarre as there has never been a suicide bomber from Cuba but it reveals the mindset of the Obama Administration – let's make it look like we're doing something even if it is completely ridiculous and irrelevant. And President Obama is so good at describing it all with a sincere face, reminiscent of the beefsteak mine bonds salesman J. Frothingham Waterbury in the W.C. Fields movie *The Bank Dick*, "I want to show you I'm honest in the worst way."

The use of nationality as a defining issue in airport security screening is unprecedented. It will be seen as an insult to the citizens of the countries involved, implying that they are all somehow being regarded as terrorists, and will further harden already negative views about the United States. It also is illogical as many of the world's most radicalized young men carry European passports. And travel by air will get much, much more unpleasant. Broadening the security sweep to include any and all travelers from certain countries will create difficulties for the security system and for air travel in general. This is already being seen in Europe, where the demands from the Transportation Security Administration and the Obama White House have effectively created a two tier security system which no one has quite figured out how to implement. It is also creating a backlash in the Muslim world, where media reports emphasize the anti-Islamic message being sent by the new procedures, suggesting that the new administration in Washington is again signaling its intent to engage in conflict the entire Muslim world, knocking the countries off like dominoes, one by one. The lesson of Guantánamo – i.e. that you will turn innocent people into terrorists by treating them as such – is also being ignored.

The Obama Administration needs to step back from what it is doing. It must first acknowledge that it doesn't have a clue what is going on in Yemen or in most other places. It should stop the fearmongering and recognize that Yemen is not a threat to the United States, must realize that it will not fix the country through the addition of American soldiers, and that the best thing to do when dealing with a complex and poorly understood situation is to leave it alone. Regarding airport and airline security, Washington must stop feeding the panic. It should fix the failure to communicate and other disconnects in the system by repairing what must be repaired and retaining what works while maybe firing a few useless bureaucrats along the way to show that it is serious. Increasing the size of government and buying billions of dollars of expensive new equipment that doesn't work while expanding no-fly lists and hiring more snoopers is no solution. Washington must establish workable and effective security standards that apply to everyone without appearing to accuse entire nations of being prone to terrorism. If it does all that, the ability of Americans and others to travel safely will be improved and the United States will avoid yet another tragic involvement in a faraway land where there is no vital national interest at stake.