



Developments in Yemen and American Strategic Calculations

Imad K. Harb

February 8, 2017

It has been three years since Yemen's National Dialogue Conference concluded its work to set the stage for a constitution for a six-region federated state. This ended a tortuous, though inconclusive, phase of transition as part of the wave of "Arab Spring" revolutions for change. It is also almost two full years since Saudi Arabia led an Arab military coalition to help overturn what became a full-fledged illegitimate takeover of the state by an alliance of Houthi rebels and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. And yet, Yemen remains far from overcoming what is simultaneously a national crisis threatening its unity, a humanitarian disaster of formidable proportions, and a security challenge to the stability of Saudi Arabia and its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The situation also compromises American interests in the Middle East.

In fact, the latest [raid](#) by American special operations forces on an Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) base and other attacks over the last couple of months are indications that the United States still politically and militarily considers the country to be an important part of its security architecture in the region. This is obviously a continuation of a policy begun since the early days of the George W. Bush Administration following the attack on the USS Cole in Aden's harbor in October 2000. But now, the Trump Administration's bellicosity about fighting "radical Islamic terrorism" and its escalating rhetoric against Iran, which the administration believes is supporting the Yemeni Houthi rebels, raise speculations as to whether the United States may contemplate being more involved in Yemeni affairs so that it can assure a fortuitous outcome that better serves its national interests.

Yemen Today

To be sure, the Yemeni debacle was never thought of as limited to domestic ramifications of conflict or to neighboring Arab responses since, like other crises in the region, internal conditions feed, and feed on, regional and international fast-moving developments. From the competition for advantage between Saudi Arabia—and with it, other members of the GCC—and Iran, to the battle against AQAP, and to the country's strategic location astride one of the world's premier trade and security routes, Yemen is likely to remain a serious cause for concern for regional and international players for a long time to come. Indeed, after civil war and outside intervention the country has arguably become a wasteland demanding immediate regional and international attention.

A brief look at the military, social, and political status quo in Yemen paints a picture of very dark conditions for its 27 million [inhabitants](#). Militarily, and despite some recent advances by the forces

loyal to the internationally recognized President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi—in coordination with the Saudi Arabia-led coalition—the war has simply dragged on for far too long. Military operations have destroyed a large segment of the country’s poor infrastructure, important state institutions and venues, military installations and equipment, seaport facilities, and other targets. Currently, battles rage along the shores of the Red Sea where Hadi’s national army and tribal allies have [reached](#) the strategic seaport city of Mokha, an operation that limits the Houthis’ ability to smuggle arms and munitions; in the central regions of Taiz and Maarib close to the capital Sanaa; and along the Yemeni-Saudi Arabian border in the north. The Houthis have launched missile attacks on Saudi Arabian army positions and population centers—one even [targeted](#) the holy city of Mecca—eliciting direct responses from Saudi Arabian forces against Houthi areas along the border.

Socially, the war has had a devastating impact on the humanitarian situation of millions of Yemenis. By August 2016, [at least](#) 10,000 Yemenis had died, according to Jamie McGoldrick, the United Nations’ humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, while three million were displaced from their homes, 14 million were in need of food, and seven million suffered from “food insecurity.” The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) [reported](#) this past January that 3.3 million Yemenis, a figure that includes 2.2 million children, suffer from acute malnutrition and that 63,000 children died in 2016 from “preventable causes often linked” to it. Last December, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) [warned](#) of a “humanitarian catastrophe” in Yemen while a January [report](#) from Doctors Without Borders stated that the health care system in the entire country has been devastated and is “under siege.”

But what has caused the military and social deterioration in Yemen has been the failure to arrive at acceptable political compromises between President Hadi’s government and the Houthi-Saleh alliance. After nearly three years of engagement, the mission of the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, has proven to be mired in controversy and competing understandings and interpretations. As a mediator, Cheikh Ahmed has [tried](#) to accommodate myriad domestic and regional interests, only to discover that the Yemeni conflict is both borne out of internal divisions within Yemen’s tribal and elite structures and affected by the policies of regional actors. The main obstacle, however, remains the disagreement on the nature of the future state. A stalemate may thus be the operative word for a considerable period, a situation that may very well lead to the [partition](#) of the country.

Strategic Calculations for the United States

Washington’s direct involvement in Yemen has always been a bad policy prescription given the country’s history of discord and conflict. The above-mentioned conditions are additional warning signs against any ill-considered plunge into the country. Yet other strategic calculations related to Yemen may weigh in on the Trump Administration as it formulates what has thus far been an absent agenda for its objectives in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab waterway, the Gulf of Aden,

and the Arabian Sea. The Yemeni government's latest [decision](#) to end its permission for American Special Forces ground operations only adds complication to American policy and further caution about getting involved in the country.

First, the United States cannot abandon its fight against what it considers the most dangerous branch of the al-Qaeda franchise. Although AQAP and its local affiliate, Ansar al-Shari`a, have controlled territory in Yemen for a long time, continuing to do so should obviously be a source of great concern for American security officials. At different points during the last decade, AQAP has controlled important real estate along the strategic strip of southern Yemen and thus menaced trade routes and naval operations. It now continues to control areas of Abyan Governorate adjacent to Aden and is a threat to military operations by Yemen's national army in Taiz and Maarib. Recently, and highlighting the complexity of the government's problems, Yemeni soldiers [withdrew](#) from three additional towns in the governorate, which AQAP was quick to occupy.

But what may comprise a serious challenge to both the Yemeni government's legitimacy and sustainability and the American security establishment's desire to fight terrorism in Yemen is the reality of the role played by AQAP in current Yemeni politics. As the International Crisis Group's April Longley Alley has [pointed out](#) recently, AQAP is seen by many in Yemen through the sectarian lens through which much of what goes on in the country and the Middle East filters. Indeed, AQAP gains from its propaganda as a Sunni organization, ready to support the war against the Zaidi (Shiite) Houthis, and thus may quickly become an embarrassment to the Yemeni government and to Saudi Arabian and American policies in the country. Neither will President Donald Trump's Executive Order imposing a temporary travel ban on Yemenis entering the United States—as well as nationals from five other Arab countries and Iran—help distance some disenchanted Yemenis from radicalism or assist American foreign policy objectives in the country.

Second, given the Trump Administration's stridency against Iran, which the White House sees as a major supporter of the Yemeni Houthis, it is hard to separate US policy prescriptions in Yemen from the overall stance against the Islamic Republic. While President Trump has since the early days of his presidential campaign decried all things Iranian, pivotal figures in his administration have registered their visceral, negative, and belligerent attitudes toward Tehran. Briefly, National Security Advisor Michael Flynn [issued](#) a demarche against Iran and its behavior on February 2nd, after it tested a ballistic missile, putting it “on notice”—an obvious euphemism that points to potential unpleasant future conflagrations. After reiterating Flynn's refrain, President Trump [imposed](#) new sanctions on 25 Iranian entities and individuals. Secretary of Defense James Mattis [considers](#) Iran to be the most serious challenge to peace and stability in the Middle East while the American Congress is enthusiastic about increasing pressure on the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, American naval assets have [not shied away](#) in the past from directly engaging the Yemeni Houthis when they challenged freedom of navigation in the Red Sea by targeting a US

Navy destroyer, the USS Mason, in October 2016; and they will not be expected to hold back from future retaliation. In January 2017, the USS Mahan [fired](#) warning shots at Iranian speedboats challenging it in the Arabian Gulf. Finally, during the same month, a British Navy-led [naval exercise](#) with American and French ships in the Gulf also pointed to an allied determination to challenge Iranian behavior there. In essence, the US-Houthi-Iran nexus will very likely be an important strategic calculation in whether, how, or when the Trump Administration sees it necessary to get more involved in Yemen.

Third, US foreign policy may not be easily conducted in the Red Sea-Arabian Gulf expanse without the continued commitment to GCC security and the ongoing coordination with the GCC states' security establishments. The Obama Administration provided needed logistical support and munitions to the Arab coalition, helping to restore legitimate authority in Sanaa, and it would be unfathomable for the Trump Administration to contemplate a change in that policy without negatively impacting its relationship with the council. The United States will continue to be the main source of military assistance to the GCC, especially now that tensions are high between Washington and Tehran and because Iran seems to be determined to develop its ballistic missile program, which GCC countries consider a serious challenge to their security.

On the other hand, while Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners may appreciate American assistance against the Houthi-Saleh alliance in Yemen, they likely would prefer for the Trump Administration to temper its strident rhetoric against Iran. In their dealings with the Islamic Republic, GCC states have developed a healthy amount of prudence that preserved peaceful, though tense, relations across the waters of the Gulf. Such caution will be of great help at least between now and the Iranian presidential elections in June, a period that will most likely witness grandstanding by Iranian hardline politicians and ideologues about the United States and the need to challenge it.

Reconfirming Old Objectives

As the Trump Administration works to put its foreign policy in order, especially in regards to the proverbial “hot spots” like Yemen, it is incumbent on it to heed the dangers associated with strident rhetoric and ill-advised policy orientation. Importantly, it would do well to remember that the United States continues to be the most consequential international player in the region extending from the Suez Canal to the Arabian Gulf, and its decisions and actions still carry considerable weight.

The Trump Administration should refrain from plunging head first in Yemen's troubles. But in trying to formulate an effective policy toward the country, the administration should consider the following strategies. It should reconfirm traditional American foreign policy objectives regarding Yemen's internal politics that affirm an emphasis on a negotiated settlement for the current crisis based on the restoration of the legitimate authority of President Hadi and the undoing of the

Houthi-Saleh coup. It should also participate in UN-led talks on the future of the Yemeni state, including political discussions of a federal structure. It further should assert its commitment to assist Hadi's government politically and economically.

It is, however, important for the administration to steer clear of linking its rhetoric about and policy toward Iran to how it conducts itself in Yemen. Despite its regional and international impacts, Yemen's predicament is first and foremost a crisis between the country's different elites; it behooves them to strive to resolve this crisis before they rely on their allies in the region. Dealing with the Houthis as Iran's lackeys or supporting President Hadi because of his good relations with Saudi Arabia will miss the nuances of intra-elite politics and would most likely not constitute a very effective or productive policy toward the future Yemen.