

Bungling in Yemen: Trump and the Cult of the Action Hero

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Rather than advancing a political solution that almost everyone agrees is the only way to solve the conflict, it seems the Trump administration's actions are just adding fuel to the fire. Adam Baron, European Council on Foreign Relations, Feb 7, 2016

The seething bickering in Washington has been going on for over a week. Was the first authorised international raid by the Trump administration, supposedly made over dinner, a success? There was little denying that the bells and blood Yemen mission in Bayda province last month was spectacularly deadly, costing the life of a US serviceman, twenty five civilians including nine children and eight women – in addition to al-Qaeda operatives.

The leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Qassim al-Rimi, did not suffer the same fate, but was happy to chortle that President Donald Trump was the “White House’s new fool.” The foolishness was compounded by revelations that a US citizen, an eight-year old girl and daughter of Anwar al-Awlaqi, was also killed.

The cleric Al-Awlaqi was slain in 2011 by a drone strike on the grounds that he was a key recruiter for al-Qaeda, making him the first US citizen to be killed by his own government without trial since the Civil War.

Even a Yemeni tribal leader was baffled at the sheer muscularity of the raid, featuring Reaper drones, helicopter gunships and elite personnel, suggesting that it would have been easier to simply bomb the place – “but it looks like Trump is trying to say ‘I’m a man of action’.” It was evident that the president had been addled by a diet of “Steven Seagal movies.”[1]

Networks were drawing up their scorecards on the mission. NPR came up with its own list, among them the death of US Navy Seal, Ryan Owens, the civilians already mentioned, and a \$90 million tilt-rotor aircraft known as an Osprey, destroyed on crash landing. “The operation, the first authorized by the Trump presidency, also raises serious questions about the planning and decision-making of the current occupant in the Oval-Office, as well as the truthfulness of information coming out of the White House” (NPR, Feb 10).

The technique of such truthfulness – the alt-fact world of tinkering, adjustments and readjustments – was as much a matter of deflection than anything else. White House press secretary Sean Spicer is fast becoming the spinner of the deflected tale and inflated ruse: instead of focusing on the mission’s heroic efforts, critics, he charged, were rubbishing the exploits of a fallen Navy Seal.

“The life of Chief Ryan Owens was done in service to his country and we owe him and his

family a great debt for the information that we received during that raid. I think any suggestion otherwise is a disservice to his courageous life and the actions that he just took. Full stop.”[2]

Impoverished Yemen has already become a pool of blood, a civil war in large part exacerbated by the continued US support for the Saudi Arabian-led operation against the Shia Houthi rebels. That particular bombing campaign has been vicious, making a point of targeting critical infrastructure (schools, roads, hospitals) along with a generous spread of holy sites.

Some 10,000 people have perished (the number is derived from an August 2016 estimate by the United Nations); millions have been displaced, joining the humanitarian queues in a global supply of refugees. Famine risks stalking the land, afflicting up to 19 million Yemenis who are said by officials to require humanitarian assistance.

Senator John McCain certainly saw few good signs in the operation, deeming it a failure. The International Crisis Group saw a gun-crazed buffoon stumbling into conflict. “The first military actions by the Trump administration in Yemen bode poorly for the prospect of smartly and effectively countering AQAP.” Even Yemen’s government-in-exile emitted mixed signals regarding the Yakla engagement, wishing to conduct a “reassessment” of the raid.

This reassessment was already taking place moments with the blood still drying. The US military’s Central Command (CENTCOM) painted a less than rosy picture despite celebrating the killing of al-Qaeda militants. “A team designated by the operational task force commander has concluded regrettably that civilian non-combatants were likely to have been killed in the midst of a firefight during a raid in Yemen on January 29. Casualties may include children.”[3]

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, initial reports that Yemeni officials had withdrawn their support for such operations was subsequently repudiated.[4] What was needed in the future, rather, was “more coordination with Yemeni authorities before any operation and there needs to be consideration for our sovereignty.”

The ingredients for a deepening of conflict exist. Michael Flynn, Trump’s national security adviser, insists that the Houthis are an Iranian proxy front, and a terrorist one, no less. The Houthis, whilst denying the full bloom link with Teheran, take issue with the US support for the Saudi operations to restore President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Add to this a range of Islamist groups of various persuasions, including the Islah Party, with deep Muslim Brotherhood links, and we have a convulsed mess that will need more than an action hero to sort out. The White House resident, imbued with the brutish spirit of Steven Seagal, will be the perfect recruitment figure for the very organisations Washington wishes to neutralise.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-trump-idUSKBN15M1HP>

[2] <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/02/spicer-anyone-who-says-yemen-raid-failed-should-apologize.html>

[3] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/admits-civilians-killed-yemen-raid-170202042531151.html>

[4] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/yemen-seeks-tighter-coordination-after-u-s-raid-1486581504>

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