

Yemen: Toward Another US Quagmire

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All the signs point to Yemen being the next target in the US-led “war on terrorism”. The Obama administration seized on the failed attempt by Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to set off a bomb on a US-bound flight on Christmas Day to dispatch the CIA and military trainers to the impoverished country. Pressure is being exerted on Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to intensify military operations against the organisation known as Al Qaeda in South Arabia.

Prominent US Democrat Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, called on Wednesday for the US to consider “a broad range of options” including air strikes, armed drones and clandestine operations in Yemen. General David Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, has urged a doubling of US military aid to the country.

The new focus on Yemen was prepared well before Abdulmutallab took off for Detroit. Sections of the American foreign policy establishment were critical of President Bush for not taking more decisive action. Obama had already been boosting military and civilian aid to Saleh’s regime. On December 17 and 24, Washington provided the intelligence for Yemeni air strikes against alleged Al Qaeda targets.

Last November the Center for a New American Security, which has close connections to the Obama administration, warned in a policy brief: “Facing an active insurgency in the north, a separatist movement in the south, and a domestic al-Qaeda presence, Yemen rests today on the knife’s edge. The consequences of instability in Yemen reach far beyond this troubled land, and pose serious challenges to vital US interests.”

The report spelt out those vital interests, declaring: “A destabilised Arabian Peninsula would shatter regional security, disrupt trade routes and obstruct access to fossil fuels.” Yemen itself has limited oil reserves, but is strategically positioned adjacent to the vital sea lanes from the Middle East to Europe via the Suez Canal.

Like his predecessor, Obama is recklessly plunging into impoverished Yemen in a bid to shore up US strategic and economic interests in the Middle East. At this stage, the Pentagon has ruled out sending US troops. This reflects concerns that as well as the US military being overstretched by the neo-colonial occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, sending in ground forces would intensify opposition to President Saleh’s autocratic and widely detested rule.

The pretext for the US intervention is to combat Al Qaeda. However, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the presence of radical Islamists in Yemen is a product of previous American intrigues. In the 1980s, thousands of Yemenis flocked to the CIA’s holy war in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation. In 1994, Saleh used many of those who returned in his war to crush a southern secessionist movement and he has continued relations with the Islamists.

Washington's new ally in its bogus "war on terrorism" exemplifies the venal character of the Yemeni bourgeoisie. A former army major, Saleh came to power in 1978 in what was then North Yemen. For three decades, he has maintained his rule by keeping a firm grip on the security forces, balancing between various tribal groupings, while manoeuvring on the international stage between the various major and regional powers. He runs the government as a family fiefdom, dispensing patronage to the favoured few in the Middle East's poorest country. Family members hold all key positions in the security apparatus.

The country is in desperate economic straits. Yemen ranks 153 on the UN Human Development Index of 192 nations. Its limited oil reserves, on which the economy and government revenue heavily depend, are predicted to run out by 2017. The global economic crisis has impacted on the Gulf States and therefore on many Yemeni guest workers whose remittances back home are a vital source of revenue. A rapidly expanding population is exacerbating chronic ground water shortages as well as the social gulf between rich and poor. The unemployment rate is around 40 percent and predicted to rise. According to the UN, about 45 percent of the population lives on less than \$US2 a day. These worsening social tensions are fuelling anger and opposition which, at present, is being exploited by dissident sections of the ruling elite that have been left out of the regime's system of patronage.

In the north, the military has been fighting to suppress a rebellion among Shiites tribes that broke out in the Saada governate in 2004. Sections of the Shiite elite felt marginalised and discriminated against by the Saleh regime as a result of its relations with Sunni extremists. The revolt has been further fuelled by the military's brutal methods, which have resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, the displacement of at least 130,000 people and indiscriminate detention without trial. The rebellion has become entangled with regional rivalries, with neighbouring Saudi Arabia providing funding to Saleh and attacking Shiite rebels inside Yemen's border areas. Without providing evidence, the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian regimes both accuse Iran of assisting the Shiite revolt, raising the danger that Washington could also seize on the issue in its confrontation with Tehran, further compounding the conflict.

Saleh also confronts a southern secessionist movement. Until 1990, Yemen was divided between north and south—the product of the arbitrary borders between the British colonial protectorate in the south, focussed on the key strategic port of Aden, and the Ottoman Empire that collapsed after World War I. The division remained even after the 1962 overthrow of the Imanate that replaced the Ottomans in the north and the rebellion that ousted the British in 1967. North and south only unified after the former Soviet Union withdrew financial and military support from its client state—the so-called socialist republic in South Yemen—in 1989. Secessionist sentiment in the south led to the brief 1994 war and was further inflamed as Saleh consolidated his position by dismissing southern military officers and state officials. As in the north, Saleh reacted to the re-emergence of a Southern Movement in 2007 by ruthlessly cracking down on public protests, in turn generating a growing armed insurgency.

The Obama administration is now intervening into this seething social and political cauldron in pursuit of Washington's broader economic and strategic ambitions. The inevitable outcome is already evident in the disasters that the US has created in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as its escalating proxy war in Pakistan. In the final analysis, the impoverished and unstable state of Yemen is the product not only of the corrupt, parasitic Yemeni ruling class but of imperialist oppression stretching back to the seizure of Aden by the British in the

nineteenth century. The US intervention now being prepared will only create another catastrophe for the Yemeni people and a potential quagmire for the American military.

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