

YEMEN: THE EVOLUTION OF A PROBLEM

In order to fathom the highly complicated challenge that Yemen poses for the international community, it is necessary to acquire some understanding of its complex recent history.

What is now known as the Republic of Yemen came into being in 1990 with the unification of North Yemen and South Yemen.

South Yemen had been governed by a Marxist regime that was both pro-Soviet and anti-American. From South Yemen's independence from Britain in 1967 until unification in 1990 - and even afterwards in the failed effort to re-establish South Yemeni independence which was the 1994 civil war - relations between North and South were extremely tense.

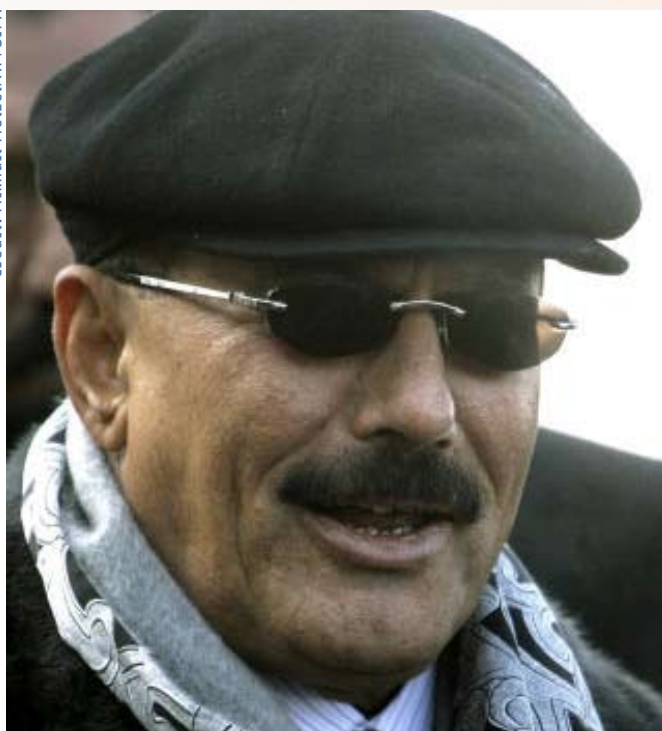
North Yemen however was not the 'conservative' government that it and united Yemen are usually portrayed as. The Arab nationalist revolution that ousted its monarchy in 1962 brought to power a 'revolutionary' government that was often anti-American.

Yemenis have not only been incensed about America's support for Israel, but more importantly, its support for neighbouring Saudi Arabia, with which Yemen was frequently at odds over the course of the twentieth century.

In the aftermath of the 1986 civil war between warring Marxist factions of the South Yemeni government and the collapse of communism a few years later, Saleh became the dominant Yemeni leader upon unification in May 1990. He then became the first - and so far, only - President of unified Yemen. He had been president of North Yemen from 1978 until unification.

During the Cold War, Saleh was a master at playing the United States and Saudi Arabia against the Soviet Union. In what can only be described as a masterstroke of wiliness, he even succeeded in obtaining Soviet

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Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh

military assistance in resisting a Marxist insurgency within North Yemen that was being supported by the Soviet-backed Marxist South.

Saleh openly supported Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and confrontation with the United States and its allies. This move was widely supported by the Yemeni public not so much because it was enamoured of Saddam, but because it strongly supported Saleh's anti-American and anti-Saudi stance.

In retrospect, of course, this move was a mistake. Saudi Arabia reacted by expelling up to one million Yemenis who had been working in the Kingdom, causing both an abrupt end to the remittances workers had been sending home and an unwelcome addition to the ranks of the unemployed in Yemen. The United States also

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sharply cut back aid to Yemen. The George H.W. Bush Administration had taken pains to improve ties with Yemen before the war in Kuwait, and was especially bitter over what it regarded as the Saleh regime's betrayal.

True to form, however, Saleh managed to slowly re-ingratiate himself with the United States. During the Bill Clinton Administration, Saleh convinced many in Washington that he was steering Yemen towards free elections and tolerance. This paid off during the 1994 Yemeni civil war. Although Saudi Arabia backed the South Yemeni secessionists, the Clinton Administration and the Western allies did not. After several weeks of fighting, Saleh's forces prevailed.

Towards the end of the Clinton Administration, it had become increasingly clear that Saleh was not serious about democratisation. Many of the freedoms that he introduced earlier were greatly curtailed by that stage.

However, the bombing of the USS Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden in October 2000 and the September 11, 2001 attacks gave Saleh another means for currying favour with the incoming George W. Bush Administration: what Bush called 'the War on Terror'.

After September 11, Saleh went out of his way to cooperate with Washington, and he even allowed the United States to launch a targeted missile attack on its - as well as his - Islamist opponents in Yemen. His actions stood in stark contrast to the Saudi government's lack of cooperation with the United States in the aftermath of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombings and then September 11.

However, Saleh's cooperation with the Bush Administration soon diminished. As the US concentrated more of its efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Saleh became less fearful of a US military intervention in Yemen: something that was openly discussed in Washington when the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq initially appeared to be successful. Further, Saleh was soon faced with two other internal security threats that posed a more serious challenge to his continued rule than did al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: the ongoing 'Houthi' rebellion in the north of the country that began in 2004, and the growing movement to restore the independence of South Yemen.

The Houthis want to restore the Zaidi Imamate that ruled North Yemen between the departure of the Ottomans at the end of World War I and the 1962 North Yemeni 'revolution'. Presumably, they also want to rule over South Yemen which, though under British rule until 1967, was claimed by the Imamate. The

South however is overwhelmingly Sunni. If anything, the Southerners are even less enthusiastic about being governed by a Shi'a Imamate in the capital Sana'a than by the Saleh regime. Although they seek different goals however, their efforts may be mutually reinforcing: a stronger Houthi insurgency in the North may result in a stronger independence movement in the South, and vice versa.

By contrast, it is not clear that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula actually seeks to come to power in Yemen. Instead, it may be satisfied with a chronic state of conflict there which would provide it with the maximum freedom to launch attacks against Saudi, American, and other Western targets both inside and outside Yemen.

There is also an international dimension to the crises in Yemen. Recent Yemeni government statements that Iran has been helping the Houthis have been cause for alarm in many quarters. The Houthis are indeed Shi'ites, but belong to the Zaidi sect and not the Twelver sect that is predominant in Iran and the largest branch of Shi'a Islam; historically, the two sects have been rivals. Many Western sources have mistakenly portrayed the Houthi conflict as a Shi'ite rebellion against a Sunni government. But Saleh and much of the Yemeni leadership - which hails predominantly from the North - are also Zaidis. Iran has denied involvement in this struggle, and the Houthis have declared that the Saleh government is falsely claiming that Tehran is supporting them in order to procure support from the US, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries for its own interests.

The Saudis, though, insist that Iran is involved. It is not clear, though, whether they really believe this or are simply going along with Yemeni government claims in order to assume a larger role inside Yemen - something that Sana'a has traditionally resisted, but now appears to welcome.

As with previous conflicts - specifically those that occurred within and between the two Yemens before unification in 1990 and the 1994 civil war - the current conflicts inside Yemen have local causes, have international ramifications and could draw in other actors. Saudi Arabia is already involved, and if not already, it could be joined by Iran. Since the advent of the Obama Administration, the US has avoided direct military intervention, but it has become increasingly involved in targeted attacks on leaders of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that have also killed or injured numerous civilians.

According to several American press reports, Saleh has stepped up cooperation with the US because he is gradually recognising al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as a threat to his rule. It could be however that Saleh is simply repeating a successful formula: playing on an external party's greatest fear - Marxists in the past, al-Qaeda now - in order to acquire resources for use against a broad range of internal adversaries like the northern Houthis and the southern secessionists, as well as to shore up his rule. The danger, of course, is that the more the US is seen by Yemenis as a supporter of the Saleh regime against all its internal opponents, and as responsible for incidental civilian deaths in missile attacks, the more Yemeni public opinion will swing against the US and more broadly, the West.

Is there anything that the European Union can do to arrest the deteriorating situation in Yemen? The international conference on Yemen held in London on 27 January 2010 was important for focusing attention on this important problem. What is especially important now is for the economic and security initiatives that were announced to be actually followed up. Beyond these, however, there are two things that the EU foreign policy leadership should bear in mind.

To begin with, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear in London that economic development efforts were necessary. However the overall US approach to Yemen is too focused on the security dimension at the expense of the development and human rights dimensions. These are areas, therefore, in which the EU could and should take the lead.

Second, the EU has not just the financial resources, but the intellectual ones to do this. As Yemen specialist Barak Barfi noted in a paper published by the New America Foundation in Washington, DC in January 2010, "There are few American scholars who can explain Yemen's byzantine ways. The best Yemen analysts come from England, France, and Germany". While there are, of course, several fine American Yemen specialists, the EU collectively possesses the resources to take the lead on development initiatives for Yemen and perhaps even to warn Washington of the dangers of an over-militarised approach.

The challenges Yemen faces - and that it presents to the international community - are far too important for the EU to ignore the opportunity to assume a strong leadership role with respect to this complex country.

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