

Fake “War on Terrorism”: In Yemen the US is Fighting against Democracy, not against Al Qaeda

Interview with Mohamed Hassan

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A pair of trousers catches fire in an aeroplane close to Detroit and missiles rain down on Yemen. Is this what is called the butterfly effect? For Mohammed Hassan, the terrorist threat is only an excuse. In this latest chapter in our series “Understanding the Muslim world”, our specialist explains what is really at stake in Yemen: i.e. undermining democracy in the Gulf in order to keep control over its oil.

Since the failed attack on the Amsterdam-Detroit flight, Yemen has hit the headlines. It's there that the young Nigerian terrorist is supposed to have trained. How could this country, an ally of the US, become a refuge for al-Qaeda?

First of all we must note this phenomenon which is repeating itself: every time that a regime backed by Washington is threatened, then terrorists appear on the scene. In the case of Muslim countries, it's al-Qaeda that gets the blame. This phantom terrorist group always pops up where nationalist or anti-imperialist movements give trouble to puppets supported by the US. That's what's happening now in Yemen. This country is ruled by a corrupt regime that is allied to Washington. But it is threatened by resistance movements.

And lo and behold there appears a young Nigerian who boards a plane destined for Detroit bearing explosives. This presumed terrorist had been placed on surveillance lists from the time his father had warned the US authorities. In addition, the US has at its disposal all the latest military technology. With its satellites it can tell whether you are eating a tuna or chicken sandwich! This terrorism tale is a hodge podge that shows that the situation in Yemen is getting out of hand as far as the US is concerned and that its interests are in danger.

Why has Yemen become so important for Washington?

Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has been in power for 20 years. His regime is corrupt, but aligned politically with the United States. A resistance group in the north of the country and separatists in the south are threatening the stability of the government. If a revolutionary movement overthrows Saleh, that could have an impact over the whole region and give encouragement to the resistance fighting in other pro-imperialist states in the region. In particular, to those fighting the feudal regime of Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, when the fight with the northern resistance broke out in Yemen, the Arab League, under Egyptian leadership, immediately condemned the rebels and gave its support to the

Yemeni government. We are still waiting for that League to condemn Israeli aggression against Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. The Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization devoted to western interests, made up of certain oil-producing countries, has also condemned the Yemeni resistance. For the US, which is at the height of recession, their Saudi colony must not be threatened by resistance movements. Saudi Arabia in fact provides a significant proportion of Washington's oil and constitutes a precious ally in the Gulf. If the region becomes unstable, that will have serious economic consequences for the US.

Who are the Northern resistance fighters? What are their demands?

In the north of the country, the government has been facing for several years the armed resistance of the Houthis who get their name from the founder of their movement, Hussein Al-Houti. He himself died in battle four years ago and his brother has taken his place. Like the majority of Yemenis in the north, the Houthis are Zaydis. Islam is divided into several trends such as Sunni or Shia. These trends are divided in turn into different branches, Zaydiism being a branch of Shi'ism.

President Saleh is himself a Zaydi, but the Houthis don't recognise his authority. The fact is that Yemen is a very poor country. Its economy depends essentially on an agriculture which is in decline, some oil income, a bit of fishing, as well as international aid and money sent home by expatriates. On top of that, it is only a handful of people in the president's entourage who gets any benefit from the country's riches, while the general population is becoming poorer and poorer. The majority of Yemenis are aged under 30 but they have no hope for the future. Unemployment stood at 40% in 2009. The Houthis have questioned the government as to the reason for the underdevelopment of the region, the lack of water and for problems of infrastructure. But President Saleh did not respond to their appeals. That is the basis on which the Houthis took up their armed struggle. Their headquarters is the town of Saada. This is most symbolic: it was in that town that more than 10 centuries ago the founder of Yemeni Zaydi'ism was based.

The fighting close to Saada is raging. It has caused several thousand people to become refugees, and the government is accusing Iran of supporting the rebels...

This accusation is false. Iran has a Shia majority, but Yemeni Zaydis, because of the way they pray and for other reasons, are in fact closer to the Sunnis. If the Houthi resistance has enough arms to carry on fighting for the next ten years, it is because it gets help from a part of the Yemeni army. In fact, many soldiers and officers are themselves also Zaydi. The struggles in the region have caused more than 150,000 people to become refugees and Zaydi soldiers can see how their brothers are suffering. Some of them are even joining the resistance.

President Saleh must therefore mobilise opportunist Sunnis in the army in order to combat the northern resistance. This cannot be done with impunity. This Zaydi president, who has already used his religious convictions to mobilize the population and the army, is today calling on Sunnis to defeat other Zaydis. Saleh is set to lose whatever support he had left in the north of the country.

And the South is demanding to secede! The Yemeni president really seems to be in a bad position.

It is essential to understand Yemeni history in order to understand what is happening today.

In its present form the country came about as a result of the fusion in 1990 of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, in the south, with the Yemeni Arab Republic in the north. These two states had different histories.

The birth of the north dates back over 10 centuries to the time when Zaydis first arrived in Saada. But in 1962 a revolution broke out aimed at overthrowing the feudal regime and installing a republic. Nasser, the Egyptian president and defender of Arab independence, supported the revolutionary movement. For their part, the US, the UK, Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran sent mercenaries to rescue the reactionary elements of the old feudal regime and to weaken Nasser. The conflict resulted in a terrible war in which more than 10,000 Egyptian soldiers lost their lives. Finally, the Republican government was not overthrown, but it was weakened by the conflict. It did not have the means to unleash a cultural revolution or completely to democratize the country, nor to industrialise it. Even though the Imam-king who led the country escaped to Saudi Arabia, a large part of North Yemen remains at the feudal stage.

What about the South?

South Yemen's history is quite different. It was colonized by the British in order to block expansion on the part of the French who had taken over Djibouti and on the part of the Russians who had spread up to central Asia. But it was also a question of the British maintaining their domination of the Persian Gulf and the strategic Straits of Hormuz. It is Great Britain that built the port of Aden in South Yemen. This town became very important for the British empire. One could say it was the Hong Kong or the Macao of the epoch. Many foreigners were sent to the region.

This is what the social pyramid looked like in this colonial society: at the top, the British colonials lorded it, followed by the Somali and Indian communities who acted as a sort of buffer against the lowest category, the Yemenis. It was a classic strategy from the British colonists: using one group of person against another one in order to protect themselves. By the way, all the people that Great-Britain used to see as dangerous for its Indian colony – such as nationalists or communists – were sent in exile in Aden.

As we have seen in Somalia, did these political prisoners influence developments in the region?

Certainly. Independence movements forced out the British colonists in 1967 and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was born the following year. It was governed by the Yemeni Socialist Party, which was a coalition of different progressive elements, inheritors in part of Aden's prisoners. You could find there communists, nationalists, liberals, and Ba'athists from Syria or Iraq. All these elements were united under the banner of the Socialist Party.

South Yemen thus became the most progressive Arab state in the region and knew its most flourishing years, with agrarian reform, equality of the sexes, etc. Nevertheless, the socialist party remained a mixture of several elements with diverse origins. The communists were the backbone of the party and gave it a certain amount of cohesion, but every time there was a need to face any major difficulty, the contradictions burst out into the open. Because of a lack of any industrial basis and the petty bourgeois character of the coalition, these contradictions ended up giving rise to assassinations. Members literally

killed each other! As a result of this the party underwent three bloody internal revolts. The last one proved fatal. Most of the ideological leaders of the party were assassinated and the liberal wing took charge of the movement. It was therefore a very weak socialist party which was governing Yemen up to the time that the two Yemen were reunified in 1990. Even though both sides had had relatively different histories, the parties of both north and south had always supported unification of the country in their respective schedule.

Why was it necessary to wait until 1990 before the north and south united?

In the north the state had been very weak after the war. It was led by liberals who lacked any really revolutionary activities and were controlled by the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia in particular. The Saudi neighbour provided arms and money to the feudal class with a view to weakening the central government. For Saudi Arabia a tribal North Yemen was easier to control. The south became, on the contrary, a bastion of progressive ideas. At the height of the Cold War it was considered as an enemy of the region which had to be put in quarantine.

But in the early nineties things had changed. First of all, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the Cold War had ended. On top of that, the Yemeni Socialist Party was no longer much of a threat. Its ideological leaders had been wiped out in the third internal party revolt. For the countries of the region as well as for the strategic interests of the west, the unification of Yemen no longer represented a danger. Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been president of the Yemeni Arab Republic since 1978, took the leadership of the country. He is still in power today.

In 1990, Yemen was the only country, apart from Cuba, to oppose the Iraq war. 20 years later, while Castro is still holding out against the 'Yankees', Saleh has for his part lined up alongside the US in their war on terror. How can you explain this change?

The opposition to the war in Iraq was not the result of Saleh's policies, but of those of members of the former Yemeni socialist party who occupied various key positions in the new government. Nevertheless, even though the socialist party had always wanted unification of Yemen on a progressive basis, it had been too weakened by its internal revolt to be able to get its policies accepted in their entirety. On top of that, Saudi Arabia, a faithful ally of the US, made Yemen pay dearly for its position against the Iraq war. The Saudi regime expelled a million Yemeni workers who had enjoyed a special status entitling them to work on the other side of the frontier. This caused a severe economic crisis in Yemen, while at the same time sending a strong message to President Saleh. The latter revised his policy, becoming gradually the puppet of US imperialism that we know today.

Reunification and Secession

Reunification was a big letdown for the southern leaders. They launched themselves into the process without a proper strategy. And, as we have seen, the Socialist Party was very weak. The centre of power gravitated in the north around President Saleh. The regime was corrupt, the expulsion of the Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia had created a major crisis and the economic situation was deteriorating.

All these factors led to the south demanding to secede in 1994. The separatists were supported by Saudi Arabia, which preferred its neighbour to be weak and divided, for various reasons. Firstly, because of the contradictions it had with its neighbour as to the

course of the Saudi-Yemeni border: Yemen was in fact claiming certain areas situated in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, because a united Yemen with good leadership could cause problems for the feudal classes in Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia.

These tensions between north and south finally led to war. The Zaydi president mobilized the people of the north and the greater party of the army on the basis of their religious beliefs to fight against the Sunni-majority south. The separatists were beaten, which weakened still further the former members of the Socialist Party within the Yemeni government. This war finally offered the north, and Saleh, an opportunity to remove their dominant influence over military and political questions.

Fifteen years later, the South is again demanding separation. Do you think that president Saleh will be able to get away with it again?

Obviously, no. Saleh is facing problems at every turn. The south is demanding again a fair share of power after the corrupt government to all intents and purposes has restored the feudal order. For the southern Yemenis, who have a progressive history, this situation is unacceptable. And it isn't acceptable either for the Houthis in the north. In this case, President Saleh is unable to mobilise most of the population and army on the basis of their religious beliefs. The Houthis are Zaydis too! The Houthi resistance has exposed the real policies of this government in a way no other strategy could have achieved in so short a time. The population is discovering what is really happening and discontent is growing stronger and stronger.

What are the reasons for the anger of the Yemeni people?

First and foremost, the social and economic situation. The regime has wealth while the people get poorer and poorer. There is also the fact that Yemen has become a bastion of US imperialism and Saleh had lined up alongside Washington in the war on terror. The Yemenis can see what is happening in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. For them it is a war against Muslims. Barack Hussein Obama may have a Muslim name and make all the speeches he likes, there are no other words to define this war.

On top of that, the Yemeni government is not even able to protect its citizens. After the September 11 attacks, some of them have been kidnapped and removed for no reason. This happened to an eminent Yemeni religious leader. When he was in the US visiting his son, he was arrested and sent to Guantánamo for no valid reason. After 6 years in detention, he was finally released. But he died three weeks later, because he became sick as a result of his imprisonment. This war on terror is really not accepted by the Yemeni people.

Finally, Saleh recognised the disputed frontier claimed by Saudi Arabia. He also authorised Saudi bombers to raid the region where the Houthi rebels are established. For the Yemenis this situation is unacceptable. Saleh is on an ejection seat. That is why he needs the support of the US which is raising the spectre of al Qaeda to be able to do what it likes in the country.

After Afghanistan and Iraq, is Yemen going to be the US's third front?

I think it already is. The US army has already sent missiles and special troops. It equally supplies a great deal of materiel to Yemen, but a good proportion of this goes over to the

hands of the resistance because of the links the Zaydis have with the Yemeni army. It is six months since Saleh launched a major offensive against the Houthis. He has called for reinforcements from the Saudi Arabian and US armies. It wouldn't surprise me if Israel were soon to join the party. But in spite of everything, they are unable to overcome the Houthi resistance. The latter operates from a mountainous region, as do the Taliban. We know how difficult it is to combat rebels in such a terrain. Moreover, the Houthis have the arms to carry on fighting for a long time to come.

Is the US facing another defeat?

History does seem to repeat itself as far as the US is concerned. For all that this country is today led by a former Muslim, its policies have not changed. Obama's speeches are a lot like George Bush's: he promises to hunt down terrorists wherever they might be. Washington raises the spectre of al-Qaeda to fight rebels ensconced in Yemen's mountains? Bush did the same thing more than 8 years ago with regard to Afghanistan, and that war is still not over.

The thing is to know how long this is going to carry on. The historian Paul Kennedy has shown that the gap between the economic basis and military expansion was one of the principal factors in the decline of great empires. If the economy of a big power is running out of steam but its military expenses are increasing, this great power is condemned to fade and become very weak. That is the situation with the US today.

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