

Yemen: Pentagon's War On The Arabian Peninsula

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Yemen will become a battleground for a proxy war between the United States and Saudi Arabia – whose state-to-state relations are among the strongest and most durable of the entire post-World War II era – on one hand and Iran on the other.

It is perhaps impossible to determine the exact moment at which a U.S.- supported self-professed holy warrior – trained to perpetrate acts of urban terrorism and to shoot down civilian airliners – ceases to be a freedom fighter and becomes a terrorist. But a safe assumption is that it occurs when he is no longer of use to Washington. A terrorist who serves American interests is a freedom fighter; a freedom fighter who doesn't is a terrorist.

Yemenis are the latest to learn the Pentagon's and the White House's law of the jungle. Along with Iraq and Afghanistan which counterinsurgency specialist Stanley McChrystal used to perfect his techniques, Yemen is joining the ranks of other nations where the Pentagon is engaged in that variety of warfare, fraught with civilian massacres and other forms of so-called collateral damage: Colombia, Mali, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia and Uganda.

BBC News reported on December 14 that 70 civilians were killed when aircraft bombed a market in the village of Bani Maan in northern Yemen.

The nation's armed forces claimed responsibility for the deadly attack, but a website of the Houthi rebels against whom the bombing was ostensibly directed stated "Saudi aircraft committed a massacre against the innocent residents of Bani Maan." [1]

The Saudi regime entered the armed conflict between the (eponymous) Houthis and the Yemeni government on behalf of the latter in early November and since has been accused of launching attacks inside Yemen with tanks and warplanes. Even before the latest bombing scores of Yemenis have been killed and thousands displaced by the fighting. Saudi Arabia has also been accused of using phosphorous bombs.

Moreover, the rebel group known as Young Believers, based in the Shi'ite Muslim community of Yemen which comprises 30 percent of the country's population of 23 million, claimed on December 14 that "US fighter jets have attacked Yemen's Sa'ada Province" and "US fighter jets have launched 28 attacks on the northwestern province of Sa'ada." [2]

The previous day's edition of Britain's Daily Telegraph reported on discussions with U.S. military officials, stating "Fearful that Yemen is in danger of becoming a failed state, America has now sent a small number of special forces teams to improve training of Yemen's army in reaction to the threat."

One unnamed Pentagon official was quoted as saying "Yemen is becoming a reserve base for al-Qaeda's activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan." [3]

The conjuring up of the al-Qaeda bogey, however, is a decoy. The rebels in the north of the nation are Shi'ites and not Sunnis, much less Wahhabi Sunnis of the Saudi variety, and as such are not only not linked with any group of groups that could be categorized as al-Qaeda, but instead would be a likely target thereof.

In service to American designs in the region, the British and American press lately has been referring to Yemen as the "ancestral homeland" of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden comes from a prominent billionaire Saudi Arabian family, of course, but as his father had been born in what is now the Republic of Yemen over a century ago the Western media are exploiting an insignificant historical accident to suggest Osama bin Laden's active role in the nation and to establish a tenuous link between the South Asian war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Saudi and American armed intervention in a civil conflict in Yemen.

In 2002 the Pentagon dispatched an estimated 100 soldiers, by some accounts Green Beret special forces, to Yemen to train the country's military. In that instance, coming as it did two years after the suicide bombing attack against the Navy destroyer USS Cole in the southern Yemeni port of Aden, attributed to al-Qaeda, and accompanied by drone missile attacks against identified leaders of the same, Washington justified its actions as retaliation for that incident as well as the attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. the year before.

The present context is different and a U.S.-backed counterinsurgency war in Yemen will have nothing to do with combating alleged al-Qaeda threats, but will in fact be an integral part of the strategy to expand the Afghan war into yet wider concentric circles taking in South and Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia and the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The eagerly awaited departure of President George W. Bush may have led to the end of the official global war on terror, now referred to as overseas contingencies operations, but nothing except the name has changed.

On December 13 the top commander of the Pentagon's Central Command in charge of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, General David Petraeus, told the Al Arabiya television network that "that U.S supports Yemen's security in the context of the military cooperation provided by America for its allies in the region" and "stressed that U.S. ships in the territorial waters of Yemen [are there] not only to control but to impede the infiltrations of weapons to Houthi rebels." [4]

To be recalled the next time the al-Qaeda/bin Laden canard is used to justify expanding U.S. military involvement on the Arabian Peninsula.

The Yemen Post of December 13 wrote that the Houthi media office "accused the U.S. of participating in the war against Houthis" and released photographs of what were identified as U.S. warplanes "involved in bombing operations in Sa'ada province [in] Northern Yemen."

The source estimated there have been twenty U.S. bombing raids coordinated with satellite surveillance. [5]

The Western press is again leading the charge in linking the Houthis, whose religious background of Zaydi Shi'ism is quite distinct from the Iranian version, to sinister machinations imputed to Tehran. Even U.S. government officials have to date acknowledged no evidence that Iran is supporting much less arming the Yemeni rebels. That will change if the script goes according to precedent as is indicated by Petraeus's comment above, and

Washington will dutifully echo the Yemeni government's claim that Iran is arming its Shi'ia brethren in Yemen as it is accused of doing in Lebanon.

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In an editorial of five days ago the Tehran Times accused all parties to the Yemeni conflict – the government, the rebels and Saudi Arabia – of recklessness and issued a warning: "History provides a good example. Saudi Arabia funded extremist groups in Afghanistan and still, two decades since the withdrawal of the Soviet army from the country, the flames of war in Afghanistan are overwhelming the allies of Saudi Arabia.

"And a similar scenario is emerging in Yemen." [6]

The comparison between Yemen and Afghanistan alluded in particular to Riyadh, in the second case hand-in-glove with the United States, exporting Saudi-based Wahhabism to expand its political influence.

Saudi Arabia is attempting to promote its own version of extremism in Yemen as it did earlier in Afghanistan and Pakistan and is currently doing in Iraq. Far from the U.S. and its Western allies expressing any objection, the Saudis and their fellow Persian Gulf monarchies will be in the forefront of what is estimated to be \$100 billion worth of Middle East arms purchases from the West over the next five years. "The core of this arms-buying spree will undoubtedly be the \$20 billion U.S. package of weapons systems over 10 years for the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain." [7] Saudi Arabia is also armed with state-of-the-art British and French warplanes as well as U.S. missile defense systems.

What the earlier cited Iranian commentary warned about regarding "the flames of war" in Afghanistan is perfectly confirmed by the Commander's Initial Assessment of August 30, 2009 issued by top American and NATO military commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal and published by the Washington Post on September 21 with the redactions demanded by the Pentagon. The 66-page document served as the blueprint for President Barack Obama's December 1 announcement that 33,000 more American troops are headed to Afghanistan.

In the report McChrystal stated, "The major insurgent groups in order of their threat to the mission are: the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG)."

The last two are named after their founders and current leaders, Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Mujahideen darlings of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the 1980s when the Agency's deputy director (from 1986-1989) was Robert Gates, now U.S. Secretary of Defense in charge of prosecuting the war in Afghanistan. And in Yemen.

In his 1996 book *From the Shadows*, Gates boasted that "CIA had important successes in covert action. Perhaps the most consequential of all was Afghanistan where CIA, with its management, funnelled billions of dollars in supplies and weapons to the mujahideen...." [8]

The New York Times in 2008 divulged these details:

"In the 1980s, Jalaluddin Haqqani was cultivated as a 'unilateral' asset of the CIA and received tens of thousands of dollars in cash for his work in fighting the Soviet Army in Afghanistan, according to an account in 'The Bin Ladens,' a recent book by Steve Coll. At that time, Haqqani helped and protected Osama bin Laden, who was building his own militia to fight the Soviet forces, Coll wrote." [9] Coll is also the author of the 2001 volume Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001.

Haqqani's colleague Hekmatyar "received millions of dollars from the CIA through the ISI [Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence]. Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin received some of the strongest support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and worked with thousands of foreign mujahideen who came to Afghanistan." [10]

This past May the (superlatively) pro-American president of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, told the American NBC news network that Taliban is "part of our past and your past, and the ISI and CIA created them together....It (the Taliban) was (a) monster created by all of us...." [11]

On September 11, 2001 there were only three nations in the world that recognized Taliban rule in Afghanistan: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. U.S. President George W. Bush immediately afterward singled out seven so-called states supporting terrorism for potential retaliation: Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria. Only Sudan, which expelled Osama bin Laden in 1996, had any conceivable connections to al-Qaeda. Of the nineteen accused September 11 airline hijackers, fifteen were from Saudi Arabia, two from the United Arab Emirates, one from Egypt and one from Lebanon.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia remain highly-valued American political and military allies and the United Arab Emirates has troops serving under NATO command in Afghanistan.

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For decades the African National Congress of Nelson Mandela and the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat were at the top of the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist groups. No sooner had the Cold War ended than both Mandela and Arafat (and Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams) were invited to the White House. The first shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and the second in 1994.

If a hypothetical self-styled jihadist left Saudi Arabia or Egypt in the 1980s for Pakistan to fight against the Afghan government and its Soviet ally, he was a freedom fighter in the U.S.'s eyes. If he then went to Lebanon he was a terrorist. In the early 1990s if he arrived in Bosnia he was a freedom fighter again, but if he showed up in the Gaza Strip or the West Bank a terrorist. In the Russian North Caucasus he was a reborn freedom fighter, but if he returned to Afghanistan after 2001 a terrorist.

Depending on how the wind is blowing from Foggy Bottom, an armed Baloch separatist in Pakistan or a Kashmiri one in India is either a freedom fighter or a terrorist.

Contrariwise, in 1998 U.S. special envoy to the Balkans Robert Gelbard described the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighting the government of Yugoslavia as a terrorist organization: "I know a terrorist when I see one and these men are terrorists." [12]

The following February U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright brought five members of the KLA, including its chief Hashim Thaci, to Rambouillet, France to offer an ultimatum to Yugoslavia that she knew would be rejected and lead to war. The next year she escorted Thaci on a personal tour of the United Nations Headquarters and the State Department and invited him as a guest to the Democratic Party presidential nominating convention in Los Angeles.

This November 1st Thaci, now prime minister of a pseudo-state only recognized by 63 of the world's 192 nations, hosted former U.S. President Bill Clinton for the unveiling of a statue honoring the latter's crimes. And vanity.

Washington supported armed separatists in Eritrea from the mid-1970s until 1991 in their war against the Ethiopian government.

Currently the U.S. is arming Somalia and Djibouti for war against independent Eritrea. The Pentagon has its first permanent military base in Africa in Djibouti, where it stations 2,000 troops and from where it conducts drone surveillance over Somalia. And Yemen.

In the words of Balzac's character Vautrin, "There are no such things as principles, there are only events; there are no laws, there are only circumstances...."

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Notes

- 1) BBC News, December 14, 2009
- 2) Press TV, December 14, 2009
- 3) Daily Telegraph, December 13, 2009
- 4) Yemen Post, December 13, 2009
- 5) Ibid
- 6) Tehran Times, December 10, 2009
- 7) United Press International, August 25, 2009
- 8) BBC News, December 1, 2008
- 9) New York Times, September 9, 2008
- 10) Wikipedia
- 11) Press Trust of India, May 11, 2009
- 12) BBC News, June 28, 1998

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