

The United States and the War in Yemen

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After six months of Operation 'Decisive Storm' to restore legitimate rule in Yemen and the recent return of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi to Eden, the United States is eager for a negotiated end of hostilities. Concern is mounting in Washington regarding civilian casualties in military operations since last March and apprehension is rising that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is benefiting from the absence of effective government control, as well as other essential considerations. As the air campaign intensifies in preparation for an assault on the capital Sanaa and the Arab Coalition deploys thousands of ground troops from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Egypt, and Sudan, American anxiety about the war in Yemen is influencing how the Obama Administration looks at its policy toward the country.



Destruction is widespread in Yemen

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In the beginning, the Obama Administration vacillated about supporting the operation but did not refrain from supplying necessary munitions to the different Gulf militaries taking part in the Saudi Arabian-led Arab Coalition. Since March, it even increased its intelligence cooperation with participating Gulf countries and raised the number of its military advisors from 20 to 45. During Saudi Arabian King Salman's visit to the United States in early September, President Barack Obama re-iterated the American-Saudi agreement about the need for a functioning Yemeni government that can effectively deal with Yemen's many problems such as the humanitarian crisis and fighting terrorism.

America's Concerns

The American Administration is worried about the increased number of civilian casualties killed in military operations and the potential humanitarian crisis emerging with internally displaced individuals and refugees, reported to be over 2,000 and 1.5 million, respectively. The U.S. Agency for International Development also warned that over 21 million of a total population of 25 million are in need of immediate assistance which, if not secured, will mean current and future humanitarian problems for the slowly-restored Yemeni legitimate government, Saudi Arabia, and its Gulf partners. And the timing could not be worse: hundreds of thousands of Syria refugees are

crossing treacherous waters and terrain to knock on the doors of Europe seeking shelter before the approaching harsh winter.

Furthermore, learned public opinion in the United States is warning the administration of the long-term impact of the continuing war on Yemen's domestic unity and regional security. While there is almost unanimous agreement among United States politicians and opinion makers that the Houthi rebels have triggered the current crisis and expelled the legitimate government, there is equal consternation that the battle to dislodge them and restore authority is taking too long and may be detrimental to social cohesion and postwar reconstruction. Observers and specialists of Yemen alike worry that if the Houthis are militarily humiliated today they will not be likely to cooperate on any future political compromise, thus depriving it of the required support and acquiescence of an essential political faction and a critical social force.



Displaced family in Yemen

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The United States is also deeply concerned that the prolonged crisis serves AQAP and allows it to expand out of its traditional areas in Hadramawt Province. News reports that the organization is operating in the south with the knowledge of the Arab Coalition, that it has succeeded in controlling villages adjacent to Eden, and that it is indeed participating in military operations against the Houthis as part of the Popular Resistance are enough to raise unhealthy suspicions in Washington. Al-Qaeda in Yemen unequivocally remains one of the most important challenges for United States security policy in the Middle East and its potential rehabilitation through participating in the Yemen war will most assuredly change how the Obama Administration looks at the conflict. Luckily for now, however, the presence of Emirati forces in Eden is giving the administration the assurance it now needs that AQAP will not benefit from the war to re-constitute itself in the country or re-emerge as a challenge and threat to security in the region.

From a strictly military perspective, the Obama Administration may also be concerned about the large losses GCC military institutions may sustain should the conflict in Yemen be further prolonged. While there are those who argue that the war provides GCC militaries the opportunity to hone their fighting skills for the first time, there are others who believe that the potential for fatigue and stalemate may be too big of a danger. Although the coalition has allowed the forces loyal to President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the Popular Resistance to lead operations, forces from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE still provide the necessary strategic strike capabilities to hold territory and to advance toward Sanaa. Additionally, as the areas under the

control of the Houthis and forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh shrink, and as the topography of the country becomes more mountainous and treacherous, the fighting may become more ferocious and cause unacceptable losses in personnel and equipment.

As the battle of Sanaa looms, American military analysts and planners worry about the toll on civilians and military personnel of a fierce fight for which GCC militaries have never planned or trained. The longer that confrontation takes, the more susceptible GCC forces are going to be and the more exposed the Obama Administration will be to criticisms about its silence about civilian casualties. As the world witnesses the tragedy unfolding with Syria's refugees at Europe's gates, another humanitarian dilemma in Sanaa will most assuredly result in American and international calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities. If the Houthis refuse to surrender, there also is the distinct possibility that the battles will expand into the latter's northern heartland with what that might bring of increased casualty figures and potential saber-rattling from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps which will see the fight in purely sectarian terms and possibly respond accordingly.

Conclusion

What the Obama Administration is looking to see in Yemen is a state of security and stability that helps restore the legitimate government of President Hadi to impose order and administer effective rule in Yemen. This would address the concerns about the humanitarian situation and would ensure the necessary institutional conditions to prevent the return of AQAP's threat. In this vein, the administration fully supports the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and the efforts of UN Envoy Ismail Wild Sheikh Ahmad to hold all-party peace talks in Muscat, Oman.

Images accessed September 28, 2015

Destruction in Yemen

<http://www.unhcr.org/thumb1/559be4126.jpg>

Yemeni refugee family

http://www.thenation.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Yemen_refugees_rtr_img1.jpg