

Arabia Infelix: The War Devouring Yemen

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For many centuries, European cartographers labeled the southwest corner of the otherwise mostly desert Arabian Peninsula as Arabia Felix, or “Happy Arabia.” It was a place where towering mountains trapped clouds blown in from the Indian Ocean so that twice-annual monsoon rains blessed terraced slopes and lowland wadis with plentiful crops. Sadly, since fighting engulfed the country in late March 2015, Yemen has never been less felix.

The brutal war and humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen are the consequences of domestic and especially regional power struggles. Often cast as a sectarian battle between Sunni and Shia Muslims, it is more accurately understood on the one hand as a banal rivalry between two discredited presidents and on the other as an unprovoked counterrevolutionary war by wealthy Gulf monarchies against a poverty-stricken republic where citizens rose up against decades of inept, corrupt rule. As fighting raged and coalitions on both sides unraveled, the sectarian narrative also grew tattered.

Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets in sustained, colorful, peaceful nationwide demonstrations for months on end in 2011, chanting the same slogan that toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt: “The people want the downfall of the regime.” Armed tribesmen laid down their weapons to protest. Young people wrote manifestos and staged street performances. Northerners and Southerners, Zaydis and Shafa’is, peasants and urbanites, women and men turned out in veritable unison. The Nobel Peace Prize committee recognized a Yemeni woman, Tawakkol Karman, a gifted public speaker, as a symbolic leader of the Arab Spring.

The Gulf dynasties fretted over the North African uprisings, but were especially alarmed by the raucous clamor for revolutionary change on their proverbial doorstep. Eventually the carbon kingdoms persuaded a reluctant President Ali Abdullah Saleh to relinquish power to his long-serving

vice president, Abdurabbu Mansur Hadi. Instead of regime change, the protesters achieved only a regime makeover.

Hadi, the only candidate, “won” a two-year term in an election in February 2012 hastily arranged under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an association of the six oil monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula comprising Saudi Arabia and the smaller states of Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar. The so-called GCC Initiative also granted Saleh and his family immunity from prosecution and left him as the leader of the party with a parliamentary majority. Concurrently, it funded a National Dialogue Conference of over 650 Yemeni delegates from various constituencies that was intended to facilitate a post-Saleh, post-Hadi transition. The conference, meeting with international consultants in five-star hotels, dragged on inconclusively.

Eventually, the feuding presidents proved willing to destroy the country in order to restore dictatorship. Their respective alliances complicated and sectarianized the nasty rivalry between the two self-serving, nonideological secularists.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

In a counterintuitive turn of events, in September 2014 Saleh joined forces with a group called Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), also known as the Houthis—a ragtag militia from the far north, near the Saudi border, that had waged six separate regional rebellions against his regime. The Houthis are a self-styled Zaydi revivalist movement within the Shia school of Islam, opposed to Wahhabism, the ultraconservative Saudi brand of Sunni Islam. They marched on Sana’a, the capital, to protest policies announced by Hadi—especially a fuel price increase recommended by the International Monetary Fund and a scheme (devised by foreign consultants and announced after minimal domestic debate) to reorganize provinces into six “federal” regions that left the Houthi’s homeland landlocked.

The national armed forces, in which Saleh loyalists retained essential commands, offered

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no resistance as the Houthis entered the capital. Hadi was placed under house arrest. Saleh's party, the General People's Congress, expelled him. In early 2015, he fled to his hometown of Aden, the onetime capital of the old People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (or South Yemen), which existed until 1990. In Aden and the south, an overwhelming majority had yearned for renewed separation from "unified" Yemen since the 1994 civil war. In late March, Hadi went into exile in Riyadh and appealed to the kingdom to reinstate him in the presidential palace in Sana'a. Frequently referred to as the "internationally recognized president," but lacking a domestic constituency or mandate, he nominally "governs" from exile.

On March 26, 2015, the new Saudi king, Salman, and his son Muhammad bin Salman, the defense minister, launched what they called Operation Decisive Storm on Hadi's behalf. The declared motivation for the Saudi-led intervention was and is to thwart Iranian influence in the peninsula. Because Zaydism is a sub-denomination of Shia Islam, the Saudis see Ansar Allah as an Iranian proxy. Despite the absence of any photographic or physical evidence, Riyadh continually insists that Iran is smuggling weapons to the Houthis—and US officials occasionally repeat the claim.

Thus the convoluted power struggle in Yemen is frequently characterized as a battle of Sunni against Shia. This simplified sectarian frame, widely reiterated in the international media, implicitly places the Saudi-led coalition alongside al-Qaeda in the fight against the Zaydi-Shia Ansar Allah. But in a separate conflict ongoing in Yemen, the Americans continue to fire drone missiles and occasionally other weapons at suspected al-Qaeda positions, while concurrently siding with the Saudis against the Houthis. The local branch, known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has benefited strategically from the general mayhem, particularly in the southern regions where it has established a presence and seems to be fighting alongside Emirati forces against the Houthi and Saleh militias.

WANTON DEVASTATION

The viciousness on all sides is extreme. The Saleh-Houthi alliance has committed atrocities on the ground, particularly in attempting to oc-

cupy, control, and subdue Aden and the third major city, Ta'iz, which they subjected to a bitter siege after encountering fierce local resistance. They also recruit and exploit child soldiers. When they manage to shoot a few missiles across the northern border into Saudi Arabia, they do so indiscriminately.

However, the most devastating humanitarian and economic repercussions are inflicted from above and beyond by the superior firepower of fighter-jets, helicopter gunships, and naval warships—all manufactured in the West and deployed by the Saudi-led coalition. The United States, the United Kingdom, and several other NATO powers explicitly or implicitly share responsibility for the onslaught. The Obama and Trump administrations arranged the sale of over \$300 billion worth of Hellfire missiles, cluster munitions, and other advanced weaponry to Saudi Arabia alone, and have participated directly in operations with in-air refueling, surveillance, and training. American, British, and other arms

industries profit from the wanton and largely pointless belligerence. Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and Honeywell Aerospace are the major US suppliers and contractors to the Saudis and the UAE.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and a few coalition partners such as Egypt have enforced a draconian air and naval embargo, ostensibly to block the importation of Iranian weapons but in fact, according to international humanitarian organizations, also obstructing shipments of food, fuel, medical supplies, and even the arrival of foreign journalists. The Sana'a airport's runways were bombarded. The main Red Sea port at al-Hudaydah was deliberately put out of commission; inspectors refused to allow replacement equipment to be imported. Air strikes in most parts of the country disabled water and power supplies, damaged or closed hospitals and clinics, left craters in roads, toppled bridges, and blasted markets, factories, gas stations, hotels, and cultural sites. Hadi and his foreign backers shut down the banking system, so that civil servants—including first responders, health-care providers, and sanitation workers—went without salaries indefinitely.

Two and a half years into the Saudi-led intervention, some 21 million people—three-quarters of Yemen's population—face food insecurity or severe

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malnutrition. Untreated sewage has contaminated drinking water, causing what the United Nations calls the world's largest cholera epidemic—nearly 900,000 cases as of November 2017. Cholera is treatable, but the crippled health care system was already overwhelmed by patients suffering from war wounds and starvation. Many of the afflicted can't reach hospitals because of damage to roads and bridges.

Meanwhile, as many as three million people have abandoned their homes. Prevented from traveling abroad by the air and naval blockades and strict border controls, and without systematic international assistance, they have sheltered with extended family, in makeshift tents, or in caves. It is worth underscoring that the victims of internal displacement, hunger, disease, and bombing are disproportionately the already underprivileged Afro-Yemenis of the Red Sea coastal region, who are Sunnis of the Shafa'i denomination, not Zaydi Shia. They are not supporters of either Saleh or the Houthis.

The internationally reported death toll from fighting alone reached about 10,000 by October 2016. After that, the Ministry of Health and other national and international agencies lost count, while the pace of airstrikes accelerated—from just under 4,000 in all of 2016 to 5,676 in the first half of 2017, according to tallies from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

SPLINTERING ALLIANCES

By the second half of 2017, events belied the simplistic story of a conflict driven by Sunni-Shia rivalries. Even the more convincing paradigm of geo-strategic rivalry between Iran and the dynastic autocracies of the Arab side of the Persian Gulf failed to pass the most rudimentary reality test when the Saudis and other GCC allies broke with Qatar. The UAE, a major party to the foreign intervention (unlike Saudi Arabia it put boots on the ground), has begun pursuing its own independent policy in South Yemen. The alliance of GCC ruling families no longer shares a common purpose; they are divided among themselves.

The temporary marriage of convenience between Saleh's supporters and the Houthis is also on the rocks. In September 2017, the two groups staged large, rival rallies in Sana'a (the capital has been under their joint control for three years). Unlike the joyful marches of 2011, when women and children were front and center, these were menacing, heavily armed, all-male power displays. As internecine rifts in both camps threaten to widen and deepen the violence, the overwhelming majority of victims will continue to be innocent civilians. The poorest country in the Middle East is paying a heavy price for reckless, convoluted struggles for supremacy among domestic, regional, and international powers. ■