Yemen: A handful of Special Interests

The percentage of Americans who have heard of Yemen is undoubtedly small. Still fewer could locate it on a map. Still fewer have even an inkling of its current political issues. Reality shows that civil unrest and insurrection has been happening in the north of that country since 2004, meaning there has basically been war in Yemen as long as there has been war in Iraq. Most of the world actually didn’t pay any attention to this conflict until maybe 2011-2012, when events inside of Yemen were swept up and connected to the Arab Spring, leaving most Westerners to think there was a ‘democratic populist movement’ that ultimately forced former President Saleh from power. None of this, of course, really comes close to reality and, most egregiously, is not even remotely as interesting. Dig just a little bit into the affairs of Yemen and one finds international intrigue, subterfuge, underhanded back-door deals, radicalism of at least THREE different varieties, indiscriminate drone attacks, and half a dozen players all placing a stake in the region’s destiny.

The original rebellion from the north that began in 2004 was a Houthi movement, which was a Shia movement, which the Saleh government tried to make into an Al-Qaeda-like sect seeking to turn Yemen into a Gulf theocracy that would implement Sharia. For the record, those fighting on the Houthi side said they were simply trying to stave off religious ethnicide and stop systematic discrimination that had long been perpetrated against them by the Saleh government. And now to disappoint all those who like to force black-and-white scenarios and ‘good guy hats’ and ‘bad guy hats’ into foreign affairs: BOTH sides were right in their descriptions. The Houthi movement was begun and initially run by a radical Shia cleric. Its vision of Yemeni government is one that stays true to its own religious doctrine. The Saleh government was indeed trying to exterminate the movement, root and branch, and had for YEARS inculcated a system of Shia discrimination across all of Yemen. So keep this in mind as you hear one side or the other trying to make its own single version of events the only story. Foreign affairs are never simple. Conflict is never clean. Yemen is no exception.

Most Americans closed the door on the Yemeni conflict once Saleh agreed to step down and institute a transitional government in 2012. Ironically, this is when true American involvement started to intensify. Being behind the stepping down of Saleh, it had a vested interest in the transitional government (which was decidedly pro-Western) and certainly was uneasy about any religious movement that might somehow be connected to Al-Qaeda. Add on to the fact that the Houthis were Shia, which makes any American think of Iran, which makes the American government queasy, and suddenly the recipe in Yemen was mixed with a heavy dose of drone strikes. What tends to be a bit odd is that those few Americans who know drones are used in Yemen also tend to not know exactly who the strikes are aimed against. The only sustained message given in the media, coming from the government, is that America is lending weapons and logistical support to the Yemeni government against ‘so-called Al-Qaeda elements operating in the country.’ There are some obvious problems with this imagining that could, ironically, only cause more problems for the United States down the road.

First, as mentioned earlier, the Houthis are Shia. Al-Qaeda is Sunni. While the Houthis are against the present regime supported by the United States, and can therefore be considered against American interests, messily labeling them Al-Qaeda for strategic messaging purposes is simply inaccurate, at best, and misleading at worst. Second, the Houthis are a popular movement made up of civilians and residing in the civilian north of the country. Therefore you can be certain that any and all American drone strikes have largely hit civilian populations and thus incurred civilian
casualties. This reality has been largely ignored and downplayed in the United States, as the details of Yemeni conflict remain deep in the shadows for almost all Americans. But given these strikes are actually being done by the American Intelligence Community, namely the CIA, in an arena where the US has not officially declared war or placed troops, the blowback potential long-term is being dangerously ignored.

It is not just the United States that has played fast and loose, however, with Yemeni affairs. The Yemen government has always made connections and leveled accusations of Iranian involvement and support to the Houthis, what with the common Shia heritage. These accusations are not completely baseless. Iran has a long history of generating support for whatever groups it can find across the Middle East, especially if those groups might share a particular hatred for Israel. Saudi Arabia has actually always supported the Yemen government’s version of events, but, keeping in mind the earlier axiom that foreign affairs are never simple and conflict is never clean, any Saudi decision that even peripherally connects to Iran has to be taken with a grain of skeptical salt, as Wahhabists running Saudi Arabia have long harbored resentment and competition with Shias running Iran. Any potential Shia emergence in the Gulf would most certainly be considered anathema to the Saudis and a potential danger to their sovereign national security interests in the Gulf and beyond. So while it is undoubtedly at least partially true that Iran has been quietly trying to support the Houthis, you can equally bet the Saudis have taken every behind-the-scenes opportunity to work against the Houthis. How much ANY of these maneuvers have happened with or against the Yemeni government, or even with its knowledge and permission, is completely unknown.

Some of the lesser-acknowledged but no less important entrants to the fighting involve Jordan, which has deployed commandos to the front in Northern Yemen to fight alongside Saudis who have also been secretly deployed to the region. Morocco, for whatever reason, has also supposedly sent para-military elite fighters into the region, trained for counter-insurgency operations, and utilized by the Yemeni government. Finally, Pakistan allegedly sent a force of 300 military commandos into Yemen, by invitation, to further shore up counter-insurgency operations. The one common element in all of these angles is that no one, and I mean absolutely no one, across the world stage seems to honor the sovereignty of Yemeni governance. Pretty much everyone is doing whatever they want to do, all of them claiming to have ‘the best interests of the region’ in mind. Even when the sides are openly invited or courted by Yemen officials, it is almost a certainty that once on the ground each individual side pursues its own interests however they may define or envision them.

So if anyone ever asks you what is going on in Yemen, just answer them everything and nothing. That is just about the only answer that makes any sense right now.

*Dr. Matthew Crosston is Professor of Political Science and Director of the International Security and Intelligence Studies program at Bellevue University, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*