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How Convenient: Saudis Attacked by the Houthis?

Say you ran a country famous for human rights abuses. It would be difficult for other countries to deal with you without facing so many awkward questions, so many so, they might decide it wasn't worth it. Even your old allies, who would otherwise defend you on principle through “thick and thin,” might start contemplating that it was in their own best interests to side with your enemies before they ended up the same way preindictment.

In such circumstances, your only ways to defend yourself would be either sheer force, or by connecting your misdeeds to what other countries considered a good cause. South American military dictatorships got away with abusing their populations and robbing their countries for decades. The civilised world would turn a blind eye as they were "protecting the world from Communism". With Communism gone they fell like a house of cards, because all they had left were their crimes and disappeared persons. Without the good cause to hide behind anymore, even the most benevolent dictatorship wouldn't have lasted a fortnight.

Hence it comes as hardly no surprise that Saudi Arabia, long a focus of global concern, is once again playing the victim in a conflict of its own making. The mighty oil rich monarchy which expects its own way in the region is pleading that the Houthi rebels in Yemen are bringing it to its knees with weaponry allegedly supplied by Iran, threatening oil interests, which always means US interests, in the Middle East and beyond.

All the usual elements are there: Saudi Arabia = Western Ally = Good Guys. Good guys don't attack the bad guys, the bad guys attack them. Iranian ally = bad guy. Therefore, the weapons used against the good guys must come from Iran, if they are being used in the Middle East, like they must come from Russia if used in Europe or China in the Far East.

But it is all a bit like listening to a Bruckner symphony. It all sounds nice, and even deep, but there is no narrative. The same figures repeat themselves again and again with different accompaniments, as if the speakers are playing American football against an imaginary opponent, relying on the goodwill of the listeners to give them a meaning.

Saudi Arabia cannot be so rich and powerful, and the Houthis so adept at destroying its installations, at the same time. When Japan was battered by its Tsunami in 2011, a common complaint was that such a rich country should not be so affected by natural disasters. That argument may be spurious when it comes to events beyond anyone’s control, but not when applied to a major regional power battling a rebel group which is supposedly being assailed from all sides by the most powerful armed forces in the world.

Saudi Arabia needs to be under attack to cover its multitude of sins. This begs the question; where are the Houthi’s weapons REALLY coming from?

Wandering in and out

In case anyone has forgotten, there are two big question marks hanging over the Saudi and US involvement in Yemen. The first is why the US ran away when it did. The second is why Saudi Arabia has stayed.

Very few people care enough about Yemen itself to get involved in its affairs, unless bases and sea passages are threatened. Even when it was split into two separate countries, the Arab nationalist Yemen Arab Republic and the Marxist-Leninist People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, these did not attract anything like the attention of East and West Germany, or even Congo (Kinshasa) and Congo (Leopoldville), as those two states were once known.
It is attractive to major powers for precisely this reason. Go to Saudi Arabia, and you must deal with a strong monarchy and a network of patronage, and the country's status as the spiritual home of Islam. Go to neighbouring Yemen and no one knows or cares what you get up to, or whom you offend whilst getting up to it.

Saudi Arabia was the major benefactor of the old Kingdom of Yemen, which later became the Yemen Arab Republic, after it was created following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It fought a proxy war there with Nasser's United Arab Republic, the short-lived union of Egypt and Syria, in the 1960s. Having prevailed against both these now defunct rivals, it is not going to create a power vacuum by leaving, when other countries are ready to fill that vacuum via yet more conflict in a peninsula which has seen long years of inter-Yemeni conflict of one form or another.

South Yemen, which went from monarchist to Arabist to Communist, was formerly a British protectorate. The long process of British decolonisation removed the will to fight the Arab nationalism which condemned its presence there as foreign imperialist occupation and offered up an alternative Arab imperialism people could understand.

But eventually pan-Yemeni nationalism proved stronger than pan-Arabism. This drove out the Soviet advisors who had supported the Arabist and Marxist regimes but did not replace it with the Saudi patronage enjoyed by the north, as the Saudis were too associated with one faction of North Yemen's conflict rather than Yemeni nationalism itself.

In the circumstances it was inevitable that the US considered itself the only acceptable patron, and regional countries also considered it the least offensive one. At least it was the common enemy they could be friends with to hide their own crimes, thus giving the US free rein to commit its own crimes, when all were friends together.

The US maintained ground forces in Yemen through thick and thin, including several waves of further conflict. It also managed to "lose" hundreds of millions of dollars of military equipment. It is a common pattern that when Uncle Sam loses weapons, terrorists seem to end up with them. After all, no one can sell arms to terrorists legally, but they get them all the same, and the "organised crime" outfits often blamed for these sales would use such weapons themselves, and gain greater rewards from so doing, if they really did control this trade.

Only when the US lost some pieces of paper from the embassy were the ground troops withdrawn. The story was that these had fallen into Iranian hands. So what? Even if Iran learns things it shouldn't, what difference would that make unless it had the resources to do something about it – and if it has those resources, why hasn't it used them against the "Great Satan" before, to win general approval at home?

All the arms passed on to terrorists leave a paper trail. Saudi Arabia is expected to be part of that, given its history and reputation. The US always claims that it is not, but still helps the Saudis due to intelligence the Saudis can provide. What that intelligence is about lies at the crux of the reason why Saudi Arabia can get away with anything, at anyone's expense.

**Sleeping fist**

Saudi Arabia needs to control Yemen through conflict rather than diplomacy because it would never be able to get away with creating a "sphere of influence" in the Middle East. Its traditions and methods are too distant from those of the West to make that permissible, even if it might benefit the poverty stricken and war-weary Yemenis.

The reason it will not be allowed to rule Yemen by proxy, as the US is so fond of doing to many countries, is because the Western tradition of seeing Yemen as nothing more than a large military base has alerted the US to the damage Saudi Arabia could do if it took control of it. Rather than concentrating on the negative aspects of military takeovers which the West also knows much about, such as the financial and human cost and the inability to get out with dignity, they focus on the strategic advantages the Saudis can gain by occupying what is now little more than a devastated desert.

Iran is under more international pressure than Saudi Arabia as a result of its nuclear programme, and the sanctions it has attracted. This programme is supposed to be a product of the inherent corruption of the Iranian state – or what others would call being different, operating according to religious and secular rules most of the locals chose over those imposed upon them by the West.

Saudi Arabia has long said that if Iran is developing nuclear weapons, rather than domestic energy, it will do the same. There is credible evidence that this is what it is currently doing – expansion of its existing military nuclear testing facilities, captured by satellite imagery, clearly suggest this.
Imagine a future Yemeni government, or a Saudi military contingent, controlling the southern entrance to the Red Sea with nuclear weapons. You know what Israel would say, and how much the US would listen when it did. You know what those who ship both legal and illegal goods would say, via their international protectors, even if they were well disposed in general to Saudi ambitions.

Consequently the US has to support the Saudi attempts to control Yemen by more or less conventional conflict. It turns a blind eye to the probable use of chemical and biological weapons because at least they are not nuclear weapons. The source of the Conflict will sap Saudi Arabia's energy and resources if sustained for long enough. In the best scenario, this will keep Saudi nuclear weapons out of Yemen, or from being developed at all when they must pay for conventional arms. If the worst happens, and the Saudis not only drive the Houthis away but overrun Yemen, this can be presented as the inevitable triumph of right, but with the string attached that the guardians of right, the US, can thus take tighter control of Saudi Arabia, via nuclear and arms agreements, to keep it on the “right” path.

No enemy can match a friend

It takes two to tango though. Saddam Hussein wasn't a terrorist, even though his methods were sometimes identical, and his challenge of the West in the Gulf War didn't last long. So how are all these different terrorist groups, who the Russians have demonstrated can be swept away without great difficulty, able to pose such an extended threat?

No “terrorist group” such as the Houthis would stand a real chance if they weren't being helped. They have money as well as arms, and the connections to acquire both. If you've ever wondered why Marx and Lenin spent so long in exile in the rich nations of Western Europe, now you know.

When the US casually announced it had lost 500 million USD of military equipment in Yemen it said the Houthis must have looted it. How? Which base or arms dump was attacked, and when? Which "Houthi sympathisers" smuggled those weapons out of US facilities, or Yemeni army ones?

For a country which suddenly told us a huge amount about Osama bin Laden on the day of 9/11, it seems a bit short on these crucial details.

The weapons the Houthis are using need expertise to be fired and targeted. The same expertise you acquire when you have been trained to use them by the country which manufactured them for its own use.

The Houthis are using US-made weapons, supplied by the US itself, against Saudi Arabia. The Saudis know this—they are happy to have their civilians threatened in the process as it makes them appear to be on the right side.

It also gives them an opportunity to develop nuclear weapons to the point where the US welcomes them into the nuclear club, under conditions which makes both parties appear right. The US will control Yemen and the Saudis can use their weapons against domestic enemies and other regional countries. Then everyone can happily believe they are doing God's work, provided they are still alive to do it.

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