Yemen: No Winners But Who Actually Loses?

Joe Biden has taken a lot of stick for the disorganised withdrawal from Afghanistan, and for his comment that “After 20 years I’ve learned the hard way that there is never a good time to withdraw US forces”. However he was absolutely right - there would never have been a good time for the US to leave, because it should never have gone there in the first place.

Afghanistan is treated as a special case, a unique cautionary tale. But it is part of a pattern we see again and again, which evokes the same response again and again - “We know this never works, but why didn’t it work this time?”

Western countries in general—and the US in particular, take the view that everyone wants to be like them. They just have to roll up and promise the earth, and everyone will recognise their superiority, stop doing what they have done for centuries and embrace whatever the West wants to do for them, because it makes them better people.

However we can all name many trouble spots where the US has been involved. The reason they are trouble spots is because this self-image is just self-deception. Most people in most places do want what the US represents. But they don’t want what it actually does. Therefore conflicts the US seeks to end by its presence only intensify, as the US is perceived as taking away what people want, not providing it.

This is why it often takes so long for the US to get out of anywhere. It can’t just sort out problems and leave, because it doesn’t provide solutions people want. But it has to try and do that, or at least pretend to, to be mighty Uncle Sam, not just another country.
The worse the US makes things, the more it needs to be there to sort out its own mess, because if someone else did that, there wouldn’t be any need for the US any more. The US is not an ethnic or political autochthony but an idea, a dream binding at least some of its people together. Take away the dream, you take away the country, whilst most others have the homogeneity and good sense to survive regardless of invasion, oppression or disaster.

This is why the US is still involved in Yemen. The ostensible reason is to stop Iran gaining greater influence in the peninsula. The actual reason is because the US was rumbled in Yemen long ago, and cares much more about that than it ever will about who sponsors the latest Yemeni government.

The US has to be in Yemen because few know or care about the place. It is therefore ripe for both military and ideological conquest, just like Africa, with its rich history of sophisticated political structures practically unknown in the West, was to the Westerners with guns in the nineteenth century.

If the US can’t ride in and control Yemen, what chance does it have against places it has heard of? Uncle Sam has to walk tall till the last pack of chewing gum, and before the next dam breaks. The US can’t be beaten in a backwater by people preferring a different vision – because this preference, rather than terrorism, is the real threat to the US.

**Out of Sight, Out of Sense**

The US can get away with its presence in Yemen because it is so far down the alphabetical list of countries. Unless you come from there, why should you bother about a place whose only claim to fame is that it isn’t Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, or any of the other countries in its broader region?

Many years ago Dr. Madsen Pirie, of the Adam Smith Institute, wrote a satirical article about a mythical organisation called O TO Z. This was a liberal, caring organisation dedicated to helping people who didn’t achieve as much as others simply because they always saw their names near the bottom of lists, and were therefore psychologically conditioned to think themselves inferior.

Pirie was only joking – he claimed one of the anti-discriminatory measures this organisation was campaigning for was for telephone directories to list the names in random order. But we understand the joke because we do know there is truth in it – further down the list, out of sight, out of mind, like the lower numbered competitors in an alpine skiing contest.

This is also why a previous article on Yemen hit home are many explanations of why the US wants to be in Yemen, but the ones which involve respect for Yemen as a sovereign state, people and culture are not often discussed. Mention however that the US only went there to smuggle arms to terrorists and the concept resonates, because that is how we expect nations at the bottom of the list to be perceived and treated.

So the US can do what it likes, because there is perceived to be no opposition. What credible source can provide it? Surely the Yemenis are all desperate to leave, live in the US and develop new identities as Yemeni-Americans, the superior version, and become members of the human race?

Iran is indeed providing military support to the Houthis, whether or not it is on the scale alleged by the US. More significantly, it provides friendship by seeking a peace settlement in which the Houthis are a partner in the new Yemen, like Hezbollah are in Lebanon.

But the only dimension in which the Iranian support for, or tolerance of, the Houthis is mentioned is a military one. If people don’t support the US, which has good guns, it is because their new friends are giving them bad guns.

Nothing else – no humanitarian aid, no scientific or educational exchanges, no protection from harm. Everything the enemy does has to be about guns, because the only way people wouldn’t want what the US is offering is if someone is forcing them, at gunpoint, to think differently.

They cannot fathom how can rational human beings support Iran, the Islamic state with the nuclear programme, which has called the US the Great Satan since 1979. It’s alleged that anyone who does that is not a human being, and thus gives the US even more reason to be there.

The same logic has propelled so many US actions that no one questions it. Yet still we marvel when the US doesn’t win everyone over by bombing them, bribing them or cajoling them, rather than ensuring and respecting local democracy, building roads and hospitals and making the benefits of all the US represents more widely available – the very things the US claims are certain cures for foreign ignorance.
Two Faces, One Mouth

Biden began his term by reversing the US course on Yemen. Whereas Trump had increased support to the Saudi offensive, in contravention of his own promises on taking office, Biden decided that peace was better than conflict, tried to legitimise both sides and seek a peaceful solution which would get the US out quicker, before ever-increasing complexity made the easy US solutions yet more hot air.

But it hasn’t happened, and it won’t happen. How can it, given the contrast between Biden and his predecessor?

Trump’s actions were typical of the man. Aggression, noise, wilful lies, grand gestures aimed at energising his base of support by appealing to its innate racism. The Houthis were terrorists because Trump wanted an enemy he could play tough guy against – and they were foreign. The Saudi intervention was as much a terrorist act, and an even bigger con, than anything the Houthis have done, but that was exactly what appealed to Trump, for reasons we all know.

Biden based his electoral appeal last time round, even if not on all previous occasions, on being the opposite of Trump. Quiet instead of loud, conciliatory instead of confrontational, mainstream instead of outsider. The System Strikes Back, as it were. So how will he ever be capable of changing the dynamic which got the US sucked into this?

If Biden wants to end the military aggression, he will have to replace it with diplomacy. But he isn’t capable of joining another country’s peace initiative, or accepting someone else’s rules.

Biden’s America is the land where Uncle Sam still knows best, and therefore asserts moral and diplomatic superiority wherever he goes. The US wouldn’t be there if it couldn’t work everything out better than anyone else. Even if no bullets are used, this is another version of Gunpoint Diplomacy, with all forces obliged to surrender to US pretensions before progress can be made.

Trump thought of himself as leading a revolt against an America which had failed his core supporters. Biden sees himself as embodying all the virtues of the America which has failed people, believing this will give them new hope, and include them once again.

So he has to show it in places such as Yemen to keep his support at home. The US must be better in every respect as it is, not how it would wish to be, and ensure that its traditions are propagated everywhere to give them any meaning.

Biden won’t commit the US to gung-ho, headline grabbing military actions. But his diplomacy is not going to work in a country where nobody trusts the US anymore, or cares about what it wants, or is affected by it.

Too many people are getting rich from this conflict, and the more people die, the fewer mouths they have to share it with. The only way the US will really influence things is by selling arms and oil to both sides, to make back some of the money already wasted on this conflict - but as soon as it does that, it is no longer in a position to make any rules.

Biden can only pull the US out of Yemen if it is totally defeated, as in Afghanistan, or if he can generate sufficient positive PR to keep his domestic supporters believing in themselves. Only a Yemen which looks more like the US will satisfy those supporters, or the military-industrial complex keen to make bigger profits elsewhere. But Biden will never admit that this is the least likely of all outcomes, for as long as the US is there.

Nobody stays in power long now unless they can show they are free of undue US influence, even in partner countries the US can only prosper by acknowledging that locals might have something superior of their own to offer, and supporting that. But a Biden US cannot do that anymore than a Trump one could, or there would be no Biden or Trump, as those who don’t dream either of their versions of the American Dream would have risen in their place.

All For One, We’ve Forgotten the Rest

At present, Uncle Sam is singing one of the familiar songs of a drowning man. The enemy has nastier weapons, not the nie ones used by the side the US supports, and this is being used to explain their apparent defiance of US superiority.

The Yemeni “government” forces, as they are described by the same press which avoids calling Sadat’s supporters the Government of Syria, are now targeting what they maintain is a “secret drone factory” in Sanaa, which is held by the Houthis. The US uses drones all the time. But if the other side have them, they are doing something contrary to the civilized rules of war, and if they manufacture them too, this increases their moral culpability.
This attack, like the other recent one on a “ballistic missile factory”, will be conducted from the air by means of precise navigation, aimed at ensuring the bombs only strike the intended targets and not civilian areas. How does the navigation get so precise? By using drones to map out the area, or what?

Here are the Houthis trying to minimise casualties in the war – in which, as it is recognised as such, they are official, recognised combatants, subject to the rules of war – and here is the US proxy trying to stop them. One law for one, one law for the other; yet still the US doesn’t recognise that importing and supporting such thinking makes it part of the problem, not the only cure.

The US has never got over Vietnam. It will take a long time, even longer, to get over Afghanistan. It can get out of Yemen if it wants to, and avoid the triple whammy, but it won’t. It won’t be the US any more if it has to accept that locals can do better, and know better, and have their own interests more at heart. America’s greatest enemy is itself.

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