

A Saudi Disaster Story:

Yemen's Unity by Force

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Brief Analysis

The capture last week of the port city of Aden by forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen marked the end of the short-lived rebellion by secessionist supporters of Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh. The outcome is a shock to the balance of power in the Arabian peninsula and a diplomatic disaster for Saudi Arabia.

The unification of Yemen in 1989, formally endorsed by democratic elections in 1992, was always seen as an uneasy marriage. The north (previously called the Yemen Arab Republic) had the larger population, an estimated 9 million as opposed to the estimated 3 million of the south (which had been known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.) Politically, the northerners preferred straightforward Arab nationalism with a minority (benefitting from Saudi backing) following Islamic fundamentalism. The southern leadership, who had rid themselves of British colonial rule in 1967, were once hard-line communists.

Saudi Arabia's apprehension about unification was fully warranted. Within months, the Yemen Republic emerged as a close ally of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. When Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in August 1990, President Saleh from his capital, Sanaa, sided with Saddam. In an atmosphere of near panic, the Saudi authorities fearing subversion expelled several hundred thousand Yemeni manual laborers from the kingdom.

Saudi fear of Yemen is based on a long-running border dispute made worse by the feeling that Yemen's large and poor population would dearly love some of Saudi Arabia's riches. Saudi sensitivity is legendary: when the results of a Saudi census were announced in 1993, one Saudi newspaper carried the triumphal headline, "We are now bigger than Yemen." (The unaudited figures showed that the kingdom had 12.3 million citizens.) There is the tale that the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdul Aziz -- also known as Ibn Saud, the father of King Fahd -- said on his deathbed in 1953, "Never allow Yemen to be united." Presumably less apocryphal is the report that King Fahd agreed to U.S. troops being sent to Saudi Arabia after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait when he was shown U.S. satellite photographs of Iraqi military aircraft at Yemeni air bases.

There is little doubt that Saudi Arabia -- by supplying weapons or money, or both --exacerbated conflict between north and south Yemen. Tensions had grown because of difficulties with oil production in the north, while new oil

reserves were being found in the southern territory. Southern suspicions of northern intentions regarding its slice of the national cake were already high when fighting began in early May between rival army units.

But if the Saudi intention had been to create a long-running civil war or re-partition, events on the ground showed that policymakers in Riyadh had a mistaken view of their abilities. Northern forces quickly moved into southern territory, encircling Aden and then seizing Mukalla, eastwards along the coast where al-Beidh had set up his headquarters. Saudi efforts to secure a United Nations cease-fire resolution were successful, largely due to the lobbying efforts of its ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. But the U.N. and other Arab states proved unable to give enough life to a cease-fire so that U.N. observers could be imposed between the two sides.

On the sidelines the Gulf Arab states dithered. Some, like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, almost recognized a new south Yemen state which even had a name: the Democratic Republic of Yemen. But the stance of the Gulf state of Qatar, which supported the north perhaps because of its own border dispute with Riyadh, made unity elusive.

The United States sought unsuccessfully to mediate, even using relatively heavyweight visitors like the assistant secretary of state, Robert Pelletreau. Individual U.S. officials say that the Saudis sneered at U.S. efforts, claiming that the northern advance would be halted when the well-armed southern tribes rose up in support of the Aden regime. "You don't know the tribes like we do," one senior Saudi is quoted as saying.

Under the circumstances, Saudi Arabia should have perhaps remained publicly quiet after President Saleh won control over all his national territory. But the degree of Saudi anxiety is clear. The day the fighting ended, King Fahd chaired an extraordinary meeting of the Saudi cabinet to discuss Yemen -- his first official meeting since having a gallstone operation in May. The next day, Prince Bandar flew to the G7 summit in Naples to lobby personally with President Clinton and British Prime Minister John Major.

For Saudis, the defeat for their policy in Yemen may be only of slightly less magnitude than Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait nearly four years ago. Riyadh will fear that President Saleh, boosted by success at home, will seek to pressure Saudi Arabia on borders, migrant workers and subsidies. The use of SCUD missile attacks, air force bombing and highly mobile armored units in the fighting will force analysts to revise their judgments on Yemen's military abilities. Already, Sultan Qaboos in neighboring Oman has reportedly cancelled his summer sojourn in Salalah, close to the border with south Yemen, because it is within SCUD range.

For the United States, the events of the last two months have been shown to be disastrous for its regional ally, Saudi Arabia. (It is conceivable that the status of the Saudi defense minister and a future claimant to the Saudi throne, Prince Sultan, the longtime architect of Saudi policy towards Yemen, could be diminished.) The U.S. must now help to pick up the pieces in the Arabian peninsula, so that a semblance of stability is restored, hoping that this policy is not undermined by a Saudi desire to back a guerrilla insurrection in Yemen.

Simon Henderson, a journalist with the Financial Times of London, is the author of The Washington Institute's Policy Paper, *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*. ❖

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