

Who's Behind the Houthis?

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Nearly 50 years ago, Yemen fought a civil war pitting the Saudi Arabian-backed government in Sana and its cadre of European mercenaries against Egyptian-backed insurgents. The six-year war was bloody: At one low point in the campaign, Cairo resorted to mustard gas and nerve agents in an effort to stem the tide. In the end, the government prevailed, but not before Egypt lost 26,000 troops.

Today in Yemen, the outlines of the conflict differ. Sana is challenged in the North by Shiite rebels (the Zaydi Houthi), in the South by impoverished Sunni separatists, and throughout by al Qaeda. Despite the new cast of characters, however, the current round of fighting features some parallels to its predecessor. Most striking among these is that Yemen again appears to be developing into a proxy war, the latest battlefield in the conflict between Iran and the "moderate" Arab states.

As in other Middle Eastern states with weak central governments -- most notably Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority -- the militant clerical regime in Iran has aligned itself with forces in Yemen seeking to destabilize the government and reverse the state's ostensibly pro-West orientation. Saudi Arabia -- which long ago supported rebels seeking to topple the government in Sana -- is now working to help insulate President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime from the rebel threat.

Riyadh is not supporting Saleh out of altruism. The Houthis are based along the Yemeni-Saudi frontier. Given the history -- in the 1960s, Egyptian-backed groups executed several acts of sabotage in Saudi Arabia, including against the ministry of defense and a Saudi airbase near the Yemeni border -- Riyadh is understandably concerned about border security.

In November 2009, the Houthis crossed the border and seized a parcel of Saudi territory, prompting a swift military reply. Since then, the Saudis have skirmished with the Houthis on both sides of the border and have suffered

significant losses. To date, more than 110 Saudi soldiers have been killed and six captured by Houthi forces. It has also been widely reported that a Saudi Apache helicopter was shot down by the rebels. Perhaps not surprisingly, Riyadh has blamed Tehran for Houthi military prowess.

The accusations have played out mainly in the Saudi press. In December 2009, the Saudi-owned London-based daily Asharq al-Awsat reported that "high ranking officials" from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps along with Lebanese Hezbollah met with Houthi rebels to coordinate military operations against Saudi Arabia. More recently, the Saudi assistant defense minister hinted at Iranian involvement in the fighting, noting, "it is not possible that [the Houthis] obtained the weapons deployed against us themselves."

To date, little hard evidence of direct Iranian support to the Houthis has emerged. The Yemenis say they have proof they have shared with their Iranian counterparts, but they have not yet publicly presented their case against Iran. Nevertheless, for the past year, the Yemenis have relentlessly accused Tehran of aiding the Houthis.

Last year, for example, President Saleh claimed that Hezbollah had trained Houthis on "grenades, mines and arms"; Yemeni diplomats similarly claim that Houthis have been trained by the Revolutionary Guard in Iran. In October 2009, Sana announced it had seized an Iranian ship transporting anti-tank weapons to the Houthis. And just a few weeks ago, while visiting the United States, Yemen's foreign minister told the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat that the rebels were receiving financial support "from Shiite authorities in and outside of Iran."

Still other sources -- including the intelligence publication STRATFOR -- claim that Iran's ally Syria has been facilitating movement of jihadists to Yemen, and that Iran itself has been funneling support to the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- the potent group that sponsored the Christmas Day attempt to bring down a passenger jet over Detroit.

Tehran has not denied the Saudi and Yemeni accusations so much as gone on the offensive against Saudi Arabia. During a televised speech on January 13, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad condemned Riyadh for "enter[ing] the war and us[ing] bombs...and machine guns against Muslims."

That Ahmadinejad would defend the Houthis comes as no surprise. The Houthis call their philosophy "pure Shia" and openly declare allegiance to Tehran. When asked last year about the bond between Iran and the rebels, leading Houthi cleric Issam al Imad compared the group's leader, Hussein al Houthi, to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, a vassal of Tehran.

The preponderance of evidence suggests a significant relationship between Tehran and the Houthis. But even if Yemeni and Saudi claims of Iranian support to the rebels are overstated, given Tehran's track record, it seems likely that Iran is playing some role in fanning the flames of insurgency in Yemen.

Washington has not yet implicated Tehran. But the administration may be moving in that direction. On January 21, the commander of U.S. forces in the region, General David Petraeus, suggested that "some indicators" could point to Iranian involvement in the conflict. Then, on January 31, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman told Al-Hayat that while Washington takes the accusations seriously, "we do not have evidence that the Iranian interference with the Houthis is as deep as is the case with Hezbollah." Feltman is among the finest and most candid of U.S. diplomats. So it is noteworthy that he does not outright deny Iranian involvement. In fact, his analogy seems to confirm it.

It is possible -- as Yemeni officials claim -- that U.S. efforts to date to downplay this issue are related to a desire not to undermine talks over Tehran's nuclear program. This explanation, while troubling, would comport with the Obama administration's hesitancy to back Iraq's accusations of Syrian complicity in the August 2009 bombings in Baghdad that killed more than 100, for fear criticism of Damascus would scuttle U.S. efforts to engage with the Assad regime.

However much support Iran may be providing the Houthis, Washington's allies in Riyadh and Cairo increasingly view the conflict in Yemen as a fight with Iran. In a region mired in conflicts with Iran, Yemen would appear to be the latest battleground.

In the coming weeks, the United States is slated to boost its 200-strong Special Forces training contingent already in Yemen. Not only will U.S. soldiers be targeted by the Houthis -- based on a January 14 fatwa against foreign troops signed by 150 non-Houthi clerics including a member of parliament -- U.S. forces could also find themselves in the sights of average Yemenis.

The troop deployment to train Yemeni forces represents not only a burgeoning counterterrorism partnership with Sana, but an opportunity to contain Iranian expansion in the Gulf. In this increasingly complex and dangerous environment, the sooner Washington understands the degree to which the Houthi are Iranian surrogates, the better able the U.S. forces there will be to counter the threat and mitigate the risk of another failed Middle East state.

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