

Yemen: Regional instability worsens as government pursues insurgents

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Fierce fighting in the northern Yemen region of Saada between government forces and insurgents has unleashed a humanitarian crisis and threatens the stability of the country and wider region.

The government launched “Operation Scorched Earth” on August 11 in an attempt to crush an uprising by the Huthis, sparked by a police operation in 2004 and raging on and off ever since, claiming thousands of lives.

The conflict has been dovetailed into the United States’ phoney “war on terror.” Under pressure from the US, its client states Saudi Arabia and Egypt have backed Yemen militarily and accused the rebels of garnering Iranian support, which they deny.

The Huthis are Shiite Muslims, but an entirely different sect to the Shiites of Iran. Yemeni Shia comprise about 40 percent of the country’s 23 million citizens. The majority of the population are Sunni.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh has accused the Huthis of trying to establish a “Shiite zone” along the Yemen-Saudi border and suggested that links exist between the rebels and Hezbollah. The government recently seized an Iranian ship in the Red Sea, which they claim was transporting anti-tank missiles to the north. A local official told AFP that the arrested Iranian were “instructors” planning to evacuate wounded Iranians already in the region working with the rebels.

The Huthis, known also as the Zaidis, were the elite in northern Yemen prior to the coup of 1962. During the civil war that followed, Saada was the main opposition stronghold. Saleh, himself a Zaidi, accuses the Huthis of trying to reestablish the pre-1962 Zaidi Imamate.

The underlying causes of the conflict are the historical marginalisation and endemic underdevelopment of this region, which are the legacy of imperialism. The city of Aden in the south became a British base in the 19th century. Initially it was a coaling station on the route to

India and later became the site of a British Petroleum oil refinery and tanker port.

After the British were driven out in 1967, Yemen became the scene of Cold War rivalries. The south became the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen, aligned with the Soviet Union. In the north the Yemen Arab Republic was formed in 1962 under the protection of Egypt. This led to civil war when Saudi Arabia and Jordan, with Western support, backed the deposed royalists. North and South Yemen were only joined in a united republic in 1990. There followed another civil war in the south of the country.

Saleh said recently that government forces would crush the rebels “in the next few days,” but last month he said that the government was ready to fight for years if need be. Operation Scorched Earth involves sustained air strikes and the destruction of entire villages and infrastructure by army shelling. There are numerous reports of civilians being killed.

Within the first days of the offensive 15 civilians were killed when a marketplace was shelled, and more than 80 people—mostly women and children—were reportedly killed when a camp for Internally Displaced People was struck by shells. Human Rights Watch cites a witness who said, “Yemeni military planes conducted four raids this morning and, without warning, bombed a group of displaced persons sheltering in an open area near a school. There were no armed clashes or rebels in the area at the time, the witness said, but the area was close to a road sometimes used by Huthi rebels.”

The city of Saada has been virtually cut off for over six weeks, with roads blocked by the army. Local residents and displaced people have been unable to leave the city to seek safety elsewhere, and food and essential items are running out. The government is demanding surrender before peace talks begin.

More than 60,000 people have so far been displaced by

the conflict. Eighty percent of the displaced people are women and children, according to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. One-third of children in the camps are acutely malnourished, according to UNICEF, and many could die without more help. Yemen is also home to some 150,000 refugees who have braved the journey across the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, from Ethiopia and Somalia.

Egypt Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit and the intelligence chief, General Omar Suleiman, travelled to Saudi Arabia in early October and debated with Riyadh over how to strengthen the Yemeni government's hand in the conflict. According to Stratfor, the US security analyst web site, the Egyptians are pushing for sustained military air strikes in Saada province, greater US assistance and replacement pilots for Yemen's air force.

Saudi Arabia has its own minority Shiite population concentrated in the southwestern provinces of Najran and Jizan near the Yemen border. Saudi fighter jets taking off from Khamis Musheit air base have been routinely bombarding Yemeni rebel positions along the border. Stratfor also reports that the Saudis are covering the bulk of the costs in the conflict and are providing funds to encourage the Murad, Hashid and Nahm tribes in Yemen to take part in the fighting against the Huthis.

Saudi Arabia denies reports that its troops have taken part in the fighting. But the London-based *Daily Telegraph* recently suggested that conflict is emerging as a proxy struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for control of the Gulf.

Yemen is under severe duress due to the global economic meltdown, and depleting oil and water resources. The global drop in oil prices has severely affected Yemen's economy, with oil revenues down by 40 percent this year. Oil revenues had comprised 70 percent of overall revenue and 90 percent of export receipts. It is the Arab world's poorest nation, with population growth amongst the highest in the world and unemployment at more than 40 percent.

On September 2, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued a "flash appeal" for \$23.7 million to help the tens of thousands of people displaced by the conflict in the north. By October 19, the appeal had received just \$4.5 million.

The US is keen to peddle the claim that Al Qaeda is growing in Yemen. Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center said, "We have witnessed the reemergence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with Yemen as a key battleground and potential regional base of operations from which Al

Qaeda can plan attacks, train recruits, and facilitate the movement of operatives."

President Saleh has also claimed that the Huthi rebels have ties with Al Qaeda, despite the fact that Al Qaeda, to the extent that it exists at all, is a Sunni organisation.

Christopher Boucek, Middle East researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, believes, "For the US government, Yemen is a counterterrorism priority second only to Afghanistan/Pakistan," despite the fact that US aid to Yemen is disproportionately small given its importance to US national security.

He also wrote in a recent Carnegie Paper, "Yemen: Avoiding a Downward Spiral," "If left unaddressed, Yemen's problems could potentially destabilize Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. The inability of the Yemeni central government to fully control its territory will create space for violent extremists to regroup and launch attacks against domestic and international targets. The international community must be realistic about the limitations of intervention in Yemen. In the near term, however, inaction is not an option."

In addition to the insurgency in the north of Yemen, the government also faces a secessionist movement in the south. Large demonstrations by tens of thousands of dismissed military personnel and civil servants demanding better pay and benefits have been held at intervals since 2006. Recent demands have broadened into a nationalist campaign including outright calls for independence.

Southern secessionism is rooted in the Cold War, when Yemen was split in two. Saada was backed by Washington and Riyadh and followed a policy of Islamisation to contain the nominally Marxist south. That policy continued into the 1990s, when the Yemeni government used the same Salafist-Jihadist movement against the southerners in the 1994 civil war. Saleh is still heavily reliant on a large number of Salafist-Jihadists within his power base, though this is conveniently overlooked by Washington.



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