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PENINSULA SHIELD FORCE INTERVENES IN BAHRAIN

Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa has announced a “foreign plot” against his country was thwarted by the military intervention of forces under the command of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Global Arab Network, March 21; VOA, March 21). The deployment was apparently carried out without consultation with Washington though short notice was given (AFP, March 14). A rare moment of agreement was seen in the responses of Washington and Tehran, with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggesting the “alarming” intervention was “not the answer” to Bahrain’s problems, while the Iranian Foreign Ministry described the intervention as “unacceptable” (CNN, March 17; *Tehran Times*, March 16). The GCC deployment indicates the Arab states of the Gulf region obviously feel more comfortable providing military support to regimes like Bahrain’s than revolutionaries such as those fighting in Libya.

The GCC member states, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, define security as a collective responsibility and therefore reject criticism from the UN and elsewhere that the arrival of GCC forces in Bahrain was a “foreign military intervention.” This stance has been supported by the Arab League, which described the entry of GCC troops as “legitimate” (WAM – Emirates News Agency, March 22). The Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) draws on troops from GCC member states and has fluctuated in size since its creation in 1982, ranging from between 5,000 men in its early days to a current total of nearly 40,000 troops including infantry, artillery, armor and combat support units with a permanent base at Hafar al-Batin in Saudi Arabia.

The PSF was created as the military wing of the GCC in response to the threat posed by the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, which threatened the security of the entire region. Pledged to protect the security and territorial integrity of member nations, the PSF was first mobilized in 1986 during the battle between Iran and Iraq for the Faq Peninsula, which brought the fighting dangerously close to several Gulf states and threatened oil exports. After PSF troops were deployed in Kuwait during the second Gulf War of 1990-1991, the PSF intensified its efforts to transform itself into a highly coordinated, well-armed and thoroughly trained force capable of responding quickly to security threats (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 16). The PSF was again deployed in Kuwait in 2003 in the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

A PSF detachment of 1,000 mechanized Saudi troops and 500 police from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) crossed the causeway into Bahrain on March 13 in response to a request for military support from Bahrain. Qatari Colonel Abdullah al-Hajri has confirmed Qatari troops have joined the PSF in Bahrain, but did not elaborate on the size and composition of their contribution (AFP, March 18). Kuwait has also announced it is sending a naval group to protect Bahrain's coastal waters (Watan [Kuwait], March 18).

In Bahrain, the PSF has been tasked with protecting infrastructure such as power stations, oil facilities and government buildings as well as maintaining law and order (*Saudi Gazette*, March 15). Prominent Shiite cleric Shaykh Issa Qassim, a major supporter of the protests in Bahrain, told worshippers on March 18 that the GCC troops could be put to better use defending Palestinians in Gaza from Israeli attack than patrolling the streets of Bahrain (Arab Times, March 18). An opposition statement described the PSF's arrival as "an overt occupation of the kingdom of Bahrain and a conspiracy against the unarmed people of Bahrain" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 15).

The PSF is led by joint forces commander Major General Mutlaq Salem al-Azima, who told *al-Arabiya* the PSF has no intention of interfering in Bahrain's politics: "The role of the troops is to protect strategic sites, whether marine or air bases, as well as military camps outside the cities and they do not take part in Bahrain's internal affairs... The troops will stay until foreign [i.e. Iranian] threats are warded off. Till this happens, the troops will remain to serve the military leadership of the kingdom of Bahrain" (*al-Arabiya*, March 23).

The commander of the Bahrain Defense Forces, Marshal Shaykh Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa and National Guard Commander Lieutenant General Shaykh Muhammad bin Isa al-Khalifa, both members of the ruling family, inspected the PSF forces on March 23, where the BDF commander praised the work of the GCC troops in deterring threats to Bahrain (Bahrain News Agency, March 23).

Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, denounced the GCC's military intervention and accused the United States of sponsoring the action: "Regional nations hold the U.S. government accountable for such a heinous behavior... The U.S. seeks to save the Zionist regime and suppress popular uprisings. So, it supports certain governments" (Press TV [Tehran], March 17). In a letter to the UN, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi asked: "How could one accept a government to invite foreign military forces to suppress its own citizens?" (Arab Times, March 18). Bahrain, which blames Iran for the unrest, withdrew its ambassador to Tehran in protest (Bahrain News Agency, March 15). The Saudi embassy in Tehran and a consulate in Mashhad have since been attacked by Iranian demonstrators opposing the PSF deployment in Bahrain (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 21).

AFGHAN TALIBAN DENOUNCE NATO ATTACKS ON LIBYA BUT DO NOT PICK SIDES

Afghanistan's Taliban movement has responded to the Western intervention in the Libyan rebellion with predictable anger, but declined to declare their support for either the loyalist or rebel factions in the conflict (ansar1.info, March 20).

The statement from the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" described the intervention as a "politically-motivated and uncalled for" adventure that would harm Libya and the greater Islamic community. Without making reference to either Qaddafi or the rebels, the Taliban simply expressed "pity that the situation in Libya evolved to the extent that paved the way for anti-Islamic forces to intervene." The Taliban believe the intervention is intended to weaken Libya through a war of attrition before seizing its oil reserves in a direct invasion.

The movement's recommendations are somewhat ambiguous; the Taliban suggests that the Libyan people "fulfill their Islamic and national duty" so that "internal and external enemies" cannot use them as "scapegoats

for their warmongering policy.” The ummah [Islamic community] and rulers of the Islamic world should not remain neutral, but should play a role “in line with the interests of Islam,” which will enable Libya to evade “the tentacles of foreign colonialism.” The statement appears to reflect the Taliban’s reluctance to issue a statement supporting either Qaddafi, whose “Green Book” ideology is abhorrent to most Islamists, or the largely secular rebel movement. Neither camp can be described as sympathetic to the Islamists, who have played a relatively insignificant role in the rebellion.

Colonialism has been a Taliban concern lately as the movement develops a response to U.S. proposals to establish permanent military bases in Afghanistan. In a statement entitled “The Afghans Can’t Tolerate the Occupation even for a Single Day, Let Alone Tolerate Permanent Bases,” the Taliban ask, “How is it possible that the proud tradition of the common Afghans and the religious obligation and the Afghan characteristics of the mujahideen will allow them to overlook the overall American presence in the country?”

A recent article in the Taliban’s *al-Somood* magazine entitled “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Combating Colonialism, Between Yesterday and Today” compared the Russian occupation of Afghanistan to that of the United States: “To us there is no difference between the Russians and the Americans. Each of them has occupied our country and shed our blood, destroyed our civilization, corrupted our culture and our religion... If yesterday, Russia described the battalions of liberation and jihad and all the mujahideen as evil, America... likewise describes its unjust and evil occupation as fighting terrorism, its intervention in other countries’ affairs as building civilization and restoring women’s rights, its obliteration of the economy as opium eradication and the sabotage of minds and ideas as education and culture” (*al-Somood* 56, March 10).

After Mubarak: Egypt’s Islamists Struggle to Adapt to the Egyptian Revolution

By Hani Nasira

Following the departure of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak on February 11 and the collapse of his regime, new faces and conflicts have appeared within the ranks of Egypt’s Islamist movement, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

As with the larger Egyptian revolution, internal dissent first appeared on Facebook pages under the slogan “Brotherhood, Development, Revolution.” Postings from the Brotherhood youth called for the dissolution of the various group structures, including the post of the General Guide, the Guidance Office and the Consultative Council, as well as demanding the involvement of the younger members and the “Sisters division” in the Brotherhood’s decision. In addition, the Facebook pages demanded the assignment of a committee of five members (with relevant qualifications and who are not members of the current Guidance Office) to manage the Group’s affairs during the transition phase in the run-up to elections in six months.

This reveals a possible cloning for the Egyptian revolution within the Muslim Brotherhood, whereby the group’s youths threatened to take to the streets and hold protests demanding the dissolution of the organization if their demands were not met by March 11. These threats compelled the group’s Guide, along with a number of its leaders, to meet with the youth’s leadership (comprised of 200 members) in Cairo for four full hours in order to ease their anger and pledge to respond to their demands (IslamTimes.org, March 3).

The situation looks more difficult for the Egyptian Islamic Group (EIG), which appears to have joined the revolution only after it had achieved its objective. The EIG leadership adopted a stance contrary to the revolution at its onset and took little part in it. While the EIG prepares to establish an Islamic Party, as announced by one of its leaders, heated discussions are going on within its youth wing over the movement’s role in the revolution. Many of the group’s youth resent their leaders’ attitudes toward the revolution as well as their hesitant and indecisive reaction to the momentous developments.

This dispute reveals a severe generational conflict within the group that threatens to divide it and disperse its members. Historically, the EIG leaders have been the sole decision makers within the movement. It is possible that some of its youth members might choose to join new Islamic parties that include senior jihadists and independent Islamists.

In Alexandria the Salafists were not enthusiastic about the revolution from the start. Their members did not join it in practice and confronted it in theory. The Salafists repeatedly claimed that involvement in the uprisings and political conflicts would divert attention away from preaching activities and would further exhaust the Islamic movement.

After the success of the revolution many Facebook invitations were sent to the Salafists to work in politics and help unify the Islamic movement. However, the Salafists insisted on adhering to their commitment to preaching activities and refusing to take part in political work. Despite their opposition to political participation, the Salafists have issued a number of announcements in which they confirmed the necessity of fully activating the second article of the Egyptian constitution (providing that Shari'a will be the main source of legislation) by implementing Islamic law

In an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *Al Shorouq*, Salafist advocate Ahmad Farid confirmed that members of the Salafist movement did not take part in the revolution or its protests, which required forbidden things like mixing between men and women and the raising of the Cross. Despite their view of democracy as blasphemy, Farid did not dismiss the idea of the Salafists being active within a political party: "The Salafists must be present in the political arena in the coming phase and it's not unlikely that the movement would endorse specific individuals to take part in general elections, either parliamentary or presidential, especially after the collapse of the fear barrier which preyed on the previous era [i.e. Mubarak's regime]... The Street seeks the Salafists who would hold the Islamic rituals and would provide more public services than the brotherhood" (Shorouk News, March 5).

The Salafists were invited to join in on political work by other streams as well, including the Salafist "Hafs" movement headed by Shaykh Rida Ahmad al-Samady. [1] Some recent leaks point to the possibility of the Salafists approving of their youth joining one of the Islamic parties that are being formed after the revolution

and will call for the full implementation of Islamic law in accordance with a Salafist process. This is a major change from pre-revolution days when the leadership rejected a similar invitation from al-Samady.

The Salafists have observed that their persistent calls for the full activation of the second article of the Egyptian constitution prompted both the head of Cairo's al-Azhar University and Coptic Pope Shenouda III to request that it remain unchanged in its current application. Other requests for the establishment of a civil democratic state are considered completely taboo by the Salafists, as this threatens their Islamic vision of the Egyptian state (Shorouk News, March 5).

Hani Nasira is an Egyptian writer who specializes in ideological movements.

Notes:

1. <http://alharakahalsalafiah.blogspot.com/> , March 14, 2011.

The Circassians of Libya and the Battle of Misrata

By Murad Batal al-Shishani

Forces loyal to embattled Libyan leader Mu'ammara l-Qaddafi have battled for days to take the coastal city of Misrata. Qaddafi's efforts to take Misrata shed light on the little known role of Circassians in Libya, descendants of the Muslim tribes of the northwest Caucasus region who gathered themselves around this settlement in the 19th century.

On March 8, Qaddafi delegated a diplomat to meet Circassian community leaders in the Jordanian capital of Amman. The leaders were asked to mediate in order

to convince the Circassians in Libya to take Qaddafi's side in the ongoing struggle for Libya. Jordan is home to a significant Circassian diaspora community with close ties to the Jordanian royal family.

An informed source told Jamestown that after the Libyan ambassador to Amman resigned in protest of Qaddafi's actions, the deputy ambassador contacted members of the Circassian Tribal Council of Jordan (CTCJ), stating that a private jet was ready to fly them to Libya to mediate between the regime and the Circassian community in Misrata, which lies 210 km east of Tripoli. The source told Jamestown that an airplane belonging to Qaddafi spent two nights in Amman's Queen Alia International Airport. Most Circassians in Libya dwell in the area around Misrata, where their numbers are estimated at roughly 15,000. There are also substantial communities in Tripoli and Benghazi [1]

Although there are several theories on the first Circassian settlement in Libya, the roots of the Circassian presence in Libya most likely go back to Muhammad Ali Pasha's treacherous 1811 massacre of most of Egypt's Mamluks at the Citadel in Cairo. Most Circassians in the Middle East are descendants of the vast migration of Circassians at the point of Russian bayonets from their traditional Caucasus homeland in the 19th century. However, there was also a substantial Circassian community in Egypt, where Circassian Mamluks ruled from 1382 to 1517. The Circassians remained part of the Egyptian military and political elite until the Arab nationalist revolution of 1952.

Most of Egypt's Mamluk warrior class were purchased as slaves in Circassia and brought to Egypt to undergo intensive martial training before being given their freedom as part of Egypt's foreign-born ruling class. Of those Mamluks not present at the treacherous massacre at the Citadel, some headed west to found the settlement of Misrata (lit. "those who migrated from Egypt") while others escaped Muhammad Ali's troops and unsympathetic Arab tribesmen to head south to the Dongola region of the Sudan. Muhammad Ali, however, was determined to destroy the Mamluks to the last man, and nine years later sent an army under his son Isma'il to flush out the 300 or so surviving Mamluks at Dongola, who were by that point at war with the powerful Sha'iqiya tribe. On hearing of the approach of Isma'il's army, the remaining Mamluks dispersed in several directions. The largest group headed west, where the Sudanic sultanates took their turns depriving the warriors of their goods and armor before expelling

them. In desperation, the survivors struck out into the desert, headed for Ottoman Libya. Some apparently succeeded in reaching their comrades in Misrata, where they are remembered by the prominent family name Dankali [i.e. Dongolawi]. [2]

The Circassians in Libya are organized into several families and they are well integrated into the Libyan social and tribal system. A Libyan woman originally from Misrata, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told the author that Circassians are well-respected people in Misrata, where they are prominent as merchants. Their features are different than other Libyans, particularly their hair and eye color. [3] However, it appears that the Circassian language and most of the customs and traditions have been lost. [4]

Qaddafi received a delegation from Jordan's Circassian Tribal Council in 2009, headed by Circassian community leader Adnan Mawloud. Qaddafi showed a deep respect for the Circassians and their historical suffering, as he called it, praising their role in host countries such as Jordan and describing them as brave and faithful people while noting their preference to be called by their traditional name, Adigya.

Qaddafi mentioned the Circassians' contribution in all countries in which they settled, but failed to note the Libyan Circassian ethnic minority. [5] A source aware of that meeting told Jamestown that Qaddafi refused the Jordanian Circassian delegates an opportunity to visit their brothers in the Libyan cities. The Qaddafi-worshipping Libyan state press recorded that the Circassians regarded Qaddafi "as a national leader with deep vision and philosophy that is worth appreciating and listening to" (LibyaOnline.com, June 2, 2009).

Unlike Circassian communities in other parts of the Middle East, Libyan Circassians do not hold high ranking positions in Qaddafi's military and security structure. Drawing on their martial traditions, Circassians became and remain an important part of the security and military structures in many of the countries to which they immigrated in the 19th century, such as Jordan, Turkey and Syria. This, however, has not been the case in Qaddafi's Libya.

Anis al-Sharif, a London-based member of the political committee of the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change, explained this situation as arising from Qaddafi's fear of creating "centers of power" inside his military and security intuitions. He has, therefore, relied on special

units of the military led by his sons, such as the 32nd Mechanized Brigade, popularly known as the “Khamis Brigade.” Al-Sharif also described militias based on individuals loyal to Qaddafi personally that allow the Libyan leader to avoid relying on particular tribal or ethnic groups. The rest of the military has been kept weak in order to avoid a repeat of the coup attempts that have attempted to overthrow his rule.

As an example, al-Sharif cited the 1975 military coup attempt by some 20 officers, most of whom were from Misrata and led by ethnic-Circassian Major Umar al-Meheshi. An original member of the 12-man Revolutionary Command Council that took power in 1969, he formed the conspirators’ first cell in Misrata. [6] Meheshi fled to Tunisia and eventually to Morocco, where he was unsuccessful in rallying resistance to Qaddafi. Al-Meheshi was handed back to Qaddafi in 1984 as a good-will gesture preceding the signing of an accord between Morocco and Libya. He has not been heard from since, though he is alleged to have been kicked to death by Qaddafi’s aides while Qaddafi waited in the next room. [7]

It seems that Qaddafi sent his delegate to Jordan in order to gain the support of Circassians in Misrata, which would have helped him consolidate his position in Tripolitania (northwest Libya) by eliminating a stronghold of resistance. The move confirmed the social-political importance of the Circassian community even though they are not influential within the military and security structures of Libya. In the meantime, the struggle for Misrata continues; a battle that Qaddafi himself has described as “decisive” for the future of Libya.

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Notes:

1. Nart Magazine 63(27), Circassian Charity Society, Amman, September 1998.
2. 1. See Andrew McGregor, *A Military History of Modern Egypt: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Ramadan War*, Praeger Security International, Westport Conn., 2006, pp.59-70.
3. Author’s phone interview, March 18, 2011.
4. Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook*, Curzon, Surrey England, 2001, p.119.

5. See the transcript: <http://libya11.com/showthread.php?t=1921> June 4, 2009.

6. Author’s phone interview with Anis al-Sharif, March 19, 2011.

7. Lillian Harris, *Libya: Qadhafi’s Revolution and the Modern State*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1986; *New York Times*, November 13, 1985.

The Unseen Hand: Saudi Arabian Involvement in Yemen

By Michael Horton

Introduction

The founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abd al-Aziz ibn-Saud (1876-1953) is purported to have said on his deathbed, “the good or evil for us will come from Yemen.” [1] The quote, regardless of its authenticity, accurately reflects the great importance and potential danger that Yemen poses to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has a long and complex history of involvement in Yemeni politics and this is unlikely to change. The future of Yemen, whatever that may bring, is intimately linked with that of Saudi Arabia and its influence in the country.

Faced with an ever increasing number of defections from his government and the military, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh called on Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal to mediate between his government and the anti-government protesters. On March 21, the Yemeni Foreign Minister, Abu Bakr al-Qiribi, was dispatched to Riyadh with a letter from Saleh (*Asharq al-Awsat*, March 21). This came after Yemen’s ambassador to

Saudi Arabia joined many of his colleagues around the world and defected to the protesters. Publicly, Saudi officials have maintained the line that the crisis in Yemen is an internal matter. However, behind the scenes, the Saudi government is deeply involved in negotiations with Yemen's tribal, political, and military leaders over the future of the regime and the country.

An Unruly Neighbor

Relations between the al-Saud dynasty and Yemen began with an al-Saud led attack on the Zaidi Imamate in 1803 that ended in Saudi forces pushing into parts of the Tihama region along Yemen's Red Sea coast. Saudi expansion was brought to an end in 1818 when forces under Egyptian Viceroy Muhammad Ali Pasha reestablished nominal Ottoman control over the Hijaz and parts of Yemen. However, in 1926, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud established a protectorate over the region of Asir along the Red Sea coast. Asir was once part of "Greater Yemen" which included parts of what are now the Saudi provinces of Asir, Jizan, and Najran. In 1932, Imam Yahya of Yemen moved his forces into the border region of Najran, but Saudi forces countered two years later with a major offensive that drove Yahya's forces out of the region. The defeat led to the Treaty of Taif in which Imam Yahya recognized Saudi claims to Asir, Najran and Jizan. [2]

For roughly the next 30 years, Yemeni-Saudi relations were largely free of the upheaval that characterized much of the first three decades of the 20th century. In 1962, Imam Muhammad al-Badr, who had just claimed the title of Imam upon the death of his father Imam Ahmed, was overthrown by a military coup backed by the Arab nationalist regime of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. Imam al-Badr and other princes from the Hamid al-Din family retreated to the mountains of northern Yemen and marshaled their forces to fight the Egyptian backed Republican forces. Yemen quickly became the stage for a proxy war between Nasser's Egypt and the monarchist al-Saud regime, which feared Nasser's Arab nationalistic rhetoric and expansionist agenda. More than 50,000 Egyptian troops were deployed to Yemen to help fight the Saudi-backed Royalists.

The Republican coup against al-Badr almost, albeit indirectly, led to the collapse of the House of Saud. Reform minded factions within the Saudi royal family supported some of the republican/nationalist ideals and wavered in their support for the Royalists, who sought the restoration of the imamate. Most importantly,

elements within the Saudi military supported the idea of republican/nationalist influenced reforms. The political upheaval in Yemen led to a dramatic reshuffling of the government in Saudi Arabia. The conservative faction within the Saudi royal family that supported the status quo sidelined the reformers and cautiously supported the Royalists with arms and money. The hard fought civil war in Yemen began to wind down in 1967 but was not officially concluded until 1970. The Saudis were forced to recognize the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and began providing financial support to the new state while maintaining its long standing political and financial ties to many of Yemen's most important tribal figures – notably the al-Ahmar family which heads the Hashid tribal confederation.

In south Yemen, what became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) gained its independence from Great Britain in 1967. The move in south Yemen towards Marxist/ Leninist ideologies presented even more of a problem for the conservative monarchist government of Saudi Arabia. Until Yemen's unification in 1990, Saudi foreign policy in Yemen was largely three pronged: contain and counter the threat of the expansionist PDRY, keep reform-minded leaders in the YAR in check and thwart efforts aimed at unification of the two countries. Saudi efforts to influence policy and events in the PDRY were largely failures, but it was far more successful at exerting influence in the YAR.

Saudi involvement in the downfall of both YAR President Abdul Rahman al-Iryani (1967-74) and his successor Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim al-Hamdi (assassinated in 1977) is widely suspected by many Yemenis and scholars. Al-Hamdi remains a popular figure in Yemen and a few posters with his portrait pasted on them have been carried by anti-government protesters in Sana'a. Though unsupported by evidence, the popular belief in Yemen is that the Saudis played a part in al-Hamdi's assassination. This belief was reiterated by a few of the protesters camped out near Sana'a university when asked by Jamestown about their views on Saudi Arabia.

Saudi relations with President Ali Abdullah Saleh are complex to say the least. Saleh has proven to be as adept at managing the Saudis as he has the tribes and tribal leaders. Shortly after taking power, he moved to counter the Saudi stranglehold on his arms supply by signing a \$600 million arms deal with the Soviets, despite the fact that they were also backing his enemies in the PDRY. At the same time, Saleh maintained his reliance on the tribal system in north Yemen and did not act overtly to

strengthen the central government to the disadvantage of the tribes. This policy pleased the Saudis since they had sway over the tribal leaders.

Yemeni-Saudi relations deteriorated markedly in the run up to the first Gulf War (1990-91). Yemen, which held a seat on the UN Security Council, failed to vote in favor of authorizing military action against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. This miscalculation on the part of Saleh and his advisors cost Yemen dearly in both economic and political terms. Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries canceled the work visas of over a million Yemenis. The loss of income from remittances dealt the Yemeni economy a blow it never really recovered from.

After September 11 and the advent of the “War on Terror,” Saudi Arabia and the United States dramatically increased aid to Yemen. The threat of Yemen becoming a base from which Salafi inspired militants could launch attacks into Saudi Arabia, motivated Saudi officials to adopt a more proactive and overt foreign policy.

Buying Influence

Saudi Arabia has long pursued a policy that aims to secure influence by paying “salaries” to many of Yemen’s most powerful figures within the government, the military and among the tribal leaders. The policy of buying influence has yielded mixed and admittedly largely unquantifiable results, but it forms the backbone of Saudi foreign policy in Yemen. However, it is not just tribal figures that receive Saudi money; it is likely that many ranking members of the Saleh regime receive “salaries” from Saudi Arabia. In a country that is as poor as Yemen, the money provided by Saudi Arabia, especially to lesser figures, is important and gives the Saudis considerably more influence than most other external powers.

The Houthi Threat

In 2009, the Yemeni military’s inability to put down or even contain the Houthi (Muslims who subscribe to a strident form of Zaidi Shi’ism) rebellion in the north forced Saudi Arabia to become directly involved in Yemen (see *Terrorism Monitor*, January 28, 2010). Saudi Arabia is historically cautious about deploying any of its military assets abroad.

The 1934 war with Yemen and the two Gulf Wars were the only times in more than eighty years that it deployed troops in significant numbers outside its borders, though

Saudi troops are currently deployed in Bahrain as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council force. Thus Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Houthi conflict, though still limited, denotes how seriously they take the threat posed by the Houthis.

Saudi fears of the Houthi movement center on concerns about its own religious minorities in the provinces that border northwest Yemen, where the Houthis are based. The province of Najran in particular is home to a large population of Zaidis and Ismailis (another Shi’a sect). In 2000, Saudi Arabia was forced to put down an Ismaili revolt. Many of the residents in Najran are also ethnically Yemeni.

The 2009-10 phase of the Houthi war left the Houthis in control of large parts of the Yemeni governorate of Sa’dah, which abuts the southern border of Saudi Arabia. The signs are that the Houthis and Houthi aligned groups are already taking advantage of the weakness of the Saleh regime by consolidating their hold on the region. In particular, reports indicate that they have taken complete control of the city of Sa’dah (Mareb Press, March 21; News Yemen March 20). These events must have the Saudis deeply worried, although, given the poor performance of their forces against the Houthis in 2009-2010, it is unlikely that they will take any kind of overt action apart from continuing to try to shore up defenses and security along their southwestern border.

Saving President Saleh?

Saudi Arabia, like other regional powers, is scrambling to try to assess, manage, and, if possible, contain the rapid rate of political change in the region. Saudi Arabia’s management of its foreign policy in Yemen has been frustrated by its own internal divides. The Yemen portfolio, in theory, belongs to Crown Prince and Defense Minister Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz al-Saud. However, he is ill and possibly incapacitated. Interior Minister Prince Nayef Abd al-Aziz al-Saud and his son Prince Muhammad bin Nayef seem to be the men who are really in charge of the portfolio but this remains unclear.

Outwardly, Saudi Arabia has continued to pursue its usual conservative and cautious approach to foreign policy by largely refusing to comment on events in Yemen. However, subtle shifts are detectable. The Saudi supported satellite channel al-Arabiya, while largely ignoring the revolt in Bahrain, has been covering Yemen and has used introductions like “Change in Yemen.”

Despite an at times contentious relationship with President Saleh, the Saudis cannot in anyway be happy about his likely departure and what this will mean for Yemen. Keeping Yemen weak and divided was very much an historical objective of Saudi foreign policy in Yemen, but the possibility of having a fragmented and chaotic Yemen as a neighbor at a time when Saudi Arabia is already facing its own set of problems likely means that Saudi Arabia is doing all it can to encourage stability and some kind of orderly transition that ensures roles for as many members of the Saleh regime as possible.

Conclusion

One analyst recently speculated that if Yemen were to descend into civil war, a real possibility would be that as much as half of Yemen's population of almost 24 million might try to seek shelter in Saudi Arabia. [3] Saudi Arabia could not begin to manage this. It largely failed to manage the refugee/ IDP crisis that arose from the 2009-10 war with the Houthis. Saudi Arabia's cautious and almost always covert foreign policy of the past may well be replaced with one that is more overt. This kind of change would be replete with dangers. Saudi Arabia is not popular with large portions of the Yemeni populace. Its involvement in the 2009-10 war against the Houthis helped further erode Saudi popularity in the country. Yet the changes in Yemen could easily - and most likely will - affect the House of Saud. In this regard, the possibly prophetic last words of King Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud are certainly worth remembering.

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Notes:

1. Christopher Van Hollen, "North Yemen: A Dangerous Pentagonal Game," *Washington Quarterly* 5(3), 1982, p.137.
2. See, F. Gregory Gause, *Saudi -Yemeni Relations*, Colombia University Press, 1990.
3. http://csis.org/files/attachments/100302_gulf_roundtable_summary.pdf.