



'God Help Us All': GOP Ties Obama Policies to Yemen Turmoil

By Todd Beamon

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Republicans blamed President Barack Obama's inept foreign policy for the turmoil in Yemen Thursday, with South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham saying that the bloodshed has become so common among warring factions in the region that "God help us all."

"We're on the verge of a full-scale proxy war in Yemen between Iran and Sunni Arab states that could spill over into Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, Lebanon, Jordan," Graham said at a news conference on Capitol Hill. "The Middle East is on fire, and it is every person for themselves."

Graham, who is considering a White House run in 2016, was joined by two other members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Chairman John McCain of Arizona and New Hampshire Sen. Kelly Ayotte.

"We categorically reject President Obama's foreign policy, which we believe has substantially contributed to this mess," Graham said. "Leading from behind does not work. It's putting the whole region in a state of chaos."

"The vacuum created by America's failure to lead in the Mideast is setting in motion a calamity that could result in a bloodletting between Sunnis and Shias that we haven't seen in a thousand years," he added. "This Arab coalition probably will not stop in Yemen, and Iran will probably push back."

The senators spoke after Saudi Arabia and its allies bombed Shiite rebels backed by Iran — and Egypt later Thursday pledged to send ground troops in after the airstrikes.

Iran denounced the Saudi-led air campaign, saying it "considers this action a dangerous step," as the air offensive turned impoverished and chaotic Yemen into a new front in the battle between Saudi Arabia and Tehran.

Yemeni President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who is backed by the Obama administration, reappeared Thursday after fleeing the country as the rebels — known as Houthis — advanced in the southern port city of Aden the day before.

Hadi arrived by plane in Saudi Arabia's capital of Riyadh, Saudi state TV reported.

The airstrikes started before dawn — pounding an air base, military bases and anti-aircraft positions in the capital of Sanaa and flattened a number of homes near the airport. The attacks killed at least 18 civilians, including six children. Another round followed in the evening, again rocking the city.

Rebel leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi angrily accused the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel of launching a "criminal, unjust, brutal and sinful" campaign aimed at invading and occupying Yemen.

"Yemenis won't accept such humiliation," he said on television late Thursday, calling the Saudis "stupid" and "evil."

The Houthis, who have taken over much of the country, mobilized thousands of supporters to protest the airstrikes, with one speaker lashing out at the Saudi-led coalition and warning that Yemen "will be the tomb" of the aggressors.

White House spokesman Eric Schultz said that President Obama had authorized logistical and intelligence support for the strikes, cautioning that the United States was not joining with direct military action.

The Saudi-led coalition included 100 fighter jets, 150,000 soldiers and other navy units, Saudi news agencies reported. Other aircraft came from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco and Sudan.

Yemen plays a crucial geographic role in the world's oil supply, with tankers that go through the Suez Canal having to navigate around the country.

Iran's role in the conflict comes as the United States is trying to negotiate a nuclear deal with Tehran by the end of the month. The nations implicitly are on the same side in battling the Islamic State in Iraq, aiding the Shiite-led government in Baghdad.

In addition, the U.S. is backing Gulf Arab states against the Shiite rebels allied to Iran in Yemen. Further, the al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula branch in the country — the target of U.S. drone strikes — is also fighting the Shiite rebels.

"It's an incredibly complicated relationship," Emma Ashford, a visiting research fellow at the Cato Institute, told Newsmax. "It really doesn't seem like there's some clear, overarching policy goal here with Iran."

That lack of focus by the Obama administration was slammed by the Republican senators at their news conference while praising the Saudi airstrikes.

McCain said that Saudi Arabia moved on its own because "our closest allies in the region no longer trust us.

"They no longer have confidence in the United States of America," he said. "The Saudis did the right thing."

Ayotte emphasized Tehran's role, saying that "Iran's backing of the Houthis has caused the situation to evolve where we've had to evacuate from Yemen and abandon our interests."

The United States evacuated about 100 troops and Special Forces commandos from an airbase in Aden over the weekend after AQAP seized a nearby city.

"Iran is taking similar actions in the coast of Bahrain, where we have important interests," she said — including the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet — "and they are backing Shia groups that are trying to undermine the government in Bahrain, so this is going to spread further."

Focusing on the nuclear talks, Ayotte said that Obama administration "has not put on the table Iran's sponsor of terrorism in Yemen and their efforts at regional domination.

"If this continues, what we will see is the Sunni-Shia fighting in the region increase. This should be part of the Iran nuclear talks because you cannot divorce the two."

Both Ayotte — and later Cato's Ashford — alluded to President Obama's citation last September of Yemen as a counterterrorism success in his speech on battling the Islamic State.

"I don't think anybody's going to be talking about the Yemen model anytime soon," Ashford said. "It's certainly a failure of U.S. policy over the last couple of years."

The nuclear talks are going to keep Tehran out of Yemen in the immediate term — but she said she was more concerned that al-Qaida would grow stronger because the Houthis are distracted with the Saudi coalition.

"The Houthis actually opposed al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula," Ashford told Newsmax. "They have fought against them aggressively in recent years, but if the Houthis are engaged in fighting coalition forces, al-Qaida may actually become stronger.

"In some ways, it doesn't meet U.S. interests particularly well."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.