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Bombing Yemen Won't Help It

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WASHINGTON — Yemen's volatile civil war has been depicted as merely a battleground between Sunni Arab countries and Shiite Iran for dominance in the Middle East.

The Houthis, northern tribal rebels who have waged a prolonged insurgency against the Yemeni government, took the capital, Sana, in September and have continued to seize territory since, drawing near to the southern port city of Aden, forcing President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi to flee and prompting a Saudi-led military intervention last month. But in fact, the conflict in Yemen is local, not regional. And the Saudi-led, American-backed bombing campaign is doomed to failure. It will fuel Yemen's internal strife, condemning it to a protracted torment that could rival Syria's four-year-old civil war.

Washington and Riyadh have pushed the narrative of an Iranian-supported Houthi rebellion in Yemen. This is an oversimplification at best.

While the Houthis are Shiites, their Zaydi faith is theologically distinct from the Shiite practices of most Iranians. Historically, this has limited ties between them and Tehran. And although Iran has given the Houthis some financial support, it has not been directly involved in the conflict. In fact, many of the Houthis' recent gains are a result of their alliance with Sunni supporters of Mr. Hadi's predecessor, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was removed from power in 2012, during the Arab Spring.

Iran's major gains in the region are in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, where the Iranians are funding and training Shiite militias battling the Islamic State. In Syria, Iranian support has been critical to the survival of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Yemen, where Iran's involvement is trivial, is simply not a major front in this broader regional struggle.

The conflict in Yemen — a continuing power struggle between the central government and the many secessionist and tribal groups that seek greater autonomy — is all about Yemen. And it dates back more than half a century.

Yemen itself was not even unified until 1990, when the collapse of the Soviet Union led Marxist South Yemen to unite with the Yemen Arab Republic to the north. In addition to conflicts between the two states, Yemen has experienced a succession of civil wars both before and after reunification, including rebellions by both northern tribesmen and southern secessionists. These

conflicts were driven largely by uneven economic development and a distrust of the central government.

In today's crisis we find not only the culmination of a 10-year guerrilla war by the northern Houthi tribesmen, but also a growing insurgency in the east by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, continued popular dissatisfaction in the south, and mixed support for the transitional government by mainstream political parties.

The United States plays a role, too, as drone strikes targeting Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have sparked popular outrage against the government. This is why the bombing campaign is so shortsighted. Ostensibly, the coalition has several broad objectives. Saudi officials emphasize their intention to roll back Houthi gains, and to restore Mr. Hadi's government. A White House statement pledging American intelligence and logistical support emphasized the same factors.

Though it has not been explicitly stated, the Persian Gulf states that are backing the Saudi intervention — the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain — also have another goal: combating growing Iranian influence. Yet bombing has so far failed to achieve any of these objectives.

Past foreign military interventions in Yemen have failed. Following a four-year insurgency against colonial rule, the British were forced to withdraw from Aden in 1967, resulting in the formation of the People's Republic of South Yemen. An intervention led by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in 1962-67, designed to prop up a pro-Egyptian government, likewise failed as Yemeni tribesmen waged an effective guerrilla war against Egyptian troops. More recently, a 2009 Saudi invasion of northern Yemen, responding to cross-border raids by the Houthis, ended in the withdrawal of Saudi troops, and no strategic gains. Each failed because of the internecine nature of tribal conflict in Yemen and the effective use of guerrilla tactics. Any ground force in the current conflict will also suffer defeat.

The Houthis have long felt marginalized by Yemen's political processes, and argue that corruption and a lack of representation mean that they don't experience any benefits from economic development or Yemen's natural resources. The group has waged a successful decade-long guerrilla war against the government in Sana. They know the terrain and have local support. After more than a decade of counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, the futility of subduing tribal insurgencies should be well known to the United States.

Moreover, restoring Mr. Hadi, now in exile in Riyadh, would solve none of Yemen's underlying problems. The free and fair elections promised during the Arab Spring were postponed because of factional disagreements; Mr. Hadi himself has no domestic power base. Though this made him an ideal compromise candidate in 2012, it constrains his ability to effectively govern.

The United States should encourage a political settlement, focused not on reinstalling a figurehead, but on creating a durable political process that addresses the grievances of Yemen's regional groups. A two-sector federalized state, which the Houthis have supported in the past, could provide such a framework.

Yemen has the potential to become the next Syria, spiraling into sectarian violence, with money and arms from abroad fueling the conflict. If Arab airstrikes continue, Yemen is likely to become

a failed state. Tragically, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula would be the one beneficiary, as the terrorist group enjoys a respite from drone strikes, counterterrorism campaigns and Houthi attacks.

A bombing campaign won't stabilize Yemen, or counter Iranian influence in the region. Instead, it could lead to a prolonged and bloody civil war and provide fertile ground for extremist groups. With the United States already bogged down in Iraq and Syria, there is little political appetite among Americans for wider intervention in Yemen. But the United States should stop reflexively supporting the Saudi-led military campaign, and instead push for a political settlement, so that the Arab world is spared from another unmanageable conflict.

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