

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Stumbling towards war in Yemen

Peter Henne

February 2, 2017

I really wanted to put a question mark at the end of that title.

Attention to the civil war in Yemen and potential Iranian involvement is growing in foreign policy circles. This is good, as it's an important issue. But much of the attention seems to be focusing on the threat of greater Iranian influence in the region through this conflict, which may turn into calls for expanded US involvement in Yemen. This would be a mistake, as US *interests* are not at stake in the conflict—and US *values* may be undermined by participating.

First, the recent developments. Over the weekend, a Navy SEAL raid against al-Qaeda targets in Yemen resulted in the death of one US serviceman, with several wounded, although the raid did succeed in killing high-profile al-Qaeda (AQ) targets (in addition to reported noncombatant deaths). Al-Qaeda's local franchise, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has long presented a regional and global threat. But they act alongside a broader conflict in the country between the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels. The Houthis are Zaydi Muslims (a sect related to Shiism) who have been fighting against the government for over a decade. Lately, their attacks include strikes on shipping passing by Yemen's coast; on Monday, they launched a suicide attack against a Saudi ship.

Three responses to this incident suggest Iran hawks may see the Yemen civil war as the next front in tensions with Iran.

First, according to [Fox News](#), some US intelligence analysts believed this attack was intended to target a US ship, not a Saudi ship. We don't have more details on the source, so it's not clear how widespread this belief was, but it has now been disseminated. As [David Weinberg](#), an expert on Gulf politics at FDD pointed out on his [Twitter](#) feed, this seems to be based on mis-translation. I should point out the correct translation does include anti-Semitic and anti-American language, so we should still be concerned, but not draw Fox's conclusions.

Second, the Washington Institute released a good analysis of Houthi attacks on Saudi shipping. When disseminated on Twitter, though, it included this headline: “Is Houthi attack on Saudi ship dress rehearsal for Iran attack in Gulf?”

Third, Trump’s National Security Adviser Michael Flynn released a statement putting “Iran on notice,” which connected Iran’s recent missile tests with the Houthi attack on a Saudi ship. As Cato Institute analyst Emma Ashford noted (also on Twitter), this seems like the “first step toward a US escalation in Yemen.”

So it seems that Iran hawks are connecting the Yemen civil war more closely with Iran, and we may see some calls for further US involvement in Yemen to counter Iranian influence. Why is this a problem?

Basically, because it’s not clear this is America’s fight.

Iran may be using the Yemen civil war to expand its influence, but US involvement could quickly turn into a quagmire, and would most definitely increase anti-American attitudes in the region. Moreover, the current leader in this fight—Saudi Arabia—is conducting a destructive air campaign against Yemen that has led to numerous human rights concerns. America would be making it hard to push for greater concern for human rights if we expanded our backing for this campaign. And it’s not even clear that the bombing campaign has done anything to limit Iranian influence in the country or region, as Ashford noted in an op-ed last year.

Staying out of this conflict does not mean abandoning the fight against AQAP or our Saudi allies. The United States can still work closely with Saudi Arabia to disrupt AQAP by reframing our relationship along the lines suggested recently by Brian Katulis of the Center for American Progress.

More importantly, while there is a case to be made for greater involvement (even if I don’t agree with it) that case *has to be made* and debated by the public. We should avoid expanding military involvement in Yemen before there is widespread comprehension of the conflict’s stakes. It would be tragic if the United States committed our military to another conflict that is neither understood nor supported by the American people.

Anyone who’s chatted with me about foreign policy or followed my Twitter feed knows I keep worrying about potential US involvement in Yemen. And I even warned against it in a 2009 blog post. So this may be a bit of “crying wolf,” but it is one instance in which I would love to be wrong