MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Arabia Felix No More

YEMEN CAN NO LONGER BE ignored. That is the message of last month's "Friends of Yemen" conference in London, attended by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, together with senior officials from 25 other states. It is also the message of next week's high-level Gulf Cooperation Council conference, to be attended by Yemeni officials as well. Even The New York Times's Thomas Friedman spent a few days in Yemen recently.

Why the sudden interest? Simply put, a near-perfect storm of trouble in the domestic, regional and global arenas has intersected in a way that has forced Yemen onto the international agenda.

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Back in the days of the Roman empire, Yemen was known as "Arabia Felix" (properly translated as "fertile" or "productive"), the source of lucrative spices coveted in the salons of the eastern Mediterranean. But until modern times, Yemen has mainly been a remote and largely ignored tribal region, ruled by Zaidi Shi'ite imams. Apart from neighboring Saudi Arabia, which fought a border war with Yemen in 1934, Yemen was almost entirely off of the radar screens of regional rivals and global powers until 1962, when a coup led by Nasserist-leaning officers thrust the country into wider regional currents. Yemen became "Gamal Abdel Nasser's Vietnam," as Egypt's 70,000 troops became embroiled in intra-Yemeni strife, in what became a five-year proxy war between Egypt, head of the Soviet-leaning radical Arab camp, and Saudi Arabia, lynchpin of the conservative, pro-Western Arab states.

The Saudis would remain extremely sensitive to Yemeni developments. A new threat came from Britain's former colony of Aden, the radical Marxist state of South Yemen, underpinned by East German intelligence. Its collapse and incorporation into a united Yemen in 1990 was a victory for Arab nationalist values, but the new larger Yemeni state posed a new potential threat on Saudi Arabia's border adjoining the strategic passage from the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean. Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh's support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was the last straw for Riyadh, which summarily expelled 800,000 Yemeni nationals from the kingdom, dealing a major blow to the Yemeni economy. With Iraq's defeat in 1991 and Saddam's overthrow in 2003, Saleh could do little but seek to mend ties with the GCC club of oil-rich states.

The last decade has been especially difficult for Yemen, moving it into the category of "fragile," with the potential of joining the club of "failed" states. To be sure, Yemen has always been poor, with limited state capacity, but it was usually able to maintain an internal balance of forces between competing tribes, religious sects and political factions. This apparently is no longer the case, thanks to the sheer weight of domestic difficulties and their intersection with toxic regional and global currents.

The latest Arab Human Development Report paints a stark picture: Yemen's population growth has been among the highest in the world (2.7 percent annually), with nearly half of its 23 million people under the age of 15; over one-third of the population is undernourished, which especially affects birth weights and child development; average life expectancy is only 62 years; unemployment stands at nearly 30 percent; the maternal mortality rate is 400 per 100,000 live births (rates for Western countries and GCC states are in the single digits); urbanization rates stand at 5 percent annually, creating significant water stress, especially in the capital of Sana'a; and the country's oil resources, which provide 25 percent of the country's GNP, are rapidly being depleted.

Against this background, three concurrent conflicts are tearing at the country's fabric. In the north, a five-year conflict between the authorities and so-called Houthis, representing a Zaidi revivalist current, has taken thousands of lives, displaced a quarter of a million persons from their homes, and spilled over the border into Saudi territory, evoking memories of the 1960s. This time, however, the Saudis are supporting the ruler in Sana'a, their former nemesis President Saleh, against the opposition.

What makes this conflict more than just another local affair is the Iranian dimension: the Saudis are convinced that the Houthis receive substantial support from Iran, as part of its effort to project power into the sensitive Red Sea region along its soft underbelly, and Iran has done nothing to disabuse them of the notion. Meanwhile, in what was formerly independent South Yemen, disgruntled elements representing the factions defeated in their 1994 war of secession are becoming increasingly emboldened.

And finally, of course, there is the al-Qaeda dimension. In recent years, Yemen has become a different sort of "felix," providing fertile ground for al-Qaeda recruiting and training, exemplified most recently by the Nigerian who failed in his attempt to blow up a U.S. airliner. The U.S. "war on terror" has expanded to Yemen, both in direct action by special units and predator drones, and in the training of Yemeni security forces. Complicating matters even further is the country's strong Salafi Sunni Islamic current, which was ironically encouraged both by the Saudis and President Saleh, resulting in considerable sympathy for al-Qaeda among the population.

Can Western and GCC involvement turn Yemen in the right direction? Alternatively, is Yemen headed towards an Afghanistan- or even a Somalia-like scenario? Something in-between? Stay tuned.

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