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An Asymmetric Approach to Yemen

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We are in a war of containment against radical Jihadist Islam, and Yemen is the next campaign in that conflict. How we conduct that campaign may be the critical turning point in that extended war. There are more tinderboxes for potential Jihadist outbreaks on the horizon; Somalia and several other places in Africa are among the leading candidates. We are running out of American troops to intervene in these hotspots, but we can ill afford to ignore them. Perhaps it is time to consider some asymmetric approaches to this very wicked problem.

The bad news is that Yemen is a tough nut. It is running out of oil, it has two civil war/insurgency situations, and an exponentially growing number of unemployed young men. The government only controls about a third of the country. In other words, it is a perfect breeding ground for radical Jihadists, and foreign fighters are flocking there in droves.

The good news is that Yemen is not yet a failed state. It has a functioning, if very imperfect, government. We have been able to deal with this kind of situation before. El Salvador is a good example. In that case, we were even able to take a bad government and help it become much better. The government of Yemen will not become a functioning Jeffersonian democracy in the near future, and we do not necessarily need it to become one to achieve an acceptable strategic outcome. What we do need is to have Yemen become a hostile place for radical Jihadists, and do so without committing large numbers of American troops in the process. This is where an asymmetrical approach comes in into play.

Jihadist hotspots are not everywhere in Yemen, but they need to be rooted out where they exist. Like decay in a tooth, al Qaeda on The Arabian Peninsula will spread if not challenged. But by this time, we should have learned that it is not enough to kill terrorists, we ought to be applying solutions that make the ground less fertile for terror recruitment.

One way to approach this is to fund the Yemenis to form counterinsurgent flying columns to be dispatched to hot spots in order to root out al Qaeda infestation and ensure that it does not return. A flying column would consist of a lethal arm for eliminating the al Qaeda foreign elements and a non-lethal component designed to address some root causes of dissatisfaction.

The lethal component would consist of a military or paramilitary police unit large enough to track down and eliminate the foreign fighters and their local supporters. These do not need to be crack troops, but if properly backed up by American intelligence assets and logistics, they should be sufficient to hunt down foreign Jihadists and defeat their Yemini cadres.

The non lethal arm of the flying column should consist of a cadre of administrators, teachers, and a judicial element to create the cadre for farmer-herder nation building militias designed to hold and build the target areas into something that can resist re-infection by the jihadists.

The one potential asset that we can build on in Yemen is tribal sheikhs. Sheikhs have two motivations in life, money and the capability to produce tangible results for their tribes; if they do not do that, they do not remain sheikhs for long. They don't have to love the Yemeni government to work for it.

The Sheikhs would be provided with the funding to create farmer/herder militias from among their tribesmen. American funding would provide the ability to get seeds for crops that don't need a lot of irrigation and livestock that is compatible with the terrain and climate. The cadre of expertise would be the native equivalent of American and NATO provincial reconstruction teams. They would provide employment for young overeducated, and currently underemployed, Yemeni males who might otherwise provide recruits for the jihadists. In a similar manner, the Sheikhs could provide a livelihood for their tribesmen in running the emerging farming enterprises. Educators could help produce skilled and literate farmer-herders who would acquire vocational skills that would provide an alternative to becoming al Qaeda cannon fodder. A competent judicial cadre to settle local disputes quickly and fairly would provide a buffer against a Jihadist court system.

The concept of using farmer militias to control disputed territory goes back at least to the Roman Empire, if not further. The Israelis used it effectively in their NAHAL or "fighting pioneer youth" movement in the forties and fifties.

If we feel that we have to use American or NATO troops to fight every campaign of containment in the continuing war against radical Islam, we will need to turn the United States and NATO states into warrior nations, including a resort to conscription for the foreseeable future. That is simply politically infeasible. The money does not have to be American and European alone. China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the Arab oil producing states have as much of a stake in this struggle as we do.

We need to think asymmetrically and creatively if we are to prevail against the disease that is the radical Islamic Jihadist movement. We made mistakes in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq that have caused us to use American soldiers in ways that we may not have desired, but we should learn from those mistakes. Josephus, a veteran of an ancient insurgency said of his former enemies; "the Romans made all manner of mistakes, but they never made the same mistake twice".

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