

Yemen war signals British move to destabilize Arabian Peninsula

by Dean Andromidas

The igniting of a civil war in Yemen signals a British move to destabilize the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. The move is part of London's continuing strategy of sabotaging any expansion of the policy approach of peace through economic development initiated by the Gaza-Jericho accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The destabilization follows French and German economic and political initiatives in the region, and is also directed at Jordan, Oman, and Iraq, all of which have a deep interest in a united Yemen. Whatever may be the specific internal causes of the conflict between the two parts of Yemen, Britain and its chief instrument in the region, Saudi Arabia, have played the decisive role in detonating the conflict.

The British role is confirmed by Middle East sources based in western Europe who point to the strategic and geopolitical dimensions of the conflict, rather than a fight for oil within Yemen, as primary in determining how the situation is unfolding. These sources point to the fact that at the end of last year, French President François Mitterrand made an official visit to San'a, the capital of Yemen, a country whose favor France had always given low priority. Yet, to make a point, Mitterrand led a strong economic and political delegation. France proceeded to show considerable interest not only in Yemeni oil, but in other economic activity as well.

France, which has considerable influence in Djibouti, located on the Red Sea directly opposite Yemen, saw a strong united Yemen as a more favorable regional power than Saudi Arabia, which sees Islamic northeast Africa as its sphere of influence. France has also been cultivating ties with the Islamic Republic of Sudan, particularly political leader Hassan al Turabi, as part of an effort to stabilize North Africa, especially Algeria.

The French delegation was soon followed by a high-powered German economic delegation. Germany is particularly well-positioned in Yemen, given the fact that not only has it had economic relations with North Yemen over a long period of time, but the former communist German Democratic Republic had been very active in the former socialist south. This has left a cadre of experienced engineers and economic experts, many of whom are now employed by major German industrial firms and who could be readily deployed in the south. A delegation from Yemen reciprocated the German

visit, travelling to Bonn to sign an economic cooperation accord.

Infrastructure and regional politics

More importantly, both France and Germany have taken a deep interest in participating in broader economic regional development whose potential can be unleashed once the Gaza-Jericho accord takes hold and regional peace initiatives are solidified among Israel, Jordan, and Syria. France has been instrumental in backing the peace initiative by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. In the context of the multilateral economic commitments which form part of the official Middle East peace conference in Madrid, both France and Germany have responsibility for transportation infrastructure, including railroads, highways, and ports. French engineers have toured Israel and the Palestinian territories with a view toward the possibilities for high-speed rail construction. For their part, the Germans, through Dornier Management Consultants, a subsidiary of Daimler Benz, Germany's largest industrial enterprise, have offered to develop, at their expense, a master plan for infrastructure reconstruction and development for the Palestinians. Dornier has drafted a master plan for the entire region from Turkey to the Arabian Peninsula.

British geopoliticians know as well as French and German engineers that infrastructure projects such as railroads, seaports, and a nuclear energy grid must be regional in scope in order to be viable. A seaport in Gaza must serve Jordan, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. High-speed railroads must link up with the European grid at the Turkish border and reach southward through Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, and into Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, and westward into Iraq, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent. A united Yemen with a population of 12 million, commanding the mouth to the Red Sea and forming a bridge between the Middle East and Africa, could be an important link in this chain.

Since the time of Germany's construction of a rail network throughout the Ottoman Empire prior to World War I, the British Arab bureau has worked to keep the region divided and to ensure that such infrastructure would never be developed again. British strategy has always been to keep the nationalist and more populous Arab states such as Yemen,

Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, which also lack substantial oil resources, embroiled in conflict or subservient to the oil-rich, British-dominated, and feudal Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and tiny and rich Gulf states. It was Iraq with its large and skilled population and substantial oil resources which posed a danger to British interests.

Target Yemen

A unified Yemen, with a nationalist and secular tradition, was perceived as a potential threat to Saudi Arabia, a feudal monarchy ruling over 11 million Saudi subjects and 5 million foreign workers. The discovery of substantial oil reserves in Yemen reinforced that fear. But Saudi animosity predates Yemen's neutrality during the Gulf war against Iraq, and even predates unification. This is particularly true in the case of northern Yemen.

The northern Arab Republic of Yemen was formed in 1962 through a military coup backed by Arab nationalist Egyptian President Abdul Nasser, which overthrew the feudal Imam of Yemen. Saudi Arabia immediately militarily and materially backed the royalists in what became a six-year civil war. When the civil war was concluded, the northern Arab Republic became dominated by a coalition including the military and the Saudi-backed Hashid tribal federation. Nonetheless, the North Yemen regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is now President of unified Yemen, pursued an independent, nationalist foreign policy and played a role in Arab regional politics. Saleh is particularly disliked by the Saudis. He received his military training in Baghdad, and modeled his army along Iraqi lines. In 1989, North Yemen joined with Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan to form the Arab Cooperation Council. This was perceived not only as an attempt to encircle Saudi Arabia; with backing from Iraqi oil resources, it could form the basis for a powerful alternative to the domination of the region by Saudi petrodollars.

Following the end of the northern civil war and consolidation of the Arab Republic of Yemen in 1968, the Marxist People's Democratic Republic came to power following a long period of insurgency against British colonial authority. The latter's primary interest was the port of Aden, a strategic coaling station for the British Navy in imperial times. Some say that the British allowed the Marxist regime to come to power in order to prevent a unified Yemen following the formation of the Arab Republic of Yemen. Although the southern regime had introduced many social reforms and tried unsuccessfully to export its revolution, it played little or no role in Arab regional politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union, its primary backer, made unification with the north and the establishment of a democratic and unified Yemen an attractive option.

Playing both sides

Yemen's neutrality in the Gulf war was based on a powerful consensus throughout the country and across party lines,

both north and south. It demonstrated the possibility for strong national unity that could not go unanswered by the Anglo-Saudi supporters of the new world order. The punishment was swift, with the immediate deportation of a million Yemeni citizens living and working in Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the Yemeni regime, despite the immense social hardship and financial losses, not only weathered the crisis, but managed in 1993 to hold the first elections ever held in the Arabian Peninsula.

The discovery of oil reserves led Saudi Arabia to deploy its military along its undemarcated border and to dispatch letters to foreign oil companies operating in Yemen, claiming that their concessions were in disputed territory. This was followed by Saudi manipulation of tribal politics in the north, and what appeared to be a series of assassinations of Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) leaders.

In the north, the Saudis have financially backed the Islamic Islah Party, which became the second-largest party in Yemen following the elections. It is led by Sheik Abdullah Bin Hussain Al Ahmar and Sheik Mujeed al Zindani. The former is president of the parliament and chief of the powerful Hashid tribal federation. Despite Saudi backing, both leaders opposed the Gulf war. Sheik Al Ahmar was only recently in Saudi Arabia, where he is said to have been pressured to break with President Saleh.

Meanwhile, in the south, a series of assassinations of YSP leaders over the past year became one of the principal causes of the break between northern and southern leaders. These assassinations were in fact committed by members of the Al Fahdi family, who led the country under the British and were forced into exile following the establishment of the Marxist regime. Having taken up residency in Saudi Arabia, the family furnished mercenaries to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, an operation created and financed by Oliver North, the CIA, and British intelligence. After returning to Yemen, and most likely with Saudi support, they began a series of assassinations and bombings directed at the YSP.

The discovery of substantial oil reserves deep in the former south made the idea of a united Yemen less attractive to some southern leaders. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states made it known that if the south were to leave the union, they would receive recognition. At the end of 1993, while refusing to receive President Saleh, the Saudis played host to then-Vice President Ali Salim Baidh, the principal southern leader, and only recently received former oil minister, southerner Saleh Abu Bakr Bin Husseinoun.

While the British have successfully convinced the Saudis of the correctness of the objective to dismember Yemen, or at least to force the downfall of its nascent democracy, European observers point out that the whole affair could easily backfire. A protracted civil war in Yemen and an active intervention by Saudi Arabia could exacerbate the deep economic and political weaknesses that lie below the surface of the Saudi monarchy.