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Yemen: A Beginner's Guide to (The Perils Of) Intervention

Posted by [Scott Lucas](#) in [Middle East & Iran](#)



Yemen, the state on the Arabian Peninsula which has recently exploded into the headlines as a country of concern, is little-known to most Americans. It does have a track record, however, of embroiling outside powers who decided to intervene. [Sean Foley](#), a professor at Middle Tennessee State University and author of the forthcoming [The Arab Gulf States Beyond Oil and Islam](#), writes for EA:

In October 1927 Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, delivered an historic speech in which he explained why Turks had to abandon the Ottoman Empire and embrace his new state. Ataturk in particular focused on Yemen and the fact that the Empire's leaders had sent millions of Turks to die in South Arabia in the name of a universal Muslim state: "Do you know," he asked, "how many sons of Anatolia have perished in the scorching sands of Yemen?" In the future, Ataturk promised, Turks would not die in wars in Yemen—a state that had become synonymous with the plight of the Ottoman soldier in Turkish folklore.

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Forty years later, Yemen made a similar entrance into Egyptian national consciousness. When Israel defeated Egypt in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, much of Egypt's army was fighting a protracted and bloody guerilla war in Yemen.

The experience of Turkey and Egypt should give U.S. officials pause, as they contemplate intervening in Yemen and along its 1,800-kilometer border with Saudi Arabia.

That border is one of the most disputed regions in the Middle East. Its deserts and vast open spaces assist smugglers transporting various consumer goods, weapons, illicit drugs, and illegal immigrants. Al-Qaeda has reportedly brought weapons and explosives into Saudi Arabia from Yemen and trained operatives in the country, such as Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab, the Nigerian man who sought to destroy a U.S. airliner on Christmas Day 2009.



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Although Yemen and Saudi Arabia both wish to eradicate al-Qaeda, their efforts to control the border are hampered by years of mutual mistrust. The two countries fought wars over the border region as recently as 1934, and Yemenis have claimed that Red Sea Saudi islands and the southern Saudi regions of 'Asir, Najran, Tihamah, and Jizan should be part of Yemen. Saudi Arabia has tried to build a fence along the border, which was only officially demarcated in the year 2000.

Further complicating matters is the nature of the border communities. Not only are there Sunni Muslims, but there are also Ismailis and Zaydi Shi'a Muslims. Zaydis are more than 40 percent of Yemen's population and have a tangible presence in Saudi Arabia. (Jews even lived in Najran until the 1950s.) Riyadh's relations with border peoples are often problematic, while the Huthis, a Zaydi rebel group, have attacked Yemeni and Saudi military forces. The Huthis have also received moral and potentially military support from Iran. In 2009, Saudi Arabia sought to destroy the Huthis by launching the Kingdom's biggest military operation since 1991. As of February 2010, the Huthis continue to fight on both sides of the border, and the Saudi offensive has become a contentious issue between Riyadh and Tehran.

In the long run, the best U.S. approach in South Arabia is to continue to support Yemen and Saudi Arabia, since both have the incentive and the means to attack American enemies there. Any other approach risks starting Americans down the road to a military quagmire. Indeed, no American need die in the sands of Yemen for Washington's policies to succeed in the Middle East.

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