



Transcript

Yemeni Detainees and Jihadis: Guantánamo Repatriation and Saudi Arabia

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Dr Mai Yamani:

I would like to start with a saying by the Prophet Mohammed. '*If this order threatens, take refuge in Yemen*'. The Prophet Mohammed was referring to the ancient kingdom of Yemen, which was then the centre of culture and prosperity in the Arabian Peninsula. This has become prominent since the 1980s, when states like Saudi Arabia, in line with the US agenda of fighting communism, exported dissent in the form of Osama bin Laden, who is a Yemeni of Saudi birth, to fight Soviet infidels in Afghanistan.

Although dissent was diverted to Afghanistan, where the mountains of Tora Bora resemble those of Yemen, bin Laden's trusted companions and his wife remain Yemeni. But bin Laden and his followers, whether hiding in caves in Afghanistan, or roaming through the lands of the fragmented and radicalism [Inaudible], continue to view Yemen as the prescribed haven for Al Qaeda, the base.

There is another hadith by the Prophet Mohammed, that shows that the Prophet already had an understanding of what we now call blowback. '*Najd is the devil's horn, from Najd comes dissention, and to Najd dissention returns*'. The transnational jihadis who make of Yemen their base would return to *Najd* the centre of the region of the Arabian Peninsula, and the site of power of the rulers.

My focus today is on the intricate troubled links between Yemen and Saudi Arabia as they confront the threats of Al Qaeda. I will suggest a few policy solutions.

Yemen is a bubbling cauldron of jihadis. While Saudi Arabia launched a victorious conquest of the lost segments, the best choice of terrorists for a replacement of Afghanistan or Iraq, appears to be Yemen, where the institutions of the state are weak. President Obama's order on the 22nd of January to shut Guantanamo Bay brings the challenge to the forefront. One third of the detainees are Yemeni, but Yemen is unable to provide security guarantees to satisfy the United States.

According to the Saudi Interior Ministry, 90 percent of the detainees are back in their country. Unlike Yemen, Saudi Arabia has created what is viewed as a model system for reintegrating Guantanamo Bay detainees, rehabilitation centres for curing jihadi passions. However, the last month has seen Saudi detainees from Guantanamo Bay who graduated, were offered jobs and wives, relapse and escape to Yemen through the porous mountainous tribal borders. Seven Saudis escaped to Yemen and started activity there. All signs indicate that the Saudi-Yemeni borders are united and that the two countries face a hot summer.

This is a tale of two countries. One, Saudi Arabia, the richest in the Arab world, and the other Yemen, the poorest. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest producer of oil and with oil prices almost quintupling between 2003 and 2008, the regime had gained more clout in fighting terrorism. Yemen has the lowest output of all oil-producing Middle Eastern countries and Yemen's oil story is one of danger and decline. Since the 1970s, and until the unification of north and south Yemen in 1990, both Yemens lived in the shadow of the Saudi state. Wealth came from remittances or political subventions by the Saudis. In addition, migration from the overpopulated, underprivileged Yemen to the rich neighbour.

During the mid 1980s, millions of Yemenis worked in the kingdom, until the Gulf War in 1990-1991 when 800,000 in one go were expelled. Yemen's fragile failing state is due to economic problems, to tribal loyalties. These are depended due to an imported religious ideology from its northern neighbour. The fact is that Saudi Arabia has fought every 'ism' that has sought to dominate the Middle East. From the pan-Arabism of Egypt, to communism, to today's Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. The tools of the foreign policy were oil money and the kingdoms Wahabi Islam.

During the 1980s, Saudi Arabia spent more than 75 billion dollars for the propagation of the kingdom Sunni Wahabi Islam, funding schools, mosques, charities, across the Islamic world. Thousands of schools were set up in every city and every village in Yemen. Saudi Arabia created in Yemen a strong Wahabi current that was politically and ideologically loyal. Among the most prominent missionaries is Abdul Majid al-Zindani, who studied in the religious schools and universities of Saudi Arabia and established the University of Piety in Sanaa.

The paradox is that both Saudi Arabia and Yemen are using the Salafis. President Ali Abdul Lasali invested in this Salafi movement in order to defeat his opponents. However, Salafism or Wahabism could not be controlled. The technologies of globalisation contributed to the creation of the transnational political Islamist movement in which Saudi and Yemeni youth indoctrinated in traditional Wahabi thought became exposed to the diversity of the Salafi and other youth movements in the region. Some of which adhere to the rhetoric of Al Queda.

As a result, the Al Saud came under direct threat from some of the very people they had financed and trusted. As a result, the committee of advice was established by the interior ministry to monitor all websites associated with Al Queda. Such websites numbered 20,000 in 2003. When the jihadis, indoctrinated in the Wahabi ideology, broke away from the Al Saud in the 1990s, the same split took place in Yemen. The split activated tribal, economic, ideological and political factors and resulted in violence.

The violence was witnessed in the US. 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi of Yemeni origin. Yemen and Saudi Arabia are stuck to each other through historical, ethnic, tribal and cultural ties. But without a way to solve popular resentment and resistance. Saudi Arabia's relationship with Yemen is unlike that with any other Arab country. The Yemeni president accepted the demarcation of the borders in 2000. And the cancellation of the five agreement. In return for economic benefits.

But that did not change the reality that most of the tribal land and many of the families in the main cities, thousands of families are of Yemeni origin. I am a case study. The Saudi tradition of foreign policy, quiet diplomacy, oil money and soft power are no more effective. Building fences and sending helicopters to police the borders are not sufficient. The myth of rehabilitation is not a solution. Even when it is coupled with the wife and the job. No medicine works if you keep injecting the same virus. Institutionalised Wahabism.

So how can we proceed with the vaccination? The answer is Wahabi reform and containment. The tentative moves that King Abdullah has made have to be speeded up and become more daring and more effective, in removing the Wahabi agency as a catalyst for radicalism. The Wahabis inspire the radicals and combined with economic misery, it is a lethal concoction. So long as the export of Zindani and his enthusiastic disciples will continue, the feeling of violence will mushroom in Yemen and beyond.

Both Saudi Arabia and Yemen have moderate indigenous Islamic traditions. If given the financial support that the Wahabis received, they could reverse the current picture of fanaticism. Both King Abdullah and President Saleh understand the problem, but they need to stop using the old tactics, and understand the strategic necessity of following their true convictions.

A new economic strategy is also necessary. The inclusion of Yemeni manpower would be of benefit to Saudi Arabia that relies heavily on expatriate workers. Yemenis are known to be skilled workers. So instead of exporting religious radicalism, importing manpower could neutralise the region. If you bring us in, we will be less trouble. Many isolated societies have found greater confidence when they were accepted in wider communities.

Yemeni officials have continuously voiced the request to be included in the GCC. This they see as their natural right as part of the Arabian Peninsula. However, the case of Yemen with the GCC is like that of Turkey with the EU. Yemen is the most populous country in the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, Yemen's population exceeds that of the six member countries of the GCC. Yemen is strategically important to the West. Yemen is geographically positioned as the only country in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf where oil goes to the open seas without passing through straights or the Suez Canal.

Yemen must first fight terrorists in land, pirates in the seas, in order to regain prosperity and balance that Prophet Mohammed once praised. Thank you.