

Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
The U.S. Role and Strategy in the Middle East: Yemen and the Gulf Cooperation Council

The Honorable Mary Beth Long
Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
(2007-2009)

October 6, 2015

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am honored to be here to speak about the U.S. role and strategy in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Yemen. While Yemen looks better now than it did a few months ago, we are – at best – looking at a stalemate that does not appear to lead to a political resolution anytime soon. Make no mistake: Yemen is not a model for U.S. counterterrorism efforts, as asserted by the White House spokesman in March of this year. Washington must provide a clear expression of U.S. interests, clarify our policies to our allies and our enemies, and follow through with timely and decisive action.

The primary U.S. concern in Yemen is that Iran is using the conflict there to increase its power in the region. Washington must help contain Iran and its regional meddling, which counters U.S. interests. The U.S. should also be concerned about Iran and Russia working together in Yemen and the broader Middle East. At this time, we do not understand their strategy or respective roles in what appear to be a division of labor. Washington must also recognize that Yemeni territory and islands are critical to U.S. interests. In particular, the global “chokepoint” at the Bab el-Mandab (“Gate of Grief”) is the gateway to virtually all Suez Canal traffic. Finally, it is important to note that the threat posed by terrorists and extremists in Yemen is likely a far greater risk to the U.S. and its Gulf allies than ISIS currently appears to be.

- As an Iranian official said earlier this year, “We are everywhere now: Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine.” Yemen should be on that list, though Iran may be keeping a low profile.
- The Russian-Iranian alliance suggests that the situation in Yemen could get much worse in the near term. It is a clear continuation of their aggression in other parts of the Middle East.
- The Bab el-Mandab is not only a key passageway for U.S.–bound energy, but also to other economies upon which our jobs and economy relies.
- Yemen is still home to the “single most active extremist organization planning attacks against the U.S.”: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), according to State Department and the Counter Terrorism Center.
- The rise of ISIS in Yemen will only make that worse.

The current status of the war in Yemen is thus: the pro-Yemen Government Coalition faces a political stalemate in Yemen although with recent military success.

- A timely political solution to the war in Yemen is needed to save lives and avoid further humanitarian strain in the country. The U.N. is trying to push negotiations between the Yemen Government and the Houthis, but progress appears to be stalled. The Bottom Line question is how far must the Houthis be pushed militarily to feel compelled to negotiate?
- The Saudi-led Coalition of ten or more countries is making some progress, having pushed the Houthis out of Aden and moving north toward Sanaa.
- A significant byproduct of the internal chaos is a security vacuum that AQAP and, to a lesser extent, ISIS are exploiting. They are portraying themselves as the protectors of Sunnis against the Shia Houthis and Iran. The Sunni Coalition is offering a counter to that dangerous narrative.

Russia and Iran have partnered to advance the Houthis' interests in Yemen as part of a broader Middle East strategy of aggression. Washington does not fully understand how Iran and Russia are cooperating regionally – they appear to have a strategy and we do not. In Yemen, there appears to be a tacit division of labor.

- The most recent development is evidence of an Iranian-Russian alliance in Yemen, in addition to their alliance in Syria and Iraq. Early indications are that their goals may be inimical to Washington's and its allies' interests. The Russian-Iranian alliance suggests that things could get much worse in the near term, particularly to the extent that Russia's more overt role provides the Houthis with operating space or reprieve.
 - What was likely a Russian Tochka missile killed 45 Emiratis fighting in the pro-Yemeni Government Coalition in Yemen earlier this fall. The missile was either supplied directly from Russia or delivered from Syria through Iran, according to a Hezbollah official. These missiles require military guidance to use correctly so it is likely the Houthis have either Russian or Lebanese Hezbollah assistance.
 - There is also reporting that Russia met with Houthis about future financial alliances prior to the beginning of Coalition airstrikes.
- The Obama Administration does not appear to be willing to call out Russia for its military activities in the region and elsewhere. There is a relationship between what Russia is doing in Syria and what Russia is doing in Yemen and we need to be realistic about what that is.

The Obama Administration has declared that we support the pro-Yemen Government Coalition, but has not adequately explained to the American people what are the U.S. interests at stake. A simple answer is that we support the Coalition efforts in Yemen because Coalition countries share our concerns about Iranian influence and terrorism in Yemen.

- Containing Iran is critical.
- Yemeni territory and islands are critical to the global "chokepoint" at the Bab el-Mandab ("Gate of Grief"), which is the gateway between the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa – virtually all Suez Canal traffic.
 - Freedom of Navigation of the Straits of Hormuz. There is lots of talk of U.S. energy independence, but the bottom line is somewhere around 25-30% of our oil

comes from the GCC countries and must pass unimpeded through the Gulf (Iran is at 4%).

- Key passageway not only for U.S.-bound energy, but also to other economies upon which our jobs and economy relies.
- Most powerful threat to Saudi Arabia and other southern Gulf states.

There are substantial challenges to U.S. and other operations in Yemen.

- The U.S. withdrew most of its Embassy staff from Yemen, meaning we have very little visibility on the ground.
 - The United Nations has reported that 86% of those killed civilians (2,000 dead/4,000 wounded).
 - There are 1.5M displaced and 90% in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.
- We are supporting the Coalition through the provision of targeting information (though we do not select targets), intelligence, 45 intelligence analysts, logistical and search and rescue support, and weapons.
- The U.S. relationship with GCC countries, which make up the bulk of the Coalition, is weak.
 - The U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David in May failed to do the most important thing: close the credibility gap between the White House and our GCC partners. Washington's contributions to the Coalition in Yemen could be a confidence builder and put these important relationships on firmer ground.

The U.S. made the following assertions of support at the May U.S.-GCC summit:

- On Yemen, the parties emphasized the need to move rapidly from military operations to a political process and support U.N. humanitarian efforts (including a Saudi pledge of \$274M to U.N. humanitarian efforts in Yemen);
- Security Cooperation – provision of military equipment and training, and joint exercises;
- Security Assurances vs. Guarantees
 - “We [the U.S.] are prepared to work jointly with our GCC partners” was considered a rather “tepid” response and simply sustained misguided efforts to work through the GCC/Arab League on a unified Arab force. The idea of a united GCC block is evidence of our failure to understand how the region works. Notably, Washington insisted on an agreement that the GCC “consult” with the U.S. if it plans to take military action beyond its borders.
- Ballistic Missile Defense (and a revival of the decades-old goal of a GCC-wide Missile Early Warning System);
- Military Exercises and Training Partnership, including more Special Operations Forces cooperation and training with member states;
- Arms Transfers Fast Tracking (and, again, a misguided effort for GCC-wide sales after a GCC procurement capability is established);
- Maritime Security;
- Counter-Terrorism;
- Foreign Terrorist Fighters;
- Counter-Terrorism Financing;
- Critical Infrastructure and Cybersecurity;

- Countering Violent Extremism;
- Counter proliferation.

The most important thing that will come out of that meeting is if it will restore U.S. credibility with our Gulf allies. Timely, robust follow through is critical.

Bringing the war in Yemen to a close as swiftly as possible and containing negative Iranian influence will require that Washington provide a clear expression of our interests and our policies to our allies and our enemies, and follow through with timely and decisive action. Washington should:

- Help the Coalition determine its end game and how to achieve it definitively. The U.S. should increase our support to the Coalition – particularly in the areas of deterrence -- by providing additional intelligence, logistics and weapons support. We should also provide additional combat support, particularly that which supports ground troops’ safety and better directs lethal activity, thus reducing civilian and economic collateral damage (note: precision guided weaponry saves lives);
- Strengthen U.S. efforts to intercept Iranian and Russian support, particularly weapons, to the Houthi rebels and Hezbollah in Yemen. We cannot continue to tie one hand behind our back by failing to have sufficient military equipment and activities funded and deployed;
- Help secure the Saudi border;
- Put pressure on Iran and Russia diplomatically and otherwise, including by routine Coalition exercises;
- Lead internally (and lead abroad) by explaining why we should ramp up our support to “moderate” opposition in Syria and remove the constraints on our military leadership to provide unfiltered advice on best courses of action;
- Fix current and future limitations on our naval deployments to the region as a result of sequestration and the lack of operational funds due to the BCA.