HEARING, HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Co-Chairs, members of the Commission, it is an honor to be here to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Your other witnesses have far more professional experience in dealing with humanitarian crises than I, although I have had some experience over my 35 year foreign service career. Rather, the best contribution I can make to is to discuss the strategic environment in which the conflict is taking place.

Understanding that environment is not only essential to grasping the nature of the conflict fueling the humanitarian crisis, but to resolving it. In Yemen, advancing traditional U.S. strategic policy goals and preventing humanitarian catastrophe might appear at odds. They are not. Even if the U.S. were to totally cease its cooperation with the Saudis and other GCC states, the war likely would continue, as would the risk that it descends into a world class humanitarian crisis comparable to Syria's. Conversely, more American attention to the strategic stakes and our partners' concerns could generate a compensating willingness by them to listen to our humanitarian concerns and political approaches.

THE UNDERLYING CONFLICT

This underlying conflict in the region, of which Yemen is only one theater, can be summed up succinctly as a struggle between Iran, and its various mainly sub-national allies, against a regional coalition

led by Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, with Turkey and Israel as 'partial' players; a struggle that could spark a Sunni-Shia conflagration throughout the region, bringing levels of violence particularly against civilians greater than that seen in the Syrian civil war and ISIS's campaign, and far greater than what we have experienced in Yemen.

U.S. policy should thus focus: (1) tactically, on limiting the humanitarian crisis in particular by persuading U.S. partners to be more careful in military operations in return for more military coordination and better U.S. intelligence; (2) operationally, on a ceasefire and eventual shift from war to political dialogue; and (3) strategically, on the overarching regional struggle between Iran and the Saudi-led coalition.

It is my strong belief, from many discussions over the past 11 years with the Saudi top leadership, that the U.S. will not succeed even in the tactical and operational levels cited above without providing our regional partners a way forward with the strategic Iran regional threat.

The Obama Administration's position on this conflict has both sensible and questionable elements. What's sensible is President Obama's strong belief reiterated often that the U.S. will not get dragged into a regional Sunni-Shia conflict. After all, most of the region's Shia population are not hostile or a danger to the U.S.

But what's questionable is his policy, revealed in his Atlantic interview earlier this year, and not effectively countered by two summits with GCC states after the Iran nuclear deal, to promote 'moral equivalence' between the Iranian and Saudi-led coalitions, or even a shift towards Iran, manifest in the interview quote that Saudi Arabia should find a way to share the neighborhood with Iran.

Such an approach assumes things about both Iran and Saudi Arabia that do not hold water: that the Saudis are anxious for an Armageddon-like conflict with Shia Islam; and that Iran is or could easily become a status quo power.

While my conversations with the top Saudi leadership document their fear and dislike of not only Iran but the Shia branch of Islam, I do not believe the Kingdom seeks to drive the region into a sectarian conflict. But such a conflict could arise inadvertently from its efforts to contain Iran if not better coordinated with the U.S.

Saudi Arabia and most regional states reject the idea of 'sharing' the region with Iran. They do not see the Saudi-led regional alliance and the Iran coalition as having basically similar approaches to the region even if competing between themselves over specific interests, that is, a model similar to the relationship between Pakistan and India.

Rather, the GCC states and their somewhat like-minded partners in Jordan, Turkey and Israel see themselves as status quo powers, accepting the current international and regional orders, generally respecting state sovereignty and traditional state institutions, and supportive of U.S. engagement.

Iran, whether the radical Iran of Supreme Leader Khamenei and Quds Force leader Qasim Soleimani, or the Iran of moderates such as President Rouhani and his advisor Hossein Mousavi, is seen as a threat to the regional status quo. Whether in its guise as a nation state building on a Persian imperial tradition dating back three thousand years, in its guise as a revolutionary Islamic regional movement with roots shared with al Qaeda, or as the champion of the Shia 15% of the region's population, Iran is seen as hostile to the reigning status quo.

With considerable success Iran has expanded its influence in four Arab states, three of them majority non-Shia, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, plus Iraq. It struggles in every way possible to drive American power and influence from the region, is responsible directly or through surrogates for thousands of attacks against the U.S. in Iraq and scores elsewhere, most recently apparently the missile attacks on U.S. ships off Yemen's coast. Finally, it neither respects national sovereignty of other states nor the loyalty and integrity of other state's institutions. In all of the aforementioned states it undercuts sovereignty by supporting parallel political and military institutions more loyal to Teheran than to a government in Lebanon or

Damascus; call this the “Hezbollah model.” Finally, it leverages ‘total war’ policies and rhetoric against Israel to expand regional influence.

The U.S. is aware of the Iranian threat. As then CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin put it to the Senate Armed Services Committee last March 8, “Iran continues to pursue policies that enflame sectarian tensions and threaten U.S. strategic interests.” At the April 21 2016 GCC-U.S. Summit the participants reaffirmed the need to remain vigilant about addressing Iran’s destabilizing actions in the region, including its ballistic missile program and support for terrorist groups such as Hizballah and other extremist proxies, in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

Despite signing up to that affirmation, the U.S. has done little on the ground to counter that Iranian threat beyond the JCPOA. Many believe that the Administration’s priority is protecting the JCPOA against an unlikely possibility of Iranian withdrawal and thus has not followed through on its commitments with the GCC. Those who have spoken to the region’s friendly leaders in the past six months have heard basically the same message everywhere: We are very concerned about Iran, and even more concerned about America’s seeming abdication from its traditional regional security role.

Some defending this absence argue that Yemen is the GCC states’ ‘Vietnam’ war; they are in a bloody stalemate, and eventually must conclude they are losing too much and thus will withdraw as the Israelis did from southern Lebanon.

And that analogy is applicable, but in the opposite way. For the GCC states, especially the Kingdom, this is not a war of choice far from Saudi soil. They saw what happened when the Israelis withdrew, and Iran then armed Hezbollah with now 150,000 rockets and missiles that now can strike almost all of Israel. Thus for the Saudis Yemen is an existential conflict in two ways.

First, Saudi soil and Saudi citizens are under fire just as we have seen with Israel, from both rocket attacks and ground incursions. Second, even more importantly, the GCC states see this conflict as part of a larger struggle, with the Sunni Arab states increasingly on the defensive as Iran secures footholds in Arab state after Arab state.

Some on the back of local Shia populations; others, as with Oman and Hamas, yielding for opportunistic reasons. But in any case, the attitude of the GCC states and to some degree others of our regional partners is, ‘we are besieged.’

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Under such circumstances, ending the very limited American military and diplomatic support for the GCC is unlikely to end the war or humanitarian crisis. Both the GCC states and the Houthis and their Iranian ally will fight on.

But more American recognition of, and willingness to actually help deter, Iranian advances, could generate willingness by our Arab friends to modify their tactics, especially aerial bombing, try harder to reduce civilian suffering, and support any serious peace effort.

That might not end the conflict, depending on how Iran would react, but it could limit the extent of violence and humanitarian disaster, aid in the common fight against ISIS and al Qaeda, give the U.S. more leverage in the region, and avoid a descent into Syria-like chaos in Yemen, or beyond.