

## U.S. special forces flee Yemen's chaos

### What happened

Yemen was engulfed in a full-blown civil war this week, forcing the U.S. to suspend crucial anti-terrorism operations there. As Houthi rebels began an assault on Aden, the last stronghold of the Yemeni government, beleaguered President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi reportedly fled the country by sea. The Iranian-backed militants have been in control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since September, and as they advanced south last weekend, they also seized control of the country's third-largest city, Taiz. During that advance the U.S. pulled its team of around 100 special forces troops out of the southern Al Anad air base, where they had been gathering intelligence for drone strikes against the Yemen-based group Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Houthi forces then seized the base.

In response to the chaos—and amid fears over Iran's growing regional influence—Saudi Arabia amassed heavy artillery on its border with Yemen. The Houthi rebels, who practice a variant of Shiite Islam, are receiving support from Iran's Shiite government, and are also working with security forces still loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the longtime Shiite president who was ousted in 2012. Adding to the turmoil, a group claiming allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria claimed responsibility for suicide attacks that killed 137 Shiite worshippers in Sanaa last Friday. If the claims are true, it was the terror organization's first attack in Yemen. On Wednesday, Yemeni Foreign Minister Riad Yaseen pleaded for help from other nations, urging allies to send "fighter jets, navies, and ground forces if necessary."

### What the editorials said

"Another week, another victory for disorder in the Middle East," said *The Wall Street Journal*. The U.S. withdrawal from Yemen is a "major loss" in the fight against AQAP, the al Qaida group "most focused on hitting the U.S. mainland." We still have nearby military bases and warships from which to launch attacks on terrorists, but the lack of ground forces will reduce "accurate targeting." Only last September, President Obama hailed his Yemen strategy—drone attacks on targets identified by special forces—as



Looters overrunning the U.S. special forces base

a model for other anti-terrorism operations. "That wishful thinking has now been exposed."

Yemen now faces an "Iraq-Libya-Syria scenario," with warring factions but no central government, said *The Economist*. Hadi hopes to return to power, but he "cannot realistically hope to win a war against the Houthis and Saleh." So he is now waiting for Saudi Arabia or other Gulf nations to intervene and restore his rule, which is unlikely. But the Houthis also lack legitimacy to rule all of Yemen;

after their illegal seizure of Sanaa in September, they agreed to share power with Hadi and withdraw from the capital.

### What the columnists said

"Yemen is obviously a public-relations disaster for Team Obama," said Peter Brookes in the *Boston Herald*. It's also a huge "strategic distraction" when we're already facing major challenges in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. And the U.S. role in Yemen will be limited: This civil war is just a proxy for the Middle East's newest "Great Game"—Saudi Arabia's Sunni leaders fighting for dominance in the region with the Shiite mullahs of Iran.

This will be "a protracted civil war with multiple protagonists," said Brian Whitaker in *The Guardian.com*. Former President Saleh will be "a key player." Despite having constantly battled with the Houthis during his 34-year rule, the opportunistic Shiite leader formed an unlikely alliance with the group in a bid to return to power and install his son as president. That ambition will continue to be an obstacle to resolving this crisis.

"AQAP appears to be in position to gain the most from the turmoil in Yemen," said Martin Reardon in *Aljazeera.com*. Counter-terrorism experts consider it to be "the most dangerous terrorist organization in the world," because of its determination to devise and plant undetectable bombs on airliners or other Western targets. If there's a power vacuum in large parts of the country, AQAP will be much freer to operate, and "they'll be bigger, stronger, and better." For America and Europe, that's a very alarming prospect.