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Nadia Al-Sakkaf and Felice Friedson: US Overlooks a Sleeper in Yemen

Since unrest began flooding through the Middle East, Western assessments have been colored by hopes and expectations as much as by the events themselves. Media and governments alike have waxed near-euphoric in bestowing virtue and righteousness upon those who break with the incumbent rulers. While great attention is paid to past infamies, little understanding of successor regimes has been offered. Regarding Egypt, for instance, a military council was stipulated to hold only the purest of motives although no proof was forthcoming. Even the denouncement by Mohammed ElBaradei [the opposition leader with arguably the most prominent international profile as former head of the UN nuclear watchdog organization] of the council's proposed constitutional changes as a "dictator's constitution" failed to alter the tone of coverage – at least until the Muslim Brotherhood had emerged as the clear winner in that referendum.

Yemen, as a case-in-point is frightening. The formula there for both media and diplomacy has been "anti-Saleh good" and "pro-Saleh bad," leaving no room for further due diligence. So when General Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar defected from the Saleh camp it was by definition a good thing. But has anyone bothered to examine Al-Ahmar's past performances and question whether his ties to Al-Qa'ida are still in-tact? So much so that it raises the specter of a front man for the international terrorist organization. Although the US government professes the war against terror to be a priority among its concerns in the Middle East, apparently no one is paying attention to this very issue in the controversial poverty burdened Yemen.

What many fail to realize about this general is that his defection may not be totally related to the call for change advocated by opposition parties and protestors in the streets. Al-Ahmar has been known to be strongly affiliated with Al-Qa'ida. According to a 2005 cable by the American ambassador to Yemen Thomas Krajewski revealed by Wikileaks, Al-Ahmar appears to have amassed a fortune in the smuggling of arms, food staples, and consumer products.

He is one of what we call in the Arab world a "war prince"-- someone who benefits from times of conflict.

Signs backing this analysis are already showing in the latest news from the southern governorate of Abyan where the US had attacked an Al-Qa'ida training camp in 2009. The camp was allegedly run by Al-Ahmar, yet this point did not seem to resonate with either US thinkers or Yemeni authority as they dealt with this name.

"It is all about power struggle," cry out activists leading the youth protests in Change Square as they complain of losing faith in all political parties including the opposition. They feel that they have been failed by all political entities - both inside and outside the country.

In fact, the United States was not spared protestors' angst, as bullet shells and other armament were displayed on television with a sign reading, "Made in USA" and accompanied by shouts of "the US is killing us."

So what is America's involvement in Yemen? Is it the long standing commitment to support President Saleh as an ally in the war against terrorism still operative? If so, is Saleh's friendship and protection of Yemeni leader Abdulmajid Al-Zindani – frequently on the "Most Wanted Al-Qa'ida" list – problematic?

Or need Saleh answer for Al-Ahmar's use of jihadis to fight Shiite rebels linked to Iran between 2004 and 2008?

There is more to Yemen than is being reported or discussed in the media and behind closed doors whether in Washington or Sana'a. The US needs to stay focused and understand the dynamics of Yemeni politics and the various connections in order to really address the issue of terrorism. As events continue to unfold and foment, who is on whose team today seems to be of minimal concern. But the message of the street rejecting such arbitrariness is becoming louder and far less ambiguous than that of the politicians. It's that voice that needs to be heard.

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FELICE FRIEDSON is President & CEO of The Media Line Ltd, an American news agency specializing in coverage of the Middle East. NADIA AL-SAKKAF is the editor of The Yemen Times since 2005; a Yemeni human rights activist; and strong promoter of women empowerment and civil society development. Together, Friedson and Al-Sakkaf are behind WOMEN of MIDEAST MEDIA, an effort to support, train and empower women for careers in media in the Middle East. Friedson can be reached at [REDACTED]; Al-Sakkaf at [REDACTED].



A Call for Peace and Women's Empowerment in Middle East

Felice Friedson and Nadia Al-Sakkaf at the Overseas Press Club in New York



Before the event, from left: Allan Dodds Frank, Nadia Al-Sakkaf, Felice Friedson

Before the event, from left: Allan Dodds Frank, Nadia Al-Sakkaf, Felice Friedson, Peter Yarrow and OPC President David Andelman.

A member of the audience during the conversation about women in media in the Middle East wanted to compare the government possibilities in Egypt to Yemen, but Nadia Al-Sakkaf, Editor-in-Chief of *The Yemen Times* stopped that comparison cold. "It's not fair," she said. "These are different countries entirely." Throughout the conversation on Monday, March 28 at Club Quarters, the resounding call from Al-Sakkaf and Felice Friedson of The Media Line Ltd., an American news agency specializing in coverage of the Middle East, was for those outside of the region to see each country as a distinct entity, not just a blanket "Middle East."

"What is understood by Americans and anyone outside of the region is a result of media providing that information," Friedson said. "Information is the core of public policy makers and is the key for democracy." She said that one of the oddities of being based in the Middle East is reading accounts of events that are written by someone who is thousands of miles away. "Yet they profess total confidence knowing more than those on the ground."

Friedson also talked about the phenomena of "pack reporting," when hundreds of journalists drop into a country for spot news. "They're all doing the same story, asking 'what did that translator say?' which again supplies an imperfect or incomplete idea that might be widely published with little room for correction, but bound to become conventional wisdom."

Friedson said it's important that asking legitimate questions, like 'did we witness a military coup or popular revolution in Egypt?' is not an indictment of Egypt, nor is giving equal time to the Israel and Palestinian debate. "Advocates have an ax to grind, but journalists shouldn't," she said.

Friedson and Al-Sakkaf met over the internet six years ago and Media Line now supplies "content," as Friedson dubbed it, to Al-Sakkaf's paper, which is published in English.

The Yemen Times was started 20 years ago by Al-Sakkaf's father, she said he gave his life for freedom of the press. "When I took over in 2005, my staff, half of my male staff, didn't like it that they had a woman boss," she said. "Yemen is conservative and traditional. Many think that it's okay for women to be teachers or doctors but they shouldn't be journalists." She smiled and paused for emphasis to the largely female audience. "So with the power bestowed on me...I fired them." Al-Sakkaf estimated that there are about 500 women journalists in Yemen and many more who do not have press passes and said that half of her newsroom is comprised of women and several foreign reporters from countries like the U.S., Australia and Canada. "I was empowered because my family owns the paper," Al-Sakkaf said. "But it made me wonder what about all the other women who want to make change but their families don't own the paper?"

Al-Sakkaf asked for the U.S. to empower Yemenites by showing them how to build governmental institutions. "Don't define our future for us. Don't send your troops to die in Yemen," she said. "We will fight our own battle." While women are able to run for elected office in Yemen, there is only one woman who occupies a seat in the current parliament that has 301 members. Al-Sakkaf would like to see this change and said she herself would run for a political position in Yemen if a new government is installed. She called the current instability with cries for the current president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to cede power is at a standstill. "The questions we get from him are: don't prosecute me or my family and don't ask me about the money collected for the past 32 years," Al-Sakkaf said, "and we have a problem with that."

In Yemen, the current unemployment rate hovers around 35% and almost half of the population is under 15 years of age. Al-Sakkaf said one of the most critical pieces of legislation for Yemen would be a law for a marriage age threshold. Currently, girls of any age can be married off, considered property of the father to bestow upon another man. One year ago reports of a 12-year-old Yemeni girl who died of internal bleeding following intercourse three days after she was married made international news. The year before that, another married 12-year-old died during childbirth that also killed her baby. Al-Sakkaf said the most powerful person in Yemen is the president and that "if he wanted to do something for women, he would have done it by now. Right now, he's let me be [at the newspaper], and I hope this continues," she said, with fingers crossed.

Al-Sakkaf and Friedson were asked how social media like Facebook could possibly play a role in the poorest country in the Middle East. "Only one computer is needed," Al-Sakkaf said. "We group together a lot and so word of mouth and SMS [text messaging] spreads to others quickly."

The evening began with music provided by Peter Yarrow, of the group Peter, Paul and Mary, who performed with his daughter Bethany and cellist Rufus Cappadocia. Yarrow is on the board of Media Line Ltd., which is located in Jerusalem.

For videos from the event, go to youtube.com/opcofamerica

The Media Line (TML) is an American non-profit news organization established to enhance and balance media coverage in the Middle East, promote independent reporting in the region, and break down barriers to understanding in the Arab and Israeli journalism communities.

TML's mission is to provide credible, unbiased content, background and context to local media outlets throughout the Middle East and around the world. The Media Line has a mandate for education and supports scholarly endeavors at all levels. TML is "The Mideast News Source."

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