

Privatization Creates Opening for Terrorism

by Suzanne Rose

Much attention has been focussed on faulty decision-making which may have left the *USS Cole* vulnerable to a terrorist attack, from the standpoint that political or diplomatic considerations might have interfered with sound military judgment.

But the *Cole's* security was compromised long before the events surrounding the Oct. 12 refueling stop. The ship was left vulnerable by the cost-cutting mentality in Washington, which has corrupted the thinking of the military since it became dominant under the reign of Robert McNamara at the Department of Defense (see accompanying article by Carl Osgood). The pressure to cut costs led to the privatization and outsourcing of functions, which left the *Cole* vulnerable to a terrorist attack.

A Cole Commission, established by Defense Secretary William Cohen, and headed by Adm. Harold Gehman and Gen. William Crouch, is mandated to examine Pentagon policies and procedures, with respect to a ship in transit like the *Cole*, including logistics and contracting procedures.

Concerns about privatization, the contracting out of services by the military to private concerns, in the name of reducing costs, were uppermost in the minds of Congressmen at Senate and House hearings on the attack on the *Cole*, on Oct. 19 and 25. The questions asked by these lawmakers, and others, have centered, in part, on the role of private companies that serviced the ship during its refueling stop in Aden.

A Strictly Commercial Basis

One company, the Al Mansoob for Ship Supply and General Trade, owned the firm, the Gulf Aden Shipping Company, which was contracted by the Department of Defense to bring provisions to the *Cole* and haul away garbage; another, Arab Investment and Trading, contracted to supply fuel to the *Cole*, is owned by a Yemeni citizen residing in London, and has heavy Saudi investment. Both companies were under commercial contract to the Defense Energy Support Center (DESC), a division of the Defense Logistical Agency. The companies operated on a strictly commercial basis, and neither the principals, nor the employees, were ever investigated by the U.S. government or the government of Yemen, for criminal or terrorist ties. Sources have told *EIR* that, contrary to statements made at the Congressional hearings, the DESC was responsible for investigating the companies that bid for the contracts, the clearance was given by a low-level State Department official, and there is now much finger-pointing on this account.

Aden is a free port, run under contract by Singapore. The U.S. government has had a contract with Yemen to use the port as a strategic storage facility for refueling since 1998. Among the leading considerations for the port's choice, according to press accounts, was the cost at which the port could provide services. Security considerations might have countermanded this choice, since the Yemeni government is known not to have total control over the country, which is a refuge for Afghani terrorists (Anglo-American-sponsored mercenary veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, who have been redeployed to commit terrorist acts around the world). Press accounts and sources have said that the intelligence and security which the Yemeni government could have provided to U.S. ships, were minimal.

The private companies involved in the mooring, provisioning, and refueling of the *Cole*, had access to intimate details about the ship's whereabouts, and other information which would be helpful to terrorists. In fact, the vessel which carried the explosives was evidently mistaken by the crew for part of the garbage-collection detail. It was apparently disguised as a boat much like the one which had just departed from the *Cole* with a load of garbage, and therefore was not viewed suspiciously.

Navy Logistics Functions Privatized

In the 1980s, the Navy's fleet logistics force, which provisioned such ships, was much bigger than it is today, and the functions which are now provided by private contractors at the port, were then provided at sea.

The issue of the need for the *Cole* to refuel at a port like Aden, was of major concern to some members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees at the hearings. Sen. John Warner (R-Va.) pointed out that the U.S. Navy has gone from 32 to 21 refueling tankers (which are capable of refueling warships at sea), in the last ten years. Referring to the outsourcing of functions by the DLA, He said, "I wonder if we're getting to the point where we are so stretched, and we're outsourcing so much, that we're losing through this privatization—or are exposing ourselves to outsiders over whom we don't have the control that we would have, core-wise." Gen. Anthony Zinni (ret.), the former Commander-in-Chief of CENTCOM, the Middle East command where the attack occurred, confirmed that he was never given an option of having an oiler refuel his ships. He said that up until ten years ago, the Navy hardly ever pulled into port to refuel.

Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hi.), questioning witnesses at the House hearing, pointed out that the number of Navy personnel assigned to advance threat assessments and port security visits, has declined by roughly one-third since 1992. He sharply questioned witnesses from the military about who had the responsibility for investigating the contracting companies. Abercrombie was able to elicit testimony that there is no real ongoing oversight by the military, once the contracts have been agreed upon. He concluded that this posed the danger of infiltration by terrorists.