

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Yemen: An Uncertain Future

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Summary

The Christmas Day 2009 attempt to destroy an American airliner has brought Yemen again into the international spotlight. Most reporting has focussed on the al-Qaeda connection and US options to deal with this threat. But there are other, more fundamental, concerns. Yemen faces at least three insurgencies and is increasingly becoming a failed state with a large, youthful population that is highly vulnerable to the dictates of militant Islam.

Analysis

By any measure, Yemen is a fragile state. Its institutions are failing; its economy is in a state of collapse. The World Bank ranks it 166th out of 174th in terms of prosperity. Its oil exports, which account for 70 percent of its GDP, are expected to dry up within a decade. The government will not be able to generate sufficient wealth to maintain the tribal patronage on which it depends. It has an acute water shortage with many cities having access to water for less than two hours a day. Indeed, water supplies for the capital Sana are expected to be exhausted within 20 years. The UN World Food Program states that Yemen is the most food-insecure country in the Middle East.

It has a burgeoning population which has doubled since 1990 and will double again by 2025. Fifty percent of its population is under 15. Almost 40 percent of its 23 million people are unemployed. More than a third are under-nourished and half live below the poverty line.

The country is a topographical mix of desert and mountains. It has a fractured tribal culture, resulting in seven dialects. It has been called "Afghanistan by the Sea".

The regime of President Ali Saleh is autocratic, corrupt and inefficient. Once known as "Little Saddam", Saleh is the longest-serving ruler in the Middle East after Libya's Gaddafi. But his control over the country is faltering with popular movements in the north and south increasingly gaining momentum. His government has little control outside the capital and must also contend with a mix of competing tribal, clan and family differences.

Saleh also faces another issue for which he is partly responsible. In 1994, he relied heavily on those who had been influenced by a strong Wahhabist culture to subdue the socialist south. In part, this resulted from a deliberate Saudi project to finance schools and other institutions that graduated thousands of radicalised Yemenis who would fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupiers. Unlike other Middle Easterners, Yemeni returnees were welcomed by the Saleh regime.

While a considerable number of Yemenis subscribe to a Wahhabist-Salafist version of Islam, and do not advocate the militaristic outlook that is symptomatic of al-Qaeda, there appears to be an increasing number whose only option to

show their opposition to a corrupt and incapable regime is to call on their militant faith. Of course, others will seek to exploit this militancy, resulting in even greater destabilisation.

Yemen is presently host to three separate insurgencies.

The most significant is probably that on the Saudi-Yemeni border area, involving the Zaidi Shi'ite of the al-Houthi clan. This conflict pits minority Shi'ite rebels against the Sunni-dominated forces of the government. Insurgents, who seek to establish an independent state, have been active since 2004. Quelling the uprising has been beyond the capability of the Yemeni armed forces.

Recently the Houthis have conducted operations across the border in Saudi Arabia. This has led some analysts to consider this a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Certainly, there have been numerous reports indicating Iranian involvement in terms of supplying arms and equipment and even fighters. Riyadh has responded by deploying forces to the area but the possibility for further deterioration continues.

The second insurgency is that of a separatist campaign in the south. Yemen was only formed in 1990 with the unification of north and south Yemen. This was followed by a brief civil war in 1994 when the southern breakaway forces were defeated by thousands of Yemeni Mujaheddin who had fought in Afghanistan.

Ever since then, tension has gripped the region. Recently, a strong resurgent secessionist movement has emerged with a significant number of people in the south demanding a separation from what is perceived as a forced union by the north.

Poverty, instability, poor health care and low-quality education have enabled al-Qaeda to establish a base. In January 2009, the leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen, Nasir-al-Wahishi, announced that he was uniting with the Saudi al-Qaeda faction and forming al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Little is known outside of intelligence circles about AQAP. Some analysts claim they number between 100 and 300 operatives with many more supporters but that few have operational experience gained elsewhere. But there is little doubt that it is a growing force with the potential to attract many disenchanting youth.

Of course, al-Qaeda elements may also be a proxy for indigenous tribal confederations, clans and powerful families. Various factions have been quick to claim that al-Qaeda is supporting someone else or confronting a particular opponent when it is not clear that this is the case.

There is also a perception that AQAP is attempting to develop a transnational operational capability. Not only was there the attempt on the US airliner, but AQAP also tried to assassinate the Saudi deputy interior minister in August 2009. What is even more concerning is that the government is incapable of dealing with this threat while also confronting two other insurgencies. There are also many other major state players but two, in particular, are worthy of consideration: the US and Iran.

The US is faced with limited options. Certainly it will increase its advising, training and equipping role, noting that it has recently doubled the value of its military support. President Obama is also faced with the difficult option of reassuring the American people that enough is being done to counter the latest threat. Had the aircraft attack succeeded, for instance, then this would have been the second deadliest attack in the United States since 9/11. But becoming more aggressive in Yemen itself carries substantial risk.

American policy makers are fully aware of this dilemma. They have no alternative to supporting President Saleh who is only recently starting to recognise the threat from al-Qaeda. But such support could also lead to conditions of anarchy and an implosion of the state.

Recently, a well-known and respected religious and political figure, Sheikh Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, publicly delivered a nine-part religious pronouncement warning against any foreign military intervention. In this he was supported by 150 Muslim scholars, sheikhs and imams. If nothing else, this would complicate markedly any attempt to increase overt activities in Yemen.

American policy makers are also fully aware of the need to improve living conditions and recognise that counterterrorist activities are but one part of the solution. To improve living conditions, however, also requires better governance and a willingness of the people to accept aid and other measures. This probably also requires the involvement of other Arab nations such as the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. None of these conditions are guaranteed.

There is considerable speculation regarding Iran's role in Yemen. Certainly there is some evidence that Iran attempted to support the Houthi rebellion in mid-2009. This would not have been an easy task, given the logistic difficulties imposed by distance and terrain, and the sectarian challenges involved.

But Iran has shown that it is willing and capable of moving beyond its traditional Shiite strongholds in Lebanon and Iraq. Tehran, for instance, has developed close ties with the Sunni group Hamas in the Gaza Strip. And there are persistent rumours that al-Qaeda elements have worked with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

It is also in Iran's interest to highlight its ability to retaliate in as many parts of the Middle East as possible as it faces increasing uncertainty as the US and others attempt to deal with the nuclear issue. Yemen's strategic significance, therefore, is threefold.

Firstly, it sits on one side of a strategic waterway through which a high proportion of the world's oil shipments move. This situation would become even more pronounced should the Gulf of Hormuz be closed.

Secondly, a secure bastion for al-Qaeda would enable the movement to plan and prepare for transnational terrorist strikes not dissimilar to the failed aircraft attack.

Thirdly, from Yemen, al-Qaeda could again strike into Saudi Arabia, thus possibly earning support from Iran.

While the challenges are clear, the options for dealing with them have yet to be demonstrated.