
Yemen and the United States: Conflicting Priorities

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Yemeni-trained Omar Farouk Abu Mutallib's attempted attack on a U.S. airliner last December led the U.S. government to intensify its focus on Yemen as a counterterrorism priority. Washington's previous attempts to cooperate with Yemen on curbing terrorism have yielded mixed results. Although Yemen's President opposes al-Qaeda, he faces an array of domestic problems that trump his concerns about terrorism directed against Americans. The Obama administration must understand that Yemeni perceptions and priorities differ from ours and identify ways to work with the Yemeni government. This essay analyzes relevant aspects of the Yemeni situation and suggests ways to work toward a stable and lasting U.S.–Yemen bilateral relationship.

YEMEN BELOW WASHINGTON'S RADAR

For decades, Americans have largely ignored Yemen. U.S. government officials seem to pay attention to Yemen only when it affects U.S. interests elsewhere in the Middle East. From 1962 to 1970, when Saudi Arabia and Egypt supported opposite sides in the Yemeni civil war, the United States was concerned that Nasser's Egypt was gaining a foothold and threatening our Saudi friends.

In 1984, the U.S. company Hunt Oil discovered the first commercial quantities of oil in Yemen, but Washington took little notice. Vice President George Bush visited Yemen in 1986, but only because his close friend Ray Hunt persuaded him to add it onto his trip to Saudi Arabia.

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State Department officials saw Riyadh as important but Sana'a as a waste of the Vice President's time.

Washington paid scant attention when North and South Yemen unified in 1990. U.S. officials became concerned only when a civil war broke out in 1994, and Saudi Arabia was worried about unrest in its neighborhood. But the conflict was quickly resolved and Yemen disappeared again from the U.S. policymaking radar.

However, several terrorist attacks during the Clinton administration were traced to al-Qaeda and attracted attention from U.S. officials concerned about terrorism. Attacks included the 1992 assault on U.S. Marines in Yemen's port city Aden, the 1997 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania by terrorists linked to Yemen, and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, which was docked in Aden. After each attack, U.S. officials sought support from the Yemeni government in its counterterrorist efforts, and each time, Yemeni officials promised to cooperate. But their cooperation has been uneven and certain responses have caused U.S. officials to regard Yemen as unreliable or even obstructionist.

After the USS Cole attack, FBI experts questioned suspects arrested by the Yemenis, but were largely denied access to the suspects. The U.S. ambassador to Yemen believed that John O'Neill, the FBI team leader, was acting aggressively toward Yemeni officials. Deeming this behavior counterproductive, she denied O'Neill's return to Yemen after consultations in Washington. Yemen refused to extradite the key suspect, Jamal Badawi, who soon escaped from prison and rejoined a terrorist group. Yemeni courts convicted another known terrorist, Fahd al-Quso, and sentenced him to ten years in prison before deciding to release him. Al-Quso also rejoined a terrorist group.

THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR PHASE

The September 11, 2001 attacks and George W. Bush's "war on terror" elevated terrorism to Washington's highest priority. After September 11, the Bush administration applied acute pressure on the Yemeni government to cooperate in counterterrorism efforts. In December 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney traveled to Yemen to warn President Ali Abdullah Salih that the United States would go after al-Qaeda in Yemen "with or without" Yemen's support. Subsequently, Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation increased substantially between 2002 and 2004. Economic assistance and even arms sales, which had been suspended in 1990 when Yemen supported Saddam Hussein, were resumed.

But counterterrorism cooperation was not always smooth. In 2002, a Hellfire missile from a U.S. drone killed al-Qaeda leader Abu Ali al-Harithy. When Defense undersecretary Paul Wolfowitz announced the U.S. role, thus breaking a promise to Yemen to keep U.S. involvement secret, the Yemenis were furious. They were willing to cooperate, but only quietly.

In 2007, Jamal Badawi was sentenced to death, but President Salih commuted his sentence and released him. This led the Bush administration to cancel a planned economic assistance package and to doubt President Salih's commitment to counterterrorism. Bilateral counterterrorism cooperation remained troubled.

During the last two years of the Bush administration, Washington's focus on Yemen gave way to other foreign policy concerns. Deteriorating security in Iraq led President Bush to announce in January 2007 that 20,000 additional American troops would be deployed to Iraq to increase stability. This "new way forward" in Iraq was controversial in the United States and failed to produce immediate results. Simultaneously, the Taliban was regaining strength in Afghanistan. Elsewhere in the region, the Bush "road map" for Arab-Israeli peace was going nowhere. In January 2008, President Bush visited the Middle East and declared an Arab-Israeli settlement possible by the end of the year; clearly, this failed to materialize. In the lead-up to the November 2008 U.S. presidential election, a litany of foreign problems left little time for Washington to consider Yemen, which was not regarded as a crisis area then.

YEMEN IN FOCUS AGAIN

Yemen dramatically returned to the spotlight of counterterrorism efforts on December 25, 2009, when the young Nigerian Omar Farouk Abdul Mutallab attempted to blow up a Detroit-bound Northwest airliner on that day. Washington swiftly resumed its focus on Yemen's terrorist connections. The United States learned that Mutallab had gone to Yemen in August 2009 for al-Qaeda training and had received the explosive PETN, which he had sewn into his underwear. Interestingly, al-Qaeda in Yemen had used the same method less than two months earlier in its assassination attempt against the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayif.

With Washington again obliged to devote its attention to al-Qaeda in Yemen, U.S. politicians, pundits, and journalists "discovered" Yemen and struggled to understand its ties to terrorism. Many said Yemen had become the third major battleground, after Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan,

for fighting al-Qaeda. Reporters rushed to cover the story in Yemen, with their TV accounts including handy maps to locate Yemen for a generally oblivious American public. Some commentators explained that Yemen was Osama bin Laden's "ancestral home," although this fact was irrelevant to the terrorism issue. Senator Joseph Lieberman, chair of the Homeland Security Committee, declared that America's next war might be in Yemen.

The Obama administration took a more sober approach. The President called for an increased diplomatic and security partnership with

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Yemen to deal with the al-Qaeda threat and denied plans for a U.S. military intervention in Yemen.

The Obama administration understands the difficulties it faces in Yemen. President Obama rightly realizes that the correct approach is through diplomacy and cooperation rather than another military attack. But effective diplomacy includes understanding the

concerns and motivations of the other side and bridging the gaps that separate different perceptions. As Yemen's and America's perceptions and priorities are in many ways dissimilar, bridging the gaps will be a steep challenge.

YEMEN'S EARLY PROMISE

Ali Abdullah Salih became President of North Yemen in 1978 and president of a unified Yemen in 1990. When I was U.S. ambassador to North Yemen in the 1980s, the consensus was that Yemen had great potential, despite its problems. Yemen was a poor country but had two promising sources of substantial income: Yemeni guest-worker remittances and newfound oil. With the largest population on the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen exported tens of thousands of workers to Saudi Arabia and other population-starved and oil-rich Gulf states. These workers sent large remittances to their families still in Yemen. Moreover, the 1984 discovery of oil generated optimism of a brighter economic future for the country. Salih worried about South Yemen's Soviet-supported Marxist regime but maintained good relations with the USSR, which in turn supplied Salih with substantial military equipment and military advisors. The United States provided economic assistance and Peace Corps volunteers, and Salih persuaded the Chinese, Europeans, and most Gulf states to provide economic assistance to Yemen. A skillful politician, Salih sought to balance relationships abroad

and encourage competition among donors to support Yemen. Washington was part of that game.

Salih's unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 seemed to eliminate concerns about the south and to put the country on a more stable footing. But that stability proved illusory; since 1990, Salih's troubles have grown in spades.

THE EVOLUTION OF SALIH'S PROBLEMS

The only way the United States will gain Yemen's cooperation in defeating al-Qaeda is to understand the world from Salih's perspective, which includes his tribulations.

Salih faces an array of problems that in many ways reinforce each other. First, Yemen is still poor. Salih's decision to support Saddam Hussein's 1990 Kuwait invasion alienated Arab states in the Gulf, as well as Russia and the West. These countries halted their assistance programs, depriving Yemen of the financial support it had depended on since the 1980s. Gulf states also expelled thousands of Yemeni workers, thus ending the flow of remittances. Since 1990, despite Salih's efforts to attract foreign assistance, only a fraction of prior amounts has been realized.

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Concurrently, the oil deposits discovered in the 1980s are smaller than Yemen had expected and are rapidly dwindling. Yemen began exporting natural gas, but this will likely yield only \$1–2 billion annually and increase export revenues by less than 20 percent. The government pays \$2 billion a year in subsidies on diesel fuel. The Yemeni population growth rate is the fourth fastest in the world, adding 700,000 people per year to a population that already exceeds 24 million, the highest in the region. Yemen's education system is weak and female illiteracy is stagnant at 70 percent.

Compounding these economic problems, Sana'a and other areas of Yemen face a serious water shortage because of wasteful agricultural practices. Cost factors and Yemen's mountainous terrain make desalinization, used widely elsewhere in the Gulf, a non-viable option.

A second set of problems stems from Salih's concern about the south. Although Salih successfully extinguished a secession movement in 1994,

and attempts to support all regions of the country, southern complaints over unequal treatment and weak economic support have increased. Moreover, tribesmen in the eastern Marib Province and merchants in Hodaida, on the coast of the Red Sea, complain of the government's neglect and discrimination. The central government simply does not have the abundant resources of other countries in the region.

Third, owing to his limited means of coercion and his desire to remain in power, Salih has employed various tactics to induce support from his opponents. To placate a few critics, he has ignored increasing corruption in his government. In 1990, Salih allowed the country's first multi-party elections and sanctioned limited press freedom. These measures were enacted to allow Salih's opposition to "come to the surface" where he could see them more clearly. Since then, Salih has pulled back on democratic freedoms when public criticism of his regime increased.

NEW THREATS TO SALIH'S RULE

Salih's rule is highly personalized, tactical, and focused on short-term gains. He uses inducements, cooption, toughness, and factional balancing to keep his opponents off balance and to maintain his regime. But the past few years have produced new internal threats that create a much more serious challenge to Salih's rule.

In 2004, an opposition group of northern Zaydi tribesmen called for an end to Salih's regime. The rebels had retreated to the north and, led by Abdal Malik al Houthi, started an armed rebellion against the state. Salih unsuccessfully attempted to quash the rebellion with force. Saudi Arabia, worried about its border region, intervened against Houthi's forces, but also without success. The continued rebellion has caused extensive casualties and displacements, and Salih is deeply troubled by its seeming interminability.

Al-Qaeda is another major headache for Salih. Terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda have been active in Yemen since the late 1990s, but did not attack Yemeni government targets until well into the next decade. During the 1990s, Salih's cooperation with Washington against al-Qaeda was more a response to strong U.S. requests than a reaction against perceived threats to his regime. Indeed, Salih calculated that strong action against al-Qaeda and its tribal allies might strengthen his domestic opponents and feared that open cooperation with the United States would validate al-Qaeda's narrative that Salih was an anti-Muslim American puppet.

After September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia—a prime al-Qaeda target—took aggressive action against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Many AQAP members fled to Yemen, where they united with al-Qaeda-affiliated Yemeni terrorists. Last year, the disparate groups formally merged as AQAP under Yemeni leadership. Their numbers were augmented by Yemeni veterans who had fought in the Afghanistan jihad against the Soviets and by freed Guantánamo detainees. Although AQAP’s Yemeni membership is small—probably less than a few hundred—its demonstrated willingness to execute suicide attacks makes it lethal.

After the Christmas Day bombing attempt, Salih again promised to cooperate with the United States against al-Qaeda. His priority, however, is not al-Qaeda but dealing with discontent in the south; the bloody, ongoing rebellion in the north; and the complex array of tribal and local interests that threaten his leadership. Yemen’s sagging economy only galvanizes Salih’s critics. At Washington’s insistence, fighting al-Qaeda is on Salih’s list of priorities but he has other existential concerns that trump counterterrorism cooperation with the United States. The key challenge is to persuade Salih to take actions against al-Qaeda that will satisfy U.S. demands and to bridge the gap between U.S. and Yemeni needs.

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WHAT WASHINGTON SHOULD DO

The Obama administration needs to continue to send counterterrorism experts to Yemen and quietly coordinate its counterterrorism operations with the Yemenis. But it should not deploy U.S. troops. The Yemeni cleric Abdal Majd Zindani has already complained that the United States wants to impose an “international occupation” on Yemen. Salih wants to avoid any perceptions or rumors of this occupation. Furthermore, the Pentagon does not have enough forces to make a Yemeni deployment feasible. Rather, the United States should both increase its economic assistance to Yemen and work through diplomatic channels to persuade Saudi Arabia and other states of the Arabian Peninsula to reopen their economies to Yemeni workers. This would fill manpower demand in the Gulf and help revive the flow of Gulf remittances to Yemen. Second, the United

States should revive financial support to Yemen in order to ameliorate its basic economic problems, which continue to fuel despair and entrench radicalism.

Objectively, it would seem solidly in the Arab states' interest to deal with terrorists who take refuge and pursue training in Yemen, and trigger violence in the immediate neighborhood. Theoretically, it should be easy for Washington to persuade Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states to cooperate with Yemen on counterterrorism issues, provide Yemen with economic assistance, and invite Yemeni workers to return.

But the reality is not so simple. Leaders in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states remember that Salih sided with Saddam in 1990. More importantly, they fear that allowing Yemeni workers back into their countries would invite an influx of Yemeni terrorists. Despite public assertions of mutual friendship, relations between the Saudi and Yemeni governments have long been characterized by an underlying mistrust, which has outlived the Saudi–Yemeni border settlement and Saudi aid against the Houthi Rebellion in the north of Yemen.

Riyadh has always regarded Yemen as the Kingdom's backyard and has rebuffed U.S. advice on how to treat the Yemenis; thus the Obama administration faces serious obstacles in persuading Saudi Arabia to change its policies toward Yemen. Quite simply, the Saudis do not want our advice. Promisingly, Saudi Arabia has provided some economic assistance to Yemen, the UAE has offered aid, and Oman has quietly provided material assistance, particularly in its border area with Yemen. But the aid is inadequate and Yemeni workers are still largely barred from the Gulf states.

In short, unilateral American military solutions, as we should have learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, would be counterproductive in Yemen. The most effective route forward is with multilateral diplomatic efforts to mobilize Gulf states against al-Qaeda terrorism, which threatens all the countries in the region. We can only hope that the Obama administration will ignore calls for U.S. troop deployment and pursue the more subtle—yet infinitely more effective—diplomatic route, difficult as that may be. ■