

Achieving Long-Term Stability in Yemen: Moving Beyond Counterterrorism

by **Atiaf Zaid Alwazir**

SUMMARY

The United States' policy in Yemen has focused narrowly on counterterrorism at the expense of economic and political development, which has not only hindered democratic reform in the country, but also compromised the short-term goal of eradicating the threat of terrorism.

The restructuring of the security sector, currently led by former President Saleh's family members and cronies, is of paramount importance for the future stability of Yemen.

Because it has worked closely with the Saleh regime on counterterrorism cooperation, the U.S. is perceived as resistant to security sector reform.

U.S. counterterrorism efforts, particularly drone strikes, have fueled anti-American sentiment and had the reverse effect of strengthening the cause of radical militants.

The U.S. needs to shift its bilateral policy in Yemen toward long-term stability, which should include encouraging the Yemeni government to fundamentally restructure the security forces, increasing economic assistance, and limiting the use of drone strikes.

A year after Yemenis took to the streets to call for the ouster of longtime autocrat Ali Abdullah Saleh, the presidency was passed to Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi in an uncontested election on February 21, 2012. While this transfer of power represents a positive step towards the democratic reform demanded by the Yemeni people, the transitional process remains delicate with many challenges ahead. The security situation is extremely volatile, the economy is quickly unraveling, malnutrition is on the rise, and Saleh retains considerable influence as chairman of the General People's Congress (GPC) party and continually threatens to have the GPC withdraw from the unity government when matters are not handled to his liking.

To ensure that the process for fundamental change remains on track, the transitional government must commit itself to a national dialogue process in which all groups are represented and all topics discussed. Security sector reform—arguably the most important priority in the interim period—needs to be addressed as part of the national dialogue, given that it is a national issue that should receive attention beyond the Military Affairs Committee.¹ More specifically, this restructuring should focus on the unification, institutionalization, and demographic diversification of the military.

With ambassadors from the UN Security Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the European Union appointed as advisors and monitors for different aspects of Yemen's transition, the international community has an opportunity to encourage the Yemeni government to manage a successful democratization process. The United States, who has been assigned the military and security portfolio, will have a particularly important role in the months ahead. Yet skepticism looms among many Yemenis who fear that the U.S. administration may use its military aid to solidify the status quo by pushing to keep corrupt allies in the security forces. The U.S. needs to rebalance its bilateral policy toward Yemen so that political and economic development is elevated alongside its counterterrorism strategy. Such a policy would not only promote long-term stability in Yemen, it would also build greater support in the short-term for the campaign against radical militants.

THE YEMENI SECURITY FORCES: A FAMILY AFFAIR

One of the most daunting challenges during the transitional period is the restructuring of the security forces, which has been packed with Saleh's family

¹ As part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) implementing mechanism, President Hadi endorsed a decree to form the Military Affairs Committee on December 4, 2011, to restructure the security forces, including the army, the police and the intelligence services. Hadi himself chairs the fourteen-member committee.

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members and cronies who have exploited their positions to consolidate both economic and political power, further exacerbating the security situation in Yemen.

In 1978, less than a month after former President Ali Abdullah Saleh took power, a coup attempt by a group of 30 military officers failed, resulting in their execution. Henceforth, Saleh mainly recruited military and security officers from his own Sanhan tribe to ensure loyalty within the ranks. His six brothers and General Ali Mohsin (who comes from the same tribe and is rumored to be Saleh’s half brother) formed the backbone of the military. General Mohsin had been a close advisor and friend to Saleh since their early days in the military and is believed to have helped Saleh seize the presidency in 1978. In return, he became Saleh’s trusted companion and second-in-command.

This nepotism also spilled over into the economic sphere where the lack of transparency and accountability allowed omnipotent military leaders to accumulate inordinate wealth and land. Precise data on their assets is difficult to ascertain, however, their foreign bank accounts, thousands of acres of land and estates throughout the country, millions of petrodollars from oil smuggling, ownership of large companies in the country, and real estate in Europe and the Gulf testify to their vast economic power.

Saleh’s ruthless style of governance not only led to rampant corruption, but also a deteriorating security situation, as the ruling military elite were more concerned with their own power than the stability of the country. While General Mohsin was considered an important member of Saleh’s inner circle, he allegedly fell out of favor in the 1990s as he grew increasingly arrogant following his success in the Yemeni civil war. Consequently, Saleh chose to groom his son, Ahmed, as his successor instead. In 2000, Ahmed became the head of the Republican Guard, expanding it from a few thousand to 30 thousand soldiers. His influence increased further with the War on Terror bringing U.S. financial assistance and training directly to his military units. The question of succession fueled tension between General Mohsin and Ahmed Saleh and, eventually, between their respective military units, the First Armored Division (FAD) and the Republican Guard. The breaking point came in 2009, when President Saleh sought—unsuccessfully—to have Mohsin killed.

It was thus no surprise that on March 21, 2011, General Mohsin announced his support for the popular uprising that sought to overthrow Saleh. The rupture within the regime quickly manifested itself onto the streets of the capital. Mohsin’s FAD joined with armed tribesmen who were linked to opposition leaders from the powerful Al-Ahmar family to control the northwest and northeast, while government forces took control of the southeast. This division between rival forces reached its peak in September 2011 when military clashes erupted between government forces and the FAD, along with armed tribesmen. In each area, rival forces have still not fully withdrawn from the streets or public institutions such as schools, creating a constant climate of fear.

Support from external powers has helped sustain these rivalries. As a key ally in the War on Terror, Ahmed and much of the extended Saleh family is supported by the United States. Saleh’s nephew Yahya heads a counterterrorism unit in

Central Security; his son, Ahmed Ali, heads the Special Operations Forces; and Saleh's nephew, Ammar, the deputy director of the National Security Bureau, works with the U.S. on intelligence sharing. Although U.S. officials have expressed their support for professionalizing Yemen's military and security forces, after years of cultivating relationships with the Saleh regime, they are widely assumed to be reluctant to see the removal of these key military and intelligence officials. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, supports General Mohsin, one of many individuals who benefits from Saudi's vast patronage network in Yemen. While these rival groups have broad external support, the majority of people in Yemen want neither in power.

On April 6, 2012, President Hadi ordered a decree to reassign 20 military officers from their posts, including Saleh's half brother Mohammed Saleh, commander of the Air Force, and Mohammed Ali Mohsin, the son of the infamous General Ali Mohsin. The President also replaced the governors of four provinces and reassigned the former president's nephew, Tariq Saleh, from the head of the Presidential Guard to a Brigade commander. These are important changes, but Saleh's son, two nephews, and General Ali Mohsin himself still remain in their posts, meaning that comprehensive restructuring has yet to take place.

U.S.-YEMENI SECURITY COOPERATION

For a decade, U.S. policy in Yemen has focused inordinately on counterterrorism cooperation with Yemeni security forces. This cooperation includes training and funding counterterrorism units, targeted assassinations against terrorists including U.S. citizens, and deployment of small on-the-ground operation units. Section 1206 security assistance to Yemen, which allows the Department of Defense to train and equip foreign military forces for counterterrorism and stability operations, increased from \$30.3 million in 2006 to \$252.6 million in mid-2010, making it the world's largest recipient of section 1206 funding.

With calls for democratic change sweeping the Arab world, 2011 was a key moment for the U.S. to forge new alliances and to re-evaluate its counterterrorism policy in Yemen to address long-term grievances and respond to local demands. It seems, however, that the U.S. administration is clinging to its pre-existing policies that place short-term security goals ahead of longer-term democratic reform. In a recent interview, Gerald M. Feierstein, the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, stated that the U.S. counterterrorism policy in Yemen "would continue along the lines that we [the U.S.] have been pursuing."²

To be sure, U.S. assistance to Yemen—including Section 1206 funding—was suspended in FY2011 due to the uncertain political situation and concern that U.S. weaponry could be misused. Yet since Saleh stepped down in February, the U.S. has resumed assistance to the Yemeni government despite the lack of any serious restructuring of the military. Although the Military Affairs Committee in Yemen has successfully enforced a cease-fire between rival

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² Feierstein, Gerald M. Interview by Tom Finn. 22 February 2012. www.bit.ly/A8erQL

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security apparatus factions in the capital, these factions have yet to fully withdraw their armed forces and militia from the streets, and the military has yet to be unified under a central command.

Moreover, in the past year, collaboration on counterterrorism between the CIA and the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command has increased, while drone strikes have risen to “the same level as the CIA’s controversial drone campaign in Pakistan.”³ And in April, U.S. President Barack Obama expanded the program by granting the CIA the authority to use drone strikes against suspects without knowing their identities.

THE COST OF DRONE STRIKES

This reliance on drone strikes is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the United States’ counterterrorism strategy. Rather than eradicating the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen, the drone program has arguably strengthened terrorist groups. Enraged tribal leaders have refused to cooperate with U.S. and Yemeni government-led counterterrorism efforts, while family members of drone strike victims have joined these groups to seek vengeance. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between 55 and 119 civilians have been killed in drone strikes in Yemen since 2002.

Ansar al-Sharia— a branch or offshoot of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with which it has an unclear relationship— has capitalized on the collateral damage of air strikes to convince citizens that neither the Yemeni nor the U.S. government cares about their livelihood. Seeking to transform AQAP from an Al Qaeda affiliate to a more Taliban-like movement, Ansar al-Sharia has launched a wide-scale domestic insurgency to appeal to the local population, providing security, food, and power while simultaneously eliciting anti-American sentiment by distributing CDs rife with gruesome images of U.S. military attacks.

Ansar al-Sharia’s tactics resonate most notably with southerners who feel increasingly marginalized and neglected by the government. With nowhere else to channel their anger, disenfranchised young men become easy targets for recruitment.

A COUNTERPRODUCTIVE COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY

Although the U.S. administration has focused narrowly on counterterrorism strategy and support for the Yemeni military at the expense of longer-term economic and political development, it is not clear that the current policy has been effective, even from a military perspective. Many Yemenis view statements from Washington as disingenuous; not only regarding support for Yemen’s nascent democratic transition, but also in countering terrorism.

Before last year, AQAP had never controlled any city in Yemen, but they were able to capitalize on the instability in the country last spring to take over the southern city of Jaar in Abyan governorate. Today, Ansar al-Sharia claims to control five cities in

³ Woods, Chris & Slater, Emma. “Arab Spring Brings Steep Rise in US attacks in Yemen.” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. 29 Mar. 2012. <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/03/29/arab-spring-saw-steep-rise-in-us-attacks-on-yemen-militants/>

the south of Yemen—a product, at least partially, of corrupt security officers. At a critical juncture in the struggle for Jaar, the counterterrorism unit of the Yemeni military, which is supported by the United States, chose to prioritize regime loyalty over the security of its citizens, abandoning their positions and returning to Sana’a to “protect” the regime against peaceful protestors. Similarly, it is not clear that targeted assassinations of AQAP leaders have seriously weakened the terrorist group. Since the killing of American cleric Anwar al Awlaki on September 30, 2011, militant action against both regime officials and civilians in Yemen has continued unabated, while anti-American sentiment has risen.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In short, by focusing on short-term counterterrorism goals, the U.S. government has not only hindered democratic reform in the country, it has also compromised its own short-term goals of eradicating the terrorist threat. Instead, the U.S. administration should:

- ***Encourage—in its capacity as an international advisor—the Yemeni government to fundamentally restructure the security forces.*** The removal of corrupt officials from the former regime is crucial if Yemen is to truly move beyond the status quo. As a percentage of total government budget, Yemen’s defense budget is the fourth highest in the world, but corruption and disregard for the rule of law have prevented the Yemeni security forces from fostering stability in the country. Security sector reform should focus on proper training, creation of a centralized chain of command, establishment of a transparent, centralized payroll system that deters generals from exploiting salaries for loyalty or corruption (currently, soldiers receive their pay directly from division commanders rather than the central government), and the recruitment of military generals and officers from various regions and tribes of Yemen so that the military is seen as a genuinely national institution. The U.S. should also support the inclusion of youth and other previously disenfranchised groups in all negotiation efforts, even those dealing with military restructuring.
- ***Tie military aid to progress on restructuring of the security forces and ensure that all financial assistance be channeled through the civilian government rather than given directly to specific security units.*** Providing full financial support to the Yemeni security forces before restructuring has taken place will not help fight militants but will instead serve to entrench intra-elite power struggles, which could derail the transitional and reform process. Continued support for former regime officials will also increase anti-American sentiment in the country, as the U.S. will be seen as a counter-revolutionary force among Yemeni protestors who have called for changes in the security forces since the start of the revolution.
- ***Recalibrate the bilateral relationship to focus more on longer-term political and economic development rather than narrow short-term security goals.*** Constant AQAP attacks in Yemen illustrate that a policy focused solely on military assistance, weapons, and drone attacks will not eliminate the threat of terrorism. With 40 percent of the population living on less than \$2 per day,

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disenfranchisement as a result of widespread poverty is a major obstacle to Yemen’s long-term stability. The U.S. should support Yemen by investing more in economic growth, job creation, sustainable development, and institutions supporting rule of law.

- ***Limit the use of drone strikes in Yemen to only the highest-level targets and carefully weigh the political costs when determining how and where drone attacks should be utilized.*** Drone strikes are often counterproductive to U.S. counterterrorism strategy as they fuel anti-American sentiment among locals and increase sympathy for the cause of AQAP. Moreover, it is not clear that these strikes are actually weakening terrorist groups.
- ***Allow the U.S. State Department to take the lead on policy toward Yemen, rather than the Department of Defense.*** With its emphasis on counterterrorism, U.S. public diplomacy toward Yemen has become increasingly “militarized.” The U.S. State Department should instead be leading foreign policy efforts in Yemen. The frequent visits by counterterrorism advisor John Brennan to Yemen send a message to the people that he has more to say regarding U.S. policy than Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.
- ***Increase exchange programs and knowledge sharing between Americans and Yemenis.*** Despite its strategic importance, Yemen receives far less attention and interest from the West than other countries of the Arab world. With AQAP dominating conversations concerning U.S. interests, extremely few Americans understand much at all about Yemen in all its complexity and nuance. The U.S. government should therefore expand exchange programs and research fellowships for Americans to visit Yemen. Given the volatile security climate, visits by Americans to Yemen might be limited in the near future, but the U.S. should nevertheless increase the ability of Yemenis to visit the U.S. in exchange programs promoting cross-cultural understanding. In addition, the U.S. administration should invest in building an American university in the country similar to others in the region. This will not only benefit Yemenis, but will also improve the negative image of the U.S. in the country.

CONCLUSION

Last March, a public opinion survey concluded that although 86 percent of Yemenis hold an unfavorable opinion of Al Qaeda, an even higher 96 percent disapprove of their government’s cooperation with the United States.⁴ This widespread anti-Americanism exists not because of inherent support for Al Qaeda’s radical message, but because perceived U.S. support for corrupt, brutal officials is seen as fueling rather than deterring terrorism in Yemen. In a promising step, President Obama signed an Executive Order on May 16 authorizing sanctions to be imposed on “individuals and entities who threaten the peace, security, and stability of Yemen by disrupting the political transition.” This could be an important first step toward a serious shift in U.S. policy, but it is essential that it be accompanied by other meaningful changes that elevate long-term development alongside counterterrorism efforts.

⁴ Yemen Stability Survey. Glevum Stability Assessment. March 2011