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Yemen's Increasing Importance for Al-Qaeda and the U.S. Anti-terrorism Effort

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Yemen remains unstable in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In recent years, it has become an operational base for the regional Al-Qaeda affiliate, which won control of a few cities in the south. Escalation of the U.S. anti-terrorism effort in Yemen does not increase its stability, which could be augmented through an intensification of development and humanitarian efforts on behalf of Yemen's neighbours, the U.S. and the European Union.

Yemen as a Failed State. The Republic of Yemen is the poorest country in the region, and has a population of more than 24 million. It was created in 1990, after the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). Its economy is based on oil and natural gas, but these reserves might be extinct by 2020. This would increase unemployment and lead to a national financial crisis, as 70% of Yemen's state budget is currently based on income from the oil sector. There are also problems associated with the consumption of "Khat", a narcotic popular among Yemenis. Increasing levels of drug production require normal farms to be more intensive in order to achieve the same results while also using additional water resources. Access to drinking water is limited for the majority of Yemenis, and this is a problem which is particularly visible in the overpopulated capital, Sana'a. The poor economic situation in Yemen is also connected with the instability caused by the rebellion of the Shia minority (al-Huthi tribes) in the northern part of this Sunni dominated country, as well by southern separatism, inter-tribal rivalries and the activities of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In the context of easily-available small arms (for every Yemeni, there are an estimated five to six weapons), the majority of the country's territory is under control of tribal and clan militias. Additional factors contributing to destabilisation in Yemen are refugees from the Horn of Africa, piracy, and drug smuggling in the Gulf of Aden.

Between 1978 and 2012, Yemen was ruled by General Ali Abdullah Salih, first as the president of North Yemen and then of the united Republic of Yemen. Despite the authoritarian style of his presidency, President Salih was a guarantor of state unity, which was augmented by his control of oil export incomes and his skilful manipulation of both inter-tribal rivalry and the conflict between Shias and Al-Qaeda sympathisers. The situation in Yemen was further complicated in 2011 when the country witnessed mass protests against the economic crisis and Salih's presidency. After almost a year of Arab Spring-inspired protests, and following Saudi Arabia's discreet diplomacy, Salih stepped down and transferred power to his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi. Due to the scale of the challenges and problems he faces, the new president of Yemen is in no better position than his predecessor, and his government's stability depends on whether Yemen is able to avoid a humanitarian crisis through access to international aid. The Friends of Yemen group, which was created in 2010 and consists of, amongst others, the member states of the UN Security Council and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), gathered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May, and announced aid for Yemen amounting to an additional \$4 billion, of which \$3.25 billion was donated by Saudi Arabia. This money is meant to further political and economic transformation in Yemen, help ensure its territorial integrity, and prevent a humanitarian crisis.

The Threat from Al-Qaeda. AQAP, a regional affiliate of Al-Qaeda, used Yemen's instability in 2011 to its advantage. AQAP was formed in early 2009 after a merger between Al-Qaeda in Yemen, and Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, previously weakened by effective anti-terrorism efforts

by the Saudi and Yemeni security forces.¹ The leadership of the newly formed AQAP consists of veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, such as Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who escaped from a Yemeni prison. Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, responsible for the propaganda activities of the organisation, also proved to be useful additions. Their history, background (both were U.S. citizens) and creative use of new media, guaranteed a string of unprecedented propaganda coups for the organisation. Moreover, the merger extended AQAP's reach, enabling it to address global audiences and recruit in Western countries.

In 2011, the strengthened AQAP, operating under the more socially acceptable name of Ansar al Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) and using Yemen's instability to its advantage, began a guerrilla campaign that won it control of significant parts of southern Yemen. Simultaneously, it mounted terrorist attacks in the country's capital, Sana'a, and attempted, though unsuccessfully, to smuggle explosives onto U.S.-bound passenger and cargo planes. The latest such attempt took place in May.

Escalation of U.S. Covert Operations in Yemen. Yemen became an object of interest for U.S. intelligence after Al-Qaeda's suicide bomb attack on the USS Cole, an American destroyer, in the port of Aden, in 2000. During the presidency of George W. Bush, counter-terrorism cooperation between the U.S. and Yemen was unsatisfactory. The government of Yemen was selectively engaging in the fight against Al-Qaeda, and the U.S. decided to withhold the repatriation of 60 of an overall pool of 90 Yemeni citizens suspected of terrorism and held at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. This situation began to change during the presidency of Barack Obama; American assistance to the security forces of Yemen, including its special forces, coast and border guard, increased from \$4 million in 2006 to more than \$155 million in 2010 (civilian economic aid is similar). Recently, Yemen's counter-terrorism units were also strengthened by 100 American military advisors.

The Obama administration also increased the scale of the CIA's covert paramilitary activities in Yemen, as well as direct actions of units from the U.S. JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command). They are supported from new covert bases in Djibouti, Qatar and the Seychelles. As in Pakistan's tribal areas, the number of unmanned CIA aircraft (drones) strikes against AQAP members in Yemen has increased. So far, there is verified information about 39 strikes by drones, and there have already been 22 this year.

These covert operations were successful in eliminating many of AQAP's leaders, ideologists and planners. The majority of strikes are conducted by drones with precision-guided Hellfire missiles, chosen because they present a minimal risk of collateral damage to civilians. Unfortunately, the U.S. found it hard to avoid such casualties altogether. These covert actions by the CIA and JSOC in Yemen, and in neighbouring Somalia, appear to be conducted with assistance from the intelligence services of Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region. Their effectiveness and legality are also subjects of controversy among American lawyers and regional experts. Some of them underline the fact that U.S. efforts in Yemen should be focused on development and humanitarian aid, rather than fighting terrorism. Advocates of this approach also argue that U.S. national security would benefit more from the elimination of the economic, political and social roots of AQAP's success in Yemen, than from decapitation of this organisation by the removal of its leadership.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Yemen could be classified as a "failed state" because of the complex set of challenges it now faces. Because the government in Sana'a does not control the majority of the country, Yemen has again become a safe haven for Al-Qaeda terrorists. Because of its attempted terrorist attacks on the U.S. and its guerrilla campaign, the Saudi-Yemeni AQAP is regarded as the most dangerous Al-Qaeda affiliate. As a result of this, the U.S. has increased its anti-terrorism effort in Yemen visibly. However, this effort's successes have failed to prevent AQAP's transformation into a serious political and military force, which is in control of parts of Yemen.

The U.S. anti-terrorism efforts are not accompanied by a long-term strategy to stabilise Yemen. In this context, the importance of Saudi Arabian and GCC assistance is of greater importance. EU humanitarian aid to Yemen amounts to only €25 million, and, in light of the potential famine in Yemen, is insufficient. The EU, just as with the U.S., should, however, be wary of further commitments to development assistance, as excess or inaccurate targeting of such aid could lead to increased corruption or a deepening of Yemen's internal conflicts. The beginning of the EU's revamped involvement in this country should be its greater interest in the activities of the Friends of Yemen group, which met as recently as May.

¹ See: P. Sasnal, "Al-Qaeda in Yemen", *PISM Bulletin*, No. 6 (82), 15 January 2010.