



ISSUE BRIEF BY BARBARA K. BODINE AND DANYA GREENFIELD

# A Blueprint for a Comprehensive US Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen

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With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the explosion of violent conflicts from Tripoli to Gaza, the Middle East is looking more unstable and unpredictable than ever. While the focus in Washington is centered on jihadist extremists in Iraq and Syria at present, the threat from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) against the United States continues. Top al-Qaeda leadership in Yemen is hailing the territorial gains of ISIS in Iraq, and some al-Qaeda operatives are imitating ISIS' techniques such as public slaughters of those deemed infidels,<sup>1</sup> prompting fears of cooperation between two of the most active Islamist militant networks. Recent aggression by the Houthi movement, a Zaydi Shia rebel militia, against state institutions and tribal opponents has opened a new front of instability and security vacuum that AQAP is all too ready to exploit. Inattention to the interconnected nature of tribal conflict, terrorist activity, poor governance, economic grievances and citizen discontent is proving to be a dangerous combination for both Yemen and the United States. The Yemeni context may seem far from the current focus on Baghdad and Damascus, but getting the US strategy right in Yemen will have consequences for regional stability and core US interests throughout the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

Although the reach and lethality of terrorist networks in the Middle East continue to grow, there is scant evidence of innovative, ambitious thinking in Washington about how to effectively address the governance and development factors that are driving this growth. The default approach remains focused on targeted drone strikes and capacity building of partner elite counterterrorism units. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, in spite of tens of thousands of US troops on the ground, deep intelligence-gathering capabilities, and

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an investment of billions of dollars, the results have been mixed at best. In a major foreign policy speech in May 2014, President Barack Obama announced a \$5 billion Counterterrorism Fund to support capacity building and equipment for regional partners to combat terror networks. To date, however, there is little clarity about the fund's strategy, and current US policy toward Yemen—as it is implemented, not as it appears on paper—represents a good example of the shortcomings of a narrow security approach.

Any US strategy to counter jihadists needs to address the pervasive lack of economic opportunity, structural unemployment, cronyism, and the inequitable distribution of state resources. It is no coincidence that AQAP and its political affiliate Ansar al-Sharia take root in the most impoverished, neglected areas, where state authority is absent, and people lack jobs and basic social services. This formidable economic challenge stems from poor governance and exacerbates the political dysfunction. The Yemeni state needs strong, functioning institutions, the rule of law, and an inclusive political system if it is going to have the legitimacy and popular support to establish a basic level of human security and sustainable economic development. The needs are daunting and US assistance will not be a panacea, but unless the United States adopts a long-term and comprehensive approach that provides a predictable and consistent level of financial and technical assistance to address these underlying issues, Americans and the Yemenis are destined to fight the same fight over and over again.

1 Mohammed Ghobari, "Yemeni Qaeda Leader Hails Islamic State's Gains in Iraq," Reuters, August 23, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/13/us-iraq-security-qaeda-yemen-idUSKBN0GD19Z20140813>.

To be fair, the United States' stated policy toward Yemen has evolved over the past several years. There is a recognition in Washington that a narrow focus on counterterrorism capabilities and operations is insufficient and that political evolution and economic development must be core components. Officials at the National Security Council, State Department, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) articulate the need to focus on the underlying drivers of instability and extremism, improve governance, combat corruption, and enhance economic opportunity. The frustration is the gap between this rhetoric and action; vastly insufficient resources for the task at hand; misaligned resource allocation (military versus civilian); lack of consistent high-level policy attention; disconnects between political, economic, and security priorities; and failures in on-the-ground implementation. US government funding that is allocated on an annual basis admittedly makes it difficult to implement a more ambitious, multiyear approach, but this reality makes the development of a long-term strategy even more necessary. That kind of commitment may, in fact, bolster efforts in Congress and US agencies to maintain more consistent levels of funding. Otherwise, the United States has little choice but to fall back on inadequate, if not counterproductive, stop-gap measures.

### Setting the Stage: US Role in Yemen's Transition

The United States played a positive role in the negotiation and implementation of the agreement that led former President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down from power, after months of youth-led street demonstrations that prompted a dramatic split in the military and violent battles in major cities across the country. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Agreement, as it became known, gave Saleh full immunity in exchange for handing power to his vice president, Abdrabo Mansour Hadi, who became president in February 2012 elections. The agreement also established a power-sharing government with equal membership among former ruling party and opposition coalition parties.

Nearly three years later, Yemen has reason to be proud of how far it has come. The GCC Agreement averted a bloody, protracted civil war, and Yemenis can boast the only *negotiated* transfer of power among all the Arab Awakening countries. The United States actively supported the ten-month, multi-stakeholder National Dialogue process, completed in January 2014, which brought in new political players and gave women and youth a seat at the table to discuss the core issues that the country faces. The final document from the Dialogue sets forth key principles to be incorporated

into a new constitution, currently being drafted, and the broad outlines of a new six-region, federal system with decentralized, tiered authorities.

Despite these achievements, there are serious weaknesses in the GCC Agreement, the Friends of Yemen donor process,<sup>2</sup> and the National Dialogue outcomes that continue to destabilize the country and could reverse the fragile gains from the political transition. The GCC Agreement is fundamentally an elite power bargain that did little to disrupt vested interests that have a stranglehold over the political and economic life of the country. In order for the GCC Agreement to be viable, it had to ensure buy-in from key leaders needed to implement it (or at least refrain from spoiling it). However, to secure that elite support, the GCC Agreement had to be less than radical. The structure that was developed to balance all these interests resulted in governmental paralysis. The deal put in place a weak prime minister and distributed government posts along competing party lines, which paralyzes decision-making in an excessively partisan environment.

Yemen's future lies in the hands of Yemenis, yet US policy and action—perhaps to a greater degree in Yemen than in other post-Awakening states—can influence whether the country becomes a haven for jihadist activity or moves in the right direction toward economic and political development.

In this brief, the authors lay out a comprehensive, long-term strategy for US engagement in Yemen that addresses the underlying issues that contribute to radicalization and instability. The core components of an effective strategy are:

- economic assistance oriented toward sustainable development, not stop-gap humanitarian intervention;
- support for political reform grounded in inclusiveness, legitimacy, and participation;
- security assistance focused on building local capabilities; and
- public diplomacy and outreach initiated by the US government. Ultimately, such an approach advances core US interests while supporting Yemeni aspirations for a more stable, prosperous, and politically viable country.

<sup>2</sup> The Friends of Yemen group was established with leadership from the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia in 2010 as a multi-donor effort to leverage assistance to Yemen. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, donors pledged \$7.9 billion for Yemen's economic, political, and humanitarian assistance. Of that amount, roughly \$3 billion has been transferred; the rest remains pledged and allocated but not disbursed.

Although the specific context of each country is unique, Yemen can provide an instructive case study for a multifaceted approach that would go beyond short-term crisis response.

### Economic Assistance and Reform

For the past three years, the international community has been almost exclusively focused on the political transition and dialogue process underway in Sana'a. Support for political party development, election assistance, and civil society is certainly important. However, the United States must recognize that most Yemeni citizens still struggle to meet their basic needs for food, water, and safety. The United States should prioritize addressing these needs and place greater emphasis on economic assistance oriented toward job creation, private sector development, and skills training. The United States should be a leader in helping to foster the conditions for private sector growth, particularly since the largest donors—those from the Gulf—will not be playing this role. US technical assistance could focus on helping the government implement structural reforms that would lift constraints on new business development and expansion, including access to capital and revising banking and bankruptcy laws.

The United States should not relegate its role to dealing primarily with security assistance and security organizations. It is extremely important that the US government is seen engaging on economic and governance issues as well. Not only are employment and an improved quality of life essential to a secure and stable Yemen, but a continued focus on “security first” only perpetuates the perception that the United States cares solely about counterterrorism, as it affects Americans. To shift that perception and to lay the groundwork for sustainable economic growth, the United States should:

- Increase direct economic development assistance and renew pressure on Gulf states to deliver on existing Friends of Yemen pledges. Yemen faces catastrophic economic and humanitarian conditions; the impact on this and future generations cannot be overstated. Since many youth have few economic prospects and little hope, reports that AQAP, the Houthi rebel movement, or southern radicals are paying them to join their ranks are hardly far-fetched.
- Orient economic assistance toward job creation and restructure existing Friends of Yemen pledges toward small, high-impact projects that generate jobs and improve infrastructure in the short to medium term, rather than the large-scale

infrastructure projects that Saudi Arabia and others favor.

- Revisit the issue of subsidy reform, which the government implemented in July 2014 and then was forced to reverse due to Houthi-led protests. Work with the Yemeni government to introduce gradual subsidy reform by first expanding the social safety net. This should be accompanied by a public awareness campaign explaining how the savings will be utilized to benefit ordinary Yemenis through expansion of cash-transfer programs on a short-term basis.
- Reengage with Gulf allies to facilitate the entry of significant numbers of Yemeni workers into GCC countries through vocational training, apprenticeships, and skills development matching with potential employers. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have a great deal at stake should Yemen's economic and security climate deteriorate further. Masses of unemployed Yemenis do not make good neighbors.
- Support development of a Presidential Economic Council comprising qualified deputy ministers, economic experts, other technocrats, and business leaders that will report to the president and work across ministry and party lines to develop and implement an economic strategy. At present, there is no leader or ministry driving economic policy.

### Political Reform and Inclusiveness

The focus of the United States and the international community has been to support the prescribed roadmap of the GCC Agreement, which was intended to introduce a transition government that would be inclusive, accountable, and transparent. Yet even with this new phase of Yemen's political evolution, too many critical decisions were still made among leaders tainted by corruption or narrow interests. This is one of the reasons that the Houthi movement was able to mobilize such numbers in Sana'a to protest against fuel price increases and ineffective government. While the Houthi movement exploited this sentiment for their own political gain, the reality is that many Yemenis felt the party-dominated transitional government was incompetent, corrupt, and opaque, and have not experienced any improvement over the past three years.

With months of confrontation between the Houthi movement and its opponents, Yemen is in a very precarious situation at present and robust international support from the United States and other key allies for the transition process and implementation of the

National Dialogue outcomes will be absolutely essential. In order for the process to move forward, all parties must abide by the letter and spirit of the September 21, 2014 Peace Agreement, signed by leadership from the Houthi movement and the major political parties. The United States should work closely with the G10 ambassadors and use its leverage to ensure that all commitments are upheld, in particular, Houthi withdrawal from positions in Sana'a, adhering to the ceasefire, and returning looted weapons to government—and on the other side, the appointment of a competent cabinet whose members are determined by qualification, not party affiliation.<sup>3</sup> The success of the peace agreement will largely rest on decisions made by Houthi leadership, over which the United States has little influence, but US engagement to mitigate troublesome interference by Saudi Arabia and Iran will be critically important. The political transition process is under serious threat, and continued US and G10 attention must help President Hadi and state institutions reassert themselves and utilize UN and other mechanism to marginalize spoilers.

At the same time, the international community should work with the government to address the fundamental and legitimate grievances especially regarding access to development opportunities and good governance. The United States and its partners also need to be more attuned to the level of rejection in the south, where many still clamor for full independence and regard the National Dialogue outcomes and proposed federal system as a canard. Hadi did agree to specific steps to address key grievances among southerners, but unfortunately, there has been little concrete implementation of these proposals because of lack of political will and inadequate funding. Without a concerted change of course, it is not inconceivable that the majority of Southerners would either boycott or reject a constitutional referendum, planned for early 2015, and subsequent national elections. While some US officials admit concern about this reality, there also seems to be a tacit willingness even among those officials to accept such an outcome. This would be a mistake—rejection by the south would undermine the very premise of a federal system and would sow the seeds for future conflict and possible disintegration of the state.

The lack of clarity about what comes next in the transition and the absence of transparency about how these decisions are made fundamentally undermine public confidence in the process. Most Yemenis had no

engagement with the National Dialogue and feel completely disconnected from political developments and elite politics in Sana'a. In many respects, the National Dialogue was a tremendous accomplishment, but the way it concluded—with eleventh hour, closed-door decisions outside the established procedures—significantly diminished its legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Yemenis.

International pressure to keep the process moving forward is essential, but, at the same time, there is a real danger of being constrained by an artificial timetable that may truncate broad-based participation. Various political factions are pushing either to expedite or delay elections based on what they believe will serve their interests. Elections must be carried out in a credible manner, and the United States can play a critical role by helping to ensure adherence to important steps such as the development of a new electoral law and use of a new voter registry. Completing the necessary steps by February 2015 is unrealistic, so a reasonable timeline should be proposed that is agreed upon by key Yemeni leaders and the G10. Given the close US-Yemen relationship, the United States should wield its influence in a more focused way to advance a reform agenda and bring in the Southerners. In particular, the United States should help Hadi do the following:

- Expand public education and consultation on the constitution during the drafting stage. The most contentious aspects of the proposed federal system, related to revenue and resource sharing, were not resolved during the Dialogue. This phase offers another chance for the government to educate the public about how such a system will take shape and the various choices ahead.
- Move aggressively to implement the confidence-building measures in the South. This will require direct intervention by Hadi. Although hard-liners may always be beyond the reach of the government, Southerners are by no means a monolith. Hadi and his government should demonstrate good faith efforts to address grievances, end discriminatory practices, and engage youth and new potential leaders.
- Set the timetable and clear expectations for elections sooner rather than later and minimize opportunities for political parties to use ambiguity of election dates as a negotiating chip. A set framework and sequence will reduce public uncertainty and could, in turn, help boost economic investment.

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<sup>3</sup> The G10 ambassadors represent the key international players in Sana'a: the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC.



- Proactively address corruption and cronyism, targeting midlevel offenders to set standards and precedent. Unless the public sees real political will to change the culture of impunity, the promises to address corruption will remain empty rhetoric. The government should empower the Supreme National Authority to Combat Corruption (SNACC) and bring SNACC-investigated cases to trial. It should also reaffirm commitment to other standing anticorruption measures and entities, both executive and legislative. The government should use biometric ID cards and other tools to expedite efforts to remove ghost workers from the public administration and military payrolls.
- Support the development of mid- and senior-level officials and leaders within the government to enhance civil service professionalism, introduce e-government, and develop technical and language skills that would enhance government function similar to the International Military and Educational Training (IMET) program for US military and security officials.

### Security Cooperation and Assistance

The United States' approach to violent extremism and AQAP is not a strategy but rather a set of short-term tactics lacking a definable and reasonable set of goals. While imminent threats cannot be ignored, a reactive approach has driven out development of an important strategy to address not only US-centric security concerns but the legitimate desire among Yemenis for a safer and less violent environment. Although *some* targeted assassinations may be necessary, drone strikes must be just one tool in a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy toolkit. Drone strikes that result in civilian casualties not only generate significant anti-American sentiment but also erode the central government's legitimacy and its ability to effectively govern. Enhancing the level of disclosure and transparency about such operations—a pledge that Obama made but remains unfulfilled—would go a long way in gaining the trust of Yemenis.

At present, given the lack of intelligence and the difficulty of verification due to the security environment on the ground, Pentagon personnel concede there is no way to assess the degree of effectiveness of such strikes in eliminating al-Qaeda networks. Taking out “rising stars,” as one official bragged in August 2013, is not a testament to the effectiveness of eliminating the leadership and does not disrupt, deter, or defeat.<sup>4</sup> Beyond fostering a new crop

4 Eric Schmitt, “Embassies Open, but Yemen Stays on Terror Watch,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/12/world/embassies-open-but-yemen-stays-on-terror-watch.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/12/world/embassies-open-but-yemen-stays-on-terror-watch.html?_r=0).

of revenge-driven extremists, the current approach alienates potential allies in the fight, both ordinary Yemenis and political leaders. US counterterrorism policy should be part of a broader effort to help Yemen address its legitimate security issues within the context of addressing the drivers of extremism. This policy should:

- Prioritize the development of a long-term strategy that addresses the underlying security gaps in Yemen with a sustained commitment to training and equipping Yemeni security forces (not just counterterrorism forces); strategic technical assistance to Yemeni forces; and education programs for Yemeni civilian, security, and military personnel in the United States. The United States should expand IMET opportunities for Yemenis and increase the number of English-language training programs for military personnel in Yemen and in the United States so they can take advantage of such training.
- Invest more resources in enhanced capacity and operational effectiveness of Yemen's armed forces and police forces to provide security to Yemeni citizens throughout the country—not just elite counterterrorism units based in Sana'a. At present, the United States concentrates its assistance on counterterrorism units that are deployed selectively. Disruption, much less defeat, of extremist groups requires a more long-term security presence in the most critical areas. To succeed, the Yemeni government will need to work in close cooperation with local communities, which means that this troop presence must be seen as *legitimate*. Given the discredited reputation of the Yemeni army, a credible police force or National Guard-like elements that are regionally based and accountable may be better suited to take on this role.
- Desist from so-called signature strikes and minimize the use of drone strikes and targeted assassinations to instances where a specific individual is directly linked to a credible and immediate threat to US interests. This is what Obama pledged in his 2013 National Defense University speech,<sup>5</sup> but a number of subsequent cases demonstrate that it has not been adhered to fully, and there is a lack of transparency about these operations. If and when civilians are injured or killed, full disclosure should be immediate, and a

5 Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, May 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

public, consistent policy regarding compensation should be developed. At the same time, a comprehensive US strategy should include assistance to the Yemeni government to immediately rebuild homes, villages, and facilities destroyed by US strikes or related Yemeni military operations.

- Ensure that the security restructuring process (supported by the United States with the Department of Defense as well as the United Kingdom with the Ministry of Interior) prioritizes reducing corruption by emphasizing civic duty and professionalism and ensuring adequate salary and benefits. The United States and the United Kingdom should work with Yemeni security agencies to introduce inspectors general, independent judicial review, and citizen review panels to reestablish credibility and generate trust with the Yemeni public.

### Public Diplomacy and Engagement

The administration insists that counterterrorism is not the primary focus of its policy toward Yemen, yet the optics both in the United States and in Yemen of US public engagement often run counter to this claim. Although there is considerable US humanitarian and development aid flowing into Yemen, most citizens associate the United States first and foremost with the US-centric war on terrorism and drone strikes. A concerted effort should be made to profile the non-security aspects of the relationship.

The US government should prioritize the development of a new generation of leaders by giving them an opportunity to live and study in the United States. At present only around 200 Yemenis are participating in existing scholarship programs; such programs should be expanded significantly and should offer long-term opportunities, not just one- and two-week visits. Those who have had this experience are powerful change agents in their communities and attest to the transformational impact it had on their way of thinking. There could be no better long-term investment in Yemen's future prosperity—and therefore US security—than investing in the next generation and giving them the tools to succeed. Likewise, more behind-the-scenes engagement and relationship-building would go a long way toward reestablishing some damaged credibility. The United States should:

- Press Secretary of State John Kerry to reaffirm what is often claimed by US officials and often discounted by Yemenis: that the United States is invested in the long-term survival, stability, and

sustainability of Yemen and the Yemeni people, not solely the immediate issue of AQAP. The United States should send high-level, nondefense/security civilian officials to Yemen on a regular basis and provide opportunities for public engagement and open exchange during these visits with a broad spectrum of Yemenis.

- Seek opportunities to cultivate networks with Yemenis outside of the English-speaking elite in Sana'a. In particular, overtures should be made in provincial regions, such as Taiz and Ibb, and to women and youth. The EU, German, and British ambassadors are already engaging in such outreach, and their efforts are having a profound impact on public perception of their countries.
- Expand the academic scholarship programs for Yemeni students in a broad spectrum of fields. This investment in the long-term human capacity of Yemenis would be both an investment in Yemen's future and a major public diplomacy initiative to underscore the long-term commitment of the United States to Yemen's sustainable future. In addition, such programs would help enhance employability, which will help Yemenis fill existing jobs that require English and develop new growth tied to the global marketplace.

### Conclusion

As the administration evaluates how to utilize the new counterterrorism fund with partner countries—such as Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq—to combat the threat of ISIS and other violent networks, the case of Yemen should be reviewed to provide both instructive and cautionary points. When the United States narrowly pursues its immediate security and counterterrorism concerns without taking into consideration the broader human security, economic, and political needs of the local population, it risks alienating those groups that are most essential for the success of efforts to destroy and dismantle terrorist networks. Reorienting resources and attention will be extraordinarily difficult, but the United States cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past.

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