

Preventing Yemen from Becoming Fallujah

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In the rapidly mutating world of international terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has become one of the most serious threats facing the United States. The recent AQAP attempt to use parcel bombs against U.S.-bound aircraft is only the most recent manifestation of this problem. The Christmas 2009 attempted bombing of a U.S. passenger aircraft in Detroit by a Nigerian radical trained by Yemeni terrorists was an earlier warning to the United States about the dangers of neglecting events in this country. Both of these near catastrophic episodes underscored the necessity for serious U.S. efforts to support all reasonable endeavors to defeat this organization with an informed, careful, and meticulous strategy based on a comprehensive understanding of Yemen and the terrorists. This requirement may be especially clear when one considers the chain of events that could be set off if AQAP is eventually able to implement a spectacular terrorist event. Apart from the human cost of such a tragedy, severe public pressure will undoubtedly exist for military intervention in Yemen with U.S. ground combat troops. Such an intervention would infuriate virtually the entire Yemeni population regardless of the objective merits of the U.S. case for the offensive use of U.S. ground combat forces. It could lead to what al Qaeda refers to as a “bleeding war,” a struggle by the United States to pacify a hostile population which dissipates U.S. power in a hope to drive it from the region. Yemen could become like the Iraq city of Fallujah in 2004, a cauldron of radicalism and anti-American hate. To head this off, AQAP’s capacity for spectacular terrorist strikes must correspondingly be ended soon while the organization itself must eventually be destroyed.

The enemy we are facing must therefore be carefully examined. A major reason that AQAP actions in Yemen are expanding involves the January 2009 merger of Yemen’s al-Qaeda in the Southern Arabian Peninsula (AQSA) with the Saudi branch of al Qaeda under the original Saudi name of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. After a bitter struggle against Saudi military and police forces in the mid 2000s, Saudi radicals fled their home country and regrouped in Yemen on the understanding that al-Qaeda military operations against the Saudi government would continue from there. The merger of the two branches of al Qaeda led to a reinvigoration of the terrorist organization in Yemen, even while the movement accepted a weakened presence in Saudi Arabia (which they viewed as temporary). The merger also allowed Saudi radicals to use their strong fundraising skills to obtain significant additional resources for the new organization at levels that must have stunned the Yemeni members. As promised, the newly unified organization also continued to struggle against the Riyadh government from Yemen and in August 2009 they attempted to assassinate Prince Mohammad bin Nayef. Prince Mohammad is the son of the current Saudi Interior

Minister and holds the key position of Director of Counterterrorism within the Ministry of Interior.

The recent terrorism efforts against the United States are all the more serious considering that spectacular acts of terrorism against the West are only a secondary priority for AQAP—so far. Back home in Yemen, the organization is seeking to expand its influence in the Yemeni hinterland southeast of the capital of Saana. In some places, AQAP appears more like a full scale insurgent organization able to take and hold small towns until Yemeni military forces mass sufficient numbers of troops to oust them. Such actions appear faintly reminiscent of the actions of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004, although they are not yet anywhere near that scale. Another AQAP priority is to seize the leadership of the currently non-violent Southern Movement, which seeks to reestablish an independent Yemeni state in the south. The Southern Movement is currently repulsed by al Qaeda, but the terrorists are likely to continue their efforts to re-align the southerners to embrace a violent solution to their grievances. Despite these distractions, some of the AQAP leaders clearly maintain a special hatred of the United States and they will seek to strike again soon. Others will continue to emphasize gains within Yemen, but will no doubt seek to escalate strikes against the West if they are able to consolidate power within the Yemeni hinterland. New terrorism efforts against the United States are clearly coming. The only questions are when and with what levels of frequency and intensity.

That leaves the questions of what to do and what not to do. The United States must not seek to Americanize the conflicts in Yemen, and should avoid sending major ground combat units there under almost all circumstances. However bad the situation may become in Yemen, Americanizing the war against AQAP can only make it dramatically worse. Yemeni public opposition to the presence of foreign ground troops with combat missions is almost universal, and it is possible that large elements of the Yemeni public would rise against their president and parliament if the government invited the United States to provide such forces. Certainly, the Yemeni clergy is particularly shrill on this subject, and this passion goes far beyond al Qaeda sympathizers. Yet while the United States cannot solve these problems with military intervention, it also cannot expect the Yemeni government to cope with these problems on its own. That government is weak and maintains only a limited ability to project military force into the areas where AQAP is strongest. The government's capacity to gather intelligence is also limited and the Yemeni leadership has boldly stated that it is unable to obtain the information that it needs to defeat AQAP on its own.

Under these circumstances a smarter strategy for the United States is to continue and strengthen its policies of supplying intelligence, training, and military equipment to Yemen so long as these assets directly support counterterrorism missions. So far, the United States has been highly effective in tailoring its military aid to Yemen in ways that focus on the needs of the counter-al Qaeda mission. Units of elite Yemeni troops with a rapid movement capability can be extremely effective in dealing with terrorists. Should AQAP be able to develop into a widespread and effective insurgent forces in Yemen, Washington will have to expand aid in ways that are less counterterrorism focused. The United States must also structure its military support to Yemen in ways

that continue to support a long-term military relationship between the two countries in ways that expose the Yemenis to U.S. concepts of military professionalism. The United States should also consider ways in which highly professional Arab militaries, such as the Jordanian army, can be enabled to help train and support Yemeni military and intelligence forces, if both sides see advantages to such support.

The United States and particularly the U.S. military assistance program to Yemen must also recognize and respond to the changing nature of the al-Qaeda threat in Yemen. AQAP is no longer simply a terrorist group, although that organization's potential to do harm through spectacular acts of terrorism remains undiminished. It is now an insurgent organization capable of waging sustained combat against government forces. It is also capable of establishing itself in those territories where the government traditionally exercises little authority so long as AQAP can co-opt or intimidate the local tribal leadership in these areas. This danger suggests that the United States may have to expand its military assistance to Yemen, while maintaining as light a footprint as possible and avoiding the deployment of U.S. troops for anything other than training. Civilian and military planners need to consider ways to address the problems that may be associated with an expanded aid program while seeking continuing input from those on the ground on how such programs can be improved. In the end, this struggle will be won by strategy and not brute force.

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