

Striking the Balance in Our Relations with Yemen

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Instability in Yemen likely wasn't the first thing that crossed peoples' minds when a young Nigerian tried to detonate an explosive device aboard a Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines flight on Christmas Day 2009. Yet Yemen quickly seemed to become the only thing people were talking about when subsequent investigation tracked both the would-be terrorist—and the sophisticated explosive he carried—back to this country. In an instant, international attention had become galvanized on this poorest of Arab nations, as it became clear that the United States—indeed, the world—ignores events here at its own peril.

Long before the events of December 25, 2009, senior levels of the US government had been focused on Yemen, and efforts were underway to mobilize resources to address both short-term security challenges and longer-term socio-economic needs. Our own efforts were supplemented by the Friends of Yemen, a process inaugurated at a ministerial-level meeting of 24 nations in London in January 2010 that is designed to elicit commitments from the international community—and the government of Yemen itself—to a concrete and sustained stabilization effort.

Having achieved the requisite attention and sense of urgency, our challenge now is to ensure that the mix of assistance delivered to Yemen is appropriate, responsive to the full spectrum of needs, and applied quickly and effectively. The cost of failure will be measured not simply in greater hardships for the Yemeni people, but in much greater risk to the United States and our interests around the world.

A number of critical considerations underpin US engagement in Yemen. First is the recognition that our influence, while substantial, often is eclipsed by that of Yemen's neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia, with whom it shares deep cultural and religious ties. Therefore, we must to the extent possible develop a common approach that will enable us to draw on the strength of these regional relationships. Second, suspicions linger about US government intentions in Yemen, the result of our ongoing military interventions elsewhere in the region and a perception that our counter-terrorism agenda in this country trumps all other considerations. These concerns argue persuasively for a balanced approach that acknowledges our responsibility to cooperate closely with the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) on security issues even as we press for political and economic reforms, and the delivery of basic services to its population.

Understandably, much emphasis has been placed on the need for immediate measures to neutralize the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen. We are addressing this requirement by developing both the capacity and the political will needed if the Yemeni government is to deny terrorists safe haven and root out the underlying causes of support for violent extremism. Achieving this goal requires a robust response by host-nation security

services, with whom a variety of Defense Department training elements deployed to Embassy Sana'a are currently engaged. As we do so, we must be mindful that the people of this country are apt to view a purely military approach to Yemen's problems as having much less to do with any material improvement in their lives than with efforts to ensure the continuation of the rule of long-time President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Thus, it is imperative that we strike an appropriate balance between security and human-development initiatives. Yemen faces no external threat, and the most serious challenges to its stability emanate from internal political, socio-economic and resource-driven crises. For example, at current growth rates, its population of 23 million will double by 2030. Combine that with an unemployment rate of at least 35 percent, and the fact that nearly two-thirds of Yemen's population is under the age of 24, and you have an extraordinarily volatile mix that must be addressed through education (including that of young girls), maternal and child health care, vocational training, and—as the security situation permits—substantial foreign investment.

Yemen's internal conflicts are centered in the northern governorate of Sa'ada and in the southern governorates that used to be part of the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen (DPRY). In large measure, both have evolved in response to the same lack of government services, infrastructure and economic opportunity that beset Yemen as a whole, although unique conditions in the north and the south have fueled a greater intensity in those disputes. In the north, the so-called Houthi rebellion (currently in abeyance as the result of a fragile February 2010 cease-fire), is home to a largely Zaidi Shia population that complains of being marginalized by a growing Salafist strain of Sunni Islam. For their part, discontented southerners allege that the national unification of 1990 has led to political and economic exploitation by the central government, with none of the promised development.

The challenge for the United States and like-minded nations is to encourage long-overdue political and economic reforms that will enable the government to provide essential services, improve infrastructure and generate employment. We can, for example, respond to measurable steps in the area of fiscal and budget reform by providing assistance to mitigate the negative effects these measures are likely to have on vulnerable segments of the country's population. These initiatives also will diminish the lure of extremist messaging directed at Yemen's young, disenfranchised population, as opportunities grow for meaningful participation in both the economic and political life of the nation.

To be sure, there is a strong need for a robust security component to this process, at least in the early stages, as the central government asserts its authority over its national territory. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has demonstrated that it has motivation, means and a variety of targets against which it can conduct lethal operations in Yemen, elsewhere in the region, and—as we saw on December 25—half a world away. But this emphasis on security operations must be seen as only the initial step that establishes conditions under which development initiatives can claim the space once occupied by violent extremist organizations. At the same time, we must encourage the central authority to devolve power in a meaningful way to local authorities. In a nation with a rudimentary communications infrastructure and vastly dispersed population—Yemen has

an estimated 135,000 population clusters—it is virtually impossible to govern effectively from a capital hundreds of miles away. A federal-style system, with the central government retaining responsibilities for certain key functions, will encourage local solutions to problems, creating a more inclusive political process.

Notwithstanding all the destabilizing elements that confront Yemen, the nation continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience. This is not a failed state and it doesn't appear to be in immediate danger of becoming one. True, every institution of government needs reform, the nation's infrastructure requires urgent attention, and a litany of socio-economic woes afflicts its population. But children go to school every day, shopkeepers open their doors, taxis and buses ply the streets, and Yemenis—remarkably—make a life for themselves. This situation cannot persist indefinitely without serious reform measures, however, and that is where the United States and our international partners must play a role. If we succeed, the terrorist threat can be extinguished, meaningful development can resume, and the compact between the citizens of Yemen and their government can be restored.

In the long term, our ability to help shape a Yemen at peace with itself and able to provide basic services and economic opportunity to its citizens depends on the extent to which the nation successfully incorporates the multiple, competing centers of gravity (tribes, mainstream opposition groups, an increasingly conservative religious base, and regional players) into an inclusive political process, creating along the way an environment no longer receptive to terrorists' messages of intolerance and violence. This environment will contribute materially to a stable and secure Yemen, and diminish the likelihood that it will serve as a platform for future attacks against the United States, our citizens or economic interests abroad, or other nations.

Conversely, if the government fails to institute meaningful reforms, address pressing socio-economic problems and deny safe haven to terrorist organizations, we cannot exclude the possibility that Yemen will slip into a protracted period of internal conflict, political upheaval and social unrest. Given that such an outcome will benefit only those who seek to sow discord and disorder, it is one we would do well to avoid.