

PolicyWatch #1682 : Special Forum Report

Yemen's Forever War: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Featuring Christopher Boucek
July 21, 2010

On July 13, 2010, Christopher Boucek addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute, along with April Longley Alley and Barak Salmoni. Dr. Boucek, an associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, discussed al-Qaeda's activities and affiliates in Yemen. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks; all three speakers also made recommendations for U.S. and international policy toward Yemen, a summary of which appears below. For Dr. Alley and Dr. Salmoni's individual remarks, see PolicyWatches [#1680](#) and [#1681](#), respectively.

Christopher Boucek

Although al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is not the biggest problem -- or even the biggest security challenge -- facing the Yemeni government, the United States and much of the international community still place it above other issues. Successful counterterrorism is directly linked to state stability. If Yemen becomes a failed state within the next few decades, U.S. counterterrorism objectives would be decisively undermined. The challenge for U.S. policy is finding a way to bolster the struggle against AQAP without exacerbating other aspects of Yemen's overlapping security, economic, and political crises.

Al-Qaeda's strengths, Yemen's weaknesses. Al-Qaeda has a long history of violence and terrorism in Yemen, including against U.S. interests. In the 1990s, Islamist militants committed kidnappings and bombings throughout the country. And in 2000 and 2002, al-Qaeda cells attacked the USS *Cole* in Aden and the French oil tanker *Limburg*, respectively. A 2003 jailbreak freed fifteen al-Qaeda members, eleven of whom were suspected *Cole* bombers. An additional twenty-three members escaped from a Sana prison in 2006, marking the resurgence of al-Qaeda in Yemen. Since then, the group has undertaken a litany of attacks on Western and Yemeni government targets.

The growth potential for AQAP in Yemen is tremendous. The country's southern region boasts a large reservoir of young men who hold grievances, are willing to fight, and believe that it is permissible to wage armed jihad within Yemen.

AQAP is more than a local al-Qaeda affiliate, however, and has demonstrated broader ambitions than militancy within Yemen. In January 2009, Yemeni militants released a video showing the merger of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and al-Qaeda in Yemen. The new group, AQAP, threatens to bring renewed violence to Yemen's northern neighbor. In April 2009, the Saudis uncovered infiltrator networks at the Yemeni border with enough components for nearly thirty explosive vests. And in August 2009, a Yemeni-based suicide bomber detonated himself within arm's reach of Saudi counterterrorism chief Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. AQAP claimed credit for the unsuccessful attack and threatened to target planes next.

Outside the region, AQAP-trained Nigerian terrorist Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab attempted to strike the United States directly in December 2009, nearly detonating explosives on an airliner in Detroit. Since that attack, AQAP has released a new English-language gazette named *Inspire*, aimed at recruiting English-speaking volunteers. More recently, in April 2010, the group attacked the British ambassador's car

and the Yemeni security office in Aden. In light of these activities, AQAP presents a threat not only in Yemen and regional states, but also to Western interests and U.S. homeland security.

U.S. counterterrorism support. Solutions to the AQAP problem are not easy to identify. Yemen cannot fully replicate Saudi Arabia's successful strategy because it lacks a strong central government, control over the religious establishment, and large financial and military resources. Furthermore, Yemeni counterterrorism efforts are threatened by the risk of state failure. Such a collapse would provide a new safe haven for terrorists in a particularly dangerous location: astride key international shipping routes, adjacent to the Arabian Peninsula, and near sub-Saharan Africa. There are no short-term fixes for the problem; only a long-term strategy aimed at stabilizing the state will prevent al-Qaeda and affiliate movements from claiming it as a haven.

How can the United States support Yemeni counterterrorism without encouraging Sana to resort to repression as a means of resolving its other security crises? Several "soft security" measures may help. Continuing to support the development of border and coast guard forces is one key step. Long-term police and intelligence training programs are another measure that may increase effectiveness and accountability in the Yemeni security system. Washington can also help Sana develop more effective and transparent counterterrorism legislation to improve the chances of securing convictions. In addition, reforms and training with the prison system, judicial system, and legal community would boost the effectiveness of the overall criminal justice system, allowing Sana to better process detainees captured in Yemen or abroad (including a further ninety Yemeni detainees at Guantanamo Bay who may be repatriated in the near future).

Policy Forum Wrap-Up: Strengthening International Support to Yemen

All three speakers highlighted the urgent need for confidence-building based on compromise and reciprocity between the Yemeni government and the various opposition movements in the north and south. Due to the high levels of violence employed by both government and opposition forces, international mediation may be needed, first to open up political space and then to monitor implementation of ceasefire and political agreements. High-level international backing to the important Yemeni-conceived national dialogue process may help as well.

Mr. Boucek argued that the international community should speak with one concerted voice on Yemen and hold a long and painful discussion with Sana regarding reform. This discussion should be coupled with assurances that Yemen would receive significant economic assistance if it cooperated. Yet opinions differed over the level of influence that the United States and other actors can wield in Yemen.

Several approaches were debated during the question-and-answer period. It was suggested, for example, that Western leverage with Sana was limited due to the relative paucity of Western financial aid to the country. Others argued that the United States retains greater sway with Yemen than is generally recognized, in large part because the Saleh government values the kind of international legitimacy conferred by closer relations with Washington.

Alternatively, it was proposed that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and particularly Saudi Arabia, would make better interlocutors given their comparatively large financial contributions to Yemen (Boucek estimated the Saudi subsidy alone at more than \$2 billion per year). Moreover, the GCC states would likely suffer the most direct impact from Yemeni state failure (e.g., terrorism, illegal immigration, disease, smuggling) and would have a strong incentive to play a leading role in stabilization efforts.

Despite these benefits, however, Riyadh might not be the ideal interlocutor due to its history of meddling in Yemeni affairs primarily to serve its own regional interests. Indeed, some participants argued that Sana may be susceptible to U.S. pressure on reform precisely because it wants American support to counterbalance what it sees as excessive Saudi influence.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel.

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