

Yemen: Challenges of Counterterrorism

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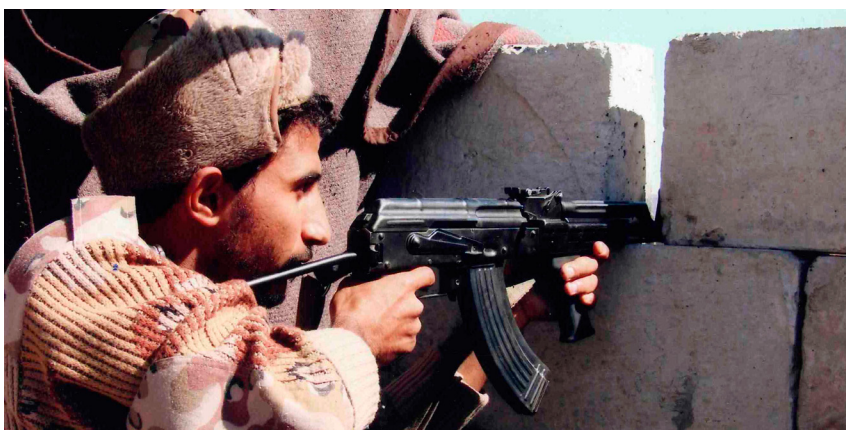
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YEMEN: CHALLENGES OF COUNTERTERRORISM

Counterterrorism operations in Yemen have proven to be difficult. While the West has recognised that a broad civil-military strategy for Yemen is required, the problem is that strengthening the central government in San'a does not necessarily translate into more stability or a diminished terrorist threat. In view of their limited leverage, Western governments should prioritise the country's regional integration and mediation efforts for resolving its internal conflicts in their policies towards Yemen.



A Yemenite soldier near Sa'dah, 13 January 2010.

Image: Reuters / Ho New

Since the failed terrorist attack on a passenger aircraft approaching Detroit airport on 25 December 2009, international attention on the situation in Yemen has been increasing. The young Nigerian would-be bomber had apparently been trained in Yemen. Against this background, Western governments in particular have made reference to the growing importance of this southern Arabian country as a base and safe haven for the al-Qaida network. Accordingly, the question of counterterrorism in Yemen has become an important issue in international security policy, at least for the time being.

The US government immediately announced its intention to increase economic and military aid and to intensify counterterrorism cooperation with the Yemenite security forces. In a conference called at short notice at the end of January 2010 in London, it was decided to create an international grouping, called "Friends of Yemen". Its mission is to assist San'a in

addressing the range of challenges facing the country.

The emphasis on reform and assistance for sustainable development indicates that the West has, to some extent, learned from its earlier mistakes in counterterrorism efforts and no longer places a one-sided emphasis on military and intelligence-based measures. The initial overblown rhetoric identifying Yemen as a third front in the so-called "War on Terrorism", together with Afghanistan and Iraq, was quickly dampened. Demands for deployments of US troops against "terrorist bases" in Yemen were voiced in Congress, but quickly rebutted.

Nevertheless, doubts remain as to whether the strategy pursued by the Western governments will improve the situation in Yemen. The country's diverse domestic political interests are a complex affair, marked by conflicts in north and south as well as by socio-economic challenges. The core dilemma of the West is that close co-

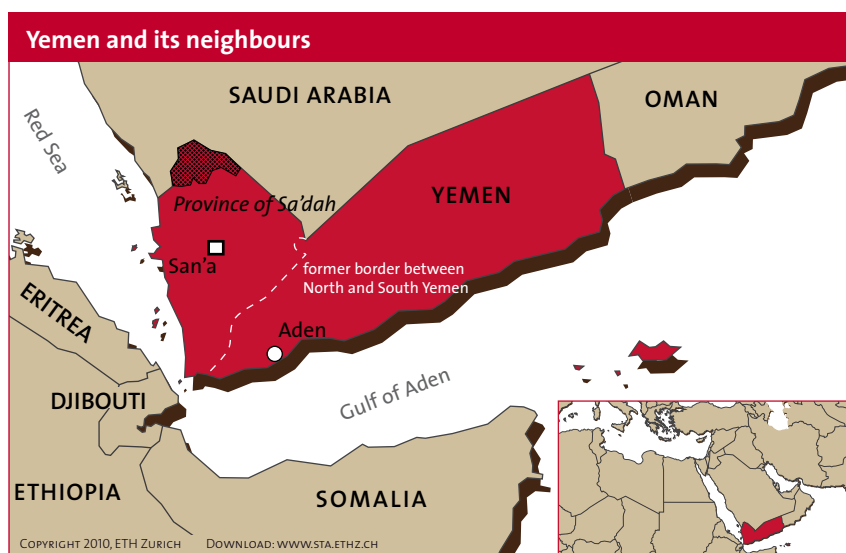
operation with the central government in San'a, which is a near-indispensable part of its counterterrorism efforts, threatens to aggravate the very same domestic constellation that facilitated the expansion of al-Qaida in Yemen in the first place. Furthermore, the instable situation in Yemen is due to regional factors that must be taken into account in international crisis management.

Unless the local conflicts in Yemen are peacefully resolved and the threat of terrorism is contained, the strategically important region encompassing the Horn of Africa and the south of the Arabian Peninsula is in danger of further destabilisation. For the West, the future of Yemen is linked to important security, energy, and business interests. Ignoring the Yemen problem is therefore not an option. Instead, the core challenge is to formulate a strategy that takes the specific local and regional conditions into account.

Al-Qaida and Yemen

The homeland of the bin Laden clan has always been an important recruiting area for militant, fundamentalist-Salafist Islamists. As early as the 1980s, a large number of Yemenite volunteers fought with the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupiers in Afghanistan; and the first jihadist groups in Yemen were founded by returnees from the Hindu Kush.

The terrorist attack on the *USS Cole* in the port of Aden in October 2000 marked the beginning of a close cooperation between the Yemenite security forces and the US in combating local al-Qaida franchises, which at the time were still only loosely organ-



ised. The cooperation was intensified after 11 September 2001. With the 'targeted assassination' of the al-Qaida leader by a US unmanned aerial vehicle in November 2002 and the subsequent arrests of the group's leading cadres, the organisation in Yemen largely seemed to have been broken up.

Due to domestic pressure and the imminent war in Iraq, however, the Yemenite leadership ceased its counterterrorism cooperation with the US. The government's neglect of the terrorism problem as well as developments in Saudi Arabia prepared the ground for a resurgence of al-Qaida in Yemen that started with a dubious jailbreak of 23 terrorist suspects in February 2006. The new al-Qaida leadership that coalesced around some of the escapees opposed the de-facto ceasefire with the government that had emerged in the previous years.

Among other factors, the further radicalisation of the organisation is due to the influx of cadres from Saudi Arabia that began in the wake of the kingdom's successful counterterrorism measures in 2005. In a volte face from earlier practices, the organisation has since been carrying out attacks not only against Western targets, but also against government officials and strategic targets within the country. The apex of this escalation of al-Qaida attacks so far has been the assault on the US embassy in San'a in September 2008. Finally, in January 2009, the organisation announced the formal merger of the Yemenite and Saudi franchises as "al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP). This move coincided with the expansion of operations to include targets outside of Yemen.

AQAP today probably consists of several hundred fighters based mainly in the pe-

ripheral tribal areas that are outside of the central government's direct control. Unlike earlier manifestations of the al-Qaida phenomenon in Yemen, AQAP has managed to gain a foothold in the tribal areas by recruiting locally and involving the authorities on the ground. However, the protection extended by some tribes to the terrorist organisation is owed to political calculation rather than ideological proximity. Unlike Afghanistan, which is often cited for comparison, Yemen features no Salafist militant insurgency like the Taliban that might be in a position to take over the entire state.

The domestic scene

In any case, despite assurances to the contrary, the threat posed by AQAP's entrenchment in the tribal areas is a minor worry as far as the government in San'a is concerned. Of far greater concern are the repeated flare-ups of the civil war in the north, the spreading secessionist movement in the formerly independent south, and the country's enormous economic and social challenges.

In the far north, the central government is fighting against the insurgency of Huthi rebels (named for the family at its helm) in Sa'dah province. The insurgents regard themselves as defenders of Zaidiyyah, the dominant branch of Shi'ite Islam in Yemen, whose adherents account for about 45 per cent of the overall population. So far, the Huthi rebellion has remained a local phenomenon that is mainly supported by former elites among the Zaidis who ruled the former North Yemen until the 1962 revolution. Their opponents claim that the Huthis intend to re-establish the Zaidite Imamate in the Yemen, which had autocratically ruled North Yemen until then. The

main aim of the Huthi insurgents, however, seems to be moderate: To end the economic and political discrimination against the Zaidis in Sa'dah province and to secure the restitution of their cultural and religious rights. President Ali Abdullah Saleh is trying to gain the support of the West in this conflict by accusing the rebels in the north of cooperating with AQAP. In reality, one of the main causes of the outbreak of the Huthi rebellion in 2004 was the spread of Salafist institutions and teachings in Sa'dah, which was supported by the central government.

Another potential flashpoint that is currently smouldering, but poses a greater existential threat to the central power, is the unrest in the southern provinces that were part of the former independent state of South Yemen. Since the unification of the two Yemenite states in 1990 and the brief civil war of 1994, the political elites of northern Yemen (mainly relatives and confidants of President Saleh) have dominated most state institutions. The resistance movement in the south was initially led by the former elites that had ruled the independent Socialist state of South Yemen. The widespread perception of discrimination by the north, the neglect of the conveniently located port of Aden, and the low share of revenues from the oil fields that are mainly located in the southern parts of the country ensured a steady stream of support for the opposition. At the same time, more and more calls were heard in support of secession for the south. Today, the opposition enjoys widespread support in the South, not least because the government responded with violent repression to expressions of protest and demonstrations. Reports of armed operations in 2009 have given rise to concern that in addition to the war in the north, the south, too, may soon experience an armed separatist conflict.

In addition to these two crisis hotspots, the government of Yemen is confronted with serious socio-economic challenges. Oil revenues, which currently account for about 75 per cent of the state budget, will run out in five to ten years. Water is also becoming extremely scarce. At the same time, the population of Yemen is continuously growing and is forecast almost to double over 20 years from the current 23 million to about 40 million. Even now, unemployment is at about 35 per cent. Yemen, which is already the poorest Arab state today, is faced with the spectre of economic collapse in the coming years.

The regional environment

In order to understand the conflicts in Yemen, the regional dimension must be taken into account. In particular, the role of Saudi Arabia is highly ambiguous, despite the apparent change in attitude in the recent past. The early spread of militant Salafist preaching in Yemen was due not least to the substantial support and funding extended by Saudi Arabia. Thus, the outbreak of the Huthi insurgency in the north must be attributed, among other factors, to Saudi support for Salafist schools and groups in Sa'dah province. The latest military intervention of Saudi Arabia had the effect of further aggravating the conflict.

The distrust in Yemen towards Riyadh is fostered by controversial border demarcations and the shared history of the two countries, with Saudi Arabia frequently questioning the territorial integrity of Yemen. Conversely, the role of Iran in the southern Arabian conflicts can currently be regarded as negligible. There is no material evidence of any Iranian interference in the Huthi conflict. Indeed, any interpretation of the conflict arising from a Sunna-Shi'a rift would be misguided. In practice, the Zaidi Shi'ite sect has a great deal in common with the Sunni schools of law and is even sometimes referred to as the 'Fifth School' of Sunni Islam. It only has little resemblance to Twelver Shi'a, which is the state religion in Iran.

On the other hand, the effects of destabilisation in the Horn of Africa on Yemen should not be underestimated. The 160,000 Somali refugees that already live in the country are not only an economic burden, but may also constitute another potential recruitment base for Islamic militants. It is true that direct cooperation between AQAP and the Somali jihadists of the ash-Shabaab, e.g., in the form of coordinated attacks on maritime traffic, is currently unlikely, despite statements of solidarity. However, the virulent piracy problem in the Indian Ocean, combined with the threat of radical Islamist militias spreading to the autonomous territories of Somaliland and Puntland in the north of Somalia, will continue to have a negative influence both on Yemen's security and its economic situation.

A sustainable strategy

The Yemen strategy announced at the London conference and articulated in subsequent statements by the Obama administration does contain a number of

promising approaches by virtue of its comprehensive civil-military character. Nevertheless, scepticism is advisable for two reasons:

First of all, the civilian and military components of this strategy could well undermine each other. For instance, direct aid and infrastructure measures for the hitherto neglected areas of Yemen will enhance the willingness of tribal leaders to end their protection of AQAP and to cooperate with the Yemenite security agencies. However, ad-hoc military strikes conducted in close cooperation with the US and resulting in high civilian casualties, as seen in recent months, undermine the support of the Yemenite population. Indeed, AQAP is trying to provoke a military intervention of the West (and Saudi Arabia) in Yemen in order to ignite a widespread Islamist insurgency.

Secondly, and contrary to the original intention, intensified cooperation with the central government in San'a carries the risk of further destabilising Yemen and abetting the proliferation of terrorism. The promise of considerably increased military aid will encourage President Saleh to reject compromise solutions with the Huthi insurgents and the opposition in the south and will raise the risk of further military confrontations. Judging by past experience, there is little reason for optimism concerning Saleh's willingness to combat militant Salafist groups forcefully, given that he has repeatedly used them as allies against other parts of the opposition.

A long-term counterterrorism strategy for Yemen would therefore have to take the resolution of the country's economic and social problems as its starting point. In this respect, however, Western actors have only limited influence. Most initiatives in the past have failed due to the refusal of the Saleh regime to implement meaningful reform. The government has abused the lion's share of state revenues for financing a patronage network in order to shore up its own power, and has always refused to accept aid conditionality. It is reasonable to assume that this time around, it will again instrumentalise the concerns of the West about the threat of terrorism in order to finance the maintenance of its own power base, reject fundamental reforms, and refuse to return to a democratic system.

From the West's point of view, therefore, the emphasis should be on fostering regional efforts to integrate Yemen

economically. Considering the historical baggage involved in its relations with Saudi Arabia, a stronger role for the other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would be desirable. Yemen's application for GCC membership more than a decade ago has so far remained unsuccessful, however. On the one hand, this may be attributed to the potential economic burden that the other GCC states would have to shoulder if Yemen were accepted as a member. Another reason may be that the Gulf monarchies also feel threatened by the fact that Yemen is the only republic on the Arabian Peninsula. It remains to be seen to what extent the recent promises of improved regional market integration for Yemen will be realised. One move of huge significance would be for the GCC economies to open their doors for Yemenite labour migrants. Until the expulsion of all Yemenite labourers in 1991, their remittances contributed considerably to Yemen's national economic performance.

In addition to promoting regional economic integration, the West could also support Yemen's efforts to deal with the issue of Somali refugees. Furthermore, it should assist the peaceful resolution of Yemen's domestic conflicts. Here, too, the West's own mediation activities and measures such as support for the recently agreed ceasefire with the Huthi rebels should be accompanied by encouragement for the mediation efforts of regional actors. In this context, it is worth mentioning the role of the emirate of Qatar in the Huthi conflict. In Yemen, regional factors are not only part of the problem, but also an indispensable part of the solution.

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