

Developments in Yemeni Foreign and Domestic Policy

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Brief Analysis

Yemen is a very traditional country and society, and to some extent it is characterized by traditional politics. Yemen's past—including its long traditions of trade and diplomacy with surrounding countries—influences its current actions. This century has been a particularly difficult one for Yemen. The North and South were divided, and beginning in the 1960s North Yemen became oriented toward the West while South Yemen became an ally of the former Soviet Union.

With the end of the Cold War, Yemen underwent a great experiment in unification and democratization. As nationalists Yemenis believed in the idea of unifying the North and South, but with the unification of two formerly independent states in 1990 came the need for democratization. Unfortunately, when some cracks in unity appeared four years later, some people exploited these disparities, and before long civil war broke out. It took only sixty days to settle the dispute, but after the disturbances Yemen's economy went into a severe decline. Yemen's leaders were wise and courageous enough to heed the advice of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and they began a program of economic reform in 1995 that resulted in the stabilization of the economy.

Yemen suffers greatly from poverty and a lack of resources. Yemen's policy of charting a course toward regional stability, including supporting the Arab-Israeli peace process and maintaining good relations with its neighbors, has gained it the support of the international community. Yemen has shown great restraint during recent disputes with Eritrea concerning sovereignty over islands in the Red Sea, and it is confident that international arbitration will resolve this conflict to Yemen's satisfaction.

Yemen and the Middle East peace process. Yemen is continuously striving for peace and stability in the Middle East and Gulf regions. Yemen's position regarding the Palestinians has always been to support whatever is best for Palestinian aspirations. Yemen was the first Arab country to support the Oslo Accords, and the Oslo Accords have made peace an inevitable reality. While Yemen was more forthcoming with Israel during the Rabin and Peres governments, its contacts with Israel are irreversible. We must work to reach peace and stability for Arabs and Israelis alike. When the Palestinians and Israel reach a final agreement, all Arab countries will be obligated to establish and maintain relations with Israel.

Regarding the upcoming Middle East and North Africa economic (MENA) conference in Doha, Yemen has always sent a positive message that it supports the peace process by never missing a summit or multilateral meeting. If a majority of Arab states attend the MENA economic conference in Doha—and it is his strong belief that a majority will—Yemen will attend as well.

Yemen-U.S. Relations. On the economic level, the U.S. is not playing a direct role in Yemen's economic development, and this is a matter of distress to the government of Yemen. On the other hand, on the political level, bilateral relations are at their highest peak of understanding. Politically speaking, the U.S. and Yemen are good friends.

Yemen-Gulf relations. Yemeni unity brought an end to border disputes between Yemen and Oman. One final dispute remains with Saudi Arabia over territorial boundaries, since the traditional, vaguely defined borders do not suffice

when oil and gas deposits may lie in disputed areas. The two sides are very close to reaching a compromise.

Yemen has good relations with all of the Gulf states except Kuwait, with which ties are still strained because of Yemen's position during the Gulf War. Although the Kuwaiti embassy is open in Sanaa, relations are not yet fully normalized. Yemen's relations with the other Gulf states are "perfect," but those states do not give Yemen any economic support. Yemen should not join the GCC until it settles its border dispute with Saudi Arabia, because doing so would only create tension within that organization. Furthermore, membership in the GCC is primarily a political statement, with no tangible benefits. As soon as there is free trade, free movement of labor, and free movement of capital between the GCC states, it will benefit Yemen to join.

As for Iraq, the U.S. policy of dual containment has actually produced uni-containment. Iraq is essentially under siege, with thousands of people dying. No balance of power exists in the region. Iran is able to acquire new technology, while Iraq remains under siege. Yemen enjoys good relations with Iraq and serves as a positive model to help the Iraqis understand the international community and their demands that Iraq fulfill all its obligations. Yemen believes that the U.S. should adopt a new policy toward Iraq, a policy of positive reinforcement. This means that if and when Iraq makes concessions to the West, the West should return the gesture by making concessions to Iraq. Yemen cannot and need not sever its diplomatic relations with Iraq, which in any event are permitted under the current UN sanctions. Presently, the largest group of Yemeni students abroad study in Iraq. This is primarily due to the affordability of education there. Yemeni students in Jordan must pay \$6000 per year compared with \$300-500 per year in Iraq. Yemen's per capita income is only about \$500 per year, and middle class families can only afford an Iraqi education.

Conclusion. Had Yemeni unity not been based on multiparty system, freedom of press, and free elections, united Yemen would never have survived. Democratization is an essential and integral part of the political system, and is necessary to maintain unity and social stability. In free elections held in Yemen last spring, twice as many women participated as in the 1993 elections. Yemen is a country of long traditions and a proud cultural heritage, and it is striving to be a model for economic progress, democratization, peace and stability in the region. A divided Yemen never would have been able to compromise with its rivals. A unified Yemen is much stronger and is better for peace and stability in the region.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Hillary Ebenstein

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