

# Yemen's National Dialogue and al-Qaeda

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Brief Analysis

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## As Yemen's National Dialogue unfolds in the coming weeks, Washington should press stakeholders to address not only reform, but also the ongoing al-Qaeda threat.

The National Dialogue Conference launched in Sana on March 18 will give Yemen an opportunity to pursue fundamental reforms over the next several months. Yet it also gives the United States an opening to help leading figures in the process focus on comprehensively defeating al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Meeting that goal will require a nuanced reform effort that aligns the state's interests with those of the tribes and other groups that have tolerated or supported al-Qaeda in the past.

## BACKGROUND

The long-delayed dialogue is a central component of the 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered settlement that facilitated the transfer of power to a new government in Yemen. The six-month conference is intended as a peaceful forum for stakeholders to discuss the central issues affecting the country's stability, with a series of working groups set to take place within a parliament-like setting. Key agenda items include drafting a new constitution that addresses the devolution of power and revenue among Yemen's quarrelsome governorates, as well as preparing for legislative and presidential elections scheduled for February 2014.

Great effort has been made to ensure that the process involves all of the country's major stakeholders, including youths, women, the Houthis (a northern tribal/religious group that has waged a longstanding armed struggle against the government), southerners (many of whom fondly recall the pre-1990 days of independent South Yemen), tribesmen, and major political parties. AQAP is the most notable exclusion, but the group's influence is surely felt; reaching an enduring peace will require finding ways to reduce that influence.

## INGRAINED SUPPORT FOR AI-QAEDA

The legacy of former president Ali Saleh's three decades of rule looms large over the National Dialogue. His leadership style emphasized an inclusive authoritarianism whereby he co-opted political challengers by incorporating them into the state's system of power and patronage. He often set different factions and leaders against each other in a divide-and-rule manner. He also used pressure and even force to get his way when needed, though usually in a limited, short-term manner that retained the imprimatur of constitutional legitimacy. Meanwhile, his family monopolized military power, and members of his northern tribe controlled key ministries and government posts.

Saleh ran Yemen's urban areas through a truncated administrative state, leaving the provinces to a system of tribal leaders and centrally appointed officials. As a result, the government never completely expanded its authority into many parts of the country, and tribal groups largely retained their autonomy. Many tribes resisted the regime because they feared that its corrupt, predatory nature would harm the population. Yet Saleh's system showed them that bargaining with the state was the best way to extract increased attention, political support, and representation. Therefore, some groups tolerated or even supported AQAP as a means of gaining greater leverage with Sana -- much like the Saleh regime tended to use al-Qaeda's presence as a way to generate Western support.

## AQAP'S INSURGENCY PERSISTS

In addition to discussing how institutional reform can help various factions break the AQAP habit, Yemenis should also use the National Dialogue as a forum on how to permanently defeat the group on the ground. Although AQAP initially focused its military operations on foreign rather than Yemeni targets, this changed dramatically in 2011 when it exploited political turmoil in Sana to overrun large portions of the south. The success of that offensive was largely due to the deliberate withdrawal of some Yemeni security forces in order to precipitate a crisis, but al-Qaeda's soft-power approach with the population played a role as well. Employing a nuanced community engagement strategy, AQAP used small-scale development projects, administration of justice, and tribal politics to garner support for its operations. It also changed its name to Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law) in an attempt to rebrand itself as an Islamist reformist organization -- one of several aspects of its sophisticated information operations campaign.

Once AQAP seized power in parts of the south, however, its brutal governing style deeply alienated the population. In 2012, a joint offensive by the Yemeni military and allied local tribes forced the group out of the areas it had overrun. Yet AQAP has responded with an assassination campaign against intelligence, military, and security officials, killing over eighty thus far. It has also battled government forces in al-Bayda governorate in recent months, despite retreating to its traditional safe havens in the interior. In short, AQAP remains a persistent threat and will no doubt attempt to reconstitute its forces in full. Delegates at the National Dialogue should therefore discuss ways to directly and deliberately tackle the al-Qaeda problem; mulling issues that indirectly affect the group's strategy is not enough.

## U.S. OPTIONS

To defeat AQAP, Washington must help Yemenis identify common interests between the reforming state and the tribes that have supported al-Qaeda. A proper approach to reform would incorporate each tribe's interests in a way that prompts them to welcome an expanded state presence instead of using AQAP as a bargaining chip. Accordingly, Washington should back the following measures:

- **A comprehensive political and security strategy to pacify al-Qaeda safe havens.** Due to the centralization of the Yemeni state, local political authority has often been limited, creating a democracy deficit and prompting excluded tribes to use violence to achieve their goals. The United States should encourage participants in the National Dialogue Conference to discuss greater local political autonomy and authority within a more democratic framework.
- **Efforts to legitimize tribal Popular Committees.** Pacifying AQAP havens will require the assistance of tribal "Popular

Committee" units, not just Yemeni army and police forces. As has been demonstrated in Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Yemen itself, a part-time tribal security force that is defensively oriented but recruited, trained, paid, and logistically supported by the state is central for enduring security. Tribes will support such an effort because it can provide security, employment, and a means of checking any abuses of power by expanding government forces. Washington should encourage Sana to legitimize these local units.

- **Full accounting of al-Qaeda abuses.** A great deal of emphasis has been placed on documenting abuses that Saleh's forces perpetrated against protestors in 2011-2012. A similar effort must be undertaken to document al-Qaeda's abuses, and to investigate whether security organizations colluded with the group when it expanded its presence in Yemen in 2011. The United States should encourage a full accounting on both fronts, including responsible prosecution of any security personnel who helped al-Qaeda.
- **Working group of tribal and security leaders.** Washington should urge conference participants to establish a working group of tribal, political, and security leaders from the areas most affected by al-Qaeda. This forum would help them share lessons learned in confronting the group, present a united reform agenda to the wider conference, and promote improved cooperation on shared goals after the conference.

*Daniel Green is the Ira Weiner fellow at The Washington Institute and a military veteran of Afghanistan and Iraq.* ❖

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