

Strengthening Yemeni Counterterrorism Forces: Challenges and Political Considerations

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Brief Analysis

On January 2, 2010, President Barack Obama confirmed that he had "made it a priority to strengthen our partnership with the Yemeni government -- training and equipping their security forces, sharing intelligence and working with them to strike al-Qaeda terrorists."

Increasing military aid to Sana will involve a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, the United States has a strong interest in degrading al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to prevent them from attacking U.S. interests in Yemen, strategic sea lanes, or international targets. On the other hand, in this weak and divided country, significant segments of Yemen's security forces are used for internal repression, and parts of the intelligence system are sympathetic to Islamic militancy, raising the prospect that U.S. aims could be undermined.

Background

The first tier of Yemen's internal security forces comprises two intelligence agencies: the National Security Bureau (NSB) and the Political Security Organization (PSO). The PSO is the older of the two and has close liaison relations with the Saudi and Pakistani intelligence services, ties that have involved Yemeni government recruitment of fighters for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. The government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh has used the PSO to negotiate various arrangements with radical Sunni Arab militants in Yemen, including the recruitment of Arab Afghan returnees for use as regime security forces in internal conflicts.

On February 3, 2006, twenty-three jihadist prisoners escaped from a PSO jail, including the leaders of the AQAP movement. This incident boosted the status of the NSB, which had been established in 2002 to provide Western intelligence agencies with a more palatable local partner than the PSO. The NSB is now responsible for dispensing \$3.4 million of U.S.-provided tribal engagement funds to support the campaign against AQAP.

The second tier of internal security forces come under the 50,000-strong Central Security Organization (CSO), a largely autonomous branch of the Ministry of Interior. Within the CSO, the Central Security Forces (CSF) are paramilitary police that secure official buildings and infrastructure and the dense network of security checkpoints on Yemen's highways. They are also beginning to undertake covert countersurveillance at likely terrorist targets. The Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) is a 150-strong special forces unit that has been successful in undertaking raids throughout the country since 2003.

The military is the third tier of Yemeni internal security. The army provides security at likely terrorist targets and security checkpoints, with units often standing alongside the CSF. Army forces are stretched very thin, however, with the Houthi uprising in northern Yemen consuming over half its active strength. This has led to the activation of "Popular Army" militia battalions modeled on the Iraqi Baath Party militias and partly manned by Sunni Arab Islamist militants, including former Arab Afghan mujahedin. Alongside the army, the U.S.-trained Yemeni Coast Guard Authority and air force provide important specialized support to internal security.

Focus Areas for U.S. Military-Technical Support

AQAP has been able to build its strength progressively due to stable and effective leadership by experienced militants such as ideologue Nasir al-Wahayshi and military field commander Qassim al-Raimi. Accordingly, it makes sense to channel U.S. security assistance into the first- and second-tier security services that lead ongoing manhunts within Yemen, notably the NSB, CTU, and specialist parts of the air force. Yet, these forces represent only one segment of the intelligence and security architecture needed to defeat AQAP.

The joint U.S. and British initiative to support the development of local counterterrorism police forces in Yemen could help reduce dependence on the PSO in the fields of intelligence gathering and tribal engagement. Counterterror efforts are currently supported by Criminal Investigation Department (CID) cells in local police forces, but these units are weak and poorly funded. Even so, they are sufficiently threatening to AQAP that they have been intensively targeted in intimidation attacks. In mid-November, for instance, Lt. Col. Bassam Suleiman Tarbush, the CID head in Marib, was executed, and a video of his death was distributed on the web. To make a serious difference in Yemen's police intelligence capabilities, a well-resourced police training mission with some freedom to mentor trainees at local facilities will be required. The U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has shown that the development of such capabilities is difficult, slow, and reliant on close-range monitoring of the developing forces.

As it prepares to increase its security assistance, the U.S. government should not overlook the Yemeni army and CSF. In particular, Washington should develop a training program that could bring a single army brigade up to a raised level of capability. During periods of elevated threat, this brigade could provide light infantry support capable of blanketing the capital and key road systems with well-trained forces (as mentioned previously, the government's regime security reserve and military special forces are currently deployed against the Houthis). It could also serve as a counterterrorism training cadre, with units rotated into other parts of the military as specialized infantry and trainers. In parallel with this near-term effort, U.S. support to Yemen's military academies could help form a longer-term strand of security assistance designed to influence the coming generation of military leaders and regime insiders. Given that the effort to stabilize Yemen will likely be a long and open-ended challenge, the new chapter in U.S. security assistance should include such far-reaching initiatives.

Potential Pitfalls

Regional governments almost invariably manipulate U.S. security assistance to serve their own agendas. President Saleh's government -- which has only recently begun to observe democratic norms and still scores very poorly on human rights measures -- will be no exception. For example, the U.S. State Department and Amnesty International

have criticized both the PSO and NSB for violence against regime opponents, journalists, and religious minorities. Similarly, U.S.-trained and equipped units like the CTU have been used in the conflict against the Houthis. Therefore, Washington must carefully consider the nature of its security assistance, balancing both near- and long-term policy objectives. In particular, it must prevent the diversion of assistance to bloody internal conflicts such as the five-year government clash with the Houthis.

Moreover, recent events argue against the provision of certain types of military-technical and intelligence support. In September and October 2009, for example, the Yemeni air force and Saudi aircraft launched strikes against Houthi targets, resulting in collateral damage incidents in markets and a refugee camp, as well as friendly fire incidents that killed twelve Yemeni soldiers. Similarly, on December 17-24, the government launched three airstrikes against suspected AQAP leadership meetings in Abyan and Shabwa governorates. As in the Houthi strikes, no senior AQAP leaders were successfully targeted, but a number of civilians were killed. Indeed, AQAP militants later visited one of the target locations to address grieving civilians. Given the degree to which these tactics reflect on U.S. efforts in Yemen and the ease with which AQAP can exploit them, Washington should advise highly selective use of such risky strikes wherever paramilitary police arrest operations are a feasible alternative.

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