U.S. Embassy Bombing in Yemen:

Counterterrorism Challenges in Weak States

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Brief Analysis

Last week, al-Qaeda affiliates attempted to storm the U.S. embassy in Sanaa, Yemen, leaving seventeen dead, including one American woman. The attack highlights the ongoing problem of terrorism in Yemen, where the United States has struggled to achieve an adequate level of counterterrorism cooperation. The challenge for U.S. policymakers is to achieve greater leverage over the Yemeni government, strengthen that government's capacity to counter terrorism, and simultaneously support much-needed political and economic reforms in the country.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen

The September 17 attack saw two suicide car bombs fail to breach the wall before a four-man team unsuccessfully rushed the embassy on foot, disguised as local security forces and wearing suicide bomb vests. This is the second attack on the U.S. embassy in Sanaa this year; the previous one was a rocket attack on March 18 that killed two Yemenis. These actions and nearly a dozen other terrorist attacks since 2006 were undertaken by cells that brand themselves as "al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Jund al-Yemen Brigades." Since their activation in 2006, these groups have been led by terrorists who escaped from a Yemeni prison that same year. The groups also have offshoots in neighboring states such as Saudi Arabia, where government officials raised the country's alert level in August in reaction to evidence of Yemeni-based fighters seeking to carry out attacks in the kingdom.

The government of Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih has moved energetically to wipe out the current crop of active al-Qaeda affiliates in his country. Of the twenty-three terrorists who escaped in 2006, only two are on the loose -- Qassim al-Raymi and Nasir al-Wahayshi. Militant communiques demand the release of prisoners, the cessation of government harassment of fighters traveling to Iraq, and the distancing of Yemen from the United States.

Shortfalls in Cooperation

Although the government is willing to hunt down committed anti-Salih militants, other elements of the militant Islamist community continue to receive a free pass from the government. The Yemeni government actively recruited for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and for subsequent jihadist campaigns in the 1990s. These

"Arab-Afghan" fighters were also used by the government to fight the socialists from the south of the country. By 1998, a tit-for-tat war broke out between the Yemeni government and the militants, and many Arab-Afghans remained embedded in the government security apparatus and political structure. Yemen's unwillingness to support the U.S. investigation of the October 2000 USS Cole bombing in Aden marked the low point in U.S. confidence in Yemen as a counterterrorist partner.

Salih moved quickly after the September 11 attacks to visit the White House and offer his assistance in the global war on terror. In return, the Yemeni government expected economic assistance, military aid, and political support. Increased U.S. training and operational support to the Yemeni military gave the Salih government greater capacity to crack down on terrorist groups. Terrorist plots against the U.S. and other Western embassies in Sanaa were foiled in 2001 and 2002. A number of plotters from the suicide boat attacks against the USS Cole and the oil tanker Limburg were arrested or killed in 2002, notably Sinan al-Harithi, the head of al-Qaeda in Yemen.

Reduced U.S. Leverage

Following these apparently decisive blows to al-Qaeda in Yemen, the United States turned its attention away from Yemen's counterterrorism efforts and refocused on the regime's political and economic shortfalls. Yemen was rejected from the threshold phase of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) in November 2005 for failing in all eight qualifying categories, ranging from governance reform and political and press freedoms to health, education, and human rights. U.S. nonmilitary assistance to Yemen dropped as low as $7.9 million in 2005, compared to $40.6 million by the United Kingdom in the same year. Even today, with Yemen admitted to the MCA, the U.S. government is offering only $20.6 million -- a sum linked to the extradition of wanted terrorists, including several of the USS Cole attackers.

The problem is that the amount of U.S. aid is very small in comparison to that of other Western governments (the United Kingdom plans to raise Yemen aid to $100 million by 2011) and tiny compared to multibillion-dollar, no-questions-asked aid pledged by the Chinese and Gulf Arab governments. U.S. leverage has never been properly developed, so it is no surprise that the Salih government will not make painful compromises to secure fairly minor U.S. rewards.

State Failure, Regional Security, and Counterterrorism

Yemen's terrorism challenge is complicated by the strong possibility that Yemen will gradually succumb to state failure. Yemen's economy is steadily collapsing, and during the 2012-2018 timeframe, fuel and power shortages will further reduce the living standard of the fast-growing population (set to double by 2020).

From the perspective of broader regional security, it is critical to prevent Yemen from becoming a failed state. Yemen faces a very active terrorist threat from al-Qaeda affiliates, an intermittent tribal insurgency in the north, and growing tension across the country related to economic and political grievances. A collapsed Yemen would function as an arms market, terrorist haven, and economic migrant route that could complicate security in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa.

U.S.-Yemen counterterrorism cooperation is also threatened by a weakened Yemeni state. As Salih's rule becomes weaker, his government is reaching out to radical Islamist allies to prop it up. Since 2004, the government has made use of former jihadists to fight the Houthi clan rebels in northern Yemen, with such fighters receiving releases from house arrest, payment, and even control of Houthi land and mosques. Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, named as a specially designated global terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department in February 2004, plays a senior role in the Islah political party, which Salih's junta of generals are likely to turn to as a political partner when his third and (by law) final term comes to a close in 2013.

Rebuilding U.S. Leverage

When Yemen's current crop of experienced militant leaders is ground down -- a moment that is approaching -- it may appear that the "job is done" once again, and U.S. policy is likely to focus on Yemen's shortcomings: its unwillingness to convict Yemeni returnees who served in Iraq; its tendency to loosen arrest conditions and overturn terrorist charges as soon as international attention has turned elsewhere; and its failure to hand over terrorists wanted by the United States or to guarantee that the 108 Yemenis being released from Guantanamo Bay will be kept from reoffending. All these complaints are valid, but reiterating them is less valuable than finding practical ways of restoring U.S. leverage and influence over the Yemeni government.

It may be that U.S., British, and Saudi aid can be linked to greater oversight of Yemeni terrorist prisoners, but this is essentially a tactical detail. An increasingly weak Yemeni government is unlikely to make painful compromises as long as U.S. nonmilitary aid is far lower than that of countries that provide much more and impose no conditionality. Aside from ensuring counterterrorism cooperation, there is a strong strategic rationale for the United States to ramp up its nonmilitary aid to help prevent state failure. Historically, the chances of receiving counterterrorism cooperation from a collapsed Yemen are zero, and the cost of rebuilding a failed state far outweighs the costs of preventing such a collapse.

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