Challenges in Iraq:

Learning From Yemen?

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Brief Analysis

The Yemeni media recently reported that thousands of Iraqis who fled Saddam Husayn's brutal regime and have lived in Yemen for more than a decade are now thinking about returning home. Many of these individuals are encouraged by signs of new infrastructure and a recovering economy in Iraq. If and when they return, they will see a number of stark similarities between their old homeland and Yemen, including primordial federalism, a "triangle" of terrorism, and questions of Sunni-Shi'i relations. Although Yemen is certainly not a model to which Iraq should aspire, San'a does have experience in dealing with challenges similar to those currently facing Iraq. Yemen's handling of these challenges provides reasons for cautious optimism about Iraq's future.

Primordial Federalism

The Iraqi government that will assume authority after June 30, 2004, is not expected to be strong. Given the influence of Iraq's primordial social structure, the first few years of self-governance will likely be characterized by weak central authority. In particular, tribal and ethnic factors will dominate Iraqi politics, making the future president's job a difficult one.

Despite having to operate within similar social and cultural conditions, Yemen's relatively weak central government has remained functional since President Ali Abdallah Salih came to power in 1978. Salih's government is not bound by strict regional, sectarian, or tribal lines. Yemen's political system, although not a democracy, is representative. It is modeled after one of the most basic forms of government in the region: "primordial federalism." As former U.S. ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine noted, "By maintaining a balanced and informally representative cabinet, Yemen has avoided the sectarian or ethnic divisions that have sundered other governments in the region and has given Yemenis a shared interest in the survival of the state." In other words, although Yemenis are aware of their sectarian, tribal, and regional identities, these identities are not politically determinative.

The new Iraq may need to conduct its politics in a similar fashion, particularly during its first few years of self-governance. Since Saddam's fall and the resultant power vacuum, the Iraqi people have increasingly fallen back on the most basic authority structures: family, clan, and tribe. Local patriarchs are seen as the primary powerbrokers, particularly in rural areas. The longer instability plagues Iraq, the more entrenched their power will become. Hence, when the Iraqi Governing Council yields power to the eventual Iraqi president, the new leader will likely have to negotiate with local authorities in order to earn a mandate.

The case of Yemen shows that a weak government is not necessarily a failing government. Even if it is initially reliant on a primordial system, the forthcoming Iraqi government will still be able function. Its effectiveness will depend on the ability of Iraq's leaders to learn how to play tribal politics until the central government gains strength.

'Triangles' of Terrorism

In Yemen, the contiguous governorates of Marib, Shibwa, and Jawf form a "triangle" (it is actually more of a rectangle) that is rife with kidnappings, terrorism, and attacks on oil installations. Moreover, due to the central authority's limited reach, this area is susceptible to nefarious outside influences, including Saudi wahhabis and al-Qaeda militants. Adding to Yemen's security problems are its porous borders, particularly in Jawf, which abuts Saudi Arabia.

Iraq is currently struggling with similar issues. U.S. officials contend that the most problematic areas of the Iraqi insurgency are Falluja, Ramadi, and other spots within the so-called "Sunni Triangle," where extremism and terrorism are most prevalent. Security authorities also struggle with preventing infiltration of Iraq's porous borders with Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. As a result, al-Qaeda militants and other foreign fighters have penetrated Iraq in the same way they penetrated Yemen from 1998 to 2002. During that period, al-Qaeda elements in Yemen attacked both Western targets (the USS Cole and the French tanker Limburg) and local targets (hotels, liquor sellers, and courts).

Similarly, both Western and local targets in Iraq have been victimized by terrorist attacks over the past year. Iraq's security forces, once they are fully operational, would do well to learn from Yemen, which has not experienced a terrorist attack since the October 6, 2002, bombing of the Limburg. Yemen has deported hundreds of illegal immigrants and suspected terrorists, expended greater efforts in monitoring mosques and Islamic organizations, stepped up its border control efforts, and launched a domestic public relations campaign warning of terrorism's cost to the economy. Yemen provides a good example of how an Arab security force can be trained and influenced by the United States while still maintaining its strong national and Arab identity. For example, on November 5, 2002, CIA-Yemeni cooperation reached its zenith when six al-Qaeda operatives were killed by a CIA-launched Hellfire missile from a Predator unmanned aerial vehicle. Similarly, U.S. Special Forces have backed up Yemeni forces in operations against al-Qaeda fighters in the Hattat region. Yemen's armed forces have established strong security ties with the United States even while maintaining trust among a population that may not be enamored with U.S. policies in the region. The Iraqi military will face this same challenge in the months and years to come.

Sunni-Shi'i Relations

Much has been made about the tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq. Under Saddam, the minority Sunnis ruled over the majority Shi'is, whom they oppressed. Animosity has festered between the two groups in Iraq since as early as the 1920s, when Britain occupied the nascent country. The challenge for the new Iraqi government will be to allow for greater Shi'i political participation while not alienating the Sunnis, who lost power overnight upon Saddam's fall.

Yemen's predominantly Islamic landscape is also split between two schools, Shafi'i (a Sunni sect claiming 53 percent of Yemeni Muslims) and Zaydi (a Shi'i sect with 47 percent of Yemeni Muslims). Prior to the unification of Yemen in 1990, the Zaydis dominated politics and cultural life in the country of North Yemen. Although the demographic balance shifted dramatically following unification and the integration of South Yemen's almost entirely Shafi'i population, inter-Muslim strife was not a problem. Indeed, Yemenis are relatively oblivious to Shi'i-Sunni enmity; they recognize that the interests of individual members of these sects are anything but monolithic. Currently, tensions between Yemenis exist mostly on the tribal level, irrespective of whether the individuals in question are Sunni or Shi'i. Even though Shi'i tribes have long dominated the country's political and tribal life, Sunnis do not

resent this arrangement. In fact, Shi'is and Sunnis pray together in Yemen's mosques.

Despite a host of other problems, San'a has found a way to de-emphasize religious differences among Yemenis, focusing instead on a common Yemeni identity. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts for Iraq to reach this kind of social arrangement; the balance between Yemen's Shi'i and Sunni communities has evolved over hundreds of years within a unique culture. Yemen can serve as an inspiration, however, proving that ethnicity and religion do not have to dominate the Iraqi political landscape.

Conclusion

To be sure, there are many differences between Iraq and Yemen. First and foremost, Iraq is endowed with substantial oil wealth. "Black gold" will provide the country with a fiscal edge and likely propel it forward at a faster pace than Yemen, where poverty has undoubtedly hindered progress. Iraq will also benefit from the expertise of thousands of U.S. officials, as well as billions of dollars from U.S. coffers designed to get Iraq up and running. Still, Iraq and Yemen shoulder some of the same burdens. For its part, Yemen has shown that a unique approach to some of these challenges can generate working solutions. As Iraq nears sovereignty, these Yemeni examples serve as a reminder that Iraq can and will find organic solutions to some of its toughest problems.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute. Over the past year, he has conducted research in both Iraq and Yemen.

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