Sanaa Dispatch:

Basket Catch

by **Jonathan Schanzer (/experts/jonathan-schanzer)**

Aug 21, 2003

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Along the serpentine road that heads east from the Yemeni capital of Sanaa to the desert, the barrel of a tribe-owned tank peers out over rugged, lawless territory where heavily armed local patriarchs shun government authority and harbor Al Qaeda militants. In the governorate of Ma'rib, a cigarette-smoking 10-year-old carries a Desert Eagle handgun in his belt, one of some 60 million weapons scattered throughout this country of 20 million people. At arms bazaars, or souks, anyone with a fistful of cash and minimal bartering skills can buy rocketpropelled grenades and heavy machine guns. Yemen's ubiquitous weaponry is menacing and seems even more so when you consider that the country has been home to a string of terrorist attacks that began with Osama bin Laden's first in 1992 and culminated in the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in October 2000, which killed 17 sailors. Recently, several alleged participants in that assault escaped an Aden prison by drilling through a bathroom wall, raising suspicions about government cooperation with terrorists.

Yemen, bin Laden's ancestral home, is widely considered a war-on-terrorism basket case. Last year, on the six-month anniversary of the September 11 attacks, President Bush even suggested that Yemen had the potential to become another Afghanistan. But, in recent months, Sanaa has made quiet but significant strides in cracking down on terrorist elements. In the war on terrorism, Yemen may yet emerge as an unlikely success story.

The first improvements came in the aftermath of the Cole attack, amid U.S. pressure for increased counterterror steps. The United States squeezed Sanaa even harder after September 11, 2001, especially when it learned that Ramzi bin Al Shibh, who Washington believes played a key logistics role in the attacks, was Yemeni. But it wasn't until the October 2002 attack on the French oil tanker Limburg that Yemen's gloves came off. That attack cost this poverty-stricken country dearly in environmental cleanup, tourist cancellations, and port usage, which dropped sharply after insurance rates shot up 300 percent for vessels wanting to dock here. According to a government report, "Investment projects which have been already implemented at the cost of several millions of dollars were suspended. Thousands of job opportunities were lost. The total loss could be estimated at 1.8 billion U.S. dollar [sic]." Such losses are disastrous in a country where the average yearly income is an estimated $840. The realization that it couldn't afford any more attacks -- combined, perhaps, with some unease at Washington's ability to forcibly oust the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and push aside Yasir Arafat -- drove Yemen to dramatically expand its anti-terror cooperation with the United States.

The following month, in November 2002, a U.S.-operated unmanned aerial vehicle incinerated a car carrying six Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen's badlands, including the wanted Ali Qaed Sinan Al Harthi, one of Al Qaeda's top leaders in Yemen and a suspect in the Cole attack. In December 2002, Yemen's rubber-stamp parliament published a surprisingly frank, 96-page account of Yemen's terrorism crisis, listing well-known attacks as well as smaller hits that had failed to make headlines. And now, nine months later, although two prominent Al Qaeda terrorists and dozens of lesser operatives remain at large in Yemen, there is a sense in Washington that Sanaa is genuinely cooperating. The CIA and Yemen's interior ministry have been working together, and FBI Director Robert Mueller and Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh shook hands in June over the establishment of a "Legal Office" in the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, formalizing an FBI presence that began in 2000. Yemen now ranks among other valued allies with FBI offices, including Jordan and Egypt. Contrast this with the obstinate Syria, which once provided the United States with great intelligence on Al Qaeda but turned on Washington during the recent Iraq war by allowing guerrilla fighters to cross its border. Yemen-U.S. coordination, on the other hand, is yielding growing dividends. Yemeni intelligence tips thwarted a recent plot against the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa -- a move that reportedly earned the personal gratitude of President Bush. The London-based Arabic daily Al-Sharq al-Awsat reports that the FBI office in Yemen is now looking for Anwar Al Aulaqi, an American of Yemeni descent who was mentioned in Congress's report on the September 11 attacks for his ties to two of the hijackers -- Nawaf Al Hazmi and Khalid Al Mihdhar. In addition, military ties between Washington and Sanaa have expanded, beginning with increased coast guard cooperation. U.S. Marines are also training elite Yemeni forces to ferret out shadowy Al Qaeda elements, and, in late June and July, Yemeni forces arrested 37 militants in operations against the Islamic Army of Aden, a local group with known ties to Al Qaeda, in a village some 280 miles south of Sanaa. Yemeni officials say they have deported more than 5,000 terrorism suspects since 1998, and as many as 300 militants with known Al Qaeda links are in Yemeni jails.

Just as important, President Saleh appears eager to prove that he is not a typical Middle East autocrat la Saddam, Arafat, or Bashar Al Assad. Thus, when Baghdad fell and Iraqi citizens were seen burning posters of their ousted despot, Saleh ordered his larger-than-life posters removed from Yemen's capital. Saleh has also de-emphasized the role of his son Ahmad, a 33-year-old colonel in charge of Yemen's Republican Guard whose military post and rank -- which were incommensurate with his experience -- were uncomfortably reminiscent of the roles played by Uday and Qusay Hussein. Although he had won a parliamentary seat in 1997, Ahmad was not nominated by his father's ruling party for reelection this spring. Instead, the General People's Congress lost Ahmad's constituency to Islah, the Islamist opposition party. Western observers still believe Ahmad is being groomed for the presidency when his father steps down in 2012, but Saleh now appears to be treading more carefully.

While Ahmad's political fate is yet to be determined, the internationally monitored elections that took place on April 27 represented a modest step toward democracy. Although Yemen's political system is nepotistic and rife with accusations of corruption, democracy watchers, such as the Washington-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, say it is one of the freest in the categorically undemocratic Middle East. And, although Yemen's self-censored press might be viewed as an indicator of severe repression, in daily qat chews (four- to six-hour sessions when Yemenites munch on a mildly narcotic leaf), politics are discussed freely. Opposition groups, such as Islah and the Socialist Party, freely criticize the president, albeit within unspoken limits. Stepping outside those limits may jeopardize your access to power, but it won't jeopardize your life. While opposition leaders bitterly accused the government of tampering with the April elections, most are still eager to continue participating in the country's deeply flawed but evolving democratic experiment.

This is not to say Yemen's problems are in the past. American diplomats are afraid to leave their heavily guarded compound because of recent violence, and the Yemeni government continues to undercut Washington's military and diplomatic efforts to varying degrees. Ahead of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Saleh called for several large demonstrations (turnout estimates ranged from 200,000 to one million people) to protest American "terrorism." Last

December, Yemen was found importing Scud missiles from North Korea, and, in mid-May, Saleh met with Mohammed Khatami, president of Iran, the other remaining state in the "axis of evil." He also met last year with Khaled Meshal of Hamas. Such developments are undoubtedly alarming, but they do not overshadow Saleh's contributions to the war on terrorism. Insiders here say these moves represent not so much a turn against the United States as a balancing act they call "walking on the heads of snakes." As a survivalist leader in a weak state, Saleh knows he must not only cooperate with the West but also work with controversial Islamic leaders and a range of domestic actors. If cooperation with Yemen expands, Washington will be better positioned to curb Sanaa's more questionable activities. Indeed, this is already happening; Yemen has agreed not to purchase any more weapons from North Korea, according to one adviser. In that way, Yemen -- once considered among the region's worst offenders -- may one day become a case study in how to clean up a terrorism-addled country. ❖

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