Yemen and the Fight against Terror

by Amy Hawthorne **(/experts/amy-hawthorne-0)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

October 12 marks the first anniversary of the terrorist attack on the American warship USS Cole, an attack that killed seventeen sailors while the ship was refueling in Aden harbor, Yemen. A year later, although United States and many Yemeni officials are certain that Osama bin Laden was behind the incident, the file remains open. Reflecting the continuing evolution of policy in the wake of September 11, the United States now describes Yemen as a "partner" in the fight against terror, whereas the State Department's 2000 "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report stated that the Yemeni government "did little to discourage the terrorist presence in Yemen."

Yemen's 'Extremist Challenge'

While most Yemenis consider themselves religiously conservative Muslims, the extremist element is a marginal part of the political scene. Nonetheless, its strands are interwoven in the complex tapestry of Yemeni politics. One strand comprises the "Afghan Arab" mujahideen (including Yemenis and other Arab fighters) present in Yemen since the end of the Soviet-Afghanistan war. Thousands were recruited by radical shaykh Abdel Majid al-Zindani to fight against "godless" Southern Yemeni communists alongside President Ali Abdullah Saleh's Northern army in the 1994 civil war. Some remain, enjoying the Yemeni authorities' sometimes hands-off tendencies. Also, obscure local terrorist groups tied to Al Qaeda are thought to be responsible for several acts of terrorism, including an attempted 1992 bombing of a hotel in Aden that was temporarily housing a contingent of U.S. military personnel. Among these local groups is the Abyan-Aden Islamic Army, which carried out a violent kidnapping of Western tourists in 1998. Although the Yemeni government has declared this group eradicated, it appeared on President Bush's September 24 executive order listing terrorist organizations whose assets are now frozen.

Another strand exists within the formal political sphere, in the Zindani-led, so-called "extremist wing" of Yemen's Islamist Islah party. Islah is a true "big tent" party that includes a contingent of Afghan Arabs and other extremists, but mainly comprises tribesmen, moderate Islamists, and businessmen. In keeping with the highly ambiguous nature of Yemeni politics, some Islah elements oppose Saleh's platform while others are closely tied to the regime (Saleh's brother, Ali Muhsin, was among its creators). Once a coalition partner in Saleh's post-unification government, Islah won 21 percent of seats in the 1993 parliamentary elections, and 18 percent in 1997. Since 1997, however, as Saleh has both consolidated the power of his ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party and slowed down political liberalization, Islah has joined the opposition and has seen its influence diminish. In May, the government struck at part of Islah's patronage base by announcing that it would bring the hundreds of state-funded, Islah-managed religious schools under tighter Ministry of Education control. Yet, Islah remains the GPC's main

political rival, and Saleh's relations with it are delicate.

Yemen's weak central government and heavily armed tribes make all-out, sustained security campaigns potentially destabilizing, since some extremist elements enjoy tribal protection; such moves may also arouse popular opposition. In recent years, Saleh has strengthened the government's authority in the hinterlands, helped by the June 2000 border agreement with Saudi Arabia, in which the Saudis reputedly agreed to stop their extensive funding of tribal leaders. His regime has improved security procedures at Sanaa airport, and deported many suspected extremists. However, Saleh has retained power for twenty-three years in part by exhibiting immense skill in co-opting, rather than confronting, his potential enemies, as well as by carefully maintaining his tribal power base. This is his preferred method, particularly as up until now, neither the mujahideen nor extremist Islahis have made his regime a major target. In one such example of co-optation, Southern shaykh Tareq al-Fadhli, who had close ties to Afghan Arabs in the early 1990s, joined the GPC and now sits on the president's prestigious Consultative Council.

Compounding the political challenges is Yemen's vast terrain (including 2,000 miles of mostly unprotected coastline), poor infrastructure, porous borders, and lax security environment. Another factor is the economic situation. Despite sound implementation of the first stages of a macroeconomic stabilization program, Yemen remains the Arab world's poorest country, with an estimated per capita GNP of $360, a fertility rate of 7.0 children per woman, and rising unemployment (exacerbated by shrinking Gulf labor markets that had previously employed millions of Yemeni laborers). The benefits of Yemen's burgeoning 440,000-barrel-per-day oil industry have yet to trickle down to the population. Yemen's per capita military expenditure is among the highest in the world. In September, Yemen reportedly signed a $300 million deal with Russia for fifteen Mig-29 fighter jets. These factors and worsening living standards could contribute to increased resentment of Saleh's rule, and enhance the appeal of radical ideologies.

Yemeni Response to September 11: Mixed Signals

The Yemeni government's response to the attacks on the United States, like that of other Arab states, has been qualified. President Saleh immediately condemned the attacks, quickly arrested dozens of suspected extremist Yemenis, and temporarily closed Sanaa's Islamist, state-funded al-Iman University, run by Shaykh Zindani. At the same time, Saleh's foreign minister stated that Yemen would cooperate in the war against terror only under United Nations auspices. On October 9, 172 of Yemen's leading religious scholars issued an edict terming cooperation with the United States and its allies a "betrayal of God." So far, Saleh's balancing act reflects both his desire to satisfy the United States enough to prevent Yemen's becoming an American target, and his impulse to avoid a definitive stance that might jeopardize his power or provoke a significant public backlash. This ambivalence is reflected in the friction-plagued Cole investigation. From the U.S. perspective, the main bone of contention has been the Yemeni authorities' refusal to allow the FBI to question several high-level Yemeni political figures with possible knowledge of the attack, and their desire to bring the case to trial in Yemen prematurely. On September 3, President Saleh stated bluntly, "I believe the task of the American investigators is over and the case is on its way to court." (On September 17, Secretary of State Colin Powell described Yemen's role in the investigation as "very helpful recently," suggesting that Saleh has had a change of heart.)

U.S. Policy

Yemen's role as a potential new haven for dispersed Al Qaeda members, along with the extremist elements already present, makes it imperative to engage with Yemen, despite the lingering frustrations of both sides over the Cole investigation, the continuing terrorist threat there, and the longstanding tendency to view Yemen as peripheral to U.S. policy in the region. Primarily, this means recognizing that Saleh's fully cracking down on all extremist elements could be very destabilizing to his regime in the short run. The first U.S. diplomatic task is to convince Saleh that such a crackdown is critical to his long-term survival, and that he should therefore be prepared to run the short-

term risks. Second, the United States should be prepared to ease the pain of the bold steps Saleh will be asked to take with more substantial economic assistance (in FY 2001, U.S. Economic Support Fund aid was $4 million, a dramatic increase over negligible levels during most of the 1990s). Washington should, however, build in mechanisms to emphasize institutional development and encourage transparency in Yemen's usage of this aid, to help Yemenis see tangible benefits to cooperation with the United States. U.S. policymakers should also continue support for Yemeni pro-democracy initiatives, to help provide a safety valve for political tensions. Third, the United States should expand its limited counterterrorism and security-related assistance, specifically, to help Yemen develop a coast guard and computerize its passport system.

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