Terrorism against the USS Cole and the Context in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

Yemen embarked on a dramatic evolution after the 1990 merger of two remote, distinctly different, and conflict-ridden regimes (the former South Yemen and North Yemen). Unity has held, and Yemen is becoming more moderate and integrated into its region. However, a decade later the transition is incomplete.

For the first time, Yemen is a unified state presided over by one president. Yemen's population of more than 17 million rivals that of Saudi Arabia. The strong U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf puts Yemen in a good position to exploit its location controlling the eastern side of the Bab al-Mandab, the strait through which ships must pass en route to the Gulf from the Suez Canal.

Yet, negative factors persist. Yemen remains one of the world's poorest countries. As the most tribalized nation in the Arab world, its heavily armed tribes, multiple power centers, and constant bargaining hinder the growth of institutions and majority rule needed to implement reform. Furthermore, Yemen remains a weak state, whose central government cannot fully exercise its authority in all regions of the country. A brief but bitter civil war was fought in 1994 between former South Yemeni leaders and the Sana'a government.

Nor has the regime moved steadfastly toward reform in recent years. In the wake of unification came a process of political liberalization, highly praised by the United States and other countries. Yemen experienced an unprecedented flourishing of pluralism and civic activity, raising expectations that it would become the Arab world's first real democracy. Although competitive multiparty elections were held in 1993 and 1997, no meaningful reform has occurred since then. Yemen now has only the formal trappings of democracy, with far less of the substance than Yemenis want. Economic reform has also stalled.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh presided over the creation of institutions of unity such as a parliament, but lacks legitimacy in all quarters. Saleh and his top deputies evince the prototypical Yemeni political skills–they co-opt and coerce the opposition for short periods of time, but rarely crack down fully for fear of destabilizing effects. President Saleh is, above all, a survivor, in power since 1978 in a country known for frequent assassinations of leaders. The regime's emphasis on status-quo management and bargaining contribute to the sense of paralysis often felt in Yemen.

As for foreign policy, Yemen has recently relied upon negotiation, rather than force, to settle territorial disputes with Oman, Eritrea, and Saudi Arabia. Its June 2000 border agreement with Saudi Arabia marks a major turning point

from tense to cooperative relations with its most important neighbor. Yemen's decision to pursue closer ties with the United States is the leading example of a move toward pragmatism. However, signs of the old guard persist, particularly in Yemen's position toward Iraq, its rejection of contact with Israel, and its promotion of pan-Arab ideology.

The USS Cole attack could prove to be a turning point in Yemen's evolution. Whether the attackers are found to be Yemenis or foreigners, the Yemeni regime will come under intense pressure to crack down decisively, for the first time, on all sorts of "radical elements." Because the Yemeni opposition is so diffuse, and because Saleh does not fully control key areas of the country, such a move could seriously destabilize the regime. The USS Cole attack has also prompted a re-evaluation of U.S.-Yemeni relations. While the U.S. should not overestimate its influence in Yemen, a decision by Washington to turn away now could produce something far worse.

STEPHEN GOTOWICKI

In late 1997, the U.S. Central Command began a process of security re-engagement with Yemen that included infrequent ship visits to Aden, training of senior Yemeni military officers in the United States and a de-mining project involving U.S. military personnel. This policy emerged because General Anthony Zinni, then commander-in-chief of the Central Command, supported engaging Yemen. He believed that Yemen could be of importance to U.S. interests both in the Gulf and in the Horn of Africa. Aden would provide valuable support in the event of U.S. military involvement in the Persian Gulf due to its spectacular harbor facilities, reasonable proximity to the Gulf, and location out of range of medium range ballistic missiles. Yemen could also make an excellent logistical lodgment for any future military operations conducted in the Horn of Africa.

In December 1998, Central Command decided to relocate the U.S. Navy strategic fuel reserves from Djibouti to the port of Aden. That decision was taken after a review of bids received from the ports of Salalah (Oman), Aqaba, Jeddah, and Aden. Aden was chosen for its cheap storage charges, shorter refueling time, strategic location, and because Aden was, in General Zinni's view, the safest of all the ports being considered. Fuel storage in Aden was also a de facto U.S. endorsement of Yemen's emerging stability. Contrary to local impressions, the U.S. government had no intentions whatsoever of establishing any permanent military installation anywhere in Yemen, whether in Aden or on the island of Socotra.

The U.S. embassy in Sana'a considered Yemeni politics to be noisy but not dangerous. To be sure, the Yemeni government generally allowed various Middle Eastern terrorist groups to reside, proselytize, and conduct limited military training in Yemen, but never to conduct operations in or from Yemen. There have been 150 kidnappings of foreigners in Yemen in recent years, but virtually all of them were designed to pressure the central government into providing services to the kidnappers' tribal areas and did not put hostages' lives at risk. The exception was the Islamic Army of Aden's capturing of a British tour group in Mudiyah in December 1998. This kidnapping, part of a bid to secure the release of several British-based radical Islamists from a Yemeni prison, resulted in the death of four hostages. Although the Mudiyah incident was conducted by "amateurs," it was considered the first major terrorist attack against Westerners in Yemen in years.

For years before the attack on the USS Cole, there were no incidents of terrorism in Yemen by cross-border groups, that is, no incidents of international terrorism as defined by the U.S. government. There was no record of any direct or indirect threats against U.S. military in Yemen before the October 12 attack on the USS Cole. As part of the de-mining effort, about forty U.S. soldiers were staying in Aden for several months; they would have been an easy target for terrorists but there were no credible threats.

The USS Cole suffered from a security lapse on board. U.S. Navy ships refueling at Aden have armed sailors on deck whenever docked with orders to maintain an exclusion zone of 200 meters. But it is unrealistic to expect that young

sailors will initiate the use of deadly force while in port in a friendly country.

The past record of Yemeni radical and armed groups suggests that none could conduct such a sophisticated terrorist operation. Groups such as the Islamic Army of Aden lack the technology, training and field craft necessary for such an operation. On the other hand, this attack bears the hallmarks of the past operations of Osama bin Laden: the long-term planning, the sophisticated technology, and the targeting of U.S. presence in the Gulf. Yet, it is unlikely that the investigation will be able to obtain legally sufficient evidence of bin Laden's involvement.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this attack is the use of a "shaped explosive charge," which indicates a quantum leap in the technology employed by terrorist organizations. This suggests that such deadly terrorist operations will continue and become more effective.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ashraf Zeitoon.

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