

YEMEN

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Test for the West

The botched plot to bomb Northwest Airlines Flight 253 – believed to have been hatched in Yemen – has turned the media spotlight on terrorism in this strategic Arabian peninsula state. Speaking after the attempted attack, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown described Yemen as ‘an incubator and potential safe haven for terrorism’ that presents ‘a regional and global threat.’ Rising concern about the country’s future has prompted the British government to host an urgent international summit on radicalisation there.

nOT SINCE THE FATAL ATTACK on the USS Cole in Aden harbour in 2000 has the poorest country in the Middle East been subject to such international scrutiny and attention. Yemen has a long history of involvement with Al Qaeda and its affiliates: the first attempted strike on United States soldiers took place in Aden in 1992. However, a period of successful cooperation between Yemen and the US in the early years of the 21st century saw the threat temporarily contained.

The current resurgence of Al Qaeda in Yemen stems from a jailbreak four years ago, when more than twenty terrorist suspects and convicts

absconded from a high-security prison in the capital, Sana'a. In the same period, security gains elsewhere in the region – in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Pakistan – have driven a number of operatives to Yemen. Last year's merger of Al Qaeda in Yemen with the parallel group in Saudi Arabia has established Yemen as its new centre of gravity on the Arabian peninsula.

Over the past year, Yemen terrorist networks have grown in strength and global reach, but the country's current security challenges are a symptom of much deeper problems. The army has been fighting an intermittent civil war in the north for nearly six years, the security services routinely clash with grassroots protestors in the south calling for independence and the last round of parliamentary elections, scheduled for early last year, has been put on hold until next year. Political space is shrinking and press freedom is under assault, with eight newspapers shut last year.

RUNNING DRY

Against this backdrop, the oil-dependent economy is taking a nosedive, as its mature fields run dry and production falls towards zero. The World Bank predicts that oil reserves will be exhausted in the coming decade, but the squeeze is already being felt.

Concerns about Al Qaeda's support in Yemen are likely to intensify as the macro-economic strain increases, and the state's resources and related political capital diminish. Dwindling oil revenues threaten the government's ability to pay civil service salaries and maintain the country's extensive patronage system.

Pentagon planners worried about Al Qaeda's symbolic revival on the Arabian peninsula now need to combine short-term security objectives with a longer-term strategy to prevent state collapse and support the country in its transition to a post-oil economy.

The test for the west is to embed evolving counter-terrorism measures in a comprehensive 'whole of government' approach that coordinates diplomacy, development and defense. However, the range of options is limited and the long-term framework is both high-risk and ambitious.

While aspects of the state-building agenda in Yemen are familiar from Iraq and Afghanistan, two stark differences stand out. Firstly, the west has relied on troop deployments to help with state-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that option is not currently available in Yemen.

Secondly, for all its flaws, Yemen is an

established parliamentary democracy and President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been in power for more than thirty years, first as leader of North Yemen and then, since 1990, as ruler of the unified republic. This is not a fledging post-conflict government installed by the west.

Furthermore, the country's Arabian peninsula location and geographic proximity to Islam's holiest sites raises unique challenges for the west's active pursuit of wanted terrorists. Public opinion is widely hostile to US policy in the Middle East and prominent Yemenis are warning that the deployment of US troops would amount to an occupation.

The White House has calculated that it has no option but to work remotely through the Yemeni military, and US President Barack Obama has ruled out sending soliders. Instead, the US is maintaining a light footprint by sharing intelligence and providing technical support and military trainers.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has argued for a holistic approach to Yemen, saying the time has come to elevate development as a central pillar of American foreign policy. 'The odds are long,' she concedes. 'But the cost of doing nothing is potentially far greater.' Previous attempts under President George Bush to kick-start an ambitious aid programme ran into the ground when a prominent USS Cole suspect was released from jail just days before officials were due to sign the agreement. Renewed progress depends on mutual understanding and goodwill between Yemen and the international donors.

PATCHY RECORD

A whole-government approach relies on a willing and able partner, but Yemen's track record is patchy. Four years ago, Saleh lent his support to a bold national reform agenda. He established the Supreme National Anti-Corruption Authority and revised laws for government purchasing contracts. This promising early start has not been followed with effective implementation.

With international aid contributions standing at less than \$20 per head, Yemen is still underfunded relative to need. Its human development indicators consistently trail the regional average by a wide margin; they are closer to the average for sub-Saharan Africa – where aid levels hit \$40 per head – and often lower.

The population is growing rapidly but roughly a third of people are living on the breadline and Yemen has among the highest

International Events February

FEBRUARY 4 British police officer in court over assault charge during G20 Summit

FEBRUARY 5 G7 finance ministers meet in Canada

FEBRUARY 7 Second round of Ukraine presidential election

FEBRUARY 11 First anniversary of Morgan Tsvangirai becoming Zimbabwe Prime Minister

FEBRUARY 17 Second anniversary of Kosovan independence

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rates of child malnutrition in the world. Since 2006, donors have pledged \$5 billion in development aid, but only a tiny fraction of these funds has been spent.

NO BLANK CHEQUES

With money already in the pipeline, Yemen is not likely to receive further development aid pledges until donors improve coordination and ensure that existing funds are allocated. Low capacity in the civil service is often blamed for the aid spending bottleneck and stagnant reform process, but momentum also depends on high-level political will to tackle corruption.

Yemen's Foreign Minister has warned that the US and Britain should not use heightened concerns about terrorism to increase pressure for reform, or push for the resolution of his country's internal conflicts.

Many Yemenis worry that the US has no choice but to back Saleh at any price, signing blank cheques in return for clamping down on Al Qaeda. Yet, western donors recognise that the resurgence of Al Qaeda there stems, in part, from poverty, poor governance and the lack of law and order. They seem inclined to insist on safeguards and oversight that will help strengthen state institutions. 'Unconditional love will not help Yemen at this stage,' said one western diplomat, wryly, in the run-up to the London conference.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are collectively the largest donors to Yemen. The Saudi Arabian army is deployed at the border, quashing cross-border incursions by rebels in Yemen's

northern Saada province. The member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council are well aware that further instability in Yemen has the potential to generate heightened political tension throughout the region. They have far greater influence over Yemen's decision makers.

INCREASED RISKS

What happens if the message does not get through to Yemen's elite and the underlying issues continue to fester? The implications for Yemen include fragmentation or de facto secession, renewed civil war, a humanitarian crisis and the growth of organised crime.

The implications for the international community include an increased risk of terrorist threats from Yemen, increased risk of internal conflicts spilling over its borders and increased risk to maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

During the past year, Yemen has risen rapidly up the list of foreign policy priorities, in response to fears about the regional and international fall-out from impending state failure. The attempted Christmas Day attack in the skies over Detroit has simply accelerated the quest for a coherent response to the country's converging challenges. It is essential that western donors, international institutions and Yemen's neighbours work towards a common position and maintain their focus on state collapse and the economic crisis once immediate fears about counter-terrorism begin to subside.

Time is short and apprehension is likely to rise over the coming year. The appointment of a special envoy would help raise Yemen's profile in global diplomatic institutions. The formation of an international contact group would provide an ongoing framework for sustained engagement.

An effective regional approach to Yemen's problems requires a strategy that includes the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as addressing links to the Horn of Africa. The challenges are too great for any single country to resolve alone.

