



ARAB UPRISINGS

Yemen: The Final Days of Ali Abdullah Saleh?

March 24, 2011



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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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The thirty-three year reign of Ali Abdullah Saleh as President of Yemen appears to be in serious jeopardy. Protests continue to spread through the country, even in the face of harsh repression. A wave of resignations from Saleh's government suggests serious splits at the heart of the regime. The President's offers to step down at the end of the year and to commence wide-ranging political reforms seem to be falling on deaf ears with a society which has grown skeptical after years of unmet promises. While nobody can predict how long the struggle will continue or how bloody it might become, it is becoming increasingly likely that major political change is coming sooner rather than later.

The prospect of political change in Sanaa has sent tremors through Washington DC, which has relied on Saleh as a key partner in counter-terrorism, and across the Gulf. But as the Middle East Channel essays collected here suggest, this concern may be misplaced. Saleh's regime has been as much the problem in Yemen as the solution. His regime's corruption, insularity, political repression and cynical manipulation of the country's fault lines have contributed to the manifold problems which have undermined Yemen's stability and prosperity. His departure may pose a problem for counter-terrorism narrowly defined, but may in fact be a requirement for meaningfully addressing the underlying problems which render Yemen an attractive environment for al-Qaeda.

These essays demonstrate powerfully the extent to which Saleh's regime has privileged his own political survival needs over both American counter-terrorism concerns and the interests of the Yemeni people. His ongoing battle with an insurgency in the south and his ham-fisted response to the Huthi rebellion in the north both mattered far more to his regime than did the AQAP problem for which he collected international assistance. Military and security assistance aimed at AQAP was too easily redirected to his domestic political foes, often facilitated human rights abuses and political repression, and did little to combat urgent problems such as declining oil and water supplies, poverty, and unemployment.

U.S. officials must now think more creatively about a future which is coming regardless of American preferences. Yemen without Saleh should not be considered an inevitably "failed state," as Lisa Wedeen astutely notes in her Middle East Channel contribution. There is a deep reservoir of civil society, tribal networks, and NGOs upon which to construct a civil, democratic and accountable Yemeni state. International attention should not focus exclusively on terrorism and al-Qaeda, as important as such threats might be. Instead, it should seek to empower and engage a Yemeni society which has been poorly served by decades of Saleh's rule and to help a post-Saleh government begin to seriously address these long unresolved issues.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS

See Ya, Saleh

Yemen's embattled president struggles on the brink of collapse.

By Gregory Johnsen, March 23, 2011

The writing has been on the wall in Yemen for weeks. In Taiz, a highlands city of half a million, people painted it on huge banners; in Sanaa they baked it into bread; and everywhere they chanted it: Irhal. Go. That single Arabic word has united Yemen's fractured political opposition, turning old enemies into temporary allies and pushing President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime to the brink of collapse.

The protest movement against Saleh's 32 years of rule has been growing since Feb. 11, when Hosni Mubarak stepped down in Egypt. That day, for the first time, student activists and pro-democracy demonstrators took to the streets outside the umbrella of Yemen's largest opposition grouping, the Joint Meeting Parties. In much the same way Egypt's 1952 revolution shaped and inspired Yemen's own uprising a decade later, so too has Egypt's January 25 Revolution found an echo in Yemen. In addition to demanding Saleh's resignation, protesters are also calling for key members of his family to surrender their positions in the military.

In fits and starts, for the past six weeks, the protests have gradually incorporated most of Saleh's domestic opponents into their ranks. Across the south, in Aden, Lahj, and al-Mukalla, pro-secessionists have slowly dropped their calls for a separate state, at least for the moment, and gone on the record stating that their only wish is for Saleh to go. In the far north, where the president has been waging a brutal seven-year civil war against a group known popularly as the Houthis, the rebels added their voice to the mix, marching for the fall of the regime. Many of Saleh's parliamentary allies have deserted him as well. Some resigned with open letters to the press, while others, like influential tribal leader Sheikh Hussein al-Ahmar, arranged their announcements for maximum publicity.

On Feb. 26, Ahmar joined several other sheikhs from the

powerful Hashid confederation at a conference in the northern governorate of Amran. In a fiery speech, the young tribesman denounced Saleh as a corrupt ruler no better than the imams that ruled north Yemen for much of the past millennium. Behind him other men threw their membership cards from Saleh's ruling GPC party in the dust as proof of their resignation.

The president, who has remained in power for more than three decades largely by deftly playing opposition groups off one another, attempted to stem the tide of tribal defections by doling out bags of cash and distributing complimentary cars. Hussein al-Ahmar, Hamid al-Ahmar, and the rest of their eight brothers countered Saleh by opening their own bank accounts to tribesmen. As the auction for tribal support continued in the north, the protests continued to grow across the rest of the country.

In Taiz, the intellectual and activist capital of the country, protesters gathered in the thousands, camping out downtown and entertaining each other with poetry and chants as they waited for Saleh to get the message. The president tried to stay ahead of the protesters by anticipating potential moves. Like Cairo, Sanaa has a Midan al-Tahrir -- Liberation Square. Worried about the precedent from Egypt and the optics of thousands of people demonstrating in the square, Saleh dispatched paid supporters to occupy the area. Undeterred, the protesters set up a tent city outside Sanaa University, dubbing it Sahat al-Tagheer -- the Square of Change.

Increasingly desperate to disperse the protesters after weeks of watching their numbers grow, Saleh fatally miscalculated on March 18. Shortly after noon prayers on that Friday, snipers surrounding Sahat al-Tagheer opened fire, killing 52 protesters in several minutes of concentrated shooting. There had been several instances of brutal violence previously in the protests, most notably

in Aden, where handfuls of demonstrators have been killed -- but nothing like this. Even with French warplanes in the sky over Libya, Al Jazeera devoted hours of its coverage on Friday to the horrific images of bloody corpses being carted into mosques and hospitals near the university. Most of the young men and boys had bullet holes above their eyes or in the back of their heads.

Saleh tried to limit the damage, holding a news conference that evening. He expressed regret at the killings, even calling the dead “the martyrs of democracy,” but brazenly insisted that the opposition be blamed for the bloodshed. Few in Yemen seemed convinced. Saleh also stated he was implementing a state of emergency in Yemen, a move that suspends all law in the country and allows the president to take whatever steps he deems necessary. It quickly became clear that even that wasn't going to be enough. Led by Faisal Amin Abu Ras, Yemen's ambassador to Lebanon, more resignations started to trickle in. Late Sunday night, Saleh fired his entire cabinet in an effort to prevent its members from resigning en masse.

But the big blow came the next morning on Monday, March 21, Saleh's 69th birthday, when Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar (no relation to Hussein al-Ahmar), the commander of the 1st Armored Division and the most powerful figure in the Army, read out a statement on Al Jazeera, saying that he supported the protesters and that his troops would protect them. His understated performance opened the floodgates. Ahmar, who also commands one of Yemen's four military zones, is from the president's own Sanhan tribe. For most of the past three decades, he has protected the president and his interests in the military. His defection was a crushing blow. Shortly after Ahmar's statement, the commander of the eastern military zone, Muhammad Ali Muhsin, announced his support for the protesters. Within minutes two commanders responsible for half the country had abandoned Saleh.

Many of their colleagues followed their lead, and by the end of the day more than a dozen top commanders

made similar announcements, scrambling to avoid being the last one off a sinking ship. Ahmar's decision also reverberated through Yemen's civilian leadership, as diplomats abroad and local politicians spent much of Saleh's birthday calling into Al Jazeera to announce their resignations live on the air.

Backed into a corner, Saleh dug in. He surrounded the presidential palace with tanks from the Republican Guard under the command of his eldest son Ahmad and sent his fired, but still serving, foreign minister, Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, to Riyadh.

Ahmar's move was a carefully calculated political decision designed to separate most of the Sanhan tribe from Saleh, Ahmad, and four of the president's nephews, all of whom hold high positions in the military. By coming out in support of the protesters now, Ahmar believes he can save his lucrative job as well as those of key allies, while letting Saleh and his five heirs take the fall for three decades of misrule. Many of the protesters who have been demonstrating for weeks are wary of Ahmar and his intentions, but appear willing to accept his support in order to get rid of Saleh.

The president, who still commands the loyalty of the Air Force, most of the Republican Guard, and the Central Security Forces, is also counting on Saudi Arabia. He is hoping that King Abdullah is more worried about what the fall of another regime in the region will mean for Bahrain and political dissent in Saudi Arabia than he is about the potential for chaos or armed conflict in Yemen. If March 22's animated speech, in which Saleh warned of civil war, is any indication, the president believes he has the Saudi monarch's support. And that makes the current standoff in Yemen very dangerous.

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Worst and Best Case Scenarios for Yemen

Sheila Carapico, March 23, 2011

Yemen's current political crisis is too fast-moving and too complex for anyone to predict the next turn, much less the final outcome. Based on recent events, however, it is possible to consider worst case scenarios of violence or chaos and best case scenarios for a new social contract pointing towards a more democratic future.

Here's the background to this week's news, in a nutshell. At least since President Ali Abdallah Salih restored unity by force during a short civil war in 1994, Yemen has staggered under odious burdens of rising poverty, inequality, corruption, cronyism, political de-liberalization, economic disinvestment, and ecological degradation. In power since early 1979 in North Yemen and seemingly determined to rule for life, prepare his favorite son Ahmad Ali Salih as his heir, and retain a monopoly of seats for his ruling General People's Congress in an increasingly impotent parliament, the President derailed a functioning competitive multiparty electoral process. Southerners living in what had been the People's Democratic Republic (PDY) prior to 1990, having failed in the 1994 secessionist bid, have been protesting for several years against material deprivation and military repression. Discontent simmered in the former North where Ali Abdallah Salih had ruled since 1978, too. The regime battled a localized al-Huthi insurgency in Sa'ada province up towards the Saudi border, claiming the Zaydi Shi'a rebels were inspired by Iran. Both the "harak" (movement) in the former South and the al-Huthi rebellion considered their grievances to be separate from those of the rest of the country, and the regime successfully portrayed them as isolated, illegitimate throw-backs to the PDY and the Zaydi imamate, respectively, that threatened the unity of the republic. But across the country citizens were alienated, frustrated, and miserable.

The popular revolts that toppled Tunisian and Egyptian dictators in early 2011 inspired Yemenis. Bypassing the formal opposition coalition of the so-called Joint Meeting Parties, mostly youthful demonstrators thronged

to public squares. Although in contrast with Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain they couldn't assemble in fantastic and photogenic numbers in a single central metropolitan area, in a half-dozen major cities and a number of small towns constituted themselves as a nationalist pro-democracy movement. They chanted the North African slogans, "Irhal" and "Isqat al-Nizam," calling for the immediate removal of the president and his whole regime. In response to violent attacks by purported pro-regime counter-demonstrators, they mockingly turned the slogan around: "al-nizam yurid isqat al-sha'ab:" the regime wants the downfall of the people.

Notwithstanding President Salih's vague promises of an electoral transition in 2013, demonstrations persisted, spread, and expanded. Some members of parliament, the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), and the administration quit in solidarity with "the youth." Even some prominent shaykhs of the president's own Hashid tribal confederation declared their sympathies with the rebels.

Last Friday, March 18, in a pitch of fury or panic someone ordered snipers to open fire on demonstrators near Sana'a University. The next day, at least fifty lay dead, and others mortally wounded. In disbelief, anger, and grief, a record 150,000 marched in Sana'a's biggest day of rage so far.

Senior diplomats, ministers, ruling party members, and civil servants resigned *en masse*. Most striking were defections from within the military, long the main base of Salih's support. Most ominously for Salih, Major-General Ali Muhsin (al-Ahmar), a regime stalwart and top commander who pitilessly prosecuted the 1994 campaign against the South and the war against the al-Huthis, announced his support for the demonstrators. Launching a partial military revolt, he ordered his tank units to defend the demonstrators even as the Republican Guard under Ahmad Salih positioned itself around the massive

presidential compound. The reformists are wary of a wolf in lamb's clothing.

What, then, are the possible scenarios for the coming days, weeks, or months? Quite a few are circulating already, mostly quite dire. The mutineers could clash with the American-armed Republican Guard led by Ahmad Ali Salih and other forces headed by members of the Salih family. An Ali Muhsin victory would amount to a military *coup d'état* at the hands of a new dictator no less savory or popular than President Salih or his son. Prolonged battle could destroy the country or collapse the state. The former PDRY could re-declare its sovereignty. Other regional or tribal aspirations for autonomy could come to the fore. There could be a free-for-all reminiscent of Somalia, or as in Libya rebels could take some territory as the old regime unleashes its fury on the population in those areas. It's impossible to predict the outcome of a fight to the finish, except that more blood would be shed.

Any of these outcomes would turn Yemenis' dreams of freedom into nightmares of tyranny and/or anarchy. Other Arab reformers rooting for liberalization would be disheartened. Warfare or chaos in Yemen could also potentially threaten the stability of neighboring Saudi Arabia, embolden radical jihadists in the Peninsula, and thus ultimately endanger the interests of the United States.

But things don't need to turn out badly for Yemen, its neighbors, and America. What are the alternatives? Best-case scenarios seem contingent on Salih following Ben Ali and Mubarak's example rather than Qaddafi's. If he resigns immediately, power could be transferred to a technocratic, civilian transitional government. New parliamentary and presidential elections could be organized in a matter of months. This transition would be easier in some ways than Egypt's, because there are already organized, legal political parties in Yemen (the several JMP parties and perhaps a reconstituted GPC). Since the existing multiparty electoral process has been suspended rather than irretrievably despoiled, it could be resuscitated.

It might be desirable to amend the constitution, as Salih himself recently offered to do by way of feeble concessions, such that the country is run by a parliamentary rather than a presidential system. But unlike Egypt Yemen would not have to change the constitution before holding elections. Instead of quick piecemeal amendments, Yemenis could re-constitute a contemporary version of the National Dialogue of Political Forces that held mass conferences and scholarly workshops nationwide in 1993 and early 1994 and eventually offered social contract and constitutional proposals in papers the most comprehensive of which was called the Document of Pledge and Accord. That effort, which failed to thwart the 1994 civil war, could be restarted now to engage the street protesters in a genuine civic conversation about necessary reforms and help envision a national path towards more democratic, just, transparent, responsible civilian governance.

This is a tall order, but it is do-able. It is the best case scenario for angry yet hopeful Yemenis who have put their lives on the line, for the now-beleaguered pan-Arab pro-democracy movement, and ultimately for America. Under its counter-terrorism strategy during the past couple of years the US spent hundreds of millions of dollars bolstering a corrupt military dictatorship that backtracked on reforms, muzzled the press, disregarded popular aspirations, and resorted to extra-judicial detentions and even executions.

Backing an economically, politically, environmentally, and ethically unsustainable *status quo* will not make Americans safer or win hearts and minds in Arabia; it will put the United States on the wrong side of history and could even give comfort to our worst enemies. The Obama administration and other Western governments must announce an immediate suspension of military aid to the Salih government and bring all possible diplomatic pressure to bear to convince President Salih that the time has come for him to relinquish power.

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Bloody Days in Sanaa

For Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, rising economic grievances pose a graver risk to his grip on power than al Qaeda ever did.

By Barak Barfi, March 18, 2011

After more than 40 people were killed on March 18 in Sanaa, Yemen, where security forces and regime loyalists opened fire on protesters, the bonds that hold the delicate country together are increasingly fraying. For years, a combination of security and economic problems threatened the country, yet they were never able to topple President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government. But in recent weeks, grassroots frustrations have spurred disgruntled youth to challenge a regime that is clearly willing to use brute force to suppress their demands. And with neither side willing to back down, they are slowly inching Yemen toward the abyss.

In a society where violence is a preferred form of diplomacy, it should come as no surprise that Saleh unleashed his security forces on peaceful demonstrators. In the past, tribesmen in regions hostile to the regime killed soldiers who sought water from their wells, while clans seeking concessions from the government kidnapped foreign ambassadors to express their frustrations. In Yemen, politics is a blood sport.

Having witnessed the fall of three presidents -- two of whom were assassinated -- in the four years before he took power, Saleh has long been prepared for threats to his rule. To solidify his power, he created a military that is loyal to him rather than the state. Following the model of his long-time ally, former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Saleh chose a senior staff based on family ties rather than merit. Almost all top military positions are held either by his kin or by members of his extended Sanhan tribe. They have as much to lose as Saleh does if he is deposed.

For years, many Yemen observers argued that the dilemmas the country faced -- a secession movement in the south, a sectarian rebellion in the north, and a flourishing al Qaeda affiliate -- threatened to implode the

country. But as I argued shortly after the 2009 Christmas Day bombing, these challenges were unlikely to bring down the regime. Security unrest could never really cripple a land that has experienced political turmoil for a thousand years. Historical instability has rendered Yemenis largely inured to a level of violence that would be considered chaos in most countries.

Widespread societal frustrations, not regional grievances or jihadism, are at the root of the current protests. In a country where 65 percent of the population is under 25, Yemenis are understandably more interested in finding employment and weeding out corruption than in eliminating al Qaeda operatives in remote tribal regions. New cadres of college graduates have protested outside government offices in Ibb demanding jobs. Workers have crippled the port in Hudaydah, calling for the resignation of superiors who grew rich at the public's expense.

The Yemeni people's resolve has shaken the regime, and it is beginning to reveal its cracks. Senior provincial officials have quit their posts. Almost two dozen parliamentarians have resigned from the ruling General People's Congress party. State electric workers have gone on strike in Taiz. Even the military has not been spared. In the northern province of Saada, where a rebellion has flared for the past seven years, soldiers mutinied against their senior commander. The regime is hemorrhaging defections.

But more worrisome for Saleh than these desertions is the ripple effect the unrest is causing among his chief backers -- the tribes. For the first time in Saleh's 32-year rule, most of the tribes in the two largest confederations oppose the president. And even among the clans that have remained loyal, such as Bayt Lahum and Banu Suraym, his support is far from secure. Saleh has been able to win over the chiefs with lavish financial promises and government posts,

but the average tribesmen, who rarely benefit from this patronage, have turned against him.

The unrest has spread to Yemen's financial sector as well. Foreigners are unable to withdraw hard currency from their bank accounts, and money-changers are refusing to sell U.S. dollars. Seeking to avert an economic crisis, Yemen asked its wealthy neighbors from the Gulf Cooperation Council last week for \$6 billion in aid. But having earmarked \$10 billion to shore up member nations Bahrain and Oman rocked by political unrest, the council may be reluctant to provide more funds to a country it often views as a poor stepsister.

Despite their accomplishments, Yemeni protesters have a long way to go before they can replicate the success of the demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was a pharaoh -- he could ignore the opposition because he never had to consider their views. So when protests shook the pillars of his regime, he did not know the very people who could throw him a lifeline. But in Yemen, Saleh is little more than a tribal chieftain who has historically relied on shifting coalitions to prop up his rule.

More primus inter pares than despot, Saleh has always been deft at maneuvering between factions and parties. In fact, a number of opposition leaders currently jockeying to speak for the protesters sat in a unity government with Saleh during the early 1990s. If Saleh's use of force was intended to frighten them to the negotiating table, his familiarity with these personalities and intimate knowledge of their demands may help him defuse the crisis.

Moreover, the Egyptian paradigm of "take the square and cripple the country until the president resigns" is ill-suited to a country like Yemen. Egypt is a hydraulic civilization where approximately a quarter of the population lives in the capital along the Nile River. So when a million protesters poured into downtown Cairo, they paralyzed the country. But in Yemen there are too many squares in too many towns and villages to capture. Fewer than 10 percent of Yemen's 25 million people live in Sanaa. Almost 70 percent of the population lives in rural regions spread out across a vast area.

And though protesters have staged large demonstrations in cities such as Aden and Taiz, they have made less headway in the president's tribal strongholds of Amran, Dhamar, and Khawlan. Holding these provinces is crucial to Saleh's survival hopes.

Throughout his three decades in power, Saleh has successfully placated both friends and adversaries with his well-oiled patronage machine. But today's protests are led by a young generation that refuses to be bought off. Having rejected the government's lavish financial promises, the demonstrators are not likely to flinch in the face of force either. And in a country where conflicts are often decided by force, more blood may spill before the standoff is resolved.

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with the New America Foundation.*



Our Man in Sanaa

Why the big problem with Yemen is Yemen's president.

By Ellen Knickmeyer, October 1, 2010

SANAA, Yemen -- The scene in Yemen's capital Sept. 20 was almost embarrassing, according to those who looked on: John Brennan, the influential White House counterterrorism advisor, was trying to leave Sanaa after a fly-in, fly-out visit with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh about his country's burgeoning al Qaeda branch.

But Saleh was too busy pleading for U.S. cash to let the 25-year CIA veteran drive away, according to people familiar with Brennan's visit. Clutching Brennan by the arm, Yemen's burly president of 30-plus years stood at the open door of Brennan's limo, pressing his appeals that the United States pay up now, not later, on the \$300 million that Barack Obama's administration is planning to give Yemen over the near term to help it combat al Qaeda. (Someone finally eased shut the limo door on the Yemeni leader, allowing Brennan to get away, witnesses said.)

And everyone knows what will happen if Saleh doesn't get more free money, because it's a threat Saleh and his officials use at every opportunity to demand international aid: Without an urgent and unending infusion of foreign cash, it will lose its fight against the aggressive Saudi and Yemeni offshoots of al Qaeda that Saleh long allowed -- though he doesn't admit that part of the story -- to make their home here in Yemen.

"No friend of Yemen can stand by when the economy of that state comes close to collapse ... or when the authority of the government is challenged by extremism, by violence, by crime, or by corruption," British Foreign Secretary William Hague said on Sept. 24 in New York, striking the spunky, this-is-Yemen's-finest-hour theme at a "Friends of Yemen" conference of officials of roughly 30 countries gathered together to brainstorm propping up the Arab world's poorest and most chaotic country despite Yemen's best efforts to collapse.

Yemeni Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Mujawar echoed the World War II theme when it came to hinting what kind of money international donors might want to drop on the dresser on the way out -- that is, if they want Yemen to fight al Qaeda.

"Certainly, we need a Marshall Plan for supporting Yemen. I believe the amount needed is around 40 billion dollars," Mujawar told the London-based Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper. (Yemen's annual GDP is a mere \$27 billion.)

Reviewing Yemen's recent history suggests a different idea: The big problem with Yemen isn't al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Nor is it the Zaidi Shiite rebellion in Yemen's north or the separatist movement in Yemen's south. It isn't the 40 percent unemployment. It isn't the near one-in-10 childhood mortality rate or the malnutrition that causes more than half the country's children to be stunted. Although all those factors exist, tragically, in this hospitable, ancient, and beautiful country, and all are grave, none of them is Yemen's main problem.

No, the big problem with Yemen is Yemen's president -- Saleh.

The perpetually shortsighted corruption and mismanagement of Saleh and his circle have been such that almost everyone -- Westerners, Yemen's Persian Gulf neighbors, many Yemenis -- routinely use that word "collapse," speculating more on the "when" than the "if."

Yemen moved squarely to the front of U.S. security worries last December when a Nigerian allegedly trained by al Qaeda in Yemen tried to detonate a bomb on a Detroit-bound airliner. Ambitious and energetic, led in part by Saudi veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as the Yemeni branch is known, has launched almost daily attacks this summer and early fall

on Yemeni security and intelligence forces. Some U.S. intelligence officials and others see Yemen's branch as the gravest threat to the United States, and U.S. Central Command said this summer it wants to pump \$120 billion in military aid into Yemen over the coming years to help it fight al Qaeda.

U.S. State Department officials publicly have been more measured so far, saying they will direct more than \$100 million of the new nonmilitary aid to building public services and civil society. Brennan, one of the most adamant in the Obama administration about the threat of al Qaeda in Yemen, made his trip here last week with a letter from Obama to Saleh calling the United States "committed" to helping Yemen.

No one doubts that the threat to Saleh's government from the few hundred al Qaeda fighters here is real. But no one doubts, given Saleh's history, that the Yemeni leader is trying to exploit that threat to gain foreign aid and squelch political opponents and dissidents.

The West, the Arab states in the Persian Gulf, and others have already put \$5.7 billion on offer to Yemen since 2006, as Yemen's al Qaeda threat grew. But Saleh's ineffective government has been unable to come up with concrete spending and monitoring plans that satisfy the donors. The Friends of Yemen conference was intended to sidestep those concerns and come up with a way to push development regardless, perhaps by establishing an additional development fund for the country.

What Yemen needs most isn't more cash, though, but a government that spreads its cash to the people, rather than steals it. Military and domestic aid given without the strictest of conditions and oversight will only let Saleh's government continue to ignore all pressure for reform, perpetuating the disaffection and suffering that sustain insurgencies and al Qaeda.

When it comes to short-sightedness regarding Yemen's best interests, Saleh and his ruling family circle have demonstrated a near unerring propensity to err since he

assumed the presidency in 1978, after leading a military coup in 1962. Since then, Saleh has built a power system based heavily on buying the goodwill of Yemen's tribal leaders, allegedly paying them to deliver the votes of their people in election after election.

In the first Gulf War, Saleh cast what became known as the most expensive "no" in history -- voting against international deployment to roll back Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Yemen's Gulf neighbors expelled Yemeni workers from their countries, lastingly depriving Yemen of remittances, the mainstay of its tiny economy.

The blunders continued. Saleh allowed al Qaeda members to make their homes here as long as they didn't target his government (a gentleman's agreement broken only in recent years). Instead of incorporating southern Yemenis after the 1994 north-south civil war, Saleh marginalized them, politically and economically. Anger in the south has fed insurgencies and protests against Saleh's government, creating southern discontent that al Qaeda is now trying to exploit.

In 2004 when the Zaidis, a religiously oriented sect in Yemen's north, took up arms against the government, Saleh's military rocketed and mortared the cities and towns of the north, according to residents there -- killing hundreds if not thousands of his people and doubling and doubling and doubling again the ranks of fighters for and supporters of the northern rebels.

Corruption -- the theft of Yemeni public funds and foreign aid -- is so rampant here it would make Afghan President Hamid Karzai blush. In a country with one of the highest child-mortality rates in the Middle East, where only about half the people have access to medical services, top government officials and low-ranking workers alike steal and waste half of the slim allocation that the government devotes to health care, according to the World Health Organization.

Saleh's government also has resisted significantly scaling back an outdated fuel-subsidy program that sucks up

more than 10 percent of Yemen's GDP -- perhaps because, according to Abdul-Ghani Iryani, a Yemeni development analyst, Saleh's cronies are skimming \$2 billion a year off the program for their own pockets.

Estimates are that Yemen, a country at peace with all its neighbors, spends from one-third to one-half of its budget on security and intelligence services, keeping a lid on its own people.

On the day Brennan visited, Yemeni forces with U.S. help staged an attack on an al Qaeda hideout in the southeast. But the siege ended with the showy Yemeni cordon of tanks, artillery, troops, and warplanes around the town of Huta somehow letting top al Qaeda leaders escape, as Yemeni forces did last month at another siege in the southern city of Lawdar.

Saleh's regime appears eager to use the influx of new military aid against its own people, persistently claiming that al Qaeda and Yemen's southern separatists are one. (Separatist leaders deny it; Saleh's regime has supplied no hard evidence; and most Westerners are skeptical.)

Saudi Arabia has been one of the worst enablers for Saleh's regime, bailing it out recently with a more than \$2 billion gift of cash just when growing money pressures had economists hoping Yemen might be forced into reform.

U.S. officials seem to be more properly cynical about Saleh and his claims, and working to try to monitor aid for special operations and critical social services.

But if Saleh continues to refuse and delay reforms, the United States and its allies should do something inconceivable in the can-do war on terror: back off and let Saleh feel the pain of his sucked-dry economy and thwarted people. Rather than trying to prop up another wobbly tyrant, as in Afghanistan, the United States would help most by allowing Yemen's citizens, and potentially better Yemeni leaders, to finally have a say.

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Yemen's 15 Minutes of Fame **The world's attention may have moved on since January,** **but that doesn't mean the country's problems have disappeared.**

By Gregg Carlstrom, February 26, 2010

Remember Yemen? For a few short weeks this winter, after the Yemen-trained Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab tried (and failed) to blow up a commercial airliner in Detroit, the troubled country found itself under a rare media spotlight. Journalists descended on the capital, Sanaa; pundits offered advice for fighting al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ending Yemen's two insurgencies. Congress called

hearings. Yemen's foreign minister, Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, was a regular guest on international news networks.

The country was the new Afghanistan, many said, the latest worrisome safe haven for al Qaeda and its affiliates. U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman declared it "tomorrow's war."

And now: nothing. Most of the reporters who landed in Yemen shortly after the failed bombing have left the country. If you search Google News for “Yemen,” you’ll get 24,100 results for January. For February? Just 593 -- many of them wire stories or items from the handful of blogs that regularly cover the country. The contrast is even starker on TV news, where the word “Yemen” was uttered exactly twice on U.S. evening newscasts in February, both times in the context of the bombing plot.

In Washington, too, the discussion has largely stopped: The congressional hearings and think-tank discussions have ended, and Yemen only merited mention at one State Department press briefing in February.

The Abdulmutallab plot convinced Americans that they should pay attention to Yemen -- but as quickly as it arrived in the public consciousness, it disappeared. The few weeks of media attention did little to dispel popular misconceptions of the country, so often portrayed as a drug-addled nation of radical terrorist sympathizers. Journalists who should probably know better often reinforced the myths: Thomas Friedman’s two Yemen columns in February recounted a khat chew and fretted about Osama bin Laden greeting him at Sanaa’s airport. The brief public debate also failed to answer a number of key policy questions or clarify the United States’ often muddled Yemen policy.

The lack of attention now is unfortunate because -- despite the media’s silence -- quite a bit has happened in Yemen over the last few weeks. The Zaidi Shiite rebels in northern Yemen -- the Houthis -- agreed to cease-fires with both the Yemeni and Saudi governments. The rebels have taken steps to implement both truces, releasing most of their Saudi prisoners of war and clearing roadblocks from northern Yemen.

But though the fighting has largely stopped, reconstruction has yet to begin. Northern Yemen’s infrastructure is shattered after years of war: The fighting has demolished “7,180 houses, 1,412 farms, 267 mosques, 94 schools, eight medical centers, four police stations, three court buildings,

three other government facilities and two religious centers,” according to an estimate published in January in *Small Wars Journal*. A quarter-million people have been displaced in Yemen, and many have been displaced in villages in Saudi Arabia along the border.

Western countries have pledged to provide development and humanitarian assistance to Yemen; rebuilding the devastated north should be a major goal of those aid efforts. And yet the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in late February had to approve a \$5 million bridge loan to finance its operations in northern Yemen. It shifted money away from other programs, in other words, so it could continue to provide basic services to refugees and internally displaced persons in Yemen’s border regions.

Why was this kind of last-ditch effort necessary? Because international donors have contributed less than 10 percent of the \$39 million the UNHCR says it needs to fund operations in northern Yemen this year.

“This step is an alternative to scaling down or suspending UNHCR’s protection and assistance programs,” Andrej Mahecic, a spokesman for the agency in Geneva, said at a news briefing.

Refugees in the north might seem irrelevant to policymakers in Washington or London. The Houthi conflict is an internal issue (though it has drawn in Saudi Arabia as well), and predominantly Shiite northern Yemen isn’t a very fertile recruiting ground for a stridently Sunni organization like al Qaeda.

But the Houthi conflict is a central piece of Yemen’s complex political and socioeconomic puzzle. The Yemeni government has spent millions of dollars fighting the Houthis since 2004, draining an already-depleted treasury. And every dollar that’s spent fighting the rebels is a dollar that can’t be used to fight al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) -- or to spur economic development in a desperately poor country where half the population lives on \$2 or less per day.

The Houthi conflict has quieted down, for now, though previous cease-fires have collapsed after weeks or months. In southern Yemen, the government continues to round up members of the separatist movement: More than 130 people were arrested in the last week of February, and Tariq al-Fadhli, the separatists' leader, has pledged "acts of civil disobedience" against the government.

Both of these conflicts distract the government from dealing with the small AQAP presence in the country. Yemen's Interior Ministry made a much-publicized pledge on Feb. 9 to fight the group "around the clock" -- or that's how it was reported, at least. The actual Arabic statement, though, made almost no mention of al Qaeda; instead, it promised to fight "the terrorists" -- al-irhabeen -- a shorthand the government often uses for all its internal threats. The statement pleased an international audience, which viewed it as proof of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's willingness to fight al Qaeda, but it was also intended as a not-so-veiled threat to his domestic foes.

Another unanswered question is the proper role of development aid. Both of Yemen's insurgencies are fueled, in part, by complaints about a lack of economic development and the government's inability to provide basic services. Economic issues, then, should be a key part of Western policy toward Yemen, but questions linger about what sort of foreign aid is best. Gregory Johnsen, a Yemen expert at Princeton University and an FP contributor, has urged more development aid "as a way of dealing with local grievances in an attempt to peel-off would-be members of al-Qaeda." FP's Marc Lynch notes the government's "mind-boggling" corruption and advises a more modest approach to foreign aid.

International donors have pledged to give more, though specific commitments are still vague. Representatives from Gulf Cooperation Council countries -- plus the United States and the European Union -- met in Riyadh on Feb. 27 for another international conference on aid to Yemen. President Saleh is looking to raise \$40 billion from international donors over the next five years but got little in concrete commitments.

The United States, for its part, has pledged to deliver \$121 million in development aid to Yemen over the next three years. The U.S. Agency for International Development says the money will focus on a few key areas, such as increasing youth employment and improving the Yemeni government's ability to deliver health care and education. That's an insignificant sum -- less than \$2 per Yemeni per year -- and it's unlikely to have a significant impact on Yemen's economic problems.

Most U.S. aid to Yemen is still focused on the military. Gen. David Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command, was the first high-ranking U.S. official to visit Yemen after the Christmas Day bombing plot. He met personally with Saleh and delivered a letter that promised to double the United States' \$70 million annual budget for training and equipping Yemen's security forces.

Military aid would undoubtedly help Sanaa combat AQAP. Saleh's government, though, views security assistance as "dual use": New training and hardware will help the Yemeni Army fight the Houthis and the southern separatists. But the Army's conduct in both conflicts has often been brutal -- so U.S. support for those conflicts, even unintentional, could fuel anti-American sentiment in Yemen.

"Countries working with the Yemeni government should recognize that many Yemenis see their government as a greater threat to their security than al Qaeda," Human Rights Watch wrote in a Jan. 22 memo, which urged the United States to ensure its security assistance is not used to commit human rights abuses.

Security assistance is ultimately a short-term fix to a long-term problem. Yemen's mounting economic woes -- the country is running out of oil and water, the official unemployment rate is 35 percent, the state-run power company can meet only 83 percent of the country's rapidly growing electricity demand -- will rapidly become a regional concern, as impoverished Yemenis leave the country in search of work.

And that failing economy could create security problems for the region and the West. AQAP remains deeply unpopular in Yemen; the group has less than 300 active members in the country, according to most estimates from Western and Yemeni intelligence officials. But the group has shown itself able to exploit Yemen's internal grievances, particularly in the south, as a useful recruiting tool. As the economy deteriorates, the government's ability to provide services -- and thus its authority -- will continue to weaken. That could make parts of Yemen a useful base for AQAP and affiliated groups.

Yemen will surely never command the attention that, say, Afghanistan does -- at least not while U.S. soldiers are fighting and dying in the latter. But Washington still needs a holistic policy toward Yemen, one that addresses the country's longstanding socioeconomic problems and political grievances. That requires a sustained focus from policymakers and analysts (and even reporters!) -- not a reactive approach that simply escalates military aid without regard for the consequences and offers superficial solutions to Yemen's woes.

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Ignoring Yemen at Our Peril Last week's mail bombs could have taken a horrific toll. Next time, the world might not be so lucky.

By Gregory D. Johnsen, October 31, 2010

Seven years ago this month, al Qaeda in Yemen was on its last legs, worn down by years of U.S. and Yemeni strikes. The group's original leader, Abu Ali al-Harithi, was dead, the target of a November 2002 strike by an unmanned CIA drone.

His replacement, an amputee named Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, fared little better. One year after the death of his boss, the veteran of the fighting in Bosnia and Chechnya was presiding over an organization in disarray. Like a general without an army, al-Ahdal was out of options. In November 2003, he was tracked down to a safe house on the outskirts of Sanaa, the Yemeni capital. A last-minute mediator from the president's office prevented a shootout in the residential neighborhood, convincing al-Ahdal to surrender. Just like that, the threat had been eliminated. Al Qaeda in Yemen was defeated.

Since then, things have not gone so well. Edmund Hull, the United States' first post-September 11 ambassador to Yemen, left the country in the summer of 2004. His departure marked a turning point for U.S. priorities in Yemen. No longer was al Qaeda a top concern. Now, it was election reforms and anti-corruption campaigns that took center stage, as part of the Bush administration's grand scheme to democratize the Middle East. President Ali Abdullah Salih, who had been part of the solution on al Qaeda, was increasingly seen as part of the problem on reform. U.S. funding dwindled to embarrassingly low levels. Absent a terrorist threat, Yemen was no longer important.

The Yemeni government was just as distracted. Instead of working to secure the victory, it directed its attention and military resources against an armed rebellion in the

country's far north that began in June 2004. The on-again, off-again civil war has since gone through six different rounds, draining the country's coffers and exacerbating tribal fault lines.

Both countries were guilty of lapsed vigilance. Years of dithering and distractions left each unprepared for a resurgence. The spark came early one morning in February 2006, when 23 al Qaeda suspects tunneled out of a maximum-security prison on the edge of Sanaa and into a neighboring mosque, where they performed the dawn prayer before walking out the front door to freedom.

Hampered by inattention and the resulting sketchy intelligence reports, U.S. officials focused on what they knew. They concentrated their efforts on Jamal al-Badawi and Jabir al-Banna, the two escapees on the FBI's most wanted list. But as is so often the case, it was what and who the U.S. didn't know that would, in the end, be the most damaging.

Instead of al-Badawi and al-Banna, it was Nasir al-Wihayshi and Qasim al-Raymi who would turn out to be the most dangerous fugitives, resurrecting al Qaeda and taking aim at U.S. interests and even the American homeland. Al-Badawi and al-Banna were yesterday's threats, the last survivors of a fading generation. Al-Wihayshi and al-Raymi were the future.

Both had spent time studying under Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, supplementing their conversations and lessons with time in al Qaeda training camps. Al-Wihayshi, the tiny, wispy figure, was a bin Laden favorite. The tall Saudi selected the short Yemeni to serve as his understudy and personal secretary. The four-year apprenticeship would serve al-Wihayshi well when he began to build his own branch of al Qaeda in the aftermath of the prison break. Bin Laden's blueprints in Afghanistan served as his model for the new organization in Yemen.

But still the threat was ignored. Al-Wihayshi's efforts were taking place in the eastern governorates of Marib and al-Jawf, far from Yemen's centers of power, out of sight and

unknown. In 2006, the year al-Wihayshi escaped and began to rebuild, U.S. funding to Yemen totaled a paltry \$ 4.6 million, the lowest it had been since September 11.

Neither the United States nor Yemen treated the prison break as anything other than aberration, a one-off event with few long-term consequences. The continued neglect in the face of mounting evidence -- suicide attacks, assassinations, and statements of intent -- represents a failure of imagination on a colossal scale -- and the U.S. is still paying the price.

It would be another two years before U.S. officials realized that, once again, they had a serious problem in Yemen. In September 2008, seven men in two cars launched a well-organized assault on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, which if not for the quick thinking and brave actions of a private Yemeni security guard, who was killed in the attack, might have been much bloodier than it was. A handful of civilians, including one American, were killed in the shootout along with all seven attackers.

Months later, in January 2009, two former Guantánamo Bay detainees, both of whom the U.S. had released, showed up in a video sitting beside al-Wihayshi and al-Raymi and together they announced the formation of a new regional organization, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Almost immediately, the newly merged group went after the man at the top of its hit list, Muhammad bin Nayyif, Saudi Arabia's deputy minister of the interior and the single biggest threat to its continued existence.

The ingenious assassination attempt used one of bin Nayyif's earlier successes against him. A Saudi militant, Abdullah Asiri, posing as a repentant member of AQAP, persuaded the prince that he wanted to surrender. During their subsequent meeting at a Ramadan banquet, Asiri convinced bin Nayyif that there were others like him in Yemen who just needed a word of assurance from the prince before they too would surrender. As soon as he got on the phone, the bomb Asiri had hidden in his rectum exploded, lightly wounding bin Nayyif (there is some dispute about the bomb's exact placement).

Elements of that attack were later incorporated into the attempt to bring down a Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Both bombs used PETN, a highly explosive chemical agent, and were likely built by Ibrahim Asiri, Abdullah's brother, and the man suspected of constructing the parcel bombs discovered last week.

The United States, faced with a difficult situation in Yemen and still playing catch-up from years of neglect, has been unable to find an adequate response to the AQAP threat. Early estimates of 300 members are, to judge by the summer of attacks in Yemen, far too conservative. President Barack Obama is overburdened with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is likely well aware of the disastrous consequences of invasion. He does not want to send U.S. troops into Yemen. He has opted instead for surgical strikes aimed at decapitating AQAP's leadership. Unfortunately, the series of airstrikes the United States orchestrated in late 2009 and early 2010 have only made the problem worse, boosting al-Qaeda's local recruiting appeal.

In one early strike, dozens of civilians were killed in a village in the south of Yemen. In another airstrike, a Yemeni government official was killed instead of the al-Qaeda member, who was supposedly the target. Both incidents have been used by AQAP's media wing as examples that Yemen is under Western military attack. Under this argument, Yemenis are compelled to fight the United States and its local allies in defense of Muslim lands.

Neither approach -- full invasion or surgical strikes -- will solve the problem of al-Qaeda terrorism in Yemen and make America safer. The United States and its allies have been lucky three times in just over a year. Counting on that luck holding is not a safe bet.

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Don't call Yemen a "failed state"

Posted By Lisa Wedeen, Tuesday, March 30, 2010 - 4:55 PM

Yemen is a weak state by anyone's estimation, but the recent rush to label the country a "failed state" is premature and likely to be counterproductive. Bandied about recently in relationship to the Yemeni regime's struggle with al-Huthi's "Believing Youth," and invoked with renewed vigour after the failed airplane bombing by a Nigerian youth who claims to have derived inspiration, shelter, and onsite training from al Qaeda activists in Yemen, the easy application of "failed state" to Yemen exposes important problems with the term's current popularity. Yemen should not be categorized with such countries as the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, or Somalia,

where violence has completely destroyed communities and shattered fragile political arrangements previously in existence. Yemen has thus far endured despite weak institutional capacities and a peripheral location in the global political order. Calling Yemen a failed state may lead to adopting harmful policies, which could create a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy.

Few would deny that Yemen is unstable, with a heavily armed population, widespread poverty, the presence of al Qaeda operatives, and ongoing contestation by citizens of the south (some of whom call for outright secession).

This situation is compounded by growing water scarcity, declining oil revenues, tensions within the ruling elite, persistent charges of corruption, and a localized civil war in the northwest governorate of Sa`da near Saudi Arabia. State institutions do not control violence, nor are they capable of providing welfare, protection, or education to large swathes of the country. Complaints are heard with regularity throughout Yemen about the lack of security, that the state is unable to guarantee safe passage from one region to another, to stop practices of extra-legal justice, or to disarm the citizenry. Moreover, to the extent that a sense of membership coherent and powerful enough to tie people's political loyalties to the nation-state of Yemen does exist, there is little evidence to suggest that the incumbent regime is responsible for creating it.

Although under such circumstances it is tempting to label Yemen a "failed state," it does not follow that "state building" is the appropriate response. The language of state failure obscures how regime incentives to build state institutions can be incompatible with regime incentives to survive. President `Ali `Abd Allah Salih has been in power for more than 30 years, as the leader of north Yemen since 1978, and of unified Yemen since its inception in 1990. The possibility must be considered that what international analysts regard as the "weakness" of the Yemeni state is directly related to the longevity of the Salih regime, and following recommendations to build a stronger state could undermine, rather than preserve, the tenuous stability that exists there.

The Yemeni regime has historically relied on spaces of disorder as a means of reproducing its rule. Whereas political science and policy-relevant literatures on "state failure" presuppose the necessity of state-building (i.e., fashioning institutions such as an effective police force, schools, hospitals, and roads in return for a modicum of allegiance and a lot of obedience), a regime's interests in survival can be at odds with processes of state-formation -- with the political will to monopolize violence, provide services, and control territory. For example, the costs for the Yemeni regime (in resources, in added vulnerability) of punishing those who resort to local systems of justice

rather than relying on state courts may outweigh the benefits of allowing customary systems to co-exist with the state's. As various international agencies and ethnographers can attest, tribal arbitration, to name one example, can be an efficient way to solve some disputes, and powerful state officials (both those who support the regime and those who oppose it) may identify as "tribal" (especially in the northern highlands), thereby making the elimination of such networks extremely difficult. In general, the cost of undermining any of the various local systems of governance evident in Yemen or of attempting to monopolize violence among a heavily armed population can cause more bloodshed than it will prevent. Specific institutional weaknesses that scholars and policy analysts are quick to identify with "state failure" may, in fact, signal a regime's successful adaptation to circumstances, enabling it to endure, as indeed the Yemeni regime has for more than 30 years.

Distinguishing the incentives of regime survival from the logics of state-building is not to imply that foregoing state-building in the name of survival ensures regime survival, of course, or that the Yemeni regime's politics of "muddling through" will continue to work. It does not even imply that the regime always has a coherent set of incentives to which it responds. (Recent fighting among regime members in Sa`da attests to this lack of coherence.) Considering a regime's durability and the possible survival strategies open to it nevertheless invites a healthy scepticism towards hasty pronouncements of "state failure."

The Yemen example offers broader grounds for scepticism about the growing focus on "failed states." The seemingly neutral analytical category is frequently accompanied by a foreign policy agenda predisposed to U.S. political and military intervention. It is almost always applied to countries already deemed a threat to U.S. security interests. From this point of view, the terminology of "failed states" appears as new language for a familiar impulse. The past half-century has seen a series of purportedly objective labels being used to justify "security"-based U.S. interventions worldwide. It should not be forgotten that certain of these previous interventions played a significant

role in producing the very problems with which security specialists in Europe and the U.S. subsequently find themselves confronted.

Although the indicators of a failed state generally involve claims about “good governance,” the variables comprising what “good governance” means are routinely defined by particular stakeholders’ interests -- by specific firms, individuals, commercial risk-rating companies, nongovernmental organizations, aid agencies, and bureaus in the public sector. University of Chicago graduate student Sarah Parkinson has argued that stakeholders’ assessments can easily lead policy-makers astray, because such assessments ignore, misunderstand, or contradict beneficial local practices or mask deeper difficulties. A country can rank high on an indicator such as currency stability simply because every time a conflict breaks out the government forces banks to freeze individual assets, which on its own could scarcely be regarded as a likely contributor to future stability. In the case of Yemen, reliance on stakeholders’ criteria has worked to focus attention on isolated issues, without any nuanced regard for context, neglecting the claims and concerns of insurgents and, arguably, the regime.

Viewed from a perspective of citizen participation and associational life, Yemen is more democratic than many countries in the Middle East. If the U.S. goal is indeed to foster democracy abroad, these vigorous forms of non-

electoral contestation need to be protected. “Security” measures introduced from without are likely to endanger grassroots forms of democratic practice from within. An increased military presence multiplies potential targets for al Qaeda-like groups, makes the U.S. (or others involved) vulnerable to charges of occupation, and taps into a palpable anxiety among a range of Yemenis about issues of national sovereignty. Therefore, the impulse to intervene militarily should be avoided.

Dwindling oil and water reserves mean that Salih may be unable to purchase loyalty in ways he has managed to do until now. Promoting policies that provide general goods and services to the population may mean coming up with imaginative modes of distribution geared towards controlling corruption by circumventing patronage networks. Eradicating corruption is probably impossible, however, especially if the goals are ensuring both the implementation of some state-building policies and the regime’s survival (again, if indeed these are the goals). The key is to address citizens’ dissatisfactions, both moral and material, on their own terms.

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Yemen: not on the verge of collapse

Posted By Steven C. Caton, Wednesday, August 11, 2010 - 2:56 PM

The Republic of Yemen is often spoken of in the press and in policy circles as a society on the verge of collapse (last year it was “another Somalia”), based largely on two claims, the first being the supposed weakness of its state, the other the supposed lawlessness of its tribal population that makes up the majority ethnic group (about seventy-five percent are settled agriculturalists in the mountains and another five per cent, nomadic Bedouin in the eastern desert). And supposedly being on the verge of collapse, Yemen is seen as vulnerable to take-over by terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda that threaten America’s and the region’s security. Let us consider how tribe and state, law and conflict operate in Yemen that few analysts seem to grasp when they make these pronouncements.

History may provide some perspective. There has been a state or dawlah in Yemen for thousands of years, whether the Sabaean state that built Marib Dam and was the reputed homeland of the Queen of Sheba, or the Islamic state created shortly after the advent of Islam which lasted for a thousand years, or the republican state that came into being in 1962 and has lasted until the present day, despite two bitter civil wars. To be sure, the state has waxed and waned in power and contracted or expanded in territory during this history, and it has faced formidable outside opponents, beginning with the Romans and most recently with al-Qaeda, but it has never fully collapsed or disappeared from the scene. It is unlikely to do so in the present in spite of arguments that the current regime is at a tipping point and about to fall apart because of an unprecedented number of seemingly intractable problems facing it (an ever weakening economy, unsustainable water consumption, projected diminished oil reserves, conflicts between the state and certain regional populations, rampant corruption, and let us not forget al-Qaeda).

To those who would say to me, “How do you know it is not at a tipping point?” I can only respond with, “How do you know that it is?” and remind ourselves of the *longue durée* of Yemeni history.

But what does it mean to be a “weak state” in contemporary Yemen? Again, some historical perspective is helpful, though thankfully we need not go back three thousand years. When the current president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, came to power in 1978 I remember people taking bets in the country’s expatriate community that he would not last a year. Not only has he expanded his own personal power, he has managed to consolidate and broaden the state’s presence in the country. In 1978, there were few military checkpoints along Yemen’s highways; I could go from the capital, Sana’a, to the western town of Marib and be stopped at most two times along the way by state authorities. Now there are over a dozen such stops and identity papers are checked. Military outposts can be seen on most mountain-tops. And there is an administrative system doing the state’s business in even the most far-flung regions of the county. Paved roads, state-run or sponsored schools, clinics, and hospitals represent a different aspect of state power and legitimacy, and perhaps they are more effective in that they penetrate into the everyday lives of people. Usually none of this context is taken into account when the western press glibly asserts that the state can barely control the capital, let alone the hinterlands beyond it.

The power of the tribes in Yemen is crucial to understanding the state and its ability (or not) to operate. Historically the Yemeni state has worked with tribal groups to secure the nation’s territory (the two most powerful tribal confederations, the Hashid and the Bakil, were called the “wings” of the imam, the former king of Yemen, because he would call on them rather than a standing army to defend the borders; the same is true today when the state calls on loyal tribes to help fight Huthi rebels in the north of the country). As a way of bringing the southern part of the country to heel under the central state after the second civil war in 1994, the current regime embarked upon a tribalization of that part of the country (just as the socialists in the same part of the country had repressed, often brutally, the presence of the tribes because they were

thought to be anti-progressive or traditionalists). It is also important to bear in mind that Yemen's army is composed mostly of tribesmen who depend on wages, meager though they be, for their families, and that tribesmen make up a large part of the economy in the towns (both informal and formal), and that the majority of elected members to parliament are tribal sheikhs.

To us, this symbiosis of tribe and state may seem puzzling, for the two are often seen to be antithetical to each other: tribes value honor and autonomy and the state is perceived as threatening to the integrity of both (in the case of autonomy this may be obvious; in the case of honor the cultural logic is that anyone or anything that is more powerful than you has the potential of putting you in a compromised or potentially dishonorable position). Even more surprising is the notion that the state should depend on the tribes in some areas to keep the peace and maintain order, for it is presumed that tribes are inherently "lawless" and feud-addicted.

In fact, there are three distinct systems of law in the country, tribal law or *curf* (which has its own code as well as its own legal processes for resolving disputes), Shariah, and civil law. Conflicts are usually not settled by coercion

but by persuasion and the rule of law. The three legal systems co-exist without much competition with each other (as long as long as tribal and civil laws are compatible with the Shariah), and they operate more or less in their own spheres. And so when a state official says, "That is a tribal affair," he is not necessarily shirking responsibility for dealing with the conflict but acknowledging the relative autonomy of the tribes as well as their own elaborate rules for adjudicating disputes on which the state should not encroach. It is rather like the U.S. government acknowledging state's rights or state authority in place of federal law. Of course, problems can arise in the tribal system, and when they do one or the other legal system can be appealed to for a solution. And so it is hard to know what someone means when they assert that "there is no rule of law" in the largely tribal regions of the country.

It is my hope that by viewing some current events in Yemen with this history and these contexts in mind, we may arrive at more nuanced and more accurate understandings of them.

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Special operations in Yemen

Posted By Sheila Carapico, Thursday, May 13, 2010 - 9:42 AM

Yemenis and Americans who once imagined that Barack Obama's administration would pressure the country's longtime ruler, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, to respect freedom of the press, stick to a regular elections schedule, respect human rights, and abide by the rules of war have had their hopes dashed. Washington has seemingly rewarded arbitrary arrests of journalists reporting from

two domestic war zones, indefinite postponement of elections, brutal tactics against protesters as well as armed rebels, and a wave of heightened repression during the past 12 months in the name of counterterrorism. The United States seems to be backing the Saleh government with military assistance not only in its war against a few hundred al Qaeda militants, but also in its suppression of

the popular uprising in the former South Yemen as well as the al-Huthi rebellion in the North. This short-term approach will only harm U.S. interests and values in the long run.

Until December, when Yemen was carried into the American publicity limelight as a new haven for al Qaeda terrorists, the United States treated Yemen to stretches of benign neglect punctuated by moments of contempt. South Yemen's independence struggle against Britain and North Yemen's civil war between royalists backed by Saudi Arabia and republicans fighting with Egyptian support in the 1960s were barely a blip on the U.S. radar screen. In the next two decades when independent South Yemen's ruling Socialist Party inclined toward the Soviet Union, anti-communist North Yemen (host to only a small USAID mission) was regarded as a Saudi sphere of influence. Unification in 1990 and the political opening of multiparty competition it introduced attracted little attention from either the American press or the State Department.

Washington did notice when Yemen's U.N. ambassador, who happened in 1990 to occupy the rotating chairmanship of the Security Council, refrained from voting for the U.S.-led military campaign to dislodge Iraqi invaders from Kuwait, however, and cut off the paltry \$30 million to \$35 million per year or so heretofore doled out in USAID project assistance. In the intervening two decades, assistance gradually crept up to about that level again in military and development aid combined. Terrorism emanating from Yemeni soil is evidently the only thing capable of attracting U.S. attention. As Washington's concerns about al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula mounted, the total more than doubled to over \$60 million. But even as U.S. support for the Yemeni regime grew, that government suspended an electoral schedule in place since 1990, waged indiscriminate battle against two homegrown insurgencies, and clamped down on the press. This year, security-related aid is expected to top \$150 million.

This is not the first time that terrorism has driven the U.S. agenda toward Yemen. Even before an amateur underwear bomber tried to ruin last Christmas in Detroit, the United

States had occasionally taken the war on terrorism to Yemen. Detectives and FBI agents swarmed Aden after the attack on the USS Cole in the harbor there in 2000, looking for clues and suspects. In November 2002, a remote-controlled Predator drone fired on a vehicle in the eastern province of Marib, killing the accused mastermind of the Cole attack, an U.S. citizen, and several others traveling with him -- one of the first salvos in what would become a signature feature of the global war on terror in both the Bush and Obama administrations. The week before Christmas 2009, in another remote-controlled operation, President Obama authorized the use of U.S. firepower and targeting for what was said to be a Yemeni attack on an al Qaeda encampment in Abyan. This operation, which reportedly killed 34 suspects, sent a double message, warning al Qaeda that America will locate and fire on its hideouts and signaling to anti-government protesters in Abyan and the rest of South Yemen that the United States supports Sanaa's military. While the view from Washington was of a successful strike, internally it seemed like part of Saleh's army's use of disproportionate force and extralegal tactics against insurgents, demonstrators, opponents, and even journalists reporting on legitimate grievances concerning rampant unemployment, poverty, corruption, and negligence.

The Nigerian who attempted to set off explosives aboard a plane on Dec. 25 had not only gotten al Qaeda training in Yemen, but had also been in contact with the same Yemeni-American radical cleric, Anwar Nasir al-Awlaki, who had corresponded with the Fort Hood bomber, Maj. Nidal Hassan. The day before Christmas, the Yemeni air force had reportedly bombed a location in Shabwa province, also in the South, where Awlaki was thought to be; he was not among the dead. Since then, most recently on April 13, the United States has made clear its intention to target him, whereas even the Yemeni government has insisted that it has a warrant for his arrest but no court order for his execution. The response has primarily focused on supporting counterterrorism and security forces, rather than on addressing the human rights, democracy, and governance shortcomings of the Yemeni state.

A policy dictated by the punctuated, unpredictable rhythm of terrorism is not likely to create a long-term, stable Yemen that aligns with U.S. interests or values. The United States has not been a patron of Yemeni democratization. Nor has it been a major donor of socioeconomic or humanitarian aid to combat grinding poverty or catastrophic ecological degradation. To the contrary, America has turned a blind eye to both human rights and human needs. The current policy of ignoring acute social, economic, and political

problems while bolstering special operations forces, offering satellite surveillance, and rationalizing extrajudicial executions might possibly net a few terrorist suspects but will not stabilize the country, encourage the democratic opposition, or advance the rule of law.

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Treating terrorism in a vacuum

Posted By Christoph Wilcke, Wednesday, April 7, 2010 - 11:38 AM

Since a Yemen-based militant group's claim of responsibility for the failed Christmas Day plot to blow up an airliner over Detroit U.S. policy makers have been paying more attention to Yemen. In early March, Yemen launched airstrikes on suspected al Qaeda hideouts, and in mid-March, Yemeni security forces arrested a U.S. man in San'a on suspicion of belonging to al Qaeda. Figuring out what to do about it has been more difficult. Should the U.S. primarily help Yemen's security forces to defeat the militant group, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, by capturing or killing its members? Or is it also necessary to reduce the lawlessness and impunity in Yemen on which the militant group thrives?

The U.S. appears to lean toward the first option, judging by the quick increase in military aid to Yemen. Yet Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seemed to recognize that military aid alone won't do the job. At the high-level meeting on Yemen in London on January 27, called by the U.K. to discuss problems that threaten the stability of Yemen and the region, Clinton said that "bringing unity and stability to Yemen is an urgent national security priority of ours."

Here is the core of the problem: Yemeni security forces are themselves responsible for grave violations of human rights and the laws of war in their battles with peaceful domestic opposition, armed rebels, and violent militants. Rather than "resolving conflict and ending violence," as Clinton pledged in London in January, U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Yemen risks becoming complicit in the human rights abuses of the Yemeni government.

Human Rights Watch research into both the five-year conflict with Huthi rebels in Yemen's north (a truce was declared on February 11, but previous truces have not lasted) and into the government's response to peaceful separatist demonstrators in the south illustrates the danger of building up Yemen's security forces without changing its approach to its own population.

Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman and U.S. Central Command Chief General David Petraeus, in congressional testimony in February and March, agreed that these conflicts and a large number of refugees in the country complicate dealing with the threat from al Qaeda. But the U.S. can't quite seem to make up its mind.

Petraeus in his testimony vowed to “address the root causes of instability rather than apply quick fixes to their symptoms.” But Clinton, at the January London meeting, pledged “non-interference” in Yemen’s affairs.

Our conversations with government ministers makes it clear that current policy favors short-term fixes to underlying problems without addressing the human rights crises arising from Yemen’s domestic conflicts. Failure to do so, however, would undermine the long-term struggle against militant extremism and that too-close association with the Yemeni government in counterterrorism measures risks further increasing militancy and instability.

In a report on the Sa’da conflict issued yesterday, Human Rights Watch details allegations of how Yemen’s military indiscriminately bombed populated areas in the north in its war on the Huthis, causing civilian casualties. Huthi forces also violated of the laws of war by engaging in summary executions, use of non-combatants to deter an attack, pillage and looting, and prevention of flight of civilians, including for medical treatment. Both parties used children in combat. Yet neither party has held anyone responsible for these crimes, deepening the culture of lawlessness and impunity that has characterized this conflict and, based on the recent claims of the Saudis from their border conflict with the rebels, allowed al Qaeda to make inroads into the area.

Similarly, a December Human Rights Watch report detailed how Central Security Forces under the Ministry of Interior used unlawful lethal force against peaceful demonstrators in southern Yemen, killing at least 11. No one was held accountable, and since the beginning of the year, violence at protests has further escalated, turning more southern Yemeni areas into no-go zones for government officials, and providing a haven for al Qaeda. Nevertheless, Feltman on an early March visit to Yemen declared the southern separatist movement protests an “internal” issue.

Al Qaeda has tried to garner support by expressing solidarity with victims of Yemeni government violations against the separatists. In turn, counterterrorism measures against al Qaeda in southern provinces have fuelled sympathy for al Qaeda, especially where these measures resulted in civilian casualties. Feltman’s comments came on the same day as the Yemeni deputy prime minister for defense and security, Rashad al-‘Alimi, apologized to victims’ families over the killing of 42 civilians in a U.S.-assisted airstrike on suspected militants in the southern Abyan province on December 17, 2009.

Yemeni security forces have also repeatedly abducted and “disappeared” suspected insurgents, terrorism suspects, and critics of government policy, undermining counterterrorism measures by creating solidarity among the victims of the Yemeni government violations that include al Qaeda.

The U.S. should forthrightly address these human rights abuses in Yemen - as part and parcel of its counterterrorism strategy - by calling on Yemeni officials to investigate laws of war and human rights violations and press for the prosecution of those responsible. The U.S. should also support the deployment by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of a human rights monitoring and reporting mission to Yemen.

Under the eyes of an independent party, it would be a lot harder for all sides in these conflicts to threaten or harm civilians. Such a presence could also strengthen accountability by making it harder to ignore abuses when they occur.

Most importantly, standing up to San’a’s human rights abuses would make it impossible for Yemen’s government to claim victory over murderous terrorists by attacking innocent civilians.

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What if Obama's Yemen policy works?

Posted By Aaron Y. Zelin, Wednesday, September 22, 2010 - 3:05 PM

In the past month, Yemen has returned to the spotlight. The CIA now believes that the Yemen-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is a larger security threat to the United States than al Qaeda Central in Pakistan. Since then, press accounts have stated that the United States government plans to carry out drone attacks in Yemen, and reported that U.S. Central Command plans to give \$1.2 billion in aid to Yemen's military over a five-year period. But such policies, no matter how well-intentioned, are unlikely to solve the very real challenges posed by al Qaeda's presence in Yemen and may well make the situation worse.

It originally appeared that there was widespread consensus in the government on providing such military aid to Yemen. But a recent article in the New York Times highlights that there is a vigorous debate within the Obama administration about the efficacy of such aid. The Obama administration has been debating the legality of droning an American citizen (i.e. Anwar al-Awlaki). Before rushing into a major new program, it's worth recalling the reasons why past U.S.-backed efforts aimed at eliminating al Qaeda's presence in Yemen have failed.

Efforts to aid the Yemeni government against AQAP have done little to help solve some of Yemen's larger societal problems, including water shortages, declining oil supplies, refugee and IDP problems, population growth, rebellion in the north, and a secessionist movement in the south. Indeed, increased military aid could actually exacerbate the already pervasive military culture in Yemen and cement the war economy, and intensify the grievances of citizens from the rebellion led by the Huthis in the north and the secessionist southern movement in the south. This is problematic because Yemen's President 'Ali 'Abdullah Saleh views those conflicts as more of a threat to his power than AQAP and may well be tempted to use counterterrorism assistance against them. If this were the case, as Brian O'Neil argues, this would severely undermine the United States' efforts.

Drone strikes are often proposed as an effective method for targeting AQAP's leadership. But such strikes in Yemen could lead to many innocent civilian deaths without having a significant impact on AQAP's leadership. The debate about their effect in Pakistan, which reveals a deep tension between military utility and potentially negative political effects, may be even more intense in Yemen.

The only reported drone strike in Yemen since President Obama came into office was the Dec. 17, 2009 strike on the community of al-Ma'jalah in the Abyan governorate in southern Yemen, which killed 41 civilians and 14 members of al Qaeda, but no one of importance. Consequently, AQAP used this drone strike as the reason for the attempted Christmas Day attack conducted by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab on Northwest Airlines Flight 253, en route from Amsterdam to Detroit.

This, however, was not the first time drones have been used in Yemen. In November, 2002, the Bush administration conducted a drone strike which killed the leader of the group then known as al Qaeda in Yemen, Abu 'Ali al-Harithi, which also killed American citizen Kamal Derwish (Ahmed Hijazi). This reportedly hobbled the organization for some time, but as Gregory Johnsen points out: "this is not 2002 and if the U.S. thinks that by taking out [AQAP leaders] al-Wahayshi, al-Shihri or al-Raymi it can do what it did when it killed al-Harithi it is sadly mistaken. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula will survive the deaths of any one of those individuals and possible the deaths of all three."

The politics are treacherous. Launching drone strikes could hinder efforts to solve the northern and southern conflict peacefully. As Gregory Johnsen has warned, conducting drone strikes in Yemen could entangle the United States in tribal conflicts, which would further draw the United States into Yemen's internal matters, as well as inflame other challenges to the Yemeni government such as the southern insurrection and the Huthi rebellion.

If the United States tried to target an AQAP operative in a Huthi stronghold in northern Yemen and accidentally killed individuals who sympathize with the Huthi cause, it would most likely break the fragile peace and lead to a resumption and major escalation of war between the Huthis and the Yemeni government. Further, in the past round of battle from August, 2009 to February, 2010, Saudi Arabia -- which collects a large amount of American military aid -- overtly entered the war. A small counterterrorism operation could quickly spiral into a regional war that has nothing to do with AQAP, but could further destabilize the security situation in Yemen and detract from the fight against AQAP.

One has to also consider the rise in recent months of violence between AQAP operatives and Yemeni security forces, which has mainly occurred in southern Yemen as well as the recent uptick in violence by the Yemeni government against the southern movement. This could potentially lead southerners to establish closer ties to AQAP, even though each group has different goals. AQAP has already tried to co-opt the southern movement's banner for cessation, though, under the framework of an Islamic Emirate when releasing a message titled "Message to Our People in the South." As the leader of AQAP, Nasir al-Wahayshi, states: "We in the al Qaeda network support what you are doing: your rejection of oppression practiced against you and others, your fight against the government and your defending yourself." As of now, there is no evidence of collusion between the two groups even if the Yemeni government argues otherwise. The southern movement has rejected overtures from AQAP in the past. But if the Yemeni government continues to conflate the southern movement with AQAP and further violence is directed toward the southern movement, it could lead to an alliance of convenience.

Another issue has to do with the legality of targeting an American citizen. How the Obama administration decides to handle the situation with Anwar al-Awlaki will shed light on the United States' legal policy vis-à-vis the war on terror. Will it lead the United States down a slippery slope that further erodes the rule of law and its legitimacy in

the eyes of the international community? Or, will it affirm Obama's statement in his inaugural address: "we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals."

Finally, the United States should not be surprised if AQAP tries to respond to drones by attacking the homeland as it nearly did with the Christmas Day failure. What if AQAP was successful? As Greg Scoble succinctly points out: "the call for America to push aside its weak local partner and take care of the problem itself will only grow louder." Will the United States then expand its aid to deal with Yemen's other domestic issues - governance, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and economic development? Or potentially put boots on the ground? That would only further entrench the United States in a complex society that it truly does not understand; and, as we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, that leads to greater trouble.

But what if pouring \$1.2 billion of military aid into Yemen buttressed by a drone offensive against AQAP works? Obviously, one hopes the United States is successful in dismantling AQAP and that it does not repeat the same mistakes it made in 2003 by taking its eyes off of al Qaeda's presence in Yemen. But, it is hard to envision the United States completely succeeding since President Saleh has an incentive to keep AQAP alive. Between 2003 and 2006 the United States reduced its military aid significantly. As such, President Saleh views AQAP as a tool to continue to get attention from the United States even at the expense of his nation.

The United States should encourage Yemen to peacefully resolve the conflicts in the north and south as well as address the grievances these groups have, which would free up resources to tackle other pressing issues. The United States should also do the following: take a lead in a new international donor fund initiative for development and reducing poverty, but unlike in the past make sure donors follow through; continue its low-profile training of Yemen military officials; support efforts to diversify Yemen's economy, which relies heavily on unsustainable depleting oil resources; promote international aid programs to help the more than 300,000 IDP's and refugees; and stimulate

reform efforts in the political, judicial, educational, infrastructural, and medical realm to better serve Yemen's citizens. This may marginalize AQAP by taking away potential rhetorical points, leading to its eventual defeat.

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Al Qaeda Bombings, Drive-By Shootings, and Penalty Kicks? In two weeks, a major international soccer tournament will be held in southern Yemen -- one of the most dangerous places on Earth. What are they thinking?

By Laura Kasinof, November 9, 2010

SANAA, Yemen – International sporting events can be a great way for a country to rehabilitate its image. For two weeks in 2008, for instance, the world focused not on China's treatment of Tibet or economic policies, but on its stunning Olympic facilities and the spirit of apolitical international competition. This summer, South Africa used the World Cup to put forward an image of an emerging "rainbow nation" unencumbered by racial tension or poverty. But compared with Yemen, which plans to host the Middle East's largest soccer tournament later this November, those countries had it easy.

The international media generally only focuses on Yemen when it emerges as the source of an international terrorist plot, as it did in October after a failed attempt to send explosives in packages to the United States was traced back to the unstable Middle Eastern country and after the failed underwear bomber plot of last Christmas. But even when the world is not watching, shootouts at police checkpoints, attacks on oil pipelines, and assassinations of government officials are regular occurrences in Yemen's southeastern region, where the central government's control runs thin.

All this makes it doubly strange that on Nov. 22, six national soccer teams from across the Arabian Peninsula plus Iraq will arrive in the southern Yemeni governorates of

Aden and Abyan -- the most unstable region of one of the world's most unstable countries -- to compete in the Gulf Cup of Nations, a two-week tournament sponsored by the Committee of Gulf Football Unions.

Although al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) -- the al Qaeda offshoot implicated in the recent "printer bomb" plot -- hasn't released a specific statement against the Gulf Cup yet, leaders of Yemen's burgeoning southern separatist movement have called on Gulf countries to boycott the event. "The situation in the south is an occupation, and the participation of these countries means recognition of the injustice perpetrated by the regime in Sanaa against the people of the south," said Abdo al-Matary, a separatist spokesperson, in a meeting with the Yemeni media. "How can there be an international game in light of the massacres committed? ... Do they want to play football on the blood of the south?"

Southern separatists say their region has been marginalized by Yemen's northern tribes, of which President Ali Abdullah Saleh is a member. Although they reject ties with AQAP, the southern separatists have attacked places and figures representing the central government. (Saleh has tried to make the case that the two militant groups are working together, but there's little evidence this is the case.)

The violence surrounding the tournament has already begun. On Oct. 11, a bomb attack on al Wahda soccer stadium in Aden killed three civilians. Two weeks later, police claimed to have foiled yet another plot against the stadium. The government has dispatched 30,000 additional troops to the region to boost security, and it is widely believed that recent army offensives against alleged AQAP hideouts in the region were meant at least in part to intimidate militants from trying to thwart the tournament in any way. In a statement, al Qaeda denied that it was behind the stadium attacks, claiming it only targets “criminals from the Americans and the crusaders and their followers from the security forces and intelligence officers.”

In light of all this, one might wonder what the organizers were thinking in the first place. The idea, when Yemen was picked four years ago by a regional soccer body to host the 2010 competition, was that the event would be a means by which the country could engage with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the conglomeration of six oil-rich countries on the Arabian Peninsula of which underdeveloped Yemen -- with a GDP per capita of \$2,500 -- is the odd man out. Yemen is due to join the GCC by 2016, which could mean greater economic investment from its far wealthier neighbors. By introducing the country into the GCC slowly through collaboration in areas like sports, health, and education, the council can see whether Yemen will make the grade. But Yemen has never hosted an international event of this size in recent history.

As for why the tournament is being held in the south, it's because the more stable capital city of Sanaa lies in the northern mountains, at around 7,200 feet in elevation, too high to meet the standards of international soccer. While the tournament is not yet affiliated with soccer's global governing body, FIFA, organizers hope that it will be soon and have gone overboard to make sure that the event is up to snuff. But it's fair to say that most other destinations for international sporting events don't grapple with the persistent threat of violence that Yemen does.

In light of Yemen's recent instability, local media have been speculating that the tournament might be moved to another country or canceled altogether. Bahrain has

offered to host the event in case a last-minute decision is made to relocate. However, at a meeting held in the United Arab Emirates in mid-October, the GCC and Iraq decided to continue supporting Yemen as the host country.

“There still are some worries about security in Yemen, and that's a fact,” said Ali Khalifa al Khalifa, vice president of Bahrain Football Association. “Everyone who is going is worried, not just Bahrain, but I think at the end of the day Yemen is a friend and an ally, so [the other countries] will participate.”

For the Yemeni government, pulling the tournament off successfully is an important sign to its wealthier neighbors that it maintains control over its territory, particularly in light of the bad publicity following the printer-bomb plot. Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports Moammar Al-Eryani projected confidence. “I think that the championships will not be more worrying than the World Cup in South Africa,” he said. “In South Africa the crime is very high. The whole world was scared of this, yet everything went peacefully. Even we were surprised.”

Yemenis say this tournament is as important to them as the World Cup is to the rest of world. Organized events, whether sport-related or cultural, are a rarity in this country. Youth, who don't have much else going on in their lives aside from chewing khat, a popular mildly narcotic plant, are eager to engage in any sort of planned activity.

“As a person who lives in Sanaa, it brings me and my friends a very big opportunity to go to Aden for fun, watch the game, and support the national team,” said Ahmed Asery, 24, a medical student at Sanaa University.

Yemenis are very attuned to the outside world's negative impression of their country -- and very bothered by it. If the GCC soccer clubs end up deciding that the security situation is too precarious to host the tournament, it will just be one more reminder for the Yemeni people of their country's trajectory toward failure, surrounded by wealthy states that are all too happy to ignore their troublesome neighbor.

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