



Think twice before engaging in Yemen

Western governments should think twice before engaging in Yemen with its unstable government and a reputation as a hotbed of al-Qaeda related radicalisation. Support from Europe and North America will have a limited effect because of the fragile political system and various dynamics within the country.

May 2010

Yemen has caught the eye of the international community above all because it has been portrayed as a hotbed of radicalisation and a training ground for al-Qaeda. As a state, Yemen is broadly considered to be both fragile and on the brink of failure. This Policy Brief argues that for a variety of reasons – largely relating to the political system and dynamics within the country – support from Europe and North America will have limited effect. There are limited, if any, technical solutions to the challenges that confront the country; only political ones. International actors from outside the regional context must therefore think twice before engaging and, above all, have a good understanding of the political system that they will be engaging with.

A RANGE OF CHALLENGES

At a glance Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, faces a number of fundamental challenges. Oil revenue currently represents 70% of the state budget and supports Yemen's patronage system. However, reserves are estimated to run out within the next ten years. Water resources are diminishing rapidly and a water crisis is imminent. Tension and open conflict with the Houthis in the North, secessionist groups in the South, and al-Qaeda elements within Yemeni territory challenge the legitimacy of the government in Sana'a. The overall security situation in Yemen is such that doubts are being raised about whether elections, planned for 2011, can be carried out.

The gut reaction from the Yemeni executive to destabilising elements in the country is a greater focus on security. "Military more than police" has been a catchphrase of some observers, with reference to the many checkpoints that are being set up across the country. There is a growing fear about security in general within Yemen, and specifically in the inner circle around Yemen's

RECOMMENDATIONS

Donors should assess carefully whether they really have the capacity to engage in Yemen. They need to:

- Understand the implications and consequences of providing support, and be realistic about what can be achieved
- Push for and sustain dialogue with the Yemeni executive on Yemen's future
- Understand and motivate strong engagement by Saudi Arabia
- Understand how power is distributed in Yemen, including through centralisation and networks of patronage

President, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Militarisation rather than reform appears to be the preferred solution.

Apart from accepting and acknowledging the complex context of Yemen, which in itself does not suggest the existence of political will within Yemen to carry out necessary and radical reform, actors outside the region currently have two primary concerns. Neither appears to have been realised. First, external actors need to sustain their push for dialogue on the future of Yemen with the Yemeni executive. Second, external actors must understand the motivations and strategies of Saudi Arabia towards Yemen and, by extension, must ensure proactive Saudi engagement in ensuring the stability of the country.



TOXIC CONCENTRATION OF POWER

During his 32 years of rule Yemen's President has managed to concentrate all powers in the Office of the President. No significant decisions are made without the blessing of the President. As a consequence the Cabinet, Parliament and other state institutions have, to a large degree, been marginalised from relevant decision-making processes. This concentration of power is noticeable in the fact that Parliament has not issued a single statement during the conflict in Sa'dah which has been ongoing for the last three years, around tension in the South or during the recent and continuing al-Qaeda activity. Statements of significance are and have been issued by the Office of the President.

The President is regarded as having insulated himself by surrounding himself with individuals who are uncritical of what he says and does. He is most comfortable with what can be described as 'yes men.' More 'level headed' advisers who may have been prepared to tell the truth and to give bad news to the President have been marginalised. Some observers have even suggested that Saleh has no advisers because he does not trust people who deliver bad news. In the event that he is presented with conflicting reports he chooses good news over bad.

This concentration of power has led to the marginalisation of state institutions. The power base is narrow and therefore Yemen has become more vulnerable to takeover by sheikhs and the military. Currently, however, the sheikhs and to a degree the military do not have power over Saleh; rather they have leverage. This distinction is important because it denominates the ability of tribal leaders, for instance, to make change not because they are powerful but because the system is vulnerable. Power revolves around Saleh and his family, a loosely defined and inclusive concept.

HISTORY OF YEMEN

North Yemen became independent of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. The British, who had set up a protectorate around the southern port of Aden in the 19th century, withdrew in 1967 from what became South Yemen. Three years later the southern government adopted a Marxist orientation. The massive exodus of hundreds of thousands of Yemenis from the south to the north contributed to two decades of hostility between the states. The two countries were formally unified as the Republic of Yemen in 1990. A southern secessionist movement in 1994 was quickly subdued. In 2000 Saudi Arabia and Yemen agreed to a delimitation of their border.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html>

DECISION-MAKING BY COINCIDENCE

There is little doubt, seen from a democratic point of view, that the process by which decisions are made in Yemen is deteriorating. While Yemen has never been a democracy it appears that Saleh is increasingly shying away from a collaborative approach to governing the country. To non-Yemeni observers he seems to have become more and more paranoid. This has led them to conclude that the President is making decisions with little reference to others and following a haphazard logic.

At the same time, although Saleh's autocratic power is the greatest shortcoming it could also represent the greatest asset for Yemen in its current situation. It is believed that the President is still in a position where he can implement reforms faster and more cost effectively than anyone else. If he does nothing, which is the most likely trajectory at the moment, decline will continue, significant elements of the security sector are likely to fall apart or fracture, and warlords are likely to emerge competing for power.

The leadership and associated alternative governments that could emerge, should Saleh relinquish power, are likely to be weak. They are likely to make so many compromises that addressing the issue of ineffective state institutions and power structures could prove impossible. Saleh's present vantage point makes it easier to make difficult decisions now, but he does not seem to have the will to do it.

SALEH: A TYPICAL DICTATOR

On the prospect of regime change, debates in Yemen revolve around the perceived indispensability of Saleh. As one Yemeni political analyst has noted "*since 1962 we have had several regime changes which did not lead to destruction.*" Yemen has always had a weak central state and a number of social forces have been at play at any given moment; including business classes, intellectual elites, religious and tribal leaders as well as the military. Why is it that Saleh is tolerated then? The short answer is that the general public, the majority of whom have little education and are disadvantaged, cannot imagine any other leader. An observer noted: "*It's like changing the religion in a way.*"

Saleh has tackled the social forces mentioned above, but this has resembled a 'hit the clown game.' When he hammers down one individual or group, another one pops up. He has targeted the 'traditional opinion leaders' who are both religious and traditional. However, the collateral damage of this approach has been significant since moderate forces within 'traditional society' including the middle business class have been suppressed in favour of the Houthis and Salafists of Yemen.

When Saleh came to power and strengthened his control over the central government he replaced the middle business class with tribal leaders. Weakening state regulation has been carried out by putting severe restrictions on the formal sector, thereby allowing non-state regulated business to flourish.



PATRONAGE

Paying tribal leaders off or paying one tribe to attack another, thereby weakening both, a policy of divide-and-rule essentially, has been the norm.

This means, according to one observer, that *“Yemen is a unique system where the formal institutions are just for show. It doesn’t mean that they are powerless; they just function differently [P.A., and by extension, to the external observer, appear dysfunctional]. The state will not behave as you expect; it seems to work against itself.”* Understanding the dynamic of the Yemeni state is the first step towards knowing what to do – and what not to do. Talking to the Deputy Minister of the Interior, the observer quoted above notes, *“you feel the ministry is powerful, but it is in fact the system of patronage within the ministry that manages it.”*

The death of Sheikh Abdullah ibn Husayn al-Ahmar, former leader of the Hashid tribal federation, is one example of the generational shift that is currently taking place in Yemen. Saleh is now spending considerable resources to raise the profile of his son and stated successor, Hamid al-Ahmar, with whom he has had severe clashes in the past. As one Yemen specialist noted to me: *“They [the al-Ahmars] are angry, but he [Saleh] continues to buy them; it’s overtaxing the budget of the state, the system. We are close to breaking point.”* While it is certainly difficult to verify or to clearly identify a breaking point for Yemen, there is little doubt that the entire structure of the state is governed according to the rules of patronage more than by legislation which has been passed in Parliament.

TEN POINT PLAN

Ahmed Saleh, son of the President, led the ‘group of young reformers’ that came up with the Ten Point Plan. This document sets out a proposed reform agenda for Yemen, including job creation, public services such as water and power and the rule of law. Jalal Omar Yaqoub, Deputy Minister for External Financial Relations, is the ‘brain’ behind the Plan and its main protagonist internationally. Yaqoub is one of few public faces of the

Government who is sincere when he talks about reforms. There are others, but they are not as vocal. Indeed, Yaqoub is considered to be the only member of the Ten Point Plan group who believes that reform is about more than placating donors to ease the pressure for reform. Words and practice are, to state the obvious, two different matters.

It is unclear what leverage the Plan has. First, given the way that Yemen is structured politically it must be assumed that Saleh senior influences Saleh junior, and not the other way around. It is unlikely that the Plan was developed and presented in public without acceptance from the President. At the same time, there has not been a lot of movement by Saleh on the Plan’s points. Another issue that has been raised about the Plan is that it, according to one observer, *“squanders the most precious thing we have: time. If they had proposed the Plan five years ago, I would have seen it as fitting into a learning curve. Now we really have to make the hard choices. We don’t have time.”* The hard choices are, as yet, not being made.

SAUDI ARABIA

With respect to relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, two things are unclear. First, what are Saudi intentions vis-à-vis Yemen and, second, who controls the Yemen question in Saudi Arabia? There is reason to believe that observers from outside the region overestimate the consistency of Saudi Arabia’s Yemen policy. Indeed, it is unclear whether one exists at all. In its current form the policy seems to be one of short-term management and containment rather than one of seeking a long-term solution. Sultan Nayef and his son appear to be competing over the Yemen portfolio.

The history of North Arabia and South Arabia is one of antagonism and interdependence and has been ongoing ‘for the past 2000 years’. *“They used to overthrow presidents here [P.A., in Yemen]”* said an observer: *“Two presidents were killed, and Saleh was targeted for many years.”* Yemen is the homeland of 1/3 of the Saudi labour force



and 40% of the Saudi population can trace their ancestry back to Yemen (these are perceptions rather than verified, objective facts. As perceptions, however, they are important in shaping practice).

The leverage of Saudi Arabia over Yemen is therefore substantial and probably the most important element of any solution to Yemen's current challenges. Saleh talks about the UN as if he dictates their policies and he talks about the US and Europe as if they are minor partners. With respect to Saudi Arabia, however, the President is painstakingly aware of his junior position. Influencing the Saudis would, therefore, be a better use of resources than simply applying additional pressure on Saleh.

For a long time the Saudi policy towards Yemen was simple: to keep it 'unstable enough'; on the brink, but not to push the country over the edge into conflict. An event which changed the Saudi perception was the al-Qaeda attack on the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister in charge of counter-terrorism, Muhammad Bin Nayef. It is the alternative Yemen that is now coming to haunt them. There is a political power vacuum and it is not being filled by Saudi-supported groups, but rather by al-Qaeda and the Houthis. This has led the Saudis to revisit their approach to Yemen, reflected in their substantial financial support to the country, estimated to be around US\$ 2-3 billion.

Saudi leverage in Yemen is incomparable to the leverage of any other external actor and, in addition to this, the US is extremely sensitive to Saudi concerns. Unfortunately the Saudis have not played a strong role in the context of promoting stabilisation in Yemen, at least not openly. If they do not move to do so, however, it is close to pointless for other donors – notably from Europe and North America – to engage. Currently the biggest concern is that

the Saudis simply do not support processes of democratisation in Yemen because they do not want a process of this nature to occur in their own country.

A FINAL THOUGHT

This brief sets out a number of issues and concerns within Yemen to show that what is needed are political rather than technical solutions. The question in this regard is then whether external actors from outside the region, North America and Europe specifically, have any leverage? Where there is a political will, there is a way, as it were; by Yemen in the first instance, and by Saudi Arabia in the second. In support of broader processes of reform neither will nor way seems to be present at the moment. Such reforms would include Saleh loosening his grip on power, addressing networks of patronage and, perhaps, beginning the implementation of some of the Ten Point Plan suggestions. Whatever the Yemeni leadership decides to do, some urgency is necessary.

However, Yemen is currently undergoing what appears to be a process of further securitisation bordering on militarisation at the expense of the broader governance system. This, of course, does not bode very well for dealing productively with secessionist movements in the South, the Houthis in the North and al-Qaeda elements – except by use of force.

As a minimum, actors from outside the region should therefore think twice about the rationale for engaging, about what they can possibly achieve in Yemen, and above all understand the dynamics of the country and its neighbour to the north: Saudi Arabia.

Peter Alexander Albrecht
PhD Candidate · paa@diis.dk

SUGGESTED READINGS

Yezid Sayigh, *Fixing Broken Windows: Security Sector Reform in Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen*, Carnegie Paper, October 2009, website: [HYPERLINK "http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2405"](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2405)
["http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2405"](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2405)

Khalid R. Al-Rodhan and Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric War: Yemen*, CSIS, July 28 2006, website: [HYPERLINK "http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060728_gulf_yemen.pdf"](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060728_gulf_yemen.pdf)
["http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060728_gulf_yemen.pdf"](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060728_gulf_yemen.pdf)

Human Rights Watch, *In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government's Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests*, 15 December 2009, website: [HYPERLINK "http://www.hrw.org/node/87086"](http://www.hrw.org/node/87086)
["http://www.hrw.org/node/87086"](http://www.hrw.org/node/87086)

Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, Carnegie Endowment, Carnegie Paper No. 80, February 2007, website: [HYPERLINK "http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19024&prog=zgp&proj=zdr1,zme"](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19024&prog=zgp&proj=zdr1,zme)
["http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19024&prog=zgp&proj=zdr1,zme"](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19024&prog=zgp&proj=zdr1,zme)

Waq al-Waq (blog), website: [HYPERLINK "http://islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com/2010/01/senate-testimony-on-yemen.html"](http://islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com/2010/01/senate-testimony-on-yemen.html)
["http://islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com/2010/01/senate-testimony-on-yemen.html"](http://islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com/2010/01/senate-testimony-on-yemen.html)

THE DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Strandgade 56, 1401 Copenhagen K · Denmark · Tel. +45 32 69 87 87 · diis@diis.dk · www.diis.dk