

# Yemen: Make Haste Slowly

Edward Burke

>> The leadership of al-Qaeda has long considered Yemen as a prime location to establish an Islamic emirate from which to launch global operations. Al-Qaeda's leading strategist, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, in his highly influential *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance* noted that Yemen was the 'fundamental pillar' of *jihad* given the 'religious and economic factors which exist there'. Al-Qaeda is deeply aware of the strategic importance of Yemen, its position on the vital Bab al-Mandab straits of the Red Sea and proximity to Saudi Arabia. Yemen's history of violent conflict has also left the country awash with a cheap and readily available supply of arms. It is important however to note that al-Qaeda in Yemen takes many forms. There are many diverse *jihadi* groups who fought with Osama bin Laden and the *mujahidin* during the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s, but a lack of consensus on whether the Yemeni government is a legitimate target for *jihad*. Although this debate splits the 'Afghan generation' of al-Qaeda in Yemen, no such scruples can be attributed to the younger 'Iraqi generation' of *jihadi* volunteers that trained and fought with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh has long sought a *modus vivendi* with the 'Afghan' veterans, using them as a militia during the civil war of 1994 and more recently against the rebellion by Zaydi Shia tribesmen loyal to the Houthi family in the north of the country and showing remarkable leniency to those Yemenis who fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Such tolerance ultimately resulted in a 'blowback' against the Yemeni government. Returning veterans from Iraq have denounced their former *jihadi* allies who spoke out against attacks upon the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh as *ulama' al-sultan* (the Sultan's clerics). As distinct from the 'spectaculars' against the *USS Cole* in 2001 and the French oil tanker, the *MV*

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite the dramatic attempted Christmas day bombing, a resurgent al-Qaeda in Yemen must be seen primarily within its local context.
- The key external actor in Yemen is Saudi Arabia: All paths out of Yemen's current woes go through Riyadh.
- An overtly military intervention in Yemen would be counterproductive; instead the US and Europe would be better placed to address the long-standing grievances and political deadlock which have weakened the state and strengthened insurgency.

»»»»» *Limburg*, in 2002, there has been a greatly increased trend of attacks upon the Yemeni state and its economic lifelines, namely upon energy infrastructure and tourism.

### **AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN – THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT**

In addition to linking the Saudi and Yemeni *al-Qaeda* elements within one organisation, *al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has astutely tapped into widespread grievance in the south, addressing the people there directly: 'What you are demanding is your right granted to you by your religion [...] injustice, oppression and tyranny should not be practiced in the name of unity.' The widespread sense of 'occupation' and exploitation by the ruling elite of the north has seen former government allies in the South who fought against the Socialist regime, such as the tribal leader and 'Afghan' veteran, Tariq al-Fadhli, ally themselves with the southern secessionist movement led by their former enemies and with AQAP. American officials have angrily rejected recent proposals by President Saleh to negotiate with groups linked to AQAP. However, President Saleh understands, even if he does not say so openly, that many of the tribes who accept AQAP money do so more out of a sense of local political grievance or economic desperation than a zealous commitment to global jihad.

It is perhaps not surprising that tribal support for AQAP has grown at the same time as the Yemeni economy is in decline. The number of AQAP operatives is likely to be relatively small, well below 1000, but their presence has expanded during the last year, partly due to an influx of Saudi and other foreigners who have joined the movement. Although some observers have called Yemen 'the perfect storm' of political, social and economic grievance, such a sweeping analysis over-states the weakness of the central government and ignores the resilience of the main tribes, of which many have resolutely resisted infiltration by AQAP.

Nevertheless, the economic situation in Yemen is dire. Oil exports easily generate the majority of gov-

ernment revenue but these have declined by almost half in recent years. A lack of revenue and a bloated, corrupt public sector means that President Ali Abdullah Saleh is rapidly running out of money with which to pay government salaries and reinforce tribal patronage networks. The population has increased by 600 per cent in the last 40 years and is set to double in the next 20. Yemen is increasingly going hungry: according to the UN almost 40 per cent of the population is suffering from malnourishment. It is currently obliged to import 75–90 per cent of its food, the shortage of which is compounded by the growing of *qat*, an extremely popular mild narcotic and cash crop, which consumes almost 30 per cent of Yemen's severely limited water supplies.

Despite the threat from al-Qaeda, Yemen has been a remarkably low priority for US development assistance, lagging behind European donors such as the UK and Germany. The US development agency USAID allocated just under \$15 million to Yemen in 2005 which fell to \$9 million in 2006 as a consequence of a bilateral dispute over the freeing of suspected al-Qaeda militants by the Yemeni government. Western donors have frequently complained about the Yemeni government's lack of capacity to manage aid or implement development projects, yet in 2009 USAID terminated a large part of their governance programmes in Yemen. As the US begins to inject almost \$70 million of security and development assistance in 2010, the sustainability of this aid remains in question until there is serious commitment from the government and international donors to improve governance standards. US proposals for a major increase in military assistance for the Yemeni security forces overlook the profound rivalry and animosity that exists between certain commanders and their heavy involvement in the country's economy, including in the seizure of land and other assets in the south following the end of the civil war in 1994.

### **SAUDI ARABIA: THE KEY PLAYER**

In terms of political influence and delivery of aid, the most important international donor to

Yemen is unquestionably Saudi Arabia, which has made a commitment of \$1.25 billion in development assistance to its southern neighbour in 2010, dwarfing those made by Western donors. This is not new: together the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries have for a long time provided the largest share of aid to Yemen. Much of this is channelled directly through the President's office or through tribal networks in order to alleviate the government's increasing shortage of revenue and to fund large infrastructure projects. However, some Gulf diplomats now complain that an increasing amount of this assistance is embezzled rather than used to alleviate poverty in the country.

## **'US proposals to increase military assistance for the Yemeni security forces have largely overlooked the profound rivalry that exists between certain commanders'**

against Iraq. More recently the extent of Saudi Arabia's tribal network was clearly demonstrated in an interview by a Saudi journalist with the two most powerful tribal leaders in Yemen, widely believed to be principal beneficiaries of Saudi funds, Sheikh Naji bin Abdul Aziz al-Shayef and Sheikh Sadiq bin Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar of the Bakhil and Hashid tribes respectively, who condemned the incursions by Yemeni rebels into Saudi Arabia: 'The Kingdom and Yemen are one country and one people, and our countries and people's brotherly relations go back to the eternal depths of history, and we cannot allow any threats to the

Saudi Arabia has for decades funded tribes in Yemen to act as a political lever against the government in Sana'a if necessary. Its rulers have long been fixated with a possible threat emerging from Yemen and moved to expel almost one million Yemeni migrant labourers during the first Gulf War following Yemen's abstention from a vote in the UN Security Council authorising the use of force

security of the Kingdom'. Although such comments are deeply resented by many Yemeni nationalists, they clearly indicate the weight and influence of Riyadh in its neighbour's affairs.

Saudi Arabia's policy on Yemen has been consistently reactive, without a clear strategy on how to reverse the mounting threat to the region from al-Qaeda. Although Saudi diplomats pay lip-service to the prospect of Yemen joining the GCC trading bloc, in reality there has been very little process made towards achieving this goal. The most striking Saudi policy in recent years has been its proposal to build an enormous barrier along the border with Yemen. Riyadh is also believed to have deliberately frustrated a Qatari-mediated truce in 2008 between the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels in the border province of Saada, suspecting Qatar's ties with Iran and the Houthis own alleged support from Iran and Iraq. This now appears to have backfired following the resumption of hostilities in 2009 which saw rebel incursions into Saudi Arabia and resulted in the death of over 100 Saudi soldiers. The *Shia* faith of the rebels, albeit very different from the 'Twelver' *Shia* practices of Iran and Iraq, has nevertheless stoked hostility in these countries against Saudi Arabia, with both Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Office of Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq calling for support for the rebels. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has condemned Saudi Arabia for seeking to crush fellow Muslims instead of using their weapons in support of the people of Gaza. This increasingly regional conflict together with a recent AQAP suicide bomb attack that narrowly avoided killing the Deputy Minister for the Interior, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, have shown the limitations of Saudi engagement in Yemen and the need for an urgent reappraisal by Riyadh of its relations with its southern neighbour.

### **WHAT TO DO?**

2010 threatens to be an even more turbulent year for Yemen than 2009. From a position of doing too little in terms of counter-terrorism



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»»»»» efforts in Yemen, the US and Europe now seem tempted to try and do too much. The international community needs to think very carefully about how a vastly increased programme of military assistance will influence the balance of power in Yemen. Any military assistance should be linked to a programme of security sector reform to curb the worst abuses of the Yemeni security forces. Yemen's prisons are overcrowded, brutal and have been where AQAP has done much of its recruiting. They are also notoriously insecure, with a number of successful escapes being made by senior AQAP operatives in recent years. The Yemeni army and police have frequently shot unarmed protestors when a non-lethal response to provocation was possible, with disastrous consequences in terms of alienating the population from the government. There have also been worrying accounts of soldiers selling weapons and ammunition to insurgents with impunity.

There has been an obvious lack of will on the part of the international donor community to play a role in resolving the deadlock between the government and the opposition that led to the postponement of parliamentary elections, originally scheduled to be held in 2009, to 2011. Confusion surrounding the appointment of an Electoral Commission and voter registration has greatly exacerbated mistrust of the government's commitment to reform. Yet US and European diplomats in Sana'a admit that, given the current fixation upon counter-terrorism cooperation, there has been little or no interest from their governments to put pressure on the Yemeni government to hold fair elections. Neither has any priority been given to easing southern grievances. Donors should insist that the south receives an appropriate portion of any increase in aid and that the Yemeni government draft and implement a strategy for dealing with southern grievances.

Shelving the reform process in Yemen in favour of a more 'realist' security engagement would be a self-defeating paradox – much of the frustration which has fostered the growth of AQAP can be

traced to a lack of accountability and the persecution of political and civil society activists by the government, some of whom have been imprisoned indefinitely under vague anti-terrorism legislation. There is no doubt that an urgent increase in US and European aid to Yemen is required but it is imperative that such assistance is sustained over the coming years.

Yemen also needs to be made a priority of relations between the West and the Gulf. All paths out of Yemen's current crisis go through Riyadh. Yet, Yemen has for too long been an after-thought of bilateral and multilateral engagement with Saudi Arabia, whose government have been adept at brushing it aside as a matter of local concern. This has to stop. The US and Europe must be firm and consistent in pushing for a dialogue with Saudi Arabia on a collective strategy to turn the tide against AQAP, addressing grievances, under-cutting AQAP's tribal support and negotiating an end to the debilitating Houthi insurgency. Qatar and the UAE are two obvious partners in lifting Yemen out of its economic stagnation and to fund programmes to reduce alarmingly high illiteracy rates by improving education standards. These not only provide economic opportunities for Yemen's youth but simultaneously reduce the likelihood of radicalisation taking place in the classroom.

**MAKE HASTE SLOWLY**

Following the attempted Christmas day bombing aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253, there has been much sabre rattling in Washington DC calling for military strikes against AQAP. Senator Joe Lieberman, the Chairman of the US Senate's Homeland Security, stated that 'Afghanistan is today's war. If we don't act pre-emptively, Yemen will be tomorrow's war'. This is highly dangerous rhetoric to follow years of US complacency and disinterest in Yemen.

If the US military robustly engages 'pre-emptively' and overtly in Yemen, such actions will become the recruiting sergeant that AQAP have long

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dreamed of and could transform it from being a movement with fringe support in the Gulf into a popular insurgency. Comparisons with Afghanistan are not only simplistic but highly counter-productive, fuelling Yemeni suspicion of Western motivations. Many Yemenis do not primarily perceive Afghanistan as a country that was liberated from the rule of religious extremists, but rather associate it with a humiliating occupation imposed upon a Muslim people.

Until recently the US and European presence on the ground in Yemen has been minimal, constituting only a handful of diplomats, intelligence and military personnel. The internal dynamics of Yemen are notoriously complicated. With fewer resources and a population deeply suspicious of any foreign intervention, the US and Europe would do well to tread very carefully during the next months. Working closely with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries to address the political grievances that have sapped the strength of the Yemeni state would be a far more deadly blow to AQAP than any short-term military response. Yemen's problems are predominantly local and multi-faceted. Al Qaeda thrives on all of them.

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