

Saleh's opportunism renders US counterterrorism efforts ineffective

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Posted by AD Brown

Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, faces a number of fundamental social, political and economic 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. At the same time, tension and open conflict with the Houthis in the North, secessionist groups in the South, and al-Qaeda elements in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) pose serious challenges to 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 held.



Iconic President Ali Abdullah Saleh adorns placards at pro-unity rally © Khaled Fazaa-AFP/Getty Images

The reaction from the Yemeni government to destabilising elements in the country has been a greater focus on security. There is a growing fear about security within Yemen in general, and specifically in the inner circle around Yemen President, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Militarisation rather than reform appears to be the preferred solution in order to be able to maintain the delicate balance of power between pro-government tribes while facilitating suppression of oppositional movements under the banner of 'counter-terrorism'.

Throughout his 32 years of rule, President Saleh – a military general by profession – has managed to concentrate all powers in the Office 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. He has established an inclusive patronage structure binding tribes, opposition politicians, businessmen and religious figures into a web of personal loyalty through the distribution of oil rents. This formula has ensured Saleh's survival but it has distorted party politics and stifled grassroots political participation.

However, the diminishing sources of state revenue in combination with an increased level of social unrest in north, south, and increasing presence of AQAP is gradually reducing his grip on power. Saleh has also become highly unpopular in certain segments of society, further exacerbating political conflict.

This is why the US government's top priority in Yemen – counterterrorism – is actually perceived as an opportunity by the Yemeni state to consolidate its power domestically. For Yemen's long-serving president, AQAP is a third-order issue. In fact, to many in the leadership, al-Qaeda's small number of followers in the country must seem far less a threat than an opportunity. An increased U.S. military commitment to Yemen pumps weapons and training into the country that can be employed against a wide range of threats that have nothing to do with al-Qaeda. A flood of money creates opportunities not only for contracting, but for graft, corruption and extortion.

It follows then that apart from counterterrorism and/or deradicalisation efforts, international community should pursue two other primary goals in the Yemeni theatre.

First, external actors urgently need to address socio-economic problems in Yemen by devising a mechanism to both tackle governmental corruption and also sustain their push for dialogue on the future of Yemen with the Yemeni government, leaders of the Houthi rebellion and the Southern secessionist movements. Nevertheless, it ought to be acknowledged that the increasing presence of AQAP and the subsequent formation of formal and informal ties between its elements and some tribes have greatly complicated the situation. The good news, however, is that tribal protection that has been extended by some tribes to AQAP elements is based on political calculations rather than ideological affiliation.

Secondly, extra-regional actors need to understand the motivations and strategies of GCC states, in particular Saudi Arabia, towards Yemen and, by extension, seek to encourage their proactive engagement in ensuring the stability of the country. Yet again, there is no agreement on the nature and extent of GCC states involvement in Yemeni affairs due to the complexity of geopolitical factors. It is not easy to persuade six *Sheikhdoms* to support and empower a *Republic* as this could have domestic repercussions for the Gulf States, especially in Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom of Bahrain.

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