

Yemen: Primer and Prescriptions

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Rather than being an artificial creation of the colonial era, Yemen measures its history in millennia

Wikipedia (Ferdinand Reus)



Yemen: Primer and Prescriptions

BY BARBARA K. BODINE

To borrow from Mark Twain, reports of Yemen's demise are greatly exaggerated. Decisions and commitments that the international community and Yemenis make this coming year, affirmed at the London Conference, and the sustainability of those commitments over the long term will determine whether the reports become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yemen is not a failed state. It is fragile and faces challenges—economic, demographic, political, and security—that would sunder other states. There are those who would write it off as a lost cause,

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dismiss it as a sinkhole of assistance, outsource the solutions to the neighbors, or turn it into a “Third Front” even though we have not yet completed or been unquestioningly successful in the first two fronts in Iraq and Afghanistan. To write it off is premature. To declare it a sinkhole overstates the quality and consistency of our assistance to date. To outsource to the neighbors is abdication, and a counterproductive one at that, and to open a Third Front is pure folly. The United States, along with international partners, has the ability to help Yemen walk back from a precipice if it is willing to commit sufficient resources—financial and political—to a broad, sustained, coordinated, and strategic engagement that learns the right lessons of the first two fronts, understands the challenges that Yemen faces and the historical context that is still at play, and suppresses the impulse to apply the false templates of other fragile and failed states.

- ❖ The fundamental challenges Yemen faces are the lack of critical natural resources—energy and water—and insufficient state and human capacity, not will. The Yemen government is not unmindful of the threat posed by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), but it is not its sole threat, it is not (yet) an existential threat, and it is not on a par with the inherent threats that resources and capacity pose.
- ❖ A security-centric approach will not be sufficient or successful in addressing our immediate security interests or Yemen’s medium- and long-term stability challenges. Efforts at security that do not address stability based on legitimacy ignore a basic lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan.
- ❖ A partnership with Yemen to deny AQAP sanctuary on Yemeni soil or the capability to operate with impunity against Yemeni or international interests must understand that Yemen operates within the context of two equal if not greater security challenges to state survival: the rebellion in the north, and persistent secessionist sentiments in the south.
- ❖ The northern and southern threats are economic- and state infrastructure–driven more than ideological. They cannot be resolved militarily but require more than a “humanitarian” response or new power-sharing arrangements. Mediated efforts are best left to regional partners with no direct agenda or checkered history in the country, such as the United Arab Emirates.
- ❖ To the extent the Yemeni people see our presence and efforts in their country as an American Third Front against al Qaeda with Yemen little more than the battleground, and see no corresponding commitment to Yemen or its people, resentment toward the United States and its allies will increase. Anti-Americanism does exist, but it reflects frustration and disillusionment with American policy in and toward Yemen, including widely erratic assistance levels over the past few years, as much as general antipathy toward American military operations in the region.
- ❖ Our announced economic and development strategy is an improvement but is still woefully inadequate. To be effective and credible, it needs the profile, funding, and sustained commitment of the security package. It must work on governance, state, and human capacity at the national and local levels.

- ❖ Broad and sustained engagement cannot and need not be a U.S.-only endeavor. In fact, the United States is a minor donor to Yemen. We need to be mindful, however, of the limits and consequences of channeling our policy and efforts through a third capital.

Many years ago, when I was the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, a senior European Union (EU) official came to visit. At dinner with the ambassadors and directors from major donor states and organizations, he asked if we were optimistic or pessimistic about Yemen's future. After we rattled off the litany of glum statistics, he concluded we were all pessimists. Yemen is large, perhaps the size of France or Texas. It is rugged and forbidding—mountainous highlands and plateaus in the north and desert in the interior. Its population of 20 to 25 million, equal to or exceeding the population of the rest of the peninsula combined, is overwhelmingly young, uneducated, and growing at a staggering rate. It is bereft of enough natural resources to support its population, provide sufficient government revenue, or export meaningful products. It lacks adequate arable land, surface water, and oil. And finally, as both a reflection and consequence of these factors, its governmental structures are underfunded, undeveloped, and unable to provide basic services or infrastructure to the majority of the population. Moreover, the government is prone to corruption at both the lowest transactional and senior contractual levels, especially within the military.

Add to those chronic problems three serious security challenges—the Houthi in the north, the southerners, and al Qaeda (all having antecedents that go back decades)—and it sounds like a failed state, but it is not. Our response to the EU director was that while pessimism is warranted, fatalism is not.

Simple Templates, Simplistic Solutions

Each failed state fails in its own way. Simple templates from other states lead to simplistic solutions.

Iraq. Yemen lacks the sectarian divides that exploded in Iraq. Yemenis are neither Sunni nor Shia and most certainly not Wahhabi. They are in the north Zaydi, a branch of Shia Islam closer in theology and practice to traditional Sunni than traditional Shia, and, in the south from Ibb and Taiz southward, Shafii, a branch of Sunni Islam with characteristics

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closer to Shia'ism. Unlike much of the rest of the Arab world, Zaydi is the establishment religion, and Zaydi have been dominant politically and intellectually from the days of the last Imamate to the current government. It would be a mistake to view the Houthi violence in the north solely through a sectarian prism or respond as if it were a Saudi-Iranian proxy war. This potential exists, but that is neither the proximate cause nor the inevitable outcome. It would be similarly distorting to view southern secession tensions as a Zaydi/Shafii battle.

Afghanistan. Yemen lacks the ethnic/linguistic cleavages of Afghanistan or Iraq. Despite regional distinctions and unique political histories, expanded upon below, there is a strong sense of Yemeni identity and tradition of inclusiveness. Contrary to the new conventional

wisdom, the writ of the state extends beyond the capital.

Somalia. Yemen lacks the tradition of clan violence found in Somalia or of warlords in Afghanistan. Yemen is often described as a tribal society, but it would be misleading to understand these tribes as hierarchical with strong leadership authority rather than horizontal familial structures. Furthermore, the combination of British colonialism and 25 years of Marxism gutted the southern tribal structure. We should not go looking for a “Sons of Yemen” partner. There is far more fluidity to

policy made absent an understanding of history is fatally flawed—and even more so in a complex and ancient society such as Yemen

the society than the label “tribal” implies and far greater traditional but effective participation and accountability.

Yemen is politically more developed than the three template states. The U.S. Congress, the past and current administrations, and major democracy-support organizations recognize Yemen as an emerging democracy. With 20 years experience in reasonably free, fair, and contested elections, including the last presidential election, nationally based multiparties, universal suffrage, and a strong civil society, its democratic experience is fragile and flawed but real and, most importantly, indigenous.

History Matters: The Land of Cain and Abel

When I worked in Iraq in 2003, I was informed by one senior U.S. official, after I attempted to inject a little Iraqi history in

the discussions, that “we are smarter than history.” We are not. History is not a substitute for analysis, but policy made absent an understanding of history is fatally flawed—and even more so in a complex and ancient society such as Yemen.

Although its international borders with Saudi Arabia were finally negotiated only 10 years ago, Yemen is not an artificial construct of the colonial era. It calculates its past in millennia, not decades or centuries, with a significant and proud pre-Islamic history. It is the land of the Queen of Sheba, the Three Wise Men of the Nativity, and a number of Jewish kingdoms; and, according to some, it is the burial place of Cain and Abel.

Aden Port has been a prize for nearly as long. There is evidence of a brief and unsuccessful Roman presence near the port, and, as one of the jewels in the British crown, it served as a major coaling station for over a century. The eastern portion, primarily the Hadramaut, however, was under protectorate status only, and attempts by the Ottomans to control the North ended in repeated failure.

Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic) in 1978 following the assassination of two predecessors, one by South Yemeni agents and the other by agents of another state, in the space of 9 months. (A South Yemeni president was assassinated in the same timeframe by his hard-line rival responsible for the death of Ali Abdullah’s immediate predecessor.) Eight months later, in early 1979, the South, backed by the Soviets and its allies, including the Cubans, invaded the North, prompting a massive U.S. military airlift to the North and support from a broad number of Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. From 1976 to 1982, the South also backed

a northern insurgency. What Ali Abdullah inherited in 1978 and struggled with into the 1980s was a state that essentially existed along the Sana'a-Ta'izz-Hodeidah roads and was economically dependent on remittances from over a million migrant workers. The southern border with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was volatile; the 2,000-mile border with Saudi Arabia was contested and undemarcated.

To compound the challenges of political histories, the union in 1990—an article of faith and negotiated by the leaders of the two states—was not between equals. North Yemen, impoverished and underdeveloped, had approximately 15 million people and the South less than 2 million. Abandoned by its patron and benefactor, the Soviet Union, its status as a major port had been decimated by the closure of the Suez Canal in 1967, its British infrastructure had been allowed to rot, and its bureaucracy was bloated to 300,000 in the final days before unity. Moreover, it was an international pariah with its formal designation as the first state sponsor of international terrorism based largely on the network of Marxist and alphabet-soup terrorist group training camps. Unity meant a near tripling in land size, but the South brought few assets and a number of liabilities, as well as great expectations, into the union.

Unification was more than the stapling together of an antimonarchical Yemen Arab Republic and the lapsed Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen to create the Republic of Yemen. It was the unification of at least three distinct political cultures and historical memories.

First, the rugged highlands of North Yemen were a hereditary Zaydi theocracy closed to the outside world until the 1962 Republican Revolution. A vast majority of Yemenis live in

the highlands and plateaus on subsistence agriculture in small, scattered villages. The republic's early history was marred by assassinations, Marxist insurgencies, coup attempts, and invasions—and that was just from the neighbors. Saudi Arabia backed the monarchists while Nasser's Egypt supported the Republicans. The revolution remains the defining moment in modern Yemeni history.

Second, a Crown Colony and capital of Marxist South Yemen, Aden was relatively modern, densely populated, and directly governed by the British for over 100 years. Aden Port, one of the best natural harbors in the world, sits astride the Bab al-Mandeb at the foot of the Red Sea and is about equidistant from Singapore, Durban, and Gibraltar. Well into the 20th century, Aden was one of the 10 busiest harbors in the world. By 1990, the port's insignificance was hard to overstate.

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Third, 10 or so tribes, sultanates, and emirates to the east of Aden Port were under protectorate status from the 1880s–1890s until the early 1960s. Sparsely populated, politically traditional, and socially conservative, they were allowed a considerable degree of political autonomy under the British and were an awkward fit with Aden in the events leading up to and following independence in 1967. There remain unsettled scores between the scions of protectorate families and deposed remnants of the Marxist government that played out in the 1994 civil war and cast a shadow today.

The United States and Yemen

Given the self-isolation of the Imamate and British control of Aden, the United States essentially ignored the two Yemens for most of their modern history. There was one major exception: a U.S. scholarship program in the late 1940s and early 1950s for 40 young men, mostly Zaydi, to study in the United States. Nearly all returned to Yemen, none cast their lot with the royalists, and many went on to serve Yemen as technocrats, government ministers, and the core of Yemen's political evolution over the next 50 years, a tradition that a number have passed to successive generations. President John F. Kennedy recognized the republican government in the North in 1962, barely 3 months after the revolt, over the objections of the British, French, and Saudis. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tiananmen Square in China, unification of Germany, and a host of other events in 1989 and 1990, the United States barely noticed the quiet unification of North and South Yemen, but strongly, publicly, and decisively backed Yemeni unity against the machinations of its neighbors during the brief 1994 civil war.

Since 9/11, the United States has looked to Yemen as a constructive counterterrorism partner, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Michael Mullen and others have given Yemen good marks. The dip in the mid-2000s was in part a U.S. failure to maintain focus following the invasion of Iraq, and, within Yemen, the beginnings of the Houthi revolt in 2005 and the influx of Saudi al Qaeda operatives after Riyadh's crackdown in response to a spike in terrorism in the Kingdom.

Yemen's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, including a number of Yemeni fighters on the frontlines and Yemeni mujahideen battling the Soviets in Afghanistan (a

disproportionate number of whom came from the South), was coincident with U.S. and regional policies at the time and became liabilities in the relationship only in retrospect.

Beyond that, Yemen figured as a secondary player in broader Cold War and regional politics. Nasser's Egypt squared off against the Saudi monarchy over the Republican Revolution. The Egyptians threw in the towel in 1967 following their defeat in the war with Israel (at that stage, the Republicans had essentially defeated the monarchists). South Yemeni meddling in the North reflected tensions along the international East-West divide as much as any inherent tensions along the North-South Yemeni divide. The U.S. decision to provide massive military assistance to the North in 1979 to repel the South's invasion reflected events in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa as much as any intrinsic interest in North Yemen. (The decision to send military equipment, training, intelligence support, and other aid was a wise step back from an ill-conceived and hyperbolic proposal circulating at the highest levels in Washington at the time to send the 82^d Airborne and friends to "stop Communist expansion here.")

U.S. economic development assistance and security cooperation with Yemen have been erratic and episodic. After the 1979 airlift, the United States walked away from the Yemeni military. Some of that equipment was still in the Yemeni inventory when I arrived almost 20 years later as Ambassador. Economic assistance waxed and waned. In the best of times, it included a vibrant and still-well-remembered Peace Corps program, major agricultural development assistance, and an active scholarship program. At other times, it was virtually zeroed out.

By the late 1990s, the United States had essentially no development program, no U.S.



Yemenis considered the October 2000 bombing of USS *Cole* to be as much an attack on them as on the United States

Agency for International Development (USAID) personnel, no Peace Corps, and no offer of scholarships. The Yemeni decision to vote against the 1990 United Nations Security Council Resolution on Operation *Desert Shield/Desert Storm* and the 1994 civil war are often cited as the reasons for this precipitous drop. However, Yemen was not alone among Arab states in opposing non-Arab military action to liberate Kuwait—Jordan and Tunisia took the same position—and the civil war lasted barely 2 months. It hardly represented a significant, direct, or continuous threat to U.S. personnel. Yemen just slipped quietly off our radar screen. There was no major economic interest and no apparent security interest. It was neither malicious nor benign neglect—just indifference.

By 2001, U.S. assistance was in the neighborhood of \$50 million. USAID officially returned in 2003, but by 2005 assistance was only \$14.8 million and by 2006 a paltry \$9 million, crabbing its way back to \$20 million and now \$40 million and a 3-year commitment. No one—donor, nongovernmental organization (NGO), or host government—can plan and execute a viable program with that much swing in its budget.

The mandate of my tenure as Ambassador, with the full backing of the Department of State and General Anthony Zinni at U.S. Central Command, was to rebuild the relationship on as broad a front as possible, including enhanced security cooperation, expanded democracy support, reinstated scholarships, economic development, and ultimately the creation of a coast guard. To the Yemenis, the attack on USS *Cole* was not only an attack on the United States but also an attack on them—and an attack on the changing relationship.

Yemen's Challenges, U.S. Options

It is not difficult to curb one's enthusiasm over the U.S. announced doubling of annual economic assistance to \$40 million along with \$120 million in military assistance. If we accept that there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 to 200 AQAP members in Yemen, and approximately 20 to 25 million Yemenis not affiliated with AQAP, we have upped our assistance to the non-AQAP Yemenis from less than \$1/year/Yemeni to about a buck-sixty per year. (To put it into another context, NBC paid Conan O'Brien \$45 million to go away.)

Yemen does not share its neighbors' blessings in oil or gas

There is not a direct dollar-to-dollar correlation between an effective level of governance and development assistance and military assistance, but this is not good, it is not smart, and it will not be effective.

Yemen faces four inherent challenges:

- ❖ water: finite, inadequate, and diminishing rapidly
- ❖ energy: finite, inadequate, and diminishing rapidly
- ❖ population: apparently infinite, abundant, and expanding rapidly
- ❖ political infrastructure: finite, inadequate, and vulnerable.

Water. Reports that Yemen, or at least the Sana'a Basin, will run out of aquifer water imminently have been circulating for decades and will become true at some point. No one knows when. Wells are dug at ever greater

depths. Demand far exceeds the monsoons' ability to replenish and antiquated irrigation methods and subsidized fuel for pumps exacerbate the problem. Desalinization plans are hampered by the exorbitant cost of piping water over several mountain ranges to the populated and agricultural highlands at roughly 4,000 to 8,000 feet. Swiftian proposals to relocate the entire Yemeni population to the coasts do not warrant discussion; the financial costs and the social and political upheaval would be catastrophic.

Pressure on water resources would be mitigated by a lifting of fuel subsidies, but repeated efforts over the past 15 years have met with stiff and sometimes violent public reaction and equally effective opposition from those who profit—some illicitly—from the import of fuel.

Improved irrigation will also allow some savings but will only postpone the day of reckoning. Debates on crop substitution for *qat*¹ are informed more by moralizing than by calculations of water demand for the new crop or the potential economic dislocation that ill-conceived *qat* eradication could cause.

Energy. Yemen does not share its neighbors' blessings in oil or gas. What they have is diminishing, lies in remote and inaccessible regions, or will be offset by rising domestic demand. To put it in perspective, Yemen's oil reserves are calculated at 3 billion barrels (bbl). That is roughly half of Oman's reserves; Oman's population, however, is one-tenth of Yemen's. Iraq, with approximately the same size population, has reserves of approximately 115 billion bbl, plus water and arable land. Yet the oil sector provides 90 percent of export earnings and 75 percent of government revenues. The World Bank has estimated that state revenues from oil and gas will fall to zero by 2017, but the crunch point will come sooner.

Yemen LNO Company revenue will not make up the shortfall from the impending decline in oil exports. Yemen has expressed interest in nuclear power, but the cost of construction, concerns about security, and need for a distribution system do not make this a viable option in the foreseeable future.

Population. Yemen has one of the highest population growth rates in the world. With a majority under the age of 15, an early marriage age, and a fertility rate that hovers between 6.7 and 7.2, a sonic baby boom is in the offing. A government- and clerical-supported child spacing program in the late 1990s and beyond has been hampered by lack of a good distribution network and rural clinics, not cultural or religious opposition. As the trajectory climbs steeply, the pressures on water and energy will only increase as those resources decrease.

More importantly, this is a largely uneducated population. Less than half of the girls attend primary school; perhaps 15 percent attend secondary school. Literacy for males over 15 is 70 percent. Girls' education is hampered again not so much by culture, tradition, or religion but by access. Sometimes the solution is as simple as adding a bathroom to a school or a well to a village so young girls need not spend the day fetching water over long distances.

The low level of education is a significant drag on the development of the country. Schools are few and far between and teachers often are imported to supplement Yemeni teachers, while too many Yemenis are unemployed. Prospects for foreign investment are hampered by a work force that lacks the necessary skills.

Political Structure. Despite the conventional theories of political science, Yemen has created a fragile, flawed, but very real democratic structure and process that reflect the Yemeni libertarian character and traditions.

Its flaws should be a focus of assistance, not an excuse to disengage or not engage. On the contrary, until its flaws are addressed, the legitimacy of the government and the stability of the state could hang in the balance. Economic development assistance and security cooperation without commitment to the third leg of the stool—governance—will not be stable.

This is not an unattainable goal. President Ali Abdullah and a circle of enlightened advisors crafted the elements of a democratic state as part of the unification bargain in 1990. Their efforts lacked the micro(mis)management of international scrutiny and were largely successful as a result. Organizations such as the National Democratic Institute have worked with Yemen for nearly 20 years on enhancing the basic structures and providing desperately needed training and support (primarily with U.S. Government dollars), but the underlying commitment and understanding that this was necessary, prudent, and wise came from the Yemenis.

Regrettably, that commitment and progress have wobbled the past few years, despite the contested presidential elections of 2006. The wobble reflects a number of factors coming together: a narrowing circle of advisors, disproportionately corrupt cronies within the military, the state's increasing inability to provide basic services, and diverted political attention and state resources to security concerns in the north and south. The core values and aspirations are still there, the traditional structures that buttress democratic processes remain, and, while there is a predictable jockeying for position in a post-Ali Abdullah Yemen, there is still room for engagement on the governance front.

It is important to note here that Yemen has a robust civil society estimated at 7,000 local

NGOs and a number of international NGOs headed by Yemenis. Many are run by women. They operate in both political advocacy and social services. Civil society is an amorphous concept anywhere and can be overvalued as a precursor or guarantor of democratic governance. It does, however, fulfill one pragmatic function, especially in Yemen. Civil society provides a training ground—a farm team—for the future leadership of the country. In fact, it already has. The Minister of Water headed an NGO focused on water issues, for example, while the current Minister of Planning established and ran the extraordinary parastatal Social Fund for Development.

Governing Yemen

Governing Yemen is no easy undertaking. To say that the political integration is not yet complete and the infrastructure of governance is insufficient is an understatement few Yemenis would argue with. Any Yemeni government must balance the competing needs and demands of a disparate and deeply politically engaged population.

Yemenis have been accused of the politics of muddling through, and there is some truth

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to that. Yemen's history for the last 50 years has been one of external meddling, internal bickering, and poverty, yet it has not only survived but has also expanded several times over, avoided direct military intervention, and dodged an economic meltdown or famine. Part of its political survival is the extraordinary

lengths taken to keep all factions, elements, wings, and strong personalities inside the tent, a very large tent. Those who stray too far and risk upsetting the delicate equilibrium are chastised but rarely marginalized.

“Big Tentism” tends to impede progress on any one front at any one time at optimum speed. Compromises and concessions are necessary as efforts are taken to ensure that there is maximum buy-in or at least minimal opposition. On occasion, tactical retreats and regroupings are required. To an outsider—and to many Yemenis—this looks a lot like a muddle. It works only if there is a core vision and nimble leadership. Big Tentism also implies a belief among all factions, elements, and parties that there is an avenue for their views and concerns to reach into the government deliberations. The *qat* chew is a traditional mechanism; the Parliament provides another. It explains the selection of the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar as Speaker of the Parliament, despite his Islah party's minority status and the convention that speakerships go to the majority.

Perhaps the best analogy is a juggler with plates on a stick. Each plate must be given its due attention or it, and perhaps all of them, will come crashing down. The question is whether there are now too many plates—too many pressures on the state, too many security and economic challenges, and too few resources—and whether the juggler is still agile enough.

There are two emergent threats to this arrangement: corruption and cronyism on the one hand, and the generational shift on the other. Patronage is a given in the best of political systems, and corruption may be an inevitable feature of the human condition. All leaders prefer to surround themselves with advisors and aides they trust. Smart leaders may also practice the dictum to “keep your friends

close and your enemies closer.” That is reality, and observers of Yemeni politics would do well to refrain from sniffing in horror. Supporters of sustained engagement must also candidly assess whether prudent inclusiveness has slipped to cronyism—that is, the appointment of friends or relatives because of ties and irrespective of qualifications (until we disqualify our friends in the Gulf with pervasive familial ties throughout their governments, bloodlines in and of themselves cannot be the standard). They must also determine whether corruption has become so pervasive and able to distort allocation of state resources that it affects the legitimacy of the state, and then whether governmental and nongovernmental institutions exist with the power and credibility to identify and act against the corruption.

Ali Abdullah has always had cronies; they were once called The Bowling League. He has also had enlightened advisors and a multigenerational pool of talented technocrats. A wider circle of Yemenis acts as influence peddlers to the outside, often with less influence to peddle than advertised. There are nephews in key security positions (by all accounts well qualified), and other relatives, broadly defined, are given sinecures. However, reports of pervasive corruption, land grabs by senior military officers, contract diversions, and other irregularities have become persistent and are corrosive.

Concerns over cronyism are directly linked to issues of succession (“elite competition” as one often-quoted observer calls it). Ali Abdullah has been in power over 30 years and many of his best advisors are considerably older than he. The President has said he will not run in 2013. It is not clear who, either within the narrow family or more broadly, can succeed him. There is most certainly jockeying for position throughout the next generation—tribal,

merchant, and technocrats. The late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar has been succeeded by a coalition of sons. The Famous Forty are rapidly leaving the scene, as are those from the Republican Revolution and the independence fight in the South. It would be presumptuous for us to declare the winner, and facile to assume it will be the president’s son. We have

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no idea. Yemeni politics are more kaleidoscope than mosaic. It would equally be unwise for us to insert ourselves into the process directly or indirectly. Whoever succeeds President Ali Abdullah will need the affirmation of the nascent democratic structures as well as the blessings of the multiple power elites. Yemen’s republican credentials are a point of pride for most Yemenis, and primogeniture succession is not a given in Yemeni society. We can support the institutions, structures, and processes; we cannot assume or pick the winners.

Cronyism and corruption reflect and feed a major challenge that touches on all four of the core challenges and the three major security threats—the inability of the state to provide basic services to the broad population. Yemen lacks the bureaucratic institutions to manage resources and deliver basic services in a credible way. It remains a bloated entity that cushions many from utter unemployment but lacks the training and the tools to be efficient, let alone effective. The technocratic talent at the top of agencies and in NGOs is stymied by the lack of local implementers. Pay is inadequate (a government minister makes approximately \$300/month), fueling petty transactional

corruption. Competency reflects an insufficient education system. In both the northern rebellion and among the southern secessionists, a fundamental issue is the perception and the reality of inadequate provision of governmental services. Each movement is a demand for a more effective, efficient, and responsive government (but not necessarily tighter government control) that provides resources through credible support to the local administration system and to the citizens. To compound the problem, to the extent the three major security concerns pose an existential threat to the survival of the government and the state,

the 2010 London Conference made all the right noises about sustained engagement, but it will take more than a conference to convince the average Yemeni that there has been a credible shift in resources, philosophy, or commitment

the concern is not the movements' political agenda but their ability to distract and divert attention and resources. Neither this government nor any foreseeable successor will find it easy to manage all three adequately and still provide the basics in services. The juggler can only move so fast.

Where Should the United States Focus?

To focus disproportionately on immediate military and security capacity-building is shortsighted. If our concerns about the threats from Yemen are sufficient to fund \$120 million in security assistance and an implicit understanding that development of credible security

structures is a long-term investment, then our interest in keeping Yemen on the good side of the failure curve (recognizing that it may never be wholly prosperous) warrants an equal commitment to civilian capacity-building over a similar long haul. We need to do more than invest in extending the authority of the state. We must invest as well in the legitimacy and capacity of the state and society. We cannot grant "legitimacy," but we can assist in the development of those elements of the state that provide services to the citizens, and the development of a society strong enough to be partners to its state. The "we" here is the U.S. Government, the international community, and the regional neighbors. The 2006 donors' conference was generous, but its pledges remain unfulfilled. The 2010 London Conference made all the right noises about coordination and sustained engagement, but it will take more than a conference to convince the average Yemeni that there has been a credible shift in resources, philosophy, or commitment to governance and development, to a preconflict whole-of-government, and to governments plural. And Yemenis will have to be convinced that this will not all evaporate in the face of excuses and other priorities.

The perception of many Yemenis, including our friends, is that in recent years the U.S. policy aperture has narrowed to security only or security first—and to security as we define it. We need to reopen that aperture. We learned that lesson in Iraq late in the game. We are attempting to apply those lessons in Afghanistan. We have progressed from conventional military to counterinsurgency to the "3Ds" (defense, diplomacy, and development) to manage postconflict situations. We have the opportunity to apply the basics of those lessons preconflict and pre-failure in Yemen.

1. Civil Service. State capacity (for example, civilian capacity) at all levels, not the least being the development of a competent civil service as well as a strong civil society, is fundamental. The focus on development of local capacity needs to happen in concert with the development of central governing capacity. To tilt too far in either direction risks unbalancing the state and creating a vacuum in the center or at the local level. Similarly, overreliance on military or security service capacity delegitimizes the civilian governing structure, especially those within the civilian structure who offer the best hope of building enduring state institutions—political, economic, and social. Strengthening civilian capacity includes strengthening the management of the juridical system, not simply the police.

2. Education is critical to the long-term survival of the state and economic development. Any effort to help Yemen walk back from the abyss of failure is predicated on support for a strong education system. Building

as the United States has danced in and out of Yemen for decades, a number of European partners and Japan, along with the World Bank and the EU, have been there

schools is not the issue; providing qualified Yemeni teachers at the elementary and secondary school level is. Employment, health care, successful child spacing programs, and all the other elements of sustainable development require the establishment of an education system that is universal and relevant to the skills needed.

3. Control of corruption must be a core element of broader engagement, but not a

precondition or sidebar to it. Corruption is a symptom of a governing structure in crisis. Support for, not hectoring on, Yemeni efforts to mitigate opportunities for diversion and corruption by the development of viable governmental and nongovernmental accountability structures is required. The government and the Parliament have responded with a phalanx of organizations—the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption, the Higher Tender Board, and the Central Organization for Control and Audit—each of which will have to prove itself competent to act against malfeasance or risk dismissal as window dressing by Yemenis and a sop to donors. The international community must do more than tut-tut and work with those organizations and actors most involved and committed to reform as a top priority.

4. A coast guard is critical to the economic health of Yemen. The decision to establish a coast guard was driven by economics more than security, and its long-term value to the country remains economic. There is the immediate need to guard against smugglers, extremists, and illegal aliens and to counter the prospect of Somali pirates forming a band of brothers with Yemenis. At the same time, Yemen's coastal waters are home to rich fisheries that could provide a renewable source of exports and food if properly managed. As with the Somali coast, those fisheries have suffered the depredations of factory ships from around the world and toxic dumping.

5. Aden Port needs to be revitalized as a major entrepôt for the Indian Ocean rim. This is Yemen's major natural resource. Aden has the potential to be another Singapore. Development of the port would provide employment and government revenues, and help integrate the south and the north as more equal partners.

The 2010–2012 USAID Country Strategy recognizes many of the core challenges and, as a 3-year program, attempts to address many in a coherent and systematic manner. It is a significant improvement over past approaches, but it is not nearly sufficient:

- ❖ Designed to be implemented over 3 years at increasing funding levels, it remains dependent upon annual congressional appropriations and thus vulnerable to the vagaries of our budget process, competing new demands, and abrupt disruptions due to non-development assistance policy disagreements between the United States and Yemen.
- ❖ It states that eight governorates are of greatest priority to USAID (and presumably the U.S. Government) but, citing resource limitations, targets only five—al-Jawf, Mareb, Sa'ada, Amran, and Shabwa—described as “most at risk.” This triaging risks perceptions of rewards for bad behavior and could fuel competition and rivalries from districts and governorates not selected, perceptions of corruption and cronyism, and thus disruptions in implementation. A broader distribution of smaller projects may not create as much “bang for the buck” but may avoid negative political fallout from an over-concentration in high risk areas.
- ❖ It is heavy on data collection that may be available through other sources, such as the World Bank or the Yemen Social Fund for Development (SFD). Data collection efforts delay project delivery.
- ❖ It is overly dependent upon Beltway contractors. The outcome should not

be an increase in employment and the quality of life in Rockville, Maryland, or Tysons Corner, Virginia.

- ❖ There is insufficient coordination with the U.S. Special Operations Command Civil Affairs and community outreach. Yemen is difficult and can be dangerous, but it is not a war zone. Military-run programs must be supporting to, not parallel with, efforts by State and USAID.

If we accept that a core goal is to develop effective, efficient, and self-sustaining local capacity, perhaps the greatest gap in the strategy is the underutilization of Yemeni partners. The strategy lauds the SFD as “a particularly strong and well-funded development agency [that] provides an example of an effective, efficient and transparent institutional mechanism for providing social services [that] empowers local communities [and] is considered one of the most effective branches of the Yemeni government in the areas of community development, capacity building, and small and micro-enterprise development.” But the strategy states that the SFD is not a partner institution. During my tenure as Ambassador, the U.S. Embassy worked closely with the SFD to design and implement many of our development assistance projects throughout Yemen—without a large official presence or overhead, with sufficient credit given to the United States, but a light American footprint and full transparency and accountability. There is a wheel in Yemen that is sufficiently round and rolling that we do not need to and should not seek to reinvent.

Perils of Outsourcing

This is an ambitious program and one beyond the ability of any one government to support,

especially one as fickle as ours. International partners are critical, and they are there. As the United States has danced in and out of Yemen for decades, a number of European partners and Japan, along with the World Bank and the EU, have been there—as have some Gulf states, specifically Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. The level of their support dwarfs ours. Welcoming their participation is not an excuse for the United States to abdicate. Our interests are parallel but not the same. This is particularly true of Saudi Arabia, which shared a long border and a difficult history with Yemen. A policy and programs that run through Riyadh on their way to Sana'a will suffer a distortion effect that will not serve Yemeni, Saudi, or our own interests. We do not need the filter, the affirmation, and certainly not the military involvement of another state in crafting our relations and programs with Yemen.

Final Thoughts

In shaping a U.S. strategy going forward, we need to bear a few lessons in mind from both our own recent history and Yemen's long history. We are not smarter than our history or theirs.

- ❖ We are dealing with a sovereign state, not a failed one, and a state that has proven to be a credible if not always capable partner. We need to work with the whole of government, not await some date or some benchmark of standards, without providing the assistance and support the government needs to reach those benchmarks. This is not *carte blanche* by any means; rather, it is recognition that purity in a partner is rarely an option and that time is on no one's side.
- ❖ The Yemeni government will undertake those actions that are in its own best national interest. We have shared priorities, but perhaps not in the same priority order. U.S. policy should not be predicated on convincing the Yemeni government to adopt our priorities but should seek out areas of common interest and understand interconnectedness.

None of this guarantees success, however defined. None of this promises to eliminate al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, end extremism, placate every tribe, or bring the birth rate down. However, a short-sighted, security-centric, and episodic engagement with Yemen could create the very failed state neither we nor the Yemenis want or can afford. However failure is defined, it includes the chaos that provides AQAP space to operate, fuels frustration and anger that leads to extremism, exacerbates internal tensions, and undermines further the nascent democracy, and ensures an enduring spiral down into poverty. If these prescriptions look costly, time consuming, and labor intensive, they are. The far greater cost of dealing with the ramifications of state failure can be guaranteed. **PRISM**

Note

¹ *Qat* is a mildly addictive substance close in chemical composition to coffee. Its green leaves are chewed at hours-long “*qat* chews” in Yemen and a few of its neighbors in the Horn of Africa. *Qat* production has squeezed out other crops, and *qat* chews can eat up hours each day, a significant portion of a family's funds, water, and fuel to run pumps. Efforts by the government to restrict its use have been half-hearted. There are no meaningful crop-substitution programs, and any program would have to consider what, if any crop, would use less water (and thus less fuel for pumps), provide as high and as immediate circulation of currency from rural to urban areas, and fill *qat*'s unique and politically critical niche in the social fabric.