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Yemen, al Qaeda and America's Challenge

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to speak today to the Committee on Foreign Affairs. I am a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy in the Brookings Institution. I have traveled extensively in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula for the last thirty years before and after retiring from the CIA to join Brookings, even sailing around it last year. My family actually has long experience with Yemen, my father served there with the United Nations during the last days of the British colony in Aden. Today I would like to place Yemen's numerous security problems in perspective, highlighting those that threaten American interests and offer some thoughts on how the United States should try to help Yemen resolve them.

Of course America's interest in Yemen flows from the presence of al Qaeda in the country. Usama bin Laden has taken direct responsibility for the attempt to blow up an American airliner last year orchestrated from Yemen and has promised more such attacks until the United States ends its support for Israel. Since the failed al Qaeda attack on NW 253 on Christmas day the Obama administration has made defeating al Qaeda's franchise in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a top priority. In fact the administration had been focusing more attention and resources on Yemen and AQAP since taking office but that effort was largely under the radar screen. Now it is rightly a front burner. But it will be a very difficult mission to accomplish because Yemen has always been one of the world's least governed spaces, is deeply divided on complex and confusing sectarian and regional grounds, is armed to the teeth and its ruling government is a weak partner in the fight. To make matters worse, several decades of bad US-Yemeni relations have soured most Yemenis on America and made many sympathetic to al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda's Yemen Roots

Al Qaeda has long been active in Yemen, the original home land of Usama bin Laden's family. The Laden family comes from the extreme south east of Yemen, the remote province called the Hadhramaut which is today an al Qaeda stronghold. Bin Laden offered to lead a tribal rebellion against the former communist government in south Yemen in 1989, an offer turned down by his Saudi government hosts at the time. One of al Qaeda's first major terror attacks was conducted in Aden in 2000 when an al Qaeda cell nearly sank the USS Cole. Bin Laden married a Yemeni woman just before the 911 attacks to further solidify his tribal ties to the country.

A year ago – in January 2009 --the al Qaeda franchises in Saudi Arabia and Yemen merged after the Saudi branch had been effectively repressed by the Saudi authorities under the leadership of Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayif. The new AQAP showed its claws when it almost assassinated the Prince last August with a suicide bomber who had passed through at least two airports on the way to his attempt on Nayif.

The same bomb makers who produced that device probably made the bomb that Omar al Farooq Abdulmutallab used on flight 253. In claiming credit for the Detroit attack AQAP highlighted how they had built a bomb that “all the advanced, new machines and technologies and the security boundaries of the world’s airports” had failed to detect. They praised their “mujahedin brothers in the manufacturing sector” for building such a “highly advanced device” and promised more such attacks will follow.

AQAP has also provided refuge for the Yemeni American cleric Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki who was in contact with US Army Major Nidal Hassan who killed 13 soldiers at Fort Hood in Texas on November 5, 2009. In an interview with al Jazira released on December 23rd, Awlaki said he had encouraged Nidal to kill his fellow soldiers because they were preparing to go to Afghanistan and were part of the Zionist-Crusader alliance that al Qaeda says it is fighting. In claiming credit for the Christmas day airline attack AQAP also lauded the Fort Hood massacre and urged other American Muslims to emulate Nidal Hassan.

The global jihad has long attracted many Yemenis. They flocked to Afghanistan in the 1980s, Bosnia in the 90s and Iraq in this decade. A few have even shown up in Gaza in the last year to fight Israel.

Yemen’s Many Troubles

Yemen has always been a somewhat lawless land. Nominally part of the Ottoman Empire from the 1530s it gained independence at the end of the First World War when the Ottoman Turks collapsed. In fact it was virtually autonomous from Istanbul during most of three centuries. After 1918 the northern part of the country was ruled by an almost medieval regime dominated by the minority Zaydi Shia (about 45% of the population), a uniquely Yemeni Shia movement that is independent of the larger, mainstream Shia sect that runs Iran. It lost a border war with Saudi Arabia in the 1920s that has left Yemenis angry towards Riyadh ever since.

In 1962 Egyptian backed Arab nationalists overthrew the Zaydi Imam in a coup. A Zaydi guerilla army backed by the Saudis, Jordan and even Israel fought back. Egypt sent 70,000 soldiers to try to buck up the nationalists. Despite Cairo’s use of chemical weapons and carpet bombing, it was unable to defeat the Zaydis, and the Egyptians departed in humiliation after the 1967 war with Israel made keeping the expeditionary force in Yemen too costly. The fight between the nationalists and the Zaydis continued, with the Zaydis ultimately failing to take the capital Sana from the nationalists after a long siege. A series of military dictators have ruled since.

Some of the Zaydi tribes in the north have rebelled against the central government again under the leadership of the Houthi tribe. The rebellion is the most serious immediate threat to the nation's stability and more than half of the Yemeni army is deployed to fight the Houthis. The war has now spread across the border into Saudi Arabia. Last fall the tribes turned on their old Saudi allies and attacked across the border into the Kingdom. The Saudi Deputy Defense Minister has said the war has cost over 130 Saudi soldiers their lives.

Riyadh has accused Iran of backing the rebellious Zaydis but has offered little proof. The Saudis also claim al Qaeda is helping the rebels. Some serious analysts have suggested that Iran and al Qaeda are both backing the rebellion. Hard evidence for these claims has yet to surface but they are not implausible. Indeed, as both Iran and al Qaeda seek to weaken the influence of the United States and Saudi Arabia in the region, the Houthi rebellion may become an increasingly attractive means to do so. We should be awake to this threat.

The southern part of Yemen became a British colony in the 1830s. Actually the British only wanted the port of Aden as a transit stop on the sail to India and the Raj. They barely ruled the interior, leaving it in the hands of tribal shaykhs. The British were ousted by a Moscow backed communist guerilla war in 1968. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 the abandoned and broke communist south had no choice but to merge with the north. The hero of unification was President Ali Abdallah Salih who survived a Saudi backed southern rebellion in 1994 and has now been in office 31 years.

The south still seeks to break away. Aden is a hotbed of secessionism. This secessionist movement is still in its infancy but is a dangerous threat to the stability of the country and its territorial integrity. Al Qaeda has supported the secessionist movement since most of its strongholds are in the south and it wants to widen its appeal by appealing to the south's desire for separation from Sana.

Yemenis are desperately poor, half illiterate and very young but armed to the teeth. Every male always carries a large dagger with him and usually an automatic weapon. Many are addicted to the local narcotic, the qat leaves grown in the country. Growing qat is so lucrative that about 40% of the nation's dwindling water supply is devoted to its cultivation. Almost half of Yemeni children under five are chronically malnourished.

The Saleh government has ruled by divide and accommodate. Saleh is himself a Zaydi Shia but also a firm Arab nationalist. He is not from the family of the former ruling family deposed in the 1960s and is therefore seen by some as illegitimate. He backed Saddam Hussein and Iraq in the first gulf war in 1990. In response the Saudis expelled a million Yemeni expatriate workers from the Kingdom and backed the anti-Saleh southern insurrection in 1994, even supplying it with modern aircraft. He allows parliamentary elections and was opposed in his last bid for reelection, but the regime is in fact a police state, just a weak one. He is now trying to ensure his son Ahmed, head of

the Republican Guard, succeeds him to the Presidency, a move that is provoking dissent as well.

The regime's battle against al Qaeda illustrates its weaknesses. Again and again al Qaeda operatives have been captured by the government only to escape from prison. The current head of AQAP, Nasir al-Wahishi, broke out of the nation's number one prison in Sana in 2006 along with twenty other terrorists. Other prison breaks have occurred in Aden. Many of these escapes look like inside jobs. Wahishi's number two, Said al-Shihri, is a Saudi released by the Bush administration from Guantanamo to the Kingdom. AQAP's strongholds are mostly in the south in the remote Sunni tribal provinces that the British, communists and Saleh have never really governed and where Usama bin Laden's family comes from.

Enter the Americans—what to do now?

US-Yemeni relations have never really recovered from the 1990 gulf war differences. All aid was cut off in 1991 and only slowly resumed. After al Qaeda blew up the USS Cole in Aden harbor in 2000 the investigation of the attack only further embittered both sides as each claimed the other was holding back key information. The Bush and Obama administrations have rightly refused to send Yemeni detainees back from Guantanamo given the history of prison breaks in the last decade. Yemenis rightly believe we treat them like a poor cousin of their traditional Saudi enemy.

But there is no made in America answer to AQAP. Drones can kill key operatives if we have good intelligence on where they are but that primarily comes from the Yemenis. Controlling lawless spaces where al Qaeda thrives must be a primarily Yemeni mission. We can and should help with military and economic assistance but the Yemenis have to buy into the job. Putting American ground forces into Yemen would actually play into al Qaeda's hands – bin Laden would welcome another “bleeding war” to add to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite years of bad relations between Riyadh and Sana we also need the Saudis and the Gulf Arabs to help provide the economic aid and jobs that are the only long term solution to salvaging the anemic economy. Opening the gulf job market to Yemenis would do a great deal to help stabilize the economy. Thankfully the Saudis and others seem to be recognizing a failed Yemen will destabilize the entire Arabian Peninsula. Riyadh, despite its baggage with Saleh and Sana, must be our key partner in Yemen.

The Obama administration has offered Saleh additional military assistance and has encouraged the government to strike hard at al Qaeda hideouts in the last few weeks. The attacks have killed some AQAP leaders but it is unclear exactly how serious a blow these have inflicted on the group. AQAP has vowed revenge for the strikes which it blames on an alliance of America, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Saleh government. This promises to be a long and difficult fight.

The United States should avoid being drawn into Yemen's internal conflicts. We should encourage a peaceful resolution of the Zaydi Houthi rebellion and support efforts by third parties, like Qatar, to find a political solution. We do not want to have our aid diverted from fighting al Qaeda. This will require a delicate line with both Sana and Riyadh but President Saleh has more than once said he was a negotiated agreement with the rebels. The recent announcement by the rebels of a unilateral cease fire with the Saudis and a withdrawal from Saudi territory may be an opening toward conflict resolution which we should support.

Similarly we should encourage economic development in the south in part to undermine secessionism. In this regard the long neglected port of Aden is an opportunity. We should encourage a multinational effort to rebuild this once great port in its strategic location near the Bab al Mandeb, one of the energy choke points of the world. The United States should partner with other countries that have an interest in this and can help fund such a project including the Saudis and Gulf States, China, India, Japan and the EU.

Finally we also need to keep in mind that AQAP still takes its strategic guidance and direction from the al Qaeda core leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The merger between the Yemeni and Saudi factions of AQ that created AQAP last January was directed by Usama bin Laden. He has now implied that he directed the Christmas day attack. How much his hand actually is directly involved now in Yemen is frankly an unknown but he remains the virtual leader of the global jihad. Yemen is a vital battlefield in the war against al Qaeda but the epicenter is still in Pakistan.