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THE YEMEN BOMBING: ANOTHER WAKE-UP CALL IN THE TERRORIST SHADOW WAR

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The October 12 bombing of the USS Cole in the port of Aden in Yemen was not a direct reaction to intensifying Israeli–Palestinian violence, but most likely part of a long-term campaign to drive American influence out of the Middle East, overthrow moderate Arab governments, and replace them with radical anti-Western regimes. The terrorist operation apparently was planned far in advance of the Cole's arrival and probably would have occurred regardless of the events unfolding in Israel and the Palestinian territories. The chief suspects in the bombing—Osama bin Laden's terrorist network and Iraq—share a virulent hostility to the United States and to Arab governments that cooperate with it. The United States must take steps to prevent similar bombings in the future by improving security around its naval vessels, avoiding insecure ports, and bringing the terrorists to justice. Beyond this, Washington must develop a systematic policy for uprooting terrorists from sanctuaries such as Afghanistan and imposing stiffer penalties on states and clandestine groups that resort to terrorism.

Prime Suspect: The bin Laden Network.

Although the Cole bombing occurred during a period of heightened Israeli–Palestinian tensions, it probably was unrelated to that struggle. Palestinian terrorist groups that have resorted to suicide bombings— Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—have never targeted American military personnel and

would be much more likely to strike Israeli targets. Lebanon's Hezbollah organization, which also has sympathizers in Yemen, conducted suicide truck bomb attacks in 1983 against the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut but has focused its terrorist campaign against Israel since releasing its last American hostages in 1991.

The bombing of the Cole bears a close resemblance to several other terrorist operations conducted by the loose terrorist network headed by the exiled Saudi, Osama bin Laden, now based in Afghanistan. Like two previous bin Laden terrorist bombs detonated in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, the operation involved a huge bomb targeted against U.S. military personnel. Moreover, bin Laden is known to have followers in Yemen and has launched terrorist operations there in the past. His first terrorist bombing is believed to have been the 1992 bombing of a hotel in Yemen used by American military personnel en route to humanitarian operations in Somalia.

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Significantly, investigators probing the Cole bombing reportedly have linked several suspects to the Hadramawt, a region in eastern Yemen that was the birthplace of bin Laden's father and now contains tribal fiefdoms that are strongholds of Islamic radicalism.

Iraq also may have been involved in the Cole bombing. The sophisticated nature of the bomb, which was shaped and placed within a metal container to channel the blast into the hull of the warship, suggests state involvement. Iraqi officials are known to have made contact with bin Laden in Afghanistan, and Iraq has used terrorist surrogates in the past. Saddam Hussein shares bin Laden's goal of expelling American military forces from the Arabian peninsula, and the USS Cole was bound for the Persian Gulf to help maintain the naval quarantine of Iraq.

It will take time to determine who is responsible for the attack, but the presence of bin Laden's supporters and other terrorist groups in Yemen calls into question the prudence of the port visit. The Pentagon should rule out port visits in Aden until terrorist groups are expelled from Yemen and port security is greatly improved. The Pentagon also should reevaluate the security situation in other ports frequented by the U.S. Navy. Oilers should be dispatched from other theaters to the Middle East–South Asia region to reduce the need for U.S. vessels to refuel in potentially dangerous ports. The Navy should develop more aggressive anti-terrorist tactics for ships entering foreign ports; any vessel approaching an American warship should be stopped and inspected. The Navy should consider deploying barriers similar to the plastic barriers used to contain oil spills to protect its ships from small-craft suicide bombers in high-risk situations.

The USS Cole was put in a vulnerable position partly because the U.S. Navy has been stretched thin to meet its global commitments. Since 1992, the Navy has shrunk from 393 ships to 316. This has forced it to break up its battle groups by deploying individual ships on missions unsupported by oilers and other support ships that could

reduce the need for frequent port visits. The United States needs to reverse the decline in naval strength, particularly in the number of support ships that could resupply and refuel vessels at sea, thereby reducing their vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

Washington also should reduce the number of peacekeeping and humanitarian missions that divert its military forces from their primary military missions. U.S. Navy ships and military personnel are symbols of American power targeted by terrorists regardless of the reason for their deployment. This should be factored into any decision to commit U.S. military forces to humanitarian missions such as the 1982–1984 multinational peacekeeping deployment in Lebanon or the 1992–1995 deployment in Somalia.

Conclusion. The United States has been targeted repeatedly in a low-intensity terrorist war waged by Osama bin Laden's global terrorist network, which is determined to expel U.S. and Western influence from Muslim lands and replace moderate governments with radical Islamic regimes. The United States can reduce its vulnerability to terrorist attacks, but it cannot end such attacks until it has destroyed bin Laden's organization.

Washington must relentlessly hunt down the culprits behind the Cole bombing and bring them to justice. But it should look beyond the terrorist pawns deployed by bin Laden and take action against the states that support him: the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that gives him sanctuary and possibly Saddam Hussein's Iraqi dictatorship. The U.S. goal should be to oust these regimes, not merely to contain them, because as long as they remain in power the United States and its allies face a heightened threat from international terrorism.

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