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Yemen and the Resurgent Al-Qaeda Threat

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The failed attempt to bomb an American airliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day has focused attention on the rising threat posed by the al-Qaeda franchise based in Yemen, long a stronghold for radical Islamist forces.

Yemen offers al-Qaeda many advantages: the protection of friendly tribal leaders opposed to a weak central government, the support of radical Muslim religious leaders, porous borders that facilitate covert movements and offer a back door to Saudi Arabia, and a sympathetic population that has been spoon-fed anti-Western propaganda for decades by militant Islamists and pro-Soviet Marxists. To combat the growing threat of terrorists based in Yemen, the U.S. should work with the beleaguered Yemeni government, Britain, Saudi Arabia, and other threatened countries to attack al-Qaeda's regional leadership, disrupt its operations, and diminish its ability to launch terrorist attacks.

Hotbed of Islamist Radicalism. Yemen, Osama bin Laden's ancestral homeland, long has been a bastion of support for militant Islamism and al-Qaeda. Many Yemenis who migrated to Saudi Arabia to find work during the oil boom of the 1970s were exposed to the combative doctrines of Saudi Wahhabi Islam.

Yemenis made up a disproportionate number of the estimated 25,000 foreign Muslims who flocked to Afghanistan to join the jihad against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. They also make up a large segment of al-Qaeda, which was founded by veterans of that jihad, to expand the struggle into a global revolutionary campaign.

Al-Qaeda's first terrorist attack against Americans occurred in Yemen in December 1992, when a bomb was detonated in a hotel used by U.S. military personnel involved in supporting the humanitarian food relief flights to Somalia. Al-Qaeda launched a much more successful attack in Yemen in October 2000 when it bombed the USS *Cole* in the port of Aden, killing 17 American sailors.¹

Yemen also factored into the radicalization of American Muslims such as John Walker Lindh, who traveled to Yemen to study Islam before being recruited to fight in Afghanistan, and seven Yemeni-Americans from Lackawanna, New York, who were recruited by al-Qaeda before 9/11. While six were convicted of supporting terrorism and sent to prison, the seventh became a fugitive and later surfaced in Yemen.

In 2002, al-Qaeda bombed the French oil tanker *Limbou* off the coast of Yemen. Later that year, a senior al-Qaeda leader was killed in Yemen in one of the first publicly revealed Predator drone attacks. Al-Qaeda grew much stronger in Yemen following the February 2006 escape of 23 al-Qaeda suspects—including some of the terrorists responsible for the bombing of the *Cole*—from a Yemeni prison. U.S. intelligence officials assessed that the well-organized

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jailbreak was assisted by members of Yemen's intelligence services sympathetic to al-Qaeda.²

Al-Qaeda's Growing Threat. Yemen became increasingly important as a base of operations for al-Qaeda after crackdowns in other countries in recent years. In September 2008, al-Qaeda launched a complex attack on the U.S. Embassy in Yemen that killed 19 people, including an American woman.

Yemen's importance to al-Qaeda increased further when al-Qaeda members pushed out of Saudi Arabia merged with the Yemeni branch to form Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in January 2009.

Yemen is also the refuge of radical Muslim cleric Anwar al-Aulaqi, a Yemeni-American ideologue believed to be an influential guide for many al-Qaeda members, including three of the September 11 hijackers. Major Nidal Hasan, who killed 13 soldiers in a November 2009 rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, sought guidance from Aulaqi and exchanged e-mails with him for months before the attack.³

The Yemeni government has linked Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the would-be Christmas Day bomber, to Aulaqi.⁴ AQAP had previously used explosives similar to those Abdulmutallab used in a failed assassination attempt by a suicide bomber last August against a Saudi prince who led the kingdom's counterterrorism efforts.

AQAP, which is estimated to have 200–300 full-fledged members, has exploited alliances with powerful, well-armed Yemeni tribes, including the radical cleric's Aulaq tribe, to establish sanctuaries and training bases in Yemen's rugged mountains. This is similar to al-Qaeda's *modus operandi* in Afghanistan before 9/11 and in Pakistan's tribal badlands today.

Boosting Counterterrorism Efforts in Yemen. Yemen is not a failed state, but it is on the path to

become one if present trends continue. Yemen's meager oil exports, the chief source of government revenue, peaked in 2002 and will probably run out in the next decade. Growing water shortages, high unemployment, government corruption, Sunni-Shia tensions, and tribal rivalries have handicapped one of the fastest-growing populations in the Middle East.

The U.S. has repeatedly prodded the Yemeni government to take stronger action against al-Qaeda. This has produced some results, but the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh perceives greater threats from a Shia rebellion led by the Houthi clan in the north and chronic secessionist agitation in the oil-rich south. This region was formerly part of South Yemen, which merged with North Yemen in 1990 and mounted a bloody uprising in 1994. President Saleh crushed the rebellion with the help of Islamist militants and is reluctant to burn his bridges to his former allies, many of whom sympathize with or support AQAP.

The launching of at least two air strikes against AQAP targets in December suggests that the Yemeni government has stepped up cooperation against al-Qaeda. The U.S. should leverage foreign aid increases to secure stronger cooperation in the future. Washington should also help build up Yemeni counterterrorism capabilities, ensuring that they are fully focused on AQAP, not diverted for use against the Houthi rebels. Funding, training, equipment, and close cooperation should be afforded to Yemen's National Security Bureau, an intelligence agency that has a much better track record in fighting AQAP than the Political Security Organization, an intelligence agency infiltrated by AQAP sympathizers that should be shunned.⁵

Washington should also press for the use of *Predator* drone strikes against high-ranking AQAP leaders while taking care to minimize civilian casualties

1. See James Phillips, "The Yemen Bombing: Another Wakeup Call in the Terrorist Shadow War," Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum No. 773, October 25, 2000, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/EM703.cfm>.
2. Sudarsan Raghavan, "Al-Qaeda Group in Yemen Gaining Prominence," *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/27/AR2009122702022.html> (January 8, 2010).
3. Stephen F. Hayes and Thomas Joscelyn, "Connecting the Dots," *The Weekly Standard*, November 23, 2009.
4. Lee Keath, "Yemen Says Nigerian May Have Met Radical Cleric," Associated Press, January 7, 2010, at http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/M/ML_YEMEN_AL_QAIDA?SITE=MAHYC&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT (January 8, 2010).

to the greatest degree possible. This is not a silver bullet, but over time it can reduce the effectiveness of AQAP.

Washington should also work with allies such as Britain and Saudi Arabia to increase economic development aid to reduce a fertile recruiting pool for AQAP. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has called for an international conference to provide aid to Yemen. This is unlikely to be a long-term solution but can help to increase Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation in the short run. Saudi Arabia can also be helpful in rewarding Yemeni tribal leaders for turning against AQAP or at least denying it access to their territory.

Of course, one of the most useful policies would be to stop making the problem worse by repatriating Yemeni terrorists held at Guantanamo Bay, where they form the single largest group of remaining prisoners.⁶ Yemen's revolving-door prisons, some of which are staffed by al-Qaeda sympathizers, offer little assurance that repatriated detainees will not return to their murderous activities.

The Saudi terrorist rehabilitation program has also yielded questionable results. At least two of the planners of the Christmas Day bombing were al-Qaeda members who were released from Guantanamo in 2007 and sent home to Saudi Arabia, where they were enrolled in an "art therapy rehabilitation program" that had little known effect on their murderous ideology. The two later found sanctuary in Yemen.⁷

Diminishing the Threat. Given the favorable Yemeni environment that it operates within, Osama bin Laden's transnational terrorist network is likely to remain a potent force in that troubled country for many years to come. Nonetheless, discreet and well-targeted U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with the Yemeni government and close coordination with other allies can help diminish the threat.

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5. Michael Knights, "Strengthening Yemeni Counterterrorism Forces: Challenges and Political Considerations," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 6, 2010, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3158> (January 8, 2010).
 6. Charles Stimson, "Yemeni Terrorist Transfers: Policies That Make Sense," Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2745, January 6, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2745.cfm>.
 7. Brian Ross, Joseph Rhee, and Rehab El-Buri, "Al Qaeda Leader Behind Northwest Flight 253 Terror Plot Was Released by U.S.," ABC News, December 28, 2009, at <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/northwest-flight-253-al-qaeda-leaders-terror-plot/story?id=9434065> (January 8, 2010).