Terrorism in Yemen

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Long known as a fertile ground for al-Qaeda activities, Yemen was once again at the centre of global attention as it transpired that the Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who had unsuccessfully attempted to blow up a Christmas Day flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, had been 'radicalized, trained and equipped by a Yemeni from the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)'.[1] The incident caused great consternation across the globe as it raised the specter of al-Qaeda gaining critical foothold in a strategically placed country which is so consumed by grave security and economic challenges that many have come to view it as the 'next failed state'.[2] Nowhere else, however, did alarm bells ring louder than in the US where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the threat emanating from Yemen as 'global' in its dimensions.[3] British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's decision to call a summit meeting regarding this threat on January 28, 2010[4] further attests to the urgency that has gripped Western capitals to take immediate corrective measures vis-à-vis the Middle Eastern country.

Though the al-Qaeda threat may have been blown out of proportion, as Yemeni officials claim,[5] the fact remains that it has already established its feet in the country. Moreover, diminishing state capacity resulting from severe economic malaise, mounting security challenges and highly inefficient governance afford the terrorist organization ample opportunities to turn the country into a strong base for itself on the way to creating an 'intellectual terrorism incubator'.[6] The situation in Yemen therefore warrants immediate, careful and sustained policies on the part of state as well as major international players if it is to be adequately ameliorated.

In the following pages, an effort is being made to identify and explain the factors which have helped and are still helping al-Qaeda to establish a firm presence in the country. It discusses also what possible options are available to other major players, particularly the US, if they are to stop al-Qaeda from gaining further strength in Yemen. Some of the factors that have facilitated the organization's rise in Yemen will be discussed below.

Cooption and containment as opposed to confrontation

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President Ali Abdullah Saleh's policy of accommodating and co-opting rather than confronting militant elements in Yemen is believed to have been the major factor behind al-Qaeda's rise in the country. This policy dates back to the early 1990s when the government allegedly struck a deal or a 'covenant of security' with the Yemeni mujahideen returning from Afghanistan; this won them freedom of movement provided they did not create trouble inside Yemen.[7] These 'Yemeni-Afghans' are believed to have subsequently coalesced into new jihadi groups, of which the most important – Islamic Army of Aden-Abyan - is the Yemeni affiliate of al-Qaeda.[8]

The Saleh regime however, continued to turn a blind eye to the gradual ascendancy of al-Qaeda affiliates even as they started violating the covenant. This became clear with the bombing of the USS *Cole* in 2000 and an assault on the French tanker - the *Limburg* - in 2002. After September 2001, after facing immense pressure from the US, Yemen pledged to support the war on terrorism and redoubled its counterterrorism efforts but the policy soon started showing signs of weakening. In late 2003, President Saleh announced a decision to release a number of militants linked to al-Qaeda as long as they 'pledged to respect the rights of non-Muslim foreigners living in Yemen or visiting it.'[9] A February 2006 jailbreak that saw an escape of 23 terrorists, including some top al-Qaeda leaders, from a high-security Sana'a prison has also been cited by many as a proof of official complicity with al-Qaeda elements.[10]

This soft approach towards militants is not without reason. The government is believed to have used them in its fight against rebel movements and opponents of the regime, particularly during the 1994 civil war, when President Saleh successfully co-opted the Islamist fighters against southern secessionists.[11] Yemeni officials in fact own up to this policy even today. Foreign Minister Abu Bakar al-Qirbi was recently quoted by *The Guardian* as saying that 'Yemen has dealt with some of those affiliated with al-Qaeda because they say they are prepared to cooperate with the government and help fight other extremists.'[12] This policy of cooption and containment is believed to have been seen by al-Qaeda elements as the regime's weakness, encouraging them to strengthen and expand their forces within Yemeni territory. [13]

Other security challenges

Another reason for al-Qaeda's ascendancy in Yemen has been the government's preoccupation with security threats emanating from the Sa'dah rebellion in the north and a rising secessionist movement in the south. The former has been led by members of the Houthi family who

belong to the Shia Zaidi sect. They condemn Saleh's alliance with the US, resent his perceived support for Salafi Sunnis, complain about economic marginalization of their region and demand freedom of worship and social justice.[14] The government on the other hand accuses the Houthis of being a fundamentalist religious group that is loyal to Iran and aligned with the Lebanese Hezbollah. They are also accused of undermining the Yemeni state and planning to restore the Zaidi imamate[15], whose toppling in 1962 had led to the establishment of the modern republic. The regime has also tried to portray the conflict as a battle against terrorism.[16]

Lately, this conflict has assumed very dangerous regional dimensions as Saudi Arabian forces attacked rebel strongholds inside Yemen. These were claimed to have had infiltrated the Kingdom,[17] and this was followed by Iranian officials criticizing the Saudi role. Needless to say, peace in Yemen will have positive repercussions on peace in the entire region.

The second major challenge for the regime emanates from separatist movements from the south. Yemen achieved reunification of its two parts – the Yemen Arab Republic (in the north) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (in the South) in May 1990. Relations between both parts of the new Republic of Yemen have not been very cordial. The southerners in fact tried to undo the unification in 1994; this led to a brutal civil war culminating in victory for the North under President Ali Abdullah Saleh.[18] Secessionist elements however, have repeatedly created troubles for the central government. Like the Houthis, the southerners too complain of economic marginalization of their region which contains the bulk of Yemen's oil reserves as well as exclusion from networks in business, politics and the military that usually have patronage from the north.[19]

In this scenario, it becomes clear that the regime's threat perception originates mainly from the Houthi and southern rebellions and not from al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Tackling al-Qaeda therefore has not been a prime concern. Besides, the two armed rebellions fighting the government have put an extortionate stress on its dwindling financial resources, making it difficult to confront al-Qaeda with gusto even if it had been adopted as a policy. A high ranking Yemeni official rightly pointed out that 'if the Saudis need to buy $200m worth of communications equipment for security, they can. But if we need to spend $1m we have to squeeze and save.'[20]

Diminishing state capacity and poor governance

Diminishing state capacity mainly due to mounting economic challenges is manifest in poor governance structures and has been another major factor that has facilitated al-Qaeda's quest to establish safe havens in

Yemen. Al-Qaeda has benefited from rampant poverty and a lack of government services and control across the country to garner support and find regions in which to operate.[21] As large swaths of territory remain outside the central government's authority, al-Qaeda has been successful in finding safe havens in these areas mainly by paying the tribes who had little sympathy for a central government that was criticized for not having done anything to improve their lives.

A Sana'a-based source, quoted in *Financial Times*, pointed to this fact: 'It's clear that in the areas where al-Qaeda is located, there are places that are ungoverned and economic issues are paramount – no water, no jobs, or electricity.'[22] A country ranking 153 on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index, Yemen certainly offers al-Qaeda the necessary conditions which it can capitalize on to deepen its presence among impoverished people.

The economic challenges confronting Yemen are due to limited resources which are rapidly depleting, a burgeoning population which is increasing at one of the fastest rates in the world, and rampant corruption which makes it one of the most corrupt countries in the world - ranking 141 out of 180 according to Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perception Index.[23]

Influx of al-Qaeda elements from other areas

Yemen's terrorism problem has been exacerbated by an influx of al-Qaeda elements from other areas where they had come under intense pressure from state authorities. Commentators, diplomats and security officials have noted that the strength of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP has been bolstered by its ranks being filled up by fleeing militants particularly from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan.[24] As counter-terrorism efforts in these countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, make it increasingly difficult for al-Qaeda to operate, most of its members are believed to have moved to Yemen expecting a more hospitable climate. Since large swaths of the territory are beyond the remit of the central government, a tribal society and a rugged terrain make it an attractive option for fleeing terrorists. The merger of al-Qaeda branches in Yemen and Saudi Arabia in January 2009 under the title of AQAP adds credence to such an argument. Further evidence of cross-border terrorist movement comes from the widespread belief that a Saudi citizen named Saeed al Shehri is the second-in-command of AQAP.[25]

AQAP is also believed to be attracting militants from Somalia where an al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabab is fighting against the US-backed transitional

government. Yemen has long served as a refugee outpost for Somalis fleeing chaos and mayhem at home, but now with clear signs of cooperation between al-Shabab and AQAP who are said to be 'swapping' militants,[26] Yemeni officials fear that some of the refugees could be al-Shabab fighters who could fill the ranks of AQAP.[27] Unfortunately then, Yemen is not only paying the price for successes of some, it is also bearing the brunt of the failures of others.

US options in Yemen

Though already on the radar screen of US security establishment, Yemen has been receiving unprecedented attention since the Christmas Day incident when the Head of US Central Command General David Petraeus dashed to Yemen, where he held talks with President Saleh and promised to double security assistance.[28] The contours of this new 'security assistance' have started emerging. According to a recent *Washington Post* report, US military teams and intelligence agencies are deeply involved in secret joint operations with Yemeni troops. The Americans, according to the report, do not take part in raids in Yemen but help by planning missions, developing tactics and providing weapons and ammunition.[29] This strategy is a continuation of US counterterrorism policies pursued elsewhere whereby working with foreign partners - even those with questionable human rights records, feeble democracies and week accountability structures - has been deemed the best way to counter al-Qaeda.[30]

The risk, however, is that looking at the situation in Yemen only through a security prism, as the US appears to be doing, will not eradicate al-Qaeda; at best, some of its leaders might get killed. Bolstering the Saleh regime through military and financial assistance too will not solve the problem as aid would more likely be used against opponents of the regime and not against al-Qaeda. To get rid of the menace, Yemen will have to be helped to tackle its other security, economic and governance problems - failing which, it will continue to be a fertile ground for al-Qaeda and other such groups. The US, with the support of European and Gulf states, can help Yemen in the following ways:

1. The US should exert pressure on the Saleh regime to put an end to the internal conflicts. The President should be coaxed into accommodating the fair demands of rebel groups and addressing their economic, social, political and religious grievances so that they are ready to shun violence. This will enable the government to devote itself to fighting al-Qaeda and deprive it of any opportunity to exploit cleavages in the society.

2. Though difficult to argue that poverty is the only or even the major cause of extremism, it cannot be gainsaid that someone who sees no prospects for himself in life is more susceptible to radicalisation. Yemen, the poorest of all Arab states, should then be helped to overcome its enormous economic problems by moving it towards significant economic reforms and assuring sustained cooperation by the US and the European and the Gulf powers.

3. Strengthening state capacity for improved governance should be one of the top priorities of foreign powers seeking to stabilise Yemen. State institutions should be strengthened and provision of basic services for the common people be ensured so that the state has popular support, making it difficult for terrorists to find any vacuum to operate in.

4. State security apparatus needs to be strengthened to enable it to exert control over its entire territory. At the same time, it ought to be ensured that this does not target the regime opponents. Helping Yemen to secure its porous borders and coastline from an influx of arms and terrorists should be prioritized. Intelligence sharing, training and provision of modern equipment necessary for counterterrorism are all needed. US cooperation in this regard, however, should be covert due to the rampant anti-US feelings among the Yemeni people.

To deny al-Qaeda safe havens requires a change in US policies beyond the borders of Yemen. The US should realize that extremist ideologies cannot be defeated by military might only; rather it should pursue policies to 'win the hearts and minds' of Muslim people across the globe. As long as it continues to occupy Muslim lands in Iraq and Afghanistan and tolerate Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, radical elements will keep finding new recruits to propagate extremist ideologies.

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