

How did the poorest country in the Arab World become one of the most important?

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Posted by AD Brown



Overlooking the Saudi boarder with Yemen © NYTimes

With a Houthi rebel insurgency in the north and a secessionist movement in the south, Yemen has not seen true stability nor all-encompassing governance in decades. [40% of its water supply is used to cultivate qat](#), an amphetamine that [more than 70% of households in Yemen say have at least one user](#). Couple the deep cultural, political and economic significance of the drug (from use once a week by the wealthy to widespread use following economic expansion in the 1970s) with the declining water supply and a recipe for crisis emerges.

To make matters worse, the fragile state (North and South Yemen are hanging by the threads of a unification in 1990) is slowly and finally moving into the limelight in the global fight on extremism, ushering in fresh and false voices on what policies should be implemented.

Not too failed and not too stable, Yemen is a ripe and ideal location for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP, [essentially a combination of Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda forces](#) (the two groups emerged mainly due to strong Saudi clampdowns following the 2003 bombings in Riyadh), has found a niche for planning, staging and recruiting for future regional and global attacks.

Noting the security risk, the Obama administration has been active in attempts to combat the threat since day one. Given the slew of failed plots coming out of Yemen (see the Christmas Day Bomber, the October Cargo Bomb Plot), along with the fresh faces on the fight on terror (see Anwar al-Awlaki and AQAP's presence in the media), it may only be a matter of time until the calls for boots amplify and expand.

This, however, would prove disastrous domestically, regionally, and internationally. A sure way to guarantee Obama's failure in November 2012 is through the opening of a conventional front in Yemen. Boots would [guarantee a massive increase in regional attacks](#), including suicide bombings which would not only help to destabilize the

Yemeni President Saleh's regime (not to mention worry the Saudi regime, too) but would put more US and coalition troops at risk. Bringing the fight to Yemen would only make it that much easier for AQAP to fight the "far enemy." Plus, and perhaps most importantly, the Obama team would stand to lose substantial ground in the international arena. In the era of austerity, bailouts, and drawdowns in Afghanistan and Iraq, can the US politically and economically afford the repercussions of a full-scale overt operation in Yemen?

Defense Secretary Robert Gates [recently echoed](#) what President Obama has repeatedly stated on the concept of conventional activity in Yemen. The current policy is about to shift from a [reliance on mostly cruise missiles](#) to covert UAV strikes and more CIA "U.S. hunter-killer teams" and this is the most politically practical move. Here's to hoping it stays that way.

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