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Yemen: Is Economic Aid the Best Solution for this Ailing State?

LSE Ideas

By Christopher Swift

The failed bombing of Northwest Flight 253 has sparked renewed emphasis on Yemen and its role as a sanctuary for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Just days after the attempt, the Obama administration promised to double civilian and military assistance to Yemen. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown pledged an additional £100 million to bolster the Yemeni government. And the European Parliament opened debate into efforts to assist the ailing Arab republic.

This emphasis on economic assistance will headline the 28 January Yemen Ministerial, to be held on alongside the London Conference on Afghanistan. Unlike multilateral initiatives in other al-Qaeda sanctuaries, this gathering will address Yemen's condition on a proactive, rather than reactive, basis. That aim is commendable, if not essential. Yet while economic aid is necessary, it will not be sufficient. And so long as that aid emphasizes national elites rather than its traditional social structures, it will only amplify Yemen's internal discord.

This is not to malign foreign aid. With unemployment reaching thirty-five percent and nominal per-capita GDP around £726, Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Muslim world. Its population is growing. Its water table is falling. And its oil reserves are running dry. Faced with these pressures, President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government may soon lack the means to mend Yemen's deteriorating social fabric. By delaying collapse and encouraging growth, foreign assistance might ameliorate these destabilizing conditions.

Yemen's weakness is not merely a matter of development, however. Since 2004, the predominantly Sunni government has fought an intermittent campaign against Shi'a Houthi rebels in the north. With Iran intervening to support the Houthi and Saudi Arabia moving to secure its frontier, that conflict may invite a proxy war. The South Yemen insurgency is equally destabilizing. Sparked by a dispute over military pensions in 2007, the secessionist movement now espouses many of the same grievances that animated the 1994 Yemeni Civil War.

These conflicts erode state authority. Despite its nominally republican government, tribal networks still dominate Yemeni politics. And like Afghanistan, Iraq, or Somalia, those networks may either complement or constrain centralized power. Thus the more Saleh's government contends with indigenous insurgents, the less it can address the other sources of domestic disorder. And the longer that disorder persists, the more it empowers AQAP.

According to Olivier Roy, al-Qaeda's uprooted nature makes it difficult to operate in indigenous societies without support from local allies. Yet unlike Chechnya, Xingjian, or Afghanistan, Yemen presents few of the social or cultural barriers that frustrate Arab militants. AQAP is comprised of Saudis and Yemenis rooted in indigenous tribal structures. And in some communities, the movement now presents a meaningful alternative to governmental authority. Thus despite its modest size, AQAP may be uniquely positioned to exploit local conditions for regional, and perhaps even global, ends.

Regional instability amplifies those concerns. With al-Qaeda propagandists calling for 'maritime jihad', and the radical al-Shabab movement pledging to support AQAP's struggle, the chaos afflicting neighbouring Somalia might permeate Yemen's porous borders. As one British parliamentarian noted, Yemen's collapse would 'provide a safe haven for terrorists with close proximity to important shipping routes and neighbouring oil-producing Saudi Arabia'.

Fighting poverty is an essential precondition for long-term stability. Yet that aim cannot be accomplished through aid alone. Nor can it be obtained without resolving the Northern and Southern insurgencies, reforming Yemen's corrupt patronage system, and ending repressive government policies. Against that backdrop, Western governments must remain wary of Yemeni efforts to expropriate external resources to advance internal agendas.

Foreign aid also carries unforeseen consequences, including the risk that the regime will be seen a proxy for Western infidels. Elements of that critique already resonate within the Yemeni ulema, where a coalition of prominent clerics recently threatened

jihad against foreign forces targeting AQAP. By channelling resentment generated by Western operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, that trope could radicalize a wider segment of Yemeni society.

Sensitivity to these concerns has not produced a coherent international strategy. If the goal is to eliminate AQAP, then an emphasis on kinetic operations, intelligence sharing, and military training may suffice. If the object is to strengthen the Yemeni state, however, then prolonged investment in education, economic development, and basic social services are necessary. The former invites an indigenous backlash that may undermine the government. The latter strains credulity, particularly when viewed in light of the West's economic malaise, burgeoning deficits, and countless unfulfilled promises in other failed and failing states.

Against this backdrop, the Yemeni Ministerial is more likely to coordinate existing policies than propose innovative initiatives. The United States will continue drone strikes and covert operations. The United Kingdom will expand its counter-terrorism training and intelligence coordination activities. And continental Europe will implement some of the economic assistance programs envisioned in the October 2009 EU-Yemen Communiqué. These approaches are complementary, to be sure. Yet ultimately their effect is more palliative than curative.

Three measures would give the Yemeni Ministerial a more substantive foundation. First, Western governments should encourage multilateral military, intelligence, and law enforcement coordination across the Arabian Peninsula. Absent regional coordination, even the most effective national campaigns may simply drive the al-Qaeda threat elsewhere. Second, the international community should help Yemen mediate disputes with indigenous insurgents. This would stem a significant source of internal disorder while laying the foundations for sustainable economic development. More significantly, it would mitigate the conditions that attract and sustain transnational terrorist syndicates.

Finally, Western governments should adopt population-centric policies. This does not mean abandoning the Yemeni government. Nor does it require military interventions similar to the surge in Iraq or NATO's operations in Afghanistan. But if recent experience in those theatres provides any guidance, it is that state-centric solutions are ill-suited to tribal societies. So long as indigenous networks represent a counterweight to state authority, they require complementary engagement. And so long as those network shelter, or sustain AQAP, they are the social terrain in which Yemen's future will be won or lost.

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