Yemen: A state that must be saved

By Christopher Boucek

Yemen’s problems are many, and some are already spreading beyond its borders. Security and stability are deteriorating. The population is growing rapidly. The economy is collapsing. There are few good options today; things will look worse tomorrow. Immediate and sustained international attention is needed to at least lessen the impact of some problems.

Yemen is a weak state with little history of central government control. The government’s first priorities have been a civil war in the north and a growing secessionist movement in the south; lower on the list has been confronting al-Qaeda, which is now resurgent. The government does not fully control all territory, nor does it have the authority or capacity to adequately deliver social services in many rural areas. Organizations inspired or directed by al-Qaeda have sought refuge in underdeveloped spaces.

Yemen is often considered a failing state. Its stability should be a critical concern for the United States. The international community needs an integrated and comprehensive approach that addresses both the immediate security issues and the underlying sources of instability and militancy. While military and counterterrorism operations are critical, long-term development assistance is also necessary.

The United States can support police reforms, help to professionalize the prison service and assist in implementing effective counterterrorism laws. Coast guard and border officials also need quiet aid in controlling smuggling, trafficking and illicit migration. The international community needs to build local capacity in Yemen before it is too late.

The writer is an associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Internal instability

North and South Yemen were united as the Republic of Yemen in May 1990, but the union was troubled. Southerners argue that the central government has denied the South its share of revenue from national resources. Protests have grown since about 2007, when the execution of a Marib security official is believed to have 100 to 300 members. Its leader, a Yemeni national named Nasser al-Wuhayshi, once served as Osama bin Laden’s personal secretary and was one of the Saudi nationals who had been detained at Guantanamo Bay. Areas where al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is thought to operate include portions of Marib, al-Jawf, Shabwah and a growing secessionist movement in the south; lower on the list has been confronting al-Qaeda, which is now resurgent. Yemen is often considered a failing state. Its stability should be a critical concern for the United States. The international community needs an integrated and comprehensive approach that addresses both the immediate security issues and the underlying sources of instability and militancy. While military and counterterrorism operations are critical, long-term development assistance is also necessary.

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