

WHAT'S NEXT IN YEMEN

News that the attempted Christmas Day bombing of a Northwest Airlines flight to Detroit was tied to al-Qaeda in Yemen brought a flurry of front-page articles warning that the fractious Arab state might become the next Afghanistan. Could al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) bring about the collapse of the fragile Yemeni government and usher in a Taliban-style regime? Is Yemen becoming the next base from which al-Qaeda will target the West?

Western policy makers are scrambling to be seen as responding decisively to the crisis, offering increased military assistance, development aid, or some combination thereof. Foreign intervention presents opportunities for positive change, but there are limits to what it can accomplish. Two issues must inform any action in Yemen: the nature of authority in the state, and the complex relationship between its tribal communities and militant jihadis such as AQAP.

YEMEN'S POLITICAL REALITIES

Yemen is a relatively young and developing state in which the rules of political power remain under negotiation. Al-Qaeda benefits from the weakness of the Yemeni regime, but the regime's failure would not necessarily be a win for the militants. Yemenis are not inherently sympathetic to militant jihadism, and AQAP probably benefits more from Yemen's position as a weak state than it would if the state were to fail altogether.

Much of Yemen's periphery is without effective formal, state-administered governance, but this does not mean that these regions are ungoverned—or there for the taking, particularly by outsiders to the area. Operatives have found safe haven in some of Yemen's tribal regions, but their goal of establishing an international caliphate conflicts with many local political realities, potentially limiting this hospitality.

Tribal society in Yemen is regulated by complex rules that bind its members to one another. As an external actor with a clear political agenda, AQAP poses a threat to the local mechanisms that maintain a level of order, and it is the tribes that are most able to rout AQAP if they see fit.

However, while Yemen's tribal terrain complicates Al-Qaeda's ambitions, its chances of becoming perceived as a legitimate political actor increase the longer it functions in the background without overtly challenging the tribes for power. The potency of AQAP rests on its ability to offer only slightly more to the tribes than what the government is offering. In the current turbulence of Yemen's domestic politics this is not an overwhelming task.

PITFALLS FOR THE WEST

What can the West do to improve the situation? Western policy makers must consider the intricacies of the Republic's domestic politics before acting. While overt military intervention is likely to further entrench al-Qaeda in the country, greatly increasing development aid also risks reinforcing a regime that is poorly equipped and poorly motivated to distribute the aid effectively among its people.

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The growth of militant jihadism in Yemen stems from the malignancy of the country's political system. Targeting AQAP's leadership in Yemen with U.S.-assisted air strikes does not change this, nor is it likely to strengthen the Yemeni regime against militant jihadism in the longer term. The U.S.-assisted air strikes conducted between December 17–24, 2009, have been seen on the Yemeni street as an affront to Yemen's sovereignty and were described in some of the local press as massacres.

The softer "whole of government" approach seems to assume that a loss for the Yemeni regime is a win for al-Qaeda but this oversimplifies the current crisis. More money will not necessarily make the Yemeni regime more willing to genuinely devolve power. The pledged aid cannot be delivered because the arms of the Yemeni government have atrophied and there is no local mechanism through which to effectively deliver such large amounts of aid.

This problem speaks volumes about conditions on the ground in Yemen. Unless there is to be an aid mission that intends to perform (and is capable of performing) the basic functions of government, foreign aid needs a local implementing partner. The Yemeni government has not proven it can fulfill this role; historically its leadership has lacked the political willingness and its institutions remain ineffective.

THE LONG-TERM OUTLOOK

As the West responds to recent events involving Yemen, it is important to remember that neither a military counterterrorism approach nor a short-term developmental approach can correct the source of the problem: The heavily centralized system of power that keeps resources and political leverage in the hands of a select few and further entrenches Yemenis' economic hardship.

Reinforcing the aspects of the Yemeni regime that threaten its survival is not the answer; a fundamental restructuring of the Yemeni political system is. The system must become far more inclusive, which means removing considerable power from the incumbent elite. This is undesirable in the eyes of some within that elite, particularly those who maintain their influence through extra-constitutional means.

Western chances of encouraging a more inclusive political system are questionable. In the long term, only a fundamental domestic restructuring of the political system to become much more inclusive will lead to stability.

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