

House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security

Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland – Al Qaeda in the Arabian
Peninsula (AQAP)

Testimony by Barak Barfi
Research Fellow
New America Foundation
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I want to begin by thanking Chairman Meahan and the committee members for inviting me to speak today. I would also like to thank my advisor Professor Richard Bulliet of Columbia University for teaching me the skills necessary to understand the Middle East. My prayers are with him and his family right now as they face a difficult time. I just returned from a month long journey in the Middle East, where I witnessed the Egyptian revolution and political unrest in Bahrain. Events in the region are challenging long-held views about the region, and Washington must be ready to respond.

Nowhere is this truer than in Yemen. In the wake of the 2009 Christmas Day bombing, I wrote a policy paper on Yemen in which I argued against the prevailing wisdom that the country was a failed state on the verge of collapse. I maintained that the threats facing Yemen – a secession movement, a sectarian rebellion, a strong al-Qaeda presence and economic turmoil – were not enough to topple a country historically marked by turmoil sometimes bordering on chaos. Since then, two Arab states have succumbed to the revolutionary fervor sweeping the Middle East, a third is on its knees, and a fourth has called out the military to quell protests.

Yet, while regimes were falling between December and February, Yemen hobbled along. Today, however, the viability of President Ali Abdallah Salih and his regime are in question. For the first time in Yemeni history, most of the tribes in the two largest confederations publically oppose the regime. The ruling party has suffered numerous defections, strikes are damaging the economy, and military units are mutinying against their superiors. A wily survivor, President Salih will have to reach deep into his bag of tricks to survive the latest and most serious threat to his 32 year rule.

THE HISTORY OF AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN

Among the challenges the Salih regime faces is a resilient al-Qaeda. The organization has a long history in Yemen. The family of al-Qaeda founder Usama Bin Ladin heralds from the eastern province of Hadhramawt and Yemen has always occupied a special place in his heart. In the early 1990's he was active in Yemeni politics, working to combat the atheist Socialist party.

After he moved to Afghanistan in 1996, Bin Ladin recruited Yemenis to staff key positions in his inner circle. He also used Yemen as a clearinghouse, routing phone calls through the country and sending people to safe houses there. But by the end of the decade, he decided to transform Yemen from a logistical hub to an operational theater. To this end, al-Qaeda targeted the USS Cole in October 2000, leading to the death of 17 American sailors.

After the 9/11 attacks, the Yemeni government allied itself with Washington and began cracking down on al-Qaeda. It arrested key operatives and allowed the US to stage a missile strike against the organization's leader. By 2004, al-Qaeda appeared decimated.

A January 2006 prison break by mid-level cadres reinvigorated the organization and by the end of the year, it was once again operational. Since then, al-Qaeda has carried out dozens of attacks against regime targets, Western diplomats, tourists, and oil installations. In December 2009, it

embarked on a new strategy when it dispatched a suicide bomber to attack the American homeland. Though the attack failed, it sharply illuminated the threat al-Qaeda's Arabian affiliate poses to the United States.

In January 2009, the Saudi Arabian and Yemeni branches merged to create al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The Saudi faction was compelled to seek the union after substantial losses brought the group to the brink of extinction. Though the Saudi regime was caught off guard when al-Qaeda began launching attacks in the kingdom in 2003, in subsequent years it was able to virtually eradicate the organization. The Saudi campaign led the remaining members to seek shelter in Yemen, where the regime has been less successful in stomping out the al-Qaeda branch there.

AQAP is shrewd, compact, and has shown a remarkable resolve in implementing its strategy without getting distracted by superfluous conflicts. The group is a formidable adversary, the likes of which Washington has not faced since Bin Ladin's organization was decimated in 2001.

AQAP IN ITS YEMENI HABITAT

AQAP has taken advantage of restless tribal regions to establish strongholds in areas far beyond the purview of the central government. Historically, Yemeni governments have been too weak to extend their authority to outlying provinces, giving the tribes there a substantial degree of independence. At the same time though, these clans have been frustrated by the modern regime's inability to provide basic services. As a result, they have often sold their loyalty to the highest bidder. In the past, they relied on largesse from the Marxist regime in South Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Today AQAP has exploited the tensions between the central regime and the tribal areas to carve out a sphere of influence. The organization is able to operate in these regions, often without fear of government retribution. It recruits mid-level cadres and foot soldiers among the tribes that host it.

The clans that shelter AQAP do not share the group's extremist views and puritan religious outlook. Rather, they support the organization for political reasons. They use AQAP as a tool to leverage their position vis-à-vis the central regime. Nevertheless, AQAP's attacks and vehement denunciation of the government has drawn the ire of some tribes, creating problems for the organization.

Despite its concentration on Yemen's tribal areas, AQAP has demonstrated its ability to operate far from its strongholds and it often drafts recruits outside these areas. To do so, it has developed a powerful propaganda machine that produces a bimonthly journal called *Sada al-Malahim* or *Echo of Battles*. It also reaches its audience through videos and internet statements. Recently, supporters of the organization began publishing an English magazine called *Inspire* that has proved to be widely popular among alienated Western Muslims who cannot understand the sometimes archaic Arabic used in *Echo of Battles*.

YEMEN'S EXTREMIST ENVIRONMENT

AQAP's extremism is not a new phenomenon in Yemen. It is simply the latest in a long line of radical groups that have exploited the country's fertile extremist environment. Whereas Arab states such as Algeria and Egypt jailed and persecuted veterans returning from the Afghan campaign against the Soviets, Yemen not only welcomed back its fighters, it also embraced Arab combatants from other countries.

With the regime too weak to combat its adversaries, it has relied on jihadists to fight its battles. When a union between North and South Yemen broke down in 1994, leading to civil war, President Salih dispatched Arab Afghans to subdue the secessionists. After a sectarian rebellion erupted in northern Yemen in 2004, the regime invited Salafists to quell it. The regime's historical tolerance of extremism, coupled with its alliances with jihadists, produced a society ripe for the radicalism preached by AQAP.

LOOKING AHEAD

AQAP is firmly entrenched in Yemen. American airstrikes against the group in December 2009 and January 2010 failed to neutralize the group. On the contrary, an emboldened AQAP was able to ratchet up its violence in 2010, carrying out more attacks last year than in any previous year. Its strikes were more daring and sophisticated. It began to confront military units and ambush checkpoints. And it once again sought to target the American homeland when it sent parcel bombs in November aboard freight planes.

The Yemeni military is ill-equipped to subdue AQAP. It is unable to operate efficiently in the tribal areas the organization calls home. Units dispatched to arrest AQAP cells are often captured. American training has gone a long way to shore up the Yemeni military, Coast Guard and Navy. Nevertheless, there is still much that needs to be done to bring up these forces to the combat levels necessary to confront AQAP.

The Salih regime has never viewed AQAP as the dire threat Washington has. Instead, it has focused on quelling a six year sectarian rebellion in the country's northern provinces and suppressing a secession movement in the South. Salih has told American diplomats that these two conflicts pose a more serious danger to his rule than AQAP does. In shifting military resources to address these two conflicts, the regime has at times neglected the AQAP file.

The current unrest gripping the country is bound to benefit AQAP in the short term. With the regime increasingly focused on its survival, it is likely to shift military resources away from targeting AQAP, freeing the organization to plot attacks. In short, 2011 holds great promise for a group that has historically thrived on political instability.

WHAT CAN THE US DO TO HELP YEMEN?

Embrace a Regional Approach - The United States must understand that there is no made-in-Washington solution to Yemen's problems. It must work with regional powers, such as Saudi

Arabia, to solve the challenges faced by Yemen. The Saudis provide hundreds of millions of dollars in aid annually, dwarfing Washington's contribution. But unlike Washington's aid, which seeks to strengthen Yemen, Riyadh's money is funneled to the tribes to weaken the central regime and keep it in line. Washington needs to encourage Riyadh to take a more constructive approach towards Yemen.

Seek to Integrate Yemen into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Yemen has long sought to join this exclusive club. Member states have a more intimate understanding of the challenges Sana'a faces and can better pool their resources to effectively address development and security concerns. The GCC can also offer Yemen a seat on key economic committees that would allow the country to benefit from the organization's deep coffers.

Conventional Aid Approaches Will Not Work – The United States has often believed that providing economic and technical aid can play a key role in solving their problems. But in Yemen, this approach will not work. The country simply does not have the technical capacity to absorb large amounts of aid. Examining past aid pledges to Yemen illustrates this dilemma. In 2006, international donors pledged \$5.7 billion to Yemen. But three years later, only about \$325 million of that had been disbursed.

Focus on Making Government More Responsive to Citizens' Needs – Washington needs to concentrate on better governance programs that will restore Yemenis' faith in their government. To this end, Washington should invest in initiatives that improve financial transparency and alleviate bureaucratic inertia. Today, a number of the protests in Yemen are focused on accountability and corruption. Washington can address these issues by working with government ministries and non-governmental organizations.

Support Apolitical Forms of Islam – Islam is not a monolithic religion whose primary goal is the destruction of the West. A number of Islamic currents are politically indifferent to America. In Yemen, Sufism has strong roots and its institutions are battling the same type of religious extremism that threatens the West. Washington needs to find a way to support Yemeni Sufism. Doing so will not only strengthen this moderate form of Islam, but also create a powerful counterweight to the radicalism Washington seeks to eradicate.

Support Academic and Cultural Exchanges – American expertise on Yemen is lacking. There are only a dozen scholars who have an intimate knowledge of the country. The best Yemen researchers come from France which provides ample funding for students and academics to sharpen their skills in the country. The American Institute for Yemeni Studies is tasked to do the same for Americans. But since 2008, the State Department has prevented scholars who have received federal funding from using it in Yemen for security reasons. As a result, between 15-19 scholars have been deprived of the opportunity to do research in Yemen. Academics who received grants in 2008 to do in country research will see their funding expire later this year. In Pakistan where the security situation is precarious, the State Department has found a way to accommodate scholars. It needs to do the same for researchers in Yemen. At the same time, Washington should foster cultural exchanges by granting more visas to Yemenis who seek to study in America. Doing so will allow Yemenis to view the United States beyond the military-security prism.