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Breaking the Camel's Back:

Maintaining U.S. Involvement in Yemen without Full Scale Military Intervention

by John Cochran

Yemen has long been a hot bed of unrest. Since its inception as a unified country in 1990, the northern and southern areas have strained to reject the other. Within these respective areas, the division is further amplified by the different tribal factions. The only element cementing the chaos together is a corrupt government headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh. These facts created an optimum environment for al-Qa'ida to establish a refuge, as well as successful recruiting grounds for the organization.¹ These combined attributes also create the potential for the US Military to become embroiled in another conflict that will cost needless lives, national treasure, and already meager diplomatic capital. Therefore, while the area does present a problem for the U.S. that needs to be addressed, it must not be addressed with full-scale military involvement.

The current situation in Yemen seems to be the textbook situation that the problem could be solved by U.S. military involvement. The government of Yemen is asking for assistance in the form of military involvement. Previous U.S. military operations have been successful in neutralizing Al Qaeda leadership, to include Abu Ali al-Harithi, who was suspected of being the mastermind behind the USS Cole bombing.² A government that wants U.S. involvement, confirmed Al Qaeda organizations and leaders, a fracturing country, and already successful U.S. operations: the entirety seems almost perfect for the deployment of U.S. military forces. However, this is a façade that, if engaged, would end with disastrous results, beginning with the overt military support to Yemen's corrupt government and even more corrupt president, Saleh.

Ali Abdullah Saleh has strongly advocated for cooperation with the U.S. in dealing with the terrorist threat in Yemen. However, in Saleh's determined effort to maintain his seat of power he has shown no moral compunction. In the article "No Blank Checks for Yemen", Stacey Yadav states that, "[s]ince the introduction of multiparty elections following unification, [Saleh] has channeled political competition to his benefit, pitting Yemen's Islamists against its socialists to maintain power."³ In addition, Yadav also highlights Saleh's relationship with Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, who has been listed for years by the U.S. Department of

¹ Sarah Phillips, *What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building*. (Carnegie Endowment Press, 2010), 1-3, 5. Charles Levinson and Margaret Coker, "Al Qaeda's Deep Tribal Ties Make Yemen a Terror Hub," *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 January 2010, 1. Emile Nakhleh, Statement to the Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations on Yemen, *Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm*, Hearing, January 2010.

Robert F. Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 6 July 2010

² This is an accredited/accepted fact per several sources and can be derived from Levinson and Coker's article. Levinson and Coker, "Al Qaeda's Deep Tribal Ties Make Yemen a Terror Hub", 3.

³ Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "No Blank Checks for Yemen", 1. *Foreign Policy*(2010), 1.

Treasury as a financier of terrorism.⁴ Saleh's character and regime are further detailed by Dr. Emile A. Nakhleh in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 2010. Dr. Nakhleh highlights Saleh's record of "...corruption, nepotism, repression, denial of human rights...willingness to make alliances with shady characters and centers of power in order to survive and bequeath his rule to his family."⁵

Saleh's time in office has been wrought with dealings between tribal leaders, terrorist organizations, and any other entity that he perceives keeps him in power. This has created a schism between the people of Yemen on one side and Saleh and his government on the other. In addition, Saleh's most recent attempts to encourage jihadists in Yemen to leave for Saudi Arabia and other gulf states have the potential to form a rift between Yemen's allies in the region.⁶ Therefore, the U.S. must proceed carefully when dealing with Saleh or risk being seen as supporting another corrupt government in the Middle East. If the U.S. is seen more as a supporter of Saleh as opposed to hunting al-Qa'ida it will provide additional fodder for al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) already robust propaganda campaign.

Saleh and his corrupt government are only part of a complicated equation in dealing with Yemen. In addition to the corrupt government, the country is divided between the north and south, as well as tribally.⁷ The amalgamation of the north and south in May 1990 to create the Republic of Yemen had a similar effect to post-World War I colonial powers dividing up the Middle East with a straight ruler. In creating a unified country the government of Yemen placed two peoples together who had polar opposite political and social philosophies. Northern Yemen was a functioning republic while southern Yemen was a socialist state. These political philosophies have continued over the past twenty years, resulting in constant unrest between the two factions. In addition to differing political philosophies, both Southern and Northern Yemen were sub-divided into independent tribal entities. The sum of this demographic has been played against each other by the national government since the creation of Yemen. Therefore the entity which is Yemen is a fractured civilization held together by rapidly depleting oil reserves and a draconian government. These facts, if coupled with U.S. military involvement, equates to a strategic win for the al-Qa'ida organization.⁸

The overt involvement of the U.S. military would be the tipping point for Yemen that would fracture the country.⁹ A full-scale U.S. military presence would promote the influx of foreign fighters, disenfranchisement of Arab partner-nations by the perceived invasion of yet another Muslim country, loss of diplomatic capital in the region and internationally, increase al-Qa'ida recruitment of Yemenis, and substantiate al-Qa'ida propaganda. This cascading effect would in turn gain support for al-Qa'ida throughout the region. In the end, an overt U.S. military presence would be the proverbial straw that "breaks the camel's back" in regards to the U.S.'s ongoing execution of the Global War on Terrorism. A U.S. military action would also give the

⁴ Yadav, "No Blank Checks for Yemen", 2.

⁵ Nakhleh, Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm.

⁶ Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan,"

⁷ Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan," Nakhleh, Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm. Phillips, What Comes Next In Yemen?, 7

⁸ Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan," Nakhleh, Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm." Frederick W. Kagan and Christopher Harnisch, "How to Apply 'Smart Power' in Yemen," The Wall Street Journal, 13 January 2010

⁹ Nakhleh, Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm. Yadav, No Blank Checks for Yemen

perception of the U.S. supporting/propping up another failed/corrupt government. It is capital the U.S. can ill afford to spend.¹⁰

However, these facts do negate the need for action in this area. Yemen's internal and external regional threats must be dealt with and there are options available that need to be taken. This is best illustrated by Dr. Emile Nakhleh's testimony when he stated, " Al-Qa'ida Central and AQAP would want the US to declare Yemen a new front in the war on terror hoping we would initiate massive military operations in that country. We should not fall in their trap! 'Invasion' of yet another Muslim country, especially one located in the greater 'Land of the Two Holy Mosques,' will be a propaganda bonanza for al-Qa'ida and other radical organizations."¹¹ However, this cannot dissuade the U.S. from acting on other existing options to secure this country. The U.S. must approach this complex problem with a similarly multifaceted answer.

Dr. Sarah Phillips gives a possible course of action in dealing with Yemen by taking a whole of government approach. In her opinion, the answer is in extending the reach of the current government throughout the country. In addition, Dr. Phillips advocates U.S. investment in economic development, improved government, and domestic stability.¹² This course of action bears merit but, it is only a portion of the needed equation. Dr. Nakhleh goes further in his testimony, stating the U.S. needs to incorporate its Arab and Muslim allies in the stabilization of Yemen. This stabilization, according to Dr. Nakhleh, must be viewed as "a long-term, generational project, which would require patience, expertise, and national commitment at the highest levels of our government."¹³ While Dr. Nakhleh does not expound on this topic, success in Yemen would necessitate that these partner nations provide more than a few million dollars in a coffer. It requires long-term sustained governance programs, humanitarian programs, and security cooperation deals in which the surrounding Arab countries take an active role in securing Yemen.¹⁴

These programs would run counter to current efforts by al-Qa'ida to establish itself in the region. Levinson and Coker highlight this fact in their article by stating, "[AQAP] has also started providing some basic services to locals in the country's rugged hinterlands, long neglected by the government... [AQ] has dug wells for the community, paid for medical treatments for locals, and is even paying monthly allowances to poor widows in the community."¹⁵ Both authors continue to highlight how militant groups have conducted similar humanitarian operations elsewhere with success, underlining the fact that this is as much a fight for peoples' heart and minds as it is a kinetic fight. The fight for the peoples' hearts and minds must be one of the main objectives of this multi-national partnership and it can be accomplished with an Arab national front and U.S. backing. In addition, joint military operations involving Yemenis and the same Arab partner-nations must occur, coupled with U.S. covert operations.¹⁶

¹⁰Yadav, No Blank Checks for Yemen. Nakhleh, Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm. Phillips, What Comes Next In Yemen?, 11-12

¹¹ Nakhleh "Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm.", 6.

¹²Phillips, What Comes Next In Yemen?, 11

¹³Nakhleh "Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm."

¹⁴Phillips, What Comes Next In Yemen?, 11-12

¹⁵Levinson and Coker. "Al Qaeda's Deep Tribal Ties Make Yemen a Terror Hub .", 4.

¹⁶Nakhleh "Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm.", 5-7. Phillips, What Comes Next In Yemen?, 11-12

While an overt U.S. military presence would be detrimental to Yemen's and the region's stability, overt Yeminis and partner Arab countries military operations against al-Qa'ida would demonstrate the region's resolve against the organization and eliminate the perception of U.S. manipulation/domination in the region. These military operations must be multifaceted in their implementation in order to attain the maximum affect.

Yemen's security forces must openly partner with other Muslim security forces and conduct operations against al-Qa'ida elements that exist within Yemen's borders. In addition to operations within Yemen's border, neighboring Muslim countries must step up security operations in their own countries, thereby eliminating al-Qa'ida's room for maneuver and external sanctuaries from which AQ could launch attacks into Yemen. This partner force must also co-opt the tribes in these contested areas to assist in the establishment of security and stability. This will give the security operations a tribal face, which in turn, will induce the inter-tribal customs of *umma*,¹⁷ as well as decrease the possibility of attacks by al-Qa'ida due to the possibility of a blood feud.¹⁸ Co-opting the tribal entities also gives these entities a "buy in" in regional control. This "buy in" would also facilitate open dialogue between the tribal leadership and the national government. In this dialogue, the national government will be working with the tribal leaders as per tribal customs. This direct relationship between national government and tribal leaders will elevate the importance of the tribal leadership, which in turn will prompt tribal leaders to discourage their members from participating or joining with al-Qa'ida.

In addition to this open engagement, there will need to be a covert side in order for the military operations to be fully effective, as well as allow the U.S. to participate in and monitor operational effects. In the covert operations, U.S. forces could physically participate with the Yemen and partner nation forces. Here the U.S. could bring its full capability to bear on the capture and neutralization of Al Qaeda leadership. Additionally, the U.S. would be able to assist all of the participating nations with intelligence capabilities in a clandestine or covert manner. With covert participation, the U.S. can demonstrate its support and resolve to secure the region without alienating the region further.

In conclusion, a full-scale whole of government approach, as outlined by both Dr. Phillips and Dr. Nakhleh, will be the most successful, but only if it is nested with a coalition of Muslim and Arab nations, as well as the local tribal participation. This coalition, backed by the U.S., will be able to monitor the humanitarian aid being given to Yemen and assist in its distribution, thus negating much of the possibility of misappropriation, as highlighted by Kagan and Harnisch. The two authors state, "The problems with Yemen will not be solved simply by throwing American money at them. [Developing] a Coherent strategy focused on the right objectives is important, and hard to do. [Despite] years of talk about the need to develop this kind of capability in the State Department or elsewhere in Washington, it does not exist. It must be built now, and quickly."¹⁹ This approach will also negate the Al Qaeda propaganda machine. The approach will be seen as Arab and Muslim nations defending each other independently and eliminating a threat to their people. Finally, for the entire campaign to be successful, the U.S. must be a supporting actor and not the progenitor of these operations. If the U.S. is viewed as

¹⁷ Phillips, What Comes next in Yemen, 10-11. In using the word umma, I am utilizing the tribal condition of hospitality and community where disagreements and issues can be discussed. This will bolster the tribal leader's clout, as well as bolster the federal government's reputation and clout in tribal issues.

¹⁸ Phillips, What Comes next in Yemen, 9.

¹⁹ Kagan and Harnisch, "How to Apply 'Smart Power' in Yemen,"

the lead in these operations, no matter what good outcomes result from the operation, the operations will be viewed as the U.S. not only invading another Muslim country but, in the words of Dr. Nakhleh, "...one located in the greater 'Land of the Two Holy Mosques.'" ²⁰Also, with complete engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. cannot afford to be fully committed to another area of operation. The partnership of national government, tribal leaders, Arab partner nations, with indirect/covert U.S. participation is the only logical course of action available to meet the goals of stabilizing the country and eliminating AQAP.

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²⁰ Nakhleh "Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm.",6