

36 The United States and Yemen

A history of unfulfilled expectations

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Yemen has never figured in the front rank of US foreign policy interests, even within only the Middle East. Nevertheless, it has occupied a certain and often significant degree of Washington's attention and concern at almost regular intervals across the last half-century. This has been even more true in the 2000s. Two constants over this entire period have been Washington's twin focus on Yemen's impact on Saudi Arabia and the stability of successive Yemeni regimes. All too often, Yemen has been a haven for ideological forces that have been antithetical to US interests.

The nature of these anti-status quo forces has evolved over time. The US, for its part, fundamentally a supporter of the status quo in the region, has maintained a steady if wobbly policy of engaging Sanaa governments while simultaneously regarding them as fragile, undependable, and/or untrustworthy. This certainly holds true today, as a regime narrowly based on a foundation of support by the military and two smallish tribes appears unable or unwilling to contain Islamist extremism, wages ineffective yet brutal war on its own citizens, and is powerless to deal with such pressing socioeconomic crises as an exploding population, pervasive and persistent poverty, declining modest petroleum revenues, and a precipitous fall in vital water resources.

There is a certain symmetry between the beginning of relations between the US and Yemen in the 1960s and relations in the 2000s. In both cases, the US sought to improve relations not to further direct US interests in Yemen but mainly because of US fears that the instability in Yemen and the presence there of antagonistic elements would create security problems for the region and farther afield. In the 1960s, the civil war in the north threatened to unleash pan-Arab nationalism and Nasserism on the Arabian Peninsula, while the emergence of an independent state in the south was seen as even more threatening with its Marxist ideology and total dependence on communist-bloc backers. In the 2000s, the specter of Islamist extremism in the form of jihadist activism has emerged as a direct challenge not only to the Yemen government but to the US as well.

Background

US relations with Yemen date to the 1940s. Diplomatic relations between the US and Yemen were established in 1946, and an American mission was established in Ta'izz, the de facto capital, in 1959 but moved to Sanaa in 1966. A Yemeni mission was opened in Washington before the 1962 revolution, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) started a small aid program, punctuated by the building of the road between Mocha, Ta'izz, and Sanaa.¹

The next step in US–Yemeni relations occurred with the revolution in the north.² Washington had seen its influence slipping in the Arab world as the wave of “progressive” Arab regimes began toppling monarchies and older constitutional regimes. Thus, the US was forced into a defensive posture that backed the remaining conservative regimes in the region.

The coup d'état of September 26, 1962 in Sanaa removed an extremely conservative monarchy—with which Washington had gotten along even if relations were not close. Furthermore, the coup replaced the monarchy with a radical republic—at least in rhetoric—that was strongly supported by Nasser's pan-Arab socialist Egypt. Indeed, the coup was quite likely engineered by Cairo.

Nevertheless, President Kennedy chose to make a statement of his willingness to work with Nasser and the emerging order in the Arab world. Accordingly, the US was one of the first countries to recognize the Yemen Arab Republic. It was largely an empty gesture as Britain opposed it and Saudi Arabia felt directly threatened (and gave refuge to the Imam and his family).³ Alienation from the Sanaa regime continued to grow as the civil war grew more entrenched and Soviet advisers appeared on the republican side.

US–Yemeni relations remained low key after the civil war. Washington welcomed the negotiated end to the civil war, and there was always a US embassy in Sanaa and the provision of a modest amount of aid. Nevertheless, US interests lay squarely with Saudi Arabia, and Yemen was mostly marginal to US foreign policy. Key US interests included the fear that the regime would collapse and the country would descend into anarchy that would threaten the conservative regimes of the Arabian Peninsula. The small amount of assistance that the US provided seemed to be a small, local side-show in the global cold war. The US and the Soviet Union both vied to provide military equipment to North Yemen, while the Sanaa regime was seen as a bulwark against the more radical South Yemen.

Washington's relations with South Yemen were far more troubled. Aden had been the site of the first US consulate in the Arabian Peninsula, established about 1940. It made a good listening post for Yemen and for Saudi Arabia as well until a consulate was established in Jiddah in 1942. Indeed, much of the information gathered seemed to be garnered from the British, who held Aden as a crown colony and the surrounding hinterland as a protectorate. For that reason, an American diplomatic presence in Aden was never a problem—until opposition groups began carrying out a campaign of hostile acts against the British presence in the 1960s. By November 1967, Britain was forced to hand over control of Aden and the protectorates to the radical National Liberation Front (NLF).⁴ The new People's Republic of Southern Yemen, later renamed the People's Republic of Democratic Yemen (PDRY), continued to have diplomatic relations with both Britain and the US even though it began building close ties with China, the Soviet Union, and East Germany. It was not long before the regime lurched even further to the left. At Independence Day celebrations in 1969, the PDRY abruptly announced it was cutting off relations with the US and ousting its embassy in Aden.

This development was not unexpected, particularly as the US ally Saudi Arabia had been funding and providing arms to various small South Yemeni groups that attempted to overthrow the regime from exile. Another reason for US suspicion of South Yemen was the logistical and safe-basing support that Aden provided for the leftist opposition front waging an insurrection in Oman's southern province of Dhufar. Furthermore, the NLF had grown out of the Arab Nationalists' Movement (ANM), and consequently its ties were close to such radical Palestinian groups as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, organizations that had acted against US interests on multiple occasions. Clearly, the US would have liked to see changes in Aden but apparently it did not regard the PDRY stance as threatening enough to justify active intervention. Fundamentally, the PDRY was a small, weak, and poor country that could do little real harm. Containment was a better and less risky option.

Unification and the crisis of 1990–91

The year 1990 was a momentous one for US–Yemeni relations. The first development was the long hoped for achievement of Yemeni unity in May. Unity had been a cherished goal since

before the 1962 revolution in the north, but had been stymied by the denouement of the British presence in the south. After Aden's independence, the North Yemeni government turned more conservative, while the South Yemeni government became more radical. One consequence was the outbreak of two small border wars in 1972 and 1979, which ended with renewed commitments to achieving unity.⁵ The key to a change in the environment that would actually permit the process of unity was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. The loss of its principal supporter pushed South Yemen into bankruptcy. (In addition, internecine struggles in 1969, 1971, 1982, and especially 1986 had removed many of the principal figures in South Yemeni politics and resulted in a less doctrinaire leadership.) The regime in Aden had no choice but to accept unity with the north essentially on the north's terms.

But only a few months after unification was achieved in May, the new Republic of Yemen (ROY) found itself in a serious crisis provoked by Iraq's August invasion of Kuwait. Yemen's relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq had been relatively warm, and Sanaa had joined with Iraq and Jordan to form the Arab Co-operation Council, an attempt to answer and emulate the far more viable Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). Furthermore, Yemeni public opinion seemed to be solidly in favor of Iraq's action. But, most importantly, Yemen held a seat on the UN Security Council at the time. The combination of its existing relations with Iraq and public opinion at home caused Yemen to abstain on a series of resolutions meant to condemn Iraq and authorize action to liberate Kuwait. The consequence was the deportation of approximately one million Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia and a termination of all foreign aid from the US and most Western countries. It took years for Yemen to get back into Washington's good graces, and diplomatic relations were not re-established with Kuwait until 1999.

As a consequence, US-ROY relations remained low key during the early to mid-1990s. Certainly, some US interests remained, principally the holding of the former North Yemen's principal oil concession by US company Hunt Oil, as well as the awarding of the concession held by Canadian Occidental (a Canadian subsidiary of a US company) in the former South Yemen. In addition, the US sought to broker better relations between Riyadh and Sanaa. Furthermore, President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih, who came to power in 1978, was clever in providing a growing semblance of democratization, as demonstrated in holding free elections for a parliament. This attracted Washington's attention given the emphasis on democratization as a bulwark of declared US policy towards the Middle East at the time. The National Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute both opened offices in Sanaa to observe elections and to encourage additional steps.

The US and the 1994 civil war

After unity in 1990, the south quickly found itself reduced from constituting an independent country to being simply several smaller and less populated provinces of a united Yemen. At first, the south's Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) became a junior partner with President Salih's General People's Congress (GPC) in governing the Republic of Yemen (ROY), and national leadership was formally invested in a five-man Presidential Council. But it was clear that Salih retained the actual reins of power and the council was subsequently disbanded. The YSP was soon cast out into opposition as the GPC turned to the conservative al-Islah party as its coalition partner. Simply put, the much smaller population of the former south meant that the YSP had no more influence in the legislature than it did in united Yemen's practical politics. Popular opinion in the south shifted from strong opposition to the YSP at the time of unity to grudging support for the party as a quasi national symbol of southern identity. As the years passed, it became increasingly clear that President Salih did not consider the south as an equal half of the state.

By 1994, the situation had become so tense that the principal southern politicians had withdrawn to Aden. In May, the YSP leaders gathered all the southern political figures they could

find, including even right-wing figures who had opposed the NLF/YSP before independence, and declared independence for a new Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY). Fighting broke out soon after between northern and southern army units, and gradually DRY forces were on the retreat to Aden and finally to the Hadramawt in the east. The war was over in a matter of weeks.⁶

The US assumed no definitive position on the war, confining itself largely to supporting GCC calls for a ceasefire, which if it took effect would have favored the south. Despite this, President Salih subsequently told the *Kuwait Times* that “The United States supported the unity of Yemen. We had the green light from them to maintain the unity. The US wanted the region (Yemen) united and not partitioned, we felt that.”⁷ A few months later, an improvement in bilateral relations was signaled by a letter from President Clinton to President Salih urging good relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. According to an Arab newspaper, Sanaa’s dismissal of Iraqi trainers for ROY’s MiG-29 fighters was a prime cause of the changing climate.⁸ The theme of US support for a Saudi–Yemeni border agreement gained additional support from comments by the US ambassador to Sanaa in 1997.⁹ A further sign of improvement came in 1997 with Washington’s dispatch of a team of experts to remove land mines placed during the 1994 war.¹⁰ By 1998, Yemen was co-operating regularly with the US in providing access to Aden for US naval port calls and bunkering. However, the positive climate changed after the *USS Cole* was attacked in Aden harbor in 2000 and the 9/11 attacks took place a year later.

US–ROY relations after the attacks on the *USS Cole* and of September 11, 2001

There were other signs of gradually and slightly improving relations through the late 1990s and beyond. Certainly Yemen was low on the list of Washington’s priorities, but it was deemed advisable to nudge Yemen and Saudi Arabia towards a better working relationship. On the other hand, Sanaa and Washington definitely held deeply divergent views on Arab–Israeli matters, and the US continued to be irritated by Yemen’s relations with Saddam’s Iraq. US aid slowed to a trickle and the USAID closed its Sanaa office.

Economic ties proceeded on an even path but at a minor level, thus mirroring political relations. US goods exports to Yemen in 2002 totaled only \$366 million, compared with \$1 billion to Kuwait for example. Imports from Yemen totaled \$246 million, mainly crude oil and coffee, again compared with \$2 billion from Kuwait. Still, the US indicated its desire to negotiate a free trade agreement with Yemen as part of its broader regional trade framework.¹¹

The biggest factor in economic relations was oil. The US firm Hunt Oil Company began prospecting in Yemen onshore in 1981 and offshore in 1984. The company struck oil in 1984 in the Ma’rib region east of Sanaa in a structure that appeared to stretch across the border into South Yemen.¹² Work began subsequently on a pipeline to the Red Sea coast and a small domestic refinery at Ma’rib. Exports began in December 1987, initially at 130,000 barrels per day (b/d).¹³ Hunt’s offshore exploration was unsuccessful, as were the efforts of Exxon and Texaco in other concessions, but Exxon subsequently became a partner with Hunt in the Yemen Hunt Oil Company, which operated the producing Block 18.

After unification, Canadian Occidental Petroleum, a subsidiary of American Occidental, began producing in the Masilah field in the Hadramawt region of what had been South Yemen.¹⁴ By the time of the civil war in 1994, Hunt was producing 170,000 b/d and CanOxy was producing 150,000 b/d.¹⁵ Production in both areas was shut down only temporarily during the hostilities. Another impact of unification was the availability of two additional pipelines, one to al-Shihir on the Arabian Sea and the other to al-Nashimah in the Gulf of Aden, thus allowing oil to be exported easily in various directions.¹⁶

Helped by exploration and discoveries in a number of new concessions, Yemeni oil production peaked at 450,000 b/d in 2000.¹⁷ But as fields matured, Yemen faced steadily

declining production, despite the government's sustained efforts. It shrank to 380,000 b/d in 2006 and to 317,000 in 2007.¹⁸ Production and export was also impeded from time to time by repetitious attacks on the pipelines by disgruntled tribes and workers' strikes.

US interests in hydrocarbons suffered a blow in 2005 when Yemen expropriated the Hunt Oil/Exxon Mobil concession and reassigned it to a state-owned company. The two US companies sought international arbitration alleging breach of contract. In August 2008, the International Chamber of Commerce ruled in favor of Yemen.¹⁹ Despite this disagreement, Hunt has continued to operate the smaller Jannah Hunt Oil Company concession, which has averaged 45,000 b/d of production in recent years.²⁰ Hunt has also been instrumental in the development of Yemen's liquefied natural gas (LNG) export industry since 1997 and holds a substantial interest in the Yemen LNG Company. The start-up of the first train was expected in December 2008.²¹

There is a long, if fitful, history of US development assistance to Yemen, beginning with road building during the last years of the Imamate in the North. Low-level assistance continued off and on after the end of the North Yemeni civil war (1962–70) until the debacle of 1990. US and other Western development aid almost completely dried up at that time. It took until 1993 for USAID funding for Yemen to reach about \$4 million, still only one-fifth of the amount offered at the beginning of the 1980s.²² By 1995, assistance had increased to \$9.4 million.²³ But Yemen's debt to the US also grew, totaling about \$102 million in the same year. In 1998, bilateral agreements were signed to forgive some \$17 million of the debt.²⁴

USAID closed its Yemen programs in 1996. However, the atmosphere in Yemen had improved enough by 2003 for the mission to reopen.²⁵ The restarted aid program focused on five poor governorates in the north and northeast of Yemen, including Sa'dah, al-Jawf, 'Amran, Ma'rib, and Shabwah, and concentrated on maternal and child health, basic education, income, food security, and democracy promotion. Not coincidentally, these governorates suffer heavily from inadequate socioeconomic infrastructure and were specifically targeted because it was felt that, for this reason, they were susceptible to terrorist recruitment and provided havens for terrorists.²⁶

Yemen became eligible for the Threshold Program of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC; an arm of the US government that provides aid for the poorest countries) in 2004 and then received \$14.8 million in aid during 2005. The total amount disbursed dropped to \$9 million the following year when the ROY's MCC eligibility was withdrawn because of the repression of journalists and pervasive corruption. As a consequence, Yemen never saw the \$30 million in MCC support requested for 2007 and lost in excess of \$100 million in aid from the World Bank. However, in November 2007, the MCC declared that Yemen had made enough reforms to reinstate its eligibility. These were said to include anti-corruption efforts, judicial reforms, enactment of new procurement laws, free elections, re-evaluation of a draconian press law, and implementation of a National Agenda for Reform. As a consequence, the MCC awarded a \$20.6 million grant to fight corruption and improve the rule of law on September 12, 2007.²⁷

In addition to more traditional programs for support in health care, education, and agriculture, USAID assistance in Yemen has been targeted towards the National Decentralization Strategy, along with support for local councils at the governorate and district levels in planning, budgeting, and management. It has also provided support for the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum, as well as tribal conflict mitigation programs.²⁸

Security concerns

A major focus of US interests in Yemen since 2001 has been the belief that the country is or can be a haven for terrorists. Serious concerns about domestic security had been present in previous decades because of the weakness of the central government in the North and the

ideological orientation in the South. Elements of the Palestine Liberation Organization were given refuge in North Yemen after the 1982 Israeli sweep into Lebanon, and the South has hosted radical secular Palestinian groups over the years. Later, after the Soviets were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan, as many as 60,000 “Afghan Arabs” made their way to Yemen and set up shop in remote provinces and steadily influenced local radicals and won converts.²⁹ Many Yemenis became convinced that Saudi Arabia was actively proselytizing in Yemen for its ultraconservative Wahhabi view of Islam and that the ranks of the converted included Islamist extremists.

Some evidence of extremism appeared before 2001. In 1993, bombs were set off in two Aden hotels where US marines were staying en route to Somalia. As a consequence, the US withdrew its troops from Aden, which had been serving as a refueling port for US forces.³⁰ Furthermore, at least one Yemeni national was suspected of involvement in the 1998 Al-Qaeda bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.³¹ Threats made against the US and British embassies in early 1999 forced the withdrawal of US mine-clearing teams for three months.³² More threats against the US embassy in June 2001 forced the removal of dependents from the country, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) teams investigating the *USS Cole* attack.³³

The most consequential incident by far was the attack on the US warship *USS Cole* in Aden harbor in October 2000. An explosive-laden boat approached the warship, set off its explosives, and blew a hole in the side of the ship, killing seventeen sailors aboard the *USS Cole* as well as the suicide attackers. Two years later, a French supertanker, the *Limburg*, was attacked off the coast of al-Mukalla on the Gulf of Aden.

While these two incidents garnered the most attention, they were not the only or the last ones. The US embassy in Sanaa was closed for a week in April 2002 because of a terrorist threat.³⁴ A suspected terrorist attack to kill the US ambassador was thwarted in May 2004.³⁵ The US and British embassies were closed again in April 2005 and non-essential personnel and dependents evacuated.³⁶ In December 2006, a Yemeni man opened fire with an AK-47 on the US embassy and was wounded and captured by Yemeni security forces, but it is not clear whether this incident was terrorist related.³⁷

The latest attack aimed at the US occurred on September 17, 2008 when two cars rammed the barriers in front of the US embassy in Sanaa. The first car sped up to the compound and several attackers began firing at the guards with rocket-propelled grenades and rifles. This was followed by a second car that drove into the gate and exploded in a suicide bombing. The death toll was sixteen, including the six attackers, six security guards, and four bystanders, one of them a US citizen. The embassy was not breached.³⁸

US–ROY military and security co-operation

From the low point of 1990–91, military relations improved as the decade progressed, so much so that rumors began to circulate that Sanaa would grant the US basing rights in Yemen, particularly on the island of Socotra. This provoked President Salih to announce that, “It is not our policy to grant facilities to the United States.”³⁹ In April 1998, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern affairs Martin Indyk stopped in Sanaa, and a month later, Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, the Commander in Chief of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), visited Yemen and held talks with President Salih. It was the first time that such a visit had been made, and it was prompted in part by US difficulties in getting Bahraini permission to use that country’s military facilities at the time of the 1998 air strikes on Iraq.⁴⁰

It is not surprising that the US should be interested in utilizing Aden’s excellent natural harbor. Not only would it provide an alternative if necessary to bases in the Gulf, but it is ideally situated near the vital Red Sea shipping lanes and the volatile Horn of Africa. It is also

likely that Washington sought greater influence in Yemen in order to stiffen the government's resolve to act firmly against Islamist activism and to encourage the improvement of relations with Saudi Arabia. Evidence of US military interest was soon forthcoming: a warship became the second US naval vessel to anchor in Aden since 1967, more ship visits were scheduled, and a small joint exercise took place.

The new Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Ronald Neumann declared in Sanaa in May 1998 that US interest was more than just security related: "The United States has not paid attention to Yemen for a long time, but we are increasingly recognizing its leading role as a democratic reformer and its importance for regional stability."⁴¹

Security relations continued to forge ahead in 1999, with Zinni making his third visit to Yemen in less than two years amid rumors that the US intended to use Yemen as a military staging post and to open a naval base on Socotra—an assertion quickly denied by Zinni.⁴² However, a few days later, the Yemeni foreign minister said that his government had no objection to allowing US forces to use its bases "some day if it is in Yemen's interest."⁴³ The US already was using Aden for bunkering by this time. In 2000, the US offered its good offices to mediate on Saudi–Yemeni issues, an offer that the Saudis rejected as unnecessary.⁴⁴ President Salih's visit to Washington in April 2000 dwelt on US appreciation for easing exit requirements on Yemeni Jews and on Salih's voicing of appreciation for US development efforts in his country.⁴⁵ By the time of the October 2000 attack on the *USS Cole*, Zinni had made four visits to Yemen, and the US Navy had made twenty-three port visits to Aden, a relationship that Zinni insisted had developed because of Aden's strategic location and not as an attempt to curry favor with the ROY government.⁴⁶ One consequence of the *USS Cole* attack was the withdrawal, at least temporarily, of the mine-clearing teams.⁴⁷

The attack refocused US attention on Yemen as a haven for terrorists. Paradoxically, another effect was to demonstrate Yemen's near-complete inability to police its own territorial waters. If similar actions were not to reoccur, Yemen would need substantive help in boosting its territorial security. General Tommy Franks, Zinni's successor at CENTCOM, visited Yemen in January 2001, a joint US–Yemeni team was formed to track down the *USS Cole* perpetrators, US assistance was provided for upgrading security at its airports a few months after the US ambassador's plane was hijacked, and the State Department sent Edmund Hull, its Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, to Yemen as the new ambassador.⁴⁸ Ten months after the bombing, US–Yemeni security relations were returning to normal. Franks, on another visit to Sanaa, presented proposals for relaunching a planned joint exercise and resuming the Aden port calls.⁴⁹

Relations grew more complicated following the 9/11 attacks. Not only was Al-Qaeda linked with activities in Yemen through the *USS Cole* incident, but Washington was convinced that the ROY government was not being vigorous in rooting out Al-Qaeda supporters and other Islamist extremists. Former Yemeni Prime Minister and Foreign Minister 'Abd al-Karim al-Iryani was dispatched to Washington to discuss matters two weeks after 9/11.⁵⁰ Both President Salih and the speaker of the parliament, Shaykh 'Abdullah Husayn al-Ahmar, distanced Yemen from the US-led attack on Afghanistan.⁵¹ President Salih himself visited Washington in November to assure the US of his positive intentions *vis-à-vis* terrorism and agreed to permit greater access to US investigators of the *USS Cole* attack. In return, the US said it would help improve Yemen's special forces and provide some development assistance to the remote governorates in which terrorists were believed to operate.⁵² By trumpeting its willingness to cooperate, Yemen escaped the possibility that it would be a US target after Afghanistan. As a sign of good faith, the government announced that it was hunting several tribesmen suspected of being key agents in the Al-Qaeda network.⁵³

Early 2002 saw a number of top US officials dropping into Sanaa to emphasize the need for co-operation in security and anti-terrorism efforts. These included Robert Mueller, Director of the US FBI, in January, George Tenet, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in

the following month, and Vice President Richard Cheney in March.⁵⁴ Furthermore, US officials were sent to Yemen to inspect security arrangements at Aden port as a prelude to resuming port calls there. A US cargo ship put into Aden in October, the first US ship to do so since the *USS Cole* bombing.⁵⁵ Still, there were concerns about Salih's intentions as he apparently continued to deal with Saddam Hussein's Iraq and bought North Korean Scud missiles. In addition, it was believed that 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nashiri, the chief of Al-Qaeda's operations in the Gulf and a major planner of the *USS Cole* attack, was moving freely in Yemen. Still, the US felt it was necessary to deal with and support the Sanaa government in order to root out alleged terrorists from the remote provinces. In addition to training Yemeni troops, support included the dispatch of Special Forces to Yemen, and the CIA began flying Predator drones over Yemeni territory.⁵⁶ One of these drones was used to kill the leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen 'Ali Qa'id Sinan al-Harithi and associates in November 2002 by remote control.⁵⁷ The Yemeni government admitted its co-operation in the attack only after more than a year had passed.⁵⁸

Security co-operation went through ups and downs, partly due to disagreements over how investigations and suspects should be handled and partly over Yemeni public suspicion of ties between Sanaa and Washington. A Sanaa demonstration against the expected US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 resulted in the death of two demonstrators.⁵⁹ Shortly afterwards, the US State Department issued a travel warning because of a terrorist threat and let dependent personnel leave Yemen in March and again in August.⁶⁰ The persistence of these threats convinced President Salih to agree to the opening of an FBI office in Yemen.⁶¹ In November, Yemen announced its success in the arrest of local Al-Qaeda leader Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal.⁶²

Another bone of contention was US insistence on the extradition to the United States of prominent Islamist figure 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, who had been designated in February 2004 as a US Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the US Treasury Department.⁶³ The Yemen government refused on grounds that it could not extradite any citizen.⁶⁴ More to the point, Zindani was a founding figure in Yemen's principal opposition party al-Islah, runs al-Iman private university, and has considerable support throughout the country and even in the government. In September 2005, the ROY government formally asked the US government to drop charges against Zindani as it felt that they were based on partisan newspapers. If there was any real proof, Sanaa said, it should be submitted to the Yemen government, which would then be obligated to take appropriate action.⁶⁵ The US returned to the attack in February 2006, when Bush sent a letter to Salih asking him to arrest Zindani. Again, Yemen demurred and asked for evidence of his involvement with terrorism.⁶⁶

Still, Yemen somewhat grudgingly permitted the US greater access to terrorism suspects and participation in the prosecution of the suspects accused of bombing the *USS Cole* during their 2004 trial. Many of the defendants were being tried in absentia, including mastermind 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nashiri who was in secret US custody at an unnamed location.⁶⁷ In return, the US agreed to hand over to Sanaa seven of the approximately 100 Yemeni detainees in Guantánamo Bay.

The up-and-down nature of political and security relations continued into recent years. Remarks in 2005 by US ambassador Thomas Krajcski contending that Yemen had halted progress toward democracy drew rapid condemnation from the ROY government.⁶⁸ On the other hand, President Salih was invited to visit Washington, DC, in November 2005, his third trip since 9/11. A major subject of his talks with President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice centered on co-ordinating anti-terrorism strategies, but the Bush administration was also said to have pressured Salih on the lack of progress of democracy in Yemen.⁶⁹ A few months later, it was revealed that US naval ships were patrolling Yemeni waters in an effort to block maritime escape routes for the suspected Al-Qaeda members who had been part of a mass escape from prison in 2004.⁷⁰ In March 2006, three Yemenis who had been held in secret prison locations by US agents since 2003 were turned over to Yemen, which quietly released them after concluding that they had no terrorist ties.⁷¹

Another cause of contention was Jamal al-Badawi, one of the suspected planners of the *USS Cole* attack who had escaped from prison in 2004 but was recaptured in September 2006. The US protested the ROY government's apparent release of Badawi in October 2007 and threatened to cut off aid through the Millennium Challenge Corporation.⁷² When this caused Condoleezza Rice to withdraw from the US-sponsored Forum for the Future on reform in the Middle East, Yemen cancelled the event.⁷³ Throughout this period, Badawi's status was less than clear. Some Yemeni officials asserted that he had been released so that he could help track down other Al-Qaeda members, an option that seemed to mesh with Yemen's policy of re-educating Islamist extremists.⁷⁴

This approach did not go down well in Washington. The administration sent FBI director Robert Mueller to Yemen in April 2008 to express Washington's opposition—a visit that accomplished little.⁷⁵ In addition, an Arab-American former FBI agent who had participated in the *USS Cole* investigation lambasted Yemen's lukewarm attitude and what he saw as an inadequately aggressive US policy *vis-à-vis* Yemen.⁷⁶

Washington renewed its military relations with Yemen gradually over the years after the *USS Cole* attack. Port calls to Aden port by US naval vessels resumed, joint exercises were held, and seven gunboats were delivered by 2004.⁷⁷ The US was instrumental in the creation of the Yemeni coastguard and has provided assistance to the anti-terrorism unit of the ROY Central Security forces and the Ministry of the Interior.⁷⁸

US views of Yemen's stability

The net result of this tortured history of co-operation and disagreement has been a heightened and continuing official US fear that Yemen will not be able to control extremists in its territory. In part, this is because of Yemen's dire economic situation. It is one of the world's poorest countries and its resources, ranging from oil to water, are being rapidly depleted. A rapidly expanding population, now approaching 23 million, threatens to make a dire situation worse. Ironically, Yemen's problems are compounded by the necessity of providing refuge and assistance to citizens of a country even worse off, a wave of Somalis crossing the Red Sea.

President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih has been in power for more than a third of a century, far more than anyone expected and has proven far cleverer than anticipated. The future after Salih is a matter for great concern. His regime is based on his personal control of the reins of power, exercised through his own small tribe and an equally small allied tribe. It is widely believed that Salih is grooming his son, Ahmad, for succession, in the manner of Hafiz al-As'ad in Syria and potentially Husni Mubarak in Egypt. It is questionable whether such a tactic will work and, if so, whether Ahmad can long retain power in an inherently fractious and fissiparous political environment.

While the power of the central government has improved markedly since unification, it is still weak. The outlying provinces bordering the great Rub' al-Khali Desert are largely autonomous and harbor numerous extremists with relative impunity. Salih's victory in the 1994 civil war has been regarded by most southerners as a humiliating defeat and a northern occupation. Tensions on this account remain strong, and demonstrations and acts of violence by southerners against domination by northerners occur with some regularity.

In addition, Sanaa has fought a long-running war against the Huthis, a Zaydi Shi'a group in the far north of the country, during which it has committed numerous brutalities. While active fighting seemed to have been brought to an end in mid-2008, many of the underlying causes of the fighting remain unresolved, among them Zaydi uneasiness at the increasing Sunni Salafi influence in Yemen and in the government in particular.

Finally, the more the ROY government co-operates with the US in the matter of terrorism and security, the more opposition it generates among its own people. The US is exceedingly unpopular throughout the Middle East and beyond. Yemen is no exception. There are foundations and

good reasons for better relations. But the road to improvement is unpaved and potholed. For both sides, unfortunately, the incentives to enhance ties do not seem to be vital enough to alter continuing policies in any truly significant way.

Notes

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Robert E. Looney**

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