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US-Yemeni Relations

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The United States has had an erratic relationship with Yemen, at times being overly involved and at others not at all. The lens through which Washington has looked at Yemen has been distorted in various ways, whereas Yemen, under President Ali Abdullah Saleh, has been opportunistic in viewing the US as a cash cow that can be cajoled or blackmailed to provide material support and military hardware and training for his regime. The US has been alternately punitive, generous because of the emergence of democratic practices in Yemen, and lastly collaborative in the fight against Al-Qaeda's terror network. Washington's policies can be described as largely ad hoc in nature, never addressing the totality of Yemen's situation and problems, but instrumentally responding to short-term imperatives, like the so-called war on terror. Today, the US perceives a stark choice between supporting Saleh's regime, which purports to be at war with Al-Qaeda, and allowing him to fall and thereby giving Al-Qaeda free rein of the country. This is a false dichotomy, as we shall explore further below, but first let me provide some historical background.

Examining US-Yemeni relations over the last two decades, from the Gulf War in 1990 until today, we begin with a dramatic moment at the United Nations when Yemen, then a member of the Security Council, voted against resolution 678, authorizing the use of force to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The then serving US Secretary of State, James Baker III, told Yemen's UN representative "That is the most expensive vote you ever cast." The US and its allies (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) withdrew hundreds of millions of dollars in annual aid from this desperately underdeveloped nation. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it also expelled nearly one million Yemeni migrant workers—a measure that overnight ended most overseas remittances that Yemen relied on, and this began a downward economic spiral, leading inexorably to the near collapse of the economy today. What allowed President Saleh's regime and patronage system to survive this intervening period (1990 until today) have been revenues from oil and gas finds as well as foreign aid in the form of loans and grants. The oil is almost depleted in the north (Ma'rib basin) and what remain profitable are fields in the south, a source of tension between a southern Yemeni population that feels set upon by the northern Saleh and his ruling clique.

1990 was also the year of the unification of the two Yemens—the republican north and the communist south—and for four years the country experienced an astonishing political opening, with many newly formed political parties, a burgeoning and free press and elections held in 1993 that appeared to be relatively free and fair. While this was taking place, President Saleh waged a secret assassination campaign against his Socialist allies in power. The period between 1990 and 1994 was one of cohabitation in power between President Saleh's General Peoples' Congress party and the Socialist party led by Ali Salim al-Bidh. Eventually, because of the assassinations and other tensions, the two sides broke their alliance, which led to a bloody civil war in 1994 in which the Socialists were defeated. As victor, Saleh continued to rule over a united Yemen in an increasingly authoritarian and corrupt fashion.

Elections continued after the war was concluded and the image of an economically backward and religiously conservative society in the Arabian Peninsula adopting democratic practices, such as holding regular multi-party elections, was beguiling to many in the West. Because of this, aid contributions from donor countries as well as multilateral lenders, such as the IMF and World Bank, began flowing again to Sanaa soon after the civil war. Saleh played the democracy game adeptly, managing to win all the elections, parliamentary (1997, 2003) as well as presidential (1999, 2006), through a complicated system of patronage, coercion and fraud. Despite various promises to do so, he never carried out the structural adjustment or administrative reforms that were asked of him, always prevaricating and finding ways to explain his non-compliance. Most donors eventually lost patience and cut off aid by the end of the 1990s.

The events of 9/11 and the US war on terror were a boon for Saleh because he could present himself as a loyal ally in this effort and for which he would begin receiving aid, military training and equipment, and support from the United States. His collaboration with the US in the struggle against Al Qaeda was never unequivocal, in keeping with his maverick style and modus operandi. In some instances, Saleh was fully engaged, as when he allowed the US to target and kill Abu Ali al-Harithi, a leading Al Qaeda operative, in an unmanned drone attack in 2002. At other times, Saleh was less than cooperative, as when Al Qaeda members fled a high security prison in Sanaa in 2003. And by the admission of many US officials, Yemen has not been fully forthcoming in providing information on Al Qaeda operatives or allowing US personnel complete access to its prisoners.

Beginning in 2004, Saleh was confronted with a domestic rebellion led by Zaydi notables and their tribal allies in the northernmost part of the country—the so-called Huthis. Zaydism is a branch of Shii Islam (not to be confused with Imami Shiism of Iran and elsewhere), and is a religious tradition that has been present in Yemen since the 10th century CE. With the republican revolution of 1962, Zaydi leaders, especially the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him), called sayyids and who have played a leading role in the community's affairs, have been discriminated against and politically marginalized. In the post-9/11 atmosphere, one of these sayyids, Husayn ibn Badr al-Din al-Huthi, began criticizing Saleh's rule, especially his alliance with the US. This in turn led Saleh to attempt to crush this group by military force. The effort failed miserably because the Yemeni army was repeatedly routed in a series of battles with the Huthis.

In defeat, Saleh resorted simultaneously to two contradictory claims to garner Saudi Arabian and US support respectively. With the Saudis, Saleh claimed that Iran was fomenting the Huthi rebellion in order to obtain a foothold on the southern border of the Kingdom. Iran's involvement has never been proven and indeed Zaydis and Imami Shiis (as in Iran) have historically been theologically antagonistic to one another, so any collaboration on the basis of a mutual Shii identity is highly unlikely. Ever suspicious the Iranian menace the Saudis appear to have accepted Saleh's claim and eventually were dragged into a war against the Huthis in 2009, one that ended in a stalemate.

No doubt thinking the US ignorant of local realities, Saleh claimed to Washington that Al Qaeda was backing the Huthis. Again, this is religiously improbable given that each group considers the other to be unbelievers and are known to have vilified and fought each other. Moreover, Nasir al-Bahri (aka Abu Jandal), one of Usama Bin Laden's former Yemeni bodyguards, claims that Saleh sought the help of Al Qaeda's fighters in Yemen in 2005 to help him in the battle against the Huthis. Al-Bahri, who was privy to these talks, states that Al Qaeda conditioned its acceptance on it being allowed to form a separate military unit and not be amalgamated with the Yemeni forces; Saleh balked at this request and no agreement was reached on the matter. The Huthi uprising remained unresolved despite the repeated mediation of Qatar, and this was largely due to Saleh's unwillingness to abide by the terms of the truces that he had agreed upon, such as the promise to release Huthi prisoners.

Saleh was again provided with an opportunity to prove his usefulness to the United States in early 2009 when the formation of Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) was formally announced. This consisted of the amalgamation of the remnants of the Saudi-based Al-Qaeda with its affiliate in Yemen. An important member of this group is the ideologue and US-Yemeni citizen Anwar al-Awlaqi. The latter is fluent in both English and Arabic and has been able to recruit several individuals and to have them engage in terror attacks against the United States. One such person is Major Nidal Hasan of the US army who attacked and killed a number of soldiers in Fort Hood in November 2009. Another is the Nigerian man Umar Abd al-Muttalib, the so-called Christmas Day or Underwear Bomber, who tried to blow himself up on a US airliner over Detroit on December 25, 2009. Last though not least was AQAP's failed attempt in October 2010 to send two explosive-laden packages on cargo

planes bound for the US. The revamped Al-Qaeda threat from Yemen meant that the US needed Saleh more than ever in its fight against the group.

Al-Qaeda has a few hundred members in Yemen and is perceived today to represent the most serious threat to the US, having in some sense supplanted Al-Qaeda Central, that is the mother organization based along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The US has trained a unit of the Yemeni forces in counter-terror tactics, and President Saleh's nephew, Yahya, leads this force. The US, in other words, has invested a lot in Saleh's regime and in the hope that he will be able to contain the threat from Al-Qaeda. He, of course, reiterates ceaselessly that he is ready to do just that and needs additional support to accomplish this.

In this recent spring season of uprisings in the Arab world, Yemen has not been immune. In fact, for at least three months, hundreds of thousands of young Yemenis (shabab) have been continuously and peacefully demonstrating in Sanaa and elsewhere in the country, asking that Saleh resign his post and give up power along with members of his family who control many of the central institutions and nodes of power in the country. His response to these demands has been to prevaricate, as is his wont, and to refuse to sign on three separate occasions a Gulf Cooperation Council plan for a peaceful transfer of power with full immunity from prosecution. He has also resorted to his usual claims that without him Yemen would implode and become like Somalia, a failed state. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda would take advantage of this situation and entrench its power further in the country and pose a graver threat to the world. The need for stability in Yemen is an argument that works well in both Riyadh and Washington, but the question that begs itself today is whether Saleh can provide this or whether he is in fact the factor that causes the country to remain unstable. His track record does not speak well for him and it is surely time to consider an alternative to his rule in the country. This is no doubt what the Saudis, Americans and various concerned Gulf states are discussing at this moment as Saleh convalesces from his injuries in a Riyadh hospital.

Bringing stability to Yemen requires an imaginative and broad approach that does not see the country's problems simply through the lens of Al-Qaeda's threat. Yemen is on the verge of political, economic and ecological collapse because of the mismanagement of the country by Saleh's government over the last 33 years. It is the weakness and inefficiency of the central government and its inability to provide remedies to Yemen's multiple problems that make the country unstable, not Al-Qaeda, which is one symptom of the general malaise. A representative and accountable government in Yemen presents the only hope for a long-term solution to these problems. This is what the people demonstrating in the streets want to see, and not another authoritarian leader who lives on handouts from the US and the Gulf states while also stealing his country's wealth and destroying all forms of institutional and accountable governance. It is this negative record of rule that constitutes President Saleh's lasting legacy and it behooves the US and other Gulf states not to be unwitting collaborators in the mismanagement and misrule of Yemen.

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