



## Yemen

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- The attempt to destroy an airliner bound for Detroit on Christmas day 2009 focussed attention on Yemen
- The country's security, demographic, economic and ecological indicators make a severe crisis look inevitable in the next few years, as the country's delicate political fabric unravels
- Yemen is already a significant base for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and there are signs that this presence is growing, despite vigorous actions by Saudi Arabia, among others, to counter it
- The US has increased its covert operations in the area but must take care not to undermine support for the Yemeni Government with overt military support
- Widespread insecurity and the weakness of the state complicate attempts to spend development aid
- Should Yemen be allowed to join the Gulf Cooperation Council? Should GCC countries re-open their labour markets to Yemenis? Can the West and the GCC countries do more to implement services on the ground to help ordinary Yemenis?

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## 1 Political situation in Yemen

The Yemeni Government is headed by President Ali Abdallah Saleh, who has led the country for 31 years. An election was held in 1999 which the President won, with more than 96% of the vote; the opposition was not allowed to present a candidate. The President has been accused of trying to turn his rule into a virtual monarchy, filling important posts with close family members and grooming his son to succeed him. He is supported by the pillars of the state: the army and tribal powers. The President is in his second term of office and the Constitution prevents him from seeking another term.

Yemen is a mountainous country, some of which is fertile and some desert. The present state was founded in 1990 when the former Marxist South Yemen and the traditionalist North Yemen were united in one country. The unification was not universally popular: there was a short civil war in 1994 and secessionist forces in the South are again growing. As in Afghanistan, tribal loyalties are to some people still more important than loyalty to the state, and local warlords often wield more power, while Yemeni tribes are said to be better armed than any in the region, with millions of guns circulating in the country.<sup>1</sup> The reach of the Government is shrinking, with one western diplomat describing the Government as 'practically caged in the capital'.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 Record of the Saleh Government

President Saleh, is respected as a skilful political survivor. For the International Crisis Group, 'Yemen in many ways has the most open political system on the Arabian Peninsula, committed to developing instruments of a modern state and cooperating with international efforts to uproot the al-Qaeda network.'<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the Yemeni Government has had an uneven relationship with western powers. He sided with Saddam Hussein on the invasion of Kuwait, leading to the repatriation of nearly a million Yemenis from the Gulf States where they were working. It was not until the bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001 that Saleh signed up for the US-led 'war on terrorism'. Even since then, some in Western circles accused the regime of insufficient commitment to tackling Islamist militancy in Yemen, suggesting that influential Yemeni forces support and harbour al-Qaeda operatives in the country and Saleh did not intend to provoke those forces' hostility.

The Government has also been accused of exaggerating or even inventing the connection between Iran and the Shiite Houthist separatists in the north of the country, with the aim of gaining US and Saudi support for his government.

The system of patronage that has kept Saleh in power for so long has also been strongly criticised. Observers say that government spending is used to buy off tribes and warlords and to set enemies against each other, rather than to provide services and invest in the country's productive capacity. While this has been successful in maintaining the regime until now, commentators say that Government oil revenues are diminishing and its costs are increasing, while the balancing act is becoming more complicated. Many analysts think that

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<sup>1</sup> According to a Yemeni Government estimate, there are some 60 million small arms but, in a [recent report](#), the organisation Small Arms Survey put the figure at between 6 million and 9 million in 2003

<sup>2</sup> 'In Fragile Yemen, U.S. Faces Leader Who Puts Family First', *New York Times*, 5 January 2009

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group web page, [Yemen](#) [6 January 2009]

President Saleh is relying increasingly on a small circle of family and tribe members, and that this style of government exacerbates Yemen's political problems.

## 1.2 Houthis

It is a largely Sunni Muslim country, but there are Shia Muslims of the Zaidi sect in the Northwest of the country. There has been a long-running rebellion against the Government, which accuses these 'Houthi' rebels of taking support from Shiite Iran, although this has not been corroborated independently and the accusation is not echoed by the US. In October 2009, the Yemeni Government announced that it had intercepted an Iranian ship carrying weapons for the insurgents.

The Houthis complain of incursions by Sunni Saudi Arabian forces into their area in support of Government troops. In November, a group of Houthi rebels entered Saudi territory and killed two Saudi border guards, provoking retaliation, including the use of air strikes. On 22 December Saudi Arabia announced that it had ceased large-scale military operations against the rebels. The conflict reportedly claimed 'hundreds' of lives in recent months,<sup>4</sup> and there are as many as 250,000 displaced persons, some of whom survive in appalling conditions, according to the US Administration. In February, a ceasefire was announced which it is hoped will end the conflict; the Government has announced the construction of 10,000 new homes to re-house the displaced.<sup>5</sup> In March, rebels released 178 captives as part of the ceasefire terms.

There are signs, however, that the ceasefire is not holding. Sporadic clashes between rebels and a pro-government tribe that has been used as a militia by the Government have "snowballed into open warfare."<sup>6</sup> 11 soldiers and militiamen were killed in a Houthi attack in mid-July.

## 1.3 Southern separatists

The level of violence in the South is gradually increasing, both from separatist and Islamist militants, and analysts fear that the serious threat to the Yemenis state comes from the South. In May, spurred to action by the rising level of violence, Saleh offered a form of government of national unity and offered an amnesty for jailed southern separatists and Shia rebels, while pledging millions of dollars' worth of aid for the South. At the same time, troops released by the calmer situation in the North were redeployed to the South and a severe crackdown was instigated against insurgent elements, as well as restrictions on the freedom of expression.

Analysts fear that conciliatory moves may be coming too late and that their effect will be negated by the security clampdown. Some worry that a serious southern insurgency is emerging, led by disaffected southern former army officers.<sup>7</sup> In June, a Government building in the South was attacked and 11 people were killed. The Government arrested 30 people, nine of whom were promptly charged with membership of al-Qaeda. In July, southern rebels attacked a security post and four were killed in the ensuing gun battle.<sup>8</sup> A southern opposition politician was quoted recently:

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<sup>4</sup> BBC News online, [Country profile: Yemen](#) [5 January 2009]

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, *Crisiswatch*

<sup>6</sup> "Yemen Clashes Reflect North-South Tensions", *New York Times*, 23 July 2010

<sup>7</sup> "Saleh talks rapprochement, but it could be too late to contain insurgency in southern Yemen", *Gulf States newsletter*, 4 June 2010

<sup>8</sup> "Yemen rebel attack kills four", *Financial Times*, 15 July 2010

“For the people of the south, unity is dead. If there is a war in the south, the south is not Saada. We are 4m people, we are a nation, and we do not chant ‘death of America’ like the Zaydis [the Houthis].<sup>9</sup>”

## 1.4 Poverty

Yemen is widely reckoned to be the poorest country in the Middle East. When per capita gross domestic product for Yemenis is adjusted for purchasing power, the country is ranked somewhere between Pakistan and Cameroon.<sup>10</sup> Oil revenues from fields in the south of the country, the Government’s main indigenous source of income, are diminishing and the costs of maintaining the military campaign and the corrupt system of patronage cannot be met for much longer. Saudi Arabia has supported the Saleh Government, providing \$2 billion in 2009 to cover the budget shortfall, but one former World Bank economist specialising in Yemen said in January 2010 that the country was facing economic collapse within the year.<sup>11</sup> Yemen’s problems are exacerbated by extremely rapid population growth and already very high youth unemployment.

### Yemen: basic data

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GNI per capita (Atlas method, US\$)	870
(GNI per capita Average for the Middle East and North Africa)	2794)
Population (million)	22.4
Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	62
Literacy rate, adult total (% of people aged 15 and above)	54
Access to an improved water source (% of population)	66
Child malnutrition (% of children under 5)	41

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Source: World Bank. Figures for 2007 or most recent available.

## 2 Yemen as a haven for jihadis

In October 2000, the *USS Cole* was attacked in Yemen, in 2002 of several Yemenis were arrested in the United States and Pakistan suspected of being members of al-Qaeda, Ramzi bin al-Shibah, a Yemeni citizen, was accused of key involvement in the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US and in October 2002 the French oil tanker *Limburg* was attacked off the Yemeni coast. All these attacks were linked to al-Qaeda and have given Yemen a growing reputation as a haven for the militant organisation. On 25 December 2009, this reputation was enhanced when Umar Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian citizen, attempted to blow up an airliner flying from the Netherlands to Detroit, USA. The attacker claimed to have been trained by al-Qaeda militants in Yemen. Al-Qaeda militants were accused of a plot in April to bomb the British Ambassador’s convoy.

Gulf States specialists have described Yemen as the third most important base for al-Qaeda in the world. It is accepted that al-Qaeda pays well for cooperation from Yemenis, and in such a poor country, this is an important factor. Most of the alleged terrorist bases in Yemen are in the impoverished Sunni south of the country.

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<sup>9</sup> “Saleh talks rapprochement, but it could be too late to contain insurgency in southern Yemen”, *Gulf States Newsletter*, 4 June 2010

<sup>10</sup> Source: World Bank, 2008

<sup>11</sup> ‘Bankrupt and feeble nation ‘can survive for only one year’’, *Times*, 5 January 2009

Some western governments are reported to have been dissatisfied with the commitment of the Yemenis to the fight against al-Qaeda in Yemen during the 1990s. In the last few years, however, the Saudi authorities are perceived to have been more committed to fighting terrorism in Saudi Arabia and some observers have attributed an influx of Saudi jihadists to Yemen to this shift in Saudi policy. Since 2009, Saudi al-Qaeda militants in Yemen are reported to have accepted Yemeni leadership under the name 'al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula' (AQAP). This change has encouraged the Yemeni authorities to see the problem as a Yemeni problem and has been helped to persuade Yemen to conduct a more vigorous military campaign against global jihadists on its territory. The Government claims to have killed over 60 AQAP members in two airstrikes during December, and to be holding members of a suicide cell that was planning to attack the British Embassy. The attacks were described by the *Economist* as the Government's 'most sustained offensive yet against the jihadists'.<sup>12</sup>

The number of Yemenis in the US detention centre at Guantánamo Bay has complicated the US Administration's attempts to close it. 'At least a dozen' released inmates are reported to have headed for Yemen.<sup>13</sup> Some six months ago, the Obama Administration placed an embargo on transferring prisoners from Guantánamo Bay to Yemen. According to an official review, the 60 or so Yemenis among the remaining 181 prisoners do not have strong cases for continued detention; the moratorium is coming under increasing pressure from federal judges and may be struck down.<sup>14</sup>

The US Administration has issued an official authorisation to kill or capture Anwar al-Awlaqi, the US cleric of Yemeni origin who was allegedly complicit in the killings at Fort Hood military base in Texas in 2009, the attempted aircraft bombing near Detroit and the Times Square attempted bombing, and who is now a senior member of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula based in Yemen. The British authorities are reported to be worried that Awlaqi, who lived in London for two years, is training British Muslims for attacks in the UK.<sup>15</sup>

On 20 July, al-Awlaqi, was added to the United Nations 1267 Committee's Consolidated List of individuals and entities associated with al-Qaeda or the Taliban.<sup>16</sup>

Saudi Arabia has stepped up its actions to control the flow of suspected al-Qaeda associates across its southern border. At the beginning of July it was announced that the Saudi authorities had arrested more than 2,500 people attempting to cross the Yemeni border, more than 100 of whom they suspected of being al-Qaeda militants, coming from training camps in Yemen.<sup>17</sup>

### **3 US military involvement**

Although Barack Obama condemned aspects of the Bush Administration's 'war on terror', covert operations have increased under his leadership. The US is conducting a growing covert campaign against al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa and Yemen from its base in Djibouti, including drone attacks. Some of these strikes have been successful for the US but others have killed innocent victims. Amnesty International says that a cruise missile armed with cluster munitions was used against a suspected al-Qaeda training camp in December,

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<sup>12</sup> 'A growing worry for the West', *Economist*, 30 December 2009

<sup>13</sup> "Bad guys' make it difficult to close Cuba camp", *Times*, 5 January 2009

<sup>14</sup> "Rulings Raise Doubts on Policy On Transfer Of Yemenis", *New York Times*, 9 July 2010

<sup>15</sup> "MI5 warns of the al-Qaeda preacher targeting Britain", *Daily Telegraph*, 12 June 2010

<sup>16</sup> US Department of State, "Listing of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)", Press notice, 20 July 2010

<sup>17</sup> "Border fight to halt al-Qaeda", *Times*, 2 July 2010

resulting in the deaths of 52, the majority of whom were civilians.<sup>18</sup> In any case, the strikes run the risk of alienating the Yemeni Government from the population, many of whom resent US and Western involvement in their country.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has said that the 25 December Detroit plot was a retaliation for US involvement in strikes against militants in Yemen. The Yemeni foreign minister has denied any direct US involvement,<sup>19</sup> allegedly following the terms of a secret military assistance pact agreed in 2009. Overtly, the US provides intelligence and logistical support to the Yemeni Government.

Any strong military response involving US forces in either of the main conflicts comes with other risks attached: firstly, attracting further participation from Iran and Saudi Arabia, potentially increasing regional polarisation and negating the Obama Administration's attempts to broker compromise on nuclear weapons; secondly, spreading conflict in the sensitive Horn of Africa region. Somali al-Qaeda-affiliated groups have pledged to support fighters in Yemen.<sup>20</sup> The potential for increased problems with piracy, already prevalent off the coast of Somalia, and associated threats to the supply of oil through the Suez Canal are high on the US agenda.

Some in the US, however, are fully prepared for another US military incursion. According to reports, the Pentagon has drawn up a list of fresh targets for air strikes, but has also offered the Administration the option of massive retaliation. The US military has good access to Yemen from its bases at Bahrain, Djibouti and Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean.

Some commentators have warned that for the US to intervene militarily in Yemen would be to fall into al-Qaeda's trap and to get entangled in a war which cannot be won, increasing polarisation in the region and enhancing support for al-Qaeda.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4 UK action**

The major part of the UK's military assistance consists of training for Yemeni armed forces and police, although details are not easily available due to the sensitivity of the work. On 3 January the UK announced an increase in funding for counter-terrorism operations in Yemen; according to the then Prime Minister, British aid to Yemen involves 'intelligence support, training of counter-terror units, capacity building and development programmes'.<sup>22</sup> This is said to include UK backing for Yemen's Counter-Terrorism Unit.<sup>23</sup>

The UK spent about £20m in 2008-09 in aid to Yemen, an increase on the £12 million allocated in 2007-08, and will spend about £25 million in fiscal year 2009-10; £35 million to £40 million in fiscal year 2010-11 and, 'dependent on progress on reform of state structures in Yemen, up to £50 million in 2011-12'.<sup>24</sup> The UK is involved in attempts to improve education, health, justice and infrastructure in Yemen and combat radicalisation. This work is

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<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International, "[Images of missile and cluster munitions point to US role in fatal attack in Yemen](#)", Press release, 7 June 2010

<sup>19</sup> 'Minister denies "direct" US role in fighting Al-Qa'idah in Yemen', al-Jazeera TV, 4 January 2009, translated by BBC Monitoring

<sup>20</sup> 'UK to back US efforts in Yemen', *al Jazeera online*, 3 January 2010

<sup>21</sup> See for example Patrick Cockburn, 'Threats to Yemen prove America hasn't learned the lesson of history', *Independent*, 31 December 2009

<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister's Office, '[Vigilance key to tackling terrorist threat – PM](#)', Press notice, 1 January 2009

<sup>23</sup> "Saleh talks rapprochement, but it could be too late to contain insurgency in southern Yemen", *Gulf States newsletter*, 4 June 2010

<sup>24</sup> HC Deb 5 January 2010, c21

carried out by the Department for International Development (DFID) “with much collaboration with the Ministry of Defence”.<sup>25</sup> On 9 October, the DFID announced an extra £2 million contribution to a UN fund to assist with the refugee problem in the north of the country.<sup>26</sup>

The British engineer Anthony S, kidnapped in the north about a year ago, is still missing. The UK Government has been accused of doing too little to obtain his release. Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt visited Yemen from 22 to 24 June 2010.<sup>27</sup>

## 5 International action

On 1 January Gordon Brown called an international meeting in London to discuss ‘how to counter radicalisation in Yemen’. Five key points were agreed at the conference:

- 1 The Yemeni Government would continue to pursue a reform plan with the IMF
- 2 The Gulf Cooperation Council countries would hold a conference on how to help Yemen in February in Riyadh, including discussions of barriers to aid disbursement
- 3 Governments at the meeting reiterated their commitment to help Yemen fight al-Qaeda
- 4 The participants undertook to help with Yemeni security, especially improving its Coast Guard
- 5 Participants would set up a Friends of Yemen group, and hold the first meeting in March<sup>28</sup>

Relations between the EU and Yemen are governed by a Cooperation Agreement signed in 1998.<sup>29</sup> The EU is currently considering stepping up its assistance to Yemen, especially with security-related matters including in the fields of counter-terrorism, territorial and border control and small arms and light weapons.<sup>30</sup> In 2007, the EU strategy paper on Yemen said that ‘some member states’ were assisting Yemen in its efforts to fight terrorism.<sup>31</sup>

As agreed at the London conference in January, the Gulf Cooperation Council hosted a meeting of Gulf and other partners of Yemen in Riyadh in February. This meeting discussed the barriers to effective aid and reform priorities with the Yemeni Government. Although no fresh pledges of aid were made, participants discussed why previous commitments had made so little impact. Donors said corruption was responsible for the disappearance of much of the aid sent to Yemen, and criticised the government’s inability to make best use of available funds. The first Friends of Yemen meeting was held in Abu Dhabi on 29 and 30 March.

A draft agreement with the IMF on economic reform was due to go to the board of the IMF towards the end of July.

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<sup>25</sup> HL Deb 21 October 2009, c708

<sup>26</sup> HC Deb 22 October 2009, c1661-2W

<sup>27</sup> HC Deb 19 July 2010, c63W

<sup>28</sup> Secretary Clinton blog, London: Hillary Clinton Attends Conference on Yemen, 27 January 2010

<sup>29</sup> [COOPERATION AGREEMENT between the European Community and the Republic of Yemen](#), 11 March 1998

<sup>30</sup> Council of the European Union, [Council conclusions on Yemen](#), 27 October 2009

<sup>31</sup> Yemen - European Community Strategy Paper for the period 2007-2013,



## 6 Regional relations

One of Yemen's problems has been its regional isolation. Since Yemen settled its border dispute with Saudi Arabia in 2000, relations with its richer and larger neighbour have improved dramatically; the cooperation offered to Yemen in fighting the Shiite Houthist rebels in the north is the clearest example of that. Nevertheless, Yemen has been trying to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the regional organisation for Gulf States, but has so far succeeded in gaining membership only of the committees dedicated to health, education, labour and sport. Full membership of the GCC looks unlikely in the near future, and Yemen has directed some attention to fostering ties with its neighbours across the Gulf of Aden in the Horn of Africa countries. It has acted as a mediator in disputes in Somalia, partly motivated by an influx of Somali refugees to Yemen.

Members of the GCC are particularly concerned about the growing military power of Iran and its potential effect on Shiite sectors in GCC countries. Such western-allied countries insist that Iran supports the Houthi rebels for the same reasons as it supports Hizbollah in Lebanon: to expand its regional influence by the use of regional proxies. The US, on the other hand, wants to ensure that its aid to Sana'a is directed at countering the perceived threat from al-Qaeda militants.<sup>32</sup> Commentators say that it is essential that a coordinated approach should be developed between western countries and GCC members, particularly Saudi Arabia.<sup>33</sup>

## 7 Some policy options

Some have suggested that Yemen should decentralise, accepting the reality of distributed authority. This might alleviate both conflicts, in the North and the South, and is supported by the US State Department.<sup>34</sup>

Most Yemeni workers were expelled from the Gulf States after the Yemeni Government's decision to support Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait. Re-opening Gulf labour markets to Yemenis would do a lot to reduce the acute pressure on the fast-growing Yemeni population.

Aid to the country faces a severe constraint: the Government is not trusted by donor countries, nor can it provide security in remote areas. Billions of dollars of pledged aid remains unspent. Some have suggested that donors, especially the Gulf States, should set up their own offices to oversee the disbursement of aid. It is certainly recommended that aid programmes should be better coordinated and that the focus should not only be on security.

With the US so mistrusted, some have suggested that European countries are well-placed to establish programmes, for example in the area of health, where real benefits for the population could encourage allegiance to the Yemeni Government, demonstrate the advantages of Western aid and discourage support for militant elements.<sup>35</sup>

## 8 Map of the Middle East

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Weitz, 'The Manama dialogue', *World Politics Review*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 15 December 2009

<sup>33</sup> See for example Ginny Hill, *Yemen: Fear of Failure*, Briefing paper, Chatham House, November 2008

<sup>34</sup> US State Department, "Yemen on the Brink Implications for US Policy", Statement to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 3 February 2010

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Boucek, "A Far Away Country in Need of Help" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 May 2010



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