Crisis in Yemen and U.S. Objectives

Yemen Strategic Exercise

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Why Do We Care?

• Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, operating within a safe haven inside Yemen, has attacked the United States twice since December 2009.
• The current U.S.-Yemeni relationship has not helped to defeat the al Qaeda threat emanating from Yemen.
• The ongoing unrest in Yemen undermines the entire basis of U.S. policy in Yemen.
• Prolonged instability in Yemen will likely expand al Qaeda’s safe haven in Yemen and may destabilize regional U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia.
What Should We Do?

- Identify the U.S. strategic interests in Yemen.
- Identify key stakeholders, their interests, and likely future political actors and power brokers.
- Articulate a comprehensive set of U.S. political and military objectives in Yemen.
- Determine the tasks required to fulfill these objectives.
- Reconfigure assets, resources, and U.S. governmental authorities to execute the tasks at hand.
The United States has two primary strategic interests in Yemen:

1) Defeating al Qaeda and preventing the re-establishment of safe havens
2) Stability of Yemen in a regional context

The purpose of this exercise is to consider the most likely and most dangerous scenarios in Yemen as the political upheaval continues. Conclusions drawn from the analysis in these scenarios serve as the foundation for U.S. policy options in Yemen.
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>AQ</td>
<td>al Qaeda</td>
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<td>AQAP</td>
<td>al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula</td>
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<td>CCYRC</td>
<td>Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change</td>
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<td>CERP</td>
<td>Commander’s Emergency Response Program</td>
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<td>CT</td>
<td>Counter-terrorism</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<td>GPC</td>
<td>General People’s Congress</td>
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<td>HOA</td>
<td>Horn of Africa</td>
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<td>HVT</td>
<td>High-value target</td>
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<td>ISSF</td>
<td>Iraq Security and Stabilization Fund</td>
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<td>JMP</td>
<td>Joint Meeting Parties</td>
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<td>KSA</td>
<td>Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</td>
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<td>PDRY</td>
<td>People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen)</td>
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<td>PRT</td>
<td>Provincial Reconstruction Teams</td>
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<td>VEO</td>
<td>Violent extremist organization</td>
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<td>YAR</td>
<td>Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen)</td>
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Opposition movements in Yemen were challenging the legitimacy of the state prior to the 2011 Arab Spring.

- The northern-based al Houthi rebels have engaged the Yemeni military six times since 2004
- A southern secessionist movement, with some limited militant activity, has gained momentum since 2007

Common grievances against Saleh, including political and economic marginalization, unite Yemen’s opposition movements.

The revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia gave Yemen's opposition groups a model of straightforward opposition to the sitting government that could unite them.

- Protests began in Sana'a, Yemen's capital, in late January
- Protests spread to Yemen's major cities in February
- The opposition unified its demands in March
Yemen Basics: People and the Economy

Yemen’s population is young (median age is 18 yrs) and highly illiterate (50 percent of the population cannot read and write).

- Estimated population of 24 million people
- Demographics are more similar to the poorest African states than Arab states
- Most Yemenis are Sunni Muslim; however, Zaydi Shiites constitute 30% of the population and are concentrated in the north

Yemen’s economy is weak and relies heavily on foreign aid and income from oil, which is quickly running out.

- GDP: $30.02 billion (2010)
- Petroleum makes up about 25 percent of Yemen’s GDP and 70 percent of government revenue
- Unemployment rate: 35 percent (2003)
- Population below poverty line: 45.2 percent (2003)

Source: CIA World Factbook (updated May 3, 2011); U.S. Energy Information Administration
President Ali Abdullah Saleh has ruled in Yemen since 1978.

- Saleh became president of the Republic of Yemen in 1990 when YAR (north Yemen) and the PDRY (south Yemen) united
- Saleh maintains control largely through patronage networks

Yemen’s central government has never been strong.

- The society is organized around tribes and the government has a limited presence throughout the country
- The government’s legitimacy is challenged by socioeconomic issues and three security threats: the northern al Houthi rebellion, the southern secessionist movement, and AQAP

Despite the weakness of the central state, Yemen is not lawless.

- Tribal customs remain strong and there are mechanisms for dispute resolution
Security Threats to the Yemeni State

al Houthi Rebellion: Mainly members of the Zaydi Shiite population and active in Sa’ada and Amran governorates. Houthi rebels have engaged in paramilitary activity against government forces and pro-government tribes. A ceasefire between the government and the rebels was signed in February 2010.

Southern Movement: An umbrella group for southern-based secessionists united by perceived marginalization: unfair distribution of oil resources, domination by the north, and the collapse of Aden port post unification. Certain Southern Movement factions have militant ambitions and have executed small-scale attacks on government personnel and buildings in the south.

al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): An al Qaeda franchise established by a 2009 merger between Saudi and Yemeni al Qaeda branches. KSA’s successful CT operations drove militants to Yemen. Former Guantanamo detainees make up some of AQAP’s senior leadership. Cells operate throughout the country and rely on tribal support. AQAP seeks to recruit foreign support and its ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state. It has executed attacks on Western interests.
**Key Actors in Yemen**

**President Ali Abdullah Saleh** has ruled Yemen through patronage networks. His son, **Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh**, commands Yemen’s special forces and Republican Guard units, and his nephew, **Yahya Mohammed Abdullah Saleh**, commands Yemen’s Central Security Forces.

**Abdul Majid al Zindani**, a U.S.-designated terrorist, is one of the leading Islamist figures in Yemen.

**Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations**, among others, have defected. Leaders include **Hussein al Ahmar** and **Sheikh Sadiq al Ahmar** (Hashid) and **Sheikh Mohammed Abu Lahoum** (Bakil).

**General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar** was the commander of the northwest division and defected, spurring other military defections.

The **Joint Meeting Parties** is a coalition of opposition political parties, including al Islah, al Haq, and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). Key opposition leaders include: **Hassan Zaid** (al Haq), **Yassin Said Numan** (YSP), and **Mohammed Qahtan** (Islah), among others.
**Scenarios**

**Scenario 1:** Peaceful transition of power from Saleh to some successor(s)

**Scenario 2:** Forceful removal of Saleh and regime loyalists by elements of the Yemeni military (escalation ranging from bloodless coup to civil war)

**Scenario 3:** State fragmentation with or without Saleh nominally in charge in Sana’a

**Scenario 4:** Saleh remains in power in a unified state

**Scenario 5:** AQAP attack on West requires immediate military response

**Scenario 6:** Yemen’s economy collapses as a result of prolonged instability or attacks on key infrastructure
Scenario 1
Peaceful transition of power from Saleh to some successor(s)

• A negotiated transition will likely benefit former regime members, opposition party members, and the powerful Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations, which defected from the government.
• Formation of new government will sideline the youth movement.
• New government will face pressure to address popular grievances first and will have to re-establish central control over administrations in many of Yemen’s governorates.
• Yemen’s counter-terrorism forces will remain largely intact, but counter-terrorism issues will not be the government’s primary concern.
• Al Qaeda will likely frame the transition as the first step in the collapse of the Western state system.
• AQAP will benefit. It will be able to further consolidate control in safe havens and may seek to exploit the restive conditions.
Scenario 2
Forceful removal of Saleh and loyalists by elements of the military

- Prolonged political stalemate increases the likelihood that Saleh is removed by force.
  - His removal could take different shapes: a kidnapping, forced exile, or assassination, or the military defeat of Saleh’s own troops.
  - Minor skirmishes could unintentionally escalate the conflict into a full-scale military engagement.
- Armed conflict in Yemen will occur if commanders loyal to the regime refuse to accept the change in command.
- Counter-terrorism operations will be severely affected; elite units will be deployed to fight the defected military troops.
- There is an increased potential for state fragmentation.
- AQAP will benefit from a distracted security force and could potentially benefit from General Ahmar’s past history with Islamists.
Scenario 3
State fragmentation with or without Saleh nominally in charge

- Factions that are likely to seek independence from the central state are already identifiable.
  - A part of Yemen’s Shiite community may push for the re-establishment of a Zaydi imamate in north Yemen.
  - South Yemen, led by Southern Movement leaders, may declare independence from the central state. The state’s loss of oil reserves may bring about a conflict over access to Yemen’s resources.
- Counter-terrorism forces will be severely affected by any form of state fragmentation.
- AQAP will likely further consolidate control in its safe havens and will benefit from the deteriorated state of the security forces as well as the loss of intelligence on its operations associated with the fragmentation of the central state.
Scenario 4
Saleh remains in power in a unified state

• Saleh and his government will be faced with the challenge of re-asserting state control over many local governorates.
• Saleh will likely consolidate control over the state and state infrastructure.
• It is unlikely that Saleh will be amenable to U.S. or other regional actors’ interaction with sub-governmental authorities.
• Resumption of regular and sustained counter-terrorism operations is unlikely to be Saleh’s first priority, assuming AQAP does not pose an immediate threat to the Yemeni government and military.
• Saleh and his government may seek further U.S. support for his regime by promising increased cooperation on counter-terrorism issues.
• AQAP will likely continue to operate without constraints in certain regions of the country.
Scenario 5
AQAP attack on West requires immediate military response

- The U.S. will likely respond rapidly to a mass-casualty attack on its citizens that traces back to AQAP in Yemen by taking out known AQAP leadership and infrastructure.
- The long-term objective will likely be to destroy any current operational capabilities the group possesses as well as to prevent the resurgence of al Qaeda in Yemen.
- A large-scale or long-term U.S. operation may further encourage anti-American sentiments within the Yemeni population.
- Saleh will likely offer assistance to a U.S. response and attempt to influence the course of U.S. operations in Yemen to pursue his own interests.
- Al Qaeda and affiliated groups will likely portray any foreign military counter-terrorism action in Yemen as a violation of local sovereignty and as an example of Western interference in a Muslim country.
Scenario 6
Economy collapses due to prolonged instability or attacks on infrastructure

- An economic collapse in Yemen would bring about a humanitarian crisis in the country.
- Mechanisms for aid distribution through the state may not be readily available. Further, aid groups will seek security assurances, which will likely result in pressure on major military powers to deploy to support humanitarian operations.
- The likelihood of state fragmentation increases as local administrations establish control over the distribution of scarce resources.
- A significant outflow of refugees from Yemen, traditionally a transit point for HOA refugees, into KSA or HOA could destabilize countries on the Arabian peninsula and in HOA.
- An outflow of refugees into HOA increases the possibility of AQAP militants sharing tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) with al Shabaab to increase the group’s capabilities.
Conclusions from Scenarios: Most Likely

• It is likely that the Yemeni street and the youth movement will be sidelined in the formation of the new government. The opposition will fracture into interest groups making separate demands. Any form of transition may not end the unrest.
• The political situation in Yemen is unlikely to be resolved in a stable manner in the near future.
• Yemen remains at high risk for state fragmentation along historical fault lines.
• Saleh will likely promise increased counter-terrorism cooperation in exchange for U.S. support, though actual cooperation is not guaranteed.
• The unrest in Yemen has already expanded AQAP’s operating space and al Qaeda will continue to benefit regardless of the resolution to the unrest.
Conclusions from Scenarios: Most Dangerous

• AQAP may gain enough operating space to execute a spectacular attack against the U.S. or its interests.

• U.S. support for Saleh, in the long-term, will have negative consequences in Yemen because of his illegitimacy. Short-term crisis-management thinking makes it increasingly unlikely that the U.S. will come out of the political crisis in Yemen with a strong counter-terrorism partner.

• Any form of a new government is unlikely to prioritize or have the capability to carry out CT operations; however, it will likely continue to publicly emphasize the threats posed by al Qaeda in Yemen.

• Temporary stability will be ephemeral because of long-term structural failings of the Yemeni economy, society, and state.
The United States has two primary strategic interests in Yemen:

1. Defeat AQAP and deny a safe haven for any AQ affiliate
   - Disrupt cooperation between AQAP and other VEOs, especially al Shabaab in Somalia

2. Prevent regional instability
   - U.S. interests in: KSA, Horn of Africa, broader ME/NA countries
   - Manage refugee outflows, development of humanitarian crisis
   - Secure free passage in the Bab al Mandab strait
Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

• AQAP is the most active al Qaeda node currently operating and has exhibited its determination to attack the U.S. and its interests.
  – AQAP wages a “far war” targeting the U.S. and its interests and a “near war” against the Yemeni government
  – Desire for revenge or to increase its standing within the AQ network after the death of Osama bin Laden may change how AQAP calculates its balance of effort and risk calculations

• AQAP seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Arabian peninsula.
• Many of AQAP’s senior leaders have relations with AQC and nearly all were once detained, either in Guantanamo or in a Yemeni prison.
• American-born radical Islamist cleric Anwar al Awlaki is a member of AQAP’s senior leadership and has been operationally connected to at least one of the group’s attacks on the U.S. He has also inspired multiple plots and attacks against the U.S. and the West. A May 5 drone strike targeting Awlaki was unsuccessful.
Territory Matters to al Qaeda

- Al Qaeda and affiliated groups require territory and infrastructure in which to operate.
- The environment in which a group operates affects the group’s operational capabilities.
- The environment in Yemen is conducive to AQAP’s operations:
  - There are al Qaeda sympathizers within the current government
  - AQAP receives shelter from some of the tribes
  - Counter-terrorism assistance has been diverted to combat what the Yemeni government considers to be more exigent security threats
  - Backlash caused by civilian casualties in counter-terrorism operations discourages further action against al Qaeda for the government

For further reading, please see Charlie Szrom’s and Chris Harnisch’s report, “Al Qaeda’s Operating Environments: A New Approach to the War on Terror,” March 2011, AEI’s Critical Threats Project.
Defeating al Qaeda in Yemen

- Traditional counter-terrorism tactics, such as drone strikes, have been used in Yemen with limited success and have not prevented the regeneration of al Qaeda’s operations.
- AQAP maintains safe havens in Yemen that enable the group to plan, direct, and train for attacks.
- Popular perceptions of political and economic marginalization create the conditions necessary for al Qaeda to receive shelter from the government and to operate with little constraints in defined regions.
Regional Stability

- Yemen’s collapse could severely affect the region’s stability, which would impact key U.S. regional allies, particularly KSA.
- The al Qaeda network could take advantage of the further weakening of the Yemeni state.
Primary military objective in Yemen is to defeat AQAP.

The U.S. seeks the following minimum capabilities of a Yemeni or other security force presence in Yemen:

- Effective in taking out senior leadership of AQAP, degrading the al Qaeda network in Yemen, and preventing the establishment of a safe haven
- Able to protect state infrastructure and secure Yemeni territory

A large U.S. military presence in Yemen is highly undesirable and should be avoided if at all possible. U.S. strategy and policy should focus intensively on finding other ways to achieve our core national security objectives in Yemen.
U.S. Military Strategy in Yemen

Work through local and regional actors to achieve military objectives.
- Serve in an advisory and training role for Yemeni forces
- Coordinate with regional partners, such as KSA, to secure the stability of the Arabian peninsula

Identify and address problems in governance that drive instability.
- Yemen’s instability has permitted AQAP and other VEOs to flourish
- Certain governance issues create major obstacles in the way of any efforts to counter these conditions or AQAP and the VEOs themselves
- Counter-terrorism tactics may destroy the AQAP network, but will not prevent the re-establishment of a VEO in Yemen
Direct Action

• Continue and expand current operations to identify and remove key AQAP leaders and facilitators

• Consider using a broader range of U.S. military capabilities to defeat AQAP, including limited HVT strike-force operations with some brief boots-on-the-ground, particularly as security and government control deteriorate

• Be prepared to conduct more significant, simultaneous, and prolonged such engagements on order if threat conditions require or should opportunities arise to degrade AQAP severely
U.S. Military Strategy in Yemen

Indirect Action

• Maintain existing relationships with appropriate Yemeni agencies and units supporting the CT mission
• Continue to offer training, equipment, and financial support to such agencies, but only to the extent that they are not being used in support of internal political conflict
• If the U.S. decides for some reason to choose a side in Yemen's internal struggles, the choice should be deliberate and support a clear overarching strategy—it must not be made by default simply in order to continue supporting units that have worked with the U.S. in the past
• If Saleh goes and the new government(s) that replaces him is receptive to continuing or expanding CT cooperation, then the U.S. should be willing to expand, including deploying trainers on the ground in Yemen
Indirect Action in the context of a hostile government or power vacuum

- The U.S. should continue to try to work by, with, and through Yemenis even in the absence of a willing and effective partner in Sana'a
- U.S. personnel should work to establish relationships with tribal confederations, tribes, and other sub-governmental groups in advance of Saleh's departure and as a priority afterwards
- American trainers can work with individual such groups, particularly in areas at greatest threat of AQAP control or influence
- Where the presence of Americans is impracticable or undesirable, the U.S. should support efforts by KSA and other Gulf states to undertake necessary training and support of sub-governmental groups
- Failure to establish relationships at this level significantly increases the likelihood that state collapse will lead to the requirement to deploy conventional U.S. forces to pre-empt, prevent, or retaliate for immediate threats to or attacks on the U.S. homeland based in Yemen
Conventional American Military Forces

• The deployment of U.S. General Purpose forces to Yemen is extremely undesirable, could well prove counter-productive, and represents the failure of a sound Yemen policy

• Conditions that might require such a deployment are unlikely but plausible:
  • Explosive civil war in Yemen with significant refugee flows that threaten regional stability
  • State collapse followed by the establishment of a significant sanctuary for AQAP among tribal populations that support the group
  • Sectarian conflict leading to the emergence of a significant proxy war between KSA and Iran
  • Humanitarian catastrophe combined with expansion of the AQAP sanctuary

• The desirability of avoiding the deployment of U.S. General Purpose forces to Yemen in response to these or other scenarios creates the primary American interest in helping Yemenis resolve their internal political, social, and economic crises in a peaceful and ultimately stable way.
U.S. Political Objectives in Yemen

At minimum, a Yemeni government that:

• is willing and able to work with the U.S. against terrorist groups in Yemen
• adopts a form of governance that does not generate or cause violence, or otherwise create conditions conducive to the establishment of terrorist safe havens
• refrains from repression and widespread violations of human rights/international law

U.S. interests could be secured even if a unitary Yemeni state fragments as long as the collective of successor states meet the criteria above
• The U.S. cannot recognize a unilateral declaration of independence, however
U.S. Political Strategy in Yemen

Two-level approach: Help mediate the high-political resolution of the conflict in Yemen and establish direct connections with Yemeni tribes and other sub-governmental bodies.

Develop U.S. and regional strategies to help Yemenis address:

- Water issues
- Economic and agricultural issues
  - need to develop comprehensive understanding of these problems first
- Strategic communications
- Refugee issues (from HOA and from Yemen outward)
- Expand governance capacity-building efforts
- Outreach to civil society
Government-to-Government Strategy

The U.S. should:

• Work through KSA and regional organizations such as the GCC.
  • Need to recognize KSA’s and the GCC’s separate objectives in Yemen and should be cognizant of which interlocutors the U.S. works with and through

• Leverage, motivate, and incentivize KSA to cooperate on both a strategic and an operational level.
  • The U.S. could provide the public face and force for all initiatives if KSA works to mediate and helps to finance efforts
  • The U.S. needs to raise the profile of shared interests regarding Yemen in its relations with KSA and throughout the region
  • The U.S. should establish a Yemen coordination team at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh to facilitate dialogue and coordination
The U.S. should:

• Grant American civilian and military personnel in Yemen authorities to disperse cash and distribute resources similar to those available in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly the ISSF, CERP, and PRT programs and authorities.

• Begin engagements with tribal leaders or leaders of federations to establish relationships, understand issues, and open dialogue
  • Chief of Mission or other entities should lead these efforts
  • Requirements for transportation and security must be filled
  • Need to identify U.S. objectives in each tribal region and prioritize these objectives
  • Need to determine tribal needs and identify incentives for tribes to do any of the following:
    • Gain situational awareness in tribal regions
    • Take action or get local actors to take action in a given territory
    • Enable a potential future policy shift
  • Need to manage tribal expectations in what the U.S. can offer
  • Track tribal dynamics in the wake of Saleh’s departure, noting that shifting patronage networks might change the tribal power structure
  • Evaluate and operate on tribes with access to resources or with an al Qaeda presence
Considerations

• Achievement of U.S. objectives in Yemen requires an operational and fully-resourced (capable of executing its mission) U.S. embassy in Sana’a
• Engagement in Yemen should uphold the principles of “by, with, and through” to the greatest extent possible
• Saleh may remain in power, which will affect U.S. ability to adopt certain strategies
Consequences of non-action

- U.S. remains at an increased risk of attack that traces back to Yemen
- Yemen will continue to serve as a sanctuary for al Qaeda and its affiliates
- Key regional allies, like KSA and other Gulf states, may be weakened by Yemen’s instability and may be targets of AQAP
- The situation in Yemen could devolve into a humanitarian emergency, requiring immediate international assistance
- U.S. could lose influence in Yemen and may not be able to shape the outcome of any form transition
Initial Policy Recommendations

- Establish interagency team working with regional partners to identify and develop long-term solutions for Yemen’s economic and resource problems.
- Identify governance challenges and drivers of instability in order to develop viable policies to address them.
- Begin engagements with tribal leaders or leaders of federations to establish relationships, understand issues, and open dialogue.
- Grant American civilian and military personnel in Yemen authorities to disperse cash and distribute resources similar to those available in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly the ISSF, CERP, and PRT programs and authorities.
- Continue to advise, train, and develop capabilities of Yemen’s CT force.
- Develop contingency plans for direct action operations to degrade and defeat AQAP.
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