

# The National

## Act locally: why the GCC needs to help save Yemen

Last Updated: January 07, 2010 6:09PM UAE / January 7, 2010 2:09PM GMT



A Yemeni man passes framed pictures of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh displayed at a shop in Sanaa on Monday. **Nasser Nasser / AFP Photo**

**The threat of al Qa'eda has turned the eyes of the world to Yemen, *Bernard Haykel* writes, but the solution to its woes is right in the neighbourhood.**

The failed terrorist attack on an American aeroplane by a Nigerian man trained by al Qa'eda in Yemen has rapidly focused the world's attention on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Apparently overnight, Yemen has been deemed al Qa'eda's new headquarters – "a base for terrorist attacks far beyond the region", in the words of Hillary Clinton.

Yemen's problems, however, go well beyond the fact that it has become a refuge for a few hundred al Qa'eda fighters: the crumbling state poses a possible menace to the Gulf region – and it is in the Gulf rather than Washington that a durable solution must be forged.

Yemen is teetering on the verge of collapse – but not because of al Qa'eda's long-standing presence. After three decades of bad governance, Yemen remains one of the poorest countries in the world. It suffers from all the ills of underdevelopment: an unrestrained demographic explosion, non-existent or poor social services, depletion of underground water and oil resources, rampant corruption, authoritarian and unaccountable government and, finally, the official promotion of an intolerant version of Sunni Islam not too dissimilar from that of al Qa'eda.

Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has ruled the united country since 1990, and its northern portion since 1978, has obstructed the formation of proper governing institutions, preferring instead a highly personal style of rule defined by networks of patronage and clientelism. Oil revenues and funds from outside donors have lubricated this purposefully unstable political machine, but its gears are now grinding loudly as money dries up and the structural impediments of underdevelopment take their toll.

To make matters worse, an armed rebellion led by Zaydi Shiites, the Houthis, has been ongoing since 2004 and a secessionist movement is gathering force among the country's southern citizens. There is even dissent within the ruling clique, with some of Saleh's relatives unhappy about plans to have his son succeed him. Al Qa'eda is also present, and more organised of late, but the Yemeni government has had a complicated relationship with the jihadists since the early 1990s, and we should not automatically assume that they are the state's enemy or even its first priority.

The regime in Sanaa, like those in Riyadh and Washington, was fully supportive of the effort to recruit Arab volunteers to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Yemenis joined in droves, and pulpits in the 1980s and 1990s pulsed to the drumbeat of the righteous jihad, first in Afghanistan and then in Bosnia, Chechnya and Kashmir.

As a result, a high percentage of al Qa'eda's recruits hail from Yemen, including many of Osama bin Laden's personal bodyguards. Al Qa'eda's first-ever armed attack took place in Yemen in 1992, targeting US Marines passing through Aden on their way to Somalia; the culprits were never brought to justice.

In the early 1990s Saleh used the so-called Arab-Afghan jihadis as fighters and assassins against his socialist enemies, the erstwhile partners in the country's unification in 1990. This strategy that culminated in the 1994 civil war, which Sanaa won with the active participation of Salafi-Jihadis. The state's relationship with the militants did not cease with the close of the civil war: according to Nasir al Bahri, one of Bin Laden's men now living in Yemen, Saleh approached the jihadists after 2004 to seek their assistance in the war against the Zaydis in the north.

The state's break with al Qa'eda has only taken place in the past three to four years, after a younger and much more radical generation of fighters arrived in Yemen after fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These younger ideologues regard Saleh's government as illegitimate and refer to it as an apostate regime that colludes with the so-called "Crusader-Zionist alliance" led by the United States.

But the renascent al Qa'eda in Yemen may be the least threatening of the many challenges facing the government. Saleh is now trumpeting the presence of al Qa'eda to garner financial and military support from the West, but the funds and arms now being sent from Washington may be deployed against more threatening enemies, like the Houthis, or used to maintain the patronage networks that keep Saleh in power.

American involvement in Yemen is not a new development: the US has been targeting al Qa'eda in Yemen since the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000. One of the first al Qa'eda leaders to be targeted by an American drone strike, Abu Ali al-Harithi, was killed in Yemen in 2002, and the US has trained and armed a commando force under the leadership of Saleh's son and presumed heir, Ahmad. Last month the US participated in two separate attacks against suspected al Qa'eda sites in Yemen, and in the aftermath of the Detroit incident Washington is abuzz with calls for increased funding and more direct military involvement. But this would be a grave mistake, and not only because armed intervention on behalf of the Yemeni government would appear to confirm al Qa'eda's chosen narrative, in which the US is a vile anti-Muslim power that seeks to strengthen and maintain corrupt and illegitimate regimes at all costs, including the death of countless innocent civilians, while denying Muslims freedom and just governance. The United States and its western allies cannot defeat al Qa'eda in Yemen with military force; only Muslims, and their states, can win this war.

Indeed, it is for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states that Yemen poses the most serious problem: a failed Yemen, with an active al Qa'eda presence and a radicalised and impoverished population is first and foremost a threat to its neighbours. An opportunity now exists for GCC states to take the lead in addressing the problems in Yemen, beginning with a major mediation effort to end military hostilities between the Houthis and the Yemeni army as well as the Houthis and Saudi forces. This should not be difficult to achieve: Qatar has already brokered an agreement in 2008 guaranteeing the Zaydis greater cultural and religious rights – which is all they seek – though Saleh has evaded and delayed its implementation.

The GCC, unlike the West, has the relationships and resources required to play a constructive role in Yemen, and the country's neighbours, which have a serious long-term interest in solving Yemen's problems, are not afflicted by the blinkered obsession with al Qa'eda that confines the American perspective.

The GCC states could be similarly engaged with the secessionist forces in the South, mediating in co-ordination with the existing Yemeni opposition parties and Saleh's government. Ending these two sources of domestic tension will bring the much-needed stability that is required to deal effectively with al Qa'eda, and it may well have the ancillary benefit of reforming the regime's broken political machine at the same time. It must be remembered that one of the main reasons for Al-Qaeda's renewed strength in Yemen is that the movement was defeated in Saudi Arabia, through the use of a clever combination of intelligence, security and propaganda tactics. The same can be undertaken in Yemen, to similar effect. But it will require a radical shift in strategic thinking in the Gulf – and especially in Saudi Arabia – predicated on the realisation that Yemen's woes and a weak Yemeni state pose a severe threat to the regional order. Defeating al Qa'eda may be the West's priority, but it is the GCC alone that can help put Yemen on the path to stability and prosperity – and only this, in the end, will deprive al Qa'eda of its firm footing on the Arabian Peninsula.

*Bernard Haykel is Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Director of the Transregional Institute at Princeton University, and Fellow of the Center on Law and Security, NYU.*

---