

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

*Center for Preventive Action*

## *POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 8*

*Date:* Monday, November 14, 2011  
*From:* Gregory D. Johnsen  
*Re:* Resetting U.S. Policy Toward Yemen

Yemen is slipping into an uncertain and dangerous future. In early June 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has ruled the country for the past thirty-three years, narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. The next day he flew to Saudi Arabia for emergency medical treatment, where he remained for three months before a dramatic and unannounced return to Sanaa last week. During his absence, Saleh's eldest son, Ahmed, and a quartet of nephews moved into the presidential palace, threatening open war if there is a move toward a political transition. Lined up against Saleh and his heirs is a creaky alliance of former foes and defected generals who agree on only one single point: Saleh can longer be president.

Nearly half of the regular army is in rebellion under the command of Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a general from Saleh's own tribe. But this is much more than a two-sided fight between old comrades-in-arms. Various militia groups have taken advantage of the fracturing of state authority to further their own sectarian agendas. In the north, near the border with Saudi Arabia, the Huthis have solidified their control over large swaths of territory. In the southern governorates of Abyan and Shabwa, fighters linked to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have made a frightening surge, overrunning towns and military bases. Neither military faction is willing to openly and forcefully confront the militants for fear of weakening themselves ahead of a potential civil war.

In this murky mixture of competing interests, U.S. policy is adrift. Aware of the danger AQAP poses to the United States, the Obama administration has dramatically increased air and drone strikes in Yemen. At best, this is a delaying tactic designed to keep AQAP off-balance until the Yemeni military can act. Airpower alone is not enough to defeat AQAP. Indeed, AQAP may actually grow stronger as a result of strikes. Even more worrisome, this is al-Qaeda's second incarnation in the country. The gains of 2002 and 2003 have been forfeited by years of neglect when U.S. policy bounced from one crisis to the next without an overarching structure. What is needed now for Yemen is a strategic reset that has three goals: initiating a decisive political transition at the top, attacking the roots of AQAP's support in Yemen, and mobilizing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to energize Yemen's failing economy.

## *THE CHALLENGE IN YEMEN*

For the past three decades President Saleh has ruled Yemen by playing different opposition groups against one another. This autocratic, patronage style of governing in which Saleh's allies were rewarded and his opponents harassed alienated large portions of the population. By 2004, it had helped spark a tribal revolt in the north. Endemic corruption and poor governance also contributed to the rise of a secessionist movement in the south three years later, further undermining Yemen's perpetually weak economy.

Although cognizant of these problems, the United States has been primarily concerned with the threat posed by AQAP—the armed threat that least worries Saleh and the Yemeni government. Washington has relied heavily on air and drone strikes, which limit the immediate danger to U.S. service personnel and can be executed more cheaply than traditional military means. But such an approach has significant drawbacks: errant missiles and civilian casualties have helped radicalize a new generation of fighters and convinced many that Yemen—like Iraq and Afghanistan—is now a legitimate theater of jihad.

## *ELEMENTS OF A BROADER STRATEGY*

Given the messy and deep-seated problems in Yemen, the United States must be realistic about what it can accomplish. With limited resources and an even more limited public appetite for additional foreign policy burdens at this time, the United States has to leverage the power and influence of regional actors, principally Saudi Arabia and the GCC. Although relations with the kingdom have grown increasingly contentious since the onset of the Arab Awakening, there is room for cooperation on Yemen. Much like the United States' relationship with Mexico, Saudi Arabia views its neighbor to the south as a source of instability and potential problems for years to come. As great as the threat of an unstable Yemen is for the United States, it is even greater for Saudi Arabia.

The kingdom is still willing to hedge its bets, but there is a growing realization within Riyadh that despite Saleh's return he will never be able to reunite the country. The longer Saleh remains president, the worse the situation in Yemen will become. Both the United States and Saudi Arabia broadly agree on the main problems: the lack of a political transition, the danger of AQAP, and the simmering threat of Yemen's fragile economy. Neither country can solve the challenge of Yemen unilaterally, but together they can help arrest the country's downward descent.

### **Political Transition**

It is impossible for Yemen to move forward as long as Saleh's sons and nephews are in a position to scuttle deals that they view as unfavorable. The United States must work with its partners in the Gulf to remove this roadblock to a political transition. Last year, the United States earmarked \$75 million to assist Yemen's counterterrorism forces in the Ministry of the Interior and gave millions more to other units, including those under the command of Saleh's eldest son. The United States should, in conjunction with the GCC, inform Ahmed and his cousins that this money as well as GCC funding will be cut off and targeted UN sanctions will be applied if they do not step aside and agree to a military reshuffle and a transition council. This warning should be delivered in three stages. First, the United States, in conjunction with Saudi Arabia, should convey a private message that offers a face-saving exit but assures Saleh's immediate relatives that punitive measures will be taken if they do not step aside. If this fails, the warning should then be delivered publicly. Finally, if they still refuse to step down, the money should be cut and sanctions implemented. Ahmad and his cousins are highly dependent on money to buy the continued loyalty of their troops. Without it, many in the Republican Guards will join the anti-Saleh coalition.

In the event that a coordinated approach of cutting off the money and sanctions does not work, the United States should pursue a policy of forced isolation. To be successful, the United States would need to peel off Saleh's important remaining domestic allies—such as parliamentarians, ministers, and tribal sheikhs—through a process of pressure and enticements until Saleh and his immediate family are completely isolated.

### **Attacking AQAP's Roots**

An al-Qaeda franchise has never been defeated by force alone. The only time an affiliate has been successfully dismantled was in Saudi Arabia, from 2003 to 2006, when the population turned on the terrorist group. To replicate that success in Yemen, the United States needs to partner with the governments of both Yemen and Saudi Arabia to counter AQAP's propaganda. Washington and Riyadh must attempt to spark a public debate about AQAP and its methods, drawing public attention to the fact that the group kills civilians and consistently violates Islamic norms. Riyadh's experience using soft power to undermine al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Yemeni officials' knowledge of the local scene will be vital in ensuring that militants are not replaced as quickly as they are killed. For its part, the United States should contribute a small team of Arabic-speaking diplomats with experience in Yemen.

Together with their Saudi and Yemeni colleagues, U.S. policymakers should establish a joint center for public awareness. The center would seek to deprive AQAP of one of its main assets: unchallenged public assertions. At the moment, no entity in Yemen is speaking up in Arabic against AQAP, which means that the organization is able to shape its public message uncontested. The joint center would work to make al-Qaeda as synonymous with terrorism in Yemen as it is in the United States.

### **Special Fund**

The United States should also partner with the GCC to establish a special fund to help stabilize Yemen's economy and provide humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of Saleh's departure. The initial capital for the fund, which is contingent on Saleh's leaving office, should come from the more than \$2 billion GCC countries pledged at the 2006 London conference but have yet to deliver due to concerns about corruption. The fund should be chaired by the director of the Arab Fund, with all donor countries and institutions represented on the board. This would do much to eliminate donor competition and coordination failures, which have often hampered efforts in the past. Once the economy is stabilized, the focus of the fund should shift to longer-term investment designed to create jobs and technical training.

None of these recommendations will miraculously turn Yemen into a model democracy overnight, but together they will arrest the country's rapid downward descent and deny AQAP and other militants the opportunity to exploit the turmoil in ways that threaten U.S. security and interests in the region. However, as Yemen slips further into chaos, the opportunity to implement these measures is fast diminishing.

Gregory D. Johnsen is a former Fulbright fellow in Yemen and currently a PhD candidate in Near Eastern studies at Princeton University. He blogs at [www.bighthink.com/blogs/waq-al-waq](http://www.bighthink.com/blogs/waq-al-waq).

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries.

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All views expressed in its publications and on its website are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

Policy Innovation Memoranda target critical global problems where new, creative thinking is needed. Written for policymakers and opinion leaders, the memos aim to shape the foreign policy debate through rigorous analysis and specific recommendations.

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention.

For further information about CFR or this paper, please write to the Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, or call Communications at 212.434.9888. Visit CFR's website, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

Copyright © 2011 by the Council on Foreign Relations®, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form beyond the reproduction permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law Act (17 U.S.C. Sections 107 and 108) and excerpts by reviewers for the public press, without express written permission from the Council on Foreign Relations.