

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Testimony on Yemen and Al-Qa'ida

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Turmoil in Yemen: How Understanding the Challenges Can Help Us Undermine al-Qa'ida and the Radical Paradigm

Good morning. Thank you Mr. Chairman for inviting me to share my thoughts about Yemen with you and members of the Committee.

In order to undermine the radical paradigm and disable the terrorist threat to the homeland, it is imperative that we understand the nexus between Yemen and both al-Qa'ida Central and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the realities that have made Yemen a hospitable environment for global jihadis and terrorists. The challenges we face in Yemen unfortunately are not unique; in fact, they are similar to other challenges that we have encountered in other countries and regions in which Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have found a safe haven. We need to be cognizant of these challenges in order to counter al-Qa'ida.

The threat is not new, and Islamic radicalism in Yemen goes back many years. This threat did not develop with the failed terrorist plot on Christmas Day, nor will it end with putting him away. Furthermore, the terrorist threat in Yemen cannot be viewed in isolation. We should analyze it in at least three different but inter-related contexts: **the domestic realities of Yemen; the regional Arab Islamic environment; and the changing global reach of al-Qa'ida.**

Please allow me to say a few words on each of the three contexts.

Yemen

The country possesses all the factors that often drive radicalism and extremism, including an **authoritarian regime; a serious demographic problem; weak and ineffective government authority; non-existent rule of law; tribal fiefdoms and jealousies; sectarian conflicts; dwindling resources; a Shia (Zaydi) rebellion and secessionist insurgency in the South; deep poverty; poor education; high illiteracy; and a long tradition of Islamic jihad. Yemen is a state at risk.**

- **Because of rampant lawlessness and weak governance, numerous radical tribal clerics who act as radicalizers, trainers, and recruiters roam the countryside in relative freedom.**

Regime. Ali Abdallah Saleh's regime has long been characterized by **corruption, nepotism, repression, denial of human rights, a lukewarm commitment to reform, poor economic policies,** and above all the willingness to make **alliances** with shady characters and centers of power **in order to survive and bequeath his rule to his family.**

- Saleh's son, **Ahmad**, groomed to become the next president, heads the country's Republican guard and Special Forces. His three nephews—**Amar, Yahya, and Tarek**—hold key national security positions and the Presidential Guard. Saleh's half brother, **Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar**, heads the air force. **He has consolidated his control over the country through his family and has made Yemen a "Family, Inc."**
- Saleh's "alliances" with different tribal chiefs and radical Islamic centers of power and his use of coercion and co-optation have been designed to keep his regime in power. As the income from oil dwindles, Saleh's influence over tribal chiefs is receding and **his authority beyond San'a is waning. Government authority beyond the capital is ineffective and almost non-existent; tribal chiefs and centers of power are the law in the provinces.**
- **Equally critical, for Saleh the key threat has always come from the Shia rebellion in the north and the secessionist Movement in the South. He has viewed Islamic radicalism and al-Qa'ida as a manageable threat he could contain and make deals with. He has believed for many years that al-Qa'ida's strategic goal has been to topple the Al Saud regime but not his. According to a Yemeni academic, "The Saudis are the real prize for al-Qa'ida, Yemen is the platform."**
- **Saleh's cynical use of radical Sunni Islamic ideology in recent years to combat the other internal threats (for example, the Houthis in the north and the secessionist movement in the South) has inadvertently helped spread the Wahhabi Islamization of parts of Yemeni society, which made it a hospitable environment for radicalism and al-Qa'ida supporters. The Islamic political party, Islah, which has worked with Saleh previously against internal challenges has lost confidence in Saleh's leadership and is turning against him.**
- **Saleh's legendary ability to juggle the different forces and ideological centers in Yemen in the past 30 years to maintain his hold on power has run its course. Hitching his wagon to "America's war against al-Qa'ida" would not stabilize his regime or keep Yemen from descending into chaos.**

Demographics. Yemen's demographics present another discouraging picture.

- **Almost half of Yemen's 24 million total population is under 16 years old.** Yemen has one of the highest rates of population growth in the world (3.45%).
- Yemen suffers from **deep poverty—unemployment hovers around 35%, and almost half the population is below the poverty line.** The rate of economic growth is below 3% and the rate of inflation is around 18%. Unemployment is even higher among the young.
- Like other states at risk, **Yemen's population is large, young, poor, unemployed, poorly educated, anti-regime, and becoming more Islamized.** The old traditional social contract, which allowed the regime a wide leeway to rule in lieu of state support for the safety and well being of the citizens, has all but disappeared. Literacy is barely 50%.
- **If demographic, economic, and political trends continue, it is not unthinkable to see Yemen become a failed state in the next three years.**

Islamic Radicalism. As a country and a seafaring people, Yemen has had a long experience with Islamic movements, Islamic activism, and Islamic radical ideologies. In fact, Yemen and Islamic activism have intermingled since the early days of Islam in the 7th century.

- Yemen's Islam over the centuries has consisted of Sunnis belonging to the relatively moderate Shafi'i School of jurisprudence and of Zydi Shia, especially in the north. Yemen's Islam has on many occasions been in the forefront of the fight against perceived unjust rulers and other enemies of Islam.
- Much of Yemen's Islamic militancy in past decades emerged among the tribes in rural provinces, including in Hadramaut—the ancestral home of Usama Bin Ladin.
- Wahhabi and other radical ideologies—Sunni and Shia—began to spread in Yemen in recent decades and to spearhead the struggle against domestic and regional rulers and against Western interests, policies, and personnel—the so-called near and far enemies.
- In the past three decades, Yemen exported many of its youth to do jihad in the name of Islam in Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other parts of the Gulf.
- **Numerous Muslim youth and activists from Southeast Asia, especially from Indonesia, have been radicalized in Yemen through education and training at conservative and radical institutions.**
- Activists in Yemen—Islamists and traditional secularists, including socialists, Marxists, Ba'athists, and Arab nationalists—no longer believe that gradual reform

and change are possible from within through peaceful means. **More and more groups and movements, including Islamic radicals and extremists, are turning to violence as the only way to wrest power from the regime and consolidate their own power over parts of the country.**

Radical Salafism. In the past five years, Yemen has witnessed the emergence of a new brand of Salafi ideology that offers a conservative, rigid, intolerant, and exclusivist interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith.

- **This intolerant ideology has spread in countries struggling with youth bulges and weak economies, including Yemen, Egypt, Palestine, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, Chad, Somalia, Afghanistan, and parts of Saudi Arabia and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.**
- The Salafi ideology shuns politics and has been critical of Islamic political parties for participating in elections. Such parties—for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Justice and Development in Morocco, Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait, AKP in Turkey, PAS in Malaysia, and Hizballah—have strongly rejected the Salafi ideology for its religious rigidity.
- Salafists in Yemen, as in other Muslim countries, have cooperated closely with al-Qa’ida jihadists against existing regimes and their close association with the United States. Salafis have accused the US of waging a war on Islam.
- **Saleh, like some other authoritarian regimes, has cynically used the Salafi ideology to weaken established Islamic political parties—for example, the Islah Party—and other anti-regime movements, including the Houthi rebellion and the Movement of the South.**
- AQAP has indirectly benefited from the cozy regime-Salafi relationship.

The Houthi Shia Uprising. Yemeni Zaydi Shia (one of the three Shia branches in the world; the other two being the Twelvers and the Isma’ilis) have lived in Yemen and have managed to live peacefully with Sunnis and others in that country. Zaydis Shia imams ruled Yemen from the late 9th century until 1962; currently the Zaydis constitute approximately 40% of the population. Of all Shia factions, Yemeni Zaydis are the closest to Sunni Islam.

- In recent years, however, the rise of radical Sunni activism, especially with the return of Sunni Jihadists from Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Zaydis began to feel threatened by the anti-Shia radical Sunnis and Wahhabis.
- **Hussein al-Houthi**, who was a member of the Yemeni parliament in the 1990s and is fiercely anti-Wahhabi and anti al-Qa’ida, started the uprising with his “The Young Believers” this past year because of his objections to the Saleh regime, the pro-US policies of the Saleh government, and the ascendant Sunni radicalism.

- In trying to crush the uprising, the regime has called on the Saudi military for help and direct involvement in the fighting. He has also enlisted Sunni radical groups to fight what he has described as a pro-Iranian “Shia” movement. In fact, pro-al-Qa’ida Yemeni radical Sunni figures, like Majid al-Zindani, former head of the Islah Party and a close ally of Bin Ladin, criticized the uprising as a “sedition” or “*fitna*.”
- The Houthi uprising has become a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Houthi’s anti-regime stance, however, has found resonance among Zaydi and non-Zaydi Yemenis, especially as the regime’s overwhelming force has been unable to crush the uprising.

Saleh’s growing support of US military actions against AQAP will likely weaken his position among Sunnis and undermine his efforts to fight the uprising in the north and the secessionist movement in the south. It is too soon, however, to predict how Saleh will solve this strategic dilemma. Two strategic questions come to mind:

- **First, will Saleh support the US and fail to defeat the domestic threats to his regime in the north and in the south or will he pay only lip service to the fight against AQAP and retain the support of the Sunnis?**
- **Second, as the Houthi uprising continues, as Iran and Saudi Arabia become more deeply involved in northern Yemen, and as Yemeni Shia forge closer relations with other Shia groups in the Arabian Peninsula—particularly in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait—will Saleh be forced to treat the uprising as a regional issue rather than a purely domestic matter, and will he abandon the fight against al-Qa’ida in order to regain the upper hand domestically? Or has time simply run out on such a calculation?**

Southern Movement. The new Yemen was created in 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of the Marxist south’s international patron, when the north (San’a) and the south (Aden) merged into one state. The “republican” north reflected a tradition of military authoritarianism, nationalism and Islamism; the south’s background was socialist, Marxist, and populist. Almost two decades since the merger, some people in the south still harbor the view that the union was rammed down their throats and that they are under “occupation” by the “Saleh family-run dictatorial north.”

The merger faced its first shock in 1994 when army units from the “socialist South” revolted against the “corrupt, crony” Saleh regime in the north. Saleh enlisted both the Saudis and the radical Salafi Islamists to fight the formerly Marxist forces and was able to crush the secessionist movement.

- **Saleh’s tactical reliance on the Saudis and the radical Salafis against his domestic enemies was the first in a series of such entanglements. Such arrangements reflect Saleh’s deeply held view that the Wahhabi-Salafi**

ideology, the cornerstone of the al-Qa'ida, is not a threat to him and that he could work with activists and jihadists who hold these views.

- That view dealt a severe blow when in early 2009, Tariq al-Fadhli, an Afghan jihadist from the south, broke with the Saleh regime and joined the “Southern Movement” and since then he’s become its leader.
- Salafi jihadists, tribal leaders, and traditional secularists in the south and across the country seem to be coalescing in a jihadist front against Saleh, which does not bode well for his “one-man, family-run” regime, particularly at this juncture when he is under tremendous pressure from the US to support its counterterrorism war against AQAP.

Regional Context

The counterterrorism war against AQAP in Yemen is now organically linked to regional issues, players, and developments. The regionalization and internationalization of this effort, much to Saleh’s dismay, is no longer a domestic Yemeni affair, which Saleh could manipulate like pieces on a chessboard. The regional context comprises the following ten components:

- Growing US military involvement—albeit so far by proxy—in the Middle East outside Iraq.
- Saudi-Iranian military activity in the Arabian Peninsula and on-going Iranian support of Sunni and radical Islamist groups across the region.
- Yemen’s geostrategic linkages to the Horn of Africa, the strategic Bab el-Mandab waterway between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf.
- A rising radical Salafi trend across parts of the Muslim world.
- The waning fortunes of al-Qa’ida Central and the franchising of its terror operation into nations at risk, including Yemen, Somalia, the Maghreb, and other places.
- Continued Islamization of Arab politics.
- Entrenched regime authoritarianism, corruption, nepotism, and denial of human rights in many parts of the Middle East, including in Yemen.
- On-going anti-al-Qa’ida and anti-Taliban military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

- Unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict and deepening misery in Gaza.
- Turkey’s growing shift to the Arab Islamic south and expanding involvement in Arab and Islamic issues.

Al-Qa’ida

The good news on the counterterrorism front is that more and more Muslim thinkers, writers, and media editorialists are openly criticizing al-Qa’ida’s violence and wanton terrorism. In fact, two days ago, a prominent UK Muslim group, “Mihaj-ul-Quran,” issued a lengthy *fatwa* (religious ruling) declaring suicide bombings, terrorism, and the killing of innocent civilians as “absolutely against the teachings of Islam.”

- Al-Qa’ida is losing the moral ethical argument it had advanced previously, namely that the killing of innocent civilians, including many Muslims, was justified in the defense of Islam.
- According to Arab and Muslim media analysis and reports, al-Qa’ida’s inability to provide Muslim youth with jobs, education, economic development, and women and human rights, has plunged the organization in a **crisis of legitimacy and authority**.
- The recent formation of AQAP and its publicly promoted plots out of Yemen do not mask the crisis in recruiting, fund raising, and thinning bench of terror expertise that al-Qa’ida Central is facing. Operations in Yemen might also indicate that al-Qa’ida Central in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region has suffered under US predator and other attacks.
- President Obama’s “new beginning” speech in Cairo June 4 of last year created a bounce in the Arab Muslim world about a better future relationship between the US and the Muslim world, according to Arab and Muslim media reports.
- According to John Brennan, the President’s senior advisor on counterterrorism, **our values as a nation and our commitment to justice, respect, fairness, and peace are the most effective weapon we have in our arsenal to fight the forces of radicalism and terrorism. In addition, bringing hope, educational promise, and economic opportunity to the youth in Muslim societies is the best defense against the false promises of death and destruction promoted by al-Qa’ida and its affiliates.**
- Brennan’s statement was a response to Muslim media reports that **the bounce from President Obama’s conciliatory rhetoric among Arabs and Muslims would be long-lasting if it were followed by significant policy shifts on human rights, political reform, democracy, war crimes, closing**

Guantanamo, and by renewed efforts at the highest level to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What Does This Mean and What to Do About It?

Al-Qa'ida Central and AQAP would want the US to declare Yemen a new front in the war on terror hoping we would initiate massive military operations in that country. We should not fall in their trap! “Invasion” of yet another Muslim country, especially one located in the greater “Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” will be a propaganda bonanza for al-Qa'ida and other radical organizations. Like the “invasion” of Iraq and Afghanistan, large US military operations in Yemen will be used to recruit new terrorists and jihadists; the last thing we need to do is inadvertently help energize al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.

Al-Qa'ida and other radical and extremist groups will be present in many Muslim countries regardless of the fortunes of Al-Qa'ida Central. Al-Qa'ida and other ideologically like-minded groups will continue to pose a threat to Western countries and to the Homeland and to American interests and personnel overseas.

- Regime behavior and policies in many Muslim countries—including authoritarianism, corruption, nepotism, and denial of human rights—as well as social and economic realities have inadvertently contributed to the rise of extremism in those countries.
- **In Yemen as elsewhere, however, fighting and defeating these groups cannot and will not be accomplished by the force of arms alone.**

Defeating al-Qa'ida, AQAP, and similar terrorist groups requires a two-pronged long-term strategy.

First, a continued, concerted effort to target and neutralize al-Qa'ida leaders, operations, and training camps in Yemen and other countries where these leaders operate.

- **Radical AQAP operatives, leaders, and recruiting or enabling clerics—including Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Sa'id al-Shehri, Qasim al-Raymi, Hizam al-Mujali, and Anwar al-Awlaki—might not represent the entire network and removing them from the scene might not eliminate the terror threat, but neutralizing them goes a long way toward weakening al-Qa'ida, AQAP, and their affiliates.**
- **Effective targeting operations require intensive collection, analysis, and sharing of intelligence at home; transnational intelligence cooperation among intelligence services; a long-term commitment in resources and personnel; blocking recruiting on radical websites; and deep expertise in the radicalization process as well as in Yemen and other Muslim societies.**

- **Bilateral and transnational intelligence sharing can be most effective in undermining al-Qa'ida and its affiliates in Yemen and elsewhere when it is based on professionalism, good tradecraft, genuine exchange of information, a strategic shared interest in fighting al-Qa'ida, and a willingness to share relevant and appropriate intelligence and information.**
- **Several authoritarian regimes and security services, unfortunately, in Yemen and elsewhere have used the fight against terrorism as an excuse to muzzle peaceful, pro-reform civil society institutions and to deny their peoples the right to participate in the political process freely, openly, and without harassment.**

Second, as President Obama and his senior counterterrorism advisor have said before and since the Christmas Day failed terrorist plot, US national interest dictates that we engage broader segments of Muslim societies in an effort to delegitimize the radical paradigm and undercut the extremist message of al-Qa'ida. Such engagement should target Muslim communities and centers focusing on tangible initiatives in elementary and secondary education, micro investment and economic development, political reform, public health, clean water, agriculture, and science and technology.

Although we would continue to engage regimes for national security reasons, the broader engagement should involve indigenous, credible and legitimate religious and political civil society communities that are committed to the welfare of their societies and the well being of their citizens. In Yemen, the Islah Party and private associations in the San'a and Aden regions should be involved. The strategic goal of this engagement is to present Yemeni and other Muslim youth with a more hopeful future vision than the empty promises of al-Qa'ida.

- **Although some authoritarian regime, including Saleh of Yemen, will object to such a broad effort by the US, our policymakers working in concert with our European allies and a few moderate Islamic states will have to find ways to convince skeptical regimes that engaging their non-governmental institutions will not necessarily undermine the country's stability. On the contrary, such an engagement will likely eradicate civil conflict and promote peaceful regime-society relations.**

In order to have a chance of success, we must view the envisioned relationship between the US and the Muslim world as a long-term, generational project, which would require patience, expertise, and a national commitment at the highest levels of our government. It will also have to involve our European allies and a number of modernist Muslim states such as Indonesia and Turkey.

In the past four centuries, Yemeni citizens, seafarers, and merchants have traveled to and settled in Indonesia. Their descendants have prospered in that country and attained senior positions in the Indonesian government and economy as well as in Indonesia's two largest Islamic NGOs—Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. Many Indonesian

Muslim families have maintained familial relations with their Yemeni relatives and have sent their teenage children to study Arabic and the Muslim religion in Islamic *madrasas* in Yemen.

Turkey's resurgence as a key player in the Arab Muslim world could be a positive factor in promoting tolerance and moderation in Yemen and other Arab and Muslim countries. Recent polling data from several Arab countries shows that majorities of respondents view Turkey positively and favor its growing involvement in the region. In education, business, and civil society, Turkey offers a tangible proof of the compatibility of Islam and democracy and could work with indigenous NGOs in Yemen and elsewhere to promote a more tolerant and modernizing vision of Islam.

Finally, now that we are directing our attention to Yemen and to fighting AQAP in that unfortunate country, we should not lose sight of the social factors that drive radicalism and of the regional context of Yemen. As the administration proceeds with implementing some of the principles enunciated by the President in the Cairo speech, policymakers will have to demonstrate to our citizens and to the global community that terrorism threatens Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike; that engaging Muslim communities serves our national interest; that the process might not show results for several years; and that it requires deep expertise and resources. The utilization of the full array of US power and influence through diplomacy and other means complements the military in significant ways. Long-term engagement, if done smartly, selectively, and consistently, will help erode radicalism and discredit the recruiters of suicide bombers and the preachers of hate and terrorism.

Thank you.