



## **How to Apply 'Smart Power' in Yemen**

By Frederick W. Kagan and Christopher Harnisch (The Wall Street Journal, January 13, 2010)

*The Salah government will side with us against al Qaeda if we side with it against insurgents.*

President Barack Obama has made it clear that he does not intend to send American ground forces into Yemen, and rightly so. But American policy toward Yemen, even after the Christmas terrorist attempt, remains focused on limited counterterrorist approaches that failed in Afghanistan in the 1990s and have created tension in Pakistan since 2001.

Yemen faces enormous challenges. Its 24 million people are divided into three antagonistic groups: a Zaydi Shiite minority now fighting against the central government (the Houthi rebellion); the inhabitants of the former Yemen Arab Republic (in the north); and the inhabitants of the former Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (in the south), many of whom are engaged in a secessionist rebellion. Its government is corrupt, its security forces have limited capabilities, and a large swath of its population is addicted to a drug called qat.

The World Bank estimates that Yemen will stop earning a profit on its oil production by 2017 (oil now accounts for more than half of the country's export income). Only 46% of rural Yemenis have access to adequate water (40% of the country's water goes to growing qat), and some estimates suggest Yemen will run out of water for its people within a decade.

American policy in Yemen has focused heavily on fighting al Qaeda, but it has failed to address the conditions that make the country a terrorist safe haven. Targeted strikes in 2002 killed key al Qaeda leaders in Yemen, and the group went relatively quiet for several years. The U.S. military has been working to build up the Yemeni Coast Guard (to prevent attacks similar to the one on the USS Cole in 2000) and to improve the counterterrorist capabilities of the Yemeni military in general.

But the U.S. has resisted supporting President Ali Abdallah Salah's efforts to defeat the Houthi insurgency, generating understandable friction with our would-be partner. As we have found repeatedly in similar situations around the world (particularly in Pakistan), local governments will not focus on terrorist groups that primarily threaten the U.S. or their neighbors at the expense of security challenges that threaten them directly. A strategy that attempts to pressure or bribe them to go after our enemies is likely to fail.

Mr. Salah is an unpalatable partner, and we don't want to be drawn into Yemen's internal conflicts more than necessary. But he is the only partner we have in Yemen. If we want him to take our side in the fight against al Qaeda, we have to take his side in the fight against the Houthis.

The U.S. must also develop a coherent approach that will help Yemen's government improve itself, address its looming economic and social catastrophes, and improve the ability of its military, intelligence and police organs to establish security throughout the country. The U.S. now maintains an earnest but understaffed and under-resourced USAID mission in the American embassy in Sana, the country's capital. But because of security concerns, U.S. officials are largely restricted to Sana and therefore cannot directly oversee the limited programs they support, let alone help address systemic governance failures.

Yemen received \$150 million in USAID funds in 2009—one-tenth the amount dispensed in Afghanistan; less than one-fifth the amount provided to Gaza and the West Bank; and roughly half of what Nigeria received. The Pentagon recently said it would like to double the roughly \$70 million Yemen received in security assistance. But the total pool from which that money would come from in 2010 is only \$350 million, according to Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell, and there are other pressing demands for those funds.

The problems in Yemen will not be solved simply by throwing American money at them. But dollars are the soldiers of the smart power approach. Having a lot of them does not guarantee success, but having too few does guarantee failure.

Developing a coherent strategy focused on the right objectives is important, and hard to do. The country team in any normal American embassy (like the one in Sana) does not have the staff, resources or experience to do so. The limited American military presence in Yemen does not either. Despite years of talk about the need to develop this kind of capability in the State Department or elsewhere in Washington, it does not exist. It must be built now, and quickly.

The president could do that by instructing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to form a Joint Interagency Task Force on Yemen. Its mission would be to develop and implement a strategy to improve the effectiveness of the Yemeni government and security forces, re-establish civil order, and eliminate the al Qaeda safe haven. Its personnel should include the Yemen country team, headed by the ambassador, and experts from other relevant U.S. agencies as well as sufficient staff to develop and execute programs. An immediate priority must be to provide security to American officials in Yemen that will enable them to travel around, even though there will not be American forces on the ground to protect them.

This strategy will require helping Yemen defeat the Houthi insurgency and resolve the southern secessionist tensions without creating a full-blown insurgency in the south. It will also require a nuanced strategy to help the Yemeni government disentangle al Qaeda from the southern tribes that now support or tolerate it.

One of the key errors the Bush administration made in Afghanistan and Iraq was to focus excessively on solving immediate security problems without preparing for the aftermath. Too narrow a focus on improving counterterrorist strikes in Yemen without addressing the larger context of the terrorist threat growing in that country may well lead to similar results. If the Obama administration wants to avoid sending troops to Yemen, it must act boldly now.