

SHARED SECURITY
POLICY BRIEF

SECURITY IN YEMEN



Friends Committee on
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The Friends Committee on National Legislation's Shared Security policy papers promote a more ethical and effective U.S. foreign policy. Shared Security policy papers call for serious reform in U.S. foreign policy that reflects the following core principles: peaceful ends of violent conflict through peaceful means, protection of the environment and promotion of sustainable economies, global cooperation and the rule of law, and restorative approaches that bring healing to a broken world. FCNL's Shared Security policy papers stem from a collaborative project between the Friends Committee on National Legislation and the American Friends Service Committee.

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INTRODUCTION

Yemen is on the brink of slipping back into chaos. Outcomes from the National Dialogue Conference, which concluded in January 2014, have been slowly and inadequately implemented. Grievances among minority groups and non-state actors are growing. The economy of Yemen is in tatters; the country does not have enough food to feed its starving population; health outcomes are lagging; environmental degradation is impacting thousands; the political transition is in peril; and violent conflicts are raging across the country.

An offensive campaign against Al Qaeda, riots and protests in the capital, fears of a coup against the transitional government and a dramatically under-funded humanitarian crisis have all been making international headlines. But these individual events cannot be addressed in silos. Indeed, the myriad challenges facing Yemenis and their transitional government must be addressed holistically with clear goals and a clear overarching, multi-year strategy to attain these goals.

There is an urgent need to reprioritize U.S. foreign policy to address the complex nature of the Yemen crisis. The current financial and rhetorical focus on targeted drone strikes risks the security and well-being of United States citizens, of Yemenis, and of neighboring countries throughout the Middle East. The United States is applying a one-size-fits-all model of targeted strikes—based on models and experiences from Somalia and Pakistan. But this strategy is failing in Yemen. The United States needs to fully implement a more ethical and effective foreign policy; one that addresses the root causes of conflict and insurgency across Yemen. If Congress is serious about tackling violence in Yemen, no amount of drone strikes will help.

The need for a shift in focus is more vital than ever. As conflict rages across the Middle East, and with new focus on Iraq and Syria, the United States must not lose focus on Yemen or allow the country to become a haven for radical groups. The implementation of the United States' current strategy focuses on short-term goals but jeopardizes long-term foreign policy and national security goals. The United States must adopt a broader and more holistic approach that emphasizes the underlying economic and political problems. This will better serve the stability of Yemen and, accordingly, our shared security interests. The only way forward is the road less traveled, and less funded—that of long-term, sustainable, development-oriented solutions. The security of Yemen, of the region and of the United States depend on it.

YEMEN'S COMPLEX CRISIS

The United States' current strategy in Yemen focuses heavily on security through the singular lens of counterterrorism. But terrorism in Yemen cannot be wiped out without addressing challenges that go far beyond this immediate threat. The concept of "security" in Yemen extends to a series of threats that affect the daily well-being of citizens. Broadly, "security" in the Yemen context can be categorized into five areas: economic security, health and food security, environmental security, political security, and security from conflict and violence. Looking at security through this broader lens allows for an analysis that includes traditional concepts of security as well as non-traditional threats to an individual citizen's well-being. It is only through understanding the causes, as well as the impact and intersection of these areas of security, that the United States will be able to implement a holistic, comprehensive and more strategic policy for Yemen. Addressing root causes of inequality, inequity and injustice and promoting the well-being of Yemeni citizens will ensure that the country thrives in the long-term. Only through addressing these root causes will Yemen cease to be a safe haven for extremist groups seeking to destabilize the region and threaten the security of the United States and its interests.

Broadly, "security" in the Yemen context can be categorized into five areas: economic security, health and food security, environmental security, political security, and security from conflict and violence.



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ECONOMIC SECURITY

Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world with an estimated 54 percent of the population living below the poverty line and an estimated annual per capita income of only \$1,500.¹ Official estimates state that roughly 40 percent of the population is unemployed while unofficial estimates place this closer to 60 percent.

Yemen's economy is highly reliant on oil exports, with an estimated 70 to 80 percent of national revenue coming from oil. Revenues from oil, however, depend on consistent domestic output and are dependent on international commodity prices. Output in recent years has dramatically declined. Violence is increasing across the country and tribesmen dissatisfied with the current political situation have resorted to repeated attacks on key oil pipelines. These recent bombings and repeated attempts to sabotage the pipelines have brought production grinding to a near halt.

With production reduced, domestic oil prices are rising. As oil prices rise, millions of families already living in poverty are now unable to access basic energy needs. Fuel to run tractors, to pump water or to travel to markets or health facilities is unavailable, unaffordable, or both. With the

economy in tatters, the average Yemeni does not have sufficient income to support even the most basic standard of living. Bare essentials, including a nutritious diet, healthcare and education remain out of reach for millions. Youth unemployment currently stands at over 50 percent and economic opportunities are limited. There is an urgent need to diversify Yemen's economy and to leverage the large, young labor force.

One quick and obvious path to mitigate unemployment has been to increase the number of Yemenis working in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. However, adding further strain to the weak economy, thousands of Yemeni migrants have recently been deported from Saudi Arabia due to changes in Saudi Arabia's domestic labor markets and a crackdown on undocumented workers. The International Organization for Migration has counted more than 300,000 Yemenis crossing the border and estimates that hundreds of thousands more may have returned uncounted through border crossings that are inaccessible to the international community.² Not only are these returnees now joining the ranks of the unemployed, but the decline in remittances previously sent from Saudi Arabia is also impacting families across Yemen.

HEALTH AND FOOD SECURITY

Poverty, reduced remittances, and a lack of economic opportunities contribute directly to poor health outcomes and food insecurity across the country. Nearly half the population in Yemen—an estimated 10.5 million people—is food insecure.³ Although food is available in the markets, the average Yemeni cannot afford to purchase the sufficient quantity or sufficient quality of food needed to survive. Across the country, nearly 90 percent of food is imported with the vast majority of agricultural land used to harvest qat, a mild narcotic chewed by a majority of the population. Food security in the country, thus, is heavily reliant on international markets, making the country highly susceptible to fluctuating market prices.

In addition to food insecurity, health outcomes are far below average for the region. An estimated 57.7 percent of children under 5 are stunted,⁴ giving Yemen the second highest rate of stunting in the world. In addition to chronic malnutrition, acute malnutrition affects an estimated 15.2 percent of Yemen's children. These children are at risk of dying if they do not receive immediate support. Maternal and infant mortality rates are higher than in any other country in the region and access to healthcare remains one of the highest priorities for rural and impoverished families.

The health care system in Yemen functions poorly, if at all, with poorly staffed and inadequately stocked facilities. For health services, Yemenis pay an estimated 50 percent of the fees out of pocket, despite the existing legislation for free access to health care. On top of this, only 43 percent of Yemenis have access to a public health facility. Private health care as well as traditional healing techniques are widespread and contribute to low health outcomes across the country.⁵

Weak healthcare systems and high levels of food insecurity are further impacted by rapid population growth. Forty-five percent of the population of Yemen is fifteen years old or younger and current population growth is an estimated 2.3 percent per year. At this rate, the population of Yemen will double within the next twenty to twenty-five years.⁶

Added to this, migration to Yemen from the Horn of Africa has steadily risen throughout Yemen's crisis. This migration places strain on the existing health infrastructure and requires additional resources from both the government and aid agencies currently operating in country. Yemen is host to an estimated 200,000 refugees and Asylum seekers from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq and Syria.⁷



ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

Population growth and migration to Yemen are placing increased strain on limited natural resources. Yemen is fast on its way to becoming the first country to run out of water. It is predicted that the capital city of Sana'a could be completely dry in under a decade, making it the first capital city in the world to run out of water.⁸ The country has only 120 cubic meters of renewable internal

freshwater resources available per capita per year. This is just under two percent of the global average of 7,000 cubic meters per person per year. Yemen does not have any permanent lakes or rivers and is entirely dependent on rainfall, groundwater and flash-flooding. Ninety percent of water usage across Yemen goes to agriculture, drawing groundwater at unsustainable levels and leaving limited water for drinking or household use.⁹

Management of scarce water resources is also problematic. Yemeni cities and Yemeni citizens lack clear schemes for water collection and wastewater is poorly managed. An estimated 20 to 30 percent of Yemen's water is lost through waste compared to an estimated 7 to 9 percent in European countries.¹⁰

The fuel crisis and weak economy make access to water even more difficult. Households with sufficient income resort to buying water from informal private markets but poorer households are left to spend hours fetching water from boreholes, often traveling to several locations before finding one in operation.¹¹ With limited fuel, fewer and fewer boreholes are operating, and the expense of running the pumps is unfeasible for most.

Water security is now closely aligned with national security. The country will be out of water in most Yemenis' lifetime and competition for the precious resource will increase. With effects of climate change already impacting seasonal rains and driving up temperatures, the water crisis may reach its apex sooner than expected.



Redi Waddington

POLITICAL SECURITY

The weak economy, poor development indicators and rapidly depleting natural resources lay a fragile foundation on which to build a new government and new constitution.

Increased tensions across the country are threatening the outcomes of The National Dialogue Conference, which concluded in January 2014. Representatives agreed to a federal structure and agreed on a timeline for drafting a new constitution. But non-state actors are questioning the process and refusing to accept the outlined regions for the new federal structure. The transitional government is heavily criticized for their apparent inability to manage this transition phase and allegations of corruption and cronyism are rampant. Indeed, the structure of the transitional government enabled ministers and staff to be selected based on party positions and relationships not on technical competence or experience. Groups without representation in the transitional structure are dissatisfied with their continued marginalization. Ongoing protests in the capital are a result of this marginalization and exclusion from the political transition process.

The international community has lauded Yemen's political transition as a success, but the process is not yet over and could easily be derailed. The conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference was seen as a positive sign, but the ensuing disagreements, the protests, insecurity and cabinet reshuffles indicate distrust in these outcomes and in the government itself. Corruption and nepotism are widespread across government agencies and from the federal to local levels. Furthermore, women remain grossly underrepresented across government branches. Youth, also, lack clear



political groups or clear avenues for participation in government. Despite their role in the 2011 revolution, many youth feel that the ideals they fought for are being sidelined and that the transitional government is perpetuating corruption and injustices from the old regime.

Trust in, and respect for, the transitional government has also been affected by the lack of accountability and justice following the revolution. In the peace deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, and supported by the United States government, ex-President Saleh and his party were granted immunity. Transitional justice was set aside in favor of stability. But the repercussions of this are now being felt across the country, particularly in the south, where citizens see that a government that has perpetrated injustices is allowed to remain in power.¹²

CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE-BASED SECURITY

The lack of justice and accountability combined with economic, social and political grievances have led to a rise in conflict and violence. While the American media remains almost exclusively focused on the threat of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), there are, in actuality, three distinct conflicts embroiling the Yemeni government and impacting citizens across the country.

First, the Houthis are engaged in intense bouts of sectarian and political violence against hard-line Salafist (Sunni) militias and the Islamist Al-Islah party.¹³ Although the intensity and frequency of clashes have increased in recent weeks, the conflict is nothing new. Between 2004 and 2010, the Houthis fought in six consecutive rounds of war with the government. In 2011, the Houthis participated in country-wide protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime, forming ties with anti-regime activists. Since the fall of Saleh's regime, the Houthis have expanded their presence and influence. In recent months, fighting has displaced thousands as the Houthis move further south into Amran, Sana'a and Al Dhale governorates.

Second, in southern governorates, formerly part of South Yemen, a separatist movement known as Al-Hirak Al-Janoubi has repeatedly engaged in large demonstrations against what it considers to be a northern-dominated government.¹⁴ As

with the Houthi movement in the north, Al-Hirak has become increasingly visible and increasingly powerful since the 2011 uprising.

Third, the Yemeni government and allies are fighting the emboldened AQAP network. Formed in 2009 as a merger between Saudi Arabian and Yemeni Al Qaeda Networks, AQAP is viewed as the most active and most significant Al Qaeda branch. Despite a massive campaign in 2012 to push AQAP out of Abyan—their stronghold in the south—the group reemerged as powerful as ever.

In addition to these three large-scale conflicts with recognized non-state actors, localized tribal conflicts over water and land access are also impacting communities across Yemen. Repeated tribal led attacks on power lines, on trucks carrying fuel and on oil pipelines have left residents across the country without electricity or fuel for weeks at a time.

While these distinct conflicts and struggles across the country can be attributed to various factors, much of the tension comes back to economic hardship, inequality and social stratification. "Simply put, stability in Yemen is not possible if more than half of the population do not know where their next meal is coming from, or cannot access safe water and sanitation."¹⁵

cannot afford the healthcare or food they need to survive. The dire situation in Yemen leaves many ordinary citizens with limited options for survival and wellbeing. Together, these intersecting insecurities render Yemen a fertile ground for the training and recruitment of militant groups.

INTERSECTING INSECURITIES

The security areas presented above interact and compound one-another to create a desperate situation for Yemenis. As environmental threats increase, conflict between communities increases. As the political situation deteriorates, the government's ability to run a strong economy also deteriorates. As the economy weakens, citizens

UNITED STATES' STRATEGY IN YEMEN

CURRENT U.S. STRATEGY

The U.S. government's strategy in Yemen has evolved in recent years with important steps taken to address the humanitarian crisis, to integrate good governance and to move beyond a singular focus on counterterrorism. According to John Brennan, current Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the United States government promotes a strategy for Yemen based around five key pillars:¹⁶

1. Strong and active support of political transition and of an inclusive national dialogue;
2. Help to strengthen governance and institutions (including a vibrant civil society and independent media);
3. Immediate humanitarian relief;
4. Economic reform and development for long term progress (to improve delivery of basic services including health, education and water); and
5. Improved security to combat the threat of AQAP (long term battle must be won by Yemenis / diplomatic, intelligence, law-enforcement and justice communities).

This articulation of a broad strategy for Yemen is an important and welcome step taken by high ranking U.S. government officials. Nonetheless, based on media coverage, on perceptions on the ground, on financial resources and on speeches by the President and members of the Administration, the primary focus of the United States' policy in Yemen lies in point number 5—improving security and combating the threat of AQAP—which has taken disproportionate attention.

Since February 2012, Yemen's President Hadi has expanded cooperation, particularly intelligence gathering, with the Americans, and accordingly the number of targeted killings (usually by drones) of "terrorist suspects" has jumped.¹⁷ In the first five months of 2014, a total of 14 drone strikes have been carried out in Yemen. In 2012, a total of 41 strikes were carried out; this is only 5 fewer than the number of strikes carried out in Pakistan that same year.¹⁸ Indeed, the drone campaign in Yemen appears to be a key tenet of President Obama's foreign policy. Only a single drone strike was carried out in Yemen during President Bush's presidency. In contrast, since President Obama took office, the United States has launched a total of 92 drone attacks, as well as a further 15 strikes using other forms of weaponry.¹⁹ Though some of this may be attributable to technological advances, the trend is, nonetheless, worrying.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Promoting a foreign policy focused predominantly on the threat and use of lethal force is a fundamental failure. While the United States' strategy is, indeed, broad in its stated objectives, the financial and rhetorical focus on the use of force feeds the growth of violent movements it purports to address. This focus fuels global instability and violence and undermines the security of individual communities, of countries and of the world. Each drone strike perpetuates the perception that the United States government is focused exclusively on counterterrorism and on targeting specific individuals on the U.S. government's so-called "kill list." This perception of United States' foreign policy weakens our support base abroad and facilitates recruitment of radical groups. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula continues to operate across Yemen and continues to threaten U.S. interests. In the last eighteen months, the United States Embassy in Sana'a has closed twice in response to direct threats.

The United States must avoid short-term simplistic solutions to security threats and, instead, must focus on the long game.

Non-state actors and disenfranchised groups continue to gain ground and support in their protests against the transitional government. The state is weak and Yemenis are suffering not just from conflict and violence but from economic, political, food, health and environmental insecurities. As Yemen slips further into chaos,

the country is becoming an increasingly fertile ground for the recruitment and training of militants. Desperation among average citizens leads them to seek the financial support of extremist groups while increasing anti-American sentiment also drives youth to the extremist cause. As the United States continues its campaign of drone strikes and targeted killings, anti-American sentiment in Yemen and across the world rises. As anti-American sentiment rises, recruitment becomes easier for the very extremist groups the United States government seeks to destroy.

In his 2014 address at West Point, President Obama stated that United States' foreign policy must seek to "dismantle networks that pose a direct danger to us, and make it less likely for new groups to gain footholds." This statement clearly points to a willingness on the part of the administration to move past the singular focus on targeted drone strikes to a broader strategy focused on root causes and multi-year, strategic assistance to countries such as Yemen.

A re-prioritization of U.S. strategic objectives is essential to ensure a stable Yemen, to ensure United States' interests abroad and to guarantee our shared security. In order to truly dismantle the networks that pose a danger and in order to ensure that future networks do not gain ground, the United States must focus on root causes of insecurity and extremism. The United States must reprioritize points one through four of the strategy for Yemen as articulated by Brennan. The United States must avoid short-term simplistic solutions to security threats and, instead, must focus on the long game.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Yemen needs a lifeline. The country is resilient and hardworking and the United States Congress should seize the opportunity to partner with Yemenis as equals. Not in a way that advantages the political elite, but in a way that supports a national agenda of good governance that is decentralized yet federalized, with political representation and participation at every level, incorporating models of transitional justice and reconciliation.

At the same time, the United States must be realistic about what it can accomplish. With limited resources and a limited public appetite for additional foreign policy burdens, the United States must focus on working together with partners and allies in the region and globally. This should start with the United States leveraging the power and influence of regional actors, principally Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council. In 2011, the United States successfully worked with Saudi Arabia to facilitate a transition of power in Yemen. This should be replicated in the coming months to ensure that Saudi Arabia and the United States are working towards common goals in Yemen. This will be more challenging today than in 2011. Relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia have grown increasingly contentious since the onset of the Arab Spring and the ensuing conflict in Iraq. Yet 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 potential source of instability for years to come. As great as the threat of an unstable Yemen is for the United States, it is an even greater and more immediate threat for Saudi Arabia.²⁰

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ECONOMIC SECURITY

Yemen's current \$13 billion budget and \$36 billion gross domestic product could be significantly higher. Taxes currently comprise only 7.8 percent of the government's total revenue. This is due, in large part, to exemptions for some of the country's largest industries. The oil, agriculture and industrial sectors all remain exempt from paying tax. With an estimated 70 to 80 percent of national revenue coming from oil, this sector, in particular, should be subject to taxation.

The head of Yemen's tax authority estimates that the government could raise an additional \$5 billion in revenue by adhering to a robust tax agenda. (This figure excludes the agricultural sector, in order to protect the fragile farming population.)

HEALTH AND FOOD SECURITY

Yemen ranks second highest globally in terms of malnutrition. This statistic alone should place Yemen on the top of relief organizations' lists. Despite the critical importance of development assistance to Yemen, the United States lags behind European donors including Germany and the U.K. The United States government has failed to prioritize Yemen as a top-country receiving funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Indeed, Yemen ranks behind countries including Bangladesh, Kenya, Haiti, Tanzania, and Uganda in terms of dollars obligated.²¹

As a second step, the Yemeni government must urgently restore trust among the citizens. The government must lead by example and end corruption skimming at all levels of government. Yemen's citizens must first see their government lead by example before they can be expected to follow.

To support Yemen's fragile economy, the United States should:

- Increase the percentage of United States' assistance funds allocated to economic development projects;
- Encourage Saudi Arabia to follow through on development commitments—including infrastructure development—to support market growth; and
- Support the government of Yemen in implementing labor intensive projects.

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

Conflict and insecurity will remain as long as resources are scarce. The water crisis in Yemen is already affecting thousands. The situation will deteriorate in the coming years as the population continues to grow and with ground water reserves depleted at unsustainable levels. The Yemeni government's Social Fund for Development has coordinated water programs with Germany, the Netherlands and the World Bank. The government has also outlined key steps to address the water crisis in the National Water Sector Strategy and Investment Program. Yet, the crisis remains as critical as ever. Further political will and international engagement is needed to ensure that the water crisis remains forefront on the national agenda.

To support Yemen in securing environmental resources, the United States should:

- Support the Yemeni government's National Water Sector Strategy through coordinated efforts with the World Bank and the German and Dutch governments;
- Ensure up-to-date data and information on available water reserves, on depletion rates and on usage for informed decision-making on water-related policies and projects; and
- Coordinate with international partners and the Yemeni government to reduce qat production, thereby increasing availability of water for other agricultural or household uses.



Photo: Washington

POLITICAL SECURITY

The outcomes of the National Dialogue are at risk. There have been increased attacks on government officials and the citizens' trust in their government is rapidly disintegrating. Without basic agreement on the structure for new federal regions, the NDC committee cannot move forward in drafting a new constitution. Without the new constitution, clear voting structures cannot be designed or implemented. The continued delay in holding free and fair elections will further alienate the population. Urgent steps must be taken to ensure that the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference remain on track and to ensure that elections occur as soon as possible.

CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE-BASED SECURITY

The government of Yemen is fighting three wars, not one. Political, social and economic grievances are resulting in increased tensions and hostilities across the country. Recalcitrant actors from all sides must be brought to the negotiating table. Cease-fires must be agreed and upheld and root causes of tribal and non-state actor grievances must be addressed. But to ensure peace and security post-conflict, investment must also be placed in transitional justice and in promoting rule of law across the country. Yemen needs stronger courts, well-trained police, and public support for systems that go beyond tribal ties and local power.

To support Yemen in their political transition and to guarantee political security, the United States should:

- Leverage the U.S. government's relationship with Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi to ensure that his government meets key benchmarks in the NDC outcome process; and
- Continue to support participation in the political process at all levels—not only political party elites—and include more extensive outreach to Southerners and to Yemenis in rural areas.

To support Yemen in reducing conflict and violence across the country, the United States should take the following actions:

- End reliance on drone strikes and heed the above recommendations to address root causes of conflict and essential needs of the citizens of Yemen;
- Adopt a more robust and comprehensive public diplomacy strategy that clearly demonstrates the United States' interest in supporting development and governance in Yemen; and
- Support Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar in their efforts to sustain a peace deal with the Houthis.

CONCLUSION

Yemen is not yet lost. Progress is not impossible. But the United States cannot continue its narrow focus on a counterterrorism policy that, thus far, has failed to eliminate Al Qaeda. The Yemeni government has supported the United States in its counterterrorism strategy, but the objectives have not been achieved. AQAP has launched major attacks in the capital as well as smaller, targeted attacks in the south and east of the country. Assassinations of key government officials are now commonplace.

No number of targeted strikes will solve Yemen's problems or bring stability to the region.

The United States and “the Friends of Yemen know well the factors—endemic poverty, chronic underdevelopment, poor governance, demographic pressure, environmental stress, political instability—that have brought the country to this point.”²² Together with allies in the region and across the globe, the United States must now step up to the plate and fully resource the full foreign policy strategy to help set Yemen on a positive track. Stability in Yemen and, accordingly, our shared security interests, depend on it.



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