

# Fact Sheet: Yemen

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In the last four years, two terrorist strikes launched from abroad against the United States originated in Yemen: the December 2009 “underwear bomb” attached to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s clothing<sup>1</sup>, and the October 2010 cargo planes bomb plot, which was thwarted while en route to the U.S.<sup>2</sup> A third strike, involving another form of explosive, was thwarted earlier this year.<sup>3</sup>

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, based in Yemen, claimed responsibility for all three attacks (Al Qaeda was also responsible for the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole). These terror incidents have made Yemen a top priority for U.S. policymakers. Here are some basic facts about what the U.S. is doing in Yemen, organized into three broad categories of relevance.



## Historical background

- National politics are still dominated by the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen. The countryside often works through tribal groups and tribal politics, which outsiders rarely understand well.
- North Yemen was originally part of the Ottoman Empire’s southern territory. When the Empire collapsed in 1918, the territory became the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, and later the Yemen Arab Republic after a 1962 coup that brought President Ali Abdullah Saleh to power. Colloquially referred to as North Yemen, this region contained modern-day Yemen’s capital, Sana’a.
- South Yemen was a British protectorate formed in 1839, centered around the port city of Aden. Upon independence from the British, it became the People’s Republic of Yemen, a one-party socialist state commonly called South Yemen.
- North and South Yemen had strained relations for a long time, and follow-

ing the 1990 unification, Yemen fought a bitter civil war in 1994, wherein North Yemen mobilized many mujahidin recently returned from the war in Afghanistan. Today, Sana'a and Aden remain the two major poles of Yemeni politics.

- There are at least two secessionist movements within Yemen: the Houthis in the north near the border with Saudi Arabia and the remainder of the southern movement in the south. The Houthis are a small tribal group organized around the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam who have resisted control from Sana'a ever since the 1962 coup. Both secessionist groups are complicated by AQAP's insurgency in the south-central part of the country.
- Yemen often faces street protests. However, in 2011, these protests reached a fever pitch alongside the rest of the Arab Spring, which convinced Ali Abdullah Saleh, a northerner who had ruled Yemen for decades, to resign and transfer power to his southern vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, to take over the presidency.



### **Yemen is important to U.S. commercial and strategic interests.**

- Yemen sits near major shipping lines that carry more than 3 million barrels of oil per day. Though Yemen has its own oil industry, production is down and it is in decline. While there is no immediate threat to those lanes from insecurity in Yemen,<sup>4</sup> policymakers remain worried about possible spillover.
- The U.S. also has an interest in stymieing terrorism in the region. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has a complicated history in the Arabian Peninsula, with roots in Saudi Arabia and a worrying crossover with other groups in Yemen.<sup>5</sup>
- Lastly, deep water ports such as Aden are indicative of Yemen's past and future potential as a regional commercial center should the country's security environment improve.
- Saudi Arabia considers Yemen a safe haven for terrorists because of the presence of AQAP. On occasion the Saudis will assist certain anti-militant groups in the country.

### **Yemen is politically, socially, and environmentally unstable.**

- President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, who replaced long-serving President Ali Abdullah Saleh in a no-contest election this year, is a southerner but is widely disliked there.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Hadi has initiated several modest reform efforts.<sup>7</sup>
- To support Hadi's government, President Obama issued an Executive Order this year imposing penalties on Americans who seek to obstruct Hadi's rule.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2051 supporting governmental reform by demanding "the cessation all actions aimed at undermining the Government of National Unity and the political transition" in Yemen.<sup>9</sup>

- More recently, AQAP has adopted a sophisticated political campaign in the south, posing as a political group called Ansar al-Sharia; this group has, in several important aspects, adopted the southern goal of secession as its own, while still advancing the radical goals of AQAP.<sup>10</sup> They have also occupied southern towns that the Yemeni Army has cleared at great cost.<sup>11</sup>
- Yemen is facing an unprecedented water shortage, and when supplies reach critical levels the shortages will probably spark a new round of instability.<sup>12</sup> Water and food shortages are, in part, tied to the extensive cultivation of *qat*, an illegal narcotic regularly consumed by approximately 7 million Yemenis<sup>13</sup> and the primary income source of an estimated 2.5 million.<sup>14</sup>
- Yemen's economy is shackled by extremely high unemployment, which could potentially drive further social instability as the jobless take to the streets in protest.<sup>15</sup>



*Qat market, Sadah*

### **America actively engages with Yemen economically and militarily.**

- The United States has expanded its foreign assistance to Yemen every year for more than half a decade: from \$62 million in 2006<sup>16</sup> to \$337 million in 2012.<sup>17</sup> It is part of a global \$6.4 billion pledge to assist the country.<sup>18</sup>
- Approximately \$110 million of Yemen's 2012 foreign assistance package is slated to support humanitarian efforts, with an additional \$68 million provided for development and transition programs.<sup>19</sup> The remainder is designated for security assistance: approximately \$47 million from the Department of State and \$112 million from the Department of Defense.<sup>20</sup>
- There are over half a million internally displaced people within Yemen, a quarter of a million refugees, and over a hundred thousand migrants and asylum seekers that will be covered by the humanitarian assistance package. The U.S. development and transition programs will go toward supporting the development of political parties, increasing political participation amongst women and youth, reforming the electoral system, supporting micro-finance and infrastructure projects, and rebuilding medical clinics and training medical personnel.<sup>21</sup>
- \$75 million is dedicated to counterterrorism programs in Yemen: \$29 million for night vision goggles and communications equipment, \$13.3 million for trucks and drones, \$15.1 million for small arms, \$1.5 million for two new expeditionary bases, and costs associated with hosting U.S. special forces trainers.<sup>22</sup>
- US troops have a long-standing training relationship with the Yemeni army.<sup>23</sup> After a temporary stall in cooperative counterterrorism efforts, the US has renewed training missions to combat the threat of violent extremism in Yemen.<sup>24</sup> To more effectively facilitate this mission, the White House has exempted Yemen from the provisions of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act.<sup>25</sup>
- The US occasionally strikes at military targets in Yemen. These strikes happen in conjunction with the Yemeni military, and may use cruise missiles, drones, AC-130 gunships, or other weaponry.

## Endnotes

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