



YEMEN POLICY INITIATIVE

Coordinated by the Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council and the Project on Middle East Democracy

June 25, 2012

Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

The upsurge in Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) activity and the assessment by US intelligence agencies that Yemen may be the next battleground in combating terrorist networks brought increased attention and focus to Yemen prior to the recent political upheavals and AQAP territorial advances. While the US actively supported the negotiated transfer of power, underscored by the recent Executive Order authorizing sanctions against anyone who disrupts the transition, as well as by the UN Security Council resolution threatening similar sanctions, the US has also drastically increased the number of drone strikes against extremist targets, granted the CIA enhanced authority to launch drone attacks, and expanded the US military's role in support of Yemeni military counterattacks against AQAP.

While intensified engagement may be a necessary step toward stabilizing Yemen, as individuals who care deeply about the United States and the future of Yemen, we believe the current US strategy jeopardizes our long-term national security goals. A broader approach that places emphasis on the underlying economic and political problems will better serve the stability of Yemen and, accordingly, our national security interests, rather than a primary focus on counterterrorism efforts and direct military involvement.

The US has a fundamental strategic interest in Yemen to address several key objectives: combating AQAP and other armed groups; ensuring Red Sea stability for oil transport and shipping routes; and preserving regional security while minimizing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In each of these areas, Yemen's stability is critical to achieving the United States' core strategic interests. In turn, Yemen's trajectory depends on achieving a successful democratic transition that includes disenfranchised groups, economic growth, and resolution of longstanding regional tensions.

We accept that the US will take action against those who plot attacks against Americans when there is actionable intelligence. However, removing members of militant groups with targeted strikes is not a sustainable solution and does not address the underlying causes that have propelled such forces to find fertile ground in Yemen. In order to systematically address the drivers of extremism, the US should focus on four key areas: a successful transition to a democratic government that upholds the rule of law and protects human rights; supporting the Yemeni government's provision of basic services and needs

(food security, water, fuel, and health); effective military restructuring and the development of a unified command structure that provides legitimate internal security; and economic growth and job creation.

While there are some in the US government who understand the need for a comprehensive approach, the current public diplomacy and implementation of US policy in Yemen conveys the opposite. Although the Department of State, USAID, and others have invested millions in development and governance projects, the perception both in the US and in Yemen is that US policy is singularly focused on AQAP. The Yemeni people need to know that their country is more than a proxy battleground and that the US long-term commitment to the stability, development, and legitimacy of the country matches the more immediate and urgent commitment to the defeat of AQAP.

To do that, the US should fundamentally shift its approach beyond the narrow focus on counterterrorism and should clearly articulate that it seeks to advance Yemen's social, economic, and political development. The US should recalibrate its economic and governance assistance so that it represents a greater proportion of overall assistance compared with military and security assistance. The US needs to ensure that its focus is on achieving long-term goals, not only short-term objectives.

Threats to American national security will always be the top priority for the US government. The debate is whether to revert to a business-as-usual focus on immediate threats or use the opportunity of Yemen's transition to recalibrate the approach. It is in this context that we propose the following specific policy recommendations in the diplomatic, political, economic, and security spheres:

Diplomacy

- **Communicate openly with the Yemeni people about US counterterrorism and security concerns, but place this within the larger context of long-term stability based on a successful transition and economic, political, and social development.** Yemenis understand that AQAP is a threat – not only for Americans, but for themselves as well – and most recognize the United States' legitimate need to confront those who publicly pledge to do us harm. In this regard, the interests of the United States and the majority of Yemenis are aligned, since the growth of AQAP is detrimental to them as well.
- **Change the primary face of the US government in Yemen to alter the perception that US interest and attention are solely dominated by counterterrorism and security issues.** Specifically, we encourage you, President Obama, to send Secretary Clinton to visit Yemen and clearly articulate this commitment to the Yemeni people. Secretary Clinton's January 2011 visit was well-received, and a visit to post-Saleh Yemen would send a strong signal of support for Yemen's transition. Additionally, create opportunities for other high-level officials to make public statements and speeches conveying that the US is making a sustained commitment to Yemen's political transition, economic development, and stability.
- **Elevate Yemen's importance in the diplomatic sphere and ensure that other bilateral relationships do not dominate or distort the United States' interactions with Yemen.** Deal directly with Yemen and ensure that the US-Yemen relationship is based on American and Yemeni interests. Inclusion of Yemen within the Office of Middle East Transitions would be a positive move and would demonstrate US support for the democratic aspirations of the Yemeni people.

Political

- **Support the National Dialogue and encourage representation of a broad range of diverse voices, including women and youth.** Yemen is currently working to define the parameters

and the mechanics of the national dialogue that was mandated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement. A coordinated approach by international actors to provide assistance and momentum for a genuinely inclusive process will be essential. The US can help set the tone by reaching out more broadly to civil society groups and youth, particularly outside of Sana'a and Aden.

- **Increase assistance to international and local organizations that support the transition and democratic institution-building and establish a culture of pluralism and rule of law.** Unlike many of its neighbors, civil society in Yemen has a history of engagement on issues of youth and women's empowerment, civic education, constitutional development, legal reform, political party development, and elections assistance. These organizations need increased and sustained funding streams to allow for strategic planning and technical assistance from international organizations.
- **Assist the Yemeni government's capacity to deliver basic services and meet the minimum needs of its citizens.** The government's capacity to provide adequate access to food, water, electricity, health care, and education is essential for Yemen to succeed in this transitional period and, more immediately, to avoid a humanitarian crisis. The Yemeni government will need to meet the needs of its people more effectively if it is to counter the appeal of extremists by improving the basic quality of life and advancing sustainable development projects.

Economic and Humanitarian Assistance

- **Work with Friends of Yemen, and especially the GCC countries, to leverage immediate cash assistance and provide humanitarian aid to address food security needs.** With more than 10 million people going hungry daily, Yemen's distress has reached catastrophic proportions. Beyond the moral imperative of providing assistance to avoid famine and extreme suffering, there is an acute security risk if this crisis leads to greater instability. Yemen's neighbors recognize the inherent danger in a deteriorating humanitarian environment, and yet their financial support does not create jobs or improve infrastructure. To be serious about addressing the drivers of instability, the US needs to do its share by contributing and leveraging its allies to do the same.
- **Coordinate with the UN and other international agencies to ensure appropriate mechanisms to prevent corruption in disbursement of funds.** Corruption remains a major issue in Yemen and must be addressed at all levels: in the private sector, the public sector, civil society, and the donor community. The US must take responsibility for the ways the international community contributes to this abuse of power by assuring that assistance is properly channeled.
- **Increase non-military, economic assistance and draw upon regional funds to support Yemen, in addition to its bilateral assistance package.** US assistance to Yemen should be rebalanced to prioritize economic assistance and to support programs that would improve the business climate and regulatory environment for business in order to support job creation. The US should also allocate funds from the Incentive Fund included in the President's FY2013 request, if approved by Congress.

Security

- **Focus US security assistance on long-term capacity to address legitimate armed threats to internal security.** The US should engage with Yemeni institutions, not individuals, and focus

on building institutional capacity. The US must ensure its assistance does not support the suppression of legitimate dissent or protest, but Yemen faces armed threats to its own security beyond AQAP and its security forces need to be professionalized to counter these threats.

- **Engage actively with the government of Yemen to ensure that security restructuring achieves a unified command structure under civilian leadership, in line with democratic principles and human rights.** The US has taken the lead among international players in Sana'a on the issue of security restructuring, and this assistance should be tied to progress on reform benchmarks that are determined through dialogue with the current government. In its efforts to work with the Yemeni government on the security sector, the US should also allocate resources for programs that advance concepts of rule of law and the rights of citizens.
- **Reevaluate strategy of drone strikes with the recognition that this approach is generating significant anti-American sentiment and could strengthen the appeal of extremist groups.** While the decision on when and whom to strike is weighed carefully within US policy and operational circles, careful attention must be paid to the corrosive political costs of such strikes, both in terms of the specific costs in civilian casualties, as well as its impact on the Yemeni government's legitimacy and its ability to cooperate with the United States.

As individuals that care deeply about the United State and the future of Yemen, representing a diversity of experience, opinion, and political affiliation, the undersigned urge you and those in your administration to consider and implement these recommendations with the utmost urgency. We lend our names in our personal, not institutional, capacity.

Sincerely,

Danya Greenfield, Deputy Director, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council

Rahman Aljabouri, Senior Program Officer, National Endowment for Democracy

Atiaf Alwazir, Researcher and Consultant

Sheila Carapico, Professor of Political Science and International Studies, University of Richmond

Isobel Coleman, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Dina Dukhqan, Director, Partners for Democratic Change

Andrew Exum, Senior Fellow, Center for New American Security

Stephen Grand, Director and Fellow, U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Brookings Institution

Stephen McInerney, Executive Director, Project on Middle East Democracy

Nadwa Al Dawsari, Executive Director, Partners Yemen

Ambassador Barbara Bodine, Professor, Princeton University

Juan Cole, Professor of History, University of Michigan

Megan Corrado, Counsel, Public International Law and Policy Group

Charles Dunne, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programs, Freedom House

Jamie Fly, Executive Director, Foreign Policy Initiative

Steven Heydemann, Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University

Ginny Hill, Associate Fellow, Chatham House
Yemen Forum

Toby Jones, Associate Professor of History,
Rutgers University

David Kramer, Executive Director, Freedom
House

Emile Nakhleh, Research Professor,
University of New Mexico; Former Director,
Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program, CIA

Charles Schmitz, Associate Professor, Towson
University

Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Assistant Professor of
Political Science Hobart and William Smith

Jim Hoop, Managing Director, Public
International Law and Policy Group

Brian Katulis, Senior Fellow, Center for
American Progress

Daphne McCurdy, Senior Research Associate,
Project on Middle East Democracy

Andrew Natsios, Executive Professor, George
H.W. Bush School of Government and Public
Service, Texas A&M University

Christopher Swift, Center for National
Security Law, University of Virginia School of
Law

CC: The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton, United States Secretary of State

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta, United States Secretary of Defense

The Honorable Dr. Rajiv Shah, Administrator of United States Agency for International
Development (USAID)