

YEMEN POLICY INITIATIVE

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

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Dear President Obama:

With a new national security team now in place, this is an opportune moment to reevaluate US policy toward Yemen. US strategic interests must balance a number of complex priorities: stability in the Arabian Peninsula, the disruption of terrorist networks, secure waterways and access to oil, prevention of a humanitarian crisis, and genuine support for Yemen's transition to democracy. As these challenges evolve, the US must emphasize the importance of Yemen as a stable, secure, and sustainable partner. Addressing long-term threats to US security—and not focusing primarily on acute, short-term threats—means that we must prioritize the humanitarian, economic, and political development of the Yemeni people. How we achieve that deserves far more discussion and debate.

We congratulate your administration, the US Embassy in Sana'a, the Department of State and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) on efforts to focus on long-term development and humanitarian needs and to shift funding allocations accordingly. Despite fiscal constraints, the US government has leveraged significant resources to support the implementation of the transition agreement and the National Dialogue process. USAID and other agencies are helping internally displaced persons and the country's most vulnerable populations. We can be proud that the United States is the single largest contributor of humanitarian aid to Yemen. We also recognize and appreciate the efforts of many US officials to address the recommendations that many in this group advanced in a June 2012 letter.

These positive developments, however, are considerably hampered by the chronic and pervasive perception both here and in Yemen that the United States pursues its security interests with little regard to the strategy's impact on Yemen itself. The perception that the United States is singularly focused on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is a symptom of this problem. Yemenis understand that AQAP is a threat to both Yemenis and Americans, and most recognize the need to confront those who plan and pledge to attack the United States. However, the current approach to combating these threats is proving itself counterproductive and in need of urgent reevaluation.

The United States is right to invest in enhancing the capacity and operational effectiveness of Yemen's armed forces. We have worked to provide training and technical assistance to Yemeni security forces for the purpose of combating extremism. President Hadi's decision to restructure the security forces will help the government respond to domestic threats, and US support for a Yemeni-led process to implement this reorganization with a unified, centralized command structure will enhance the effectiveness of security forces. This will ultimately enhance their capability to provide security to Yemeni citizens and disrupt terrorist networks throughout the country.

However, the increased reliance on drones undermines our long-term interest in a stable, secure, and sustainable partner in Yemen. A growing body of research indicates that civilian casualties and material damage from drone strikes discredit the central government and engender resentment towards the United States. Where drone strikes have hit civilians, news reports and first-hand accounts increasingly indicate that affected families and villages are demonstrating and chanting against the Yemeni and US

government. This creates fertile ground for new recruits and sympathizers who might provide safe haven or direct support to AQAP and its local affiliate, Ansar al-Sharia. The collateral damage produced by drone strikes, along with the political cost of alienating Yemenis, reduces the political space within which we can cooperate with and help strengthen the Yemeni government.

By embracing the expansive use of US drones, President Hadi risks undermining the legitimacy of his government. The vast majority of Yemenis likely accept that the Yemeni government must combat violent extremists that have found safe haven in Yemen, but reject US control of this campaign. The US strategy in Yemen is based on the core assumption that a strong and legitimate government is essential to overcome the myriad of challenges the country faces. By associating itself with drone strikes, the Yemeni government unwittingly undercuts its credibility amongst the population. Opposition to drone strikes is becoming a national rallying cry for those distrustful of the central government—from Ansar al-Sharia, to Houthis, to Southerners.

Ultimately, the United States will not be able to overcome the threat of AQAP by military means alone—we cannot simply kill our way out of this problem. The only effective long-term strategy will prioritize helping the Yemeni government address the very factors that allow extremist ideology to spread: the absence of basic social services, a worsening food shortage, and chronic unemployment. The US government has made some positive changes over the past four years in terms of its policy toward Yemen, but more can and must be done to set our policy on the right course. Senior administration officials already emphasize our commitment to Yemen's economic development and political transition, but actions speak louder than words. This is the moment to strengthen this commitment with concrete action. With the development of a new national security team, your administration is well positioned to make the following changes in US policy:

- **Leverage the US government's close relationship with President Hadi to strongly encourage his government to meet the reform benchmarks to which he has committed and address human rights violations.** These commitments arose from a process that President Hadi himself set forth as a result of the GCC agreement, and implementation is critical for the credibility of the process and international support. Your Administration should continue to work with Hadi and his government to empower democratic institutions and processes rather than individuals. Even in a transitional phase, Hadi and his government should focus on combating corruption, while rewarding merit rather than personal relationships.
- **Support the National Dialogue in ways that empower independent voices—not only political party elites—and include more extensive outreach to Southerners and Yemenis outside of Sanaa and other urban areas.** The United States should encourage President Hadi to implement the twenty points recommended by the Technical Committee of the National Dialogue Conference to generate confidence among Yemenis in the dialogue process itself. Credible Southern participation is essential for the success of the dialogue, and concrete measures should be taken to demonstrate the government's commitment to a fair process that will address Southern grievances. Beyond the National Dialogue, the United States should reach out more broadly to youth and civil society groups and work with new leaders capable of leading Yemen past the Saleh-era status quo.
- **Work within the Friends of Yemen group to ensure that the generous pledges committed to Yemen are delivered and that the government of Yemen has the capacity and resources it needs to implement projects.** Beyond the moral imperative of providing assistance to avoid famine and extreme suffering, there is an acute security risk of this crisis leading to greater instability. The US should work with President Hadi and his government to activate and empower the newly-established Executive Bureau with real decision-making powers

to expedite donor-funded development projects, including leverage to push implementing agencies to action. Moving quickly to implement development projects in the South and other vulnerable areas will help instill confidence in Hadi's government and the dialogue process.

- **Implement a more robust public diplomacy strategy to demonstrate that US interests in Yemen are not limited to counterterrorism and security issues.** Although the State Department and USAID are engaging President Hadi's government on economic, political, and humanitarian issues, most Yemenis are unaware of such initiatives and feel only the negative aspects of US counterterrorism policy. A visit by Secretary of State John Kerry would send a strong signal of support for Yemen's transition and its democratic aspirations. Additionally, other high-level civilian officials—who are not connected to defense or security issues—should make public statements and speeches conveying a sustained US commitment to ensuring Yemen's economic well-being and democratic development through the transition process.
- **Reevaluate our reliance on drone strikes with the recognition that this approach is generating significant anti-American sentiment and could strengthen the appeal of extremist groups.** While the tactical costs and benefits are weighed by your Administration, the same degree of attention should be paid to the corrosive political costs of such strikes. Particular attention must be focused on the effect of strikes on the central government's legitimacy and its ability to cooperate with the United States. At the same time, the Administration should work with Congress to develop a more transparent process and robust legal framework to govern the use of drone strikes in Yemen and elsewhere.
- **Ensure that security restructuring achieves a unified command structure under civilian leadership and that US military assistance does not perpetuate the same mistakes made during Saleh's tenure.** US assistance should focus on strengthening institutions to enhance the long-term capacity of Yemen's security forces to address armed threats to internal security—not only counterterrorism operations. Within such programs, the United States should prioritize the need for Yemeni forces to respect human rights and the rule of law. US security assistance and the delivery of defense articles should reflect progress on reform benchmarks to which President Hadi has already committed.
- **Increase economic assistance and draw upon regional funds to support Yemen, in addition to a bilateral assistance package.** The US should allocate funds for Yemen from the Middle East Response Fund and the FY13 budget, as approved by Congress. Over the past year, US assistance has increased and shifted the proportion of economic aid relative to military assistance—this is a positive change that deserves recognition. USAID should continue this trend, and funding should focus specifically on job creation, improving the business and regulatory environments, enhancing civil society capacity and democratic institution-building.

As individuals who care deeply about the United States 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

Ambassador Barbara Bodine, Former US Ambassador to Yemen

Daniel Brumberg, Professor, Georgetown University

Robert D. Burrowes, Adjunct Professor, Emeritus, University of Washington

Sheila Carapico, Professor, University of Richmond

Juan Cole, Professor, University of Michigan

Isobel Coleman, Senior Fellow, The Council on Foreign Relations

Megan Corrado, Legal Counsel and Director of Yemen program, Public International Law & Policy Group

Stephen Day, Professor, Stetson University

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

Joshua Foust, National Security Columnist, *PBS Need to Know*

Stephen Grand, Nonresident Fellow, The Brookings Institution

Steven Heydemann, Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University

James Hooper, Managing Director, Public International Law & Policy Group

Michael Hudson, Director, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

Brian Katulis, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

Stephen McNerney, Executive Director, Project on Middle East Democracy

David Kramer, President, Freedom House

Peter Mandaville, Professor, George Mason University

Ambassador Richard W. Murphy, Former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Department of State

Emile Nakhleh, Professor, University of New Mexico

Shuja Nawaz, Director of South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council

Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Professor, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Sarah Phillips, Senior Lecturer, the University of Sydney

Charles Schmitz, Professor, Towson University

Jillian Schwedler, Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts

Daniel Serwer, Professor, Johns Hopkins University

Anne-Marie Slaughter, Former Director of Policy Planning, Department of State

Christopher Swift, Professor, Georgetown University

Ambassador Edward Walker, Former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Department of State

Wayne White, Former Deputy Director, Office of Analysis for the Near East and South Asia, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State

CC:

The Honorable John F. Kerry, United States Secretary of State

The Honorable Chuck Hagel, United States Secretary of Defense

The Honorable John O. Brennan, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

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