



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

US Options in Yemen Following the Houthis' Take-Over

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Feb 2015

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Series: Assessment Report

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Introduction

The Houthis' seizure of Yemen's Presidential Palace on January 20, and the subsequent resignation of the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, have sparked American fears that the collapse of the Yemeni state will undermine the mechanisms in place for cooperation between the Yemeni security forces and their American counterparts in their war against al-Qaeda.

The United States sees the Yemeni-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as a major threat to its security, holding it responsible for a number of successful attacks on US soil and many others that were prevented. American fears are further increased by reports that the Islamic State (ISIL) has now expanded into Yemen, where it is allegedly competing with the local branch of al-Qaeda.¹ Moreover, recent claims that it was AQAP that was behind the recent Paris attacks have only added fuel to the fire.

Obama's "Success Story" in Fighting Terrorism

On the same day the Houthis besieged the Presidential Palace, on January 20, Obama delivered his State of the Union address to Congress. Choosing to ignore the incident for fear it would undermine his administration's claims that it was making real progress in its war on terror, President Obama talked about how the US was "partnering with nations from South Asia to North Africa to deny safe haven to terrorists who threaten America."²

According to the strategy set out by president Obama when he declared war on ISIL on September 10, 2014, the United States would not send ground forces to fight new wars in the Middle East. The "successes" in Yemen were held up as representing the alternative strategy: "This counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground. This strategy of taking out terrorists who

¹ Brian Todd, "ISIS gaining ground in Yemen, competing with al Qaeda," *CNN*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/21/politics/isis-gaining-ground-in-yemen/index.html>.

² "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, January 20, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years.”³

The United States has indeed been waging a war against al-Qaeda in Yemen using drones, in full coordination and cooperation with the Yemeni government. Americans are also providing training, support, and weapons to the Yemeni security forces and the military. An unknown number of US military advisers are also present on Yemeni territory.⁴ According to a study undertaken by the Congressional Research Service, in the period 2009-2014 the United States provided Yemen with 1.4 billion dollars in aid, mostly from the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The report also indicated that Yemen received a further 370 million dollars from the US Defence Department to fight al-Qaeda.⁵

The resignation of President Hadi and the political and constitutional vacuum in Yemen have now thrown Obama’s strategy – one that necessitates the presence of trusted partners on the ground – into great difficulties.

To start with, US drone attacks in Yemen against al-Qaeda require authorization from the legal authority, and, until his resignation, these attacks were being personally authorized by President Hadi, as he himself revealed in an interview with *The Washington Post* when he succeeded Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012.⁶ Now that there is no president or a government, and a potential slide towards anarchy, this will undoubtedly complicate US efforts in the war against al-Qaeda.

³ “Statement by the President on ISIL,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

⁴ Kristina Wong, “Thornberry: ISIS war leaves fewer resources for Yemen,” *The Hill*, January 22, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/230502-thornberry-isis-war-leaves-fewer-resources-for-yemen>.

⁵ Jeremy M. Sharp, “Yemen: Background, and U.S. Relations,” The Congressional Research Service, January 21, 2015, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34170.pdf>.

⁶ Greg Miller, “Yemeni president acknowledges approving U.S. drone strikes,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/yemeni-president-acknowledges-approving-us-drone-strikes/2012/09/29/09bec2ae-0a56-11e2-aff-d6c7f20a83bf_story.html.

Secondly, for its drone attacks, the United States is reliant upon human intelligence provided by the Yemeni intelligence agencies.⁷ In the current power vacuum, it is unclear whether these bodies are still institutionally operational and whether they are able to achieve their previous aims and provide intelligence of the same standard. The chances of sending American ground forces, or intelligence units, to make up for the intelligence gap in the fight against al-Qaeda on the ground in Yemen, seem, at least until now, remote, particularly in light of the chaos raging in Yemen, and US fears that its forces would become moving targets for al-Qaeda.

Third, the Americans fear that Yemen risks becoming a failed state and that the conflict there will become an open-ended sectarian confrontation between the Houthis and the other parties.⁸ Such a scenario might entail the reproduction of the Syrian or Iraqi situation, which would allow al-Qaeda to gain more grounds among the Sunni community. Last but not least, there is the threat that the conflict in Yemen will spread beyond its borders to become a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, which feels threatened by Houthi expansion towards its southern borders, and Iran, which is the main backer of the Houthis.⁹

US Options in Handling Yemen

If a strong central Yemeni government that enjoys local and international legitimacy cannot be formed and Yemen heads towards anarchy and fragmentation, then the Obama administration will find itself facing three main options.

First, given the absence of a local government with legitimacy to authorize continued strikes, increasing the risk of the US being charged with violating Yemeni sovereignty and attacking its territory, the US might decide to unilaterally halt drone attacks against

⁷ Craig Whitlock, "Yemen chaos threatens U.S. counterterror efforts, including drone program," *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/yemen-chaos-threatens-us-counterterror-efforts-including-drone-program/2015/01/22/4ab157c8-a26f-11e4-903f-9f2faf7cd9fe_story.html.

⁸ Amal Mudallali, "Why Yemen's Implosion Matters," *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/22/yemen-houthi-shiite/>.

⁹ Robert F. Worthjan, "At Risk of Fragmenting, Yemen Poses Dangers to U.S.," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/22/world/middleeast/yemen-at-risk-of-fragmenting.html?_r=0.

al-Qaeda in Yemen. This option is unlikely however, for despite the current power vacuum in Yemen, Washington is acting as though everything is normal. Even the American embassy in Sanaa, which has reduced its staff, is still carrying on business as usual.¹⁰ The Obama administration has not declared an intention to withdraw its military advisers from Yemen, whose number, incidentally, remains a closely-guarded secret. While there are some fears of a repetition of the scenario of September 2012 when the US Consulate in Libya was attacked leading to the death of the American ambassador and a number of his assistants and guards, the State Department affirms that the US embassy in Sanaa is well secured. The United States has also announced the presence of two warships in the Red Sea, as a precaution should there be any need to evacuate the embassy and its staff.¹¹

The second option is that US drone strikes against al-Qaeda are continued without Yemeni legal authorization, the most likely possibility in the absence of a legitimate central Yemeni government that the United States can work with. In fact, the United States happens to be doing just that in many parts of the world, with total disregard for sovereignty and legality.

The third option is indirect cooperation between the American administration and the Houthis in the war against al-Qaeda in Yemen. The chances of this are increasing given the convergence of interests between the United States and Iran and the other Shiite forces in the region in containing the Sunni Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen, as well as ISIL and the Nusra Front in Iraq and Syria. This is particularly likely given that the proclaimed Houthi hostility to America appears to be little more than a slogan. The Houthis are not known to have attacked US interests in Yemen or elsewhere. In fact, when the Houthis stormed the capital Sanaa in September 2012, they gave the highest priority to protecting the American embassy, even though their banners carried the slogan "Death to America, Death to Israel." Some in Washington go further than this in their belief that the Houthis may be more effective than the Hadi government in taking on al-Qaeda, because of the doctrinal and political

¹⁰ "US pulls more personnel from Yemen embassy," *Fox News*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/01/23/us-pulls-more-personnel-from-yemen-embassy/>.

¹¹ Barbara Starr, "Pentagon in position to evacuate U.S. Embassy in Yemen," *CNN*, January 20, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/20/politics/pentagon-in-position-to-evacuate-u-s-embassy-in-yemen/>.

animosity between them.¹² This possibility is strengthened in view of the Obama administration's refusal to describe events in Yemen as a coup.¹³

In this context, one might understand why the Obama administration kept silent over the Houthi advance in Yemen, even when, in December 2014, they took control of the city of al-Hodeida which is situated on the Red Sea coast close to the Bab al-Mandeb straits which, along with the Straits of Hormuz, represent key points for the transportation of Gulf oil to global markets. Further adding to suspicions over the US position, White House press secretary Josh Earnest at a press conference on January 23, stated that it was not clear that Iran was "exerting any kind of command and control over the rebels in Yemen."¹⁴ This statement suggests the United States might decide to work with the Houthis in the fight against al-Qaeda in Yemen, in the context of regional arrangements, which Iran is playing a leading role in orchestrating.

Conclusion

Sunni Jihad groups are deemed by the US as the "major threat" to US security and interests, which explains the Obama's administration obsession with eradicating them. To confront them, the administration is following strategies that rely on remote engagement, primarily by means of drones and security and intelligence cooperation with local forces that Washington is training and arming to avoid the need to put US troops on the ground to take on these groups. However, this strategy, concerned as it is with finding instant solutions to intractable problems, appears short-sighted. If anything, it is creating even bigger problems since it overlooks the role of the state and helps to undermine it, by strengthening the roles of other players represented by militias that are mushrooming throughout the region. No doubt, this in itself will also have major ramifications for US interests.

¹² Worthjan.

¹³ "Daily Press Briefing by the Spokesperson of the U.S. State Department Jen Psaki," U.S. State Department, Washington, DC, January 21, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/01/236171.htm>.

¹⁴ "'Worst-case scenario': Yemen chaos, Saudi king's death pose new challenges for US," *Fox News*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/01/23/worst-case-scenario-yemen-chaos-saudi-kings-death-pose-new-challenges-for-us/>.