



Yemen Under Attack

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Yemen is on the verge of becoming a failed state. The interim Yemeni government is struggling to fight terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, that have made Yemen a base of operations. The international community, led by the US and Saudi Arabia, must develop a comprehensive plan to support the government in Sana'a.

The Republic of Yemen's demographic and social structure, tribal divisions, perpetual civil wars, and lack of effective central government are taking the country down the path towards failure. Yemen is experiencing a tough political transition since former President Ali Abdullah Saleh was ousted in February 2012, after a year of deadly protests against his 33-year rule. The interim government is currently facing a myriad of challenges, grappling with secessionists in the south, Houthi rebels in the north, and al-Qaeda-linked terrorists in the east. Divisions within Yemen's security services – loyal to rival Yemeni leaders, including former President Saleh himself – have made it all the more difficult to confront the militants.

The country is experiencing economic and social crises as well. Instability has been fuelled by a lack of progress in national dialogue talks intended to bring in a new constitution and democratic reforms within a two year interim period. Under newly-elected President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the country remains unstable and security conditions have deteriorated; terror attacks and kidnapping of locals and Westerners continue to be carried out by al-Qaeda. The convergence of these growing pressures has led to the assessment that state failure is highly likely in the near future. Such an outcome would lead to wide-scale civil war or disintegration of the country, and have serious implications for regional and international security.

Assault on the Defense Ministry

A recent example of the deterioration in Yemen's internal security is the December 5, 2013 terrorist attack on the Defense Ministry in the heart of Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Heavily-armed terrorists wearing army uniforms blew up a car packed with 500 kilograms of explosives near an entrance gate, then split into groups that swept through a military hospital, shooting at soldiers, doctors, nurses, and patients. Fifty-six people were killed and more than 200 injured. Among the dead at the Defense Ministry complex were soldiers and civilians, including at least seven foreigners. Official sources confirmed that President Hadi's nephew, who was visiting his ailing father in hospital, died in the bomb blast. The president's brother remained in intensive care. At least eleven terrorists were killed, among them Saudi nationals.

The assault, on what was supposedly one of the most secure buildings, may have been timed to target a planned meeting of top commanders, a session that was unexpectedly delayed until later in the morning. It could also have been timed to coincide with a routine visit to the US by Defense Minister Mohammed Nasser Ahmed. Investigators suspected that sympathizers in the army may have helped the terrorists.

The media arm of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Mallahem, claimed responsibility for the attack on its Twitter account. The attack was part of a massive, national terror campaign against the government and security forces. Yassin Said Noman, an adviser to the Yemeni president, escaped an assassination attempt as his car drove through the streets of Sana'a. Elsewhere in Yemen, gunmen shot dead two senior security officials in separate ambushes. In the Balhaf gas terminal on the Gulf of Aden, Yemen's LNG gas company evacuated hundreds of workers after a mortar hit the site. Furthermore, a US warning in August 2013 of a possible major terrorist attack in the Middle East prompted the closure of several western diplomatic missions in Yemen, and US missions in several other Arab states.

The AQAP Threat

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is seen by Washington as the most active branch of the jihadist network. It was formed in January 2009 as a merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda and is led by Nasser al-Wuhayshi. Al-Qaeda fighters were emboldened by a decline in government control over the country and seized several southern cities in Yemen's eastern provinces of Shabwa and Hadramawt, before being driven out in 2012 in a US-backed offensive, which combined ground forces and drones.

Security in Yemen has become an international concern because of its proximity to Saudi Arabia, the strategic Bab al-Mandab Straits, and the discovery of terrorist plots being hatched against the US and Britain. Based in Yemen, AQAP has a track record of launching attacks far from its base, including a bid to blow up a US airliner over Michigan on Christmas Day in 2009. Five months earlier, an AQAP suicide bomber tried to assassinate Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the interior minister who had led a crackdown on the militant group between 2003 and 2006.

Conclusion

US forces have been training and arming Yemeni special forces, and exchanging intelligence with the central government. Last year the US increased its support to the Yemeni security forces and the use of drones against al-Qaeda targets in Yemen.

In spite of the efforts of the Yemeni government and American support, the terror attacks are likely to continue and even increase in frequency as long as there is no strong political settlement, and the military-security services of Yemen remain divided and weak. The international community, led by the US and Saudi Arabia, must develop a comprehensive (political, economic, and military) plan to support the government in Sana'a, and prevent Yemen's potential failure from becoming reality.

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