

How to deal with Yemen

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Once again, Yemen has hit the international news headlines, consolidating a widespread public perception that this highly fragile state on the south-western tip of the Arabian peninsula has evolved into a new hotbed for international terrorism, another Afghanistan of sorts. After some smaller incidents in the 1990s, Yemen came to notoriety with the attack on the USS Cole almost exactly ten years ago in October 2000, killing 17 US sailors. Last year, on Christmas Day a Nigerian-born, Yemen-trained terrorist tried to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit. And now, another plot originating from Yemen, this time against commercial freight airliners, has been foiled.

The parallel between Yemen and Afghanistan is not entirely accurate, but it is not too far-fetched either and helps put in context the very complex challenge that Yemen has posed for some time. In some ways, Yemen is better off than Afghanistan: there is still a semblance of a state in Yemen, with the Friends of Yemen a concerted international stabilisation effort is under way, including, crucially, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and the Western footprint in the country is still small enough not to have been a major catalyst of recruitment to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In other words, an Afghanistan-style scenario with massive military intervention can still be prevented. In other ways, however, Yemen is worse off than Afghanistan. While Saudi Arabia has a moderately stabilising influence, Yemen's other significant neighbour is Somalia, a country without an effective government for close to two decades. The efforts of the Friends of Yemen are well-intentioned and multilateral, but they lack a coherent message to the Government of Yemen that would focus the latter's attention on action rather than mere rhetoric aimed at pleasing international donors.

The challenges that Yemen and its international partners face are formidable. They fall into four broad categories: economic decline, social division, political instability, and terrorist violence. They are all interrelated, they have their sources within and beyond Yemen, some of them have a long history, including of failed strategies to tackle them, some seem to be more recent. Above all, they are not just Yemen's problems in either their causes or consequences. But they are fundamentally linked to the capacity of the Yemeni state to perform four essential tasks and to do so almost simultaneously:

1. To establish and consolidate security and stability across the whole country
2. To improve the quality and inclusiveness of its political institutions
3. To generate sustainable economic growth on the back of economic reform and job creation
4. To address social inequality and exclusion

How can Yemeni state capacity be increased such that the state can rise to this challenge? Three key factors stand out from a broader comparative perspective on both successes and failures in similar situations around the globe: leadership, international engagement, and policy delivery.

Policy delivery provides the substance for local and international action, and a number of very concrete and potentially valuable proposals have been made: from establishing a donor trust fund to more targeted humanitarian and development aid; from publicly funded oil and gas exploration to investment in agriculture and tackling Yemen's food and nutrition crisis; from timely elections to national dialogue and drawing in the expertise among the country's expatriate community; and from military cooperation to intelligence sharing. There are tough choices involved, and they will require careful consideration of the prioritisation, timing, sequencing, and resourcing of policy initiatives.

Key in this respect is a comprehensive approach, the coherence of policies, their compatibility with each other, and whether they are feasible and viable. In other words, we constantly need to ask ourselves whether policies can be delivered and by whom, and if so whether they will have the desired impact.

The second factor—international engagement—is important for a number, and fairly obvious, reasons: financial and other material resources, expertise and technical support, political and diplomatic leverage. Crucially, international engagement needs to be sustained and well-resourced. Furthermore, it needs to involve governmental, non-governmental, and private-sector actors who cooperate with each other and coordinate their efforts. Above all, international engagement needs to be sensitive to the context of Yemen: it will be all the more effective the more legitimate in terms of process and outcome it is in the eyes of Yemeni society at large.

The third factor is local leadership. We need to be conscious of the fact that no degree of context sensitivity or comprehensiveness of international engagement and no level, however high, of policy innovation and ingenuity can replace local leadership. This needs to be recognised in Yemen and among the Friends of Yemen. It means that we really need to achieve a mutual understanding of the problems that face Yemen, and it means to accept that neither the Yemeni government nor its international partners have a monopoly on the truth when it comes to what the correct analysis and conclusions are about how to devise effective responses.

Local leadership requires that not only the government of Yemen is called upon to rise to the challenges of creating a secure, politically stable, socially inclusive and economically viable country, but that business and civil society, opposition forces and tribal leaders do exactly the same. It will above all depend on the quality and courage, determination and skill of their leadership to achieve this. It will require a common vision of Yemen's future and the ability and willingness to make and sustain effective compromises, no matter how difficult they may appear at times. This necessitates a renewed emphasis on a real national dialogue among all key stakeholders in Yemen, a dialogue that rapidly leads to substantive negotiations of the future political, economic, and social structures of the country. International involvement can be crucial in facilitating such an inclusive process of dialogue and outcome-oriented negotiations, but Yemenis must take responsibility for creating the necessary momentum to begin and complete negotiations and for delivering on their results.

The next meeting of the Friends of Yemen in the Saudi capital of Riyadh in February 2011 will perhaps be the last opportunity to pull Yemen back from the brink, and the few months until then provide a rapidly closing window of opportunity prevent a further deterioration of the situation in Yemen.