

**YEMEN: COPING WITH
TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE
IN A FRAGILE STATE**

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YEMEN: COPING WITH TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE IN A FRAGILE STATE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On 3 November 2002, an unmanned U.S. "Predator" aircraft hovering in the skies of Yemen fired a Hellfire missile at a car carrying a suspected al-Qaeda leader, four Yemenis said to be members of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, and a Yemeni-American who, according to U.S. authorities, had recruited volunteers to attend al-Qaeda training camps. All six occupants were killed. Almost two months later, three American missionaries were shot and killed in the Yemeni city of Jibla. These incidents, only the latest in a series involving Yemen, reinforced its image as a weak and lawless state with porous borders, a sanctuary for al-Qaeda operatives, a country with tenuous government control over vast parts of its territory and dominated by a culture of kidnappings and endemic violence. The October 2000 attack on the *USS Cole*, the arrest earlier in 2002 of several Yemenis in the United States and Pakistan suspected of membership in the al-Qaeda network, the capture of Ramzi bin al-Shibah, a Yemeni citizen accused of being a key plotter of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., and the attack on the French oil tanker *Limburg* in October 2002 have all contributed to this perception. Indeed, during the past year, the U.S. has sent special forces to Yemen and neighbouring countries, with the purpose of pursuing presumed members of the al-Qaeda network and associated organisations in Yemen.

The Yemeni reality is, of course, vastly more complex than the headlines it generates and presents a conundrum for international policymakers. Signs of potential instability are offset by significant positive political developments. Yemen has made substantial progress since its unification in 1990 and civil war in 1994. A nascent democracy with the most open political system in the Arabian Peninsula, its government has shown a general commitment to

developing the instruments of a modern state and has cooperated with international efforts to uproot the al-Qaeda network.

Concerns that areas of rural Yemen increasingly will become a magnet for members of al-Qaeda fleeing Afghanistan are legitimate but appear exaggerated and, more importantly, can lead to wrong-headed policy conclusions. In contrast to Afghanistan under the Taliban, Yemen's central government has not offered direct support to that international terrorist organisation. Al-Qaeda has used Yemen as a staging and recruitment area on account of the presence of thousands of veterans who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but has not been able to establish large bases. A variety of politically motivated attacks on foreign and Yemeni targets have taken place in recent years but these have been conducted by diverse actors driven by diverse political goals. Detailed, reliable information about such attacks is scarce, and in most cases it is impossible to discern whether they are personally, financially or politically motivated. Organisational and financial relations between al-Qaeda and two home-grown Islamist militant groups, the Islamic Jihad Movement (IJM) and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, remain murky, although it is known that there have been personal links between Osama bin Laden and members of the IJM in the past.

An exclusive focus on terrorism – and on combating it almost exclusively through military means – would present two sets of risks. First, it could obscure, and therefore leave unaddressed, the domestic roots of the many problems that confront Yemen. Endemic urban and rural violence there reflect a host of interlinked factors. These include widespread poverty, rapid population growth, an

uneven distribution of scarce natural and other resources, a heavily armed civilian population that is dispersed throughout remote and often inaccessible regions, a state often unable to extend its authority to rural areas, porous borders and smuggling, weak political institutions, popular disenchantment with the slow pace of democratisation and lingering social, economic and religious cleavages.

The central government has yet to exert full control over tribes in remote areas and faces difficulties in exerting control over religious education in both public and private schools. Parts of the population continue to resist stronger government authority, and many discontented young men and women have been attracted to a variety of home-grown Islamist movements. That Yemen continues to be marred by violent clashes and hostage taking – including by the authorities – is a function of all these complex factors, not one alone.

A second risk, is that the Yemeni government may, like other states, use the cover of anti-terrorism efforts to pursue its own, unrelated political objectives and that it might bend the rule of law in ways that risk generating broader anti-government feeling, thus creating new recruitment opportunities for militant Islamist groups. Branding government disputes with tribes as counter-terrorist operations is one example, as is direct government intervention in tribal disputes motivated by the affiliation of senior officials with one of the conflicting tribes.

The role of the international community and the policy choices it makes are critical. While the government of President Ali Abdallah Salih appears committed to cooperate with U.S. efforts to root out al-Qaeda, it also fears that excessive alignment with Washington, particularly should it attack Iraq, could generate a domestic backlash. Large numbers of Yemenis remain staunchly opposed to any deployment of U.S. forces in their country and an American presence, therefore, needs to be limited, fully coordinated with the Yemeni authorities, and geared toward enabling Yemen to handle security problems arising within its territory. The international community also would be well advised to expand its assistance beyond security in order to help Yemen tackle some of its underlying economic and political problems.

Yemen's relationship with neighbouring Saudi Arabia is equally complex. While a recent agreement resolving longstanding border disputes has the

potential to improve relations, Riyadh continues to provide direct subsidies to a number of tribal leaders – making the task of building an effective central government all the more challenging.

Yemen is not a failed or failing state but it is a fragile one. The varied and, at times, contradictory pressures it faces – from the U.S. to take stronger action against suspected al-Qaeda followers; and from the very militant groups the U.S. seeks to root out and that seem to thrive on the expanding U.S. presence in the Middle East – could put it at risk. Add to this the tensions created by a possible war on Iraq and the continued confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians, and the carefully constructed edifice of the Yemeni state – a work still in progress – may yet come apart. The disintegration of the Yemeni state would present its citizens, their region and the international community alike with a set of challenges far graver and more complex than any confronted during the recent past.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the International Community, especially the U.S.:

On Fighting Terrorism

1. Respect Yemeni sovereignty and carefully calibrate any direct military operation inside the country to avoid a large-scale presence that would galvanise public opinion and boost the popularity of extremist groups and organisations.
2. Assist in developing more effective border interdiction to impede the smuggling of weapons and persons into and via Yemen, most importantly by obtaining far more involvement and cooperation of neighbouring states – Saudi Arabia to the north and Oman to the east, but also the United Arab Emirates farther east because of smuggling routes across the vast al-Rub al-Khali Desert.

On Strengthening an Effective and Democratic State

3. Expand and improve international development assistance by:
 - (a) targeting development initiatives to rural areas;

- (b) working more directly with local communities to implement development projects; and
- 4. improving coordination among donors so as to reduce regional inequalities in aid projects.
- 5. Strengthen Yemen's judicial system by:
 - (a) assisting in the development of an independent and efficient judiciary, particularly in rural areas where Yemenis – in its absence – tend to resort to traditional, tribal dispensation of justice and often to violence to resolve disputes; and
 - (b) modernising and upgrading traditional modes of conflict resolution and conflict management, including possibly by creating mobile mediation committees staffed by local mediators, assisted where necessary by international conflict resolution experts, and seeking cooperation with Yemeni non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- 6. Support the timely and effective deployment of national and international election observers, ensuring that they are familiar with the tasks of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendums and deployed well before the parliamentary elections.
- 7. Support the further development, democratisation and professionalisation of local government, making local councils that have been elected but are not functioning properly a priority for international assistance.
- 8. Provide support for existing Yemeni human rights bodies, including by helping the parliamentary committee on human rights to investigate abuses more thoroughly and to disseminate its findings.
- 9. Provide support for awareness campaigns regarding family planning and water conservation, particularly for large *qat* plantations.
- 10. Respect the sovereignty and authority of the central government by channelling financial and other assistance through it instead of directly to tribes and tribal leaders.
- 11. Encourage Saudi Arabia to abjure its traditional policy of interference in domestic Yemeni politics so that it can become a powerful force for strengthening the Yemen state.

To the Yemeni Government:

- 12. Continue to uproot the al-Qaeda network and deny its operatives access or shelter in Yemen and otherwise cooperate internationally against terrorism.
- 13. Take action to enhance popular trust in the government and effectiveness of state institutions by:
 - (a) eliminating irregularities in local, parliamentary and presidential elections and perceptions of gerrymandering in tribal regions;
 - (b) fighting corruption including by enforcing existing penal provisions punishing bribery;
 - (c) putting an end to the practice of government hostage-taking; and
 - (d) ceasing human rights violations, for example by ending detention of citizens without due process and by holding accountable soldiers and security officials who transgress their authority.
- 14. Promote the even distribution of services and employment opportunities in different regions as part of a broader effort to reduce regional rivalries and tribal conflicts, including by diversifying the economy to provide job opportunities beyond agriculture.
- 15. Provide the military, police and other security forces with education in human rights and appropriate law enforcement techniques and press for the development of a strict disciplinary code of conduct for these forces that would end the general practice of impunity.
- 16. Reform the justice system by:
 - (a) enabling the judiciary to function independently without executive or other interference;
 - (b) implementing swiftly judicial decisions including those directed against government officials; and
 - (c) establishing an independent system of promotion on the basis of seniority and merit so that the executive no longer makes these determinations.



YEMEN: COPING WITH TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE IN A FRAGILE STATE

I. INTRODUCTION

Located in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula and with a population of more than 18 million people, Yemen has gained particular international prominence over the last several years on account of the number of acts of terrorism to which the country or its citizens have been linked. The Yemeni origin of leading al-Qaeda operatives and the assumed presence in Yemen of many al-Qaeda members who fled Afghanistan on the one hand, and, on the other, a series of politically motivated attacks on U.S. and European targets (including, most dramatically, those on the *USS Cole* in October 2000 and on the French oil tanker *Limburg* in October 2002 and the murder of three American missionaries on 30 December 2002), have placed Yemen under the spotlight.¹ As a result, it increasingly is viewed – and dealt with – by members of the international community through the lens of its war against terrorism. Much of the U.S. focus in particular has been on strengthening Yemen's ability to root out al-Qaeda from its territory and, in some instances, taking direct action to achieve this objective itself.

This dominant perception has been reinforced by two significant and related facts. First, large areas of the vast and sparsely populated country – primarily the mountains and deserts of the northern and eastern governorates – are beyond the effective control of the central government. While Yemen has continued to make progress in developing the infrastructure of a modern state, basic government services are not available in important parts of the country. This is a function of both the general lack of resources and the traditional autonomy of certain

tribal regions, especially in the North and Northeast. Porous borders, particularly those shared with Saudi Arabia, compound the problem.

Secondly, Yemen is awash in small arms. During the civil war of the 1960s in the North, both sides – and their external sponsors – financed and armed tribes to curry their support. Today, men living in urban areas are likely to own a pistol, and those living in rural areas are likely to own at least one rifle, often an AK-47. Outside the main cities, overtly carrying weapons in public is accepted as normal. The Ministry of the Interior estimates that there may be some 60 million weapons in the country,² meaning that the average male Yemeni over the age of 15 possesses more than a dozen firearms. While this probably is exaggerated, there is little doubt that the government has to control weapons possession. Prosecutions for unregistered weapons have largely been limited to non-tribal areas of the South.³ Unable to control its own borders, the state has failed to prevent arms smuggling. As a result, even heavy weapons, such as anti-tank rockets, are readily available and have been periodically employed in inter-tribal fights and occasionally in clashes with the Yemeni security forces as well.

Yet the realities of Yemen are far more complex than the concerns that have propelled it to the top of the international agenda. To simply superimpose the campaign against al-Qaeda on its intricate mix of enduring tribalism and nascent democratisation would be to ignore domestic realities, exacerbate existing tensions, and imperil the nation's fragile but emerging equilibrium. It would also run the risk of enabling the government to pursue some of its

¹ Yemen's image is not helped by the oft-repeated fact that it is Osama bin Laden's ancestral home.

² *Yemen Times*, 28 January 2002.

³ Former Minister of the Interior Husain al-Arab in an interview with *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 7 April 2001.

separate and ultimately unrelated political objectives under the guise of the war against terrorism. The roots of the country's violence run deeper than – and are in most instances not related to – al-Qaeda, although al-Qaeda has certainly sought to take advantage of the situation and has recruited many of its members there. While efforts must be made to root out al-Qaeda, equal energy should be invested in dealing with Yemen's many home-grown problems. Experience has demonstrated that failure to do the latter will only complicate efforts against the former.

II. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

A. COLONIAL AND COLD WAR DIVISIONS

Yemen has long experienced a split between North and South, and the two parts of the formerly divided country often served as proxies during both the Cold War and inter-Arab conflicts.⁴ The united Yemeni state established in 1990 thus inherited strikingly different political traditions.

Early in the nineteenth century, the British occupied the port of Aden as a key coaling station on the way to India and gradually extended their control over the southern hinterland primarily in order to establish a buffer zone against the Ottoman presence in the North. Aden eventually grew into one of the world's major ports, the site of an important oil refinery, and a large cosmopolitan city. Meanwhile, the hinterland was largely neglected, remaining under the control of traditional rulers with only minimal British supervision. This was especially true of the Eastern Aden Protectorates. The development of the Wadi Hadramawt, the most heavily populated of these areas, was hindered by famine and constant tribal fighting. For centuries, the area has been highly dependent on remittances from expatriate Hadramis residing in East Africa, India, and especially Indonesia.

In the North, Ottoman control was never fully secure and by 1904 nearly all the territory outside the cities was recognised as being under the authority of an Imam, the traditional secular and religious leader of Yemen. With the departure of the Ottomans after World War I, the Imam extended his control over the North in its entirety, established a new but

⁴ From the time in the early eighteenth century when the sheikh of a tribal confederation in Lahj declared himself an independent sultan until 1990, there was no unified state on the land comprising the current territory of Yemen. The distinction between North and South used in this report derives from the pre-unification existence of the Yemen Arab Republic, also known as North Yemen, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, also known as South or Southern Yemen. Confusingly, most of the former South Yemen's territory is west of what used to be North Yemen. The terms "North" and "South" persist, however, because of historical usage and because the former southern capital of Aden and most heavily populated areas lie due south of the old northern and present capital of Sanaa.

traditional state, and continually prodded at the British-ruled and protected areas of the South.

For much of the twentieth century, the sharp North-South divide continued and even deepened. In 1962, an Egyptian-backed coup in the North displaced the rule of the Imams and established a republican government in Sanaa, officially known as the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The republicans were unable to secure control over the entire North, however, as the Imam escaped and rallied the tribes located in the northern reaches. Fighting between the republicans, backed by thousands of Egyptian troops, and the royalists, enjoying Saudi support and sanctuary, lasted eight years until a peace was reached. The royalists then recognised the YAR as the legitimate government, and a few were given senior positions.

During the civil war, the northern tribes extended their autonomy by force of arms, and their leaders gained influential political positions. Indeed, even as Saudi Arabia recognised the new government in Sanaa in 1970 and provided aid, it continued to support the tribes. Saddled with internal divisions, poor and weak, the post-civil-war government eventually succumbed to a coup that, in 1974, put the army in power. For much of the 1970s, the YAR was ruled by a coalition of military officers, tribal sheikhs and technocrats. One president was exiled, and his two successors were assassinated. Finally, a little-known and relatively junior officer, Ali Abdallah Salih, was appointed president in 1978. Proving far more resilient than expected, he remains in office today.

The South followed a very different course. Growing opposition to British rule led to organised discontent within Aden's labour unions and then to an increasingly bloody guerrilla campaign in the countryside. By late 1967, Britain was forced to withdraw from Aden and the eastern protectorates and hand over power to the most radical of its foes, the National Liberation Front. During the first few years of independence, power struggles within that body moved the country increasingly to the left. South Yemen soon became the only Marxist state in the Arab world and was ruled by a socialist party with considerable Soviet and Chinese backing. In 1970, the country was renamed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The government nationalised most commercial concerns and sought to introduce land reform in rural areas.

In many respects, the PDRY pursued more liberal policies than the YAR; women, for example, were allowed greater access to the political system and the job market. The PDRY also tried to eradicate prevalent tribal structures, albeit with limited success. Instead, factions based on regional and tribal identity emerged within the ruling Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), exacerbating ideological divergences that led to the ouster of one president in 1971, the assassination of a second in 1978 and a bloody power struggle in Aden in 1986.⁵ When development aid from the Eastern Bloc abruptly ended after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen found itself economically bankrupt.

The YAR and the PDRY each laid claim to Yemen in its entirety, and this rivalry resulted in inconclusive border wars in 1972 and 1979, both of which ended with commitments to unify the country. In May 1990, with the end of the Cold War and after decades of strained relations and empty promises, the PDRY and the YAR officially merged.

The difficulties were tremendous. While the PDRY was significantly larger in size, its population was only about one-fourth that of the YAR. Moreover, the decision involved the unification of two utterly different political systems whose leaderships had long harboured deep distrust and hostility toward one another. Nonetheless, given the PDRY's bankruptcy and eroded popular support, it had no choice but to accept the YAR's terms, principally that Ali Abdallah Salih be the president of the merged state and that its political and economic systems follow the northern model rather than the South's approach.

The unification agreement signed in Sanaa in April 1990 provided for a five-member presidential council (three northerners, two southerners), chaired by Salih. However, Ali Salim al-Baidh, secretary-general of the southern Yemeni Socialist Party, was informally accepted as vice-president. To preserve the primary political organisations of the two former states within the new Republic of Yemen (respectively, the YSP and the General People's Congress, or Congress Party), the principle of pluralism was agreed upon.

⁵ Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Les transformations des structures tribales depuis l'indépendance du Yémen du sud", *Cahiers du Gremamo*, N°10 (1991), pp. 125-143.

From its inception, the Republic of Yemen enjoyed a level of press freedom, political pluralism and popular participation that was remarkable for the region and unique on the Arabian Peninsula. In April 1991, less than a year after unification, a constitutional referendum was held in which Yemen's male and female voters approved a collective presidency, an elected parliament with considerable power vis-à-vis the executive, and elected local councils.⁶ While the 1991 constitution made shari'ah (Islamic law) the major source of legislation, the 1994 constitution declared it to be its sole source.

However, important northern tribal leaders and Islamists called for a boycott of the referendum, arguing that the constitution gave relatively short shrift to Islamic law compared to the one that had existed in the Yemen Arab Republic. North Yemen, in contrast to the PDRY, had traditionally been more religiously conservative, and many in the YAR viewed the more liberal and secular traditions of the South with suspicion. In 1990, forces in the North that rejected the notion unification should mean adopting elements of the PDRY they feared would undermine the traditional structures of their society and politics founded the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, conventionally known as the Islah (Reform) Party.⁷ Islah is a coalition of somewhat disparate elements, including Zaydi tribal leaders, Islamists and conservative intellectuals. From its inception, it has been led by Yemen's most influential tribal figure, Sheikh Abdallah Husain al-Ahmar. Although a northerner, al-Ahmar had not always been on good terms with the YAR political leadership and maintained close ties with Saudi Arabia for decades.⁸ Including a strong Islamist element, the party is a coalition between tribal and Islamist interests.

The first multi-party parliamentary elections ever held on Yemeni territory (and the Arabian Peninsula as a whole) were conducted in April 1993. More

than two million voters, including women, cast their ballots for more than twenty registered parties, eight of which won seats.⁹ In May 1993, a coalition government was formed by the three parties that continue to dominate the political scene to this day: the YSP, which previously ruled the PDRY in the South and was led by Ali Salim al-Baidh; the General People's Congress, which ruled the former YAR and was led by President Salih; and Islah, headed by Sheikh Abdallah Husain al-Ahmar.

B. CIVIL WAR AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Although the political system of the new republic achieved remarkable early progress, genuine unification did not. Until 1994, each part of the country generally remained under the control of its former ruling party. Southerners accused the government in Sanaa of being unresponsive to their needs while northerners felt the South was reluctant to accept the former YAR's greater demographic weight. Furthermore, northern Islamists moved into the South where they attacked Islamic shrines, the brewery in Aden, and symbols of socialist land reform.¹⁰ The YSP, largely discredited in the South prior to unification, appeared to gain support on account of resentment directed at the North. At the same time, reflecting demographic realities, it lost its 50 per cent share of power in the 1993 parliamentary elections even though it won nearly all the southern seats. Relations between the former coalition partners began to sour; many Yemeni and foreign observers in fact believed President Salih deliberately called the elections as a way to remove the YSP from the leadership.

Indeed, in August 1993 the Congress Party spearheaded an initiative to amend the Constitution and abolish the principle of collective leadership whereby power had been equally shared between northern and southern leaders. The move helped spark increasingly violent clashes between South

⁶ This constitution had been worked out by a joint People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and Yemen Arab Republic committee in meetings since the early 1980s. See "The Constitution of the Republic of Yemen", *Arab Law Quarterly*, Vol. 7, N°1 (1992), pp. 70-82. Female voting had been a rarity in the North and faced considerable opposition from conservative and religious elements.

⁷ *Al-Tajammu al-Yamani lil-Islah*.

⁸ Paul Dresch and Bernard Haykel, "Stereotypes and Political Styles: Islamists and Tribesfolk in Yemen", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 27, N°4 (1995), pp. 405-431.

⁹ For details on electoral provisions and results of national elections and referendums in the YAR, the PDRY and the Republic of Yemen between 1970 and 1999, see Iris Glosemeyer, "Yemen", in Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Christof Hartmann, eds., *Elections in Asia: A Data Handbook* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 293-316. See also Sheila Carapico, "Elections and Mass Politics in Yemen", *Middle East Report*, Vol. 23, N°6 (1993), pp. 2-6.

¹⁰ The 1972 land reform in the PDRY was often carried out violently. Many former land owners fled the country to Saudi Arabia.

and North. Despite international and local efforts to mediate, the two former state leaderships led their armies and supporters into a full-scale civil war in early 1994.¹¹

The southern elites sought to bolster the legitimacy of their secessionist bid by incorporating elements from the politically moderate southern movements that had been defeated during the earlier independence struggle against the British. After the fighting broke out, a new independent southern state, the Democratic Republic of Yemen, was proclaimed on the territory of the former PDRY in May 1994. Somewhat ironically, it was supported by Saudi Arabia. A unified Yemen, and thus the prospect of a viable, large, more populous, and democratic neighbour that was also a potential oil power, clearly discomfited the conservative kingdom. However, although Riyadh contributed money and arms to the southern cause, it refused to recognise the breakaway state, thus depriving it of vital international standing.¹²

The larger northern army was supported by tribal forces, southern elements that had fled north after the earlier internecine fighting in Aden, in January 1986, and “Arab Afghans”, who had returned to their country after fighting the Soviet Union. The combined northern forces swiftly moved into southern territory, seizing control first of Aden and then of the secessionists’ stronghold in the East. By July 1994, the South had been roundly defeated. Most southern leaders, labelled “separatists”, fled the country.¹³ Some went on to found an organisation representing the Yemeni opposition-in-exile, the National Opposition Front or Mawj,¹⁴ which is based in London and funded by Saudi Arabia. Others left politics altogether.

¹¹ Renaud Detalle, “Pacte d’Amman: l’espoir déçu des Yéménites,” *Monde Arabe: Maghreb – Machrek*, N°145 (July-September 1994), pp. 113-122; Fred Halliday, “The Third Inter-Yemeni War and Its Consequences”, *Asian Affairs* (London), Vol. 26, N°2 (June 1995), pp. 131-140; Jamal S. al-Suwaidi, ed., *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (London, 1995); David Warburton, “The Conventional War in Yemen”, *Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, N°1 (1995), pp. 20-44.

¹² On Saudi Arabia’s role, see Section IV below.

¹³ For a report on the situation in Aden after the war see Middle East Rights Watch, “Middle East: Human Rights in Yemen During and After the 1994 War” (New York, Washington, D.C., October 1994).

¹⁴ MAWJ is the reverse acronym for *al-Jabha al-Wataniyya lil-Mu‘arada* (National Opposition Front).

In October 1994, parliament approved constitutional amendments that abolished the presidential council and re-elected Ali Abdallah Salih as president of the re-united republic. Salih in turn appointed a southern military officer as vice-president in a clear effort to avoid the impression of complete northern dominance, although the YSP was excluded from the new governing coalition. Since July 1994 and to this day, Yemen has been ruled by a coalition of northern political figures and southerners known for their opposition to the YSP.

In the run-up to Yemen’s second multi-party parliamentary elections in April 1997, several parties – including the YSP Socialist Party and the Islah Party – complained about irregularities in voter registration and other major violations of the electoral law. Among other complaints, the Congress Party was alleged to have moved military units to constituencies in order to produce a majority vote for the president’s party, to have registered minors and deceased voters, and to have issued several electoral cards to voters who were deemed loyal supporters.¹⁵ Eventually, the YSP and some smaller parties boycotted the elections, leaving the Yemeni electorate with a choice between the ruling coalition’s two partners, the Congress Party and the Islah Party.

For a number of Yemenis, particularly in the South, this meant choosing between the lesser of two evils; both Congress and Islah are conservative, populist parties, and neither shares the more liberal approach of the YSP on issues like women’s rights. Still, Congress and Islah captured the former YSP constituencies, leaving virtually no seats for independents or smaller parties.¹⁶ Many in Aden, especially women, feared that an Islah victory would further marginalise their role in public life. As a result, Congress was able to claim a majority of seats in that relatively cosmopolitan city. In contrast, since many Hadramis associated the Congress Party with northern military and tribal society, Islah won a majority of seats in that region.

¹⁵ For details, see the reports of the National Democratic Institute and the Joint International Observer Group in Yemen (European Union/UNDP/Arab Democratic Institute) in 1997.

¹⁶ Had the YSP participated in the election, it likely would have done poorly given that many blamed it for the 1994 civil war.

In the end, the Congress Party swept to a landslide victory, partly as a result of the electoral system.¹⁷ As in 1993, two women from the South were elected to parliament. The election also spelled the end of the coalition between Congress and Islah that had been in place since 1993. Nevertheless, the Islah Party chairman, Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, was re-elected Speaker of Parliament with the support of the Congress Party.

In 1999, President Salih called for the country's first direct presidential elections. Since no potential independent or candidate from another party, including the YSP (which was not represented in parliament because of its 1997 boycott), could win the required support of 31 members of parliament to qualify for the ballot,¹⁸ and Islah backed his candidacy, his only opponent was a largely obscure member of his own Congress Party (and son of South Yemen's first president). Unsurprisingly, Salih received the endorsement of 96 per cent of voters for a new, five-year term; no less predictably, he faced allegations of fraud.¹⁹

February 2001 saw another constitutional referendum, with almost double the participation of 1991. Voters approved amendments extending the terms of office of the president and parliament. Further amendments enhanced the powers of the presidency vis-à-vis the Parliament, including by strengthening the consultative council, a body formed to provide advice to the president and whose members he appoints. While technically part of the executive branch, the council was granted functions typical of an upper chamber in a bicameral

parliamentary system.²⁰ The Republic of Yemen's first local elections were held at the same time. However, due to the general lack of human resources and equipment, many newly elected local councils have remained largely inactive.²¹ In contrast to the parliamentary elections, all political parties participated in the local ones. Although the Congress Party was again accused of electoral irregularities, it won only 60 per cent of the seats.²²

As a result of an April 2001 government reshuffle, a southerner, former Foreign Minister Abd al-Qadir Bajammal, was named prime minister, and for the first time a woman was appointed to the cabinet, heading the newly created Human Rights Ministry.²³ The latter development was in line with several other significant advances for women, who, given the large increase in female voter registration, are increasing their political weight. This is in stark contrast to the restricted role in public life experienced in previous decades by nearly all women in the North.

C. THE ECONOMY

Although both the YAR and PDRY made substantial progress in developing their governance and economic systems prior to their 1990 merger, they were among the poorest states in the world. Because Yemen is a largely rural country, much of the economy and most of the population remain heavily dependent on agriculture for both subsistence and cash crops (principally coffee and *qat*),²⁴ as well as on small industry and remittances from workers abroad. The illiteracy rate (54 per cent) and child malnutrition (46 per cent among children under five) remain extremely high, and other indicators of social development are equally disturbing. A population growth rate of some 3 per cent a year further

¹⁷ With 43.1 per cent of the vote, Congress captured 187 of the 301 seats in parliament, giving it a nearly two-thirds majority. Islah won 23.4 per cent of the votes, up from 17 per cent in 1993, but gained only 53 seats – ten less than in 1993. For details on elections and referendums in the Yemeni republics between the 1970s and 2001 see Glosemeyer, "Yemen", op. cit.

¹⁸ Among other requirements, a potential candidate had to have the support of at least 10 per cent of the 301 members of parliament to be accepted for participation in the presidential election. See article 107 of the 1994 constitution.

¹⁹ For details on the presidential elections see Iris Glosemeyer, "Erste Direktwahl des jemenitischen Staatspräsidenten", in *INAMO* Vol. 5, N°20 (Berlin, 1999), pp. 40-41; Glosemeyer, "Yemen", op.cit., and François Burgat, "Les élections présidentielles de Septembre 1999 au Yemen: du 'pluralisme armé' au retour à la 'norme arabe'", *Monde Arabe: Maghreb – Machrek*, N°168 (April-June 2000), pp. 67-75.

²⁰ For the history of the consultative council see Glosemeyer, "The Development of State Institutions", in Rémy Leveau, Franck Mermier and Udo Steinbach, eds., *Le Yémen contemporain* (Paris, 1999).

²¹ Their budget was allocated only in early 2002. See, for example, *Yemen Times*, 23 July 2001 and 28 January 2002.

²² *Al-Hayat* (Saudi daily published in London), 5 March 2002.

²³ *Middle East International* (London), 20 April 2001.

²⁴ *Qat* is a mild natural stimulant that is often seen as Yemen's national "drug". While non-addictive, the chewable leaf is highly habit forming. Its consumption strains the budgets of many Yemeni families, and its production has severely taxed water resources.

increases the demand – largely unmet – for education, social services and employment.²⁵

Unification facilitated oil exploration, and new discoveries have added to Yemen's reserves as the country tries to capture a share of a highly competitive liquefied natural gas export market. But by 2001-2002 oil production still amounted roughly to only 500,000 barrels a day, and the income from this comparatively low production does not come close to covering basic budgetary requirements. A substantial proportion of even that income is believed to be lost to corruption.

The problem of corruption is, of course, broader than that and has been serious for decades. The weakness of the central government means that the signing and execution of government contracts often involves hefty payments to officials and diversion of funds and proceeds to private hands. The porous borders and poor customs controls mean that goods may be imported without duty in exchange for a small bribe. Because of the government's inability to provide adequate salaries to its employees, most interactions with government offices require an under-the-table payment.

Economic prospects also were severely damaged by the 1990-91 Gulf War. Iraq excepted, Yemen's economy probably was the most affected of any country as a result of that conflict. Reflecting overwhelming public sentiment, the government opposed the use of force to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait, and both the government and people ended up paying a heavy price. Nearly a million migrant workers from Yemen lost jobs throughout the Arabian Peninsula. An angry Saudi Arabia alone rescinded the special residency status it previously had granted to some 700,000 and their families. The Gulf States also suspended U.S.\$200 million of development aid, and the U.S. reduced its annual aid from \$20.5 million to \$2.9 million. The dual impact of lost income from those remittances combined with the sudden need to create jobs and services for huge number of returning citizens set the Yemeni economy back deeply. Unemployed drivers and construction workers flooded the country.²⁶ Some car

owners were able to find work in the newly developing tourism sector but many have had to lead the lives of peddlers ever since. Others remained unemployed, their families without income. The crime rate rose, and car thefts and kidnappings of Yemenis and non-Yemenis became far more commonplace.

Within five years, the rate of exchange for Yemen's currency dropped precipitously, from roughly ten Yemeni riyals per U.S. dollar in 1990 to nearly 150 riyals per dollar on the black market. A structural adjustment program demanded by the donor community, the World Bank, and the IMF was initiated in 1995, resulting in sharply escalating prices for basic foodstuffs and fuel. Inflation subsequently came to a virtual halt, though the riyal was unable to recover its value against the dollar. Much of the population saw its living standards decline. By 2000, per capita income was less than U.S.\$300,²⁷ and the government estimated that 31.5 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line.²⁸ In 2002, Yemen was forced to initiate a Poverty Reduction Strategy.²⁹

More recent events have dealt further blows to Yemen's fragile economy. These include the fall in oil prices, the attack against the *USS Cole* in 2000, and the events of 11 September 2001. The October 2002 attack on the *Limburg* is certain to dampen economic prospects. Aside from the damage to the tourism sector, insurance costs for ships that use Yemeni ports tripled, and shipping activity in those ports reportedly decreased by 50 per cent.³⁰ By November 2002, the value of the riyal had declined to 177 per U.S. dollar.

Yemen and Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, N°4 (1997), pp. 554-565.

²⁷ For details see Abdulkarim I. Arhabi, "Poverty and Social Risk Management in Yemen," at [http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/hdnet/hddocs.nsf/c840b59b6982d2498525670c004def60/09a5e8b260349c54852568f100675323/\\$FILE/arhabisrmfinal+4.pdf](http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/hdnet/hddocs.nsf/c840b59b6982d2498525670c004def60/09a5e8b260349c54852568f100675323/$FILE/arhabisrmfinal+4.pdf).

²⁸ *Yemen Economic Update*, Issue 8, March 2002, pp. 7-8.

²⁹ <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0contentMDK:20061336~menuPK:34457~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html>.

³⁰ According to Reuters, 8 November 2002, citing a fact sheet from the U.S. State Department's Office of Counter-Terrorism, there have been losses of about U.S.\$3.8 million a month in business and extra insurance premiums. This assessment apparently does not include the cost to Yemeni authorities for providing tighter security along the coast.

²⁵ The World Bank estimates the population growth rate at 2.7 per cent; Other sources claim 3.5 per cent. For these and other figures, see <http://www.worldbank.org>.

²⁶ For details see Gwenn Okruhlik and Patrick Conge, "National Autonomy, Labor Migration and Political Crisis:

Given its precarious position, Yemen has relied on assistance from the West – assistance that, for many years, was made difficult by the fact that both the North and South had received military and other forms of help from the former communist bloc. More recently, Yemen has relied mainly on the World Bank, IMF, the EU, several European and Gulf countries, Japan and the United States for loans and grants. Donors that had suspended their aid in reaction to Yemen's stance during the Gulf war – in particular the Gulf States – gradually resumed their assistance. Currently, this aid amounts to roughly 10 per cent of Yemen's gross domestic product. 15 per cent of this total, mostly in the form of grants, is provided by the Europe Union.³¹

The pattern of U.S. assistance closely mirrors its growing fear that Yemen is becoming an unwitting harbour for terrorist groups. Economic support, which was non-existent in 2000, climbed to roughly U.S.\$4 million in 2001, \$5 million in 2002 and is projected to reach \$10 million this fiscal year. Military aid, which amounted to \$125,000 in 2000 and \$200,000 in 2001, was \$500,000 in 2002 and is projected to reach \$2,700,000 in fiscal year 2003. Several tens of millions of dollars were additionally provided to Yemen as part of American military assistance to "frontline states" in the "war on terrorism".³²

D. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES AND ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

1. The Presidency and Political Institutions

Constitutionally, the Yemeni government consists of an elected president who serves as head of state, a prime minister who is appointed by the president and serves as head of government, and an elected

parliament that must ratify all legislation.³³ In practice, President Salih has a virtual monopoly on political power – a pattern that continues the YAR tradition of a dominant presidency that was introduced when the military seized power in the mid-1970s. Since taking office in 1978, President Salih has worked steadily to consolidate his power, relying principally on the armed forces and security apparatus, including relatives and allies from his own and allied tribes. Prime ministers and cabinet members, by contrast, have generally been chosen on the strength of their "technocratic" qualifications or political utility assets (for example, to maintain a regional balance). Because of the South's much smaller population and political bankruptcy, unification has not fundamentally disturbed this balance.³⁴

As President Salih consolidated his control, he simultaneously established institutions that strengthened both the state and his own position.³⁵ A Consultative Council (*al-majlis al-istishari*) has existed since 1979, with its members appointed by the president to advise him on a wide spectrum of issues but, more importantly, to co-opt representatives of Yemen's various elites. In a complementary development, the General People's Congress was created in 1982 to provide Salih's presidency popular support. His autocratic tendencies notwithstanding, the Republic of Yemen is today a pluralistic state with extensive democratic freedoms backed by a relatively free press.

2. Political Parties

Since unification, the General People's Congress has been the dominant political party. The Yemeni Socialist Party, initially the new republic's second largest, has been eclipsed by the tribal and religiously-oriented Islah Party. Because the party system mirrors many of the endemic divisions and

³¹ For an overview of the annual donor commitment level, see: http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/yemen/csp/.

³² Clyde Mark, "Middle East: U.S. Foreign Assistance, FY2001, FY2002, and FY2003 Request", Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service (Washington, D.C.), RL31342, 28 March 2002. The figure may be as high as U.S.\$100 million according to some sources. See also Neil MacFarquhar, "Yemen Turns to Tribes to Aid Hunt for Qaeda", *The New York Times*, 27 October 2002, and Jonathan Shanker, "Behind the French Tanker Bombing: Yemen's Ongoing Problems with Islamist Terrorism", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 October 2002.

³³ For many years, there was no minister of defence (and thus no civilian supervision of the military establishment) because the military was directly controlled by the president

³⁴ On the background to Yemeni politics, see Mohammed Ahmad Zabarah, *Yemen: Traditionalism vs. Modernity* (New York, 1982); J.E. Peterson, *Yemen: The Search for a Modern State* (London, Baltimore, 1982); Robert D. Burrowes, *The Yemen Arab Republic: The Politics of Development, 1962-1986* (Boulder, London, 1987); and Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge, 1998).

³⁵ Glosemeyer, "The Development of State Institutions", op. cit., pp. 79-100.

fissures of Yemeni society, it has an importance well beyond its formal role.

The Congress Party has since its establishment sought to attract moderate leftist Arab nationalists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar groups. In 1990, however, representatives of various Islamist forces previously operating within Congress broke ranks to join the new Islah Party. An important factor was the dispute as to whether religious institutes – comprising a parallel educational system dating to the Middle Ages – should come under state control or remain under the independent aegis of leading Islah Party figures. The government had sought to supervise such institutes since the early 1990s but it was not until May 2001 that it succeeded in securing Parliament's approval for the integration of the religious institutes into the state-run education system.³⁶

The question of religious institutes raises the more general matter of the Islah Party's links to extremist Islamist elements in Yemen. Despite certain ideological affinities, Islah has not led the Islamist confrontation with the state but instead has played a mediating role between the state and the country's more conservative religious elements. Islamists who joined Islah were not joining a radical religious movement but rather integrating a party that was dominated by an individual (Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar) who is far more a traditional tribal leader and republican hero than a strict Islamist ideologue.³⁷

With a membership consisting of social conservatives and religious Islamists of different shades and incorporating the Muslim Brotherhood and others, the Islah Party has evolved into a broad-based moderate Islamist party that recruits its followers from among the tribal and non-tribal population throughout Yemen. It has also served as a mechanism with which to integrate and control many Islamists, like Abd al-Majid al-Zindani (a member of the 1993-97 presidential council) and his followers, who otherwise may well have developed militant

extra-parliamentary movements with independent power bases. In the pre-unification 1988 elections in North Yemen, candidates affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood had already taken about a quarter of the 128 elected seats in the parliament,³⁸ and it appeared at the time that the Congress Party might not be able to control the Islamists any longer. Since then, at the risk of oversimplifying, one could say that Yemen's Islamists have gone in two directions: members of Islah, who participate in the system, and the radical groups that oppose the Yemeni state as well as the West.

The Islah Party also has provided a political home for many of the Yemenis who returned from the Afghan War of the 1980s and whose reintegration into public life might otherwise have posed insurmountable problems. Indeed, the growing influence of Islamism in Yemen is directly linked to the influx of these returnees. According to a former minister of the interior, the "Afghan Arabs" in Yemen – including both Yemenis and other nationalities – numbered up to 29,000 in the years 1993-1994.³⁹ According to a leading figure of the Islamic Jihad Movement (IJM) in Yemen, 8,000 Afghan Arabs had returned by 1990, and their number had increased to 50,000 a decade later.⁴⁰ Even if these figures are inflated and also include non-Yemenis who have since returned to their countries of origin (either voluntarily or because they were among the 14,000 deported by the Yemeni government in recent years),⁴¹ it is known that thousands of Yemenis went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets during the 1980s. Many "Afghan Arabs" have since taken positions in the government. Because they provided critical support to the North in the 1994 civil war, President Salih has been reluctant to move against them.

Not all the returnees were prepared to respect the political rules of the game. Consequently, a number of militant, albeit fairly small organisations like the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army and the Islamic Jihad Movement emerged that were able to recruit from among the Afghan Arabs. Similarly, the high percentage of Yemenis among those arrested by coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2002 not only demonstrates that many had stayed after the end of

³⁶ According to some reports, roughly 20 per cent of Yemen's six million students went through the religious high schools during the 1990s. See MacFarquhar, "Yemen Turns to Tribes", op. cit.

³⁷ For details on the complex composition of Islah, see Dresch and Haykel, "Stereotypes and Political Styles"; op. cit., and Ludwig Stiftl, "The Yemeni Islamists in the Process of Democratization", in Leveau, Mermier, and Steinbach, (eds), *Le Yémen contemporain*, pp. 247-266.

³⁸ The President appointed another 31 parliamentarians.

³⁹ Husain al-Arab, former minister of the interior, in an interview with the *Yemen Times*, 2 April 2001.

⁴⁰ Abu al-Miqdad, leader of Islamic Jihad Movement in Marib, in an interview with the *Yemen Times*, 27 August 2001.

⁴¹ *Yemen Times*, 24 September 2001.

the Soviet occupation, but also suggests that others returned there as recruitment continued into the 1990s with the emergence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.⁴² At the same time, the fate of some former leading figures of the Islamic Jihad Movement, such as Tariq al-Fadli, who became a member of the Congress Party in the mid-1990s, shows that they can be co-opted into one of the two big conservative parties.

Fearing that Islah could eventually threaten his rule, President Salih has adroitly played it off against the Yemeni Socialist Party, pursuing a seesaw policy between the two and using them to maintain a weak balance both between the country's right and left wings and between North and South. Thus, while several former YSP leaders remain in exile and many party assets are still frozen, Salih chose not to dissolve the YSP after the 1994 war, and many southern military and political leaders have returned to Yemen in recent years.⁴³

The YSP, which gradually had shed some of its former ideological tenets, still maintained influence in the former PDRY governorates and seems likely to improve its political position over time. Indeed, despite the dismal record of the South during the time the YSP was in charge, the party enjoyed a measure of popular credibility at the time of unification. This was due in large part to the more efficient administrative and judicial systems, the higher educational level and the low unemployment level in the South, and general southern resentment at perceived northern domination. The YSP also enjoys support among northern Yemenis who feel threatened by the Islamists or oppose President Salih for tribal, ideological, or personal reasons.⁴⁴

However, it still suffers from having attempted to secede in 1994, and the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2003 are shaping up as a heated competition between the Congress and Islah, with political rivalry often slipping into violence. Indeed, the scope of violence related to the registration period bodes ill for the future.⁴⁵ While Yemen appears to

have taken some steps to improve the mechanics of the electoral process, in particular by establishing a more credible electoral council,⁴⁶ claims of irregularity persist and have led to several confrontations between Congress and Islah members. This is particularly true at the local level, given the interplay of politics and tribalism and the wide availability of weapons.

3. Militant Islamism in Yemen

Militant Islam, in one form or another, was present on the Yemeni political scene long before al-Qaeda appeared in the news. To some degree, its roots lay in the system of religious schools that once provided the only education in the country and still educates large numbers in rural areas. A leader from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was involved in the 1948 assassination of the Imam, and religious militancy gained ground during the North's civil war in opposition to the secular republic. The migration of many tribesmen from northern Yemen to Saudi Arabia for employment in the 1970s and 1980s, together with Saudi proselytising within the YAR during this period (which included substantial funding for new religious schools, or *ma'ahid ilmiyya*, many of which were established in the 1970s and later and supplanted the *madaris ilmiya*, the earlier schools of theology), increased the power and attraction of Islamic orthodoxy – and the influence of "Salafi" or "Wahhabi" Islam in particular – within the country.⁴⁷

Against this background, and with the support of an increasingly insecure government in Sanaa,

Congress Party and the opposition – led by Islah – have traded accusations, with each blaming the other for illegal registration of voters. The complaints have focused mainly on under-age voters, who allegedly are being registered by sheikhs in different localities.

⁴⁶ The Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendums replaced the discredited Supreme Election Committee. The UNDP has played an important role, providing assistance for the organisation of the 2003 parliamentary elections, together with a number of European countries. See, e.g., *Yemen Times*, 11-17 November 2002.

⁴⁷ These Islamist movements were not monolithic in organisation or in thought. Some embraced an idealised version of Zaydi or Shafi'i tenets, while more radical movements rejected Zaydi, Sunni, and Isma'ili thought in favour of more "ecumenical" Salafi or Wahhabi ideas. Likewise, while some of the latter identified with the official Saudi version of Wahhabism, others rejected it. Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, op. cit., p. 204.

⁴² The U.S. had detained 69 Yemenis in Guantánamo Bay as of May 2002, according to press agency accounts. SABA Yemeni News Agency, 30 May 2002, and Associated Press, 22 September 2002.

⁴³ ICG interview in Yemen, 24 April 2002.

⁴⁴ ICG interviews in Yemen, April 2002.

⁴⁵ ICG telephone interview with international election analyst posted in Yemen, December 2002. The ruling

Yemen's Islamist movements began to emerge in the 1970s. The *ma`ahid*, besides providing conventional training in Islamic orthodoxy, served somewhat as recruiting grounds not only for *mujahidin* who fought in Afghanistan but also for those who fought against Yemen's own "infidels". The pattern of government support for Islamist groups continued throughout the 1980s, as President Salih sought to strengthen his position by improving ties to them.

After unification in 1990, the Islamist influence grew more pronounced. In the southern countryside, religious centres that had been covert under the anti-clerical Marxism of the PDRY reappeared. Northern Salafis began to proselytise in the South, attack Shafi'i mosques and shrines in the South and assassinate southern officials. These trends coincided with the return of the "Arab Afghans", imbued with Islamist ideology and linked to radical movements such as those established by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who later would become bin Laden's chief lieutenant. The most prominent of these was Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, one of the founders of the Islah Party and a veteran of the Afghan War, during which he was said to have been an associate of bin Laden. Al-Zindani was named to the Republic of Yemen Presidential Council as an Islah representative during 1993-1997.⁴⁸ In 1994, he opened al-Iman University in Sanaa, which offers a conservative but Islamist curriculum.⁴⁹ Islamists also were prominent in supporting the northern forces of President Salih during the 1994 civil war, with some activists going as far as declaring *jihad* (holy war) against the secessionists.⁵⁰ Thus, even as most Arab governments that earlier had encouraged the rise of Islamists as allies against secular, left-wing opponents were cutting ties with them, the Republic of Yemen sought to promote its stability through participation of the Islamist mainstream in the governing coalition and at least tacit encouragement of more radical forces.⁵¹

During this period, radical Yemeni Islamists, who rejected Islah's politics and indeed the orientation of the Yemeni state as a whole, established a number of independent militant organisations, most prominently the Islamic Jihad Movement and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army. More recently, organisational and financial relations between these organisations and al-Qaeda have been alleged, and personal ties between Osama bin Laden and members of the Yemeni Islamic Jihad Movement are known to have existed in the past.⁵² These links, combined with the fact that militant Islamists from other Arab countries sought refuge in Yemen in the 1990s, raised concerns about whether the country was not, in effect, a sanctuary for al-Qaeda operatives.

Indeed, the involvement of non-Yemenis in the kidnapping of tourists by the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army in December 1998, the October 2000 bombing of the British Council in Sanaa and the suicide attack on the *USS Cole* in Aden in October 2000 (which itself followed an unsuccessful attempt to blow up the *USS The Sullivans*), suggest that violent acts are being planned and executed by foreign groups with the participation of militant Yemeni Islamists. Although the government arrested and tried the British Council attackers, executed the leader of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army and claimed to have destroyed the organisation,⁵³ the *USS Cole* affair, in which seventeen U.S. Marines were killed and dozens injured, undermined that claim.⁵⁴ In the wake of that attack, the government arrested dozens and possibly even hundreds of suspects. However, Yemen resisted more aggressive investigative approaches by the U.S. that it claimed were overly intrusive.

In addition to suspicions that foreign militant groups are active in Yemen, concerns about participation in the global al-Qaeda network were highlighted by the

⁴⁸ Dresch and Haykel: "Stereotypes and Political Styles", op. cit., pp. 407 and 410.

⁴⁹ *The Economist*, 1 June 2002.

⁵⁰ Stiftl, "The Yemeni Islamists," op. cit., p. 260. In 1996, Osama bin Laden admitted that he had played a role in the war against the socialists. ICG telephone interview with German expert on Yemen, December 2002.

⁵¹ In 1994, possibly aware of the threat posed to its rule by radical, militant Islam, the Yemeni government founded the Higher Institute of Preaching, designed to teach a "moderate Islam". It was seen at the time as a counterweight to the private institutions run by Islamists. Its effectiveness is a

matter of some debate. ICG telephone interview with German expert on Yemen, December 2002.

⁵² See for example an interview with Tariq al-Fadli in *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 10 November 2001, reprinted in the Yemeni weekly *al-Thawri*, 3 January 2002. Tariq al-Fadli was a prominent Yemeni Islamic Jihad Movement leader, as well as a member of the pre-independence southern aristocracy, before he joined the Congress in the mid-1990s.

⁵³ *Yemen Times*, 8 January 2001.

⁵⁴ There have been allegations that some top officials of the Yemeni Political Security Organisation, the intelligence agency responsible for counter-terrorism were passing information to Islamist extremists. See "The Story of a Traitor to Al-Qaeda", *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 December 2002.

September 2002 arrests of more than a dozen Yemenis in the U.S. and Pakistan; the detainees include Ramzi bin al-Shibah, who is accused of being one of the planners of the 11 September 2001 attacks. In February 2002, the FBI issued an alert for seventeen men (thirteen Yemenis) suspected of planning attacks on U.S. targets in Yemen.⁵⁵ More recent developments, including both additional arrests and bomb explosions, have contributed to these concerns, which were further heightened by the explosion on the French oil tanker *Limburg* just off of Yemen's oil terminal near the southern port of al-Mukalla on 6 October 2002. After initial doubts, French and Yemeni officials confirmed that the explosion resulted from an attack carried out by men in a small speedboat packed with explosives that rammed the tanker.⁵⁶ Since that time, Western governments have intensified their warnings regarding the presence of al-Qaeda members in Yemen.⁵⁷

A pair of violent attacks at the end of 2002 renewed concerns about militant Islamic activity. On 28 December 2002, Jarallah Omar, the deputy secretary-general of the YSP and a widely respected opposition figure, was shot and killed in Sanaa as he finished a talk at Islah's party congress.⁵⁸ The Yemen Ministry of Interior claimed his assassin had been a member of Islah. Two days later, another militant entered a Southern Baptist mission hospital in Jiblah in central Yemen, killed three American workers and wounded a fourth. This assassin was said to be a member of Islamic Jihad and a colleague of Omar's killer; both, it was alleged, had fought in Afghanistan and had attended al-Imam University. Yemeni security officials said the pair were members of a five-man cell and voiced suspicions that they had ties to al-Qaeda, although this remains unsubstantiated. The government reacted by arresting some 30 people in

the following days, although their relationship to the assassins is unclear.⁵⁹

Ultimately, while many Yemeni Islamists have chosen to play by the rules of the Yemeni state – most visibly through the Islah Party and their participation in electoral politics – others, and the more militant among the Afghan veterans in particular, have chosen to operate independently. In some cases they have received government encouragement and furthered its agenda. In others they have taken up arms against the state, in a process that appears to have facilitated alliances with foreign and international Islamist militant organisations such as al-Qaeda.⁶⁰ But while there is little doubt concerning the presence of al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen or the links between Yemeni and foreign militant Islamist organisations, the radicalisation of Yemen's Islamists and the violence that continue to plague the country stem from a complex reality in which governmental policies and tribal conflicts play no small part.

⁵⁵ *International Herald Tribune*, 16 September 2002.

⁵⁶ Reuters, 8 October 2002; Associated Press, 10 October 2002. A statement sent to a newspaper claiming responsibility for the attack in the name of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, as revenge for the 1998 execution of its leader, was regarded with scepticism. *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 October 2002.

⁵⁷ According to British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, "There are al-Qaeda and other international terrorist operatives inside Yemen and it poses a very serious law enforcement threat and challenge". Quoted in *The Daily Star*, 18 November 2002.

⁵⁸ Omar had been instrumental in forging a coalition between the YSP and Islah for the upcoming elections. For background on Omar, see Sheila Carapico, Lisa Wedeen and Anna Wuerth, MERIP Press Information Note 115, "The Death and Life of Jarallah Omar", 31 December 2002.

⁵⁹ Some Yemenis suspect involvement by the regime or its security forces in Omar's assassination, speculating that they may have feared a powerful opposition leader. However, as Carapico, Wedeen and Wuerth comment, the subsequent attacks against the missionaries "seem to point in the direction of a terror campaign directed against Yemenis and Americans alike by a rather small but quite expert reactionary underground". *Ibid.* According to Yemeni security officials, the two suspects admitted to having plans to attack other foreigners, journalists and Yemeni political leaders. Associated Press, 3 January 2002.

⁶⁰ Kidnapping and attacks on Western targets have received the greatest international attention but attacks on the cars and houses of ministers, governors and other state employees – often those associated with the Yemeni Socialist Party – are far more common. The YSP claims that members of organisations such as the Islamic Jihad Movement and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army were responsible for the murder of 150 of its members, including a minister, in the early 1990s. Some suspects were arrested in 1992-1993 and kept in prisons in governorates of the former PDRY; however, all prisoners in Aden and Mukalla were freed after northern forces entered the cities in July 1994. *Al-Wasat*, 6 December 1993; Carapico, "Yemen and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army" op. cit.; Middle East Watch, "Human Rights in Yemen During and After the 1994 War", p. 26.

III. THE DOMESTIC ROOTS OF CONFLICT

Unrest in Yemen in both urban and rural areas has taken the form of tribal clashes, kidnapping, military-tribal confrontations, demonstrations and bomb attacks.⁶¹ Those incidents that can be portrayed as having links to international terrorism clearly have received the bulk of international attention, yet the overwhelming majority are related far more to domestic than to international factors. Indeed, Yemen presents a complex and conflict-prone mix of tribal groups, regional interests⁶² and economic concerns, in addition to significant disparities between rural areas and urban centres, all of which play a part in fuelling domestic conflict. The government's lack of control over areas of the country, and particularly its scarcely populated governorates of al-Jawf, Marib, and Shabwa and parts of Sanaa governorate, magnifies these problems.

Sectarian differences also have contributed to tensions. The majority of the Yemeni population, living in the central and southern parts of the country, are Shafi'i, one of the four schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. A slightly smaller part of the population, living in the northern governorates, is Zaydi, a branch of Shiite Islam. Zaydis traditionally dominated all of the former north Yemeni state, including the Shafi'i lower one-third of its territory, and Shafi'i resentment was one factor in the 1962 revolution in the North. Overall, Zaydi tribes have exercised inordinate influence over national politics. Both sides in the civil war of the 1960s assiduously courted them. Their members constitute the majority of senior military and security

⁶¹ A good but not very detailed overview of incidents in Yemen is available at <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/data/incident00.htm>.

⁶² Despite the merger, the North/South divide has persisted. Even more localised regional identities work against full national integration. For example, al-Hujariya (in the southern Shafi'i part of old North Yemen) has long been noted as an area of superior education, labour migration abroad (particularly to East Africa and the West) and resistance to domination by the former Zaydi Imams and their successors. Similarly, the Hadramawt is an extremely distinctive region with strong links to far-flung areas of the Indian Ocean and a reputation for producing both religious scholars and educated technocrats. The Mahra in the far east of the country are among the least integrated Yemenis because of their unique language and affinities with similar peoples in neighbouring Oman.

officers, their backing has been essential to the maintenance in power of successive presidents and, since the 1960s, important Zaydi tribal sheikhs have held government positions, thus extending their influence to Sanaa itself.⁶³

When the South attempted to secede in 1994, northern tribal levies provided considerable armed support to the northern army. Adding to the tensions, the conservative Salafi and Wahhabi versions of Sunni Islam have spread throughout the country in recent years, and violent clashes between Wahhabis and Zaydis occurred in the mid-1990s.⁶⁴ Sectarian disputes have been far less of an issue in the South since nearly all its population is Shafi'i, though there also are a small numbers of Isma'ilis (another branch of Shiites) and Jews, and some Christians and Hindus.

Of these various fault-lines, the most visible have been the tribal ones, which often serve as proxies for religious, regional or economic struggles.

A. TRIBAL CLASHES

For roughly half the population of Yemen, tribal affiliation is a vital component of identity. Disputes within tribes, between tribes, and between tribes and the central government, have been longstanding features of Yemeni politics.⁶⁵ Usually, these clashes are referred to as *thar*, a term that translates as "vendetta" or "blood revenge", but is more widely employed to describe any armed tribal feud. In principle, tribal conflicts are resolved by mediation, with compensation regulated by tribal customary law or *urf*. Yet tribal fighting can often stretch on for years or even decades, destabilising entire regions of the country. Local reports indicate that hundreds of Yemenis are injured or killed in tribal clashes every year. While increasing public awareness has resulted in more of these cases being reported, the situation is believed to be deteriorating.⁶⁶

⁶³ That said, the predominance of Zaydis in the government and security forces owes as much to their personal and tribal connections as to their Zaydi background.

⁶⁴ For an example, see Shelagh Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen", in *Middle East Report*, N°204 (1997), pp. 23-24, 26. For financial support from the "Two-Holy-Mosques' Foundation" for Yemeni Salafis, see *Yemen Times*, 30 July 2001.

⁶⁵ Other parts of the population have either weak or no tribal affiliation.

⁶⁶ ICG interviews in Yemen in April 2002.

Although the Yemeni government has condemned tribal feuds, and several non-governmental organisations are promoting their non-violent resolution, local reports indicate not only that the number of such clashes has risen but that their nature has changed: whereas tribal conflicts traditionally have been a rural phenomenon and have occurred principally in the northern governorates, increasingly they are being exported to the cities, including the capital. In 2001 at least three violent incidents in Sanaa were related to tribal problems originating in other governorates. One reason for the rising number of clashes among tribesmen in the capital is that it is increasingly becoming "tribalised", with many tribal sheikhs establishing secondary residences and many tribesmen having migrated there in recent years. In addition, the physical growth of the city has resulted in the absorption of tribal areas.

Moreover, the number of women and children who have been injured and killed – mostly accidentally – in tribal conflicts appears to be rising, including in rural areas. This might be a result of the use of increasingly lethal weaponry, though there also is strong evidence of decaying tribal norms that prohibit fighting in market places or harm to women, children and others considered "vulnerable" because unarmed. If such norms are violated, the sanctions are supposed to be extremely severe, and compensation to the families (*diya*, blood money) can be up to eleven-fold the original "damages".⁶⁷ The fraying of tribal rules might be due to the rapidly growing young generation in rural areas that still bears arms but may not have absorbed the traditional rules that regulated and restricted their use.

Until better data becomes available, it must be assumed that this decay in adherence to tribal law and an emerging breach in the existing linkages between state and tribal justice are related to the wider process of social and political transition currently occurring. Over recent years, the state's education system has developed, and leading tribal sheikhs have been incorporated into state institutions. Likewise, internal migration has brought people from the countryside to urban areas. While these developments have weakened tribal structures and therefore helped establish basic institutions of central

government, as long as the latter, and especially the judiciary, remain weak, the gap between emerging state institutions and fading tribal codes is likely to create a dangerous vacuum.

There are myriad causes for tribal clashes, ranging from insults and accidents to a marital row between partners belonging to different tribes.⁶⁸ Most often violent incidents result from material disputes: nearly half the cases of inter-tribal conflict documented by ICG – only the tip of the iceberg as there are no official statistics – are, or were initially, related to land or water. The main reasons for the rising number of disputes over such resources can be traced back fairly directly to the volatile mix of a rapidly growing population with declining resources, in particular ground water levels. Although agriculture accounts for only 15 per cent of Yemen's gross domestic product, it is the main source of employment for half the population.⁶⁹ Along with the shortage in social services and employment, increasing scarcity of water resources has thus been a major cause of tension.⁷⁰ The Tihama area of the Red Sea coast and other regions like Hajja have declining ground water levels, and even Sanaa is liable to run out of water within the next decade due to its rapid population growth.⁷¹ Overall, the groundwater being pumped is estimated to be four times the amount of natural replenishment.⁷² Many farmers do not consider the option of taking their adversaries in water disputes to court, both because of the absence of relevant national legislation and because such cases can last for years.

⁶⁸ A Yemeni NGO (Dar as-Salam, "Peace House") reported a case to ICG in which a member of the Bani Matar and a member of al-Haima al-Kharijiya tribe divorced, leading to a violent conflict between the two tribes. ICG interview, Yemen, April 2002.

⁶⁹ "Yemen in the 1990s: From Unification to Economic Reform", IMF Occasional Papers, N°208 (Washington, 2002), tables A.3 and A.6.

⁷⁰ The Tihama area of the Red Sea coast has declining ground water levels, as have other regions like Hajja, and even the capital Sanaa – which could run out of water within the next decade due to its rapid population growth. Overall, the amount of groundwater being pumped in Yemen is estimated to be four times the amount of natural recharge. [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/essdext.nsf/18DocByUnid/0B03BAE363FB1E1685256BAB0073CB07/\\$FILE/WRS SDraftSection11.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/essdext.nsf/18DocByUnid/0B03BAE363FB1E1685256BAB0073CB07/$FILE/WRS SDraftSection11.pdf).

⁷¹ ICG interviews with international experts in Yemen, April and May 2002.

⁷² [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/essdext.nsf/18DocByUnid/0B03BAE363FB1E1685256BAB0073CB07/\\$FILE/WRS SDraftSection11.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/essdext.nsf/18DocByUnid/0B03BAE363FB1E1685256BAB0073CB07/$FILE/WRS SDraftSection11.pdf).

⁶⁷ The *diya* for a simple case is currently YR 70,000, approximately U.S. \$400. The actual payment is subject to negotiations. ICG interviews in Yemen, 22 April 2002. For the concept of compensation, see Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*. (Oxford, 1989), pp. 47 ff.

The propensity to resort to violence in such cases also is related to the state of the judiciary. The court system suffers from a heavy workload (there are no small-claims courts), poor technical and educational equipment, the absence of courts in some rural areas, the poor education of judges and their propensity to accept bribes because of low pay as well as incidences of favouritism on tribal or other grounds. The head of the Supreme Court (the court system's highest body) and the ministry of justice are said to interfere in cases before lower courts,⁷³ and, though theoretically independent, judges are appointed, promoted and dismissed by the Supreme Judicial Council, which operates under the chairmanship of the President. Moreover, verdicts are often not implemented due to the executive bodies' weakness or unwillingness to act, including in the capital.⁷⁴ The limitations of the court system help explain why arbitration is viewed as an important complement.⁷⁵ The Yemeni Centre for Conciliation and Arbitration was created in the late 1990s by an alliance of jurists, businessmen, and bankers.⁷⁶

Economics play a wider role as well, as tribal conflicts often serve as mere proxies for disputes over the distribution of scarce resources. Indeed, a principal source of tension is the perception of strong

disparities in income, the allocation of resources, and the benefits derived from development projects. Yemenis living in the oil-rich governorates of Marib, Shabwa and Hadramawt, for example, believe they are not receiving a fair share of oil income derived from their territory. Residents of the governorates that formed the PDRY similarly complain that they produce 60 per cent of the national income but receive fewer benefits than the population of the "northern" governorates.⁷⁷ Tribesmen from the northern governorate of Marib have voiced similar complaints, albeit not on the basis of a North-South divide: they complain that the government tends to shower favours on those tribes that are in its good graces.⁷⁸

Tribal clashes also often have a political dimension, as tribalism is used to serve broader political objectives. Indeed, many Yemenis are persuaded that the government either ignores the problem of tribal conflicts or actually fuels it by pitting one tribe against another, keeping tribal areas in a state of permanent unrest in order to deflect potential tribal challenges to central authority.⁷⁹ This is also seen as a factor in the revival of tribal clashes in some governorates of the former PDRY, where tribal structures and identities had been suppressed by the socialist state. An additional explanation lies in the fact that an increasing number of tribal notables have assumed government positions and used these to support the interests of their respective tribes.⁸⁰ Tribes lacking access to influential officials in turn resort to outside parties for support, including political parties and Islamist organisations.

⁷³ World Bank, "Yemen - Comprehensive Development Review 2000", [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/Judicial/\\$File/BB-5.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/Judicial/$File/BB-5.pdf); U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Yemen (2001)", 4 March 2002, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/nea/8313.htm>. According to the former head of the Judicial Inspection Board, "The present condition of our judicial system is a disgrace to our country. You can find ample examples of corrupt judges, at all levels from the primary courts all the way to the Supreme Court. There is visible abuse of the system, due process of law is absent, archives and files are [dis]organised, and most of the deals are done in the dark and at homes of judges and their representatives". Interview with Najeeb al-Shameeri, *Yemen Times*, 17 November 1997.

⁷⁴ ICG interview in Yemen, 3 May 2002. See also Anna Würth, *Ash-Shari'a fi Bâb al-Yaman: Recht, Richter und Rechtspraxis an der familienrechtlichen Kammer des Gerichtes Süd-Sanaa (Republik Jemen) 1983-1995* (Berlin, 2000). In order to address the absence of proper enforcement mechanisms, the Code on Execution of Civil Judgments was revised to provide judges with more direct means of enforcing their decision.

⁷⁵ Disputes often will go through arbitration, then through the courts and then back to arbitration.

⁷⁶ See the commentary on the benefits of arbitration by former Minister of Legal Affairs Husain al-Hubaishi in the *Yemen Times*, 1 February 1999.

Tribal issues also have served as proxies for the lingering North/South divide. Since unification, some members of the southern opposition, both inside the country and in exile, have complained about their exclusion from power and have portrayed the situation as a clash between northern Zaydis (used here as a synonym for the tribal part of the population) and southern Shafi'i's (used here as a synonym for the non-tribal part of the population). Though it is true that the North-South cleavage

⁷⁷ ICG interviews in Yemen, April 2002.

⁷⁸ ICG interviews in Yemen, April 2002.

⁷⁹ ICG interviews in Yemen, April 2002.

⁸⁰ In particular, President Salih has relied upon tribes from the important Hashid confederation and upon his own tribe of Sanhan to bolster his authority while close relatives have occupied command positions in the security agencies and military units.

remains problematic and that the country's leadership has only recently begun to pay attention to it, this interpretation is overly simplistic. Many Zaydis also complain about being excluded, and many tribesmen are not Zaydis but Shafi'i. Indeed the "northern" and "southern" tribes of al-Jawf, Marib and Shabwa recently have joined hands to defend themselves against potential government military actions.⁸¹

The politicisation of tribal conflicts and the involvement of outside actors are best illustrated by the rise in violence immediately before and during elections. Tribal interests find their way into electoral contests, which explains why tensions between tribes were particularly acute before and during the 1993 and 1997 parliamentary and 2001 local election campaigns. Indeed, the degree of election-related violence has risen steadily. During the February 2001 local elections, more than twenty persons were killed. Distrust among candidates, suspicion about flawed voter registers and the seemingly arbitrary drawing of electoral districts brought tensions between tribal leaders to the fore.

Although President Salih has instructed the Consultative Council to find a solution to the increased number of tribal disputes, government interference can be a double-edged sword. While it could moderate tribal tensions, it also risks dragging central authorities more directly into such conflicts; already some tribes are complaining that influential politicians are siding with their enemies. Furthermore, should the president order a truce, it would need to be enforced by the state. This might take the form of disbursing the traditional *diya* or blood money used to end tribal conflicts, thereby triggering a flood of new and old claims, with various parties seeking large government payments.⁸² In light of these challenges, the chairman of the Consultative Council – which has already set up a committee and collected a number of cases related to electoral violence – expressed an interest to ICG in meeting with experienced international conflict resolution experts. One potentially promising option would be to establish mobile mediation committees

staffed by local mediators assisted by international experts.

B. KIDNAPPING AND TERRORISM

Kidnapping has been a long-standing and, within certain specified boundaries, more or less accepted feature of Yemeni society. Taking hostages was practiced both by tribes and by the Imam's government, and kidnappings often occurred during tribal disputes, particularly when it was felt that government justice could not be relied upon. Following the civil war in the YAR during the 1960s, kidnappings of government officials began to occur in reaction to government attempts to penetrate or exert control over tribal territory, to pressure the government to release prisoners (often hostages themselves), or to extract government benefits or services for the tribe. In addition, tribal roadblocks have long been a common travel hazard throughout parts of northern Yemen, and government vehicles are considered fair game for seizure. But the deliberate kidnapping of foreigners is a recent phenomenon which violates traditional norms.

Since the early 1990s, roughly 200 foreigners have been kidnapped in Yemen. With three exceptions, all were released unharmed. In one fatal case it is generally presumed that the Norwegian hostage was shot unintentionally during a nocturnal fire-fight.⁸³ On a second occasion, an American development worker was wounded when he resisted an attempt either to kidnap him or hijack his car.⁸⁴ The third and far more serious incident occurred in Abyan in 1998 and is discussed below.

Excepting the Abyan incident, foreigners have been kidnapped by tribes in order to achieve specific objectives, including pressuring the government to release detained fellow tribesmen (including those arrested for criminal offences), carry out development projects in the tribe's territory, provide employment, or pay or facilitate payment of ransom. The latter is perhaps the principal reason behind the proliferation of kidnappings of foreigners in recent years despite the fact that such acts are punishable by death.⁸⁵

The Abyan incident stands apart because it was not tribal in nature but rather an act of Islamic

⁸¹ *Al-Hayat*, 20 May 2002, and *Yemen Times*, 20 May 2002.

⁸² ICG interviews with the chairman of the Consultative Council and a Dar as-Salam representative, Yemen, 22 March 2002. Tribal feuds have been outlawed in neighbouring Arabian Peninsula states by admittedly stronger governments; individuals who kill a member of another tribe are convicted of murder and executed while their tribe as a whole is fined. This has occurred in certain regions of Yemen as well.

⁸³ ICG interview in Yemen, 13 April 2002.

⁸⁴ Associated Press, 9 December 1998.

⁸⁵ The government has never admitted to paying ransom.

radicalism. It can thus be linked to the growth of militant groups and their violent activities in Yemen, particularly given suspected links between its perpetrators and other Islamic groups, including al-Qaeda. Equally instructive are the Sirwah incident and the operations against the Abida tribe, which illustrate both the degree to which tribal matters can intersect with domestic and international politics, and how an inter-tribal affair or tribal-government relations can quickly become intertwined with issues that international policymakers view solely through the prism of terrorism, often with unintended consequences. All three are discussed below.

1. Abyan 1998

The Abyan incident was the first time that foreigners were the specific purpose of a kidnapping, not just the pawns, and that the aim of the kidnappers was not so much to extract concessions from the Sanaa government as to confront it and its Western supporters.

The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, a radical Islamic movement, was created in the 1990s by “Arab Afghans” upon their return to southern Yemen from the campaign against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Its members had been converted to a radical form of Islam and shared a general southern Yemeni dissatisfaction with the North’s policies toward and domination of the South.⁸⁶ It first came to notice in December 1998 when its members kidnapped a group of sixteen tourists from Canada, Great Britain and the United States, hoping to secure the release of several British Muslims who had been arrested by Yemeni authorities a few days earlier. Yemeni security forces intervened, and four hostages died in the ensuing gun battle. Both the FBI and Scotland Yard investigated but whether the kidnappers or the security forces were responsible for the deaths was never made public. A number of kidnappers were shot during the fighting, while others – including the leader of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army – were arrested and executed after being convicted of kidnapping and murder in an ordinary court procedure.⁸⁷

The Abyan kidnappings differed markedly from typical kidnappings in both their structure and

outcome. In all other cases the kidnappers had been Yemenis demanding either the release of their relatives from jail or employment in the public sector or with the oil companies working on their territory. In the Abyan case, however, the kidnappers were not local tribesmen seeking to exert pressure on their own government. Rather they were militant Yemeni and non-Yemeni Islamists from the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army. The Yemeni government claims that the organisation is linked to the London-based radical Egyptian Islamist Abu Hamza al-Masri, a British citizen whose son was among those the kidnappers were trying to free. Attempts to have al-Masri extradited to Yemen have been rebuffed by the British government.⁸⁸ Following the kidnappings, there were additional allegations that the group was linked to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and that it had been responsible for at least some of a series of bombings in Aden and Abyan.⁸⁹ In June 2001, Yemen arrested alleged members of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army on charges that they were planning to bomb the U.S. embassy.

In response to the Abyan debacle, Special Forces units were established under the command of Ahmad Ali Abdallah Salih, the President’s son, and initially trained by Jordanian officers.⁹⁰ In keeping with an October 1998 agreement, U.S. military advisers are also reported to have offered training to these troops in the spring of 2002.⁹¹ However, reliable information about the size and equipment of the Yemeni Special Forces remains elusive.

2. Sirwah 2000-2002

While Abyan has been the sole unambiguously Islamist kidnapping incident to date, the line between local tribal grievances, disputes among tribes and between tribes and the central government on the one hand, and Islamic radicalism on the other has become increasingly blurred. Assessing the origins and nature of the conflict is made more difficult because both

⁸⁶ Sheila Carapico, “Yemen and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army”, *MERIP*, PIN N°35, 18 October 2000.

⁸⁷ *Yemen Times*, 4 January 1999, and *The Guardian*, 14 October 2000. See also *The Guardian*, 26 June 1999.

⁸⁸ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 22 November 2001.

While they have not extradited al-Masri, British authorities eventually forbade him from preaching at his mosque, seized his passport, froze his assets and took other measures to limit his influence. See Jonathan Shanzer, “Behind the French Tanker Bombing: Yemen’s Ongoing Problem with Islamist Terrorism”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 October 2002.

⁸⁹ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 31 December 1998; *The Times*, 2 January 1999; *The Economist*, 9-15 January 1999.

⁹⁰ *Yemen Times*, 28 May 2001.

⁹¹ *Yemen Times*, 22 October 2001, 1 April 2002 and 1 August 2002. ICG interview in Yemen, 15 April 2002.

tribes and government have their own interest in either downplaying or exaggerating the Islamist link. Tribes may seek to underestimate the level of Islamist activities within their territory or by their members while the government may wish to overstate it in order to provide greater justification for acting against tribes or to demonstrate to the West its commitment to fighting terrorism. Purely military operations, however, are unlikely to resolve local conflicts that ultimately are rooted in disputes over resources or access to political privilege. The ambiguities in these situations are most clearly seen in the recent kidnappings and skirmishes in Sirwah.

Sirwah, located between Sanaa and Marib, is an unruly area, and between June 2000 and November 2001 it became the centre of conflict involving the Yemeni military and the neighbouring tribes of Sanhan and Bani Jabr. The former, a rather small tribe located southeast of Sanaa, belongs to the powerful Hashid tribal confederation. President Salih himself is from the Sanhan tribe, as are a large number of high-ranking police and security officers. The Bani Jabr tribe, on the other hand, belongs to Jahm, one of the tribes of Khawlan, which live further east in an underdeveloped area between Sanaa and Marib. The Khawlan tribes comprise an estimated 1.5 million people,⁹² and many of their members see the lack of basic infrastructure projects in their territories as evidence of the unequal distribution of benefits.⁹³ International donors have largely avoided establishing projects in Khawlan tribal areas, often citing the lack of security. The disputes between the Sanhan and Bani Jabr were largely resource-driven, with key points of contention being positions in the security apparatus and the location of infrastructure projects, which are widely coveted.

While the Sanhan and Bani Jabr tribes have been at odds since the 1970s, the situation deteriorated markedly with a series of kidnappings and counter-kidnapping after June 2000. Despite continuing tribal mediation, the Yemeni army became involved on several occasions, resulting in property destruction and a number of civilian casualties, including women and children. The original conflict remained unsettled.⁹⁴ In most of these incidents the al-Zaydi branch of the Bani Jabr tribe played a

prominent role and suffered heavy losses. In July 2000, it kidnapped six high-ranking army officers from the Sanhan tribe in order to secure the release of an imprisoned al-Zaydi tribesman. The government secured the release of the officers only after the 25th Mechanised Brigade attacked al-Zaydi settlements, killing three or four tribal members and wounding several dozen. The bombardment reportedly continued well after the officers were released, giving rise to suspicion that its severity owed much to the Sanhani connection with the military and government.⁹⁵ In apparent retaliation, the al-Zaydi tribe attacked an oil pumping station with rocket-propelled grenades and bazookas two months later, and another confrontation between the tribe and the 25th Brigade towards the end of 2000 resulted in the wounding of two soldiers.⁹⁶

In July 2001, while President Salih was on a state visit to Germany, a German diplomat was kidnapped in Sanaa and taken to Sirwah, where he was held. Earlier kidnappings rarely lasted more than three weeks. Unlike all prior cases of kidnapping of foreigners since the early 1990s, neither the kidnappers' identity nor their motivations initially were clear.⁹⁷ The kidnappers' main demand – which became public only after several days – turned out to be financial, and they were members of the al-Zaydi branch of the Bani Jabr tribe.⁹⁸ However, at least one had direct links to the Islamic Jihad Movement.⁹⁹ The gravity of the kidnapping was underscored by the number and rank of mediators from other Marib tribes who quickly intervened. The conditions that led to the hostage's release in September 2001 have not been made public.

Two months later, a German businessman was kidnapped by another branch of the al-Zaydi. Again the demands were material. Some observers suspected political objectives as well, as President

⁹⁵ *Yemen Times*, 3 and 17 July 2000.

⁹⁶ *Yemen Times*, 4 September and 11 December 2000.

⁹⁷ ICG interview in Sanaa with a member of the German embassy, April 2002.

⁹⁸ In late May 2001, the al-Zaydi tribe had kidnapped a German language student in an attempt to force the government to release six tribesmen who had been arrested for kidnapping a supreme court judge. The student was released two weeks later after mediation by other Khawlan sheikhs.

⁹⁹ Abu al-Miqdad, who fought in Afghanistan and joined the Islamic Jihad Movement in 1983 before later becoming its leader in Marib, declared that the Islamic Jihad Movement as an organisation had no role in the kidnapping. *Yemen Times*, 27 August 2001.

⁹² ICG interview in Yemen with a sheikh from one of the Khawlan tribes, 21 April 2002.

⁹³ *Yemen Times*, 4 January 1999.

⁹⁴ *Yemen Times*, 14 May 2001 and 21 May 2001.

Salih had just embarked on a state visit to the United States and several European countries, including Germany. The timing of both incidents, the German nationality of both hostages, and the fact that one was a diplomat seem more than coincidental. It is possible that the al-Zaydi were being used by political actors, such as the Islamic Jihad Movement or another of the President's political opponents, to embarrass him during his visit to Germany and to undermine his authority.¹⁰⁰

The German businessman was released unharmed within two weeks following the intervention of Yemeni Special Forces. Five tribesmen were killed and several injured in the operation, and one, Ahmad Nasir al-Zaydi, was arrested. The remaining three kidnappers from the al-Zaydi and the al-Tu'aiman (like the al-Zaydi, a branch of Jahm) were arrested several months later.¹⁰¹

In May 2002, the government undertook new efforts to arrest Islamic Jihad Movement member Muhammad Ali al-Zaydi, who had also been involved in the kidnapping of the German diplomat. Al-Zaydi was now further accused of being a member of al-Qaeda, a charge he denies. The attempt to arrest him ended with the commander of the 25th Brigade being taken hostage by al-Zaydi's fellow tribesmen.¹⁰²

These incidents show how a relatively narrow tribal affair, such as competition over government jobs, can mushroom into a major political issue involving foreign governments and a global militant Islamist organisation, even if the kidnappers' affiliation with the Islamic Jihad Movement might have been mainly happenstance, and their alleged link with al-Qaeda unproven. Clearly, radical movements are able to exploit such local situations and the fact that Islamic Jihad Movement has been particularly active in Sirwah is not coincidental.¹⁰³ At the same time, the

central government may have its own interest in portraying local disputes as part of a broader terrorist conspiracy and in characterising tribes with which it is in conflict as parts of the al-Qaeda network.

3. Operations Against the Abida Tribe 2001-2002

Although it is an extreme case, the operations against the Abida tribe highlight some of the confusion that can arise as deeply rooted Yemeni conflicts are played out against the backdrop of the current global campaign against terrorism. Many kidnapped tourists have been hidden in an area between Sanaa and Marib, and tribes in that region have generally been viewed as a thorn in the government's side. The Abida tribe belongs to the Madhhaj confederation and is settled east of Khawlan in the governorate of Marib. While there have been no reports of kidnappings by the Abida tribe, its members have been forceful in their demand for jobs with the Hunt Oil company drilling near its territory, and tribal members were accused of nearly 30 attacks on the oil pipeline during the 1990s.¹⁰⁴

In June 2001, the government sent the military to the area to arrest suspects in the pipeline attacks. Dozens of soldiers and tribesmen were killed or injured during the operation and, according to the local press, the tribesmen held 40 soldiers for several days.¹⁰⁵ In July 2001, after another section of the pipeline was blown up, the government again sent troops. Failing to arrest the suspected saboteurs, they instead took hostages from the al-Jaz'a branch of the Abida tribe in an effort to force the surrender of the accused pipeline attackers.¹⁰⁶

After the attacks in the U.S. of 11 September 2001, a religious institute on Abida territory, where hundreds of Yemenis and foreigners received religious education, became an additional bone of contention. While most of these institutions are

¹⁰⁰ According to some rumours, disagreements have emerged between President Salih and his relatives who occupy important positions in the security apparatus. Recently, his half brother had to surrender command of the Republican Guard to the President's son. Other kidnappings in the Marib region during roughly the same period included an Italian woman and a Chinese accountant.

¹⁰¹ SABA, 30 May 2002.

¹⁰² *Yemen Times*, 20 May 2002.

¹⁰³ For example, in February 2001 the Islamic Jihad Movement was reported to have prepared a tribal conference in that region. *Yemen Times*, 5 February 2001. In summer 2001, affiliates of the Islamic Jihad Movement were reported

to have organised a summer camp in Sirwah, showing films about *mujahidin* and giving religious lectures. *Yemen Times*, 6 August 2001. For more on the Islamic Jihad Movement in Yemen, see *Yemen Times*, 27 October 2001.

¹⁰⁴ *Yemen Times*, 2 July 2001.

¹⁰⁵ *Yemen Times*, 2 July 2001, 9 July 2001 and 24 December 2001.

¹⁰⁶ Abdallah al-Ahmar in an interview with *al-Zaman*, 23 July 2001. The holding of hostages had been a traditional policy of Yemeni Imams before the 1962 revolution to enforce tribal loyalty; the hostages were generally sons of important sheikhs who were held and educated in Sanaa.

simply private schools with a strong emphasis on religious education, some were suspected of having links to al-Qaeda and came under close government scrutiny. Hundreds of foreign students were deported for alleged immigration and residency violations,¹⁰⁷ and al-Iman University in Sanaa, which is led by Islah co-founder Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, was temporarily shut down.¹⁰⁸

When suspected al-Qaeda members took refuge in the governorates of Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwa, the government, prompted by U.S. demands to act against al-Qaeda, dispatched the military to arrest them. The combination of the pipeline attacks, the embarrassing setbacks of earlier military operations and the presence of the religious institutes led the government to try to make an example of Abida, to whose territory one of the suspected al-Qaeda operatives, Abu Asim, had moved three years earlier.

The 2001 military operation in Abida territory proved to be a disaster. According to the local press, as government forces advanced, air force planes also moved into position. Some claim the planes actually bombed the tribesmen, while others insist that the tribesmen misinterpreted the sonic boom of the planes for an attack. In either case, tribesmen quickly opened fire on the soldiers. By the end of the day, 24 soldiers, tribesmen and women were killed, and 23 soldiers were taken hostage by tribesmen who confiscated their equipment. The suspected al-Qaeda members remained at large. Tribal sheikhs contacted the military command in Marib and arranged a ceasefire. The arrested soldiers were released immediately but the government reinforced its military presence in the region and arrested several sheikhs from the governorates of Marib and Shabwa in an effort to make Abida hand over the tribesmen who had shot the soldiers. It took a committee of tribal sheikhs and government ministers several months of negotiations to obtain release of the hostages and settle the issue.¹⁰⁹

Tribal sheikhs of the region (the governorates of Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwa) have insisted more than once that they have not helped suspected al-Qaeda members and have tried to resolve the issue by negotiating a deal between the government and one

of the suspects, Qaid Salim Sinan al-Harithi. In contrast to the other two suspects, he originated from the region of the fighting.¹¹⁰ He offered to surrender on condition that he have a fair trial in Yemen and not be extradited to the United States. Negotiations were underway over his demand for hostages to stay with his family as a guarantee when he escaped from the area; he remained at large until he was killed in October 2002 (see below).

C. STRIKES AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Sit-ins and strikes constitute another source of domestic unrest, although generally smaller in scope and far less violent. These take place regularly, largely driven by local grievances. University staffs typically strike to protest their low and often irregularly paid salaries, as they did in October 2001. Demonstrations against government measures also have occurred in several governorates, and in such cases the police and military have often cracked down with a heavy hand. After demonstrators protested in several cities against rising prices in June 1998, the press reported that up to 50 were shot and 200 injured when security forces intervened.¹¹¹

A different type of demonstration took place in al-Dali, 150 kilometres north of Aden, where there have been persistent tensions between northern military and security forces and the local population. Since 1998 this tension has often escalated into open hostility, as residents believe that security forces over-step their authority. To understand these protests, one has to go back to the pre-unification period – and even to the period prior to the South's independence – when major parts of the colonial South Arabian Army were recruited from this area. After the 1994 civil war, northern and southern troops were merged into a single Yemeni military. As a result, many southern soldiers and military officers of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen lost their positions, were forced to retire or were simply sacked – leaving them with few choices but to return to their impoverished home region. With the Yemeni military being scaled back in recent years, these cuts were felt even more acutely, and the population of al-Dali was hit particularly hard. The largely northern local commanders were accused of regional bias and of

¹⁰⁷ *Yemen Times*, 3 January 2002 and 21 January 2002.

¹⁰⁸ *Yemen Times*, 12 November and 26 November 2001; *Middle East International*, 23 November 2001.

¹⁰⁹ *Le Monde*, 20 December 2001; *Yemen Times*, 24 December 2001 and 14 January 2002.

¹¹⁰ *Yemen Times*, 24 December 2001 and 17 March 2002.

¹¹¹ See for example a report by Brian Whitaker in *Middle East International*, 3 July 1998.

tolerating military attacks on civilians in the area.¹¹² During several demonstrations in 2001, clashes occurred between civilians and the military. Some demonstrators were shot, and several journalists and demonstrators were arrested and detained without proper judicial procedures.¹¹³

However, unlike the tribesmen in Khawlan who found themselves in a comparable situation, the people of al-Dali did not resort to kidnapping. Instead, they founded a *lajna sha'biya*, or Popular Committee, which the government summarily denounced as separatist and socialist because of its local agenda and the historical associations evoked by the name. Similar committees were founded in other southern governorates, and by the end of 2001 they merged into the Forum of the Sons of the South (*Multaqa Abna al-Janub*). The members of the Forum, including nearly a dozen members of Parliament, several high-ranking military officers and former ministers, voiced complaints common to many citizens of the former PDRY governorates who have lost civil service jobs since the structural adjustment plan was begun in 1995. Members of the Forum also try to protect their own positions, many of which are increasingly being taken over by northern officials. Even Vice-President Abd al-Rabu Mansur Hadi, a southern military officer who was an important figure on the northern side during the war in 1994, is said to support the Forum, albeit unofficially. In spring 2002, in an effort to stress his commitment to the South's welfare, President Salih met with the Forum's representatives. The President also inaugurated several development projects in southern governorates.¹¹⁴

One important lesson of these incidents concerns the government's heavy responsibility in dealing with protest. The reaction of the security services often has been harsh, at times politically motivated, and in violation of basic human rights norms. Most of the human rights violations appear to be committed by members of the criminal investigation department (a part of the police under the Ministry of Interior) and military units stationed in conflict zones like al-Dali. Human rights training and reform of the judiciary to

ensure its independence are needed if Yemen is to be able to rein in the security forces and hold those responsible for abuse accountable.

¹¹² ICG interview in Yemen, 27 April 2002.

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2002, Yemen", <<http://www.hrw.org/wr2k2/mena10.html>>.

¹¹⁴ ICG interviews in Yemen, April and May 2002; *al-Ayyam* (Yemeni daily), 26 December 2001. See also *The Economist*, 9 March 2002, and *Yemen Economic Update*, issue 8, March 2002.

IV. EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Yemen's fragile internal equilibrium has come under increased strain as a result of externally-driven events that are occurring more or less simultaneously: escalating conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, preparations for a possible U.S.-led war against Iraq and, since September 2001, the ongoing campaign against al-Qaeda. The government has engaged in a delicate balancing act between popular sentiment and U.S. policy. The presence of al-Qaeda members in Yemen at a time of intense anti-American sentiment fed by events related to Israel and Iraq has put President Salih in the uncomfortable position of cooperating with the U.S. in its struggle against an enemy that seems to thrive on Yemen's association with Washington. Sympathy for Osama bin Laden is said to be high and, as Parliamentary speaker and Islah Chairman Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar explained, "Every single citizen is with the government and co-operates with the state ... But when the government behaves according to U.S. pressure or interests, [Yemenis] will fight back".¹¹⁵

A. SAUDI ARABIA'S LONG SHADOW

In addition to these more recent concerns, Yemen must contend with the looming presence and intrusive tendencies of its northern neighbour, Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Yemeni relations have been troubled throughout most of the twentieth century, a function of border disputes, competition related to oil and ideological rivalry. Saudi interference typically has taken the shape of direct financial assistance to tribal sheikhs or exiled opposition members. Yemen's population, comprising both Shiites and Sunnis, has also been the target of proselytising by Saudi Arabia's conservative Wahhabi Sunni strain of Islam.¹¹⁶ In the past, and fearing the potential threat of a strong, populous YAR, the Saudis encouraged northern tribes to maintain their independence vis-à-vis Sanaa and have played off one political faction against another.

¹¹⁵ Mark Huband, "Yemen Gives U.S. a Test Case for Counter-Terrorism", *Financial Times*, 4 October 2002.

¹¹⁶ Proselytising appears to have been carried out by Yemenis who were exposed to Wahhabism during their employment in Saudi Arabia or through their experience in Afghanistan. It is supported by religious institutions (and perhaps individuals) in the kingdom.

A similar pattern of interference occurred with regard to the PDRY. Never comfortable with Britain's presence, Saudi Arabia was no less alarmed by the emergence of the independent Marxist state on its southern border and gave its backing and sanctuary to various conservative anti-regime groups in the years that followed. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia began to treat the YAR as a friendly buffer between itself and the socialist PDRY, though even then its support was often conditional and frequently provided in the form of direct cash subsidies to northern tribal leaders instead of the republican central government. After unification, tensions remained, but it was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and particularly Yemen's clear opposition to military action against Iraq, that poisoned relations. Besides cutting aid and expelling Yemeni workers, Saudi Arabia unofficially supported the south during Yemen's 1994 civil war in a clear effort to undercut the northern leadership.¹¹⁷

Saudi Arabia also has interfered with oil production by pressuring foreign companies not to enter Yemen or to restrict their exploration and, allegedly, by backing attacks on oil pipelines by Yemeni tribesmen. The goal appears to be to exert pressure on Sanaa to remain in the Saudi orbit and to keep Yemen from becoming a significant oil power.¹¹⁸

Relations have thawed in recent years, a trend that culminated in June 2000 in an agreement over the long-disputed common border and preparations for Yemen's gradual inclusion in the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia also appears to have reduced its support for the Yemeni opposition-in-exile.¹¹⁹ Still, underlying tensions remain. The treaty confirmed Saudi control of disputed territories, rankling Yemenis and leaving some tribes divided by the border. Saudi Arabia still appears to regard Yemen's political system – with its multi-party elections; direct presidential vote; women's suffrage and comparatively free press – as a threatening counter-model.

¹¹⁷ Although Riyadh contributed money and arms to the southern cause, it never recognised the breakaway state and thus denied it vital international standing.

¹¹⁸ Richard Schofield, "The Last Missing Fence in the Desert: The Saudi-Yemeni Boundary", in E.G.H. Joffé, M.J. Hachemi and E.W. Watkins, eds., *Yemen Today: Crisis and Solutions* (London, 1997), pp. 213-268.

¹¹⁹ For reports that the two countries are working closely to track suspected al-Qaeda members operating in the border area, see *The New York Times*, 19 December 2002.

B. AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The continuing appeal of pan-Arab sentiments and the conservative social and religious orientation of much of its population make Yemen particularly sensitive to developments in the broader Arab/Muslim world. Thus, the bombing of Afghanistan in late 2001 led to major demonstration in Amran, north of Sanaa, organised by – among others – Husain al-Ahmar, leader of the Congress Party there¹²⁰ and the son of Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, the speaker of the Yemeni parliament and the chairman of the Islah Party. Likewise, and as in other Arab countries, demonstrations were staged against the Israeli assault on the Palestinian Authority in March and April 2002. Popular opposition to an American attack against Iraq is also profound, further complicating the government's efforts to cooperate with Washington. The arrival of U.S. military advisers upset Yemenis who feared this was the vanguard of a larger intervention force. Similarly, efforts by the U.S. ambassador to engage directly with tribal leaders were decried by some as interference in domestic politics. Demonstrations were held in front of the U.S. embassy, which was closed for part of April 2002.¹²¹

There are various agendas behind these demonstrations. For the ruling Congress Party, it is imperative to show solidarity with popular anger directed at developments in the occupied Palestinian territories and in the region at large, lest it be outflanked by the Islamist opposition. The Islah Party is seeking to define the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in religious terms and present itself as the principal backer of both the Palestinian and Islamic causes. As for the government, it may see an opportunity to shift the spotlight away from domestic problems. However, the tactic may prove a lose-lose proposition in the long run, as such problems sooner or later return to the front burner, and the government demonstrates its impotence on

the Israeli-Palestinian front while feeding the growing perception that it is surrendering to U.S. pressure regarding terrorism.

But partisan motivations aside, there is little doubt that events related to the occupied territories, Iraq and the military campaign against al-Qaeda are affecting Yemen as they are many countries in the region, giving rise to increased acts of violence against Western and, especially, American targets.

C. THE U.S. WAR ON TERRORISM

From the time of the attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* in October 2000, Yemen has been faced with the difficult question of how much it could afford to cooperate with Washington and how much it could afford to alienate it. In the immediate aftermath, Yemen denied any link between the attack and al-Qaeda and offered only grudging cooperation to U.S. investigators. U.S. officials expressed deep frustration,¹²² and Washington even halted a military cooperation program.

The 11 September 2001 attacks dramatically changed realities both for Washington and for Sanaa. For the U.S., it signalled the importance of waging a global effort to root out the al-Qaeda network, at almost any cost. For Yemen, it meant the possibility that it might find itself next on the U.S. target list as a country that, willingly or not, was harbouring wanted individuals. Chastened by the painful experience of U.S. hostility after the Gulf War, and following a visit to the U.S. in November 2001, President Salih put aside his government's prior reluctance and made it clear that he would cooperate fully with the U.S. effort. In return, Salih claimed to have received a U.S. commitment that Yemen would not be a target and pledges of additional financial aid.¹²³

Overall, President Salih has engaged in a delicate balancing act:

- *Cooperating with the U.S. and taking steps against al-Qaeda.* Yemen's military cooperation with the U.S. dates back to 1998

¹²⁰ ICG interview with an official from Amran, 18 April 2002.

¹²¹ *Yemen Observer*, 13 April 2002 (citing *al-Mithaq*, the Congress Party's weekly). The same accusations regarding the U.S. ambassador were made again in August 2002; see *Yemen Times*, 26 August 2002. On the closing of the embassy, see *Yemen Times*, 29 April 2002. Not all Yemenis approved of these various demonstrations; some voiced the opinion that the country had enough problems of its own without worrying about external concerns. ICG interviews in Yemen, April and May 2002

¹²² ICG interview with former U.S. official, Washington, October 2002.

¹²³ Salih allegedly presented the package deal to key political leaders immediately upon returning to Yemen. See Richard Sale, "Yemen-U.S. Cooperation Threatens Crisis", United Press International, 5 December 2002.

but it was significantly increased in spring 2002, when U.S. troops, including Special Forces and seaport and airport security specialists, began arriving. They were assigned the task of coordinating with and assisting Yemeni security forces in their fight against armed elements suspected of involvement in attacks on Western targets. According to the most reliable reports, several smaller units of around 30 troops each provide anti-terrorism training to the security forces and have helped install surveillance systems at airports and border crossings.¹²⁴ Recent press reports also suggest that the U.S. and Yemen have set up a joint counter-terrorism centre, and that up to 3,000 U.S.-trained Yemeni troops have deployed in rural areas to hunt for militants.¹²⁵ Washington also has indicated it would assist Yemen in setting up a coast guard to prevent infiltration.¹²⁶

- *Keeping U.S. presence low key.* Widespread popular hostility toward the U.S. makes it difficult for the Yemeni government to cooperate openly. The presence of foreign troops remains a highly controversial issue, and a broad range of political forces – not only the Islamist opposition – would perceive any larger deployment of U.S. troops as tantamount to occupation.¹²⁷ Resentment against the U.S. was manifested in the creation of a parliamentary commission to investigate the condition of Yemeni citizens detained at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Station and other locations.¹²⁸ Moreover, there are concerns that the presence of U.S. troops will actually serve as a magnet for armed militants from abroad, further complicating Yemen's domestic political and security situation. This was true as early as

¹²⁴ *Yemen Times*, 25 February 2002 and 4 March 2002; "Backlash?", in *The Middle East* (London), 3 May 2002, and "Yemenis Resist U.S. Pressure", in *The Middle East*, 1 July 2002.

¹²⁵ Associated Press, 18 October 2002.

¹²⁶ "U.S. General Franks holds talks with Yemeni president", Yemen News Agency, 17 October 2002. In October 2002, the U.S. also dispatched roughly 800 marines to Djibouti, a staging area for possible use in neighbouring countries, including Yemen. See "Threats and Responses: U.S. to Add Forces in Horn of Africa", *The New York Times*, 30 October 2002; Agence France-Presse, 29 October 2002.

¹²⁷ A U.S. State Department official acknowledged that it was important to keep the American "footprint" in Yemen light. ICG interview, Washington, October 2002.

¹²⁸ See footnote 41 above.

1992, when militants bombed a hotel in Aden that accommodated U.S. troops on their way to Somalia. And it was certainly true in October 2000, when a suicide squad attacked the *USS Cole* while it was refuelling in Aden. As a result, details regarding the arrival and activities of U.S. troops are not released, and information is inconsistent and sometimes contradictory.¹²⁹ Indeed, only a week before the successful use by the U.S. of an unmanned Predator drone to kill suspected al-Qaeda members, Yemen had strongly denied that "pilotless United States surveillance aircraft" were flying over its territory.¹³⁰

- *Blaming Islamist militants for the U.S. presence.* More subtly, Salih has sought to deflect criticism of his agreement to a U.S. military presence by putting the onus on those who attack foreign targets. Defending his actions to a group of tribal and Islamic leaders, he asserted "What is going on does not only affect the United States but also our nation and our stability and it drives foreign powers to intervene in our internal affairs".¹³¹
- *Criticising U.S. policies toward Iraq and Israel/Palestine.* Yemen has carefully maintained a healthy distance from U.S. policies that are unpopular in the country – particularly on the sensitive topics of Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Claiming that "nothing justifies a strike" against Iraq, President Salih warned that "it could lose this coalition and the international sympathy it received as a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks as well as the attacks on the [USS] *Cole* and the embassy in Nairobi".¹³²

Although on balance U.S. officials express appreciation for the steps taken by Salih, there is genuine concern in Yemen that he will use the war on terror to promote other, unrelated goals. Tribal groups are worried that the government is using U.S. anti-terrorism efforts as a means of expanding the Yemeni military presence in areas not under full

¹²⁹ See for example, World Tribune.com, 11 March 2002; *The New York Times*, 9 April 2002, and *St. Petersburg Times*, 17 May 2002.

¹³⁰ "Yemen denies reports on U.S. search for al-Qa'ida members", BBC, 25 October 2002.

¹³¹ "Saleh says anti-Western attacks harm Yemen", Reuters, 20 November 2002.

¹³² Associated Press, 12 December 2002.

government control in order to interfere in tribal affairs.¹³³ As noted above, the fight against terrorism has led to direct clashes between the military and tribal forces. Both international and local human rights organisations have claimed that the government expelled thousands of non-Yemenis and in the process detained several hundred Yemenis and non-Yemenis alike.¹³⁴

The arrests themselves have spawned their own set of problems. Many suspects are said to have been in prison for extended periods without charges,¹³⁵ and these detentions may have triggered several bomb attacks on offices and houses of members of the Political Security Organisation in Sanaa during the spring of 2002. Indeed, a new group calling itself the Sympathisers of al-Qaeda claimed responsibility and demanded the release of 173 detainees. Interestingly, this group so far has avoided inflicting any casualties, and bombs have usually gone off during the early morning when hardly anyone is on the street. Based on previous experience in Yemen, the Sympathizers of al-Qaeda may in fact consist primarily of tribesmen trying to free their imprisoned relatives, possibly with some support from al-Qaeda activists. In July 2002, the government released 104 of these detainees, while another 100 were said to remain in jail, awaiting trial.¹³⁶

About 40 suspects of the *USS Cole* attack are said to have been detained for nearly two years without a trial.¹³⁷ In February 2002, the attempt to arrest 25-year-old Samir Ahmad al-Hada, accused of involvement in the attack against the *USS Cole* as well as the attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam in 1998,¹³⁸ ended with the alleged suicide of the suspect before he could be

questioned.¹³⁹ His death fed rumours that he was intentionally shot by security forces to prevent him from providing damaging information about influential Yemeni politicians. In the same vein, some political analysts claim that Yemen justified its decision to establish state control over religious institutes as part of its cooperation in the war against terrorism when in fact it was seeking to undermine the influence of the Islah Party, whose leaders control them.¹⁴⁰

The question of how far the Yemeni government can go in assisting the U.S. without undermining its own rule was presented most dramatically when, on 3 November 2002, an unmanned Predator drone aircraft operated by the Central Intelligence Agency fired a Hellfire missile at a car travelling in Marib province. The immediate target of the attack was Qa'id Sinan al-Harithi, the al-Qaeda suspect who figured prominently in government-tribal skirmishes in Sirwah and was believed to be instrumental in the attacks on the *USS Cole* and the *Limburg*. Of the five others killed in the strike, four were allegedly members of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, and the fifth an American citizen said to be head of a group of Yemenis earlier arrested in the U.S.¹⁴¹

The drone apparently was controlled from Djibouti, across the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa, where the United States has set up a command centre and based more than 3,000 troops.¹⁴² The Yemen government, stung by strong criticism from opposition parties – in particular Islah – took two weeks to acknowledge that it had given the U.S. permission to operate independently in Yemen and carry out the strike and to admit that US warplanes were patrolling the Yemen-Saudi border.¹⁴³ The attack also produced

¹³³ *Yemen Times*, 19 August 2002; *al-Hayat*, 20 May 2002, and *Yemen Times*, 20 May 2002.

¹³⁴ See for example, “Yemen: human rights violations have no justification”, Amnesty International Press Release, AI Index: MDE 31/003/2002 (Public), News Service N°123, 17 July 2002.

¹³⁵ See *Yemen Times*, 27 May 2002.

¹³⁶ *Yemen Times*, 19 August 2002. A member of the Yemeni parliamentary commission investigating the plight of Yemeni detainees arrested in connection with the war on terrorism said the number of detainees was 104. Associated Press, 22 September 2002.

¹³⁷ *Yemen Times*, 27 May 2002.

¹³⁸ *Middle East Times*, 15 February 2002, http://www.metimes.com/2K2/issue2002-7/reg/yemeni_killed_in.htm.

¹³⁹ *Yemen Times*, 18 February 2002; SABA, 13 February 2002.

¹⁴⁰ See Section II D above, also MacFarquhar, “Yemen Turns to Tribes”, op. cit.

¹⁴¹ Seymour Hersh, “Manhunt,” *The New Yorker*, 16 December 2002.

¹⁴² *The New York Times*, 4, 5, and 6 November 2002; Associated Press, 5 and 9 November 2002; Reuters, 5 November 2002; *The Economist*, 9 November 2002, and *The Washington Post*, 5 December 2002.

¹⁴³ In a joint statement, Yemen's opposition parties called the operation an “offensive against Yemen's sovereignty as an independent country”. BBC, 26 November 2002. Several clerics also accused the government of treason. United Press International, 23 November 2002. The government ultimately acknowledged that there had been “full coordination” between Yemen and the U.S. Associated Press, 16 November

threats of revenge by Islamic militants.¹⁴⁴ A further development is the capture in the United Arab Emirates of Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, alleged to be al-Qaeda's head of Gulf operations and the mastermind of the bombings of the American embassies in East Africa and the attack on the *USS Cole*.¹⁴⁵

2002; Reuters, 20 November 2002, and BBC 26 November 2002. The minister of interior argued that al-Harithi had been granted pledges of "safe conduct to surrender and be tried fairly" through "tribal chiefs in Marib and Shabwah", but that he rejected the request, which made "even his tribesmen abandon him". Quoted in BBC, 20 November 2002. Yemen alleged that the individuals killed in the attack were planning sabotage operations against "oil, economic and strategic installations" in Yemen. Ibid. It also was claimed, but not confirmed, that U.S. troops were working beside Yemeni special forces as they intensified security operations in Marib and al-Al-Jawf provinces. Associated Press, 15 November 2002. Echoing the Yemeni opposition, the Arab press strongly criticised the U.S. action, likening it to Israeli targeted killings and calling it a way of "terrorising the entire region"; see, e.g., *as-Safi*, 6 November 2002. It labelled the Yemeni government's silence the "silence of the impotent or the embarrassed". See, e.g., *al-Quds al-Arabi* (pan-Arab daily), 6 November 2002.

¹⁴⁴ The group calling itself "al-Qaeda Sympathisers" claimed responsibility for an explosion in a government complex in Marib town on 29 November 2002. Reuters, 29 November 2002. At least 38 other people were arrested during November 2002 on suspicion of planning an attack to avenge al-Harithi's death. Associated Press, 2 December 2002. Signalling at least some discomfort among Yemeni officials regarding the U.S. attack, Brigadier General Yahya al-Mutawakel said: "I was very optimistic when the U.S. first said they would help Yemen build its security forces and coast guard. . . [But] the result is not satisfactory. We have not yet made the Americans understand that they are here to help us fight for ourselves." Quoted in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 November 2002.

¹⁴⁵ Reuters, 21 November 2002; *The New York Times*, 22 November 2002. Sanaa subsequently requested the U.S. to extradite Nashiri. Reuters, 28 November 2002.

V. CONCLUSION

Yemen presents a complex picture of genuine domestic progress, home-grown unrest and violence and international terrorism that escapes straightforward categorisation and simple remedies.

Free parliamentary elections, a relatively free media and free expression and a measure of genuine pluralism clearly distinguish Yemen from most of its neighbours. Still, Yemen's democratic balance sheet remains mixed. Elections have been a real achievement but the lack of genuine democratic participation has dampened popular enthusiasm for them. If there is still a measure of popular participation in Yemen today, it is thanks to non-governmental organisations active at the local and national levels. President Salih controls and uses the military and security services in a way that enables him to circumvent the country's formal institutional bodies – whether political or judicial. He was sufficiently adroit to disenfranchise the Yemeni Socialist Party through parliamentary elections but not sufficiently astute to mollify southern concerns – with one result being the 1994 civil war. He was dexterous enough to engage the Islah Party as a governing partner, gradually marginalizing it, but was either complacent or not powerful enough to keep a firm hand on the growing crop of militant Islamists or to tackle the conditions that shore up their support.

Salih has been clever enough to keep the Saudis at a distance but either did not realise the implications or simply followed popular sentiment in opposing the war against Iraq in 1991, thereby drawing Riyadh's wrath and throwing the economy into deeper crisis. He rules by close alliance with his own Hashid tribal confederation and northern Zaydi tribes generally, but privileges some tribes at the expense of others and has been unable to control the vast tribal world – hence the plague of kidnappings, tribal conflicts and rebellion against the central government, and at least some succour for militant Islamists.

President Salih has been successful in mending relations with the U.S. and other members of the international community angered by Yemen's stance during the Gulf War. But should bomb attacks and kidnappings persist, international organisations may withdraw their personnel, ships might no longer refuel at the port of Aden and international investors may be deterred from doing business in the country

– all of which would sap the ability of Yemen to deal with the pressing social needs that fuel much of its violence. Efforts to re-integrate and control radicals have been relatively successful, but attempts to fight militant Islamists by military means have largely been clumsy and inefficient. Arbitrary detention, prolonged legal procedures, torture and the employment of the military against civilians do not necessarily undermine militancy and terrorism – and may well promote both.

Above all, the reality and perception of unequal treatment of different regions and the unequal distribution of wealth within Yemen – usually explained in religious, tribal or regional terms, according to the historical experience of the respective region – remain the major sources of social tension. With population growth anticipated to remain fairly high in coming years and with rising consumption of increasingly scarce natural resources, particularly water, Yemen can expect to witness an increase in violent confrontations among farmers and faster rural-to-urban migration, with all the associated social and political baggage that usually accompanies such demographic shifts. Traditional values and security systems in the countryside are eroding and key state institutions, such as courts, are either not yet in place, do not work efficiently or are not trusted. Unless the Yemeni state can replace the services now provided by tribal organisations, it will not be able to control its whole territory.

Finally, and given their prominent role in Yemen, international crises that involve either Islam or Arab nationalism are bound to have a profound and radicalising impact on the population at large. In short, the situation in Yemen has to be taken seriously and closely monitored – both for the benefit of Yemenis themselves, and in light of any potential spill over of turbulence to other countries.

The incident of December 2002 – in which a ship containing concealed North Korean SCUD missiles was first intercepted and then allowed to proceed to Yemen after the U.S. acceded to President Salih's demand – is instructive. Either the missiles were

purchased in order to be resold, which would raise serious questions about Yemen's dependability as a U.S. ally; or they were indeed purchased for the Yemeni military, which would raise serious questions about the spending priorities of a cash-starved state that is experiencing a painful economic period.

The government has also undercut its own credibility by periodically employing “tribal methods”, such as hostage taking, to achieve some of its tactical goals. While this can produce the desired results in the short run, it badly undermines state institutions and the rule of law in the longer run. A government that takes hostages will hardly be able to convince its population that it should trust state institutions. Uncritical international support for Yemen's security services could upset the complex political fabric between the military and tribes. The key is for the international community to offer the Yemeni government advice and support in developing institutions and alternative concepts for conflict resolution, particularly mediation, to tackle the problem of tribal clashes.

The dispatch of U.S. troops appears to be an inescapable result of the deteriorating international situation. But here, too, caution is in order. Sending in U.S. forces can easily backfire if they are drawn into conflicts between government and tribes. Moreover, their presence might provide targets that draw armed militants to Yemen.

The international community has a responsibility to take great care that its efforts against terrorism in Yemen are conducted in a manner that promotes long-term stability and the rule of law in the country. Success ultimately depends less on the international community than on the Yemeni government, which must deal effectively with the economic and social issues that have intensified in the years since unification.

Amman/Brussels, 8 January 2003

APPENDIX A

MAP OF YEMEN

