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**Lessons from counter-terror, stabilisation
and statebuilding in Yemen**



Larry Attree

January 2016

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Contents

Executive summary	i
Introduction	1
1 Context analysis	3
1.1 The struggle for the state	3
1.2 Zaydism and the Houthi conflict	5
1.3 Religious militancy	6
1.4 Drivers of Yemen's conflicts	8
1.5 Section summary	13
2 Approaches of major international actors	14
2.1 Regional actors	14
2.2 United States	15
2.3 United Kingdom	22
2.4 European Union	28
2.5 Section summary	31
3 Policy and impact analysis	32
3.1 Exacerbating key conflict drivers and reinforcing a dysfunctional state	32
3.2 Perverse outcomes of security partnership	37
3.3 Use of force – excessive costs with limited strategic benefit	41
3.4 Wrong side of history? Aligning with injustice and fuelling rebellion	44
4 Lessons and policy alternatives	47
4.1 Revisit strategic objectives with a focus on peace	47
4.2 Revisit strategy to avoid perverse impacts and promote positive change	48
4.3 Enhance just and sustainable security approaches	48
4.4 Avoid violence and strengthen accountability regarding abuses	49
4.5 Recalibrate regional partnerships with a focus on peace and justice	49
4.6 Encourage dialogue and transformation to bring violence to an end	50
4.7 Improve communication to the Western public and media	51
Bibliography	52

Executive summary

THIS REPORT ANALYSES EXTERNAL ACTORS' APPROACHES TO YEMEN and their impacts on its conflict dynamics from a peacebuilding perspective. It argues that counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding efforts have had significant negative impacts, and based on this identifies lessons and recommendations for the future.

The context

Yemen has received significant stabilisation assistance over the last 15 years, but today is extremely poor, deeply unstable and plays host to a number of active conflicts. Despite extensive external counter-terror support – including drone strikes, intelligence sharing and backing for offensives by the Yemeni Government – Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), its domestic wing Ansar al Sharia (AAS) and other militant groups have grown in strength. In 2015, a regional coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily to quell an armed uprising by Houthi rebels whom the Saudis view as Iranian proxies. This plunged Yemen into new levels of turmoil and distress. With more than 40 per cent of the population in food-related debt before the Saudi-led blockade and bombardment began in March, by November 2015 at least 5,700 people had been killed, 32,000 injured, and 2.3 million people forced to flee their homes. 21.2 million people now require humanitarian assistance, with 7.6 million severely food insecure.

A multitude of challenges have made Yemen one of the most unstable countries in the world. Its elites are locked in a bitter struggle to control the state, which is crumbling and unable to provide security or services throughout most of the country. Resentment among the Zaydi community about years of marginalisation has boiled over into a nationwide civil conflict between Houthis and the regime. The North-South divide and tribal conflicts pose questions for the stability and future unity of the country. Yemen's religious militants have spread into multiple provinces and pose a global threat – and Islamic State (IS) has begun to launch sectarian attacks in Yemen.

Beneath these conflicts are deeply entrenched socio-economic, political, security and justice problems. Large swathes of Yemen now lack electricity, water, gas, healthcare and education. Sixty per cent of the population are under 25. Investors have also been scared away by corruption and the dangerous security situation. State security and justice provision in Yemen has failed due to years of degradation by elite interests.

Yemen's most fundamental challenge has been the failure of a state dominated by kleptocratic elites to play a constructive role in addressing the drivers of its instability and poverty. Although institutional capacities are weak, this failure has in fact stemmed from the country's dysfunctional political culture. Above the local level, precious few actors are prepared to address key drivers of conflict in the public interest. Despairing

of political processes, people have turned to group identities to seek redress for grievances, and protect their interests.

Western engagement

Since serious terror threats emerged in Yemen in 2000, the West has invested significantly in counter-terror and stabilisation. Alongside direct military action to assassinate key militants (by the US), Western actors backed the Government of Yemen to fight, prosecute or punish terrorists, and gave capacity-building support to institutions, hoping to address the weakness of a willing but fragile state.

Western interest peaked when the ‘terror’ threat was most visible, but waned in interim periods. After Yemen’s corrupt and authoritarian ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh had allowed al-Qaeda to regroup, foreign backers led by the United Kingdom (UK) pledged US\$8 billion in aid to help maintain stability. The United States (US) alone spent over \$0.6 billion on security assistance to the regime. During the Arab Spring, the West pressed Saleh to step down, and supported marginalised voices to engage in dialogue on transition and reform. Reform has also been promoted through programmes focused on technical support to institutions. However, amid wider Western reinforcement of the state and its security apparatus, which continued after Saleh left office, consistent and effective encouragement of meaningful reform is not evident from the evidence we have examined. Likewise, efforts to engage with local actors and support wider Yemeni society to press for constructive change have not been sufficient, and the US and UK have given arms, advice, logistical and political support to the regional military intervention to repel the Houthis and reinstate the Hadi regime.

The Western approach reflects a domestic discourse in the West in which Yemen has been defined primarily as a ‘threat’ – an unstable context that plays host to al-Qaeda and other dangerous groups, which must be defeated by backing the state at all costs. Western strategy is also partly set by the perceived imperative to cultivate good relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies in the face of threats from Iran and other actors.

Policy and impact analysis

Our analysis draws conclusions regarding the impacts of Western counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding efforts in Yemen grouped under four headings:

1. Exacerbating key conflict drivers and reinforcing a dysfunctional state

Viewing confronting terrorists as more important than building peace, Western actors have sought to ensure the state is strong enough to maintain order. However, conflict and instability in Yemen has escalated dramatically due to the exclusive, unresponsive, unfair and unaccountable nature of its dysfunctional state. Western actors failed to prioritise the grievances of Yemen’s people over counter-terror imperatives, and thus provided not only perverse incentives against reform – but even the practical means for elites to resist pressure to reform.

At the same time, development and statebuilding assistance foundered because donors ignored the question of political will to undertake reform and failed to engage with and persuade the shadowy, elite figures who actually wielded the power to build more inclusive, fair, responsive and accountable institutions in Yemen. The West supported Saleh’s removal, and pushed for greater political inclusion from 2011. Nonetheless, the deals made in the post-Saleh transition ultimately entrenched the same elite, cronyistic interests that were driving Yemen into the ground – and Saleh was permitted to remain in Yemen with impunity to wreak further havoc.

As grievances based on state dysfunction have worsened, armed opposition to the state and insecurity has grown on several fronts (Houthis, Southern Secessionists, tribes, AQAP/AAS, IS). Thus the short-term instinct to reinforce state-led stability has ultimately multiplied the instability it was intended to suppress – as well as degrading Yemen's institutions to the point where peaceful transition has proved impossibly challenging.

This is a strategy that appears to lock Yemen into long-term conflict, because Yemen's people and key conflict actors are unlikely to accept the violent reinstatement of a repressive, corrupt and unresponsive political order. It is, moreover, likely to deepen the grievances felt by many Yemenis towards the West, and the prospects of further transnational attacks in response.

2. Perverse outcomes of security partnership

The Western partnership with the Yemeni state has met some security objectives. It was from a Yemeni prison that Osama bin Laden's former bodyguard provided the evidence linking 9/11 to al-Qaeda. The partnership with Saudi Arabia (of which co-operation on Yemen forms a part) has likewise yielded the US and the UK forewarning of some significant attacks. However, the West's security partnership with Yemen has had many significant negative impacts, including diversion of assistance, weaknesses in controlling the terror threat through legal-judicial channels and the use of repressive approaches.

Yemen's government received increasing volumes of counter-terror and stabilisation assistance despite its track record of suppressing popular rebellions with indiscriminate military force. The consequences of this were predictable. Security institutions supported to achieve counter-terror objectives were rarely deployed outside Sana'a, but were used by former President Saleh to bolster and retain his family's grip on power during the 2011 uprising, during which both the Republican Guard and Central Security Forces (CSF) committed serious human rights violations. Such abuses have deepened grievances against both the state and its foreign backers, and predictably fuelled rebellions.

Likewise, the West continues to rely on dangerously naive assumptions: the regime's serious mistakes in dealing with Islamic militants – mixed with instances of active collusion – stretch back more than 20 years and have continued in the post-Saleh era.

US and UK counter-terror partnerships with the deeply divided Yemeni security forces continued through periods when the government was collapsing in the face of armed opposition (or being actually captured by its opponents). Even if Yemen's leaders were genuinely committed to their counter-terrorism partnership with the West, the provision of significant assistance to security forces beset by factionalism in a very unstable context has been reckless in the face of known high risks of weapons, equipment and military capacities being misused or diverted from their intended purpose.

3. Use of force – excessive costs with limited strategic benefit

The overall strategy of targeted killings using drones and other sophisticated weaponry has in some cases killed those it was intended to target. However, it has also resulted in targeting of the wrong people through questionable methods, and at least 87 civilian deaths (the true figure may be much higher). Such killings have fed anti-US sentiment and appear to have increased recruitment into militant groups – as evidenced by the trebling in size of AQAP between 2009 and 2013. The secrecy surrounding targeted killings in Yemen has made it harder to mitigate resultant grievances, creating an absence of accountability for civilian deaths and injuries.

The Saudi-led coalition's blockade, bombardment and ground campaign, backed by the West, has exacerbated a disastrous humanitarian situation. Approximately 2,800

civilians have been killed and over two million displaced in the hostilities. If Yemenis refuse to accept a political settlement imposed by neighbouring countries in such a destructive way, years of conflict and rebellion could ensue.

4. Wrong side of history? Aligning with injustice and fuelling rebellion

Al-Qaeda's strategy goes beyond attacks on security forces and civilians. By espousing sympathy for the suffering of Yemen's people, criticising the abuse and corruption of the Yemeni state, and providing relief and services to the public in some locations, it has positioned itself as a "lightning rod for entrenched grievances". By contrast, the West has supported injustice and gravely harmed Yemen's people for the sake of its war against al-Qaeda and its wider strategic and economic interests in the region. However the West approaches al-Qaeda, sustainable peace in Yemen cannot be achieved without much greater attention to addressing the grievances of Yemen's people.

Short-term Western energy, security and economic interests have locked the West into support for Saudi Arabia both in Yemen and the wider region. However, backing the Kingdom to play out its rivalry with Iran in Yemen has been an unmitigated disaster for all involved. The exclusion, injustice, corruption and repression upheld by the Kingdom is highly likely to generate deep instability in its neighbourhood for future generations in the absence of careful but determined reform efforts.

On the basis of these findings, we offer the following **recommendations**:

Revisit strategic objectives with a focus on peace

- The failure of narrow objectives (containment/elimination of terrorists and assisting regional allies to prevail against Iranian 'proxies') illustrates the need for a broader, longer-term strategy to get to a lasting and just peace accepted and upheld by the people of Yemen. Only through a broader focus on addressing what drives conflict in Yemen can the terror problem be resolved.
- Western actors need to base strategy towards Yemen on a deeper understanding of the context. They must seek to understand and engage with a wider range of actors outside Sana'a, and give them a greater degree of ownership and influence over dialogue and peacemaking processes as well as future governance arrangements.

Revisit strategy to avoid perverse impacts and promote positive change

- External support for fundamentally illegitimate actors needs to be more carefully thought through in order to avoid reinforcing negative dynamics and to provide meaningful incentives for more inclusive, fair, responsive and accountable governance to emerge.
- Although there are urgent humanitarian needs and the state will at some point need to evolve to meet them, it will not make sense to seek to channel assistance through state institutions until there are legitimate leaders working within the framework of a widely accepted political settlement.
- Assistance should be provided directly to the Yemeni people through non-governmental actors, or 'shadow' alignment towards actors and institutions that are opposed to political violence and committed to public goods. These could include tribal, informal or subnational entities, such as local health and education ministries
- Reform priorities include tackling corruption and delivering effective services. These are long-term endeavours, which could be better incentivised by careful application of sanctions and penalties on *all* those profiting from grand corruption, as well as making more concerted efforts to cut off the flow of resources to all those using violence as a political strategy in Yemen.

- Pressure for an inclusive and just political settlement and reform in the public interest needs to come from across Yemeni society. To help a constituency for peace to emerge in the country, external actors must engage with a wider group of actors – outside Sana'a and across Yemeni society, including in the South. Allowing transformation to occur on Yemenis' terms requires much more support to human rights defenders, moderate political, religious and tribal actors, civil society groups, community voices and local development initiatives – both within any future peace talks and over the long term. If Western actors explain that this is what they want and back this with their deeds, it could attract popular backing from moderate Yemenis – or at least reduce wholesale resentment of the West in Yemen.

Adopt just and sustainable security approaches

- Security strategies in Yemen need to be consistent with a long-term peace strategy. All security assistance should enable rather than undermine transformation in state-society relations – supporting rather than undermining human rights and justice for Yemenis.
- There should be a much greater presumption against provision of arms, equipment and capacity support to security actors unless the provider has a high and explicit level of confidence that the items or assistance provided will be used by the stated end-user for a pre-agreed purpose. When support is provided, more robust arrangements must be made to monitor and prevent diversion of security assistance for unintended purposes.

Avoid violence and strengthen accountability regarding abuses

- Western countries should explore every possible alternative to military attacks inside Yemen, and make amends to those wrongfully killed and injured in such attacks.
- If Western actors wish to continue to support violent interventions in Yemen, they must adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law, in particular by doing more to avoid civilian casualties, and make themselves accountable for illegal actions.
- In order to retain the sympathy of the public in contexts such as Yemen, Western actors must demonstrate their commitment to justice and democratic values in practice by upholding transparency in relation to security decision-making and engaging in debate with those who criticise policies. When such policies have been wrong, mistaken, or had unintended negative consequences, Western actors should acknowledge this. They should also clearly and publicly explain to Yemen's people how their strategy will advance their security, justice and well-being (not only that of the Yemeni political establishment and people in the West).

Recalibrate regional partnerships with a focus on peace and justice

- Western countries should rethink their current approach of 'outsourcing' Yemen policy to regional state actors, recalling that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States are arguably as dependent on Western goodwill and support as the West is on theirs.
- Until there is a changed approach by regional actors to contexts like Yemen, Western countries should abstain from irresponsible supply of arms and military expertise in support of regional actors' policies, and dissociate themselves from their actions in the eyes of Yemenis and the wider world.
- Western countries should also apply strong political pressure to ensure a ceasefire and negotiations between conflict parties, backed by a strong UN Security Council resolution setting out clear penalties for non-compliance.
- To prevent the Yemeni tragedy from being re-enacted across the Arab region in the coming years, the West must attach greater priority and find more effective ways to encourage reform, respect for human rights and democratisation in Gulf states.

Encourage dialogue and transformation to bring violence to an end

- Western actors should not assume that any one group is a ‘spoiler’ based on its name or alleged affiliations, and they should seek to understand the motives and behaviours of all conflict actors in greater detail. They should judge all actors in light of their actions and provide incentives to all actors to engage in peace processes and to work in support of people’s rights and interests.
- If it is possible to address grievances constructively among those who may sympathise or temporarily align with militant groups, it may be possible to achieve a wider political agreement from nearly all actors to renounce violent methods and cooperate for the benefit of Yemen’s people.
- It will be important to seek to understand AAS in more detail – considering its leaders and members as conflict actors with perceptions and interests that can be engaged in creative ways as part of the search for peace in the country, rather than simply as an ‘enemy’ that must in all scenarios be dealt with through the same (failed) belligerent tactics and partnerships.
- Similarly, Western actors will need to establish dialogue with AQAP. While talking to violent groups in any context entails huge dilemmas and sensitivities, initiating dialogue is almost always worthwhile. Such dialogue should not lead to concessions regarding the rights of other groups, but should explore the potential for working towards a political settlement in which any relatively moderate members of AQAP/ its sympathisers might be able to participate.

Improve communication to the Western public and media

- Western governments need to move beyond portraying Yemen as a terror threat whose militants can be faced down through military intervention and security assistance to the incumbent regime. The Western public should be made aware that its security will depend on Yemenis being able to develop a peaceful state that is run for their benefit, and that a more nuanced and less belligerent approach in Yemen will reduce the resentment that is mobilising many Yemenis to want to attack Western countries.

Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS THE US AND ALLIES including the UK and other nations have put responses to terrorism, violent extremism and instability among their foremost priorities. To oppose regimes and armed groups that present international security risks, they have been involved in international military interventions into Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Mali, and provided significant support to regional allies to confront these threats and build more stable states. Yet, despite the investment of huge resources – primarily military, but also financial, human and political – by the US and its allies, the results of this action have been mixed at best. This is illustrated by the long-term instability of Afghanistan, the vulnerability of Iraq and the wider Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region, as well as the increasing worldwide vulnerability to ongoing violence and insurgency from the likes of IS and al-Qaeda.

Visible violence is not the only shortcoming in current approaches. The longer-term stabilisation and statebuilding efforts undertaken in unstable contexts appear in many cases to be reinforcing rather than addressing drivers of conflict, making lasting peace and human rights fulfilment more remote. In many contexts affected by political violence and rebellion, national and regional governments have embraced the counter-terror agenda in problematic ways and proved adept at eliciting support for this from international partners. Pragmatic Western partnerships with questionable regimes have in many contexts reinforced bad governance, injustice and the abuse of human rights, and lessened the prospects for genuine reform. Likewise there is significant evidence that the use of aid to reinforce military action and stabilisation efforts may be ineffective at best – and actively driving further conflict at worst.

There has not been sufficiently full and frank public debate about the lessons of past engagement with security threats, nor about how future engagement could be improved in the interests of building lasting peace founded on the fulfilment of human rights. However, failure to recognise and pursue effective peacebuilding alternatives to these approaches could condemn the US, its allies and their partners to a vicious circle that they can ill afford: multiplying instability wherever they attempt to reduce it, and in response becoming ever more belligerent in the face of renewed threats, while compromising their commitments to democracy, justice and human rights.

However, alternatives to the dominant military-authoritarian paradigm – in which militarised notions of masculinity are also a prominent feature – are available. In the discussion paper, *Dilemmas of Counter-Terror, Stabilisation and Statebuilding*,¹ Saferworld provided a review of global evidence on the impacts of existing approaches, and suggested a number of constructive directions for improved policy, including:

¹ Keen D, Attree L, *Dilemmas of Counter-terror, Stabilisation and Statebuilding*, (Saferworld, January 2015).

- Avoiding defining conflicts narrowly as problems of ‘terror’, ‘extremism’ or ‘radicalisation’, and instead adopting a more impartial, holistic and sustainable approach to resolving them
- Changing international and national policies and approaches that fuel grievances and undermine human rights
- Redoubling efforts for diplomacy, lobbying, advocacy and local-level dialogue to make the case for peace and adherence to international law by conflict actors
- Looking for opportunities to negotiate peace – balancing pragmatic considerations with a determined focus to achieve inclusive and just political settlements in any given context
- Considering the careful use of legal and judicial responses and targeted sanctions as alternatives to the use of force
- Taking greater care when choosing and reviewing relationships with supposed ‘allies’
- Supporting transformative reform efforts to improve governance and state-society relations and uphold human rights
- Choosing not to engage if harm cannot be effectively mitigated and no clear solution is evident.

This report is accompanied by two others on Afghanistan and Somalia. Together, they explore the issues identified in the initial discussion paper through detailed examination of specific country contexts from a peacebuilding perspective – in order to stimulate further debate on the lessons learnt.

This report analyses external actors’ approaches to Yemen and their impacts on its conflict dynamics. It looks in particular at counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding efforts in Yemen, and identifies a number of critical questions and suggested alternative approaches drawing on the lessons from the context. It begins by summarising the key conflict dynamics in Yemen’s recent history and the most significant factors driving them. It then discusses briefly the role played by regional powers, with particular emphasis on the role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, before describing and analysing in more detail the approaches taken to Yemen by the US, UK and other major Western actors over the last 15 years.

Western actors’ approaches are considered both in terms of their appropriateness in relation to Yemen’s conflict dynamics and their impact on these dynamics. Drawing on this, the paper concludes with a number of lessons from the last 15 years, coupled with policy recommendations for avoiding the pitfalls of existing counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding approaches and building lasting peace in Yemen. Many of these recommendations have relevance for a variety of other contexts where similar challenges are currently being played out.

1

Context analysis

YEMEN TODAY IS EXTREMELY POOR, deeply unstable and plays host to a number of active conflicts. To consider external actors' impacts on conflict dynamics in Yemen, this section looks back on its history of conflict, and then highlights a number of the key factors that have driven this violence.

1.1 The struggle for the state

Until civil war took hold in 1962, Yemen was ruled under an ancient imamate that kept it relatively closed to the outside world. The civil war resulted in the formation of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the North in 1968. At a similar time, the South, including Aden and the former Protectorate of South Arabia, took up socialism, becoming independent of British rule in 1967 – and evolving into the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1970.

In the North, the young YAR was beset by internal division for the following decade. The army seized power in 1974, but the young country lost three presidents before the advent into office of a relatively junior military officer, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in 1978. To ensure a tight grip on power, Saleh immediately began to place relatives and supportive tribesmen in influential positions within a centralised regime. During the 1980s, prominent Saleh loyalists in the YAR's military took control of the country's resources and commerce – consolidating power through patronage networks and control of licences, land and business deals, smuggling and corruption.²

In the South, the PDRY – the only Marxist state in the Arab world – enjoyed Soviet and some Chinese backing, but proved unstable due to regional and tribal factionalism throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Hardline socialists prevailed against liberal elements in a bloody power struggle in Aden in 1986, but as the Eastern bloc collapsed in 1989, the PDRY lost its external backers.

Rivalry marked by episodic border wars persisted between the PDRY and YAR throughout the 1970s and 80s. Nonetheless, the PDRY and the YAR merged in 1990 under a unity agreement that paved the way to the ratification of a surprisingly liberal constitution in 1991.³ When civil war broke out in 1994, the erstwhile president of South Yemen attempted to secede, but Saleh prevailed in the ensuing fight and cemented his rule over a unified Yemen.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Yemen refused to endorse military action against Iraq at the UN Security Council. Annoyed by this, Saudi Arabia expelled over 800,000

² ICG, 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform Seeds of New Conflict' (ICG: Brussels, 2013), pp2–5.

³ Phillips S, 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction and division in a crisis state', (DLP Research paper 14, February 2011), p11.

Yemenis. The loss of remittances from the many of these who were migrant labourers was not only an economic blow to Yemen, but tipped the balance of economic power away from Yemen's citizens towards the state.⁴ After the civil war, power in Yemen was heavily concentrated in the hands of Saleh's inner circle, as well as with the pre-eminent tribal Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar, and the military General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar.

During Saleh's tenure as president, a number of overlapping conflicts festered in different areas of Yemen. For example, the Southern question re-emerged in 2007 when protests over civil service salaries and pensions turned into a more widespread movement voicing aspirations for equality, decentralisation and a greater share of state welfare for the South. Yet the regime itself remained relatively intact and immune to pressures to reform until Yemen's transitional crisis began with the eruption of nationwide protests against the regime in January 2011. As the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), Ali Mohsin, and Sheikh Al-Ahmar's son Hamid all came out in support of the demonstrations, in which the Houthis were also involved, the Saleh regime violently suppressed the protests. In the ensuing conflict, clashes erupted between the Al Ahmars, military units controlled by Ahmed Saleh and Saleh loyalists, General Ali Mohsin, and secessionist and Islamist movements in the North and South of Yemen.

Beyond popular unrest and intra-elite violence, other movements were quick to gain through the crisis: the Houthis took control of most territory in Sa'dah; AAS – the domestic wing of AQAP – claimed most territory in Lahj and Abyan provinces in the South; and the secessionist Hirak movement became more visible in the South. Critical oil infrastructure was also attacked, slashing oil production and sparking sharp food, water and fuel price increases as well as a halt in government service provision.

With the country in turmoil, and under heavy regional and international pressure, President Saleh relinquished power in exchange for immunity under the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement in November 2011. The deal enabled him to remain in Yemen and to continue playing a key role in its subsequent descent into nationwide conflict. A coalition government was then formed between Saleh's General People's Congress party (GPC) and the umbrella opposition JMP, and a new president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, was elected in February 2012. At the same time a 'National Dialogue Conference' (NDC) was set up to create consensus on the way forward for Yemen.

The conference – designed to be inclusive of all political actors, as well as women and youth – eventually ran from March 2013 until January 2014. The NDC's vision was the product of cross-party dialogue that included women and young people, and produced some commitments to address Southern grievances. Its final document delineated principles for the new constitution, and a new six-region, decentralised federal structure. However, the federalism proposal did not emerge from the NDC's working groups, and the NDC's outcomes ended up protecting the interests of Yemen's key elites and putting power back in the hands of the main political parties, offering little in the way of transitional justice.

Various sections of the population were unhappy about the proposed federal model. The Houthis perceived it as limiting their influence and access to resources. Capitalising on popular discontent with corruption and weak government, the Houthis, with support from former President Saleh, overthrew the transitional government in September 2014 and continued southwards. Meanwhile, AAS in the south and east took advantage of the weakness of Hadi's central government and army with operations and (temporary) landgrabs in Abyan, Shabwa and Al-Bayda. In the east, aggrieved by the lack of jobs for local people, a Hadramaut Tribal Confederation (HTC) began in 2013 to challenge security forces protecting oil fields and related infrastructure, while AQAP also began to exert stronger influence in Hadramaut in 2014 – taking control of Mukalla's airport and seaport, while working with the HTC and city council to administer the town.

Tribal groups in Mareb and surrounding provinces repeatedly attacked a key oil export pipeline throughout 2013. The fragmented Southern Movement likewise perceived little effort to address its grievances under the Hadi administration.

To reinforce the fragile political settlement that was framed around the NDC and President Hadi, from 2015 a Saudi-led coalition of regional governments, supported by the US and UK, intervened militarily in Yemen against the Houthi uprising. Coalition airstrikes against Houthi forces across Yemen have evolved into a ground conflict, which continues to date. Coalition ground forces reportedly include mercenaries from a range of countries with a history of brutal conflict: according to the *New York Times*, some 450 Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadoran and Chilean mercenaries have been deployed by UAE, possibly alongside Eritrean troops, while Saudi Arabia has also deployed hundreds of Sudanese soldiers.⁵

Meanwhile, Houthis supported by forces close to former President Saleh continue to battle forces aligned to President Hadi, including units of Yemen's military. Regular citizens have taken up arms, alongside national armed forces, tribal and Islamist groups and militias.

1.2 Zaydism and the Houthi conflict

One key thread of Yemen's conflict story has been the rise of the Houthi rebel movement. The movement has its origins in a struggle between Zaydis and the State. Zaydis are nominally Shia, but the distinction between Shia and Sunni in Yemen is not as strong as in some other Middle Eastern countries.⁶ While many of Yemen's erstwhile ruling elite, including President Saleh, shared Zaydi origins, in the 1990s a political movement of 'Believing Youth' involving Zaydi scholar Badr Al-Din al-Houthi and his sons emerged that refused to acknowledge the president – as opposed to a Hashemite (descendant of the Prophet) – as the legitimate ruler of Yemen.⁷ Dismayed by the venality of the Sana'a regime, one of al-Houthi's sons, parliamentarian Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, declined to seek re-election in 1997 and retreated to Sa'dah province to defend Zaydism.

Wahhabism spread within Yemen with the blessing of the state from the 1970s. By permitting Saudi backing of Wahhabist groups, Saleh cultivated a social force that could undermine the Zaydi powerbase in Sa'dah. Wahhabists clashed with Zaydis in the 1990s,⁸ and the attempted arrest, and eventual killing, of Hussein al-Houthi in Sa'dah in 2004 sparked a series of conflicts between his followers, the Houthis, the regime and its local allies that have continued ever since. These conflicts, centred around Sa'dah, cut off services and displaced an estimated 265,000 people between 2004 and 2011.⁹ An early hint of the potential spread of the Houthi movement was offered by a sympathetic rebel uprising in an eastern suburb of Sana'a, Bani Hushaish, in spring 2008.¹⁰

In 2011, the Houthis seized control of most of Sa'dah.¹¹ Then, emboldened by the support of former President Saleh and, allegedly, Iran, the Houthis made significant progress in 2013–2014. They fought tribal militias who were backed by the Islah party in Amran province (which lies between Sa'dah and Sana'a) and in neighbouring Al-Jawf and Hajja, while reaching deals with other tribes to remain neutral or offer support.

⁵ Hageer E, Mazzettin M, 'Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight', *New York Times*, 25 November 2015.

⁶ I.e. Zaydism is closer to Sunni Islam than the Twelver Shiism followed in Iran. Al-Shamahi A, 'Yemen is more nuanced than "Sunni" & "Shia"', *Yemeni Times*, 27 February 2014 notes that 'A common saying referring to the Zaydis is that they are "the Sunnis of the Shia, and the Shia of the Sunnis"' and points out that Zaydis and Shafi'is are often found in the same families, often pray in the same mosques, and fight both for and against the Houthis; see also Johnsen G, 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen Ph.D Candidate Near Eastern Studies Princeton University Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee', 20 January 2010, p25.

⁷ *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p25.

⁸ *Ibid* p 25–26.

⁹ *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p9.

¹⁰ Hill G, 'Yemen: fear of failure' (Chatham House, November 2008), pp2, 5.

¹¹ Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen', (Saferworld, October 2015), p.10.

Following a month of protests about ineffective and corrupt government, Houthis took control of Sana'a itself in September 2014.¹²

With the Sa'dah conflict spilling across the Saudi border, in November 2011 Saudi Arabia conducted air and ground offensives to target Houthi fighters.¹³ At the time of writing, the Houthis are thus fighting multiple groups (including AQAP/AAS) for control of several parts of Yemen – in the face of airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition.

1.3 Religious militancy

The links between political Islam and violence in Yemen are not a new phenomenon. The Muslim Brotherhood played a role in assassinating the Imam in 1948.¹⁴ The merger of Islam and strong political ideologies further flourished due to cross-pollination between Yemen and Saudi Arabia – where many Yemenis migrated for employment in the 1970s and 1980s, and through substantial Saudi financial support for the spread of ma'ahid Ilmiyya – new orthodox religious schools – in Yemen from the 1970s.¹⁵ Such developments were backed by the Saleh regime, which courted the favour of powerful religious groups.¹⁶

Yemenis played a significant role in the anti-Soviet struggle of the mujahidin in Afghanistan during the 1980s.¹⁷ Many of these fighters returned to Yemen in the late 1980s.¹⁸ At the same time, the Firqa brigade, established in the 1980s under General Ali Mohsin, was also linked to religious movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood as well as returning mujahidin.¹⁹ After unification in 1990, Salafists from the North began to proselytise in the hitherto secular South.²⁰ They attacked Shafi'i mosques and shrines and assassinated Southern officials.²¹ Meanwhile, some Yemenis remained in Afghanistan to train with al-Qaeda in the 1990s.²² One prominent veteran of the Afghan war with ties to Osama bin Laden, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, was also a founder of Yemen's Islah party and represented the party on the Republic of Yemen Presidential Council from 1993 to 1997.²³

The Islah party itself is a coalition of tribal and religious elements whose other founders included a number of elite figures, including Abdullah ibn Husayn al-Ahmar and General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar. It is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabi groups, as well as having close ties to Saudi Arabia.

As early as December 1992, two bombs were detonated in Aden, targeting (but missing) US soldiers. These bombs were later described by bin Laden as the first al-Qaeda attack on the US.²⁴ In 2000, the bombing of the USS Cole in Aden harbour killed 17 sailors, and in 2002 another maritime strike killed a crew member, and shed 90,000 barrels of oil, from a French tanker in the Gulf of Aden.²⁵

From 2000, President Saleh consolidated his grip on Yemen's security apparatus, appointing his son and nephews to senior security and intelligence roles.²⁶ They created

¹² *Ibid* pp1, 20.

¹³ *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p27.

¹⁴ ICG, 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence', (Amman/Brussels, 8 January 2003), p10. See also Bowering G (ed), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p600.

¹⁵ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' pp10–11.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p11.

¹⁷ *Op cit* Hill p4.

¹⁸ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' p4.

¹⁹ *Ibid* p4.

²⁰ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p11.

²¹ *Ibid* p11.

²² *Op cit* Hill p4.

²³ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p11.

²⁴ Healy S, Hill G, 'Yemen and Somalia: Terrorism, Shadow Networks and the Limitations of Statebuilding', (Chatham House, October 2010), p4; Michael Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, Revised Edition (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2006), p147.

²⁵ *Op cit* Hill p4; Holguin J, 'Evidence Points To Yemen Terror Attack', CBS News, 6 October 2002.

²⁶ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' p7.

new structures in parallel to existing services, but better qualified and equipped.²⁷ For example, Saleh's nephew Yahya Saleh became chief of staff for the CSF, a paramilitary organisation that "came to be viewed as his own army", and also formed the elite Counter-Terrorism Unit.²⁸ The regime also formed the National Security Bureau after the USS Cole and 9/11 attacks²⁹ – cooperating with US counter-terror efforts from 2001 to 2003, and largely overcoming al-Qaeda in Yemen.³⁰

However, al-Qaeda enjoyed a renaissance in Yemen from 2006. In February that year, 23 prisoners tunneled out of a high-security prison in Yemen.³¹ A rash of attacks followed from 2006 to 2008, including a twin car-bombing of two separate oil installations,³² the killings of Spanish and Belgian tourists, and two attacks on the US Embassy in 2008 – the latter of which killed 18 people including the six attackers.³³

Behind the scenes, al-Qaeda had been forced to withdraw from Saudi Arabia in March 2008, and regrouped in Yemen where it was joined by rebel fighters returning from Iraq and further domestic recruits. After the Yemen and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda merged to form AQAP in January 2009, the group's attempts to bomb a US passenger aircraft on Christmas Day in 2009, two US-bound cargo planes in 2010, and a further US passenger jet in 2012 have all underlined the level of threat posed to the West, and especially the US, by the group.³⁴ In July 2010, the group created an online English magazine, *Inspire*, to recruit new members and justify its cause,³⁵ and in 2011, its domestic offshoot, AAS, emerged to fight the Yemeni Government and promote Sharia (Islamic law) in areas it controls.³⁶ AAS recruits are reportedly not required to swear allegiance to al-Qaeda and according to some reports are also paid.

AQAP has killed hundreds of Yemeni military and intelligence personnel, and continued to target foreigners for assassination or kidnap, but has generally not targeted Yemeni civilians (except for specific groups such as 'apostates', 'homosexuals' or 'spies'). As noted, AAS seized territory in Abyan in 2011–12³⁷ and Shabwa in 2012, continued to be present in Al Mahfad in Abyan and in Al-Baydah during 2012–14,³⁸ and also took root in Hadramaut in 2014.³⁹ Thus, despite years of US-Yemeni cooperation in targeting the group, including through drone strikes, intelligence sharing and US-backed offensives by the Yemeni Government, AQAP/AAS has grown in strength.

AAS/AQAP ranks have been swollen by the country's aggrieved and destitute youth, and incidents such as the seizure in April 2015 of a depot of tanks and other weaponry in Mukallah, Hadramaut by AAS/AQAP illustrate how the group has also been able to exploit the chaotic situation in Yemen. With the collapse of state-provided security, AQAP has gained acceptance from some tribes as a security provider of last resort. Beyond attacking regime, Western and Saudi interests, AAS/AQAP has been active in criticising the corruption of the country's Saudi and US-backed rulers, and has even made some attempts to provide justice, services and relief at a local level (albeit with varied success).⁴⁰

27 *Ibid* p7.

28 *Ibid* p8.

29 *Ibid* p9.

30 *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p9.

31 *Op cit* Hill p4.

32 *Ibid* p4.

33 *Reuters*, 'Yemen: 30 Are Arrested After Attack on U.S. Embassy' 18 September 2008; *op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p16; *op cit* Hill p4.

34 *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p31, HRW, "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" The Civilian Cost of US Targeted Killings in Yemen' (HRW, 2013), p13.

35 *Ibid* p14.

36 *Ibid* p13.

37 *Ibid* p15.

38 Roggio B, 'AQAP regrouped in Abyan province', *The Long War Journal*, 27 June 2012; Roggio B, Adaki O, 'US drone strike hits AQAP training camp in southern Yemen', *The Long War Journal*, 1 April 2014.

39 Al-Rahbi H, 'Yemen military say Hadhramaut controlled by Al-Qaeda', *Asharq Al Awsat*, 5 August 2014; Reidel B, 'Al-Qaida's Hadramawt emirate', *Brookings Institute*, 21 Jul 2014.

40 Examples include the apparently failed attempt to do so in Abyan in 2011–12, where many of the local population fled, and the tribe from which their leader came assisted in their ouster by the army; but also the ongoing effort to administer Mukalla, where services are reportedly less depleted than in other parts of the country and where AQAP was also rumoured to have played a key role in providing relief to local people following a typhoon in November 2015.

IS was also increasingly active in Yemen in 2015, opposing the government, regional coalition forces and the Houthis. IS launched a string of suicide attacks on Shiite mosques that killed over 130 people in March, and killed a further 30 Shiite worshippers on 24 September, apparently in a bid to entrench violent sectarian division.⁴¹ On 6 October it reportedly killed 22 people, including Yemeni and UAE soldiers in Aden and Houthis praying at a mosque in Sana'a.⁴² IS's appetite for indiscriminate violence, tolerance for civilian casualties and apparent lack of interest in governing and integrating at local level differentiates it from AQAP thus far, and also runs against Yemeni tribal culture.⁴³ Its support base at the time of writing may even consist of converts from AQAP. However, as increasingly extreme violence and sectarian division become normalised among a young, destitute and aggrieved population, IS may well prove able to build a more significant following, taking advantage of Yemen's turmoil just as AQAP has done in recent years.⁴⁴

1.4 Drivers of Yemen's conflicts

One of the reasons why Yemen is one of the most difficult contexts in the world in which to promote peace is the multitude of competing challenges it faces. To provide a background against which to analyse the peace and conflict impacts of external actors' approaches in Yemen, it is important to outline the factors that have driven these complex conflicts. These factors – which include social, economic, environmental, political, security and justice dimensions – are likewise complex: they interact with one another, and some causes of conflict in Yemen are clearly also the *effects* of conflict and of its other causes.

However, perhaps the most fundamental of Yemen's problems – which is connected to all these dimensions, and which makes the country particularly immune to straightforward attempts to 'assist' it – is its political culture. Yemen is almost completely dominated by actors pursuing their own particular interests and/or defending their particular interests against others, and (above local level) contains few actors that are prepared to address key drivers of conflict in the public interest.

As already described, the **security and justice** situation in Yemen is perilous. At present, all over Yemen, various armed factions are competing militarily with one another for the control of territory, resources and power. The danger for civilians is compounded by aerial bombardment by the Saudi-led regional coalition. This pervasive violence to an extent locks all the actors involved into the 'security dilemma', whereby if some actors are using violence to assert their claims for power and influence, others are forced to arm and defend their interests against their rivals or to face being victimised and marginalised.

For several years, in fact, the Yemeni state has been too weak to exert control over much of its territory in the face of armed challenges from citizens – with no reliable access by 2011 to governorates such as Abyan, Shabwa, Al-Dhala'e, Marib, al-Jawf, Sa'dah and Lahj.⁴⁵ Absence of reliable security and justice provision has been an important reason for tribes and other groups to make their own arrangements. For example, the Houthis mobilised in part due to their sense of being a community under attack.⁴⁶ But state security and justice provision failed in Yemen not only because of *weak capacity* but more significantly due to years of contamination of security and justice institutions by elite interests.

⁴¹ Salisbury P, Mohsen A, 'The Rise of the Islamic State in Yemen', *Vice News*, 20 July 2015; Luck T, 'In Yemen, Islamic State is struggling to claim mantle of Sunnis' champion', *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 September 2015.

⁴² Mukhashaf M, 'Islamic State kills 22 in attacks on Yemen government, Gulf troops, mosque', *Reuters*, 6 October 2015.

⁴³ Drawing on presentations from a Chatham House analysis meeting on Yemen, 18 November 2015.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p8.

⁴⁶ *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p31.

When Saleh became president, his post was a dangerous one, and as noted, he cemented his position by appointing relatives and fellow tribesmen to key positions, especially within the security sector, with commanders and the intelligence services reporting directly to him.⁴⁷ In a country dominated by powerful military leaders, security institutions came to be above the law, loyal to individual commanders, and feared by the general population (especially those outside of groups favoured by the president).⁴⁸ Saleh used security forces to bolster numbers of ‘supporters’ at rallies and to vote for him in marginal electoral districts, and used the Interior Ministry and intelligence services to spy on his political opponents.⁴⁹ As civil unrest intensified in 2011, security forces loyal to rival elite factions turned on each other, and were also used to suppress unarmed protesters.⁵⁰

Similarly, formal justice institutions in Yemen from 1990 were either co-opted by elites, deliberately weakened or altogether absent.⁵¹ Military figures came to exert significant control over the judiciary to ensure its alignment with regime interests – even in some cases acting as judges and running their own prisons.⁵² Thus the judiciary is structured in a way that forecloses action against corruption and impunity, and ordinary people lack access to effective justice provision by the state.⁵³

Yemen’s place at the centre of regional arms, drugs and people trafficking networks, as well as the massive profits being reaped from smuggling and ghost salaries in the military, go some way to explaining the strong incentives for elites to maintain the kind of security and justice institutions that enable this profitable activity.⁵⁴

During the 2011 crisis, military-security institutions loyal to different members of the divided elite turned against one another.⁵⁵ Those loyal to Saleh, and especially the CSE, were also used to cling to power in the face of popular unrest – killing protesters on multiple occasions.⁵⁶

From 2012 and throughout 2013, Yemen’s new President Hadi began an attempt to transform the security sector. He removed many of former President Saleh’s relatives from senior positions, downsizing the Republican Guard and establishing new Presidential Protective Forces, while also setting out new principles for the Interior Ministry and police based on respect for human rights and public service.⁵⁷ The military reconstruction process immediately provoked tensions and clashes,⁵⁸ and was perceived to lack transparency and strategic direction, while the exclusion of Houthis and the Southern movement meant that the process lost legitimacy.⁵⁹

Security and justice have had severe knock-on impacts on **socio-economic** drivers of conflict: areas where armed groups are operating typically lack electricity, water, gas, healthcare and education.⁶⁰ Investors have also been scared away by the dangerous security situation and the climate of corruption and lawlessness.⁶¹ In the Saleh era, problems such as the staging of gun battles to demonstrate the need for investors to hire private security protection, and the requirements for investors to partner with Yemeni economic institutions controlled by the president begin to explain how the venality of Yemen’s elites has eroded the country’s economic prospects.⁶²

47 Noman M, Sorenson D, ‘Reforming the Yemen Security Sector’ (CDDRL working papers, No 137, June 2013).

48 *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen’s Military-Security Reform’ pi.

49 *Op cit* Noman, Sorenson; see also: Seitz A, ‘The ‘Arab Spring’ and Yemeni civil military relations’, in Lackner H (ed), *Why Yemen Matters*, (Saqi Books, 2014), p62.

50 *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen’s Military-Security Reform’ pp10, 12–13.

51 E van Veen, ‘From the struggle for citizenship to the fragmentation of justice – Yemen from 1990 to 2013’ (Clingendael, February 2014), p8.

52 *Ibid* pp22–23.

53 For examples that illustrate the extent of corruption and impunity in judicial cases see *ibid* pp34–35.

54 *Op cit* Healy, Hill pp9–10; on ghost salaries: ‘According to a report in January 2013, over 54,000 fictitious soldiers belong to the Republican Guard, and over 100,000 exist in the entire Yemeni Military.’ *Op cit* Noman, Sorenson.

55 *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen’s Military-Security Reform’ p10.

56 *Ibid* pp12, 13; HRW, ‘Yemen: protesters’ Killings show Perils of Immunity Deal’, (20 September 2011).

57 *Op cit* Noman, Sorenson.

58 *Ibid*.

59 *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen’s Military-Security Reform’ pp11, 20.

60 Salama V, ‘Yemen’s counterterror offensive sidesteps real problems’, Atlantic Council, 1 May 2014.

61 *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ pp26–27, *op cit* Johnsen ‘Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen’ p38.

62 *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ pp26–27.

Yemen's socio-economic situation is dire, serving as both a cause and a consequence of its conflicts. Its macro-economic situation is incredibly challenging. Oil reserves are dwindling and revenues from them have collapsed – diminishing the ability of the state to pay for vital imports and services.⁶³ Water is scarce and growing scarcer; infrastructure and services are weak or absent in much of the country; the population is growing very rapidly and in 2014 over 60 per cent of it was aged under 25.⁶⁴ In this context, deprivation is high and rising. Even before the blockade on imports and relief aid established by the regional coalition in April 2015, over 50 per cent of the population was estimated to be living in poverty,⁶⁵ With unemployment at 40 per cent overall (60 per cent among youth).⁶⁶ Likewise, following the significant food, fuel and water price hikes of recent years, 40 per cent of households were in food-related debt.⁶⁷

While any country would struggle with such challenges, in Yemen's case they have been fatally compounded by the active role of elites in pursuing their particular interests. Both government spending and foreign assistance increased significantly during the 2000s, but failed to translate into public goods; the economic decline since then has compounded disillusionment with deep-seated problems of corruption.⁶⁸ One constraint on Yemen's economic success was the policy of setting corporation taxes at such a high level as to force businesses to choose between being either uncompetitive or being complicit in the criminalisation of the state.⁶⁹

Smuggling, bribery and diversion of public funds (for example from government contracts) into private hands is thought to be rife in Yemen.⁷⁰ Yemen's ten most significant groups/families are thought to control 80 per cent of its banking, finance, insurance, telecoms, transport, shipping, construction, engineering, manufacturing and import businesses.⁷¹ At least 50 per cent of public funds allocated to diesel subsidies in 2008 (estimated at \$3.5 billion) were thought to have been diverted for private gain through various smuggling practices.⁷² Another key method of plundering state resources has been theft of salaries for shadow employees.⁷³ The proceeds of such corruption are then typically diverted outside of Yemen rather than being invested in the country.⁷⁴ This form of grand corruption continued after 2011:⁷⁵ though the 2014 state budget was triple that of 2004, it has reportedly “disappeared into a ‘black hole’”.⁷⁶ While water is in short supply, it is increasingly being used at unsustainable rates to cultivate the mild narcotic *qat*.⁷⁷

As suggested by the above analysis, Yemen's **political dynamics** have underpinned and deepened other drivers of conflict rather than providing meaningful channels for addressing grievances. Despite the collapse of Yemen's economy into violence and chaos, the strong incentives that have prevailed upon Yemen's elites to plunder

63 *Ibid* pp7–8; *op cit* Hill p7.

64 Population growth 2.72% per year (2014 est); 41.7% under 15, 21.1% aged 15–24: Central Intelligence Agency, 'Yemen', *The World Factbook*, accessed 9 May 2015.

65 Ahmed N, 'Yemen's collapse is a taste of things to come', *Middle East Eye*, 20 February 2015, pp1–2.

66 *Ibid*.

67 *Ibid*.

68 *Op cit* Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen' p9.

69 *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p23.

70 *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p7; The YEC is an important example of this: "One of the most important sources of corruption in the security sector is the Yemen Economic Corporation (YEC, formerly the Yemen Military Economic Corporation, or YMCO, before unification), the economic arm of the security sector. It was established in mid-1970s to supply the military with boots and uniforms and food supplies. After Saleh came to power, he used it to compete with civilian business houses, without any transparency, auditing or accountability, using public funds. It received thousands of hectares in different agricultural areas around the country, including most land-holdings from Imamic times. Dresch notes that the YEC "... has expanded from farming and retailing to packing and canning, transport and refrigeration...". It took over the ownership of most profitable public companies by instructions from Saleh. It is one of Saleh's most corruption money "taps," specifically to fund militias of "thugs" he brought into Sana'a and Taiz, to confront the 2011 uprising." (*Op cit* Noman, Sorenson).

71 *Op cit* van Veen p23.

72 *Ibid* p23, citing also Phillips S (2011) *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, (Abingdon, Routledge); estimated subsidies 2008: *Op cit* Hill p7. See also *op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p7, *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p16.

73 *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' pp35–38.

74 *Ibid* pp35–38.

75 *Op cit* van Veen p23.

76 Salisbury P, 'Yemen's astonishing financial meltdown', *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2014.

77 *Op cit* Ahmed N p2.

the country while locking the wider population into a state of deprivation remain entrenched as a critical problem for the country.⁷⁸

Throughout Saleh's tenure, Yemen was glued together through patronage. Saleh, as the figurehead of the regime, controlled access to power and privilege for those in his inner circle and other useful allies, through a relatively centralised system.⁷⁹ In such a context, advancing reforms that would advance the collective interests of all Yemenis – including elites – would involve cutting across the interests of individual power holders, potentially alienating them and disrupting the political settlement.⁸⁰ Thus, even for Yemen's leadership, space to embrace reforms wholeheartedly was limited. Instead, institutions were used to uphold regime interests on behalf of Yemen's elites. For example, the Central Organisation for Control and Auditing, the nation's primary institution for tackling corruption, was used by Saleh to control political opponents rather than to tackle Yemen's deep-seated corruption problems.⁸¹

Another key strategy for the Saleh regime was 'divide and rule'. The regime would arm both sides in tribal disputes in order to take the credit for resolving the problem.⁸² Likewise, rather than addressing grievances related to Zaydi marginalisation in Sa'dah – grievances that were instead fanned as the regime sought to undermine the power base of Yemen's former rulers – Saleh appears to have used the protracted Sa'dah conflict as a way to diminish the power base of General Ali Mohsin, his erstwhile ally turned rival – whose forces were tasked with fighting the Houthi movement. A further relevant example of political cynicism relates to AQAP, which was allowed to renew itself in Yemen, creating a convenient bargaining chip for Saleh to secure international support to help consolidate his power.⁸³

Having suffered years of marginalisation and abuse under this system, tribes and other marginalised groups in Yemen seem to have reached the conclusion that the government was primarily a vehicle for a small elite to harass and abuse the wider population.⁸⁴ Houthi marginalisation led to calls for greater regional autonomy and more equitable distribution of resources.⁸⁵ The government had opportunities to ease frustrations of both Hirak and the Houthis, but instead their grievances were allowed to fester and grow into more widespread rebellion.⁸⁶

Until the present upheaval, Yemen's main political parties over the last two decades have been the GPC (Saleh's party) and the JMP – an umbrella opposition party including Islah plus a range of smaller parties. Beneath the rhetoric used by these parties, an important feature of Yemen's political life has been that they have functioned largely as umbrellas for a variety of constituents to have a stake in power. With the arguable exception of AAS, Yemen is largely devoid of political actors advancing a clear policy agenda oriented towards the delivery of public goods.⁸⁷

As a further illustration of the prevailing political cynicism, efforts by pro-business technocrats to advance a development agenda in Taiz have been thwarted by GPC and Islah-backed militias.⁸⁸ Likewise, former President Saleh's *volte-face* to support

78 *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p7, *op cit* van Veen pp22–23, *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p27.

79 *Ibid*, pp4, 38.

80 *Ibid* p39.

81 *Ibid* p22.

82 *Ibid* pp23–24.

83 *Op cit* van Veen p56.

84 Phillips S, 'What comes next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building', (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010), p7.

85 Craig I, 'What the Houthi takeover of Sanaa reveals about Yemen's politics', *Al Jazeera*, 25 September 2014.

86 *Op cit* Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen' p14.

87 As Phillips explained in 2011: "[The GPC's] key function, and purpose, is to extend patronage to politically and socially relevant elites and to provide the formal institutional base of support for President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The GPC is not an ideological party but like the JMP it incorporates a diverse group of elites under a broad umbrella." (p.3); Similarly regarding the JMP: "there is low ideological and policy consensus between the member parties" (p.3), and "preference for maintaining the appearance of unity has had the effect of weakening all of the members by enforcing a sometimes bland uniformity. [...] There is no coherent policy, ideology, or vision that links the parties together other than the broad desire to serve in the regime's stead and to implement a broad swathe of reforms. [...] the JMP's popularity has been hindered by its attempts to persuade the regime to change itself, rather than to compel it to change by becoming attractive to a broad cross-section of ordinary citizens." (pp44–45).

88 *Op cit* Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen' p20.

his erstwhile adversaries the Houthis has been a key enabler of their military advance, underlining how both parties' erstwhile political and ideological differences have taken a clear back seat to pursuit of power.

Tribal sheikhs could be argued to offer an exception, in some cases representing constituents whose interests they are genuinely committed to advancing. However, the flow of government resources primarily to those sheikhs who cooperated with the government agenda has taken its toll on the integrity of tribal leaders, who are increasingly resented as urbanised and co-opted.⁸⁹ Given the absence of an actor with the legitimacy to lead a coherent, unifying agenda for policy reform, a key political challenge in 2011 was thus the absence of a credible alternative to the political settlement under Saleh and the political culture that underpinned it.⁹⁰

Inclusive dialogue under the NDC did offer a rare opportunity for perspectives of marginalised groups to enter into national level political dialogue. However, the proposals for federalism and decentralisation hurriedly advanced by Hadi in its closing stages failed to achieve a balance of interests acceptable to all actors and commanding broad-based popular support.⁹¹ The proposed boundaries threatened to split Hirak's constituent groups,⁹² and limited the Houthis' access to resources and the sea.⁹³ Oil and gas resources also fell into proposed regions without urban centres, over which Sana'a would therefore have to continue exercising central controls.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the federal, decentralised model posed a threat to existing elites keen to maintain the spoils of the centralised patronage system.⁹⁵

Despairing at the inability of political dialogue to transform Yemen's stagnation, many of Yemen's young people believe that the grievances that led to the 2011 uprising had worsened by 2014, and have given up on the idea that a political solution to Yemen's problems is possible. In such a context, identity-based political groups have come to the fore.⁹⁶ The Houthi movement has frequently been characterised in international media as Shia and Iran-backed. However, its spread from 2011 has in part reflected the Houthis' ability to tap into popular resentment about corruption within the Sana'a-based regime – enabling them to gain backing from tribal and Sunni groups.⁹⁷

In a context of widespread popular grievance and disillusionment with Yemen's leadership, Johnsen argued in 2010 that AQAP had become “the most representative organisation in Yemen”.⁹⁸ In support of this, Johnsen observes that AQAP had been consistent not only in criticising corruption and illegitimacy in the Yemeni regime, but also in enunciating its goals in public and seeking to align its actions with its rhetoric.⁹⁹ As well as providing a livelihood to recruits, AQAP has at times sought to address the vacuum of justice and services by providing not only electricity but also Sharia judges to tackle backlogs of judicial cases in areas such as Jaar, Zinjibar and other southern towns that it has seized.¹⁰⁰

Although most Yemen experts insist that AQAP and IS remain unpopular with the vast majority of Yemenis, at present it appears likely that both AQAP and IS will extend their appeal across a young population beggared by poverty and brutalised by injustice and intensifying violence.

89 *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p18.

90 *Ibid* p52.

91 *Op cit* Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen' pp17–19.

92 *Ibid* p17.

93 *Ibid* p18.

94 *Ibid* pp16–17.

95 *Ibid* pp17–18.

96 *Ibid* p19.

97 *Op cit* Craig, 'What the Houthi takeover of Sanaa reveals'; on tribes reacting to government destruction of the land, crops and homes by joining the Houthis' struggle see *op cit* Johnsen p32.

98 *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p12.

99 *Ibid* p12.

100 *Op cit* van Veen p55.

1.5 Section summary

From this overview of Yemen's recent conflict history and analysis of the key drivers underpinning it, there are two key points that emerge. Firstly, it is clear that Yemen is a country facing seismic challenges in the economic and social plane that have left much of its population on the edge of destitution. Alongside these challenges, security and justice are crumbling, convulsing the ground beneath the feet of those who would seek to move the country forward – and in this context, those who have organised themselves to use violence to claim power have come to the fore. Secondly, however, like so many contexts facing challenges of conflict around the world, Yemen's problems have proved intractable owing to the failure of the state – dominated as it has been for decades by kleptocratic elites – to play a constructive role in addressing the drivers of its instability and poverty. Importantly, although institutional capacities are weak, this failure has in fact stemmed from the country's *dysfunctional political culture*, in which precious few actors above the local level have advanced a sincere, people-focused agenda for tackling the country's problems. Despairing of political processes, people have turned towards group identities to seek redress for their very real grievances, and to protect their interests.

2

Approaches of major international actors

IN THIS SECTION, we examine the approach of international actors – in particular as they relate to counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding – seeking to understand what their engagement has been with the above conflict dynamics and the thinking that has underpinned it.

2.1 Regional actors

A key factor in Yemen's conflict dynamics has been the role played by regional actors. Although these warrant further detailed analysis, in order to focus on Western approaches, only a summary of key points is offered here.

Regional actors, in particular Saudi Arabia, have greater influence in Yemen than Western countries, and in this sense it is important to note that it is difficult for Western actors to exert influence in Yemen without persuading regional powers to support (or permit) their approach.

Saudi assistance – both to the Yemeni state and to a wide network of clients all over Yemen – dwarfs that provided by Western actors. The Kingdom has (along with other Gulf partners) often bailed the country out when bankruptcy loomed or oil reserves were exhausted.¹⁰¹ In this sense, the role of regional actors was to prop up the Saleh regime for many years. However, fearing Somali-style chaos, regional actors also helped persuade Saleh to leave office during the transition crisis of 2011.¹⁰²

Despite this, regional actors are naturally reluctant to allow radical change and fragmentation in contexts such as Yemen. Saudi foreign policy is not necessarily consistent and coherent given the range of elites involved, and the Kingdom's interests in Yemen are extensive and diverse.¹⁰³ However, a key priority is to prevent Yemen-based militants (including al-Qaeda, IS and the Houthis) attacking the Kingdom and its interests.¹⁰⁴ In particular, Saudi Arabia opposes the spread of the Houthi movement, with which it has a history of cross-border conflict and which it views as a Shia, Iran-

¹⁰¹ Scale of assistance compared to West: Sharp J, 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (Congressional Research Service, 11 February 2015), p24, *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p17; wide network of clients: *Ibid*, pp29–30, *op cit* Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen' pp14–15. Significant Saudi, UAE and Libyan bailouts: *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' pp30, 51; *op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p32; post-2012 Saudi bailouts and their misuse: *op cit* Salisbury 'Yemen's astonishing financial meltdown'.

¹⁰² *Op cit* Saferworld, 'Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen' p10.

¹⁰³ Salisbury P, 'Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'', (Chatham House), February 2015, p3; *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p29.

¹⁰⁴ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' p24.

backed group. The Western-backed regional coalition's campaign of airstrikes, troop deployments and blockade on imports initiated in March 2015 to face down the Houthis and reinstate the transition government¹⁰⁵ can thus be seen partly as one front in a regional power struggle between Saudi and Iranian interests.

In terms of Iran's role, Yemeni authorities and the regional coalition report intercepting Iranian weapons shipments.¹⁰⁶ However, Yemen analyst Peter Salisbury notes that journalists have found such claims hard to corroborate – thus: “A large question mark remains over the extent to which Tehran or Hezbollah have funded or armed the group.”¹⁰⁷

Qatar's engagement has at times been more constructive, including through its attempts to mediate the Houthi conflict since 2007 as well as to ease tensions in the South of the country – but this has created tensions between Doha and its GCC partners.¹⁰⁸

2.2 United States

The US has long been the most significant Western actor engaged in Yemen. Before 2000, with Yemen disapproving of American policy in the Middle East and with few military and economic ties, relations between the US and the Saleh regime were relatively distant.¹⁰⁹ However, US-Yemen military cooperation appears to have begun in 1998.¹¹⁰ The bombing of the USS Cole in 2000 and the 9/11 attacks increased Yemen's importance to the US. From this time, stabilising the country and defeating the terror threat emerging from it became a significant US priority,¹¹¹ and direct military cooperation was stepped up in spring 2002 with the arrival of US troops, including Special Forces and seaport and airport security specialists.¹¹² The US approach since 2000 has included multiple strands, including direct military action, security assistance and cooperation, socio-economic support and political engagement.

In terms of direct **military** action, the US has steadily sought to eliminate terror suspects in Yemen in more than a decade of targeted strikes and support to counter-terror operations aimed at religious militants including key cadres within AQAP and its local affiliate, AAS. The US conducted its first drone strike in Yemen on 3 November 2002.¹¹³ Since the creation of AAS and the 2011 crisis US airstrikes in Yemen have reportedly increased markedly.¹¹⁴ According to The Long War Journal, there were 121 US air-strikes from 2009 to 2015 – 105 of them between 2012 and 2015.¹¹⁵ Besides drone strikes, the US has also reportedly shared intelligence and conducted secret joint operations against militants with Yemeni troops.¹¹⁶

The Yemeni Government was heavily criticised by the Islah Party and Arab news media following the 3 November 2002 drone strike.¹¹⁷ Since then the US has maintained an approach of secrecy regarding its role in targeted killings in Yemen – releasing limited details about them only very rarely. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has described what the US has provided as ‘inadequate’ legal justification for its role in targeted killings in

¹⁰⁵ Madeleine Rees, ‘Military intervention in Yemen: the international system in crisis’, Open Democracy, 9 April 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Sharp J, ‘Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention’, (CRS, 2 October 2015), p3.

¹⁰⁷ *Op cit* Salisbury ‘Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War’ p7.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid* p10.

¹⁰⁹ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p31.

¹¹⁰ *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence’ p23.

¹¹¹ *Ibid* p8, *op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p31.

¹¹² *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence’ p23.

¹¹³ *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ pp25–26.

¹¹⁴ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p10.

¹¹⁵ Roggio B, Barry B, ‘Charting the data for US air strikes in Yemen, 2002–2015’, *The Long War Journal*, www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php (accessed 18 November 2015). Other estimates of total US strikes: 137 (New America Foundation, ‘Drone Wars Yemen: Analysis’, available at: <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/yemen-analysis.html> (accessed 18 November 2015)); 105 minimum but 308 possible (Overall figures aggregated by author based on: Bureau of Investigative Journalism ‘Yemen: Reported US covert actions’ [data for 2001–2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015]. Available at www.thebureauinvestigates.com (accessed 18 November 2011)).

¹¹⁶ *Op cit* Healy, Hill p13.

¹¹⁷ *Op cit* ICG, ‘Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence’ p26.

Yemen.¹¹⁸ Since then, the US has explained that under P.L. 107–40, the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF):

[...] *the U.S. military has conducted direct action targeting members of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is an organized, armed group that is part of, or at least an associated force of, al-Qa'ida. The determination that the AUMF authorizes the use of force against AQAP is based on information about both AQAP's current and historical connections to al-Qa'ida and the fact that AQAP has repeatedly launched attacks against the United States [...]*¹¹⁹

US secrecy regarding its role in targeted killings has been maintained on the grounds of 'national security concerns',¹²⁰ but may also be a precondition for the cooperation of the Yemeni authorities, with whom Wikileaks cables suggest the US has conspired to conceal information regarding attacks.¹²¹ US strikes have not only been targeted at individuals actively involved in militant operations and attacks, but also those suspected of links to or promotion of the cause of al-Qaeda.

An aspect of the policy of secrecy has been that, even in cases in which civilians have been killed and injured, the US has offered no public acknowledgement or apology to Yemenis for mistakes made during its campaign of targeted assassinations.¹²² In 2013, the US had in fact acknowledged its role in two strikes in Yemen (both involving US citizens) and President Obama has also noted that there is a 'wide gap' between the US Government's estimates of civilian casualties from targeted killing operations in Yemen and those of NGOs.¹²³ The US Government even appears to have actively encouraged the incarceration of a Yemeni journalist – apparently because of his attempts to report critically on the impacts of such strikes.¹²⁴

In terms of its **security-related support**, as noted it was following the USS Cole bombing, and under the growing 'war on terror', that US security assistance to Yemen began to grow in scale. According to the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, the Bush administration agreed a \$400 million counter-terror deal with President Saleh in November 2001.¹²⁵ This reportedly created a CIA, US Marine and Special Forces-run facility in Yemen, backed by the Lemonnier drone base in Djibouti, and provided Saleh with helicopters, eavesdropping equipment and training for the CTU.¹²⁶ Some sources put US military assistance to Yemen in 2003 at \$2.7 million,¹²⁷ but levels of security assistance grew significantly in subsequent years: from 2002 to 2006, US military financing to Yemen was estimated at \$55.5 million.¹²⁸ In September 2009 a US Government cable posted by Wikileaks indicated US expenditure of over \$115 million equipping counter-terror forces since 2002.¹²⁹ Trends in US security and non-security assistance to Yemen from 2006 to 2014 are shown in Figure 1.

¹¹⁸ Open Society Justice Initiative/Mwatana Organization for Human Rights 'Death by drone: civilian harm caused by US targeted killings in Yemen', (Open Society Foundations, 2015), p6; *op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p3.

¹¹⁹ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p12 citing Prepared Statement of Stephen W. Preston, General Counsel, Department of Defense, 'The Framework Under U.S. Law for Current Military Operations', Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 21 May 2014.

¹²⁰ *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p3.

¹²¹ *Ibid* pp68, 76; see also: The Guardian, 'US embassy cables: Yemen trumpets strikes on al-Qaida that were Americans' work', 4 December 2010 [cable dated 21 December 2009]; Scahill, J, 'The Dangerous US Game in Yemen', *The Nation*, 30 March 2011, which provides details of interaction between Yemeni leaders and senior US officials including Yemen's Prime Minister joking with US officials about misleading parliament regarding the US role in targeted killings.

¹²² *Op cit* Open Society Justice Initiative/Mwatana Organization for Human Rights p6.

¹²³ *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" pp20–21.

¹²⁴ The journalist Abdulelah Haider Shayi was imprisoned by Saleh after reporting on the deaths of 21 children and 14 women at a bomb site in Al-Majalah that was littered with the debris from U.S. Tomahawk missile and cluster munitions. When President Saleh pardoned Shayi in 2011, he remained in prison after President Obama telephoned Saleh and expressed 'concern' over his release. When President Hadi released Shayi in 2013, the US State Department expressed concern and disappointment, but still did not set out specific concerns or press for him to be fairly tried. See *op cit* HRW, "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p80, Tisdall, S "Obama takes 'war on terror' to Yemen" *The Guardian*, 29 December 2009; Amnesty International, "Images of missile and cluster munitions point to US role in fatal attack in Yemen"; Spencer R, "US cluster bombs 'killed 35 women and children'" *The Telegraph*, 7 June 2010; Salon.com, "WikiLeaks: U.S. bombs Yemen in secret".

¹²⁵ *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* 'Yemen: Reported US covert actions 2001–2011', Available at: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/03/29/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-since-2001/> (accessed 18 November 2015).

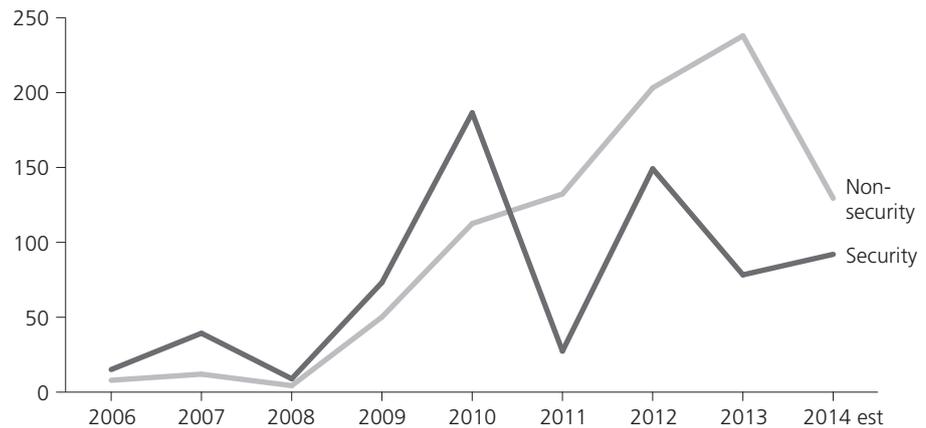
¹²⁶ *Ibid*.

¹²⁷ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p8.

¹²⁸ *Op cit* Hill p2.

¹²⁹ *The Guardian*, 'US embassy cables: Bomb al-Qaida where you want, Yemen tells US, but don't blame us if they strike again', 3 December 2010 (cable dated 15 September 2009).

Figure 1: US Foreign aid allocations to Yemen (\$ millions) [Source: Sharp J: Yemen: Background and US Relations (February 2015), Yemen: Background and US relations (June 2011)]



In spring 2009, the CIA stepped up intelligence cooperation with Yemen as part of the fight against AQAP.¹³⁰ By mid-2010, Yemen had become the largest recipient of funds under the US Defense Department's 1206 funding line for counter-terror training and equipment authorised under the National Defense Authorisation Act.¹³¹ From 2006 to February 2015, Yemen received over \$401 million in 1206 funding alone.¹³² The total value of US assistance between 2006 and 2014 was over \$1.5 billion, of which \$670 million was for security or counter-terror programmes.¹³³

Support was focused on specific parts of the security apparatus that were overtly focused on combating the terror threat – the Counter Terror Unit (headed by President Saleh's nephew), and Special Operations and the Republican Guard (both commanded by Saleh's son).¹³⁴ The Republican Guard received the bulk of new weapons and supplies, as well as benefits such as housing, health care and education. The CTU and Special Operations received US training in combating terrorism.¹³⁵ These parts of the military-security apparatus were, as noted, established around 2001 under relatives of President Saleh. US assistance included the supply of sophisticated weaponry and other equipment, and well as planes and helicopters. For example, 1206 funding has provided Yemen's Special Operations units with training, sniper rifles, secure personal radios, bullet proof jackets, helicopters with night vision cameras and, in 2010, a CN235 transport plane.¹³⁶

US security assistance was also directed towards the air force, which was supported to acquire transport and surveillance aircraft,¹³⁷ and the coast guard, which received patrol boats and radios, and the border forces, which received armoured pickup trucks.¹³⁸ President Obama's Counter-terrorism Partnerships Fund has created a further funding pool of \$0.75 billion from which Yemen's security forces might be eligible for further support.

Following the fall of Saleh in 2011, the US continued its cooperation with Yemen's security apparatus in combat against AQAP/AAS, as well as supporting the defence restructuring initiated by President Hadi (while the EU focused on the Interior Ministry).¹⁴⁰ Yemen was allocated \$150 million in 1206 aid from 2012 to 2014, primarily to improve its Special Operations and maritime security forces, which have reportedly

¹³⁰ *Op cit* Scahill.

¹³¹ *Op cit* Healy, Hill p13, citing Sharp J, 'Yemen, Background and US relations' (CRS, 28 July 2010); US support for military training and counter-terror peaked at \$176 million in 2010 (*op cit* Ahmed p3).

¹³² *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p27.

¹³³ See *Ibid* p29.

¹³⁴ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' pp7, 11, *op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p17.

¹³⁵ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' p11.

¹³⁶ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen, Background and US relations' (July 2010) p29 and Sharp J, 'Yemen, Background and US relations' (CRS, 8 June 2011).

¹³⁷ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p27.

¹³⁸ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen, Background and US relations' (July 2010) p27.

¹³⁹ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen, Background and US relations' (February 2015) p27.

¹⁴⁰ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' p15.

raided AQAP bases in cooperation with US Special Operations forces.¹⁴¹ Aside from 2006 funding, the US also provides security assistance to Yemen from State Department-managed accounts (FMF, NADR, INCLE, IMET).¹⁴² US and allegedly Saudi airstrikes drove AAS from Abyan in June 2012.¹⁴³ Even amid the Houthi takeover of much of the country in 2014, US officials affirmed that counter-terror cooperation with Yemeni actors was continuing,¹⁴⁴ although it ultimately had to suspend US-Yemeni counter-terror cooperation in 2015, as well as evacuating its embassy and withdrawing all US military personnel.¹⁴⁵

When the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes against the Houthis began in March-April 2015, the US underlined its commitment to reinforcing the state against its challengers by supporting the Saudi-led airstrikes to reinstate President Hadi's government,¹⁴⁶ including by providing intelligence and air-to-air refuelling.¹⁴⁷ It continues to provide logistical support at the time of writing, and in November 2015 the Pentagon also approved the sale of 22,000 smart and conventional bombs worth a reported \$1.3 billion to replenish Saudi arsenals.¹⁴⁸

Alongside its military-security approach, the US has also offered significant **social and economic support** to Yemen, and been cognisant of the country's weak institutions and governance deficits. Economic assistance was \$5 million in 2003, but by 2014 economic support and USAID allocations had grown to over \$128 million.¹⁴⁹ Part of the US strategy has been to mitigate drivers of conflict by targeting aid at unstable areas, with AQAP always uppermost in mind.¹⁵⁰ For example, it focused its community livelihoods project in AQAP-affected areas such as Amran, al-Jawf, Marib, Shabwah, Abyan, Al-Dhala'e, Lahj and Aden.¹⁵¹

Although disrupted by the current level of crisis in Yemen, recent US development assistance has supported programmes on democracy assistance, global health, education, economic development, and humanitarian aid.¹⁵² The breadth of contemporary US engagement is illustrated by the range of programmes under which the US allocates assistance to Yemen – which in early 2015 included 17 programmes managed by various agencies spread across the State Department, USAID and the DoD.¹⁵³ The US is also the largest provider of humanitarian assistance to Yemen, providing over \$180.9 million in 2013 and 2014.¹⁵⁴

In terms of **political engagement**, the US approach to security through partnership with the state has required friendly relations with both the Saleh and Hadi regimes. While we will return to the question of whether this has precluded the US from exerting significant pressure in favour of inclusive, fair and accountable governance, it is important to note here that the US has at times sought to encourage progress on poor governance and corruption. For example, the US pushed President Saleh on corruption issues by cutting assistance to Yemen in November 2005 (even if the gesture appears to have backfired).¹⁵⁵ Though perhaps without great faith in Saleh's commitment to reforms, the US and the UK did also voice support for the Ten Point Plan – an agenda

141 Juul P, 'Building Foreign Security Forces as a Counter-terrorism Strategy Is Not a One-Size-Fits-All Approach', Center for American Progress, 24 June 2014.

142 *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p27.

143 *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p16.

144 Hosenball M, Stewart P, 'Exclusive – some counter-terrorism efforts in Yemen frozen for now: US officials' (*Reuters*, 24 January 2015), Rampton R, 'Obama defends US counterterrorism strategy in Yemen', (*Reuters*, 25 January 2015).

145 *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention' p6.

146 *Op cit* Rees.

147 Samaan M, Loveluck L, Sherlock R, 'UN urges 'humanitarian pause' in Yemen's 'catastrophic' war', *Telegraph*, 12 April 2015.

148 *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention' p5; *Reuters*, 'US approves \$1.3bn sale of 'smart' bombs to Saudi Arabia', 17 November 2015.

149 *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p29.

150 See for example *op cit* Johnsen G 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p6, *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p55.

151 *Ibid*.

152 *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p26.

153 *Idem*.

154 *Idem*.

155 *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p11.

for moderate technical reforms that emerged from 2008.¹⁵⁶ As protests grew in 2011, the US also helped to broker the deal that replaced Saleh (but allowed him to remain in Yemen immune from prosecution). The US then actively supported inclusive political debate on the way forward for the country via the National Dialogue process in 2013–2014. The process also served as a way for the US to encourage commitments by Hadi's government to address Southern grievances, even if these went largely unfulfilled.¹⁵⁷

Another aspect of the US political approach to Yemen, linked to its preference for secrecy regarding its military-intelligence strategy, is that it has preferred to try to suppress AQAP's message, rather than to out-argue it. Thus the US and UK authorities got Anwar al-Awlaki's videos banned from the *YouTube* website, while President Saleh made it illegal for terrorists to speak to the press.¹⁵⁸

On the economic front, under President Obama's May 2012 Executive Order 13611, the US established a sanctions regime for individuals threatening the stability of Yemen, and on 10 November 2014 applied these sanctions to former President Saleh and two Houthi leaders.¹⁵⁹

The US has also exercised diplomatic influence to encourage coordination among donors to Yemen – for example working with the UK to launch the 'Friends of Yemen' forum among 24 countries in January 2010, resulting in pledges of roughly \$8 billion to the country.¹⁶⁰ As noted, the US has also politically supported the Saudi-led regional intervention in 2015.

To understand the **rationale** that underpins the US approach to Yemen, it is important to recall the regional context through which the US sees countries like Yemen. America's broader regional imperatives include protecting Israel, maintaining economic and strategic ties to energy-rich Gulf states cooperating with efforts to combat terrorism, and limiting the threat posed by Iran. In support of these imperatives, a key aspect of the American approach to the region has been to arm, train and conduct joint operations with its allies in order to ensure their strategic dominance. As Chuck Hagel (US Defense Secretary 2013–14) explained:

*Over the last 20 years, the sale of advanced weapons has helped to shift the military balance in the region away from Iran and in favor of our Gulf partners, and this shift is accelerating. DOD has approved more than \$75 billion in U.S. arms sales to GCC states since 2007. These sales during the past six years are worth nearly as much as those made previously totally in the previous 15 years. During my last trip to the region, we finalized agreements w[or]th nearly \$11 billion that will provide access to high-end capabilities, including F-15s, F-16s, and advanced munitions, such as standoff weapons. These are the most advanced capabilities we have ever provided [...] to this region. We'll continue to ensure that all of our allies and partners in the region, including both Israel and the Gulf states, have these advanced weapons. Upgrades in military hardware have enabled the United States military to work more closely, more effectively with our partners and allies in a wide variety of joint exercises, training, and collaborative planning. American men and women in uniform, serving alongside the soldiers, sailors, and airmen of our partners in the region, are staring down the same threats [...]*¹⁶¹

This explains the wider complex of alliances with which US approaches to Yemen need to be consistent, as well as the core assumption that the US can serve its interests by arming and working with partners who share its goals across the Middle East region.

¹⁵⁶ *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' pp14–16.

¹⁵⁷ Bodine B, Greenfield D, 'A Blueprint for a Comprehensive US Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen', (Atlantic Council, October 2014), p4.

¹⁵⁸ Nowicki D, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of the US Counterterrorism Assistance Program to the Republic of Yemen', (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2011), p30.

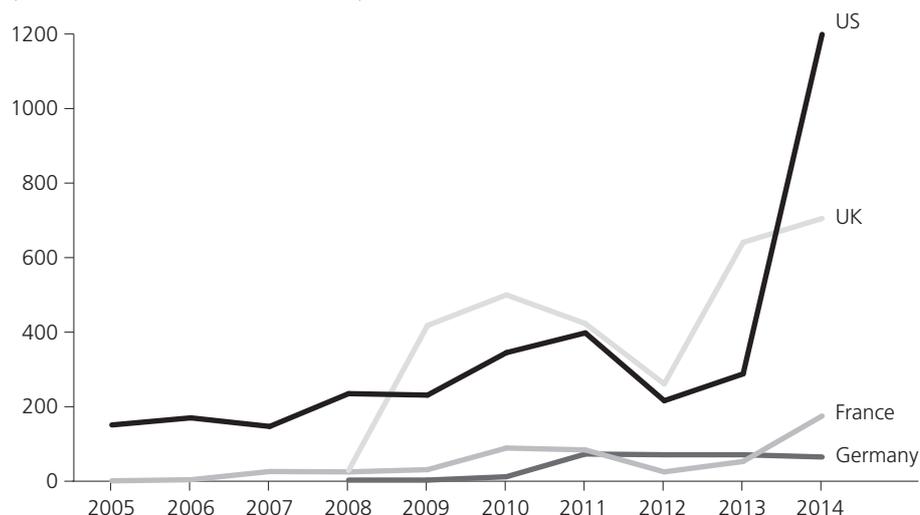
¹⁵⁹ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (February 2015) p25.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid* pp23–24.

¹⁶¹ Cordesman A, Peacock M, 'Iran, Evolving Threats, and Strategic Partnership in the Gulf', (CSIS presentation), 22 December 2014, p32 citing Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, IISS Manama Dialogue, As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Manama, Bahrain, 7 December 2013.

Figure 2: Values of arms exports to Saudi Arabia 2005–2014 (\$ million)

(Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database)



In June 2014, President Obama described the US approach to Yemen in similar terms:

*You look at a country like Yemen – a very impoverished country and one that has its own sectarian or ethnic divisions – there, we do have a committed partner in President Hadi and his government. And we have been able to help to develop their capacities without putting large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground at the same time as we’ve got enough CT, or counterterrorism capabilities that we’re able to go after folks that might try to hit our embassy or [...] to export terrorism into Europe or the United States [...]*¹⁶²

As revealed in such statements, the rationale that has underpinned the US approach in Yemen has overall been firstly to defeat its enemies in the country and secondly (fearing that a collapse into outright instability could allow such groups to grow significantly more capable of attacking US interests) to seek to ensure that the state is strong enough to uphold stability and combat enemies of the US successfully.¹⁶³

Based on AQAP’s track record of attempting attacks on the US homeland, the US has affirmed AQAP as the al-Qaeda affiliate “most likely to attempt transnational attacks against the United States”.¹⁶⁴ Its fears have been fanned by the emphasis in policy circles on the potential for Yemen to form a key part of a ‘new zone of instability’ hosting and training fighters hostile to the US.¹⁶⁵ Viewing Yemen through the lens of this threat, as suggested in Sharp’s analysis of US-Yemen relations, the Hadi administration was seen as having “managed to bring all the nation’s political factions together”. On the other hand, actors such as the Houthis would be categorised by the US as among Yemen’s ‘spoilers’, whose self-interested actions “to disrupt the system in pursuit of their own interests... may challenge outside powers, such as the United States, to reassess how they can exert influence inside Yemen in pursuit of their national security interests, such as counterterrorism”.¹⁶⁶

Media coverage of appearances by President Obama and Defense Department officials affirming the continuation of support to combat AQAP amid the Houthi takeover in Yemen further illustrate how success for the US in Yemen has come to be defined as victory in the ‘fight’ against AQAP:

Obama said the United States had not suspended its counterterrorism operations. “We continue to go after high-value targets inside of Yemen and we will continue to maintain the pressure which we require to keep the American people safe,” he said. “What we have

¹⁶² *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p12 citing US President Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq’, 19 June 2014.

¹⁶³ See for example Johnsen G, ‘How we lost Yemen’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 August 2013.

¹⁶⁴ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p8.

¹⁶⁵ See for example *op cit* Healy, Hill p3.

¹⁶⁶ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) pp2–3.

shown is that we can maintain the kind of pressure on these terrorist networks even in these kind of difficult environments,” he said. White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough defended the U.S. strategy on Sunday on television news shows, saying Washington needed to support its allies with equipment, training and security cooperation – not a huge number of troops. “We cannot be an occupying force ...”. The United States needed to support fighters on the ground, ...” so that they win this fight for themselves and for their own future. That’s how it’s going to be won.”¹⁶⁷

Given this portrayal of its engagement in Yemen to the public as a ‘fight’ that needs to be ‘won’, the US is portrayed as facing a binary choice in its Yemen strategy: whether to fight AQAP directly, or to do so through its allies.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, while there has been significant critical debate regarding US counter-terror policy in Yemen, much of this has been focused on whether the US objective should be to ‘contain’ or ‘eliminate’ AQAP, and for how long Yemen’s dysfunction will require the US to remain militarily active there – rather than questioning the direction of US strategy in more fundamental ways.¹⁶⁹

The predominance of counter-terror concerns over all other objectives is further illustrated by the inconsistency of US interest in Yemen. The sharp increase in US interest in Yemen following the attempted Christmas Day bombing of a US airliner in December 2009 illustrates this wider trend.¹⁷⁰ Saleh wasted no time in seeking huge increases in external support in order to stave off the terror threat,¹⁷¹ and as US General David Petraeus hurried to Sana’a with an offer of increased support in January 2010, US President Barack Obama affirmed that it was:

*“a priority to strengthen our partnership with the Yemeni government – training and equipping their security forces, sharing intelligence and working with them to strike al-Qaeda terrorists”.*¹⁷²

Non-security US and UK assistance leapt from \$22 million in 2008 to roughly \$130 million per year in 2010.¹⁷³ However, interest has waned at other moments.¹⁷⁴

The extent to which US national security interests have dominated its perspective on Yemen is further illustrated by reflecting that even US support for the ouster of Saleh has been ascribed to its fear that “the political unrest and resulting security vacuum were strengthening terrorist elements”¹⁷⁵ – rather than a conviction that Yemen’s people should be supported in their call for an end to autocratic and corrupt governance.

American interest in Yemen’s stability is also to an extent economic: roughly 3.5 to 4 per cent of global oil flows pass through the Bab el Mandab strait in Yemen’s waters, and thus a major breakdown in Yemen’s stability would have significant implications for global economic stability and energy security.

What is striking when examining the statements of US leaders on Yemen is the extent to which the country has been viewed as a battleground for the US to confront its enemies through ensuring the state is strong enough to maintain a degree of order.

While US strategy on Yemen – to the extent that there has been a cohesive strategy at all – has been dominated by its own security imperatives, many US officials have also understood the complex and intersecting nature of Yemen’s competing challenges – aware of the social, economic and political dysfunction that underpin its instability. Thus former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara K Bodine observes that US-Yemen policy has evolved to include a “focus on the underlying drivers of instability and extremism,

¹⁶⁷ *Op cit* Rampton.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) pp13–17, esp. p13.

¹⁷⁰ See *op cit* Nowicki p16–17 re haphazard approach.

¹⁷¹ *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ p31.

¹⁷² Kornblut A, DeYoung K, ‘Obama ties airliner plot to al-Qaeda’s Yemeni affiliate’, *Washington Post*, 3 January 2010.

¹⁷³ *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ p32.

¹⁷⁴ For example from 2004 to 2005 – see *op cit* Johnsen ‘Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen’ p6. See also Figure 1.

¹⁷⁵ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p31.

improve governance, combat corruption, and enhance economic opportunity” – even if her impression is that these elements are not effectively and coherently combined.¹⁷⁶ This analysis is consistent with the fact that in 2011 US development assistance began to exceed overt counter-terror and other security assistance.¹⁷⁷

2.3 United Kingdom

The UK’s approach to Yemen has been broadly similar to that of the US in recent years, combining security assistance and cooperation, the provision of aid in support of humanitarian and statebuilding objectives, and political engagement to encourage the emergence of a stable, inclusive political order that enjoys strong regional and international support.

Relatively little information is available on UK **military action** in Yemen. Reports in the *Telegraph* and the *Scottish Herald* suggested that the US was negotiating a role for the British Special Air Service (SAS) in counter-terror operations in Yemen as early as 2001.¹⁷⁸ The *Telegraph* reported in 2010 that UK SAS and Special Forces operatives have been deployed to Yemen in classified operations “where they operate as part of a counter-terrorism training unit, assisting in missions to kill or capture al-Qaeda leaders [...] as part of Britain’s military contribution to Yemen”.¹⁷⁹ Similar claims appeared in the *Mirror* in the same year.¹⁸⁰

In terms of **security cooperation**, with rule of law as one of four priorities in its Yemen portfolio, the Department for International Development (DFID) began a justice and policing programme in Yemen in 2008.¹⁸¹ Following the attempted Christmas Day bombing in 2009, the UK hosted a meeting of the Friends of Yemen in January 2010, including high level representatives from Yemen, the GCC, the US, EU, UN, World Bank and IMF, in which “all present committed to support the Government of Yemen in the fight against al-Qaeda” as well as “helping Yemen to address its broader security challenges, including through increased international support for the Yemen coast-guard”.¹⁸²

From 22 March 2013 the UK Government’s official website described “Supporting Yemen’s fight against terrorism” as a “World priority”.¹⁸³ More recently, according to UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (FCO PUSS) Tobias Ellwood, the UK’s three core objectives in Yemen in February 2015 were “to disrupt al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula and its ability to launch aviation-based attacks against the UK and partners, to address the urgent humanitarian situation facing the poorest people in that country, and to bring about greater stability through a more inclusive political system that respects the rule of law”.¹⁸⁴

In terms of practical UK security activities, during the post-2011 transition the UK was known to be helping both the US to restructure the defence ministry, and the EU the Interior Ministry.¹⁸⁵ According to the UK Government’s website, actions under its worldwide priority included “working with the Yemeni Government to counter the threat of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula”, with the UK Embassy playing “a leading

¹⁷⁶ *Op cit* Bodine, Greenfield p2.

¹⁷⁷ *Op cit* HRW “Between a drone and al-Qaeda” p28.

¹⁷⁸ *Telegraph*, ‘US military want SAS to attack bases in Yemen’, 16 December 2001; Bruce I, ‘British SAS troops prepare for raids on Yemen’, *The Herald*, 18 March 2002.

¹⁷⁹ *Telegraph*, ‘Cargo bomb plot: SAS hunting al-Qaeda in Yemen’, 2 November 2010; *Telegraph*, ‘Anwar al-Awlaki: MI5 warns of the al-Qaeda preacher targeting Britain’, 11 June 2010.

¹⁸⁰ *Mirror*, ‘Crack SAS team to hunt al-Qaeda terrorists – Exclusive’, 3 January 2010.

¹⁸¹ Bennett J, Duncan D, Rothmann I, Zeitlyn S, Hill G, ‘Evaluation Of DFID Country Programmes: Yemen’, (Evaluation Report EV706, February 2010), px.

¹⁸² UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband, ‘Statement on Afghanistan and Yemen’, House of Commons, 1 February 2010.

¹⁸³ UK Government, ‘Supporting Yemen’s fight against terrorism’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/priority/supporting-yemen-s-fight-against-terrorism>, (first published 22 March 2013, withdrawn 11 May 2015), accessed 8 June 2015.

¹⁸⁴ UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Tobias Ellwood, Backbench Business: Yemen’, Westminster Hall, 24 February 2015.

¹⁸⁵ *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen’s Military-Security Reform’ p15; in 2014, Bodine suggested the UK’s was primarily working with the Interior Ministry (*op cit* Bodine, Greenfield p6).

role in guiding reforms in the defence, security and police sectors, encouraging and supporting activities that reduce the threat of radicalisation and terrorism”.¹⁸⁶ Ellwood further stated in January 2015: “We... have conflict pool money going into the country, and we are providing security assistance to the Yemeni armed forces. We provided over £173 million from 2011 to 2014, and then we committed a further £78 million for this year – 2014–15. That funding comes from the development stabilisation programme.”¹⁸⁷ Another hint at the UK’s security relationship with Yemen is provided by the UK Parliament’s Committees on Arms Export Controls 2015 report, which details that there were 12 extant licences for UK arms exports to Yemen, including Standard Individual Export Licences worth £1,596,408.¹⁸⁸

Given the collapse of the Government during renewed Houthi offensives in 2015, Ellwood intimated in February 2015 that the UK had “temporarily suspended counter-terrorism capacity-building activity with the Yemeni security forces”, while “exploring ways to re-engage with them in such activity, in a human rights-compliant manner.”¹⁸⁹ The UK’s worldwide priority of ‘Supporting Yemen’s fight against terrorism’ was withdrawn on 11 May 2015.¹⁹⁰

Although the UK’s approach has evidently included a security dimension focused on countering the terror threat in Yemen, in fact the UK’s engagement grew and evolved to the point where it became an advocate of the adoption of a ‘Comprehensive Approach’ – streamlining political, economic, social and security dimensions – by all international actors engaging in Yemen.¹⁹¹ This approach continues today, with the UK espousing an overall vision of ‘a more stable, secure and prosperous Yemen’.¹⁹² However, the rise of the Houthis and the Saudi-led intervention to combat them has lessened the focus on combating AQAP and IS, and the viability of a more comprehensive approach, for the time being.

In terms of the UK’s **development** approach, DFID only established a country presence in Yemen in late 2004,¹⁹³ and its financial allocations have grown significantly: from £2 million in 2003, they reached £20 million in 2008–2009, and peaked at just over £81 million in 2013–14.¹⁹⁴ Although threatened by the ongoing violence, the allocation for 2015–2016 was £72 million in December 2014.¹⁹⁵

The rationale for the scale-up in UK development assistance included concern at the “downward political and social trends that threatened regional as well as national stability” and “high poverty levels and low levels of aid per capita by UK and other donors”.¹⁹⁶ Part of the rationale underpinning the increase in DFID support to Yemen was also the application of a ‘fragile states lens’ to the country. A ‘Strategic Conflict Assessment’ and a ‘Drivers of Change’ study were prepared in 2005, while a Conflict Audit was carried out in 2008. Despite this analysis, an evaluation of DFID’s programme in February 2010 noted that no overarching DFID strategy for Yemen had yet been put in place and that “DFID had neither a clear strategy on how to build donor coherence around conflict prevention, nor for taking forward the recommendations emerging from the analytical work”.¹⁹⁷ However, as early as August 2007, DFID had put in place a 10-year Development Partnership Arrangement (DPA) with the Government of

¹⁸⁶ *Op cit* UK Government ‘Supporting Yemen’s fight against terrorism’.

¹⁸⁷ UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Tobias Ellwood, ‘Oral Answers to Questions: Yemen’, House of Commons, 21 January 2015.

¹⁸⁸ UK Parliament, ‘Extant arms exports exceed £5 billion’, 20 March 2015.

¹⁸⁹ *Op cit* UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Tobias Ellwood ‘Backbench Business: Yemen’.

¹⁹⁰ *Op cit* UK Government ‘Supporting Yemen’s fight against terrorism’.

¹⁹¹ See e.g. Chatham House, ‘Yemen, the Region and the World: Perceptions of Regional and International Interests’, (Meeting summary, 6 April 2009), p4.

¹⁹² DFID Yemen, ‘Operational Plan 2011–2016’, (Updated December 2014), (London: Department for International Development), p4.

¹⁹³ *Op cit* Bennett, Duncan, Rothmann, Zeitlyn, Hill pviii.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid* pviii, *op cit* DFID Yemen p8.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁹⁶ *Op cit* Bennett, Duncan, Rothmann, Zeitlyn, Hill ppviii–ix.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid* p10

Yemen.¹⁹⁸ Beyond the rule of law assistance mentioned above, the DFID portfolio at the time included education, health, other social services, water resources management and technical support programmes focused on public financial management and economic investment.¹⁹⁹

The overall goal of DFID's programme in December 2014 was "to help Yemen prevent and manage crises and address the drivers of conflict and poverty by addressing urgent humanitarian needs, delivering basic services, and supporting political and economic reform". Under this, it focused on three objectives:

1. Respond to and manage conflict by addressing immediate and underlying humanitarian needs, building resilience, and delivering basic services.
2. Tackle the drivers of instability by supporting the political transition and political reform.
3. Support economic reform to increase citizens' confidence in government and lay the groundwork for longer-term development.²⁰⁰

Although the 2007 DPA did not yet include budget support to the Government,²⁰¹ DFID styled itself as "very much a leader on aid effectiveness in Yemen",²⁰² and its 2010 evaluation encouraged it to identify "alternatives that facilitate government ownership and commitment to reform".²⁰³ At the international level, the UK was instrumental in promoting Yemeni ownership of its development process and donor support to meet the Yemeni government's financing needs. In November 2006, it hosted a Consultative Group meeting in London that resulted in increased donor pledges of approximately \$4.7 billion for Yemen – ("over 85 per cent of the government's external financing needs").²⁰⁴ The UK went on to co-chair the Friends of Yemen group, helping to convene major international meetings to strengthen international coordination and support, including the conference in September 2012 that generated aid pledges of \$7.8 billion for Yemen.²⁰⁵ DFID's Operational Plan for Yemen 2014–2016 highlights the UK's continuing role as a "leader in encouraging donors to pool support to the government through World Bank or UN-administered funds".²⁰⁶

This reflects the emphasis placed in the UK's **political approach** to Yemen on fostering coherence between Western actors and GCC members in support of efforts by Yemen's government to maintain stability and institute reforms. Thus the Friends of Yemen initiative fostered under Gordon Brown's premiership facilitated an agreement among its members in January 2010 to support Yemen's fight against al-Qaeda and assist with other security challenges, improve the disbursement of aid, and support the Yemen Government's national reform agenda – with a particular emphasis on economic reforms.²⁰⁷

When the 2011 crisis emerged, the UK was engaged alongside the US and others to encourage a peaceful transition away from the Saleh regime, that would enable space for inclusive dialogue while continuing to uphold stability and contain the threat from al-Qaeda. UK support to the political process included a commitment of £1 million to support the establishment of Jamal Benomar as the United Nations special representative,²⁰⁸ while DFID provided support via the UN to the NDC, the constitution drafting process and preparations for the parliamentary elections envisaged for 2015.²⁰⁹ Additionally, the Foreign Office supported work to encourage youth engagement.²¹⁰

198 *Ibid* pviii; *op cit* Hill p8.

199 *Op cit* Bennett, Duncan, Rothmann, Zeitlyn, Hill pviii.

200 *Op cit* DFID Yemen p4.

201 *Op cit* Bennett, Duncan, Rothmann, Zeitlyn, Hill pviii.

202 *Ibid* pxiv.

203 *Ibid* pxvi.

204 *Ibid* pix

205 *Op cit* DFID Yemen p7.

206 *Ibid*.

207 *Op cit* UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband 'Statement on Afghanistan and Yemen'.

208 *Op cit* UK Special Envoy to Yemen Sir Alan Duncan 'Backbench Business: Yemen'.

209 Smith B, 'Yemen: back to the brink', 13 February 2015, (House of Commons Library, SNIA/7102), p7.

210 *Ibid*.

Thus the UK had invested in creating a political settlement after 2011 that offered continuity and stability while enabling greater levels of inclusion (even if these ultimately proved insufficient). When this settlement began to crumble in the face of violence from the Houthis and other factions during 2014 and 2015, the UK encouraged the development of a new peace agreement, called for an end to the violence and supported the legitimacy of President Hadi's transitional government. In this context the UK also supported the Saudi-led airstrikes against the Houthis. Not only has the UK supplied arms and military advice,²¹¹ according to Security Council Report it also played an important political role at the UN Security Council in authorising the Saudi-led bombardment:

*The UK, the penholder on Yemen, essentially ceded the role to Jordan and the GCC, which drafted the initial texts of resolution 2201 adopted in February, a 22 March presidential statement and the 14 April resolution 2216. [...] By May other members' support of Jordan and of GCC states' positions had dissipated, apparently because of concerns over the conflict's humanitarian impact and open-endedness of the Saudi-led military intervention. In hindsight, some members felt that the Council had adopted a resolution that had been largely drafted by a party to the conflict and some have privately expressed regret over its adoption. [...] As of May, the UK, reasserted itself as penholder. [...] The Council in its statements has repeatedly urged the parties to negotiate without preconditions and has endorsed the Secretary-General's calls for unconditional humanitarian pauses. [...] However, there does not appear to be much appetite among members for a new resolution. [...] for members close to Saudi Arabia, there may be a reluctance to call for a ceasefire [...]*²¹²

The **rationale** underpinning the UK's approach appears to consist of three core components: first, the view of Yemen as a fragile state whose descent into chaos would create a platform for al-Qaeda and other transnational threats to grow and threaten both the region and the UK and its allies; second, faith in the doctrine that, to achieve 'aid effectiveness' in 'fragile states', external actors should offer dependable support to the government's efforts to reform and build the institutions with which to achieve stability; third, the need to adopt an approach to Yemen that would be supported by the UK's key ally and essential partner in the region, Saudi Arabia.

The fear that Yemen's descent into chaos would provide a platform for terrorists has been very consistently and powerfully voiced by both influential actors and decision-makers as a basis for UK policy in Yemen over a number of years. In September 2010, Jonathan Evans, the head of British domestic security service MI5, warned of the risk posed to the UK by terrorist plots hatched in Yemen,²¹³ while analysts were highlighting the fears of a new zone of instability hosting a core of trained militants hostile to the West.²¹⁴ In the UK as elsewhere in the West, media coverage on Yemen is overwhelmingly focused on its role as a hub for al-Qaeda's local branch to grow and launch attacks against the West. Thus, to pick but one illustrative example, the *Guardian's* coverage of Hadi's resignation in January 2015 highlighted Yemen as a security vacuum in which jihadists could thrive, noting the capacity of AQAP to "keep people in our capitals up at night".²¹⁵

Such fears have been similarly prominent in shaping political debate on Yemen across the UK political spectrum. During the crisis in which Hadi was forced from office in January 2015, MPs on both sides of the House of Commons echoed this view. An influential opposition MP warned that, "If Yemen falls, the front line of the conflict will be the streets of London, Birmingham and Leicester. We simply cannot allow this beautiful country to become a haven for terrorism and violence."²¹⁶ To this, the UK's

²¹¹ *Op cit* Rees.

²¹² Security Council Report, 'August 2015 Monthly Forecast', 31 July 2015.

²¹³ *Op cit* Healy, Hill p3.

²¹⁴ *Ibid* p3.

²¹⁵ Chulov M, Yuhua A, Ackerman S, 'Regime collapse threatens Yemen's key role in US counter-terrorism strategy', *Guardian*, 23 January 2015.

²¹⁶ Speech by Keith Vaz MP, 'Oral Answers to Questions: Yemen', House of Commons, 21 January 2015.

Special Envoy to Yemen agreed that “the danger is that Yemen will end up without a legitimate Government and will become ungoverned anarchic space, leading to unchecked terrorist training, civil war, proxy conflict and humanitarian disaster”.²¹⁷

Tied to the overriding imperative for the UK to have a partner in countering terror threats, the second element of the UK’s rationale for approaching Yemen has been the idea that, as a fragile state, Yemen above all required dependable support to the government’s efforts to reform and build institutions. In 2003, despite acknowledging popular disenchantment with the Yemeni Government and the risk of the Yemeni Government “us[ing] the cover of counter-terrorism to pursue its own, unrelated political objectives”, the International Crisis Group portrayed the Yemeni Government in these optimistic terms:

*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.*²¹⁸

It thus urged external actors to “Respect the sovereignty and authority of the central government by channelling financial and other assistance through it”. Similarly, in 2008, a briefing by Chatham House argued that security concerns would need to remain paramount in the context of rising Islamist influence in Yemen – and encouraged Western governments to approach the context as “donors”, and avoid “volatile aid flows” that could “compromise reformers who are pushing for controversial measures”.²¹⁹

A similar sentiment was strongly espoused by UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband as the UK pursued the Friends of Yemen initiative in the wake of the narrowly averted Christmas Day bombing of 2009, arguing that progress in Yemen, as in Afghanistan, depended on: “coherent plans confidently advanced by sovereign governments with huge support from the international community”.²²⁰

After the 2011 transition and in the wake of renewed challenges to the state, the sense that support to the incumbent government was the UK’s only feasible option continued to predominate. According to Labour MP Keith Vaz, “The long-term answer to al-Qaeda is a strong Yemeni Government, with whom we should have a close, ongoing relationship”, and similarly, President Hadi was “the only individual who maintains democratic legitimacy in Yemen’s political system”.²²¹ Likewise the position of the UK Government has been to affirm “the legitimate government of President Hadi” – which is seen as “a key partner for delivery on counter-terrorism objectives”.²²²

For this rationale to be sustained, it has been necessary to emphasise the view that Yemen’s government is both legitimate and has a serious commitment to defeating terrorism and implementing reforms. This emphasis on the Government’s legitimacy and political will has also been complemented by the view that opponents of the Yemeni Government are relatively illegitimate. Thus, commenting on the Houthi takeover, FCO PUSSE Tobias Ellwood affirmed, “We cannot accept the Houthi use of military means to achieve political aims.”²²³ In the same debate, alluding to its possible Iranian backing, another MP described the Houthis as an “evil organisation”.²²⁴ Although one parliamentarian did “see the potential for the encroachment of extremism into some deeply impoverished communities who had little else to survive for and were easily tempted by extremist voices that offered, on the face of it, some form of hope out of their despair”,²²⁵ the idea that those who opposed the Yemeni state might

²¹⁷ Speech by UK Special Envoy to Yemen Sir Alan Duncan MP, ‘Oral Answers to Questions: Yemen’, House of Commons, 21 January 2015.

²¹⁸ *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence’ ppi, iii.

²¹⁹ *Op cit* Hill pp8, 10.

²²⁰ *Op cit* UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband ‘Statement on Afghanistan and Yemen’.

²²¹ Speech by Keith Vaz MP, ‘Backbench Business: Yemen’, Westminster Hall, 24 February 2015.

²²² *Op cit* UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Tobias Ellwood, ‘Backbench Business: Yemen’.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Rehman Chishti MP, ‘Backbench Business: Yemen’, Westminster Hall, 24 February 2015.

²²⁵ Tim Loughton MP, ‘Backbench Business: Yemen’, Westminster Hall, 24 February 2015.

have legitimate political grievances that would question the overall logic underpinning UK engagement (i.e. backing the Yemeni state against its opponents) has been largely absent from UK parliamentary debate on Yemen in recent years.

While the tendency to view the Yemeni state as a legitimate partner has been underpinned by the UK's focus on Yemen as a terror threat, the view among UK actors that armed opposition by Houthis and other rebels is also illegitimate may also derive from the need to define an approach to Yemen that is palatable to regional powers – notably the GCC and Saudi Arabia.

UK policymakers are aware that they can achieve little in Yemen without at least the acquiescence of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia views the Houthi movement with suspicion due to alleged backing for the 'Shia' group from its chief regional rival, Iran. Shia-Sunni sectarian divisions are relatively insignificant in Yemeni culture, and non-Shia Yemenis have clearly played a role in the Houthis' spread as a military force. The exact role played by Iran in support of the Houthis also remains unclear. But despite this, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated repeatedly that it is willing to go to great lengths – including using significant military, political and financial muscle – to curb Houthi influence in Yemen.

UK policymakers occasionally evince discomfort regarding Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policies – but have a variety of reasons to align with Saudi policy on Yemen. One reason for this is Saudi influence in Yemen. The Kingdom is capable of investing much greater financial resources within Yemen than any Western actor, and has significantly stronger and more diverse relations with many Yemeni actors. Similarly, unlike Western actors, Saudi Arabia is able to coalesce other members of the GCC in support of its approach.

A second reason is that, despite the acknowledgement of the Saudi history of financial and moral support to extremist groups,²²⁶ according to the UK parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Saudi Arabia "shares many of the UK's goals in the region and it is important to work closely with Saudi Arabia on these shared outcomes."²²⁷ In Yemen, the common interest of Saudi Arabia in containing the threat from al-Qaeda, which is as strongly inimical to the Saudi regime as it is to the US and the UK, is an important factor in underpinning Western-Saudi cooperation. Thus, in 2013, stabilisation efforts in Yemen were seen as "a good example of UK-Saudi cooperation to try to bring stabilization and to promote development in a country that is key to Saudi Arabia's interests", and, it was hoped, "could act as a model of high-profile and substantial British support for locally-led solutions to regional problems."²²⁸

At the same time, a third and fundamental reason for the UK to support the Saudi approach in Yemen is the belief among UK decision-makers that they need to maintain strong cooperative relations with Saudi Arabia at all costs. Thus the Foreign Affairs Committee (2013) notes "Saudi Arabia's importance across a wide range of areas", including as:

*a regional influence, a global religious influence, a key counter-terrorism partner, a key player in global energy markets, a major market for British goods and services and a country visited by tens of thousands of Britons every year.*²²⁹

In particular, the Saudi relationship has great economic value to the UK: Saudi Arabia is the UK's eighteenth largest market, with bilateral trade worth £15 billion per annum; and the UK has, like the US and other EU Member States, maximised its arms sales to Saudi Arabia in recent years,²³⁰ granting export licences for almost £4 billion worth of defence equipment from 2008 to 2013. In 2015, extant licences to export arms from the

²²⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, 'The UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain', 12 November 2013, paras 82–83.

²²⁷ *Ibid* para 96.

²²⁸ *Ibid* para 96.

²²⁹ *Ibid* para 100.

²³⁰ See Figure 2; so France: RFI, 'France and Saudi Arabia sign contracts worth 10 billion euros', RFI, 13 October 2015.

UK to Saudi Arabia were reported to be worth roughly £1.68 billion. The latter point also highlights the importance of the extensive defence cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the UK, which is “seen to ‘underpin’ the entire bilateral relationship”.²³¹

2.4 European Union

Counter-terror and statebuilding are high on the European Union’s external action agenda. While Member States have the primary responsibility for combating terrorism, EU institutions undertake various initiatives through the instruments, mechanisms and processes at their disposal. In Yemen, the EU’s overall approach to counter-terror and stabilisation is in line with the ‘prevent’ strand of its Counter-Terrorism Strategy,²³² which was defined in the Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism and stresses the need to “promote good governance, rule of law, human rights, democracy, education, economic development, security sector reform, and stability by means of political dialogues and [...] assistance programmes”.²³³

Whereas development cooperation between the EU and Yemen started in 1978, engagement increased and took a political dimension as the EU recognised the threat posed by instability and terrorism to the country and the region as a whole. As such, in 2004 the EU launched a political dialogue to exchange information on security, counter-terrorism, and human rights – and contribute to security and the fight against terrorism.²³⁴

The EU’s approach has been based on the increasing threat posed by terrorism in Yemen and the broader region, and the view that insufficient capacities are what has hampered the government’s efforts to address the instability and insecurity plaguing the country. Accordingly, drawing on the various tools at its disposal, the EU set out to provide statebuilding assistance, and support to stability, security and good governance in a comprehensive manner.²³⁵ The EU’s approach to statebuilding combines support to democracy and human rights, the rule of law and good governance, as well as accountability and transparency of government institutions – including in particular the civilian security sector.

Specifically, in 2009, EU Council conclusions underlined the importance of addressing the security, political and economic challenges facing the country, and noted that the EU would “consider stepping up its comprehensive assistance towards Yemen, especially on security-related matters including in the fields of counter-terrorism, territorial and border control and small arms and light weapons”.²³⁶ A Comprehensive Approach to Yemen was subsequently adopted to guide the EU’s short- and long-term engagement in Yemen on the political and economic fronts. Amid increasing regional instability in 2011, and following the adoption of the Agenda for Change, EU assistance in Yemen was scaled up and programming increasingly focused on statebuilding.²³⁷ In turn, the EU became the largest donor in the governance sector in Yemen.²³⁸

To support its statebuilding and good governance efforts, the EU has made use of the full range of instruments at its disposal. Alongside political dialogue, the EU’s geographic and thematic financing instruments supported its objectives in Yemen and supported actions by some of its Member States. Under the Development Cooperation Instrument, through which the majority of development aid to Yemen is channelled,

²³¹ *Op cit* Foreign Affairs Committee para 75.

²³² Council of the EU, ‘the European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy’, 30 November 2005.

²³³ Council of the EU, ‘Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism’, 19 May 2014.

²³⁴ Council of the EU, ‘Joint Declaration on Political Dialogue between the European Union and the Republic of Yemen’, 6 July 2004.

²³⁵ ADE and COWI on behalf of the European Commission, ‘Evaluation of EU Cooperation with Yemen 2002–2012: Final Report Volume I – Main Report’, March 2015.

²³⁶ Council of the EU, ‘Council Conclusions on Yemen’, 2971st External Relations Council meeting, 27 October 2009.

²³⁷ *Op cit* ADE and COWI.

²³⁸ European Commission, ‘Annual Action Plan for Yemen – Action Fiche “Yemen Fisheries Support Programme”’, 2010.

the European Commission's primary aims are to reduce poverty and contribute to socio-economic development by strengthening the delivery of basic health and welfare services and fostering private sector development. However, to achieve progress on these fronts, it recognises that "good governance is a prerequisite, in particular in the areas of democracy, respect of human rights, and the rule of law in the administration and judiciary, including the fight against corruption".²³⁹

Since the early 2000s, EU country strategies for Yemen have thus prioritised interventions in the area of good governance, democracy and respect for human rights.²⁴⁰ In particular, under the governance objective of its 2007–2013 strategy – for which €23 million were allocated – the EU set out to (a) support democracy through the strengthening of the parliament and (b) bolster the capacities of state institutions to implement national reform priorities.²⁴¹ Notably, €9.5 million were allocated to a programme to strengthen the juvenile justice system, improve the law enforcement capacity of the police, increase respect for human rights, and modernise public administration in Yemen.²⁴²

In 2013, the EU country strategy was revised and extended for the period 2014–2015 to support implementation of the governance and socio-economic reforms foreseen in the Transitional Programme for Stabilisation and Development. The EU allocated €46 million to support the ongoing reform of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and its civil security institutions, build trust between the population and the security forces, and increase the capacity of the state to formulate and implement structural reforms.²⁴³ Notably, the EU stressed that "good governance in the security field and the strengthening of legitimate, service oriented and resilient – non-partisan – security and justice institutions is an essential part of the Transition".²⁴⁴ Through its focus on building up state institutions in the rule of law and strengthening state-society relations, the EU's stated aim is to increase the government's capacity to address instability, contribute to social peace and address the root causes of terrorism.

The EU's Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) supports conflict prevention, crisis response and peacebuilding activities (including counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation) – notably by strengthening the capacity of law enforcement and judicial and civil authorities involved in the fight against terrorism.²⁴⁵ In 2011 the EU funded a €2 million project under this instrument to strengthen the Yemen Government's capacity to address the security and humanitarian needs associated with mixed migration, as well as a €15 million project to strengthen law enforcement, counter-terrorism legislation and civilian conflict prevention. In particular, the latter programme aimed to (a) support the reform of the criminal justice system including the counter-terrorism legal framework; (b) improve law enforcement and security by facilitating information exchange and inter-agency cooperation under the MoI, enhance border controls and operational capacity of state actors; and (c) support civil society work on conflict prevention and counter-radicalism at community level.

Because of the political crisis, activities in support of state institutions were suspended and support to civil society became more important and has continued since. For instance, under this component, the EU funded a project aimed at facilitating a dialogue between the administration and civil society to create a multi-layered approach to security sector governance in Yemen.²⁴⁶ In addition, under the IcSP, the EU has prioritised conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities to address the root

²³⁹ European Commission, 'Yemen Strategy Paper 2007–2013'.

²⁴⁰ European Commission, 'Yemen – Country Strategy Paper 2002–2006'.

²⁴¹ European Commission, 'Mid-term review of the EC-Yemen Development Strategy 2007–2013 – preparation of the Multiannual Indicative Programme 2011–2013'.

²⁴² European Commission, 'Annual Action Plan for Yemen – Action Fiche "Support to Juvenile Justice, Rule of Law and Public Administration Modernisation"', 2008.

²⁴³ European Commission, 'Draft Multiannual indicative programme: Yemen 2014–2015'.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Official Journal of the European Union, 'Regulation No 230/2014 establishing an instrument contributing to stability and peace', 11 March 2014.

²⁴⁶ European Commission, '2011 Annual Report on the Instrument for Stability', 24 July 2012.

causes of terrorism. For instance, a recent call for proposals called for actions supporting national civil society actors in mediation, dialogue and reconciliation, as a way to address the underlying factors of radicalisation and violent extremism.²⁴⁷

Recognising that instability and insecurity in Yemen pose a regional threat, notably to the Horn of Africa region, the EU also adopted a Counter-Terrorism Action Plan for the Horn of Africa and Yemen in 2012.²⁴⁸ In June 2015, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator announced that the implementation of the Action Plan had been “put on hold due to the current explosive political situation”.²⁴⁹

In spite of EU commitments and contributions to statebuilding and resilience in Yemen, the challenging internal context has negatively impacted on the implementation of EU programmes and on the sustainability of its action.²⁵⁰ Therefore, the EU has also been a vocal supporter of statebuilding in Yemen on the political front. In particular, following the 2011–2012 revolutions, it pledged €172 million in support of the NDC to ensure the agreement and implementation of an inclusive political transition in Yemen.²⁵¹ It called upon the Government of Yemen to embark on a national political and economic reform process to support security and stability in the country, and expressed its readiness to support such efforts. Notably, the EU funded the deployment of a Security Sector Reform (SSR) expert team to assist the MoI to elaborate a comprehensive SSR plan.²⁵²

Similarly, in response to the current conflict, the EU has expressed that only a broad political consensus through peaceful and inclusive negotiations, setting a clear path towards a constitutional referendum, elections and the formation of a Government of National Unity can provide a sustainable solution to the current crisis and that military action is not a solution.²⁵³ While programming is complicated by the current context, the EU has suspended most of its programmes and is involved in the political negotiations in support of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen. However, unlike most other donors to Yemen, the EU has made efforts to continue support to civil society amid suspension of other assistance. Since 2014, it has also allocated €74 million to assist communities affected by acute malnutrition and the victims of conflict and forced displacement.²⁵⁴ Until programming can resume, the EU is in the process of reviewing its strategy for engagement in Yemen, which is notably informed by a recent evaluation of EU cooperation with Yemen from 2002 to 2012 and an internal conflict analysis and needs assessment exercise. In all likelihood, the overall approach of the EU will be maintained, funds having already been earmarked to provide statebuilding and SSR assistance. Moreover, at the time of writing, the EU remains increasingly concerned about the risks posed by extremist and terrorist groups in Yemen and the region, at a time when it is urgently seeking to step up its external action on countering terrorism.²⁵⁵

2.5 Section summary

Overall, since serious terror threats first became manifest in Yemen, Western actors have invested significant effort to stabilise the situation and fight the terror threat in the country. Alongside direct military action to assassinate key militants (by the US), Western actors backed the Government of Yemen under both Saleh and Hadi. Their support combined assistance to the security apparatus to fight, prosecute or punish

²⁴⁷ European Commission, ‘Peace-building Partnership Annual Action Programme 2014, Guidelines for grant applicants (Ref: EuropeAid/ICSP/2015/136-728/DD/ACT/YE)’, April 2015.

²⁴⁸ European Commission and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, ‘Joint Communication to the Council: EU Counter-terrorism Action Plan for the Horn of Africa and Yemen’, 31 August 2012.

²⁴⁹ Statement by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator to the Council/European Council, 10 June 2015.

²⁵⁰ *Op cit* ADE and COWI.

²⁵¹ Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Friends of Yemen meeting, 7 March 2013.

²⁵² European External Action Service, ‘Yemen – Crisis Response in 2012’, 31 December 2012.

²⁵³ Statement of the High Representative and Vice President Federica Mogherini on the situation in Yemen, 26 March 2015.

²⁵⁴ European Commission, ‘Yemen ECHO Factsheet’, September 2015.

²⁵⁵ Council of the EU, ‘Council Conclusions on Counter-Terrorism’, Foreign Affairs Council meeting, 9 February 2015.

terrorists with capacity-building support to institutions, premised on the idea that these could address the weakness of a willing but fragile state.

Although Western interest peaked during periods when the terror threat was very visible, it has waned in interim periods. While the West proved willing to press President Saleh to step down when his pariah status became undeniable, and has supported inclusion of some traditionally marginalised voices in dialogue on transition and reform, consistent and effective encouragement to undertake meaningful reforms is not evident from the evidence we have examined. There has been some investment in promoting reform through programmes primarily focused on technical support to institutions, but in the wider context of significant reinforcement of the state and its security apparatus. More thoroughgoing efforts to engage with local actors and support wider Yemeni society to press for constructive change have been lacking. Agreeing to Saleh's immunity likewise enabled his continuing destabilising role after 2011.

The combination of military strikes plus security, development and political support to the Yemeni state reflects a domestic discourse in the West that primarily defines Yemen as a 'threat': an unstable context that plays host to al-Qaeda and other dangerous groups, which must be defeated by backing the West's ally, the Yemeni state – at all costs. Western strategy in Yemen has also been determined in part by wider regional 'imperatives' such as cultivating good relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies in the face of threats from Iran and a number of other actors.

The next section analyses these approaches and their impacts on peace and conflict dynamics in Yemen.

3

Policy and impact analysis

THIS SECTION OFFERS AN ANALYSIS OF THE WESTERN APPROACHES (described in section 2) and their impacts on Yemen and its conflict dynamics (as described in section 1). While it notes positive impacts where they have been identified, it suggests significant negative impacts on the context in Yemen. Analysis of Western impacts has been grouped around four key points:

- Western approaches configured around counter-terror and stabilisation imperatives have exacerbated Yemen's key conflict drivers – most notably by failing to prioritise governance reform and reinforcing a dysfunctional state.
- The security partnership with the Yemeni state has been based on questionable assumptions and has had perverse outcomes.
- The use of force in Yemen has brought limited strategic benefit but carries an excessive cost.
- Western actors have placed themselves on the wrong side of history in Yemen – and by aligning with injustice they have predictably fuelled rebellions that will be very difficult to extinguish.

The impacts presented in this section have, overall, served to increase instability, and concomitantly the threat posed by militants opposed to Western actors based in Yemen, in predictable ways, and therefore help to inform the analysis of potential peacebuilding alternatives provided in section 4.

3.1 Exacerbating key conflict drivers and reinforcing a dysfunctional state

Western policymakers – especially in the US but also in the UK and elsewhere – have conceived of Yemen primarily as a battleground in which to confront terrorists and other threats through ensuring the state is strong enough to maintain order. However, as noted in section 1, the central driver of Yemen's multiple and overlapping conflicts in the past two decades has been the exclusive, unresponsive, unfair and unaccountable nature of its dysfunctional state. Addressing this depends upon the political will of power-holders to undertake reforms, but the evidence suggests that Western actors have failed to conceptualise and articulate their interests as lying primarily in achievement of a sustainable peace in Yemen, and have proved unable to prioritise addressing the grievances of Yemen's people over counter-terror imperatives.

Because of this, Western actors have provided not only perverse incentives against reform – but even the practical means for elites to resist pressure to reform. As grievances based on state dysfunction have worsened, armed opposition to the state and insecurity has grown on several fronts (Houthis, Southern Secessionists, tribes, AQAP/AAS). Thus the short-term instinct to sustain the state to contain the dangers posed by its opponents at all costs has ultimately multiplied the instability it was intended to suppress and frustrated the potential for more meaningful transformation through less violent means. In spite of this, Western leaders have continued to insist that their only option lies in ‘winning the fight’ in Yemen hand in hand with the state (even as the state has been collapsing).

As has been noted, the Saleh era was notable for the massive scale of theft of public resources by elites in control of the Yemeni state and military. Dissent was controlled by manipulation of the judicial system as well as the state’s ‘anti-corruption’ apparatus.²⁵⁶ The state also repressed independent journalism and hounded reporters who sought to report on public grievances and state behaviour, such as its repressive approach to the Houthi rebellion.²⁵⁷ Popular rebellions were put down by the regime with indiscriminate use of military force, including aerial bombardment and artillery shelling that caused, according to HRW, “high civilian casualties”.²⁵⁸ Government forces routinely opened fire on unarmed protestors in the years preceding 2011, usually “without warning” and from short-range.²⁵⁹

Even in 2003, the risks of the counter-terror agenda becoming a pretext for internal repression in the interests of Yemen’s elites – with the very damaging potential to expand grievances and rebellion – were clear. According to International Crisis Group (ICG), in 2003, the fight against terrorism had fed into “direct clashes between the military and tribal forces”, and tribal groups were already “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 government control in order to interfere in tribal affairs”. The government had by this time also “detained several hundred Yemenis and non-Yemenis”, placing them “in prison for extended periods without charges”.²⁶⁰ This triggered retaliatory bomb attacks against intelligence services in Sana’a in 2002, apparently undertaken by a combination of “tribesmen trying to free their imprisoned relatives, possibly with some support from al-Qaeda activists”.²⁶¹

The same 2003 ICG report also notes that:

*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.*²⁶²

While Western actors evidently did intermittently apply pressure on the Saleh regime on governance and corruption issues, Saleh appears to have been able to use the prime importance placed by the West on counter-terror to secure ever-increasing volumes of assistance while neutralising pressure for progress in other areas. Thus, according to Johnsen, in 2005 the World Bank and the US cut aid to Yemen because of poor progress on anti-corruption and democratisation.²⁶³ Having apparently expected praise and renewed support given his regime’s progress in tackling al-Qaeda up to that point,²⁶⁴ Saleh was shocked by this,²⁶⁵ and apparently learnt his lesson: rather

²⁵⁶ See *op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ p22, *op cit* van Veen.

²⁵⁷ HRW, “‘A Life-Threatening Career’ Attacks on journalists under Yemen’s New Government’ (2013), pp20–23.

²⁵⁸ *Op cit* Ahmed pp2–3; for specific examples, see e.g. Amnesty International, ‘Amnesty International Report 2008 – Yemen’, 28 May 2008 alongside comparable reports for other years.

²⁵⁹ *Op cit* Ahmed.

²⁶⁰ *Op cit* ICG ‘Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence’ p24.

²⁶¹ *Ibid* p24.

²⁶² *Ibid* p25.

²⁶³ *Op cit* Johnsen ‘Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen’ p11.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid* p9.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid* p11.

than redoubling governance reform efforts, his regime apparently reacted by allowing al-Qaeda to regroup.²⁶⁶ In subsequent years, the Government of Yemen then ramped up its demands for external stabilisation support to ever-higher levels. As the threat from al-Qaeda in Yemen spiked following the attempted plane bombing on Christmas Day 2009, “requests for aid by the Yemeni government ranged from \$US1.2 billion to a staggering \$US44.5 billion over five years, or over half of the country’s [...] budget every year for the next five years.”²⁶⁷

In response, the US and the UK publicly acknowledged that, in the words of Hillary Clinton, “we cannot afford inaction” and continued to increase both security and non-security assistance.²⁶⁸ Non-security US and UK budgets increased from \$22 million in 2008 to roughly \$130 million after Christmas 2009.²⁶⁹ Combining these signals with the low levels of interest displayed in Yemen at times when the terror threat was less prominent (e.g. 2004–2005),²⁷⁰ the implicit message conveyed by the West to the Saleh regime was that playing host to anti-Western militants was a lucrative endeavour, and that pressure to undertake reforms could be neutralised by the higher-order priority of maintaining a partnership on stabilisation and counter-terrorism.²⁷¹

This was particularly damaging in that, as Phillips explains, to undertake the kind of reforms that could have prevented the implosion of the Yemeni state into conflict, President Saleh required sufficient incentives to rein in the interests of his inner circle in favour of national progress. In Phillips’ view, a crisis could have provided pressure to do this, but his incentives to reform were lessened by the flow of resources from his neighbours and the West.²⁷² Thus the view was entrenched that “bargaining with the international community is more lucrative than bargaining with Yemeni society.”²⁷³

Perhaps because of their limited ability to apply meaningful pressure on an ally they felt they could not afford to lose, the emphasis Western actors did place on reforms during the Saleh era failed to encourage meaningful change. For Phillips, Western stabilisation plans took the willingness of the Saleh regime to undertake reforms “too much at face value.”²⁷⁴ Thus US and UK support for the ‘Ten Point Plan’ that emerged from 2008, though perhaps well-intentioned, was according to Phillips unrealistic, insufficient and ineffective.²⁷⁵ The plan proposed technical solutions to bureaucratic inefficiencies, ignored the question of political will to undertake reform, and – despite the huge importance of tackling the massive scale of theft of public resources via diesel subsidies – omitted the core issue of elite corruption.²⁷⁶ Moreover, at least half of the plan’s ten points were rapidly dropped.²⁷⁷

Donors such as the US hoped to achieve ‘quick wins’ through development initiatives focused on technical capacity building. But the idea that reform could be encouraged by support to technocrats and technical initiatives also foundered in predictable ways: statebuilding approaches relied on support for technical reforms being advanced by those with little influence – and did not effectively engage with and persuade the shadowy, elite figures who actually wielded the power to build more inclusive, fair,

²⁶⁶ *Ibid* pp11–12, and further sources below.

²⁶⁷ *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ p31.

²⁶⁸ The words of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the first Friends of Yemen meeting in January 2010, cited in *op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ p54.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid* p54.

²⁷⁰ *Op cit* Johnsen ‘Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen’ p6.

²⁷¹ Katherine Zimmerman, ‘Recipe for failure: American Strategy toward Yemen and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’, *AEI Critical Threats*, 17 February 2012; 17.

²⁷² *Op cit* Phillips S ‘Yemen: Developmental dysfunction’ p40.

²⁷³ *Ibid* p27

²⁷⁴ *Ibid* p17.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid* p16.

²⁷⁶ *Idem*.

²⁷⁷ *Idem*.

responsive and accountable institutions in Yemen.²⁷⁸ Donors' investments in short-term programming initiatives overlooked the power of the 'shadow state' to negate their attempts to overcome capacity-related challenges as if they were technical issues. Donors lacked close enough relations with those within Yemen's inner circle who had the power to dismantle the shadow state if given good enough reason.²⁷⁹

Statebuilding efforts to reinvigorate the "presence and legitimacy" of the state in areas threatened by al-Qaeda²⁸⁰ were also criticised at this time: since the problematic nature and presence of the government was part of the reason why these areas were vulnerable to al-Qaeda, statebuilding risked *exacerbating* rather than reducing the problem.²⁸¹

This failure of Western actors to prioritise and work effectively on a transformative governance agenda – or at the very least to avoid incentivising the regime not to undertake serious reform – were compounded by continued expansion of support to the state's coercive apparatus, in the name of stabilisation and counter-terrorism.

While half-hearted and unrealistic support to reform efforts foundered, the pattern noted by ICG in 2003 of the counter-terror agenda feeding into regime repression and popular grievance continued in subsequent years. As Johnsen notes:

*The overreaction of governments like Yemen, largely as a result of US pressure, arresting nearly everyone it could link to Al-Qaeda, with or without evidence, did not reduce radicalisation but had the opposite effect. Young men left Yemen's security prisons more radical than when they were initially incarcerated. Many of these men were prepared for recruitment by their time in prison. The groundwork in numerous cases was not done by Al-Qaeda but by the government.*²⁸²

Similarly, according to HRW:

*In 2008 [...] government restrictions on free expression had hampered investigations into alleged rights abuses. These restrictions included complete denial of access to areas affected by fighting and arbitrary arrests of those leaving such areas, threats against journalists, and the disconnection of many mobile telephone numbers. The authorities also harassed journalists who sought to report on the displacement of civilians and the other humanitarian impacts of the conflict, going as far as to prosecute some on charges of endangering 'national security'. In June 2008, for example, the Specialized Criminal Court sentenced journalist Abd al-Karim al-Khaiwani to six years in prison for writing articles criticizing the conflict with the Huthis [sic], although President Saleh pardoned and released him three months later.*²⁸³

Security institutions supported to achieve counter-terror objectives were rarely deployed outside Sana'a, but were used by former President Saleh to bolster and retain his and his family's grip on power – and were even used to guard him during the 2011 uprising. Both the Republican Guard and Central Security Forces committed serious human rights violations during Yemen's 2011 uprising.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁸ "Donors have little to show for their state-building efforts because their policy template does not fit with the local realities, in which power is only partially structured through government ministries, if at all." (*Op cit* Healy S, Hill G p14); "The stabilisation strategy does not directly address the drivers of Yemen's downward trajectory but instead tacitly assumes the existence of an environment in which technocrats hold the reins. Focusing on the technocrats assumes that the political barriers to their ascendance have already been removed.[...] Dealing with matters of agency and elite self-interest is outside the traditional purview of donors, who work with more tangible issues of capacity, hoping to mould developmentally progressive leaders by creating the right tools for them to do their work. Often, and in the case of Yemen, this puts the cart before the horse. Technical reforms to Yemen's government institutions are unlikely to have a significant impact unless there is also a sea change in the politics that drive the capacity of the state's formal institutions.[...] In most conversations about appropriate strategies for Western donors in Yemen, the term "quick runs on the board" (or similar variations thereof) is invoked, for which there is usually a security imperative: the need to quickly stabilise an area that is vulnerable to violence or militancy. While this is understandable in the prevailing climate, the focus on quick impact projects reinforces two misconceptions. First, that political instability is a function of government ineffectiveness and can therefore be turned around by making the government more effective irrespective of the shadow state; and, second, that political instability can (and should) be prevented by these projects. This focus masks the fact that what Yemen needs more than stability is change." (*Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' pp17, 54, 58).

²⁷⁹ *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' pp57–58.

²⁸⁰ USAID, 'Community Livelihoods Project: Project Guidelines,' (RFA 279-10-006 6, 2010). Similar programmes are also described in Kennedy C, 'Interview with Amb Edmund James Hull', *Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project*, 10 October 2005, p141.

²⁸¹ *Op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p55.

²⁸² *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p8.

²⁸³ *Op cit* HRW "'A Life-Threatening Career'" pp20–23.

²⁸⁴ *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" pp17–18.

The failure to incentivise reform in meaningful ways – combined with the active reinforcement of the state’s coercive capacities and resources – self-evidently did not reduce the venality, abuse and exclusion of the Saleh era, and ultimately could not suppress the mounting grievances against the existing order that exploded in Yemen in 2011. At this point, although it was by now admittedly impossible for Western actors to ignore the pariah status the Saleh regime had acquired internationally, they did work in support of Saleh’s removal, and to an extent exercised influence in favour of greater political inclusion. This averted immediate civil war, and went some way to addressing drivers of conflict related to exclusion: the National Dialogue “brought in new political players and gave women and youth a seat at the table” and included “specific steps to address key grievances among southerners” while maintaining a level of stability.²⁸⁵

Nonetheless, given the apparent need to placate major power-holders in the new political order, the deals made in the post-Saleh transition ultimately allowed Saleh to remain in Yemen with impunity and the influence to foment a new level of conflict. Likewise, they entrenched the same elite, cronyistic interests that were driving Yemen into the ground. Thus, according to former US Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine and Danya Greenfield, the GCC Agreement was:

*fundamentally an elite power bargain that did little to disrupt vested interests that have a stranglehold over the political and economic life of the country. [...] to secure [...] elite support, the GCC Agreement had to be less than radical. The structure that was developed to balance all these interests resulted in governmental paralysis. The deal put in place a weak prime minister and distributed government posts along competing party lines, which paralyzes decision-making [...]*²⁸⁶

Similarly, regarding commitments made in the National Dialogue to address grievances, Bodine and Greenfield observed that “unfortunately, there has been little concrete implementation”²⁸⁷ and further that:

*The lack of clarity about what comes next in the transition and the absence of transparency about how these decisions are made fundamentally undermine public confidence in the process. Most Yemenis had no engagement with the National Dialogue and feel completely disconnected from political developments and elite politics in Sana’a. In many respects, the National Dialogue was a tremendous accomplishment, but the way it concluded – with eleventh hour, closed-door decisions outside the established procedures – significantly diminished its legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Yemenis.*²⁸⁸

Likewise, as noted by HRW in a detailed examination of ongoing repression of freedom of speech by the Yemeni state, Hadi’s arrival in February 2012 brought “no significant relaxation of state pressure on journalists”, who have instead “become exposed to attack from new quarters, including Huthi supporters and religious extremists, not just the government and its security forces”²⁸⁹ Others have observed that the justice situation in Yemen worsened after 2011.²⁹⁰ As noted, the government’s 2014 budget of \$14 billion (triple that of 2004) apparently disappeared into a “black hole”, with “practically nothing” being spent on investment and infrastructure. Despite this, “The backers of the transition[...] imposed practically no accountability on the president”²⁹¹

Ultimately, although there were sporadic attempts to encourage governance reforms and address other drivers of conflict in Yemen, stabilisation imperatives remained paramount for Western actors. Western actors therefore deprioritised the need for constructive change in Yemen, and in many ways helped to stifle it, until it became so

285 *Op cit* Bodine, Greenfield pp2, 4.

286 *Ibid* p2.

287 *Ibid* p4.

288 *Idem*.

289 *Op cit* HRW “A Life-Threatening Career” p24. HRW further specifies that journalists are threatened by “the former regime and the people loyal to it, the intelligence authority, the Defense Ministry, the Information Ministry, the presidency, people loyal to the president, tribal leaders, thugs of former regime or the new regime”, and details a number of illustrative examples, including the example of an armed assault and abduction of a journalist for reporting on Republican Guard activities in July 2012. See p29 ff.

290 *Op cit* van Veen p29.

291 *Op cit* Salisbury ‘Yemen’s astonishing financial meltdown’.

pressing that it resulted in major instability. Since the transition crisis, the environment for those who would wish to push in a constructive way for reform in Yemen is now worse than ever. After years of kleptocratic, abusive rule backed by the West, the country's degraded institutions and divided political landscape offers no solid ground for those who might wish to manage a peaceful transition. While genuine champions of reform appeared absent from the post-2011 transition administration, Western actors nonetheless remain convinced of the need to reinforce the incumbent regime in the interests of short-term stability and counter-terror objectives. However, as the tragic violence of 2014–2016 has already shown, an attempt by external powers to force Yemen's people and key conflict actors to accept a repressive, corrupt and unresponsive political order is as likely to deepen grievances and escalate the conflict as it is to achieve stability. As discussed further below, for Western actors, a significant disadvantage of maintaining this approach may be that Yemenis continue to blame them for the consequences, deepening and extending the grievances felt by many Yemenis towards them, and the prospect of further transnational attacks in response.

3.2 Perverse outcomes of security partnership

An important question when analysing impacts of Western approaches in Yemen is whether, despite their drawbacks in other areas, the results could be argued to be satisfactory in security terms. It is important in this respect to acknowledge perceived successes as part of the cost-benefit analysis. In this sense, counter-terror partnership with the Yemeni government yielded intelligence viewed as critical in the war on terror: for example, it was from a Yemeni prison that Osama bin Laden's former body-guard provided the evidence linking 9/11 to al-Qaeda.²⁹² The partnership with Saudi Arabia (of which cooperation on Yemen forms a part) has likewise yielded the US and the UK forewarning of some significant attacks (although it has been argued that this would probably not be undermined were Western actors to distance themselves more from the Saudi regime).

However, the Western security partnership with the Yemeni state has also at times appeared to rest on dangerously naive assumptions about the commitment of its local 'partner', and has had a number of significant negative impacts, including misuse of assistance, weaknesses in controlling the terror threat through legal-judicial channels and the use of repressive approaches. This has deepened grievances against both the state and its foreign backers, and predictably fuelled the rebellions it was intending to suppress.

A number of sources provide evidence that serves to question the commitment of the Yemen Government to the counter-terrorism partnership it has enjoyed with Western actors. The Yemeni authorities, as noted above, both welcomed Yemeni militants back from the Afghan mujahidin and used them in the 1994 struggle against Southern secessionists, while Saleh also cultivated support among Islamist political groups throughout his presidency. In 1999, the authorities arrested Khallad bin Attash, an al-Qaeda operative who was then released (reportedly at the request of Osama bin Laden) before going on to play a role in the USS Cole bombing.²⁹³ Similarly, in 2002, "[al-Qaeda operative Jaber] Elbaneh was roaming freely on the streets of Sana'a despite his conviction for his involvement in the 2002 attack on the French tanker Limburg and other attacks against Yemeni oil installations."²⁹⁴ In February 2006, 23 convicted Islamic militants escaped from prison in Yemen, apparently with inside help following the infiltration of Yemen's Political Security Organisation by al-Qaeda sympathisers.²⁹⁵

²⁹² *Op cit* Healy, Hill p5.

²⁹³ Novak, J, 'Yemen strikes multi-faceted deals with al-Qaeda', *The Long War Journal*, 11 February 2009.

²⁹⁴ Sharp J, 'Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations' (CRS, 7 July 2009), p14.

²⁹⁵ *Op cit* Nowicki p24, citing Yoram Schweitzer, 'Current Trends in al-Qaeda and Global Jihad Activity' Institute for National Security Studies, [www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1248344152.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1248344152.pdf), 177; Prados and Sharp, 'Yemen: Current Conditions and U.S. Relations'; Abdul Elah Hider Shaye'a, 'Reviving the Dead: The Yemeni Government and Al-Qaeda's Resurgence', *Arab Insight* (May 2010), www.arabinsight.org/aiarticles/229.pdf, 73; Phillips J, 'Yemen and the Resurgent Al-Qaeda Threat', The Heritage Foundation, Web Memo No. 2750 (8 January 2010), 1–2.

Several of the escapees were convicted of involvement in the Limburg and USS Cole bombings, and two, Nasir al-Wuhayshi and Qasim Yahya al-Raymi, became AQAP leaders. In 2007, Yemen released Jamal al-Badawi, mastermind of the bombing of the USS Cole, from prison.²⁹⁶

Furthermore, in February 2009, Yemen analyst Jane Novak alleged that “Saleh recently struck a deal with Ayman Zawahiri” in which the former president agreed to release large numbers of reformed jihadists from prison, “asked the militants to engage in violence against the southern mobility movement” and agreed to “supply the mercenary group with arms and ammunition”.²⁹⁷ The same article describes a string of negotiations between the Yemeni state and al-Qaeda regarding mutual non-aggression, as well as allegations of support by the Yemeni state for Yemenis to fight coalition forces in Iraq and recruitment of al-Qaeda members to fight in its war against the Houthis in Sa‘da.²⁹⁸

While Novak’s allegations are difficult to corroborate, other sources indicate various kinds of collusion. A US Congressional Research Service report in 2010 observed that “Yemen continues to harbor a number of al-Qaeda operatives and has refused to extradite several known militants on the FBI’s list of most wanted terrorists”.²⁹⁹ An article in *Foreign Policy* also cites US officials as stating that Saleh and loyalists in the security services “at times kept former jihadi fighters on their payroll”.³⁰⁰ Similarly, former senior FBI agent Ali Soufan is quoted as saying “we have so many instances where Saleh was using these guys from Al Qaeda to eliminate opponents of the regime”.³⁰¹ In an interview with Al Jazeera, former al-Qaeda operative turned Yemeni informant Hani Muhammad Mujahid alleges that, in the period when al-Qaeda regrouped from 2006, Saleh’s regime was using the group as “a scarecrow aimed at the Americans and at the Europeans to obtain support”.³⁰² More specifically, Mujahid alleges that he was handed funds to mount one attack by President Saleh’s nephew, and that he forewarned Yemeni security services on multiple occasions about both the attack that killed eight Spanish tourists and two Yemenis in 2007 and the US Embassy attack that killed 19 people in September 2008, to no effect.³⁰³

According to Johnsen, the mix of mistakes and collusion between the state and Islamic militants continued after the Saleh era. Thus Hadi accepted a doubling of US assistance between 2011 and 2012, but:

*At the same time, he formed a coalition government with local Islamists, handing them several coveted government portfolios. And, perhaps most importantly, Hadi retained questionable elements of the old regime, which the U.S. has long suspected of combating al-Qaeda in public and coddling them in private.*³⁰⁴

Echoing the February 2006 prison break, a further Congressional Research Service (CRS) report observes that “In February 2014, AQAP successfully freed 19 of its militants from a central prison in the capital, despite warnings from prison officials to government officials that a planned AQAP prison break was imminent”.³⁰⁵ In a video, al-Qaeda subsequently claimed that prison officials assisted in the escape.³⁰⁶

As noted above, US and UK counter-terror partnerships with the deeply divided Yemeni security forces continued through successive periods in which the government was in a process of collapse in the face of armed opposition (or being actually overthrown by its opponents). Even if it is argued that Yemen’s leaders were genuinely committed to their counter-terrorism partnership with the West, it can be argued that

²⁹⁶ Worth R, ‘Yemen’s Deals With Jihadists Unsettle the U.S.’, *The New York Times*, 28 January 2008.

²⁹⁷ *Op cit* Novak.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen, Background and US relations’ p25.

³⁰⁰ Hill E, Kasinof L, ‘Playing a Double Game in the Fight Against AQAP’, *Foreign Policy*, 21 January 2015.

³⁰¹ Scahill J, *Dirty Wars* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2013), p62.

³⁰² Jordan W, ‘Informant says Yemen’s Saleh helped direct al-Qaeda’, *Al Jazeera*, 4 June 2015.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Almosawa S, Johnsen G, ‘Resurrecting The Jihad in Yemen’, *Buzzfeed News*, 15 May 2014.

³⁰⁵ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p17, *op cit* Almosawa, Johnsen.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

the policy – providing significant security assistance to security forces beset by factionalism in a very unstable context – was reckless,³⁰⁷ creating a very high risk of assistance being diverted from its intended purpose.

According to a range of sources, the capable and well-trained military units supported by the US but headed by Saleh's relatives were not primarily used to tackle terrorism or other security threats, but rather to protect the capital and the presidential palace.³⁰⁸ By contrast, from 2000 the Firqa and the regular army that did much of the actual fighting against al-Qaeda and the Houthis received little new equipment or training.³⁰⁹ In January 2010 a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report found that it was “likely that U.S. counter-terrorism assistance had been diverted” to the fight against the Houthis, and recommended strengthening efforts to monitor how its equipment was used.³¹⁰ These findings corroborated the impression created by leaked Wikileaks cables from December 2009, suggesting that US and UK counter-terror money and training were diverted to fight the Houthi insurgency in Sadaah.³¹¹ Two counter-terrorism units who were provided with over \$0.5 billion in US train and equip assistance – the Special Operations Forces and the Counter-Terrorism Unit – were also deployed to guard President Saleh and control civil disobedience during the 2011 uprising.³¹² US-supplied weapons captured by Houthis in Sana'a in 2015 were reportedly later used in assaults on Aden and Taiz.³¹³

It is especially remarkable that such diversion of assistance from its intended purpose was insufficiently recognised and dealt with earlier on: even before the ICG observed how Yemen was using counter-terrorism as a veil for aggression against tribal groups in 2003 (see above), a 2002 report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy noted that the US had “failed to establish a clear understanding on the terms and conditions for the use of advanced weaponry with which the U.S. plans to arm Yemeni forces and train them in counterterrorism tactics”, and commented that “Salih [sic] seems intent on using the advanced weaponry to crack down on his traditional tribal opponents, not necessarily the radical Islamists associated with al-Qaeda.”³¹⁴

A related factor in US security policy towards Yemen has been the difficulty the US faces in monitoring how its assistance is used. Thus one US General Accounting Office report found that “decision-makers lack the information necessary to adequately assess” the results of its assistance.³¹⁵ Meanwhile, the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations commented on inadequate monitoring of US assistance that “much of the equipment was unaccounted for. There were also significant discrepancies between ... data on the quantity that had been provided and that which was in the Yemeni forces' inventories.”³¹⁶

Aside from evidence that parts at least of the Yemeni establishment have enabled releases and escapes of those suspected of carrying out and/or planning violent attacks, a further key issue in analysing Western security assistance and its impacts is the

³⁰⁷ See for example *op cit* Juul P.

³⁰⁸ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' p11, *op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p17.

³⁰⁹ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform' pp8, 11.

³¹⁰ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen, Background and US relations' (July 2010) p27; additionally, the *Wall Street Journal* has flagged how another recipient of US security assistance, the Yemeni Coast Guard, has rented patrol boats and crew to commercial ships seeking protection from piracy. *Wall Street Journal*, 'U.S. Military Aid is Up for Hire in Yemen', 4 January 2011; cited in *op cit* Noman, Sorenson p23.

³¹¹ US Embassy, Sana'a, 'Yemen's Counter Terrorism Unit Stretched Thin by War Against Houthis', Diplomatic Cable, 17 December 2009. Available through Wikileaks, Reference ID 09SANAA2230, <http://wikileaks.ca/cable/2009/12/09SANAA2230.html> (cited in *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p26).

³¹² *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p17; author interview with Baraa Shibhan, September 2015.

³¹³ *Ibid*; Porter G, "A significant part of that [US-supplied] weaponry and equipment was scooped up by Houthi fighters on their way into Sanaa and has been visible in the months since then. When the Houthis advanced into Aden 1 April, residents reported seeing four tanks and three armored vehicles as well as Rocket propelled grenades. On 29 March, after the Saudi bombing campaign had begun, the Houthis were reported to have had control of the Yemeni Air Force's 16 fighter planes, of which eleven had been destroyed by the bombing." 'Houthi Arms Bonanza Came from US-Backed Ex-President, Not Iran', 23 April 2015.

³¹⁴ Levitt M, 'Targeting terror: U.S Policy towards Middle Eastern State Sponsors and Terrorist Organizations, Post – September 11', (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2002) 95.

³¹⁵ *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p17.

³¹⁶ Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate 'Following the Money in Yemen and Lebanon: Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Security Assistance and International Financial Institution Lending', (Washington, Government Printing Office, 2010), One Hundred Eleventh Congress, First Session, 5 January, p. 10, cited in *op cit* Noman M, Sorenson D.

heavy-handed approach that has at other times been taken by the Yemen authorities. Even by 2003, the Government's combination of "arbitrary detention, prolonged legal procedures, torture and the employment of the military against civilians" had been shown to be "clumsy and inefficient" by the way in which the excessive use of force to target al-Qaeda operatives backfired in Abida in 2001:

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 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, soldiers, tribesmen and women were killed, and 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.³¹⁷

By 2008, Ginny Hill observed that this heavy-handed approach to rebel groups appeared to have strengthened their resolve:

a new mood has emerged among some active jihadis, who reject negotiation or compromise with the authorities. New recruits are targeting the security services, in retaliation for the alleged torture and humiliation of their captive associates.³¹⁸

Despite the obvious dangers of violent and repressive approaches fuelling rebellion and violence, over a decade after the Abida affair, in 2012, the same approach was echoed in Abyan where both Yemeni and AAS forces appeared to violate the laws of war,³¹⁹ with the government carrying out "indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks resulting in civilian deaths and injuries"³²⁰ Another source describes the Abyan offensive as a "scene of callous bloodshed" in which:

Poorly trained, heavy-handed security forces attacked insurgents that had used the political instability as an opportunity to bolster their presence, engaging in a brutal war that crushed local villages and killed many innocent civilians in the crossfire. Instead, the military pushed many of those militants deep into the mountains for incubation, while the violence sparked a mass exodus of impoverished civilians, many of whom remain internally displaced today.³²¹

As noted, the behaviour of Yemen's security forces has alienated the public at large, who "perceive the Yemeni security services as intrusive political and economic actors who threaten their livelihoods and well-being".³²² Similarly, according to an individual cited in a USAID study on Yemeni youth in 2008: "Prisons and juvenile centers are supposed to rehabilitate the youth. What happens is the opposite. They get abused and they come out of jail even more aggressive and more violent".³²³ Unfortunately, rather than taking effective action to stop abuses from taking place, the growth in counter-terror cooperation from 2001 was also, "accompanied by a serious clampdown on media, with Yemeni security forces, notably the Political Security Organization,

³¹⁷ *Op cit* ICG 'Yemen: coping with terrorism and violence' p20.

³¹⁸ *Op cit* Hill p4.

³¹⁹ *Op cit* HRW "'Between a drone and al-Qaeda'" p16.

³²⁰ Amnesty International, 'Yemen: Despite significant reform, human rights violations persist', (Amnesty International Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review, January–February 2014), p5.

³²¹ *Op cit* Salama.

³²² *Op cit* Healy, Hill p13.

³²³ USAID, *Yemen Cross-Sectoral Youth Assessment*, (Washington: USAID, 2008), p35.

harassing journalists for their reporting on counterterrorism operations”³²⁴ The most concerning example of active Western support to this approach is President Obama’s telephone call to President Saleh persuading him to cancel the release of a Yemeni journalist who was apparently arrested for his attempt to report on a US drone strike in al-Majalah that, according to HRW, killed 41 civilians including 9 women and 21 children.³²⁵ This further underlines the point that the counter-terror partnership appears to have deepened the exclusive, unfair and unaccountable nature of the Yemeni state at a moment when urgent improvements in governance were needed to avert a breakdown into conflict and instability.

3.3 Use of force – excessive costs with limited strategic benefit

In addition to sponsoring the use of heavy-handed approaches by Yemen’s security apparatus, the US has also used force directly to target Al-Qaeda and AQAP/AAS in Yemen since 2002. This use of force has in some cases killed those it was intended to target, but at the same time, it has caused death and injury to civilians. The lawfulness and wisdom of targeting particular individuals as well as the weapons used has been called into question. Likewise the overall strategy of targeted killings has been criticised on a number of grounds: for creating popular resentment that has fed into anti-US sentiment and increased recruitment into militant groups; for its secrecy and therefore the lack of accountability for civilian deaths and injuries.

It is important to acknowledge that, if analysed in relation to the military objective of defeating Al-Qaeda and AQAP/AAS, targeted killings have succeeded in eliminating some of the groups’ leaders and operatives in Yemen. In 2013, a Yemeni official told HRW that US airstrikes had killed at least nine ‘high-value’ targets in Yemen, including four suspected al-Qaeda leaders, including Anwar al-Awlaki and Said al Shihri.³²⁶ On 9 June 2015, a US drone strike killed Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP in Yemen.³²⁷ From this perspective, it is possible to argue that there has been “success in degrading AQAP’s leadership without incurring American casualties and while maintaining broad international support”³²⁸

While targeted killing has been viewed by some as militarily effective, as noted there are questions regarding its lawfulness and wisdom. Boyle notes that only two per cent of US drone strikes’ victims from 2004 were ‘high-value targets’ – the remainder consisting of lower-ranked operatives associated with other Islamist movements and civilians.³²⁹ He also notes that “Many of these actors pose no direct or imminent threats, but rather speculative ones, such as individuals who might some day attack the US or its interests abroad”³³⁰ This appears to have been the case in Yemen: some of the individuals targeted appear to have had links to AQAP but limited capacity or inclination to attack the US.³³¹ Others appear to have been targeted based on false information supplied by the Yemeni regime in order to eliminate its opponents: one US official who oversaw targeted killing operations in Yemen admitted to a Washington Post journalist that “There were times when we were intentionally misled, presumably by Saleh, to get rid of people he wanted to get rid of”³³² A number of targeted killings in Yemen have been so-called ‘signature’ strikes, in which targets are selected based on patterns of suspected militant activity rather than information on their exact identities.

³²⁴ *Op cit* HRW “A Life-Threatening Career” p17.

³²⁵ *Op cit* HRW “Between a drone and al-Qaeda” p80. HRW goes on to note that “President Hadi on July 23, 2013, commuted the remainder of Shayi’s sentence to two years’ house arrest. The State Department said the United States was ‘concerned and disappointed by his early release’. The US government never laid out specific concerns about Shayi’. Some Yemeni observers believe that President Obama’s statement about the case, expressing concern at Shayi’s release rather than pressing for a fair trial, has fueled anti-American resentment and eroded confidence in US claims that it supports democracy and rule of law in the post-Saleh era.” For al-Majalah see below and *op cit* HRW “Between a drone and al-Qaeda” p5.

³²⁶ *Ibid* p19.

³²⁷ The Guardian, ‘US drone strike kills Yemen al-Qaida leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi’, 16 June 2015.

³²⁸ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p13.

³²⁹ Boyle M, ‘The costs and consequences of drone warfare’, *International Affairs*, 89: 1 (2013) 1–29, p9.

³³⁰ *Ibid*.

³³¹ Greg Miller ‘US drone targets in Yemen raise questions’, *Washington Post*, 2 June 2012.

³³² *Ibid*.

HRW provides evidence that some US attacks in Yemen have struck only civilians or used indiscriminate weapons, and claims that this puts the US in clear violation of international law. For example, in its analysis of six strikes carried out in 2009 and 2012–13, it notes not only the killing of at least 57 civilians but also that one of the attacks was carried out by: “cruise missiles releasing cluster munitions, indiscriminate weapons that pose unacceptable dangers to civilians.”³³³ Describing one among a spate of US strikes in December 2009, HRW found that:

*As many as five US Navy Tomahawk cruise missiles armed with cluster munitions struck the hamlet of al-Majalah in southern Abyan province. Yemeni government officials described the attack as a Yemeni airstrike that killed 34 “terrorists” at a training camp. According to a Yemeni Government inquiry, the strike actually killed 14 suspected AQAP fighters, including the apparent primary target, Muhammad al-Kazami, but also at least 41 local civilians living in a Bedouin camp, including 9 women and 21 children. Subsequently, cluster munition remnants killed at least 4 additional civilians and wounded 13 others. [...] the attack used indiscriminate cluster munitions, and caused indiscriminate and possibly disproportionate civilian casualties.*³³⁴

Likewise, in the hamlet of Sarar in 2012, a drone strike on a vehicle:

*[...] killed 12 passengers, including 3 children and a pregnant woman, in violation of the laws-of-war prohibition against attacks that do not discriminate between civilians and combatants. [...] The strike’s apparent target, tribal leader Abd al-Raouf al-Dahab, was not in the vehicle, and it is not clear that he was even a member of AQAP.*³³⁵

In a report on nine case studies, Open Society Justice Initiative also described a strike on 23 January 2013 on a house containing 19 civilians.³³⁶

These examples bring into view another important negative impact of the targeted killings policy: its human impact in causing death and injuries. Estimates from *The Long War Journal*, the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, and *New America Foundation* estimate that from 2002 to 2015 the 105–137 US airstrikes killed 597–1155 people, including 87–133 civilians.³³⁷ Moreover, *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* data suggest the true number of attacks could have been as high as 308, killing 1,638 people including 258 civilians.³³⁸ However, civilian casualty estimates may in fact be much higher than this: on the ground, the journalist Iona Craig concluded after investigating the government offensive against AAS in Abyan in 2012, official casualty data are “absolutely worthless. All I can be sure of is many more people are dying than we know of, or are being told about.”³³⁹ Meanwhile, in the US, according to the *New York Times*, “Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties,” that, “in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants.”³⁴⁰

Although the rationale behind targeted killings has been to weaken militant groups that are hostile to the West, numerous analysts have observed the extent to which targeted killings have generated “significant resentment against both the Yemeni and US governments,”³⁴¹ which has in turn increased support for and recruitment into al-Qaeda/AQAP/AAS.³⁴² After the slaughter of women and children by the drone strike in Abyan in December 2009, the local media described the incidents as massacres,³⁴³

333 *Op cit* HRW “‘Between a drone and al-Qaeda’” p3.

334 *Ibid* p5.

335 *Ibid* p5.

336 *Op cit* Open Society Justice Initiative/Mwatana Organization for Human Rights p6.

337 *Op cit* Roggio, Barry; *op cit* New America Foundation; *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* ‘Yemen: Reported US covert actions’ [data for 2001–2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 aggregated by author]. Available at www.thebureauinvestigates.com (accessed 18 November 2011).

338 *Ibid*.

339 Craig I, ‘The lost land of Abyan’, 31 May 2012.

340 Becker J, Shane S, ‘Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will’, *New York Times*, 29 May 2012 – citing ‘several administration officials’.

341 *Op cit* van Veen p57.

342 See also *op cit* Johnsen ‘How we lost Yemen’, *op cit* HRW “‘Between a drone and al-Qaeda’”.

343 *Op cit* Phillips S ‘What comes next in Yemen?’ p11.

while jihadi online fora were filled with pictures of the victims' bodies,³⁴⁴ and AQAP leaders came to grieve with the families of the victims.³⁴⁵ In 2010, a drone strike mistakenly killed a local official who was mediating with al-Qaeda, and in response local tribes cut off oil pipelines, attacked electricity infrastructure and blocked main roads to the capital.³⁴⁶

Compounding the sense of grievance has been the failure to apologise and demonstrate accountability for killing, injuring and damaging the property of civilians. HRW provides several examples, particularly poignant among which is the case of the brother of a drone strike victim who tried to use legal channels to press for accountability by Yemeni and US leaders for his brother's killing, and in response had his house raided by Yemen's CTU – a force trained and funded by the US.³⁴⁷ Following the incident in al-Majalah (2009), HRW also reported in 2013 that, “The families have not received any compensation for the deaths or injuries”; and following the attack on Sarar (2012), Yemeni authorities only compensated the victims after HRW had raised the case with the US Government.³⁴⁸

*In response to these killings, AQAP has issued statements accusing the United States of fighting a war not just against Al-Qaeda but against all Muslims. Residents have set up roadblocks and held demonstrations in which they chant anti-US slogans. Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, tasked with drafting the country's new political and constitutional roadmap, has called for criminal penalties under domestic law for any targeted killings that violate international law.*³⁴⁹

Targeted killings have thus had significant consequences of fuelling widespread anger and anti-Western militancy in Yemen. As illustrated following the killing of suspected al-Qaeda operative Adnan al-Qadhi, which led to widespread anger across the powerful Sanhan tribe, the popular outrage provoked even by killings of al-Qaeda operatives may serve to create more enemies of the US than they eliminate.³⁵⁰ In line with this hypothesis, critics have observed that:

*[...] any apparent U.S. successes scored against AQAP are partial or illusory [...] the terrorist group has not been defeated, it continues to plot attacks at home and abroad, and moreover, the threat has morphed from a handful of individuals to a broader movement.*³⁵¹

In support of this thesis is the observation that in 2009 AQAP was estimated to have approximately 300 members, but by mid-2013 its ranks had swelled to over 1,000 members.³⁵²

Aside from their direct use of force and support for domestic security actors, Western actors have also provided arms, logistics, advice and political backing for the airstrikes by Saudi Arabia and its regional partners from March 2015. It is too early to assess fully the impacts of these strikes; however on 1 July, OCHA and UN agencies declared the situation a ‘Level 3’ emergency, the UN's most severe ranking of a humanitarian crisis. On 18 November 2015 the UN announced that:

[...] the ongoing conflict in Yemen has resulted in over 32,000 casualties, with 5,700 people killed, including 830 women and children, alongside a sharp rise in human rights violations. [...] approximately 14 million people lack sufficient access to healthcare, with three million children and pregnant or lactating women in need of malnutrition treatment or preventive services, and 1.8 million children have been out of school since mid-March.

³⁴⁴ *Op cit* Johnsen ‘Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen’ pp19–20.

³⁴⁵ *Op cit* Nowicki p13.

³⁴⁶ *Op cit* Healy, Hill p13.

³⁴⁷ *Op cit* HRW “‘Between a drone and al-Qaeda”’ p49.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid* p5.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid* p49.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid* pp49–50.

³⁵¹ *Op cit* Sharp ‘Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations’ (February 2015) p13, citing Zimmerman K, ‘Yemen Model won't work in Iraq, Syria’, *Washington Post*, 17 July 2014.

³⁵² *Op cit* Johnsen ‘How we lost Yemen’.

[...] nearly 21.2 million people, or a staggering 82 per cent of the population, are in need for some kind of humanitarian assistance [...] over 19 million people lack access to safe water and sanitation; over 14 million people are food insecure, including 7.6 million who are severely food insecure; and nearly 320,000 children are acutely malnourished.³⁵³

According to the UN, before 26 March 2015, 16 million people in Yemen required humanitarian assistance.³⁵⁴ In this context the coalition has also been criticised for hindering the entry of humanitarian shipments into the country.³⁵⁵ In October 2015 Amnesty International accused the coalition of war crimes in a number of attacks between May and July 2015.³⁵⁶ On 26 October 2015 the coalition also destroyed a *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) hospital in Northern Yemen whose coordinates had been shared with the Saudi-led coalition, and whose roof was marked with the MSF logo.³⁵⁷ On 7 January UN spokesman Rupert Coleville told the BBC that the Saudi-led coalition was responsible for approximately two-thirds of an estimated 2,800 civilian deaths from their fighting against the Houthis.³⁵⁸ Thus clearly the Western-backed GCC campaign has significantly added to the existing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and inflicted considerable suffering on the civilian population.

On 17 December 2015, a legal opinion provided to Saferworld and Amnesty International by law firm Matrix Chambers found that the UK Government is breaking national, EU and international law and policy by supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia in the context of its military intervention and bombing campaign in Yemen.³⁵⁹

As we have seen in recent years, violence by external actors has fuelled considerable public resentment and militancy in Yemen. Although the legitimacy of Hadi's administration may not be questioned by the US and UK, Hadi's term of office was supposed to expire in February 2014.³⁶⁰ Looking forward, it is thus hard to imagine Yemeni society at large backing any political settlement that is seen to have been imposed by force of Saudi/GCC arms – and there is every likelihood that this Western-backed intervention will fuel further conflict and rebellion.

3.4 Wrong side of history? Aligning with injustice and fuelling rebellion

This raises fundamental questions about Western actors' role in Yemen: have they pursued narrowly defined short-term interests in a way that has put them on the wrong side of history? By instrumentalising Yemen as merely a battleground for conflict with al-Qaeda, have they been deliberately ignoring and therefore upholding the injustice and repression of other actors? If so, has the betrayal of Western commitments to just, democratic and accountable governance lent real legitimacy to many of those who oppose Western approaches in Yemen? If it is difficult to answer 'no' to these questions based on the evidence presented above, there is a real danger that Western governments have not only been guilty of ethical failures in Yemen, but also that their actions have made peace with wider Yemeni society a very remote possibility.

The attempt to 'stabilise' a repressive regime in the face of a destitute and desperate Yemeni society to achieve the West's narrow and short-term security objectives has succeeded only in driving Yemen – one third of whose citizens already had inadequate calorific intake even in 2010 – further into the ground; a new generation of rebellion and conflict now beckons that could well merge with and multiply the instability from conflicts involving anti-Western movements elsewhere.

³⁵³ UN News Centre, 'Yemen: UN warns humanitarian situation has deteriorated 'drastically' as conflict claims 5,700 lives', 18 November 2015.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ *Op cit* Sharp 'Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention'.

³⁵⁶ Ridgwell H, 'Saudi-led Coalition Accused of War Crimes' Voice of America, 12 October 2015.

³⁵⁷ Médecins Sans Frontières, 'Yemen: MSF Hospital Destroyed by Airstrikes', 27 October 2015.

³⁵⁸ UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Spokesman Rupert Coleville speaking on BBC, The World Tonight, 7 January 2016.

³⁵⁹ Sands Prof P (QC), Clapham Prof A, Ghráiligh B, 'Legal Opinion: The Lawfulness Of The Authorisation By The United Kingdom Of Weapons And Related Items For Export To Saudi Arabia In The Context Of Saudi Arabia's Military Intervention In Yemen', 11 December 2015.

³⁶⁰ See *op cit* Rees.

The dangerous message has been sent that security of Westerners matters much more than the well-being of Yemenis, to whom the purported Western values of justice and democracy can apparently be selectively applied. An example of the consequences of this is provided by the case of al-Shayi, the journalist whose release was apparently cancelled by President Saleh at President Obama's personal request. After he was released by President Hadi in 2013, the State Department stated that it was "concerned and disappointed by his early release" rather than pressing for a fair trial. According to HRW, this statement has fuelled anti-American resentment and eroded confidence in US claims that it supports democracy and rule of law in Yemen in the post-Saleh era. Instead, many Yemenis perceive with some justification that Western security is unjustly valued much more highly than that of Yemenis:

*In the Western countries, when one person is killed the whole country will mobilize and turn itself upside down, but in our country our government does not value its citizens*³⁶¹

The US tendency to conceive of Yemen as a battleground in its struggle against terror limits its ability to understand the perspectives of those in Yemen who have good reason to oppose US policy and strategy in the country. The consequence, according to Johnsen, is that the US may find it hard to maintain a distinction between hardcore devotees of al-Qaeda's international project and those devoted to jihad and the extension of Sharia law within Yemen: "If it expands the war to include both... then it will end up fighting most of the country".³⁶²

A variant on this warning is the observation that external support for the regime on one particular conflict (against AQAP/AAS) has spread opposition to other groups who are as a result less able to oppose Yemen's unjust regime in their own struggles. This appears to have occurred in relation to the Houthis, whose rebellion Saleh tried to portray as 'terrorism' and who in turn condemned Yemen's alliance with the US.³⁶³ As Healy and Hill observed in 2010:

*[...] all three rebellions against President Saleh's authority ... present themselves as social justice movements, arguing that President Saleh's regime is simultaneously sustained and discredited by opportunist military alliances with Riyadh and Washington.*³⁶⁴

As noted, many people across Yemeni society oppose the US because of its targeted killings and support for the country's abusive rulers. Under the counter-terror lens, it may be tempting for the US to categorise all such people as 'terrorists' whose perspectives and motives require no further scrutiny. However, no sustainable political settlement in Yemen could presumably be made on the basis of the exclusion of all such people, and therefore this lens leads into a scenario in which conflict escalates and lasting peace is impossible to achieve.

By contrast, al-Qaeda in Yemen has explicitly espoused sympathy for the suffering of Yemen's people, and criticised the abuse and corruption of the Yemeni state. In 2009, in the publication, *Sada al-Malahim*, al-Qaeda argued that, with corrupt officials stealing the profits from their oil resources, "The inhabitants of [the oil rich areas, Marib, Shabwa and Hadramaut] are paying for their own oppression".³⁶⁵ This approach has enabled al-Qaeda to court the favour of disaffected tribesmen and traditional elders, and undermine loyalty to the central government by highlighting both its injustice and its external backing.³⁶⁶ Thus in 2009 an AQAP video criticised a government offensive in Marib and asserted that "the biggest shame is for the tribal sheikhs to turn into foot soldiers and slaves of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is himself a slave to the Saudi riyal and the American dollar".³⁶⁷ As noted earlier, AQAP/AAS had also attempted to provide

³⁶¹ *Op cit* HRW "Between a drone and al-Qaeda" p59.

³⁶² *Op cit* Johnsen 'Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen' p8.

³⁶³ See e.g. *op cit* Hill p4.

³⁶⁴ *Op cit* Healy, Hill p6.

³⁶⁵ 'Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula', *Sada al-Malahim*, Vol. 10, (in Arabic, August 2009), pp26-27, cited in *op cit* Phillips S 'Yemen: Developmental dysfunction' p9.

³⁶⁶ *Op cit* Healy, Hill p13.

³⁶⁷ Osman A, 'Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Counterterrorism Strategies in Yemen', *Journal of Political Inquiry*, vol 5 no 2, (2012), p5.

relief, electricity and justice in some of its areas of operation. Through such actions, according to Phillips, al-Qaeda established itself as a “lightning rod for entrenched grievances”,³⁶⁸ or rather, as Johnsen argues, by “put[ting] itself on the right side of nearly every issue [...] with the notable exception of suicide attacks within the country” al-Qaeda has developed a narrative that “is broadly popular in Yemen”.³⁶⁹

Although al-Qaeda poses a real threat to Western security, this does not justify the grave harm done to Yemen’s people to combat al-Qaeda and for the sake of the West’s wider strategic and economic agenda in the region. Several Yemeni experts interviewed for this study took issue with Johnsen’s analysis – pointing out that AQAP does not enjoy widespread support across Yemeni society, and that deals between al-Qaeda and local tribes rest more on fear and pragmatic calculation than ideological support. However, the problem remains that for many such people, the state has failed to offer an appealing alternative. For example, rather than backing a government offensive against AQAP in Abyan and Shabwa in April 2014, several local tribes remained neutral, reportedly fearing the violence, displacement and corruption that the arrival of Yemen’s army could bring in a context of wider Southern distrust about the transition process.³⁷⁰

Overall, al-Qaeda in Yemen can currently make more than a *narrative claim* that Western actors are promoting injustice and harming Yemenis. Al-Qaeda’s rhetoric can refer to real Western failures to uphold justice for Yemen’s people. This will remain powerful to many until Western policies and their very negative impacts on Yemen’s people significantly improve. To overcome al-Qaeda’s narrative, people in Yemen will need to be able to see the West promoting justice, democracy and well-being in practice in their country.

Considering the West’s approach to the wider region, again the lack of both values and a long-term strategy for achieving just and lasting peace is very apparent. The essential ally of the West in Yemen and the wider region, Saudi Arabia, has ranked lower than Iran on Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index every year for the last 32 years.³⁷¹ Although effective in combating al-Qaeda domestically, the Kingdom has an abysmal track record of promoting and funding violent and fundamentalist movements within and beyond Yemen.³⁷² Beyond the existing impacts of this in contributing to multiple ongoing conflicts, the evidence is clear that the exclusion, corruption and repression upheld by the Kingdom is likely to generate deep instability in its neighbourhood for future generations in the absence of careful but determined reform efforts.³⁷³ However, although support for democracy and justice are the avowed cornerstone of Western counter-extremism policies,³⁷⁴ in the case of Saudi Arabia, Western actors have prioritised their immediate energy, security and economic interests at the clear expense of these wider, arguably much more important, considerations. The consequences of the Western rush to provide arms, strategic and political assistance to the Saudi regime will not only be felt by Yemen’s long suffering people today – the resultant grievances are highly likely to fertilise the next generation of conflict in the Middle East.

368 *Op cit* Phillips S ‘What comes next in Yemen?’ p7.

369 *Op cit* Johnsen ‘Testimony of Gregory D Johnsen’ p5.

370 Dawsari N, ‘Tribes and AQAP in South Yemen’, *Atlantic Council*, 5 June 2014. According to other sources, family ties between tribesmen and Al-Qaeda could explain tribes’ hesitancy to support the military more explicitly.

371 Freedom House, ‘Freedom in the World Country Ratings 1972–2015’, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world> (accessed 18 November 2015).

372 See section 1 regarding the spread of Wahhabism in Yemen; regarding Saudi inaction on addressing financing see, for example, Lichtblau E, Schmitt E, ‘Cash Flow to Terrorists Evades U.S. Efforts’, 5 December 2010: “A classified memo sent by [then US Secretary of State] Mrs. Clinton last December made it clear that residents of Saudi Arabia and its neighbors, all allies of the United States, are the chief financial supporters of many extremist activities. ‘It has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority’, the cable said, concluding that ‘donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide’.”

373 For evidence on the strong links between poor and authoritarian governance and: terrorism, see Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2015*, (IEP, 2015); conflict, see Saferworld, ‘Addressing conflict and violence from 2015 – Issue Paper 2: What are the key challenges? What works in addressing them?’, (November 2012).

374 BBC, ‘David Cameron on extremism: We must uphold British values’, 20 July 2015; US Government, ‘Enduring leadership in a dynamic world – Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review 2015’, (Washington: US Department of State, 2015).

4

Lessons and policy alternatives

BASED ON THE POLICY AND IMPACTS ANALYSIS PROVIDED ABOVE, this concluding section underlines the most important lessons from recent counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding experiences in Yemen. These lessons need to inform future engagement in Yemen, but should also inform international engagement in other contexts where similar strategies are being applied and assumptions being made. Lessons from the evidence and analysis in this paper are presented alongside complementary recommendations for each of the key themes identified.

4.1 Revisit strategic objectives with a focus on peace

Western experiences in Yemen illustrate how strategies based on simplification of the context and narrow external objectives tend not to succeed. The approach of defining the problem as ‘terrorism’ and focusing primarily on containing/defeating actors that pose a threat to the West has made efforts to adopt a more ‘comprehensive’ approach based on Yemen’s needs unfeasible and incoherent. The failure to understand and prioritise wider drivers of conflict has produced approaches that actively worsened drivers of conflict. Likewise, engagement has tended to be limited to an insufficiently diverse range of actors across the country – meaning that partnerships have been formed with actors who lack the agency and motives to achieve positive change, while some actors have remained excluded from and dissatisfied by efforts to reshape the political settlement in Yemen to be more just, inclusive and sustainable.

- The failure of narrow objectives (containment/elimination of terrorists and assisting regional allies to prevail against Iranian ‘proxies’) illustrates the need for a broader, longer-term strategy to get to a lasting and just peace accepted and upheld by the people of Yemen. Only through a broader focus on addressing what drives conflict in Yemen can the terror problem be resolved.
- Western actors need to base strategy towards Yemen on a deeper understanding of the context. They must seek to understand and engage with a wider range of actors outside Sana’a, and give them a greater degree of ownership and influence over dialogue and peacemaking processes as well as future governance arrangements.

4.2 Revisit strategy to avoid perverse impacts and promote positive change

Yemen vividly illustrates the difficulties of balancing priorities in different areas and avoiding dangerous contradictions when doing so. Armed militants in Yemen appear to draw strength from deep poverty, food insecurity, lack of water and other resources, absence of services and so on. However, injecting significant aid and security assistance through divided and elite-dominated state structures has reinforced a corrupt system and an abusive security apparatus. This has allowed elites to retain patronage links that maintain their power base, intimidate and fight opponents, and lessened their incentives to support change that allows Yemen to tackle injustice and provide security, livelihoods, services and resources. This means a pivot towards more development and capacity building outside the security sector does not offer a panacea. Development actors need to think as hard as security actors about *how* their engagement will impact on the country.

- External support for fundamentally illegitimate actors needs to be more carefully thought through in order to avoid reinforcing negative dynamics and to provide meaningful incentives for more inclusive, fair, responsive and accountable governance to emerge.
- Although there are urgent humanitarian needs and the state will at some point need to evolve to meet them, it will not make sense to seek to channel assistance through state institutions until there are legitimate leaders working within the framework of a widely accepted political settlement.
- Assistance should be provided directly to the Yemeni people through non-governmental actors, or 'shadow' alignment towards actors and institutions that are opposed to political violence and committed to public goods. These could include tribal, informal or subnational entities, such as local health and education ministries.
- Reform priorities include tackling corruption and delivering effective services. These are long-term endeavours, that could be better incentivised by careful application of sanctions and penalties on *all* those profiting from grand corruption, as well as making more concerted efforts to cut off the flow of resources to all those using violence as a political strategy in Yemen.
- Pressure for an inclusive and just political settlement and reform in the public interest needs to come from across Yemeni society. To help a constituency for peace to emerge in the country, external actors must engage with a wider group of actors – outside Sana'a and across Yemeni society, including in the South. Allowing transformation to occur on Yemenis' terms requires much more support to human rights defenders, moderate political, religious and tribal actors, civil society groups, community voices and local development initiatives – both within any future peace talks and over the long term. If Western actors explain that this is what they want and back this with their deeds, it could attract popular backing from moderate Yemenis – or at least reduce wholesale resentment of the West in Yemen.

4.3 Enhance just and sustainable security approaches

In particular, the risks of diversion and misuse of arms and military-security assistance to serve the opposite of its intended purpose in contexts such as Yemen are excessively high. The West has been scared by the threat of terror and instability from Yemen into deepening its support for 'strong' autocratic leadership, but this has fed into Yemen's catastrophic instability for the coming generation. If they continue to stymie necessary transformation for the sake of immediate stability, Western actors will persist with short-term security investments and interventions that will continue to exacerbate the conflict. This will facilitate yet more misuse and diversion of arms, equipment and training to serve the opposite of their intended purpose, and worsen grievances among those victimised by the West and its 'allies'.

- Security strategies in Yemen need to be consistent with a long-term peace strategy. All security assistance should enable rather than undermine transformation in state-society relations – supporting rather than undermining human rights and justice for Yemenis.
- There should be a much greater presumption against provision of arms, equipment and capacity support to security actors unless the provider has a high and explicit level of confidence that the items or assistance provided will be used by the stated end-user for a pre-agreed purpose. When support is provided, more robust arrangements must be made to monitor and prevent diversion of security assistance for unintended purposes.

4.4 Avoid violence and strengthen accountability regarding abuses

Western support to the repression of media reporting on counter-terror and its impacts within Yemen, as in the case of al-Shaybi, illustrates a red line that should never have been crossed. Material support and training for security actors implicated in torture, violence against civilians, repression of political protests and free speech further illustrate the Western failure to adhere to fundamental values in Yemen. For peace to be achieved in contexts like Yemen, where violent anti-Western movements are able to feed on public experiences of injustice, Western actors must demonstrate their unambiguous commitment to justice and human rights to the public.

Targeted killings and military intervention in Yemen have killed some violent individuals. However, they have failed to reduce the overall threat from rebel/anti-Western militant groups. Such violence appears to have increased resentment of the West as well as Gulf actors and fed popular sympathy with militant groups. Even when violence is used, it is important to be accountable for its use. Transparency about the rationale of the West for using violence in Yemen has also been lacking.

- Western countries should explore every possible alternative to military attacks inside Yemen, and make amends to those wrongfully killed and injured in such attacks.
- If Western actors wish to continue to support violent interventions in Yemen, they must adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law, in particular by doing more to avoid civilian casualties, and make themselves accountable for illegal actions.
- In order to retain the sympathy of the public in contexts such as Yemen, Western actors must demonstrate their commitment to justice and democratic values in practice by upholding transparency in relation to security decision-making and engaging in debate with those who criticise policies. When such policies have been wrong, mistaken, or had unintended negative consequences, Western actors should acknowledge this. They should also clearly and publicly explain to Yemen's people how their strategy will advance their security, justice and well-being (not only that of the Yemeni political establishment and people in the West).

4.5 Recalibrate regional partnerships with a focus on peace and justice

Sooner or later, the US and the UK will be forced to recognise that their interests depend on achieving lasting peace in the MENA region, and that achieving this will be impossible without fundamentally altering those of their policies and alliances in the wider region that are unjust and fuel terror.

Engaging with Yemen merely as a battleground in wider geopolitical struggles and conflicts – either against al-Qaeda in the 'war on terror' or against Iran in the context of power struggles between Gulf states – has been a mistake. It has led to strategies that

ignore or actively worsen dynamics within Yemen. This has exacerbated its conflicts and deepened instability leading to an unconscionable depth of human suffering. Yemen provides a vivid example of how Saudi foreign policy, including the export of fundamental religious ideologies and financial and military reinforcement of authoritarian and illegitimate governance structures, does not serve to contain terror and instability – but rather to exacerbate them. Saudi Arabia’s military intervention has failed to defeat its enemies in the country, and is likely to make the conflict more transnational and harder to resolve. The Western tendency to see Yemen only as a battleground in the war on terror has led to under-recognition of the failures of other actors and the importance of other dynamics, as well as sending a deeply alienating message to Yemen’s people.

- Western countries should rethink their current approach of ‘outsourcing’ Yemen policy to regional state actors, recalling that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States are arguably as dependent on Western goodwill and support as the West is on theirs.
- Until there is a changed approach by regional actors to contexts like Yemen, Western countries should abstain from irresponsible supply of arms and military expertise in support of regional actors’ policies, and dissociate themselves from their actions in the eyes of Yemenis and the wider world.
- Western countries should also apply strong political pressure to ensure a ceasefire and negotiations between conflict parties, backed by a strong UN Security Council resolution setting out clear penalties for non-compliance.
- To prevent the Yemeni tragedy from being re-enacted across the Arab region in the coming years, the West must attach greater priority and find more effective ways to encourage reform, respect for human rights and democratisation in Gulf states.

4.6 Encourage dialogue and transformation to bring violence to an end

Approaching Yemen with a predetermined view that AQAP/AAS and the Houthis are spoilers to be defeated or marginalised at all costs has guaranteed failure to achieve military, security and peacemaking goals in several ways. On the one hand, it precluded Western and regional actors from focusing hard enough on encouraging the changes that other elites, political parties and state structures need to make to achieve peace and security in the country. On the other, it served to perpetuate belligerent approaches towards those designated as spoilers at the expense of creative experimentation with alternatives that could prove more productive and effective at ending violence and achieving lasting peace. Faced with Western belligerence, the Houthis became more explicitly anti-Western, and the ranks of both the Houthis and AQAP/AAS have swelled with support from Yemenis aggrieved by Western belligerence and support for illegitimate, ineffective and abusive state structures. An important question is therefore: had Western actors found alternatives to directly attacking and backing combat operations against militants in Yemen from 2002, would anti-Western militancy in Yemen have thrived or faded? There is no clear answer to this question, but the case could be made that it would have faded.

- Western actors should not assume that any one group is a ‘spoiler’ based on its name or alleged affiliations, and they should seek to understand the motives and behaviours of all conflict actors in greater detail. They should judge all actors in light of their actions and provide incentives to all actors to engage in peace processes and to work in support of people’s rights and interests.
- If it is possible to address grievances constructively among those who may sympathise or temporarily align with militant groups, it may be possible to achieve a wider political agreement from nearly all actors to renounce violent methods and cooperate for the benefit of Yemen’s people.

- It will be important to seek to understand AAS in more detail – considering its leaders and members as conflict actors with perceptions and interests that can be engaged in creative ways as part of the search for peace in the country, rather than simply as an ‘enemy’ that must in all scenarios be dealt with through the same (failed) belligerent tactics and partnerships.
- Similarly, Western actors will need to establish dialogue with AQAP. While talking to violent groups in any context entails huge dilemmas and sensitivities, initiating dialogue is almost always worthwhile. Such dialogue should not lead to concessions regarding the rights of other groups, but should explore the potential for working towards a political settlement in which relatively moderate members of AQAP/its sympathisers might be able to participate.

4.7 Improve communication to the Western public and media

As in many other contexts that have served as battlegrounds of the global ‘war on terror’, a key lesson from Yemen is that simplified narratives about the country and what Western countries should do in it have reinforced policies that take insufficient account of what the context requires and the lessons of past engagement. In particular, harmful approaches towards Yemen are a logical consequence of the misleading and simplistic portrayal of Yemen as a place in which the West is simply involved in a ‘fight’ against AQAP together with legitimate and unproblematic partners. A more honest portrayal to the public of the complex and challenging operating environment could pave the way for less belligerent, more nuanced and effective, engagement – and is therefore crucial to achieving the results that best serve both Western and Yemeni interests.

- Western governments need to move beyond portraying Yemen as a terror threat whose militants can be faced down through military intervention and security assistance to the incumbent regime. The Western public should be made aware that its security will depend on Yemenis being able to develop a peaceful state that is run for their benefit, and that a more nuanced and less belligerent approach in Yemen will reduce the resentment that is mobilising many Yemenis to want to attack Western countries.

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Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

In recent years Western actors including the US, UK, and the EU have put responses to terrorism, violent extremism and instability among their foremost priorities. Yet, despite the investment of huge resources – primarily military, but also financial, human and political – by Western actors, the results of this action have been mixed at best.

There has not been sufficiently full and frank public debate about the lessons of past engagement in countries where a global terror threat has been identified, nor about how future engagement could be improved in the interests of building lasting peace founded on the fulfilment of human rights. However, failure to recognise and pursue effective peacebuilding alternatives to these approaches could condemn Western actors and their partners to a vicious circle that they can ill afford: multiplying instability wherever they attempt to reduce it, and in response becoming ever more belligerent in the face of renewed threats, while compromising their commitments to democracy, justice and human rights. In the discussion paper *Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding*, Saferworld provided a review of global evidence on the impacts of existing approaches, and suggested a number of constructive directions for improved policy.

This report on Yemen is accompanied by two other reports on Afghanistan and Somalia. Together, they explore the issues identified in the initial discussion paper through detailed examination of specific country contexts from a peacebuilding perspective – in order to stimulate further debate on the lessons learnt.

COVER PHOTO: Army forces move into the southern Yemeni city of Zinjibar, after freeing it from the hands of Islamist militants in September 2011. © STR NEW/REUTERS



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