

Terrorist Activities in Yemen and the US Countermeasures

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***Abstract:** Since late 2009, the threat imposed on the international community, especially on the US, by the al Qaeda in Yemen has aroused strong concern across the world. The major concern of the international anti-terrorism camp is the Houthi rebellion in North Yemen and the possibility of al Qaeda's comeback in Yemen. Considering its backward economy, unstable and multipolar society and traditional culture of violence, it's really difficult for Yemen to get rid of terrorism within a short period of time. Now that terrorism in Yemen has become a severe threat to the US it's likely that the US may create a third battlefield of anti-terrorism in Yemen as it started the Iraq and Afghan wars.*

***Key Words:** US; Yemen; Terrorism; Al Qaeda*

Although terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Yemen, its importance in the anti-terrorism chain has long been ignored by the international community. Yemen is neither rich in oil resources nor strong in national strength. Besides, western countries have had little economic or interest presence in Yemen. During the period between 9/11, 2001 and the first half of 2009, the international anti-terrorism campaign led by the US focused primarily on the Iraq and Afghan wars, yet essentially overlooked the movement of terrorism around the world. The November 5th, 2009 Fort Hood Military Base shooting, killing 13 people and wounding 30 others by US Army and

American-born Muslim, Nidal Hassan, who was reportedly in close contact prior to the shooting with Anwar-al-Awlaki, an American Muslim lecturer and now living in Yemen on November 15, 2009 and the later Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing attempt in Detroit, Michigan, thrust Yemen into the cusp of international anti-terrorism. Therefore, it is of great significance to figure out the root and present situation of the terrorism in Yemen and the US countermeasures.

I. Present Situation of Terrorism in Yemen

In fact, terrorism has never been a new phenomenon in Yemen. As far back as the early 1990s before the Yemen Civil War ended, many terrorist attacks against the US and other western targets occurred in Yemen. These attacks forced President George W. Bush to remove the American military ships docked in the port of Aden which had been established to provide support for the rescue operation in Somalia. At present, the terrorist attacks in Yemen are mainly carried out by the Houthis, tribes and al Qaeda's Yemeni branch and supporters. However, as the tribes usually clashed with one another over Yemeni targets, the international community was concerned more about the Houthi rebellion and the infiltration and other activities of al Qaeda in Yemen.

A. The Infiltration and Other Activities of Al Qaeda in Yemen

Even before 9/11, al Qaeda had committed many terrorist acts in Yemen. In October 2000, the USS Cole was bombed in Aden, a port of Yemen, and seventeen American sailors were killed. This suicide attack drew global attention to the terrorism in Yemen. This attack also killed five other people, including an American citizen. According to *The Washington Post*, the Yemeni government was "shocked" by this attack and asked the US not to make the attack known in case the Yemeni people might overreact after learning that their government had given the US the permission to take military operations onto Yemeni territory. However, the US ignored the Yemeni request and soon declared the attack a success. This incident sowed the seeds of distrust

between the US and Yemen and had an influence on the following bilateral cooperation in counter-terrorism. After 9/11, the US made more anti-terrorism efforts in Yemen. In 2002, an unmanned Predator strike Yemeni target and killed Abu Ali al-Harithi, one USS Cole bombing plotter and senior leader of al Qaeda in Yemen. Then in 2003, Muhammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, the successor of Harithi, was arrested by the Yemeni government. Al Qaeda suspended its terrorist acts in Yemen for some time after that. However, in 2006, 23 al Qaeda members, including Nasir al-Wahayshi, former secretary of Osama Bin Laden and Jamal al-Badawi, the man considered to be the mastermind of the attack on the destroyer USS Cole, escaped from a prison in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, and became a new group leader of al Qaeda in Yemen. Early in 2009, al Qaeda members in Yemen announced a merger with the Saudi branch of al Qaeda, the foundation of AQAP or al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Since then al Qaeda forces came back gradually in Yemen, posing a threat to the western interest in Yemen as well as the Yemeni government.

The chaos in Iraq after the Iraq War provided al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups with practical training camps and practice places. If we could regard the "Afghan Fighters" as the core of the first generation of al Qaeda members, those Iraq-War-trained "Iraqi Fighters" from other Middle Eastern countries should be taken as the core of the second generation of al Qaeda members. Over the past several years, al Qaeda's fortunes have seriously declined in Iraq. One of the key developments leading to the decline in violence in Iraq was the creation and deputization by US forces of Sunni tribal paramilitaries – many of them are former al Qaeda-affiliated insurgents – to police their own neighbourhoods. However, those young men from around the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe radicalized by the Iraq invasion are in another category (Duss, 2009: June 22). During the pullout of American troops from Iraq, these Iraqi Fighters began migrating to other fronts together with those tactics and techniques developed in Iraq – improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs, suicide vests, to name a few (Jones, 2009). During the 2009

Christmas Day bombing attempt on a Detroit-bound plane, al Qaeda members tried a new type of bomb which could pass by airport security. Although this attempt failed because of technological flaws, the technological development by al Qaeda should not be neglected (Brown, 2009: December 28).

This means that Yemen has become a country with both Iraqi fighters and new terrorist tactics and technology. During the terrorist attack on the American embassy in Yemen's capital Sana'a on September 17th, 2009, the terrorists used a new and sophisticated tactic which they had developed during the Iraq War. They used two trucks loaded with explosives: one to blow up the outside security barriers and the other to blow up inside the American embassy. On March 15th, 2009, al Qaeda members in Yemen attacked a South Korean tourist group, killing four tourists and the Yemeni tour guide. Three days later, a suicide bomber attacked the South Korean investigation delegation and family members of the victims, causing another wave of death. This attack means that al Qaeda in Yemen is already capable of combining terrorist attacks with propaganda.

So far, al Qaeda has adjusted its survival strategy and terrorist acts in Yemen. Actually, al Qaeda has no real existence in Iraq. Many armed forces in Iraq declared their willingness in joining al Qaeda mainly because of the intrusion of American troops. Al Qaeda could not fit into Iraq for its violent acts had frightened the Iraqi people away from them. That is also why al Qaeda declined in Iraq. Although al Qaeda is facing tremendous difficulties in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, it seems to be growing well in Yemen, the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden. For one thing, the second generation of al Qaeda members who came back from the Iraq War are better organized and trained than the first generation. Soldiers of Yemen brigades under al Qaeda have developed as a strong terrorist group with hundreds of members. For another reason, by taking a lesson from its failure in Iraq, al Qaeda has combined its universal and global ideology with the social reality in Yemen, saying that it is on the side of the Yemeni people. On December 17th, 2009, and later on December 24th, the Yemeni

government, in cooperation with the US, attacked the al Qaeda branch in Yemen. Then al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsular (AQAP) took these attacks as an excuse to alienate the Sunni Muslims in Yemen from the government. In particular, after the reemergence of separatist forces such as the Southern Movement in South Yemen, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP, soon declared its support for the “justice career” of the people in South Yemen in response(Ali, 2009: November 19).

Unlike the traditional practice of al Qaeda, its Yemeni branch not only make suicide attacks but also kidnapped foreign tourists and other targets. Sada al-Malahim or Echoes of Battles, an on-line magazine of AQAP, advocates kidnapping western tourists so as to free its members in jail and making these acts known through on-line videos. *Sada al-Jihad* or *The Echo of Jihad* is another on-line magazine of AQAP. This may lead to a transition of future Movement of Islamic Holy War, that is, from a global movement to a regional or transnational movement under the guide of its global goals.

B. Houthi Rebellion in North Yemen

Although Zaydi Shi'isma are an important branch of Shiite Muslims and a major part of Yemeni Shiite Muslims, the Yemeni Zaydi Shi'isms, after accepting Hanafi, are closer to Sunni Muslims who are also Arabs. The Shiite Muslims have three major branches. The largest branch Twelver is mainly found in Iraq, Iran and other places in the Persian Gulf Area. The Zaydi are also called Fivers, who mainly live in Yemen. The Isma'ili are also called Seveners, who primarily live in India and Central Asia. In the 1990s, the Yemeni government supported Shabaab al-Mu'mineen, or The Young Believers, and its spiritual leader Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi in order to counterstrike Salafi. However, Houthi soon proved to be even more extreme than Salafi. Entering the 21st century, Houthi appointed himself as “Prince of the Believers”, saying that Yemen was on the way to a Shiite divine right with him as the Imam. After the outbreak of the Iraq war, “Young Believers” or the Houthists started to fight against the pro-western and pro-American policies of the government, which finally turned into the armed clashes

between them and the Yemeni government in 2004 (Si Chang, 2005: 20).

The Houthi rebellion did not only result in the political and social unrest in Yemen but also led to tension between Yemen and its neighbor, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the Houthi rebellion was not a sect conflict between Shiites and Sunnis but a religion-based conflict between some extreme Shiite Muslims and other Muslims because Yemeni President Saleh and many other political elites are also members of Zaydi Shi'ism and targets of the Houthis. Although the Yemeni government has won many military victories over the Houthis and even killed their top leader Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the Houthis continued to fight and kept changing their ways of fighting. Today, they are still a serious security threat and a phantom haunting Yemen.

II. The Roots of Terrorism in Yemen

At present, the severity of terrorism in Yemen lies not in its threat to international security but in its political, economic and social properties, which make it really difficult for Yemen to shake off terrorism. As one of the poorest countries in the Arab world or even the whole world, Yemen suffers from social disorder and unstable politics. Yemen, a typical tribe state on a unique land, also faces dangerous water shortage today. All this makes it a natural shelter for international terrorism.

A. Economic Root

The economy of Yemen is extremely backward. Although statistics show that the GDP of Yemen was \$26.9 billion in 2008 and the GDP per capita was \$1220, the unemployment rate of Yemen was 40% in 2007 and the population below poverty line amounted to 45.2% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010: January 9). Compared with other Arab countries, the Yemeni economy is weak mainly because it is highly dependent on oil, which is, unfortunately, scarce. At present, income from oil production constitutes 70% of government revenue and about

90% of exports. However, its oil is expected to run out in 2017 so Yemen is set to be the first country in the Arab world or even the whole world to run out of oil (Fontaine, & Exum, 2010: January 10). In addition, Yemen also suffers from water shortage. The total amount of renewable water resource in Yemen is no more than 2.5 billion m³, yet the amount of water consumed by Yemen already reached 3.2 billion m³ in 1995 and Yemen's water share per capita was only 12% or maybe 13% of that in the Middle East or North Africa (Jin, 2006: 77). To make up the water deficit, underground water has been pumped without control.

However, underground reservoirs have been exhausted in many places. As a large number of farmers have to leave their hometowns, where they can find no jobs or drinking water, for the capital city of Sana'a, Sana'a is expected to be the first capital in the world to run out of drinking water in 2025 (Edwards, 2009: October 11).

The 2003 Iraq War dealt a heavy blow to the already dangerous economy of Yemen. In March 2003 when the US and UK started the Iraq War, the economy of Yemen was in a relatively better position in Yemeni history and the foreign currency reserve assets of Yemen amounted to \$4.4 billion. The Yemeni government even made an ambitious development plan, which would require \$82.6 billion of investment, in the hope of eliminating poverty and making Yemen a middle-income country by 2015. The Iraq War frustrated the Yemeni economy badly at both the domestic and international levels. In Yemen, many foreign oil companies withdrew out of security concerns, which had a great impact on the oil production in Yemen. The number of Yemeni migrants in Gulf States once reached more than one million and the money they remitted back from the Gulf area was more than 80% of that remitted back by all Yemeni migrants. Nevertheless, numerous Yemeni migrants had to leave this area after the outbreak of the Iraq War. As a result, in 2003 the oil revenue and migrant remittances of Yemen decreased by \$1.8 billion or 15.9% of its GNP, which was only \$11.3 billion that year (Chang, 2005: 21).

The deterioration of its economy weakened the ruling of the Yemeni administration and also gave those anti-government forces a

legal excuse. It was from this very background that the Houthi rebellion in the north happened and then the situation worsened.

B. Social Root

In Yemen there are many social factors which may yield terrorism. Above all, both the fertility rates and the proportion of youth in the population are very high. At present, the population of Yemen is around 23 million, but 46% of the population are youngsters below 15. Like that of Somalia, the fertility rate of Yemen, 6 children per woman, is among the highest in the world, twice that of Saudi Arabia and three times that of the Gulf States. There are 700,000 babies born each year in Yemen and the annual population growth rate is 3.45% (Central Intelligence Agency). Judging from the lessons of many other countries, a country with a backward economy, a high fertility rate and a large number of unemployed youth is a natural hotbed for terrorism and other crimes.

Secondly, a single national identity – can hardly take shape due to the complex demographic composition and the confrontation between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Yemen. In regard to Yemen's ethnicity composition, the Yemenis are mainly Arabs. In terms of religious diversity, 99% of the Yemen population believe in Islam and the other 1% believe in Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism. However, 53% of the Muslim population is Sunni and 47% Shi'a. Sunnis are primarily Shafi'i, but also include significant groups of Malikis, and Hanbalis who mainly live in the south and southeast of Yemen. Shi'is are primarily Zaidis, who primarily live in the north and northwest of Yemen. With so many different sects living in different areas, the chances of social integration are rather slim. In 2004, the Houthi rebellion erupted in the north and Yemen was thrust into another civil war. By 2009 Saudi Arabia had been dragged into the Yemen war which thus became a regional threat.

Thirdly, Yemen is a tribal state with four major tribal groups and about 200 large tribes. The tribal population represents about 80% of the Yemen population. This number includes many people who had broken away from their tribes (Yang, 2005: 52). Many Yemenis, the

undereducated in particular, recognize their tribes or clans much more than the country and obey their tribal leaders far more than the law. Therefore, on the one hand, the Yemeni government finds it hard to assert its authority throughout the country; on the other hand, many tribal customs such as avenging one's family, kidnapping and robbery can survive with ease. Apart from kidnapping foreign tourists to put pressure on the government, these tribes also fight against each other. Jurgen Chrobog, former German ambassador to the US and State Secretary of the German Foreign Ministry, was abducted by tribal forces of Yemen in the end of 2005/early 2006.

Finally, guns spread without restriction in Yemen because of the year-by-year wars, unstable politics, warlike tradition and its culture of revenge. Yemen has an estimated 60 million firearms in private hands, roughly three for each man, woman and child, the highest gun ownership rate in the world (Brandon, 2006: January 24). It means that any trivial dispute might result in terrible shooting in Yemen. It is common practice in Yemen to resort to guns instead of judicial department.

C. Geographic Factors

Although not a significant country in politics and economy, Yemen is of great geographic importance in the world. It is located to the south of Saudi Arabia and the west of Oman, bordering the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden. Yemen and Somalia are on either side of "Bab el-Mandab". In addition, Yemen is situated at the estuary of the Suez Canal. In the eyes of the international community, the waters off Yemen are a strategic transportation corridor. Many countries find it hard not to be influenced by the situation in Yemen. The 2000 USS Cole bombing in Aden was such a case in point. For the terrorist network, the best corridor that connects North Africa and the Middle East is Somalia or the route from Djibouti to Yemen, then into the Middle East as it is almost impossible to cross the border between Egypt and Israel while Saudi Arabia has very strict rules over the Red Sea. Additionally, it has close ties with Somalia and other African countries in both history and culture. Since both belong to the Islamic

world, it has been fairly easy for Somalis to blend into Yemeni society over the past centuries. Following the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia, it unconditionally opened its borders to Somali asylum seekers and about 133,000 Somali refugees were living in Yemen in 2007. There are also 700,000-strong Somali nationals already living and working in Yemen. Many Somalis have received Yemeni citizenship due to the marriage with Yemenis over the years (USCRI, 2010: January 9). Due to the close ties between Yemen and Somalia, it is more and more likely that al Qaeda may join hands with Somali pirates in their operations.

III. The US Policies against the Terrorist Threat in Yemen

As mentioned above, the root of terrorism in Yemen lies in its severe political, social and economic difficulties, which cannot be solved soon by any country (including the US). For the US, the importance of Yemen lies not in its economic or geographic positions but in the possibility that Yemen may become a new anti-American terrorism hub. The US did not have any close ties with Yemen before the Gulf War in 1991. On the one hand, Yemen was split into two nations: North and South Yemen. On the other hand, unlike other Middle Eastern countries, Yemen does not have rich oil resources. After Iraq's invasion into Kuwait in 1990, the relation between the US and Yemen showed obvious changes because the Yemeni President Saleh, who was referred to as the "Junior Saddam", had made up his mind to support Iraq. When the UN Security Council was discussing whether to use force against Iraq, Yemen, a non-standing member of the UN Security Council at that time, was the only member that refused to back the 1991 Gulf War to expel Iraq from Kuwait. On January 1st, 2010, Abu Mansur, a top official of the Somali Movement of Warrior Youth, said during an al-Shabab fighters graduation ceremony in Mogadishu that his group was ready to cross the Gulf of Aden to assist al Qaeda in Yemen. Al Qaeda is to send more fighters to chaotic Yemen. After the Gulf War, the bilateral relation was

recovered step by step. Then it became even worse when al Qaeda attacked the US Cole in Aden in 2000 because the American government believed that Yemen had not cooperated with the investigation of the FBI and, what was worse, it might have connived at the attack or let Jamal al-Badawi, one key suspect of the attack, slip away on purpose. After 9/11, the US, out of the need to establish a global anti-terrorism camp, tried to mend its relations with Yemen in politics and economy. The US-Yemen relationship, especially their cooperation on anti-terrorism, reached a rather high level. However, the US was rather unsatisfied with the anti-terrorism strategy and effect of the Yemeni government when the 2009 Christmas Day Bombing Attempt happened. Some suspected that the US was even thinking of Yemen as the third anti-terrorism battlefield. As a whole, the US policy for Yemen will not change by its nature and the bilateral relation will continue to develop instead.

First, the political relations between the US and Yemen will be consolidated. Soon after 9/11, the Yemeni President Saleh visited the US and signed a memorandum of understanding on security cooperation, seeking cooperation in the fields of cutting off terrorist funds, preventing terrorist recruitment, sharing anti-terrorism information, carrying out anti-terrorism training, and so on. President Saleh made four visits to the US during George W. Bush's tenure, pushing the bilateral political relationship to a new height. After taking office, President Obama did not give diplomatic priority to Yemen but his efforts to improve the relation with the Muslim world indicate that Obama will continue to enhance the US-Yemen relations as his predecessor did.

Second, the US will continue to increase security aid to Yemen. On January 3rd, 2010, the US and the UK reached an agreement, according to which both sides would work closer to help Yemen establish a "special counter-terrorism police unit". Speaking in an interview with CNN, Gen Petraeus, who was put in charge of the Afghan and Iraq Wars, said the US would double security aid to Yemen, to more than \$150 million from \$70 million in 2009 (Solomon, 2010: January 10).

Additionally, the British aid to Yemen will also increase to 100 million pounds (about \$161 million) (Selva, 2010: January 16).

Besides, the US has obtained the support and cooperation of the Yemeni government in terms of counter-terrorism. Early of the second Bush tenure, the Yemeni government allowed the US to carry out counter-terrorism acts in its territory and even allowed the US Special Forces to conduct ground operations of counter-terrorism in Yemen. The US developed a new anti-terror strategy or the "Yemen Approach", that is, with the permission of Yemen, the US could take direct actions against the terrorists in Yemen. In 2002, the CIA fired a missile into an automobile containing suspected al Qaeda terrorists who were traveling in Yemen. Such counter-terrorism support continued after Obama took office. There was direct or indirect involvement of American forces during the two military operations against al Qaeda conducted by the Yemeni government in December 2009.

However, the terrorist threat can never be rooted out by military attacks in Yemen or in any other place. The severe difficulty the US faces in Yemen lies not in the strength of al Qaeda in Yemen but the strong anti-Americanism of the al Qaeda fighters. Thousands of al Qaeda fighters returned from the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars still sympathizing or supporting al Qaeda and the beliefs of bin Laden. Although they no longer directly take part in terrorist acts against the US, they hate the US and the West as much as ever. Therefore, the US certainly could not interfere in Yemen affairs by military forces. According to the Washington Post Foreign Service' Sudarsan Raghavan, in his article "Former bin Laden bodyguard is among ex-guerrillas in Yemen", stated "When asked by a journalist, Nasser al-Bahri, a former bin Laden bodyguard and now a businessman in Yemen, said, 'America is a legitimate target.'" (2010: January 6). At most the US could only, by relying on the long-range attack capability of its navy and air force and its intelligence resources, provide some support to the anti-terror acts of Yemen.

Of particular note is that the US and Yemen have many differences between their specific anti-terror strategies despite their

close cooperation in counter-terrorism. Speaking of their attitudes toward al Qaeda, the US insists that al Qaeda is an enemy with whom there are no negotiations or concessions while Yemen argues it is just the al Qaeda way of acting that is illegal, suggesting that al Qaeda is a religious organization whose goals are both legal and reasonable. When taking operations against al Qaeda and other radical organizations, the Yemeni government never gave up negotiations and negotiates with them. The US thinks that this anti-terror strategy is actually conniving terrorism and the anti-terror sincerity of the Yemeni government is doubtful. Due to a failed attempt to blow up an airliner in Detroit and the rising terrorist threat in Yemen, on January 3rd, 2010 the US closed its embassy in Yemen for two days so as to assess the terrorist threat the embassy was facing (Embassy of the United States Sana'a Yemen, 2010: January 5). It is true that the decision was made out of security concerns. Meanwhile, the US indirectly increased its political pressure on the Yemeni government so that the latter might boost its anti-terror efforts.

IV. Conclusion

At present, the "Yemen Approach", which intends to strike domestic terrorists by relying on external forces, is not functioning as expected. With the help of the US, the Yemeni government has allegedly arrested or killed many al Qaeda members, which, however, cannot really weaken al Qaeda's capability of organizing terror acts in Yemen. In essence, the situation of terrorism is determined by the political, economic and social situations of a country while the counter-terrorism ability is mainly determined by the government's administrative and controlling ability over the whole country. However, the US has ruled out the possibilities of sending troops to Yemen or providing Yemen with long-term massive development aid, which means that it is unlikely that the US intends to get involved in Yemen for a long period. As a matter of fact, the current US anti-terror strategy of focusing on al Qaeda in Yemen allows the US some chances,

more or less, to win the war on terrorism in Yemen. For one thing, al Qaeda has not successfully blended into the Yemeni society so the US and the Yemeni government still have enough time left. For another reason, the security threat of Yemen on the US will decrease significantly once the US can successfully pull its force out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Taking into consideration the ordeal that the US has undergone in those poorly managed countries like Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, it's understandable for the US to adopt such a policy of restraint for Yemen.

With regard to Yemen, it is trying to establish a good international environment for itself through its cooperation with the counter-terrorism actions of the US and other countries on the one hand and it cannot irritate the conservative religious forces so as to maintain the security and stability of Yemen. This means that the Yemeni government, taking the overall domestic and international situation into account, must actively cooperate with the counter-terrorism policy of the US but its cooperation will be limited both in depth and strength. With regard to the US, it must provide Yemen with massive security aid so as to strengthen the counter-terrorism ability and will of the Yemeni government and thereby keep the influence of Yemen's al Qaeda inside Yemen on the one hand and consolidate its own homeland security and improve the intelligence analysis and communication between departments of its intelligence system, on the other hand, so as to keep Yemeni terrorist threats out of the US.

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