



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Yemen Headlined: Contemporary Myths and Empirical Realities”

National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations
B-338/339 Rayburn House Office Building
December 10, 2009, 1:00 – 2:45 pm

The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations hosted a panel discussion on the current political, economic, and security situation in Yemen. The panel participants included **Ambassador Barbara Bodine** of Princeton University, **Dr. Christopher Boucek** of the Carnegie Middle East Program, **Gregory Johnsen** of Princeton University, **Ambassador James Larocco** of the National Defense University, and **Dr. Mustafa Alani** of the Gulf Research Center. The National Council’s president **Dr. John Duke Anthony** moderated the event.

Ambassador Bodine explained that Yemen has been an “almost failing state” for quite some time, because of its land size, harsh geography, lack of resources and poverty. Yet unlike most failed states, Yemenis share a strong sense of national identity, with individuals not only identifying themselves as Yemeni but also recognizing the Yemeni nationalism of political others. As most politicians elsewhere, **President Ali Abdullah Saleh** has muddled through his country’s problems, balancing many pressures and tensions. However, contrary to common belief, he does have reach outside of Sana’a, with the government providing basic services and legitimacy throughout the country. Finally, while Yemen is a tribal society, there is not a conflict between familial relations and the government. **Amb. Bodine urged the U.S. to help expand the legitimacy of the state, not a particular person or party**, through assisting in the delivery of services. Or else, Yemen may yet finally devolve into a failed state.

Boucek argued that the U.S. must approach Yemen with a comprehensive perspective that transcends simple security concerns. While the government is admittedly weak, Yemen has a strong civil society. However, tribal governance has increasingly eroded and government actions are further destroying these systems. Currently, Yemen faces three crises of economics, demographics, and traditional security. With Yemen’s oil revenues decreasing and unlikely to ever recover, Yemen will increasingly be reliant upon foreign assistance as the region’s poorest country. Meanwhile, Yemen will be the first country in history to run out of water, as the population grows at an unsustainable rate. Finally, Yemen confronts three security challenges. In the south, feelings of economic and political inequality have fomented into a secessionist movement. In the north, a lack of development and indiscriminate fighting has exacerbated the conflict with the Houthi minority, with over 175,000 internally displaced people as a result. While there is no evidence of a direct Houthi-Iran link, there are surely indirect links that both Yemen and Saudi Arabia use to legitimize the conflict. Then, there is also the resurgence of Al Qaeda. None of these problems are unique to Yemen, but their intersection poses particular difficulties for the country.

Johnsen outlined three tiers of crises. First, Yemen faces immense structural challenges of dwindling oil and water, unemployment, high birth rate, widespread corruption and a deteriorating infrastructure. Second, there is an elite rivalry and competing patronage networks. For thirty years, Ali Abdullah has

“dance[d] on the heads of snakes” by balancing different factions with patronage. But now his “style and structure” of rule is fracturing, as he has less money to play the factions off each other. Even within his own tribe, the bonds of loyalty are strained as his eldest son and **Ali Mohsen al-Ahmer** vie for power, particular as the question of presidential succession looms larger. Third, Al-Qaeda now poses a resurgent threat. After initially defeating AQ shortly after 9/11, Yemen and the U.S. failed to remain properly vigilant and allowed AQ to rebuild. Starting in 2006, AQ announced its reemergence with a series of attacks. Then in 2008, they began to make itself relevant to Yemeni politics and society by starting a journal and undertaking more attacks on foreigners. Now, AQ in Yemen has successfully merged with their counterpart in Saudi Arabia, effectively becoming a regional actor. Today, AQ is stronger than ever and winning the propaganda war against the US by focusing on key issues that resonate with the Yemeni population, such as corruption and Palestine. The U.S. should therefore not only focus on terrorism in Yemen, but the underlying challenges that confront Yemenis.

Ambassador Larocco contended that Yemen cannot be an American struggle, but it does require “major engagement” that begins immediately. Ali Abdullah will visit the Washington soon, and the U.S. must be able to announce its full partnership by that time. Since 9/11, American officials in Yemen and elsewhere have been too secluded from the population. Among other initiatives, Congress should fast track Yemenis for exit and entry visas into the U.S. with more funding and personnel. The State Department should also start the Yemen 2000 program that would increase training and exchanges between American and Yemeni mid-level management. Finally, Amb. Larocco contended the U.S. should engage with the international community to coordinate foreign assistance to Yemen and ensure pledges are met. Ultimately, the U.S. has one choice to make with Yemen: “pay me now, or pay me later.”

Alani argued that Yemen is not a failed state or even a failing state. Rather, it is a state with a problem. Primarily, Yemen faces an economic problem that stems from both a lack and mismanagement of resources. Alani contended that Yemenis do not view Al Qaeda as a major threat. With less than 50 active members, they are less effective than often portrayed. Out of the 23 AQ prisoners who infamously escaped Yemeni prison, only three have not been captured or killed. At the same time, the Houthi rebellion presents a major problem, especially after the Saudi intervention made it a regional problem. The Houthi population wants the government to stop interfering in its affairs and allow the creation of a safe-haven, much as Hezbollah enjoys in South Lebanon. Finally, Alani dismissed the southern secessionist movement as largely a venting of frustration of a lack of development, jobs, pensions and other non-political complaints. Alani reminded the audience that South Yemen was a failed state with a collapsed economy and government. Therefore, most Yemenis associate “everything negative” with the idea of a once-again independent South Yemen. Therefore, the pressure for separation is in fact a tactic to draw government attention to divert resources towards the south.