

Complex Yemen scenario needs a careful approach

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ANALYSIS: The West must avoid exacerbating the degree of al-Qaeda threat from the Arabian Peninsula, writes **EDWARD BURKE**

AS THE world's governments gather in London to discuss a response to the threat from a resurgent al-Qaeda in Yemen, the first thing the US and European governments should reflect upon is how easy it is for them to make the situation even worse.

Following the attempted Christmas Day bombing aboard Northwest Airlines flight 253, there has been much sabre-rattling in Washington calling for military strikes against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Senator Joe Lieberman, the chairman of the homeland security committee in the US Senate, has stated that "Afghanistan is today's war. If we don't act pre-emptively, Yemen will be tomorrow's war."

This is highly dangerous rhetoric to follow years of US complacency and lack of interest in Yemen. The single most obvious similarity between Afghanistan and Yemen is the lack of actionable US human intelligence on both countries. In Afghanistan, where more than 100,000 US troops have been deployed, in addition to hundreds of US diplomats and intelligence operatives, a report recently released by the US military admits the US "finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade".

This operational blindness can be multiplied many times in the case of Yemen.

If the US military robustly engages "pre-emptively" and overtly in Yemen, such actions will become the recruiting sergeant al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has long dreamed of and could transform it from having fringe support into a popular insurgency.

Comparisons with Afghanistan are not only simplistic but highly counterproductive. Many Yemenis do not primarily associate Afghanistan with a terrorist threat and rampant corruption, as is the case in the West, but rather with a humiliating occupation imposed upon a Muslim people. The US is beginning its public relations battle to win the hearts and minds of the Yemeni population from a low ebb.

In Afghanistan, a lack of intelligence has led to catastrophic mistakes that have fuelled the Taliban insurgency. Until recently the US presence on the ground in Yemen has been minimal, constituting only a handful of diplomats, CIA operatives and special forces. The internal dynamics of Yemen are easily as complicated, if not more so, as

those in Afghanistan. With fewer resources and a population even more suspicious of US motives, Barack Obama would do well to tread carefully during the next months.

It is perhaps not surprising that tribal support for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has grown at the same time as the Yemeni economy is in decline. Although some observers have called Yemen “the perfect storm” of political, social and economic grievance, such a sweeping analysis overstates the weakness of the central government and ignores the resilience of the main tribes, many of whom have challenged al-Qaeda infiltration.

Nevertheless, the economic situation in Yemen is dire. A lack of revenue, rapidly increasing population and a bloated, corrupt public sector means that President Ali Abdullah Saleh is rapidly running out of money with which to pay government salaries and reinforce tribal patronage networks.

This year threatens to be an even more turbulent year for Yemen than 2009. From a position of doing too little in terms of counter-terrorism efforts in Yemen, the US now seems tempted to try and do too much. US proposals for a major increase in military assistance for the Yemeni security forces overlook the profound rivalry and animosity that exist between certain commanders and their heavy involvement in the country’s economy, including the seizure of land and assets in the south as the civil war ended in 1994.

There has been little interest on the part of the international community in resolving the political deadlock between the government and opposition parties in Yemen which led to the postponement of parliamentary elections originally scheduled for 2009 until 2011.

Shelving the reform process in Yemen in favour of a more “realist” security engagement would be a self-defeating paradox – much of the frustration which has fostered the growth of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula can be traced to a lack of accountability and the persecution of political and civil society activists by the government.

In exchange for an increase in aid to Yemen, the international community should push the Yemeni government to address the long-standing grievances of the south into which the leaders of al-Qaeda have astutely tapped.

Yemen’s prisons are overcrowded, brutal and have been a recruitment ground for al-Qaeda. They are also notoriously insecure, with a number of successful escapes by senior al-Qaeda operatives in recent years.

While a radical reform of Yemen’s security forces is unlikely, limited training to curb more damaging practices is possible. An overhaul of education is also crucial, not least due to high illiteracy rates but also due to the influx of funding to religious schools from extremist movements abroad.

Finally, the secondary role of the US and Europe in Yemen must also be appreciated. All roads out of Yemen’s current woes lead through Riyadh. The government of Saudi Arabia has promised over \$1 billion in aid for 2010 and for decades has cultivated an extensive range of alliances with Yemeni tribes, often to the chagrin of the government.

The US and Europe must be firm in pushing for a dialogue with Saudi Arabia on a collective strategy to turn the tide against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula while also negotiating an end to the Zaydi Shia insurgency in the north which has killed and displaced thousands and sapped the strength of the Yemeni state. Yemen's problems are predominantly local and multifaceted. Al-Qaeda thrives on all of them.

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