Beware of False Analogies:
Why Yemen is not Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia
... it's Yemen

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Wednesday, January 20, 2010

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To borrow from a fellow Missourian, reports of Yemen's demise are exaggerated. Depending on how we as well as the Yemeni government and the Yemenis handle this next year, it could become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Yemen is not a failed state. It is fragile and faces challenges – economic, demographic, political and security - that would sunder others. There are those who would write it off as a lost cause, dismiss it as a sink-hole of assistance, outsource the problems and the solutions to the neighbors or turn it into a Third Front when we have not yet completed nor been unquestioningly successful in the first two.

- President Obama is correct that we should continue to ***partner*** with Yemen to deny al Qaeda sanctuary.
- The Yemeni Government requested assistance, training and equipment support in this effort. We responded affirmatively. This is necessary, but insufficient.
- The Administration has doubled economic assistance, but the levels are inadequate in and of themselves and in comparison to security assistance.
- This must be more than an American effort, but international donor conferences are rarely constructive, strategic or concrete.
- The fundamental challenges facing Yemen are resources and capacity not will.
- What is needed, therefore, is a sustained, comprehensive strategy to:

    - Avoid the temptation to apply false analogies from other conflicts
        - Yemen is not Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia; templates do not work
        - American boots on the ground will be counterproductive

    - Apply the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan wisely
        - Efforts at security without legitimacy will not bring stability
        - Civilian-led and civilian-focused diplomacy and development are required upfront, early and long-term
        - Build state capacity, e.g. civilian capacity; professionalized civil service
            - Work through existing structures, not seek to create new ones
            - Do not empower the military/police at the expense of the civilian

    - Support democratic governance, including local administration, civil society, the media and public integrity programs
        - Work with all parties including opposition groups

    - Support sustained investment in education at all levels
        - People are Yemen's major natural resource. Make that an asset.

    - Support reconciliation solutions to northern and southern conflicts
        - This means neither appeasement nor capitulation
        - Support regionally-based negotiation efforts
        - Support programs and capacity to address core grievances

A Review of the Basics

Many of the basic facts are known, and much discussed in the past few weeks.

- It is large, perhaps the size of France or Texas
- It is rugged and forbidding – mountainous along the coasts; desert in the interior
- It is populous (20 to 25 million), perhaps exceeding the population of the rest of the peninsula combined…and that population is growing at a staggering rate.
- It is bereft of sufficient natural resources to support its own population or provide either government revenue or meaningful exports. It lacks adequate arable land, surface water or oil.
- It is beset by three serious, unrelated security challenges – in the north with the Houthi rebellion, in the south with secession sentiments, and the east with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).
- And, finally, as both a reflection and a consequence of many of these factors, the central government works within a primordially decentralized political structure, limited services and corrosive reports of corruption.

Sounds like a failed state, but it isn't.

- Yemen lacks the sectarian divides that exploded in Iraq. They are neither Sunni nor Shia and most certainly not Wahhabi. It would be a mistake to view the violence in the north, the al-Houthi rebellion, through a sectarian prism or assume and respond as if it were a Saudi-Iranian proxy war. The potential exists but that is neither the proximate cause nor the inevitable outcome.

- Yemen lacks the ethnic/linguistic cleavages of Afghanistan. Despite regional distinctions and distinct political histories, expanded upon below, there is a strong sense of Yemeni identity and tradition of inclusiveness. Contrary to the new conventional wisdom, the writ of the state extends beyond the capital.

- Yemen lacks the tradition of clan violence found in Somalia or of warlords in Afghanistan. Yemen is often described as a tribal society, but it would be a mistake to understand these tribes as vertical rather than horizontal structures and to vest in tribal leaders too much authority. There is far more fluidity to the society than the label "tribal" applies and far greater traditional but effective participation and accountability.

- Yemen is politically more developed than any of the three template states. Congress, the Administration and major democracy-support organizations recognize Yemen as an emerging democracy with 20 years experience in free, fair and contested elections, including the last presidential election, non-sectarian, nationally-based multi-parties, open press and civil society. It is fragile and flawed but real.

Political History and Current Events:

When I worked on Iraq I was informed by one senior official, after an attempt to inject a little Iraqi history in the discussions, that "we were smarter than history." We're not, and policy made absent an understanding of history is fatally flawed. More so in a complex and ancient society such as Yemen.

In the space of less than 50 years Yemen moved from anachronistic political systems to what most objective observers concede is an indigenous, democratic system. To say that the political integration is not yet complete, that the infrastructure of governance is insufficient, is an understatement few Yemenis would argue with. That is not the same as failure.

Since the 1990 unification, only 20 years ago, the size of Yemen has more than tripled. The unification of north and south was precipitated by the collapse of the South's primary patron, the Soviet Union, but unification had been an article of faith since at least the Republican Revolution in the North in the 1960s and the end of the British colonial status in the South in 1967.

As a start, the former North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic) and South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) were essentially east and west of each other. A significant portion of North Yemeni senior officials were from the South and a significant portion of South Yemeni officials were from the North. While the divide was roughly where the mountains hit the coastal plain, the divide was not along an easy Zaydi (not Shia) vs. Shafi (not Sunni) sectarian line.

The unification was also more complex than the stapling together of an anti-monarchical republic and a lapsed Marxist-Leninist state. It was the unification of at least three rather than two distinct political cultures and historical memories.

- North Yemen: The highlands were a hereditary Zaydi theocracy closed to the outside world until the 1962 Republican Revolution. Saudi Arabia backed the monarchists; Nasser's Egypt the Republicans. The Revolution was the defining moment in modern Yemeni history. A vast majority of Yemenis live in the highlands on subsistence agriculture in small, scattered villages.

- Aden Port: A British Crown Colony from 1839 until 1967 and capital of Marxist South Yemen. Relatively modern, densely populated and directly governed by the British, with strong ties to India and the subcontinent.

- Aden Protectorates: 10 or so tribes, sultanates and emirates to the east of Aden Port under protectorate status from 1880s/1890s until the early 1960s. Sparsely populated, politically traditional and socially conservative. Allowed a considerable degree of autonomy under the British and an awkward fit with Aden in the events leading up to and following independence in 1967.

Although its international borders with Saudi Arabia were finally negotiated only 10 years ago, Yemen is not an artificial construct of the colonial era. It calculates its history in millennia not decades or centuries. Aden Port has been a prize for nearly as long, and there is evidence of a brief and unsuccessful Roman presence near Aden. Attempts by the Ottomans to control the north repeatedly ended in failure. Aden was a British Crown Colony and one of the jewels in that crown, serving as a major coaling station. The eastern portion, primarily the Hadramaut was under protectorate status only. Despite a century plus of British colonialism in the Aden, by and large, the Yemen highlands and the eastern reaches missed most of the colonial period.

Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of North Yemen in 1978 following the assassination of two North Yemeni presidents, one by South Yemeni agents, in the space of nine months. (The South Yemeni president was assassinated in the same timeframe by a hard line rival). Eight months later, in early 1979, the South invaded the North, prompting massive US military assistance to the North and support from a broad number of Arab states, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The South was backed by the Soviet Union and its allies, including Cuba. From 1976 to 1982 the South also backed an insurgency in the North. What Ali Abdullah Saleh inherited in 1978 and struggled with into the 1980s was a state that essentially existed along the Sana'a-Taiz-Hodeidah roads, and in the daylight. The southern border with the People Democratic Republic of Yemen was volatile and the 2000 mile border with Saudi Arabia was contested and undemarcated.

To compound the challenges of political histories, the union in 1990, while a negotiated agreement, was not between equals. North Yemen, while impoverished and underdeveloped, had approximately 15 million people; the South, with one of the best natural harbors in the world and a refinery, had less than 2 million and was abandoned by its patron and benefactor, the Soviets. In addition, whatever Aden's natural advantages, it had been decimated by the closure of the Suez Canal and its British infrastructure had been allowed to rot under the Soviets. The South brought few assets, great expectations and a number of liabilities into the union.

South Yemen was an international – or at least and American – pariah. It was the first state placed on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list for the collection of Marxist and alphabet soup terrorist group training camps, and ranked exceedingly low on early Human Rights Reports. What it also brought to the union was a bureaucracy of over 300,000 officials, larger by several factors than that of the North. Finally, there remained unsettled scores between the traditional and disposed leaders of the former protectorates and remnants of the Marxist government.

Governing Yemen is no easy undertaking. Resources have not kept pace with demands. Oil provided a respite but never at the levels commensurate with the neighbors, the needs or the expectations. Yemenis are fiercely independent and while demanding of government services will resist any heavy government hand. Their political and social worldviews run the gamut from well-educated, urban technocrats to simple farmers, from secular socialists through nationalists, a legal Islamist party to Salafi. It would be a mistake to assume all technocrats were liberals and reformers and that all farmers and tribesmen were Islamists or that any of these came in neat geographically defined packages. Yemen is not that simple.

Any government must balance the competing needs and demands of this disparate and deeply politically engaged population. Any issue, program, official, rumor or fact will be debated at length both in Parliament and in the equally important *qat* chews.

Patronage is an essential element of any government's ability to maintain power – even here – but it is not sufficient to explain the survival of the government over 30 years. Perhaps the best analogy is a juggler with plates on a stick. Each plate must be given its due attention or it, and perhaps all of them, will come crashing down.

To the extent the three major security concerns – the Houthi, the southerners and AQAP – pose an existential threat to the survival of the government and the state it is not their desire or ability to replace the government but their ability to distract and divert attention and resources. This government and no foreseeable successor government can manage all three adequately and still provide even the basics in services. The juggler can only move so fast.

The US and Yemen

Given the self-isolation of the North and British control of Aden, the US essentially ignored The Yemens for most of its modern history. One major exception – a US scholarship program in the late 40's and early 50's for forty young men, mostly Zaydi, to study in the US. Nearly all returned to Yemen, none cast their lot with the royalists and many went on to serve Yemen as technocrats, government ministers and the core of Yemen's political evolution over the next 50 years. President Kennedy's decision to recognize the Republican government in the North in 1962, barely three months after the Revolt irritated our friends the British, French and the Saudis. Finally, the US strongly and publicly backed Yemeni unity during the brief civil war and looked to Yemen to be a constructive partner after 9/11. Earlier this month, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen, gave Yemen good marks on this last count, as had the previous Administration.

Yemeni support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and Yemeni mujahedeen battling the Soviets in Afghanistan (a disproportionate number of whom came from the south) became liabilities in the relationship only in retrospect.

Beyond that, Yemen figured as a secondary player in broader Cold War and regional politics. Nasser's Egypt squared off against the Saudi monarchy over the Republican Revolution. The Egyptians threw in the towel in 1967 following their defeat in the war with Israel, although at that stage the Republicans had essentially defeated the monarchists. South Yemeni meddling in the North reflected tensions along the Soviet-West fault lines as inherent tensions along the Yemeni border. Our decision to provide massive military assistance to the North in the 1979 border war reflected events in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa as much as any intrinsic interest in North Yemen.

US economic development assistance and security cooperation with Yemen has been erratic and episodic. After the airlift of military equipment in 1979, the US essentially walked away from any relationship with the Yemeni military. That equipment, or some of it, was still in the Yemeni

inventory when I arrived almost 20 years later as Ambassador. Economic assistance waxed and waned. In the best of times it included a vibrant and still well-remembered Peace Corps program, major agricultural development assistance and an active scholarship program. At other times, we virtually zeroed it out.

When I arrived as Ambassador in 1997 we had essentially no development program, no USAID personnel, no Peace Corps, and no longer provided scholarships. The Yemeni decision not to support the 1990 UN Security Council Resolution on Desert Shield/Desert Storm and the 1994 Civil War are often cited as the reasons for this precipitous drop. However, Yemen was not alone among Arab states – including Jordan and Tunisia – on opposing non-Arab military action to liberate Kuwait and the Civil War lasted barely 2 months. It hardly represented a direct or continuous threat to US personnel. Basically, Yemen just slipped quietly off the radar screen. No major economic interests; no apparent security interest. Neither malicious nor benign neglect on our part. Just indifference.

The mandate of my tenure as ambassador, with the full backing of the Department of State and General Zinni at Central Command, was to rebuild the relationship on as broad a front as possible, including security cooperation, democracy support, scholarships, economic development, and creation of a Coast Guard. The attack on USS Cole was not only an attack on the US but was seen by the Yemenis as an attack on them and an attack on the changing relationship.

The perception of many Yemenis, including our friends, is that in recent years the aperture narrowed to security only or security first, and security as we defined it. We need to reopen that aperture.

Yemen's Challenges; US Options

It is not difficult to curb one's enthusiasm over our announced doubling of economic assistance to $40 million/year along with $120 million in military assistance. If we accept that there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 100-200 AQAP members in Yemen, and approximately 25 million Yemenis not affiliated with AQAP, we have upped our assistance to the non-AQAP Yemenis from less than $1/per year/per Yemeni to about a buck sixty per and have committed over $500,000.00/AQAP/year.

I understand that there is not a direct dollar-to-dollar correlation between an effective level of development assistance and military assistance, but this is not good, and it's not smart and it is not effective.

Yemen faces four major inherent challenges:

- Water: Finite, inadequate and diminishing rapidly
- Energy: Finite, inadequate and diminishing rapidly
- Political Infrastructure: Finite, inadequate and vulnerable
- Population: Apparently infinite, abundant and expanding rapidly

These four challenges feed the three security challenges, two directly and AQAP indirectly.

In both the northern rebellion and among the southern secessionists, a fundamental issue is the perception, the reality, of inadequate provision of governmental services. This is not to say that the central government is no more than a mayoralty. That reflects a lack of appreciation for the intrinsic character of the political and social system. It is also not to say that there is a demand for a strong central government. It is a demand for a more effective, efficient and responsive government, one that provides resources through credible support to the local administrations system and to the citizens.

Water:

Reports that Yemen, or at least the Sana'a Basin, will run out of aquifer water imminently have been circulating for decades and will become true at some point. Demand far exceeds the monsoons' ability to replenish and antiquated irrigation methods and subsidized fuel for pumps exacerbate the problem. Desalinization plans are hampered by the exorbitant cost of transporting the water over several mountain ranges to the populated and agricultural highlands at roughly 4,000-8,000 feet. Proposals to relocate the entire Yemeni population to the coasts do not warrant extensive discussion. The financial costs and the social and political upheaval would be catastrophic.

Energy:

Yemen did not share its neighbors' blessings in oil or gas. What they had is diminishing and/or in remote and inaccessible regions. To put it in perspective, Yemen's oil reserves are calculated at 3 BBL. That is roughly half of Oman's reserves; Oman's population, however, is one-tenth Yemen's. Iraq, with approximately the same size population, has reserves of approximately 115 BBL, plus water and arable land.

Population:

Yemen has one of the highest growth rates in the world and with a majority of the population under 25, a sonic baby boom is in the offing. As the trajectory climbs steeply, the pressures on water and energy will only increase as resources decrease.

The low level of education is a significant drag on the development of the country. Schools are few and far between and teachers too often are imported to supplement the lack of Yemeni teachers, while too many Yemenis are unemployed. Prospects for foreign investment are hampered by the lack of a work force with the necessary skills.

Political structure:

Despite the theories of political science, Yemen has created a fragile, flawed but very real democratic structure and process that reflects the Yemeni character and traditions. Its flaws should be a focus of assistance not an excuse to disengage or not engage. The survival of this experiment is tied to the economic future of the state and the role of the neighbors and the donors.

A major and under discussed challenge to the political structure is the generational change underway. The Famous Forty are rapidly leaving the scene as are those from the Republican Revolution and the independence fight in the South. The next generation does not share this history or the alliances forged. Traditional tribal leaders, such as Paramount Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, have been succeeded by a coalition of sons. There is most certainly a jockeying for position throughout the next generation – tribal, power elites, merchant families and technocrats. It would be presumptuous for us to declare the winner. We have no idea. Yemeni politics are more kaleidoscope than mosaic. It would be dangerous for us to insert ourselves into the process directly or indirectly. Whoever succeeds Ali Abdullah Saleh will need the affirmation of the nascent democratic structures as well as the blessings of the power elites. We can support the structures and processes; we cannot assume or pick the winners.

Where Should the US Focus?

To focus disproportionately on immediate military and security capacity building is short-sighted. If our concerns about the threats from Yemen are sufficient to fund $120 million in security assistance and an implicit understanding that development of credible security structures is a long term investment, then our interest in keeping Yemen on the good side of the failure curve (recognizing that it may never be wholly prosperous) warrant an equal commitment to civilian capacity building over a similar long haul. We need to do more than invest in extending the authority of the state and invest as well in the legitimacy and the capacity of the state and the society. We cannot grant "legitimacy" but we can assist in the development of those elements of the state that provide services to the citizens. The "we" here is the US Government, the international community and the regional neighbors.

- Develop a credible, efficient and effective civil service. This is not a sexy as training an army or the police. It is not as telegenic. It is critical.

- Support Yemeni efforts to mitigate opportunities for diversion and corruption by the development of governmental and non-governmental accountability structures.

- Support education and schooling, not through construction of schools (that is easy) but through elementary and secondary teacher training. Human capital is Yemen's untapped natural resource.

- Support governance initiatives in all three branches of government and civil society.
  Civil society development creates a cadre of next generation officials, e.g. the current Minister of Water was the head of an NGO.

- Support training of primary health care system such as the midwifery training in the 90's.

- Support restoration of Aden Port as a major entrepot for the Indian Ocean rim. This is Yemen's second major natural resource. Development of the Port would create employment and mitigate north-south tensions.

Some Final Thoughts and Cautionary Tales – Civilian capacity not just military capability

In shaping a US strategy going forward in Yemen, we need to bear a few lessons of our own recent history as well as Yemen's long history in mind. We are not smarter than their history or our own.

- We are dealing with a sovereign state, not a failed state, that has proven to be a credible if not always capable partner.

- The Yemeni government will undertake those actions that are in its own best national interest. We have shared priorities, but perhaps not in the same priority order.

- Our commitment needs to be to build state capacity, including efforts to assist the development of a civil service, parliament, judiciary and media/civil society – within a Yemeni context.

- Our involvement in state and human capacity development needs to equal if not exceed our commitment to build a military and police capability.

None of this guarantees success, however defined. However, a short-sighted, security-centric and episodic engagement with Yemen could create the very failed state neither we nor the Yemenis want or can afford. If this set of proposals looks costly, the cost of dealing with the ramifications of state failure will be far greater.

Thank you.