

## *COMMENTARY*

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### **Saving Yemen from Itself**

**Alon Ben-Meir**

**New York University**

**Y**emen as a nation has gone through dramatic turmoil brought about by internal violent conflicts occurring over the last several decades. The forced resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh (replaced by Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi) in February, along with the formation of a transitional unity government, has had little effect on the fundamental issues that bear down on Yemen. Although recent efforts made by the Saudi government to raise billions of dollars geared toward the development of Yemen is a welcome sign, there is little assurance that these funds will in fact stabilize the situation and save the country from itself unless the money is delivered and invested wisely.

Yemen's internal conditions are and have been dismal for decades, with nearly seven million citizens deprived of basic necessities, a half million children affected by acute malnutrition and a startling 50 percent unemployment rate. The media in and outside of Yemen has scarcely reported on this dire situation, choosing instead to focus on major violent incidents committed by al-Qaeda and other extremist militia in the Arabian Peninsula (yet only to the extent that they affected neighbouring Arab countries or the US). Moreover, despite the political changes, it has and continues to be extremely difficult to assess what is really taking place on the ground, and the situation remains murky at best. While the law establishing the transitional government was lofty in content, it has had little effect on the day-to-day life of ordinary Yemenites.

The lamentable lack of attention to Yemen was also precipitated by the country's marginal political influence both regionally and certainly within the international arena. Although in the latest meetings in Riyadh international donors pledged nearly US\$6.5 billion for Yemen's development and security, these funds may still meet the fate of earlier monetary pledges made

this past May, much of which was either not delivered or was largely misappropriated with little effect on changing the quo. Successive governments in Yemen under the deposed President Saleh's 33-year reign were plagued by rampant corruption and patronage which continues unabated to this day, particularly since many of the same corrupt officials continue to hold the same position they held in the previous government.

Assuming that much of the money pledged in May (and more recently) is finding its way to the Yemeni treasury, the paramount concern remains how best to utilize these funds in order to prevent Yemen from becoming a failed state, if it has not already. To begin with, some of these funds must go toward improving the security conditions throughout the country. As long as al-Qaeda and other militant Islamist groups continue to violently undermine and sabotage any efforts to rebuild Yemen as a state, developing a lasting peace will remain on the wishful list. For the security forces to become effective, money in and of itself will not suffice to improve the overall security vacuum. External advisers and trainers from some regional states and forces such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and the US should devote time, energy and resources to train Yemen's internal security forces, improve intelligence, and provide these forces with proper military hardware to deal with the insurgency and systematically disrupt and eventually prevent al-Qaeda from operating almost freely throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

Moreover, a significant portion of these funds should be channelled toward the development of crucial infrastructure such as roads, schools and medical clinics. Although these projects should be undertaken by the government, they must nevertheless be supervised by representatives of the donor countries. These states, specifically Saudi Arabia, ought to ensure that these funds are not squandered by corrupt officials and however critical the internal security may be, the development of the infrastructure cannot wait until all security requirements are fully met. To have the most effect, the funds should be divided into instalments. Before providing the second instalment, Yemeni authorities must demonstrate that the initial payment has been utilized for what was intended by providing accountability and transparency.

In addition to security and infrastructure, sustainable participatory development projects should receive special attention. Although building infrastructure and institutions necessary to create jobs and improve the overall quality of life remains the purview of the government, empowering ordinary citizens through sustainable development should attain top priority. Sustainable economic development invariably creates wealth both for the communities that adopt such projects and for the state treasury, which can generate more income through increased tax revenues. In turn these funds (taxes) can be used toward improving the social safety net and the overall health of the economy. The great benefit in engaging in sustainable development is that small communities are empowered to collectively decide through advice and consent on projects of their choice, from which they can benefit while the principles of democratic culture are simultaneously fostered. It is worthy to note that such projects require limited capital and do not

necessitate infusion of new capital and advanced technology. In fact, ten percent of the money pledged (US\$650 million) could provide more than one million Yemenites a decent living and restore their basic human rights while fostering democratic principles.

It must be noted that none of the three objectives should take preference over the others; improving security, building new infrastructure and implementing sustainable development projects all need to be tackled concurrently. In the interim, an emergency supply of food, medical aid and other necessary provisions must be rushed to despondent families to save the lives of nearly one million who are on the verge of dying from malnutrition, particularly women and children.

Saudi Arabia is an extremely important player in regards to what is happening in Yemen. First, many of the terrorist activities that have occurred in Saudi Arabia were traced to Yemeni citizens largely instigated by al-Qaeda. Secondly, due to Saudi Arabia's proximity to Yemen, particularly their shared eastern border where a large Shiite concentration and many oil deposits are located, Saudi Arabia has every interest in ensuring Yemen's stability which informs their substantial contributions of three billion dollars at so-called "Friends of Yemen" meetings in Riyadh. Third, should Yemen become a failed state, Saudi Arabia will be directly affected by the threats of mass refugees and a terrorist infiltration that will permeate the entire Gulf region.

The current reconciliation government must ensure that it is representative of all segments of Yemeni society and in particular must seek, with the support of Saudi Arabia and neighbouring countries, a dialogue with the Houthi movement which controls significant portions of northern Yemen. Although the conflict between this tribe and the central government goes back many decades, it is nearly impossible to stabilize Yemen without finding a peaceful settlement with the secessionist groups who have established their own autonomous zone.

By providing funds, however important and critical they may be to addressing Yemen's malaise, the efforts to save the country must remain an Arab enterprise. That said, only the Yemeni people, with the helping hand of the international community, can pull the country back from the brink of an increasingly imminent disaster.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Link: [http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/saving-yemen-from-itself/?utm\\_source=Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=3d198c7303-UA-5963141-2&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/saving-yemen-from-itself/?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=3d198c7303-UA-5963141-2&utm_medium=email)

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in U.S. and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

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