



THE
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Those powers who have tried to dominate Yemen have done so to their immense cost

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A faulty pair of "Made in Yemen" exploding underpants have diverted the world's attention to a new destination. The most physically attractive and anthropologically colourful, but also the poorest and least known, country on the Arabian Peninsula is the one we're worrying about now. Within days of the botched attack, on New Year's Eve, Yemen's foreign minister was begging for help against an estimated 300 jihadists; helicopters, counter-terrorism training and money were on his wish-list. On New Year's Day Gordon Brown was responding with a plan to host an international conference to discuss ways of stopping a country he described as an "incubator and potential safe haven for terrorists" becoming another Afghanistan. By yesterday Yemen already had a pledge of funding for a new counter-terrorism unit and reinforcement for its coastguard. The US has doubled its spending in Yemen – from \$70m to \$140m for this year. Fresh intelligence of a planned attack in Sanaa has led both the US and UK to close their embassies there. Yemen – or, more precisely, its president, Ali Abdullah Salih – is an ally in the War on Terror we have been fighting this last decade so it's nice to be lending him a helping hand, but there is arguably little we can do at this stage without running a serious risk of our efforts rebounding on us.

In an ideal world, President Salih is not someone we would like to be doing business with. Although far from being a blood-thirsty tyrant in the mould of Saddam Hussein, he has maintained himself in power these past 30 years by a skilful balancing of interests made possible by the financial blandishments he has been funding from Yemen's trickle of oil revenues since 1986. This slowing trickle, the source of three quarters of Yemen's revenues, is no longer enough to dampen dissent against a regime that has been branded by the American academic, Professor Robert D Burrowes, as a "kleptocracy run by and for the thieves". Corrupt, unjust, primitive, criminal are a few of the adjectives educated Yemenis would use to describe it.

It is no surprise therefore that President Salih has been contending with two serious dissident movements for the past half decade – one in the north-west of the country, one in the south – both of which threaten the integrity of the country. The Zaydi Shiite rebels of north-western Yemen hate Salih for effectively selling Yemen's soul to Sunni Saudi Wahhabism, a policy that started in the early 1970s when Sanaa sought a bulwark against the Marxists who had seized power in south Yemen after the British departed in 1967. The southern uprising against him, meanwhile, is rooted in fury at the way the union of north and south Yemen has been handled since its enactment in 1990; in late 2004 an influential southern sheikh named Tariq al-Fadhli, an old friend of Osama bin Laden's from Afghanistan and the anti-Soviet jihad but ostensibly a loyal supporter of President Salih, confessed he wished the British would return to Aden, "before lunch, if possible!"

Assessing his two dissident movements as posing a greater danger to himself and his relations than al-Qa'ida, President Salih has been expending the bulk of his resources on them since 2004. Billions of dollars' worth of Russian MiG jets have been bombing civilian targets in Saada, and counter-terrorism efforts have been concentrated on harassing and imprisoning journalists, comedians and dissident politicians, instead of supervising mosques and schools, let alone uprooting al-Qa'ida. Yemen's jihadists have been at liberty to regroup since 2006 when 23 of them "escaped" from a Sanaa jail run by the central security agency, the PSO. Just as in Pakistan, there has been a credible question mark over the extent to which the PSO has aided and abetted the jihadists.

On my last visit to Sanaa however, one of the president's advisers assured me that al-Qa'ida had moved up the agenda since Salih had realised that they had him directly in their sights; an old woman tending a grave in a cemetery near the airport had reported the mysterious appearance of a hut among the graves and, in so doing, exposed a plot to shoot down Salih's aeroplane. In December, the uncovering of plots against the US and UK embassies in Sanaa prompted some rare direct action against al-Qa'ida. With publicly acknowledged US back-up in the form of weaponry and intelligence, Yemeni jets bombed what the US identified as al-Qa'ida targets. Instead of making more enemies out of friends, and before wading into Yemen as Senator Joe Lieberman recommends – all guns blazing in all directions and on the side of an

unpopular and failing regime – we might consider a few factors.

The hearts-and-minds propaganda war has been more or less lost in Yemen thanks to the invasion of Iraq and the unpopularity of President Salih, America's ally. Yemen is home to many different shades of Islamism, many of whom are Salafists like bin Laden – the Muslim equivalent of Puritans – but the vast majority of whom are not jihadists, even if they do distrust the West and reject its values.

The spread of radicalisation in Yemen might be slowed if pressure were applied to Yemen's wealthy Gulf neighbours to host Yemeni migrant workers and, in the long term, invest more in the country.

Our political advice to President Salih might be that he needs to decentralise as fast as possible, before the country falls apart. Yemen is unlikely to become a reliable safe haven for jihadists. Powers who have sought to dominate Yemen since the 16th century – the Ottomans, the British, the Egyptians, the Soviet Union – all learned to their immense cost that Yemen's tribes are interested in money and land, not any ideology – whether religious or secular.

Iraq's Sunni tribes were eventually bribed out of al-Qa'ida's clutches. That tactic might work in Yemen, though the dealings would certainly be better handled by fellow Gulf Arabs than by any Western power.

Victoria Clark's 'Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes' will be published by Yale in April

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