

# Troubled Yemen, the world's next failed state?

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Yemen is starting to give way to internal stresses that have built up over the last decade. Not only is it the Arab world's poorest nation and challenged by a looming civil war, it is home to a resurgent al-Qaida, a northern Shiite uprising and a revived southern secessionist movement. The country could easily disintegrate into three or more pieces.

Today, Yemen stands alongside Pakistan as one of the most important al-Qaida strongholds in the world. Many of that organization's most dangerous operations have originated in Yemen.

Yemen's underlying sources of conflict and instability are impossible to solve over the short run. The country is running out of oil and water. Its leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for 32 years, is proving incapable of holding the country together without extreme force.

Yemen is consistently ranked among the 10 most fragile states in the world ([http://www.carleton.ca/cifp/app/ffs\\_ranking.php](http://www.carleton.ca/cifp/app/ffs_ranking.php)). The country suffers from an underdeveloped and haphazard rule of law, uneven and inequitable economic development dividing the north and the south, an extremely corrupt civil service and judiciary, a weak educational system and a government struggling to control excessive spending on the military.

Its leaders are heavily dependent on foreign aid to finance budget deficits and development programs. Yemen's taxation system is almost non-existent, meaning the government is accountable to no one. Its agricultural sector is under threat due to water scarcity, putting at risk more than half of the country's economically active population who work in agriculture.

Even before the country transformed into a sanctuary for extremists, Yemen was one of the poorest countries in the world. It ranks 133 out of 169 on the Human Development Index, with a per-capita gross domestic product of about \$1,000, compared to an average of about \$26,000 for the other Gulf states.

There is a plethora of small arms scattered among Yemen's diverse tribal peoples, which makes security a major challenge. Adding to these problems, Yemen has a very high population growth rate, 3.5 per cent, and an extremely large "youth bulge" of 46.4 per cent.

Nearly half of Yemen's population lives in poverty. Although many natural resources are located in the south, a reduced portion of public funds from an unsympathetic government leaves them hindered by grinding poverty.

Yemen is one of the most water-scarce regions in the world. Without corrective action, groundwater supplies in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, are expected to be exhausted very soon.

Since the 1994 civil war, Saleh has established an intricate network of patron-client relations in the north while largely ignoring the economically weaker south. Saleh's government is heavily influenced by al-Qaida Arabs: jihadists who fought for him in the 1994 civil war after their return from Afghanistan. Today, supporters of Osama bin Laden are thought to be in positions of influence in the military and the government.

Saleh also faces rebellion in the north, from a band of very capable Shiite rebels in the Sa'ada region on the border with Saudi Arabia.

There is some urgency to the situation both for the people of Yemen and the West. The country has become the centre of al-Qaida operations for attacks on the United States, including the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Aden, the failed targeting of CIA agents in 2010 and attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa.

South Yemen-based al-Qaida leader Anwar al-Awlaki, an engineer with U.S.-Yemen dual citizenship, has been implicated in the November 2009 Fort Hood, Texas shootings and the attempted bombing of a U.S. aircraft in Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.

In response, the Obama administration has made a more secure and stable Yemen an administrative priority, insisting that the country improve its efforts to track down al-Qaida operatives in the south. The collusion between Saleh's military and al-Qaida is seen as a major impediment to progress.

When she visited the country last year, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated her government wanted a broader security relationship with Yemen beyond fighting extremists, by tackling the sources of Yemen's fragility, such as poverty and corruption. It may be too late for that.

If Yemen continues on its current trajectory it will become a failed state in the next several months. Yemen's implosion would have a significant impact on Saudi Arabia, itself feeling the direct effects of upheaval on its border with Yemen. Failure would also give al-Qaida unprecedented operational space in the south.

Even when Saleh steps down, there is little reason to believe "democracy" will take root in Yemen. Most of the country's major institutions are controlled by the president and his family and are largely dysfunctional. The crux of the issue is that Yemen, like much of the Middle East, has an authoritarian leader clinging to control well past his due date, and there are no viable alternatives for keeping the country together.

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