



## **Policy Forum Report: Yemen** **September 27, 2012**

### ***Background***

On September 27, 2012, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the current situation in Yemen. The following is a summary of the views expressed and insights that emerged from that discussion.

### ***Political Transition and Perceptions of US Role***

The Gulf Cooperation Council (“GCC”) brokered an agreement in 2011 that removed President Ali Abdullah Saleh from power on the condition that he be granted immunity, thus paving the way for his former Vice President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi to assume the presidency. In spite of its former relationship with Saleh, the United States took a risk in backing this agreement. The promise of immunity angered many Yemenis; and despite the general popularity of the new president, the agreement has been perceived by many as an effort by the United States to support incomplete change by retaining elements of the old regime and sustaining Saleh’s continued behind-the-scenes influence on the current government. Ongoing efforts by Saleh and his supporters to continue wielding influence over the political process are destabilizing the transition and inspiring resentment among the Yemeni people. While Yemenis want reduced US influence, they also want the United States to pressure Saleh to stop interfering in the political process.

### ***Terrorism and Drone Strikes***

Like most Pakistanis, Yemenis view America’s use of drones against terrorists as a violation of their sovereignty, creating considerable distrust in the process. As long as only senior members of terrorist organizations are targeted and affected by the drones, most citizens seem not to care very much. However, when civilians or lower-level members of terrorist groups are killed or injured by the drones – perhaps new recruits who still have a chance of reintegrating back into society – the backlash is enormous. In a collectivist society such as Yemen, an attack on one is often viewed as an attack on all.

Despite the fact that the use of the drones has driven a number of high-ranking terrorists into the mountains, thereby complicating their efforts at command and control, the strikes are undermining the legitimacy of the Yemeni government by reinforcing perceptions of weakness in protecting the country’s sovereignty. Many Yemenis now assume that any aircraft flying overhead is a US drone, even though most are actually Yemeni air force operations.

Although some participants felt the drone strikes contribute to militant sympathy and recruitment, a survey by one participant who had interviewed 40 Yemeni tribal and religious leaders found that the drones generally do not lead people to join Al-Qaeda. However, their use often complicates the efforts of these leaders to get the extremists to leave their areas. Another participant suggested that “targeted” drone strikes should be favored over “signature” strikes, i.e. those that are based on behavioral profile or appearance rather than a specific target.

Other participants felt that the best way to defeat terrorism is not with drones but by establishing a strong, legitimate government that is responsive to its people's needs. It was suggested that America should help empower the Yemenis to deal with their own extremists and allow the Yemeni government to lead the counterterrorism efforts.

Most participants felt that the motivation for terrorism in Yemen was a function of economic desperation, the breakdown of patronage networks, and the inability to provide for one's family, rather than being attributable to religious reasons. While Salafists (who comprise approximately 20% of Yemen's population) are often perceived to be linked to extremism, many of them are nonviolent. There are also ideological and generational gaps between the Salafists, with older Salafists, for example, wanting to capture part of the state, while younger Salafists are more inclined to want to destroy it.

### ***Developmental Challenges***

The weak government in Yemen has created an absence of basic services, ranging from inadequate access to health care and education to a pressing need for infrastructure development. If the government can develop sound economic policies that can support providing these basic services, it will gain much-needed legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. It was also suggested that in addition to the direct aid the United States is providing, it should use its influence to encourage Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies to do more, particularly by opening their doors to more Yemeni workers who need employment to support their families.

### ***Tribal Roles***

Tribal structures that have traditionally taken over where the government is lacking have been unraveling in some areas, allowing greater room for the extremists to ply their trade. Historically, the tribes have maintained records, enforced laws, engaged in conflict resolution practices, and generally acted as the community authority in lieu of the central government. Today, 90% of the conflicts in tribal areas are resolved through tribal conflict resolution systems. Tribal leaders have even succeeded in driving out terrorist cells in some areas (in part to avoid the threat of drones). Tribes often compete with one another for power, and former president Saleh manipulated this competition to his advantage by pitting tribes against one another and by selectively enlisting them to fight his enemies. While some tribes remain opposed to a strong central government, many now want a stronger state that can assume responsibility for enforcing laws, providing services, and governing the country.

### ***Southern Separatist Movement***

Unlike the northern Houthi rebellion, which has a united leadership that can enter into negotiations, the southern separatist and opposition movements encompass numerous factions plagued by infighting. As attempts at both a one- and two-state solution have failed to date, it was suggested by the participants that a federal system should be explored, especially since the government has never had much influence outside of the capital.

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\*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.