



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Monitoring Study:

British Media Portrayals of Yemen

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Introduction

Until very recently, only Mauritania among the Arab countries attracted less attention in the British media than Yemen. Not any more: since 25 December 2009, Yemen is mentioned more than any other Arab country except Iraq, with the subsequent month seeing greater media interest than the entire previous year.

Of great interest is the precise relationship between Yemen and Al Qaeda, and consequently, so is the precise relationship between Yemen and the West, and the role of Saudi Arabia. This study looks at British media portrayals of Yemen.¹

Broadly speaking, the country is seen through the prism of terrorist threat, so the reader could be forgiven for concluding that it is only Al Qaeda in its international dimension that makes Yemen of any interest to Western audiences.

Such a narrative demonstrates that the fears and attributes associated with Al Qaeda in the Western public mind, whether rightly or wrongly, have found in Yemen something solid around which to coalesce, but with very little Yemeni input in the media narrative.

¹ Outlets monitored: Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Daily Star, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Guardian, Independent, Independent on Sunday, Observer, Sun, News of the World, Times and Sunday Times.

Yemen's Government & the West

By far the most common theme in coverage of Yemen has been the relationship between it and the West, which in practice is more accurately rendered as its relationship with the US in particular.

Why Yemen?

Yemen and Somalia have become homes to Al Qaeda due to "significant successes by the United States and its allies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan," according to a Daily Telegraph editorial (4 January), adding that "at least Yemen has a functioning government with which the West can deal."

However, Tim Reid in the Times suggests that "there is little confidence in Washington over Yemen's ability to secure its prisoners, or keep tabs on those that have been released. Memories are still fresh of a 2006 jailbreak by 23 top al-Qaeda members" (5 January).

Times chief foreign commentator Bronwen Maddox argues that "until a would-be bomber attempted to bring down an aircraft over Detroit, no Western country wanted to declare that Yemen was a big problem," although security agencies were aware of the growing problem (5 January). She adds:

"The decision not to say much about this threat owed something to the familiar tactical reason that to advertise the support of the West for the fragile Government of President Saleh would only fuel anger against it."

Treading Carefully

Judith Evans in the Times notes the need to tread carefully in Yemen, as anti-Americanism is popular due to "American support for their corrupt government" (1 January). Victoria Clark in the Independent notes an anti-Americanism also fuelled by the invasion of Iraq (4 January).

Clark echoes the call to tread carefully, writing that although "President Salih is not someone we would like to be doing business with," he is nonetheless an ally in the 'War on Terror,' though "there is arguably little we can do at this stage without running a serious risk of our efforts rebounding on us." She adds:

"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 Independent develops this theme, suggesting in an editorial that foreign powers "need to understand the nature" of Yemen (4 January). It advises that:

"Outsiders need to work with the grain of Yemeni society. If they alienate the tribes, or are seen to be taking sides in the country's overlapping ethnic and religious disputes, foreign intervention designed to snuff out terror groups could easily prove counterproductive."

The Nature of Western Support

Kirsty Walker in the Daily Mail writes that "the Yemeni government has complained that it is not getting enough support from the West" (2 January), although Suzy Jagger in the Times notes the financial approach taken so far by the West (2 January):

"Washington is understood to have pledged to double the \$70 million earmarked for the Yemeni Government's security programme, while Britain has committed itself to providing £100 million over the next two years."

In return, "both Britain and America want better intelligence from Yemen to identify terror threats and accelerated training of Yemeni security forces," according to a Times editorial (2 January).

While Victoria Clark in the Independent suggests that Western support already received has been "in the form of weaponry and intelligence" (4 January), Simon Tisdall, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian, writes while noting US participation in air raids ("US-sponsored" raids, according to Brian Whitaker, Comment is Free editor at the Guardian):

"It is unclear as yet what level of increased intervention in Yemen Barack Obama is contemplating - but that there will be heightened US involvement there for the foreseeable future is beyond doubt" (5 January).

Tisdall suggests that any future plans could possibly be centred on the US military base in Djibouti. He does, however, describe President Saleh as "neither the most reliable nor the most enthusiastic of allies."

Furthermore, Daily Telegraph Middle East correspondent Adrian Blomfield suggests (7 January):

"Western powers regard many within Yemen's domestic intelligence body, the Political Security Organisation (PSO), as incompetent and suspect them of al-Qaeda sympathies."

Whitaker has a word of warning on helping President Saleh (5 January):

"The worst of all outcomes would be to be seen as propping up Saleh at a time when his power is clearly ebbing. Saleh's fate is a matter for Yemenis themselves to determine, and foreign powers should not frustrate that process by prolonging his stay in power through ill-judged 'assistance'. Yemen certainly needs sustained, long-term help, and the best way to start is by not helping Saleh."

Saudi Arabia & Yemen

Saudi Arabia is mentioned relatively frequently in recent coverage of Yemen, with a few commentators noting the link between the failed Detroit plot and the attempted assassination of Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in August 2009. However, more generally, sections of this coverage identify Saudi Arabia either as part of the solution or part of the problem, with the latter designation being by far the more common of the two.

Part of the Solution

Judith Evans in the Times hints at Saudi cooperation against "al-Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula branch," noting that "US and Saudi operations test the resilience [of AQAP]" (1 January).

Suzy Jagger, also in the Times, says such cooperation will take some convincing, describing how British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is "attempting to persuade Saudi Arabia, which borders Yemen, and other Gulf states to join forces with Britain and the US" (2 January).

Simon Tisdall, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian, notes that "Washington's close ally" Saudi Arabia is running military operations inside Yemeni territory, but notes the spectre of a proxy war with Iran, also involving the US (5 January).

Part of the Problem

Ed Husain in the Guardian notes the significance of Saudi Arabia for different reasons (2 January):

"Yemen is not a willing home to al-Qaida - it is victim to an ideology exported from neighbouring Saudi Arabia...But what is AQAP except leading Saudi...? Who is Osama bin Laden except a Saudi who wanted political reforms in his own country, failed, and then turned his guns on the western backers of the Saudi regime?"

Times Middle East correspondent James Hider adds to the theme of Saudi-exported ideology (4 January):

"Yemen has always been a recruiting ground for al-Qaeda. Many of the first generation were young Yemeni men who travelled to Saudi Arabia for work and encountered the harsher Islamic ideology of Wahhabism espoused by Saudis."

Yemen "has become a safe haven for religious fanatics from its northern neighbour," writes an Independent editorial (4 January). Prompting this was the success of the campaign against Al Qaeda by Saudi authorities, according to Brian Whitaker, Comment is Free editor at the Guardian (5 January). Times defence correspondent Tom Coghlan writes (5 January):

"Eleven of the former inmates known to have rejoined al-Qaeda in Yemen were born in Saudi Arabia."

Tim Reid in the same newspaper names Saudis and former Guantanamo detainees Said al-Shiri and Muhammad al-Awfi, "who crossed into Yemen after being sent back to Saudi Arabia," and are two of the four top AQAP leaders (5 January).

Al Qaeda's ranks in Yemen have been bolstered by extremists also from Iraq and Afghanistan, writes Daily Telegraph Middle East correspondent Adrian Blomfield (6 January).

Descriptions of Yemen

Brian Whitaker, Comment is Free editor at the Guardian, describes Yemen's passing interest to the West thus (5 January):

"Yemen, at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula, tends to be off the international political radar unless something untoward happens affecting foreigners; it then gets a brief period of attention before being forgotten again."

A number of commentators provide descriptions of Yemen's government, though none in particularly glowing terms.

A Times editorial states that "the notion of state sovereignty" in Yemen is becoming "a cruel joke," noting down a few characteristics (2 January):

"Yemen has a weak government and declining reserves of water and oil. It also has a flow of migrants from Somalia."

The combination of such features as "mountainous terrain, poverty and lawless tribal society" makes Yemen "a close match for Afghanistan as a new terrorist haven," writes Times defence correspondent Tom Coghlan (5 January).

On the similarity with Afghanistan, Whitaker suggests there is some truth to it "geographically and socially":

"The Yemeni state is virtually non-existent outside the cities; it is an impoverished tribal society with a weapons culture and numerous unofficial militias. This, with Yemen's large and porous land and sea borders, makes it relatively easy for al-Qaida to operate without much interference."

Yemen is "shackled by poverty and illiteracy and shaken by rebellions and mini-government rivals run by regional warlords," notes Times chief foreign commentator Bronwen Maddox (5 January).

The newspaper's Middle East correspondent James Hider notes the weakening effect of corruption and inefficiency on the government's performance (4 January), but adds:

"Yemeni governments are in part weak by design. Traditionally, they are less power centres than arbitrators between the main pillars of society - the merchants, the religious leaders, the tribes and the military."

Looking at the particular government of President Saleh, Daily Telegraph Middle East correspondent Adrian Blomfield suggests that power is centralised in the hands of his family, having the effect of sacrificing control of large swaths of Yemen to tribal leaders (6 January). Blomfield adds:

"The system of patronage he once used to control the more lawless parts of his country has all but disintegrated as oil reserves have dwindled, damaging his ability to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders."

Yemen's Government & Al Qaeda

While the relationship between the West, particularly the US, and Yemen is the most frequently discussed relationship, that between the Yemeni government and Al Qaeda is less considered, though of significant importance.

Al Qaeda has declared "all-out war" on the Yemeni government, because "a new and more extreme generation of al-Qaeda has arisen in Yemen in the past three years, overstepping the traditional constraints that allowed for an uneasy truce," notes Times Middle East correspondent James Hider (4 January).

He detects President Saleh's "reluctance to confront al-Qaeda until he was forced to - by Western pressure and the new brand of extremism preached by the terrorists." Hider also notes:

"A military approach to tackling the crisis would only exacerbate the problem, radicalising tribes who were already sympathetic to the Islamists while failing to address key civil grievances such as massive underdevelopment, poverty and unequal distribution of key resources, in particular oil."

Victoria Clark in the Independent also suspects reluctance on behalf of President Saleh to confront Al Qaeda, because he assesses "his two dissident movements [Houthis and southern secessionists] as posing a greater danger to himself and his relations than al-Qa'ida," which is why he "has been expending the bulk of his resources on them since 2004" (4 January).

A number of other commentators agree with this point. Simon Tisdall, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian, writes (5 January):

"For Saleh, the al-Qaida network in Yemen is not especially threatening. What he fears more is being branded an American puppet."

Brian Whitaker, Comment is Free editor at the Guardian, writes that "Al-Qaida is little more than a nuisance in comparison with Yemen's other problems," which he lists as "the war in the north with Shia Houthi rebels that has cost thousands of lives and made at least 100,000 homeless; the agitation by secessionists in the south; the widespread disaffection with the government; an economy that is in dire straits; the rampant corruption" (5 January)

Clark notes that "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."

Daily Telegraph Middle East correspondent Adrian Blomfield also notes the failure of the President's approach (6 January):

"In the three provinces where Mr Saleh is now deploying troops, tribal leaders have switched their loyalty to al-Qaeda, which brought cash and teachers when it moved in. As a result, government security presence has been all but invisible in the past three years."

Blomfield also draws attention to the President's complicated position (7 January):

"But his allies also include a number of Salafists, whose puritanical interpretation of Islam is shared by many in al-Qaeda."