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Transcript

Yemen and Somalia: Terrorism, Shadow Networks and the Limitations of State Building

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Sally Healy:

I wanted just to set out the rationale for the paper that Ginny and I had written, a paper about Yemen and Somalia. And the starting point for this is the security concerns about Yemen and Somalia and the linkages that have been made between the two countries, particularly in sort of security circles.

At one level, Somalia and Yemen could be said to face similar challenges. There are issues of local insurgencies and terrorist groups with links to Al Qaeda. There are governments have have difficulty meeting these challenges, to put it very mildly in the case of Somalia's transitional government. And this is all happening against a backdrop of poverty and economic hardship that in itself is liable to fuel discontent.

But despite these superficial similarities, Ginny and I would want to discourage simplistic comparisons between Yemen and Somalia. They are of course very different countries, in so many respects. Their language, their history, their culture and so much about them.

There are vast differences in their politics, too. And the state fragility that Ginny will be referring to is emphatically not the same thing as the state collapse that Somalia has experienced now for the best part of 20 years. Yemen hasn't had this breakdown of state functions. And that's why policy options in Somalia are much more bleak than they are in Yemen.

But there is an important point of similarity, apart from their geographical proximity. And this is that in both cases, Western counter-terrorism policy has been built around leaning on local allies. And these allies themselves are operating in very difficult circumstances themselves.

Now the aim of the paper really is to help to deepen the understanding of the security challenges emanating from the Gulf of Aden. We wanted to break out of the compartmentalisation that confines the discussion of Yemen to Middle East circles, and a discussion of Somalia to an African context, because we think that there are issues that benefit from being looked at across the two.

In getting together, I was bringing my specialist interest in Somalia, joining it with Ginny's specialist interest in Yemen, although Ginny has also had experience of Somalia, too. And we wanted to stress in looking at these two countries and their similarities, that you need to also think very hard about the country context and understand those differences.

So we wanted to contribute to the debate about the nature of the relationship between these two neighbours, looking both at the links between Al-Shabaab

in Somalia and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, between the two essentially terroristic groups which have given rise to security concerns. And also to the links between the two countries that exist outside that framework.

Now, a number of things happened at the end of 2009 that caused a bit of a kerfuffle, shall we say, in the security circles about the links between the two. One of these was evidence of the recruitment of American citizens into Al-Shabaab and into Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. And a sense that these were terrorist issues that were not confined to the region but would have implications for homeland security in the US. And indeed, you could say, in wider circles across diasporas.

The second issue was the foiled airline bombing on Christmas day in America, where the perpetrator, the investigations into the perpetrator led back and pointed to training in Yemen.

And the third issue, coming just on the heel of that was February, when one of the Al-Shabaab leaders made a pledge of practical support to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

So all these things kind of fuelled one another and created a lot of anxiety in security circles of an aggregation of the risk and a growing terrorist threat that needed to be contained in the Gulf of Aden. I think we had the feeling that there was another risk to be avoided, which was just the concern that in the process of aggregation, people might think about two and two making five and making more of this than the two difficult situations did merit.

In our paper, we tried to sketch out the story of these terrorist-orientated groups in their context. Each of them has its own character, and has developed in its own particular political context. In doing so, they've developed their own narratives around injustice and it's important to trace the history of these groups and the political context that produced them.

Now Ginny obviously will be saying more about Yemen and I'll focus more on Somalia in my remarks. But with reference to Al-Shabaab, it's fundamentally a home-grown Somali organisation. It's a great mistake to think of this as sort of, Al-Shabaab as a branch office of Al Qaeda central. These things have to be seen in their real political context.

As a Somali organisation, it's subject to all the splits and schisms that art part and parcel of their Somali lineage system, the Somali clan system, which is always creating organisations that split and fracture and re-align.

For any faction-ridden organisation, which Shabaab is, an external enemy is a great help. Al-Shabaab's growth and development was very largely driven by the Ethiopian intervention in Mogadishu at the end of 2006 to remove the Islamic Cause. It continues to need external enemies, currently the largely Ugandan African peacekeeping force which is there to protect the transitional government.

But Al-Shabaab's goals and indeed its targets are for the most part primarily local to the region. And that's important from an international security perspective, because it effects the extent to which Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Yemeni group, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, are local or global movements and to what extent they have local and international political agendas.

Now having said that, it is to be expected that connections would exist between the local affiliates. And Ginny and I wouldn't at all deny that there is potential for these to grow. But it's not a brand new danger that has just been unearthed with the discovery that Yemen and Somalia had got some parallel problems.

In the recent excitement over this linking of the two, some of the history seems to have been forgotten because in fact the Al Qaeda connection with Somalia goes back quite a long way and the very first Al Qaeda attack that we're aware of took place against the US troops who were bound for Somalia back in 1992. So this is something that goes back for 18 years now, rather than something that's just suddenly sprung into life.

And the current debate about the risks from Somalia and Yemen and these linkages between the two organisations is actually missing a third party which is, or certainly was, Al Qaeda in East Africa, which was responsible for the East African embassy bombings back in 1998 and other actions in Kenya in 2002.

So there has been a three-way triangulation between Yemen, Somalia and East Africa. It's a recurring theme at the operational level. And we've unfortunately seen it again most recently with the Kampala bombings in July 2010 this year.

What we don't seem to have any real evidence of is co-ordination at the level of command and control between Al-Shabaab and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. But there is a thread of connectivity that goes through East Africa, which certainly is something that needs to be taken account of.

The next area of heightened concern was about the role of Western nationals in these organisations. So the concern was around the impact of extremism, not just inside Somalia but the impact abroad, and the recruitment of Westerners both in Somalia and in Yemen.

In the Somali case, it has mainly involved members of the Somalia diaspora, which is of course very widespread. And they've been involved in two ways, either through funding, but also as a source of recruitment for suicide bombers.

Initially, all those missions, some of which were carried out by Somalis who'd been recruited in the diaspora to carry out suicide missions, nearly all the initial missions took place inside Somali territory. But the most recent major Shabaab attack was the one in Kampala in July. And that was the first time they'd shown their capacity to act in the region as well.

But what's important about this and the role of Westerners is the impact of globalisation and to really start factoring in that events in Mogadishu can have a real impact in Minnesota or in Manchester. It's quite difficult to go on thinking about the world as a place where a terrorist threat, for example, could be contained among territory because the linkages have established themselves worldwide.

I think this should prompt the need to think more and to think differently about territoriality and containment and think about ways of dealing with terrorist threats that might be about building networks of resilience among people in quite different ways to the conventional approaches.

Ginny is going to be talking more about the conventional strategies and I wanted to just end up with a few words about the state-building policy framework which tends to frame Western policy both towards Somalia and towards Yemen.

There's nothing wrong, in principle, with the idea of a comprehensive approach and Ginny will be saying more about that in relation to Yemen. It makes sense tackling underlying economic challenges, political problems and security. But the trouble is it's been spectacularly unsuccessful in Somalia over very long years.

Somalia ought to be the laboratory where everybody went to learn lessons about state-building and what works and what doesn't and how to engage. What actually happens is that lots of people run a mile from Somalia and don't want to get involved because it's too difficult.

But the startling fact for anyone who has followed Somalia for a long time is that the areas of greatest stability in Somalia and which are also the ones that show the greatest resilience and resistance to violent extremism are the areas where Western intervention has been minimal. It's important to think about the lessons that could be drawn from Somalia in other state-building approaches in Yemen or indeed elsewhere.

Let me just enumerate them very briefly before I hand over to Ginny. The first one is that there's something fundamentally wrong with this theory of ungoverned spaces, this idea that if there isn't a government that looks like a government that I might think is a government, it's a wide-open territory for terrorists. That's not the case and I think leads down a very unhelpful path, this is a very big subject of course, what an ungoverned space is. It's a key problem in the analysis in the state-building approach.

The second lesson is that in looking for allies in this kind of environment where there are diffuse power systems, you do require and intimate knowledge of the local power structures and weighing in with the wrong people indefinitely produce bad results.

The third lesson is that where a government does exist, or seems to exist, stabilisation can't be achieved just through security sector work. And security sector reform shouldn't be a euphemism for just doing security assistance for your allies. The legitimacy factor matters. And if security assistance is going to achieve stabilisation, it has to be underpinned by political settlements of some kind.

And if reconciliation and political inclusion are left out, grievances are more likely to fester and the forth lesson comes into play, which is simply that Western interventions can serve to undermine the legitimacy of ailing regimes and increase discontent and instability, especially when security sector support and kinetic interventions without accountability creates a sense of being under attack.

Now there are some signs in Somalia that some of these lessons are being learnt. There's a bit of reorientation away from focus just on the TFG, some wider interest in the areas of stability, both on the part of the American government and the UN is now talking about putting people back on the ground.

So it might be that lessons are being learned. But there are important lessons from Somalia and our aim in this paper was to try and bring some of this analytical discussion to a wider framework.

Ginny Hill:

Thank you, thanks Sally for setting out the overview of the paper so clearly. I'll just fill in some of the details specifically to do with Yemen and highlight some of the connections that do exist through the migration networks, before concluding by reinforcing some of Sally's points about the lessons to be learned.

Al Qaeda in Yemen has really followed quite a different trajectory from the Shabaab and extremist violent organisations in Somalia. Yemenis have had very strong ties with Al Qaeda's evolution since the group's inception at the end of the Gulf War. Significant numbers of Yemenis in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Sally mentioned the 1992 bombing which took place in Aden, US troops that were stationed at a hotel in Aden en route to deploy in Somalia. This is allegedly the first Al Qaeda style attack in the world. So Yemen has really been on the map for the organisation since the beginning.

In 1994, the Yemeni government was at war with the sort of southern socialist groups that were left over after unification between former South Yemen and North Yemen. And Yemeni veterans of the Afghan conflict were drawn in to support the Yemeni government from the North in that process. So violent extremists with an Islamist affiliation have actually been involved in consolidating the Yemeni states really since the beginning.

In 2000, the USS Cole Attack, just marked the 10 year anniversary. At that stage, there were affiliations between violent extremists with an Islamist affiliation and figures within the security services. It seems that there was factions within the security services that were willing and able to co-operate with the Americans in that investigation. And some individuals and factions potentially weren't so comfortable with that process.

But in 2001, Yemen made a decision to align with the United States after 9/11 attacks. Really, between 2001 and 2006, Al Qaeda in Yemen was effectively constrained, either by a series of kinetic interventions or by a series of arrests. It was a jail break in 2006 when 23 terrorist suspects escaped, which has really been the seed of what we're seeing at the moment.

In addition to that process, Saudi Arabia had pursued a very effective crackdown in the kingdom and several significant operators have moved into Yemen. So Yemen has become the centre of gravity for violent extremist activity on the Arabian Peninsula. And that was institutionalised in 2009, last

year when there was a merger between Al Qaeda networks in Yemen and Al Qaeda networks in Saudi Arabia.

So we're now looking at a resurgence, ambitious transnational affiliates, with dual nationality leadership. The Emir of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is a Yemeni, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, and the deputy is a Saudi, Zaid al-Samari. The leadership remains intact, despite a number of interventions over the course of the last year. And only this year we've seen an attempted attack on the British Ambassador and recently an attempted attack on the Deputy Head of the British embassy in Yemen.

Obviously these attacks are gleaning an awful lot of media attention. But what's not going reported so much in Western media is the number of attacks that are taking place on Yemeni security services. Just in the last three months alone, there have been 30 attacks on Yemeni security figures in the South. So there is a kind of domestic aspect here that's not being properly reported in the international context, but Al Qaeda is turning increasingly on internal targets as well as focusing its ambition on Western targets, in Yemen but also internationally.

The role of Western nationals in Yemen is interesting because of Yemen's reputation within the Islamic narrative. The Prophet himself praised the Yemenis for pious religious observance and their good character. The fact is it's an element that draws large numbers of Western students to Yemen's madrasahs every year to study Arabic and also to improve their understanding of the Koran.

Now many of them will study in Sufi madrasahs, but there are some within that group who are travelling into Salafi schools. There are a number of institutes in Sana'a where it's easy to gain access and within that network, it's possible to make connections, either to travel to larger madrasahs, outside of Sana'a or to join, for motivated individuals to travel to Al Qaeda camps or to make connections to more extremist elements.

The Yemenis have really cracked down and tightened visa controls since the Detroit attack. But there's ongoing concern about the role of Anwar al-Awlaki, who is a Yemeni American cleric, dual nationality. Fluent in English, fluent in Arabic, an extremely skilful propagandist, an extremely good orator.

His role as an English language radicaliser is really drawing lots of people's attention to his presence in Yemen. He is accredited with mentoring the gentleman who is responsible for the Fort Hood shooting in Texas in 2009,

which killed 12 military personnel and a civilian. And also for mentoring the Detroit bomber and allegedly for mentoring the Times Square bomber.

So his impact extends way beyond Yemen, echoing Sally's point about containment within geographical area. He's been placed on a hit list and the American Civil Liberties Union now are currently challenging the assassination order with the support of his father who's a former Yemeni minister.

His articles and his MP3s of lectures are all available online and the second edition of 'Inspire', which is Al Qaeda's English language magazine has just come out. Regardless of his fate, radicalising materials remain accessible to anybody who wishes to read them or watch them.

The interest in the growing links between Yemen and Somalia have focussed people's attentions on the population movements between the two countries, crossing the Gulf of Aden. There's been a concern that these established migration networks would be facilitating the transit of radical violent extremists. But neither open-source material nor anecdotal information at the moment bears out that concern.

Instead, what's significant about these migration routes is the profit that they're generating for the operators and their role as semi-criminal trading networks. They're generating multi-million dollar profits every year.

Somalis have been receiving automatic refugee status in Yemen since 1991. And the UNHCR currently claims that there's about 170,000 Somalis registered in Yemen. But the Yemeni government argues that the figure is close to two million.

The figures really rose dramatically between 2006 and 2009. But then they suddenly tailed off at the end of 2009 and these theory that's been put forward for this is the fact that Saudis closed the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia at the end of 2009 because of the conflict that was taking place in the North in the Sa'dah region.

In response to that, we've seen a shift in the migration network. So there's a much greater proportion of migrants coming over from Djibouti. And in correspondence with that, there's a much greater proportion of Ethiopians coming over on the boats. So what we're seeing here is Yemen as a kind of middle link in a chain involving five countries- Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Sea passage costs about 150 dollars at the moment and the land journey can cost up to 150 as well. So based on the figures for 2009, registered arrivals, which is about 80,000 refugees, we're looking at a very rough figure of about 20 million dollars a year, and that's just in terms of the number of refugees that are being registered passing through Yemen.

So this is a very significant economy in the region. And it's a disincentive to former border controls that would be a kind of logical part of the regional counter-terrorism strategy. It's not just migration networks. We're looking at integrated network involving arms trade, fuel smuggling and even piracy.

The UN monitoring group on the arms trade has consistently labelled Yemen as a primary and important source of weapons available in Somalia. The Yemeni government has done a great deal in terms of trying to buy back weapons or introduce controls on bearing arms in Yemen, but these are very mature smuggling networks that have been established for 20 years now and the amount of profit that they generate is considerable.

The Yemeni government itself is not charged with supplying these weapons, but the internal arms market within Yemen is a component element in this problem. Yemen is not trying to influence the political outcome. Yemeni arms traders are not trying to influence the political outcome of the Somali conflict, but the presence of arms in Somalia is supporting the conflict which in turn is driving migration. And that reinforces the problem of border controls and raises a distinct challenge for Western policy-makers looking to improve regional security.

I'll quickly move onto concluding points. The Friends of Yemen, the British government has been taking a very strong lead on the Friends of Yemen over the course of the last year. It's an informal contact group of donors. They're pursuing a comprehensive approach which is trying to take into account Yemen's falling oil production, its rising poverty levels. The indicators in Yemen are extremely worrying. The logic of the Friends of Yemen process is to tackle the underlying challenges, taking into account the economy, politics and security.

The Obama Administration has not deployed US troops, but they are playing a training, funding and arming local proxies using Yemeni military factions in the country. Their activities include tracking and killing suspected terrorists. Recent news reports have suggested that the US government is currently engaged in a conversation about the scale of ongoing military assistance to

Yemen, and a figure of a billion dollars over five years is currently being mooted. But there's been no commitment to that figure at the moment.

I would just echo Sally's concluding points by saying that the problem of external security assistance and external security interventions in Yemen is really a legitimacy problem in a country where public opinion is extremely hostile to US foreign policy. Both Southern separatists movement and the Northern insurgents are questioning the legitimacy of the government of Yemen and within these groups, and also other groups within Yemen as a whole, to see the Yemeni security services at times to be intrusive or aggressive actors.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is able to play on this selective discontent and this regime's reliance on external support to build a very powerful narrative around injustice. There's just recently been a statement released by the military commander of AQAP calling for Saleh to go, on the grounds that he completely undermined his legitimacy by being a fall guy for the Americans.

The Friends of Yemen are trying to encourage a political and economic reform process that will address this legitimacy problem and there has been a certain degree of progress over this year. There's an IMF programme on track, there's been a ceasefire in the North.

The Friends of Yemen process is largely a technical process, looking at technical measures to address the problems within government. And a lot of power in Yemen is not structured through government, it's structured through informal patronage networks.

I'll echo Sally's point here, that the reality of working in fragile states is that it's extremely important to work with informal networks and networks that sit outside what appears to be a conventional government structure. It's a much more resource intensive process working this way. And although the UK government has just announced its commitment to double support for fragile states, there is still a tendency because of the Comprehensive Spending Review to push for more results from less from within the administrative structure.

I think that the challenge here for all fragile states is finding a way to work effectively with these informal networks that are an extremely important part of the power of networks in these countries. And the perils of not engaging effectively with these local structures and not effectively putting legitimacy at the centre of a strategy is that we end up contributing to the tension in the

country and we wind up being part of the process of fragility that we are actually seeking to avoid. Thank you.