

Yemen asks for aid to ward off al-Qa'ida

SARAH PHILLIPS THE AUSTRALIAN MARCH 16, 2010 12:00AM

SINCE the attempted bombing of the American passenger jet on Christmas Day was traced to al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, the Yemeni government has been trying to convince foreign donors that it needs extraordinary financial assistance to stay afloat in the face of the al-Qa'ida threat.

The Yemeni economy is in dire straits and this year, requests for aid have ranged from \$US1.2 billion (\$1.3bn) to a staggering \$US40bn over five years, or a little more than half of the country's current annual national budget per year.

Part of the rationale behind the government's requests is the growing fear that Yemen's collapse could usher in a Taliban-style regime and create a base for al-Qa'ida to further target the West.

As the Yemeni regime grapples with dwindling oil reserves, an on-again off-again insurgency on its northern border with Saudi Arabia, and a movement for secession that is spreading throughout the south, AQAP has smelled blood and has become more explicit about its own domestic political ambitions.

In the 10th edition of AQAP's online magazine, Sada al-Malahim (published in August last year), one of the founding Yemeni members of the group called for skilled labourers to help "the mujaheddin" establish an Islamic state:

"The jihadi arena needs doctors, engineers and electricians. It also requires plumbers, builders, and contractors, just as it needs students, educators, door-to-door salesmen and farmers. It is searching for media specialists from writers and printers (to) photographers and directors. It also needs conscientious Muslim reporters and sportsmen, skilled in martial arts and close combat. By following your mujaheddin brothers with some of these qualities, it will accelerate the pace of achieving our great Islamic project: establishing an Islamic caliphate."

This is essentially a political manifesto. AQAP is attempting to rally sympathisers to embark on an ambitious state-building project, representative of the pious and directed by the mujaheddin.

AQAP is seeking to destroy the existing political system and establish its own.

While this prospect is deeply concerning, some perspective is necessary: al-Qa'ida operatives have found safe haven in some of Yemen's tribal regions but their goal of establishing an international caliphate conflicts with many local political realities, which potentially limits their ability to maintain this safe haven.

True, much of Yemen's periphery is without effective, formal, state-administered governance, but this does not mean that these regions are ungoverned - or there for the taking, particularly by outsiders to the area.

AQAP is not necessarily going to reap the spoils of the central government's retreat from some outlying areas in the longer term, and it is the tribes that are most able to rout AQAP if they see fit. If AQAP intends to include Yemen's periphery in its political experiment, it will need to work with the tribes inhabiting those areas.

Even if AQAP attempts to align itself discursively and operationally with the Yemeni tribes against the state, one of its broader objectives - establishing political control - consigns tribes to a subordinate status. This exclusion is likely to put AQAP in confrontation with the tribes.

Furthermore, Yemen's tribal communities are motivated by considerably more than religious ideology; one's social responsibility within the tribe is, for example, an often-heard theme in Friday sermons in the country's tribal areas. It is also a theme that strongly contradicts al-Qa'ida's core message.

Al-Qa'ida's goal of establishing an international caliphate, its propensity for extreme violence against civilians, and its hard-line religious ideology conflict with local norms and weaken al-Qa'ida's appeal to the Yemeni people, including the tribes.

As pressure increases on the international community to commit to an assistance package to strengthen the Yemeni state, it is important to keep two things in mind. First, overt military Western intervention against AQAP, like the US-assisted air strikes in December last year, is likely to further entrench al-Qa'ida in the country by inflaming public grievances.

Second, greatly increasing development aid risks reinforcing a regime that is poorly equipped and poorly motivated to distribute the aid effectively among its people.

The current crisis in Yemen reflects a common dilemma for donors. The only real answer is initially unappealing to donors and the Yemeni regime alike because it offers no fast solution, and because it threatens to upend existing power structures.

The awkward truth is that Yemen's long-term stability ultimately requires a fundamental restructuring of the political

system to become much more inclusive of its people, and that Westerners' chances of encouraging this process is questionable.

As was the case as Western states developed, negotiations over a viable and enduring political settlement is something that the Yemenis will determine for themselves.

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