



# Defining Remote Warfare: British Training and Assistance Programmes in Yemen, 2004-2015

Briefing Number 4  
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**Oxford Research Group**  
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This report has been commissioned by the **Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Programme**, formerly known as the Remote Control Project. We were set up in 2014 to examine changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This is the trend in which countries like the United Kingdom choose to support local and regional forces on the front lines rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops.

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Cover image: Sailors from USS Halsey assist in bringing a Yemen patrol boat alongside Halsey (United States of America Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Christopher Farrington/U.S. Navy, 2012).

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## About the Series

The *Remote Warfare Programme* is a research and policy unit analysing the rise of remote warfare: the recent shift away from “boots on the ground” deployments towards light-footprint military interventions abroad.

Among other factors, austerity, budget cuts, war-weariness, and high political risk aversion in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan have all played their part in making large-scale UK military deployments less palatable to the UK Parliament and public.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside this, trends in military engagement such as the increasing use of drones and an increased focus on counterterrorism and building local capacity – evident in, for example, the addition of defence engagement as a core task of the Ministry of Defence – have allowed the UK to play a role in countering threats posed by groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab without deploying large numbers of its own troops.

The emergence of approaches that seek to counter threats at a distance, without the deployment of large military forces, is an umbrella definition of remote warfare. With local troops engaged in the bulk of the frontline fighting, the UK’s role has, by and large, been a supporting one, providing training and equipment and, where necessary, providing air and intelligence support, and the assistance of UK Special Forces to bolster local troops.

The focus of the *Remote Warfare Programme*’s work has been on a strategic level, asking what the implications of these changes in military engagement are for the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of UK military engagement abroad.<sup>2</sup>

However, to ask these strategic questions, we have often had to put to one side the fact that remote warfare is not an uncontested term, and our broad definitions and analysis often hinge on an assumption that “you know it

when you see it”. Moreover, while we have been focusing on the use of remote warfare on today’s battlefield, we are also aware that future changes in technology, especially the rising importance of cyber, will have an impact on how we should understand remote warfare.

This series brings together experts to discuss important aspects of remote warfare to provide some conceptual clarity. It will look at current practice, including reports on security cooperation, intelligence sharing, private security companies and drones, as well as looking to the future of warfare: addressing how offensive cyber operations could change the landscape of military engagement.

Over the course of the next year, we will release bi-monthly briefings on these subjects by experts in their field, with the eventual aim of exploring common themes, risks and opportunities presented by the evolving use of remote warfare.



## About this briefing

Between 2004-2015 Britain engaged in capacity building operations across Yemen's police, military, and intelligence agencies. This briefing seeks to provide a critical review of these efforts, their successes, and the causes of their ultimate failure, in order to identify lessons for future training and assistance missions. British successes in Yemen were the result of sustained engagement, a willingness to develop training objectives in collaboration with Yemeni colleagues, and the integration of efforts with several institutions. But British strategic objectives diverged from those of Yemen's ruling elite, and poor coordination across Whitehall caused conflicting policies between military and humanitarian efforts.

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## Abbreviations

<b>AQ</b>	al-Qaeda
<b>AQAP</b>	al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
<b>BND</b>	Bundesnachrichtendienst (GOG)
<b>CAMA</b>	Civil Aviation and Meteorology Authority (GOY)
<b>CENTCOM</b>	Central Command (US)
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
<b>CGS</b>	Chief of the General Staff (UK)
<b>CSF</b>	Central Security Forces (GOY)
<b>CSSF</b>	Conflict, Security, and Stability Fund (UK)
<b>CTTAT</b>	Counterterrorism Training and Advisory Team (UK)
<b>CTU</b>	Counterterrorism Unit (GOY)
<b>DA</b>	Defence Attaché
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development (UK)
<b>DIA</b>	Defence Intelligence Agency (US)
<b>DMI</b>	Director of Military Intelligence
<b>DOD</b>	Department of Defence (US)
<b>DOS</b>	Department of State (US)
<b>DSF</b>	Director Special Forces (UK)
<b>FBI</b>	Federal Bureau of Investigation (US)
<b>FCO</b>	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>GCHQ</b>	Government Communications Headquarters (UK)
<b>GOG</b>	Government of Germany
<b>GOY</b>	Government of Yemen
<b>JCTTAT</b>	Joint Counterterrorism Training and Advisory Team
<b>MOD</b>	Ministry of Defence (UK)
<b>MOI</b>	Ministry of Interior (GOY)
<b>MTAT</b>	Maritime Training and Advisory Team (UK)
<b>NCO</b>	Non-commissioned officer
<b>NSA</b>	National Security Agency (US)
<b>NSB</b>	National Security Bureau (GOY)
<b>PJHQ</b>	Permanent Joint Headquarters Northwood (UK)
<b>PSO</b>	Political Security Organisation (GOY)
<b>RAF</b>	Royal Air Force (UK)
<b>RMAS</b>	Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (UK)
<b>SIS</b>	Secret Intelligence Service (UK)
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>UKSF</b>	United Kingdom Special Forces
<b>YCG</b>	Yemen Coast Guard

## Introduction

On a sun-soaked summer afternoon in 2008 a Yemeni Coast Guard vessel was on patrol, monitoring boats headed north from Djibouti. The Coast Guard was responsible for disrupting the smuggling of arms, drugs, and people, across the Red Sea, and they had come across a suspicious dhow (an Arab sailing vessel), heavily laden, with an unusually large crew. Their suspicions were confirmed when upon their approach the dhow changed course and small arms fire erupted from its side. The Coast Guard returned it, deliberately and methodically, until the dhow heeled to, and the shooting faded away. They boarded the dhow, detained its crew, and headed for the Southern Yemeni port of Aden.

Their response was a model of how such an interception ought to be carried out. It was what the Coast Guard had practiced for the past two years, mentored by a British training team from the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. But all was not well. To the Coast Guard's surprise some of their detainees were in Yemeni military uniforms. Shortly after the smugglers were put in jail, troops from Yemen's South West Regional Command showed up with heavy weapons, and demanded that their comrades be released. In the face of overwhelming force, the Coast Guard complied.

The incident encapsulated both the successes and the essential failure of British capacity building operations in Yemen, which between 2004-2015 spanned the country's police, military, special forces, intelligence services, and Coast Guard. With considerable effort and ingenuity British trainers mentored several technically competent, professional units in Yemen. But the Yemeni government had no intention of allowing these units to fulfill the functions for which they were intended. "Effective Security Force Assistance operations with another country require a shared aim and threat perception,"

explained Colonel Robert Newman (retired), US Defence and Army Attaché to Yemen from 2000-2002. "With respect to former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh it is debatable whether that was ever possible or present." Supposed counterterrorism troops, trained by Britain, were routinely used to fight Houthi rebels, and even fired on protesters in 2011.

"We learned that you have to have a sustained presence and be there to mentor the partner force day-in day-out so they implement what they have been taught," explained Captain Philip Holihead (retired) who between 2006-2009 was UK Defence Attaché in Yemen. "But you also have to work with a partner government; they need to want what you are offering, or you are on a hiding to nothing."

Because British trainers were on the ground for a long time, they were able to change the culture of Yemeni units, helping to establish the first female military units, and facilitating better intelligence sharing across the Yemeni government. "Capacity building is a long-term process with a need for resources to ensure its sustainability," noted Yemen's former foreign minister Abubakr al Qirbi. But British trainers were also prone to try and replicate themselves in Yemeni institutions, when those institutions were functioning in a very different cultural and political context. This failure not only reduced the effectiveness of training, but led to the promotion of counterproductive techniques.

"In 2012 we had a kidnap case and I watched the Yemenis respond," recalled Jonathan Tottman, UK law enforcement liaison to Yemen, who worked in the country from 2009-2015, helping to train Yemen's intelligence agencies. "They had four to five handsets, with different tribal leaders on the end of each. That wasn't a process that you'd see in a Western intelligence fusion cell. One of our mistakes was that we wanted to train them to work like us. I think it would have been better to focus on

improving their team work within their operational context.”

Ultimately, the failure to develop units that could function within a Yemeni operational context left Western forces with well-trained allies who were unable to deploy. Failure to support Yemen’s institutions – especially the police and courts – pushed Western policy towards a tendency to conduct strikes without Yemeni involvement. As Colonel Robert Newman observed, “in order to be effective at the strategic level, military cooperation and military operations should be perceived by the Yemeni population as secondary to humanitarian and economic assistance. Unilateral kinetic strikes should be very limited; the exception rather than the rule.” Over time, however, they became the norm.

With the creation of the Specialised Infantry Group,<sup>3</sup> and the expansion of the Stabilisation Unit, capacity building is to play an expanding role in the future of the United Kingdom’s foreign and defence policy. The British government has made considerable progress in refining training techniques since 2006; however, as Captain Holihead – who now conducts reviews of multilateral training missions – noted, “it is deeply frustrating to see many of the same mistakes being made again and again.”

One reason for this is that capacity building operations are highly secretive. This is unavoidable, since they involve deploying small and vulnerable groups of soldiers into dangerous environments, and publicity would threaten their security. But secrecy also inhibits the evaluation of programmes. While individual government departments will review the success or failure of a mission in relation to narrow objectives, often tied to short-term funding cycles, such programmes are rarely assessed in their entirety.

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Yemen is an important case study for those trying to improve capacity building methods. Yemen was precisely the type of state where institutional development and stabilisation was essential. If it is possible to prevent the disintegration of fragile states like Yemen, it is a goal worth striving to achieve. Because the UK no longer has trainers in Yemen, and many of the individuals with whom Britain developed relationships are either dead or in exile, it seems that it should now be possible to have a frank discussion about Britain’s role without endangering personnel, or relations with friendly governments.

This paper is an attempt to critically review the UK’s capacity building efforts in Yemen, to outline the various strands of training provided to the Yemeni government, to describe what was delivered, and to assess what was achieved. The paper aims to identify not just what succeeded and what failed, but to analyse why, and to draw conclusions about how training and assistance can be improved. Some of the challenges encountered by British trainers were tactical. Some grew from the difficulties

of coordinating an interdepartmental, and intergovernmental process. Others arose from divisions within and among Yemeni institutions. The paper hopes to address how some of these challenges were overcome, how they can be identified, and if they cannot be mitigated, to judge whether capacity building is viable.

The promise of capacity building is that it allows a small investment to prevent the need for an extensive engagement in the future. By working through local partners, it is hoped that the British government can achieve more with less. The track record, however, is mixed. If the UK is to expand such efforts, it should carefully consider what constitutes a sufficient commitment to yield results.



## Methodology

This report arose from the authors' investigation into the UK's involvement in US covert strikes in Yemen, published by VICE News in April 2016.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the investigation it became apparent that the issues of training and assistance were far more complex than could be addressed in news reporting. It also became apparent that Yemen represented an important case study in British overt and covert capacity building. What followed was two years of investigation involving the systematic identification of Yemeni, American, British, and other individuals involved in counterterrorism operations in Yemen from 2004-2015, resulting in over a hundred hours of transcript interviews with dozens of sources, as far afield as the Andes to Malaysia.

In spite of the number of sources consulted, protecting their identity proved to be challenging. Intelligence operations in Yemen were so compartmentalised that some of the events described in this paper had as few as three people directly involved. This has necessitated a certain level of opacity, not just with regards to the names of sources, but also details such as dates, which could expose the identity of vulnerable individuals.

Beyond the restrictions imposed on sources by official secrecy there were also concerns regarding the impact of this paper on the security of sources still in Yemen. With an ongoing civil war, the risk of sources being accused of espionage has necessitated that many Yemenis remain unidentified. Indeed, several Yemeni sources were killed while this paper was being written; though not as a result of their interaction with the authors.

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<sup>a</sup> In this report the term 'Western' is occasionally used to denote instances where EU and Five-Eyes governments were involved, in addition to the US and UK, even though the activities of those other governments are not explored.

Others have been detained or forced into exile.

Generally, the rule has been to only include information concerning operations where the authors were able to speak to those directly involved. It has also been the general practice to seek to independently corroborate testimony, even where sources were speaking about events in which they participated. The aim has been to confirm accounts from operators with commanders and policymakers to ensure that the activities described are properly contextualised, and similarly to discuss descriptions provided by commanders and policymakers with operators, to understand how decisions unfolded on the ground. The authors have also always sought to obtain testimony regarding meetings and interactions between Yemenis and Western personnel with both parties. The authors received a considerable quantity of compelling and plausible testimony for which these procedures were not possible, either because the relevant sources were not accessible, or because of the risk of exposing sources. In such cases the material has been omitted from this report.

There are other important omissions that demand explanation. President Saleh's conflicts with the Houthis are alluded to but not substantially addressed. The contribution of Saudi Arabia to counterterrorism operations, and its provision of aid, has been excluded. The intelligence activities of non-British and American Western<sup>a</sup> powers – most notably Germany's Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) – are not covered. Nor are the efforts of America's National Security Agency (NSA) and Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) to collect signals

intelligence on al-Qaeda (AQ). Although these subjects were central to Yemen's politics, and the counterterrorism effort, in the period under consideration, they were not vital to British capacity building operations. They deserve examination, but regrettably fall beyond the scope of this report.

The authors have not had access to, nor relied upon, classified information in compiling this report, and all testimony has been gathered with the authors identifying themselves either as journalists, or as researchers.

## Context: Yemen, 1996-2003

At the turn of the century, political power in Yemen centred around two men: President Ali Abdullah Saleh and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Hailing from the same village in the Sanhan, they had risen to power with the support of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the leader of Yemen's largest tribal confederation, the Hashid. Their victory in the Yemeni Civil War of 1994-1996 enabled both men to extend their hold on the Yemeni military. The integration of the Yemen Arab Republic's principal foreign threat – the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – removed the military's primary concern. Instead the institution became a tool for regime protection in two ways: physical security, and political security through patronage. With the forced retirement of Southern Yemeni officers, the military became a slush fund for Saleh and Ali Mohsen's clients, and tribal allies.

The use of the army as a tool for patronage degraded its professionalism. Large numbers of non-existent soldiers were on the books, enabling commanders to pocket their salaries, while equipment supplied to military units made its way onto the black market, either because commanders sold it, or because troops supplemented their salaries, which were also often pocketed by officers. The plundering of military units not only enriched Saleh's allies, but ensured that potential enemies receiving patronage lacked effective forces with which they could challenge Saleh's power.

The state of Yemen's intelligence agency, the Political Security Organisation (PSO) was more complicated. Saleh required intelligence for his protection, and a number of key allies in the organisation had the capacity to mount effective surveillance on opponents. However, the need for intelligence from Southern Yemen, and the PSO's integration with its Southern equivalent, had seen an influx of poorly vetted personnel, while Yemen's various

political factions all sought to get allies inside the organisation. The result was a bloated and compromised security structure, but with extensive links across Yemeni society, and a number of effective departments answerable to Saleh.

Those units that retained military effectiveness were similarly kept under the personal control of Saleh and Ali Mohsen. Ali Mohsen controlled the Firqa, or First Armoured Division, while Saleh retained the Republican Guard. These units remained comparatively well equipped, had operational autonomy from the formal command structure, and were staffed by officers personally loyal to their respective patrons.<sup>5</sup>

Counterterrorism interest in Yemen spiked following the bombing of the USS Cole in the port of Aden in 2000. The US deployed a large FBI team to investigate the bombing. As Western governments began to pay closer attention to AQ, it was found that a number of people linked to Osama bin Laden passed through Yemen. In the wake of the September 2001 attacks on the US, key AQ members, including bin Laden's bodyguard Abu Jandal, the first lead in identifying the 9/11 hijackers, were interrogated in Yemen by the FBI while in PSO custody.<sup>6</sup>

Given Yemen's place as a safe-haven for AQ, US and UK Special Forces and intelligence officers began to conduct raids in the country. It was recognised, however, that the number of reliable local partners was limited. Yemen's PSO were suspected of containing AQ sympathisers. Meanwhile, US and UK Special Forces were reluctant to cooperate with troops that they considered poorly trained, and potentially dangerous.

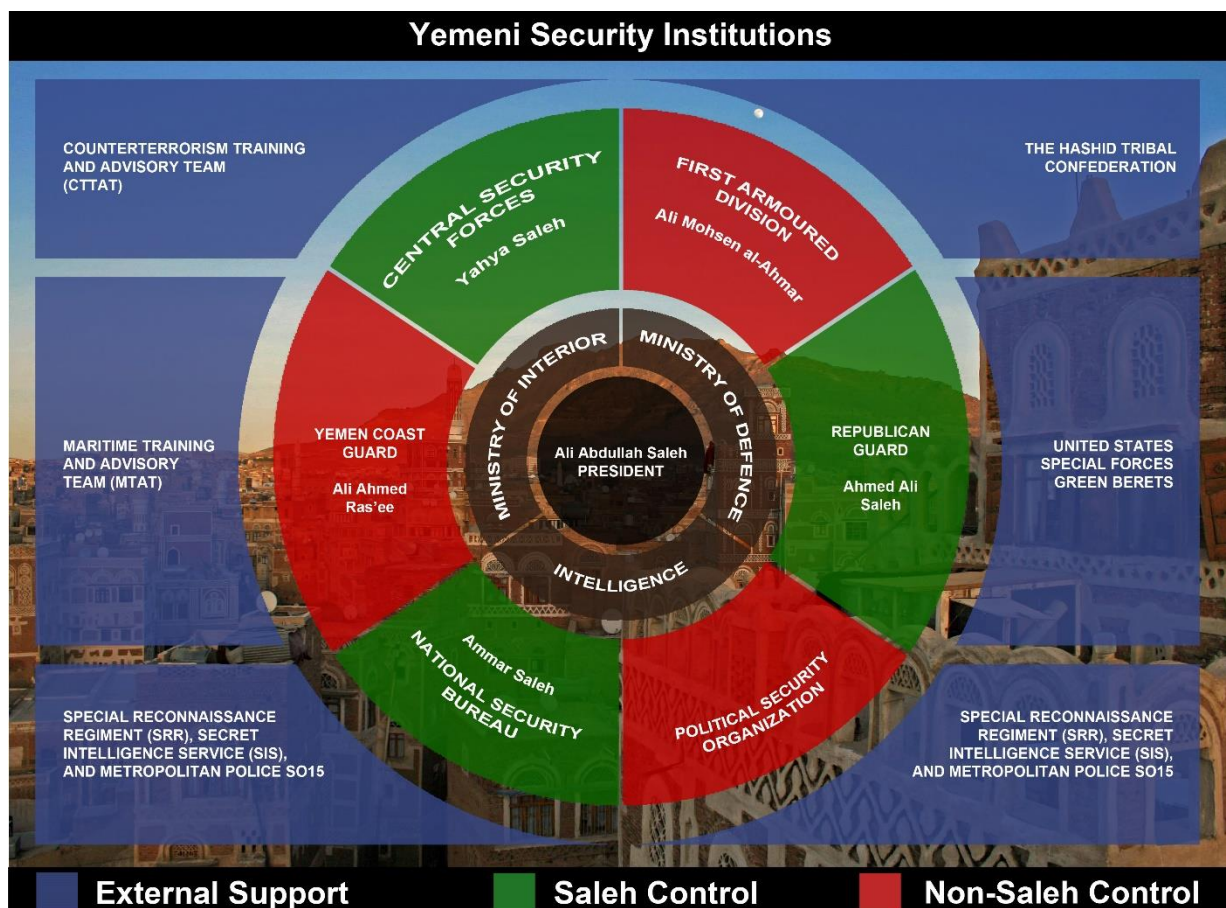
In the wake of 9/11 attacks Saleh saw an opportunity to strengthen his position relative to Ali Mohsen, to develop his relationship with the US, and to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of the forces under his control. After 2003 the US

also represented a new source of funds for patronage as the price of oil declined. Saleh had appointed his son Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Saleh to take over the Republican Guard in 2000 and embarked upon an expansion of the force. Ahmed Ali also established Yemen's Special Forces, which quickly attracted the interest of US trainers, seeking partners to combat AQ. In 2001 Saleh appointed his nephew Colonel Yahya Saleh to command the Central Security Forces (CSF), a paramilitary police force. Yahya Saleh also set up, with American and British help, the Counterterrorism Unit (CTU), a company sized strike force operating within the CSF. In 2002 Saleh created the National Security Bureau (NSB), under the command of his nephew, Colonel Ammar Saleh, a new domestic intelligence agency, which was to be more professional, properly vetted, and unequivocally loyal to Saleh.<sup>7</sup>

A further unit sponsored by the United

States was the Yemeni Coast Guard, founded in 2003 with the aim of combating smuggling, and to improve security for ships entering Yemen's ports. It was hoped that this would bring down insurance rates and help the Yemeni economy. Unlike the CTU the Coast Guard lacked significant political support within the Yemeni government, and their stated objective of confronting smugglers posed a threat to an historic source of income for coastal communities, and senior officials.

All of these new institutions were to receive extensive support from the US, on the premise that they would be able to confront AQ, which had several hundred members in Yemen. AQ's place in Yemeni society, however, was complicated. In the early 1990s a number of Mujahedeen who had fought in Afghanistan moved to Yemen.<sup>8</sup> Some married into prominent tribal families. In Yemen's civil war Saleh mobilised these fighters as irregular forces in the South.<sup>9</sup>





When Osama bin Laden formed AQ these Mujahedeen were open to recruitment and recruited others. Bin Laden considered moving AQ to Yemen in 1997.<sup>10</sup>

AQ would remain relatively small in Yemen until the late 2000s. However, detaining members of AQ was complicated by their tribal affiliations. Tribal groups were not aligned with, or supportive of al-Qaeda's political objectives. In fact, the ideological goals of AQ subordinated tribes, and were antithetical to tribal interests.<sup>11</sup> However, AQ members were also members of prominent tribes, who were honour bound to offer protection. Moreover, many Yemenis would see particular AQ sympathisers as family or friends first and foremost, before identifying them as political actors. Yemeni tribes would hand members of AQ to the state if the tribal sheikh agreed that they had violated customary laws, but this required negotiation. Seeking to avoid conflict in tribal territories, sheikhs would try and divert government and AQ forces from fighting. Often the initiation of negotiations would provide sufficient warning to enable AQ sympathisers to escape.

## CTTAT and MTAT, 2004-2009

US and UK Special Forces began jointly operating in Yemen against AQ shortly after 9/11. Britain had a long operational history in the country. Aden was a protectorate until 1967. Through the 1960s UKSF and intelligence personnel conducted a covert war in the North,<sup>12</sup> while British troops fought against Communist rebels in Oman until 1975.<sup>13</sup> The British presence in Oman continues until today, though in an advisory capacity. Britain also continued to try and develop Yemeni institutions after its departure from Aden. In 1983 the British government sought to establish a programme for police from the Yemeni Arab Republic to be trained in Durham in North England, though it was impeded by a lack of candidates with requisite language skills.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, the US valued British familiarity with the region.

In early 2004 the US and UK formed a joint training team to support the newly created Yemeni Counterterrorism Unit. The CTU at that time consisted of two platoons of Central Security Force personnel. The US provided High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and M4 Carbines, and the training team began to teach marksmanship and basic soldiering.

The trainers were re-tasked from operations targeting AQ. As Keith Mines, a former US Green Beret, working with the State Department in Afghanistan and Iraq, observed, in the wake of 9/11 “you had the Special Forces guys who really didn’t want to be providing training; they would rather be out chasing bin Laden or something like that.” The result was frustration, made worse by UKSF personnel looking down on their American counterparts. “Special Forces? - Well, Special Forces third class,” noted a British officer, referring to the American trainers. After several months of close confinement, relations within the team

broke down, exacerbated when the commander of the UK contingent began to badmouth his American colleagues to Yemenis.

“He was rude,” said Ayman Mahdi, who was the lead interpreter for the training team. “The Americans’ interpreters didn’t like that guy in the British team, which was why they started to tell the Americans bad things. It wasn’t that bad, but they made it look bad.”

Following this deterioration in relations between personnel, the UK and US joint training team was split. In the following months training provided to the CTU was disjointed. An officer overseeing the training programme described the approach as “sporadic engagement” in which training teams were “dropping in from Djibouti, when they’re in the area”, and delivering short courses on particular specialist skills like defensive driving, or close-quarters combat. “Invariably what the Americans were training was too advanced – they loved it – and the Yemenis all turned up, but it was too advanced,” noted the officer. “What it lacked was an awareness of the recipient’s ability to move forward and achieve something.”

Ayman Mahdi recalled how the Americans would deliver “the very same training again and again. It made no sense.” A similar dynamic had developed with the Coast Guard. Set up in 2003 to address piracy, smuggling, and to safeguard Yemeni ports, the Coast Guard reported to the Ministry of Interior. The US provided them with boats, and a basic set of equipment, but no sustained support or mentoring was put in place. A British officer overseeing training to the Coast Guard noted that donated equipment either ended up in permanent storage for want of replacement parts, or was sold, so that the Coast Guard did not all possess boots by 2006. “The Americans started, they did some initial training with it, and then rushed off to the next thing, and it was in danger of collapsing,” noted a senior

officer at Britain's Permanent Joint Headquarters Northwood (PJHQ).

As with the CTU, short rotational courses on navigation, and small arms drills, did little to develop the Coast Guard's operational capabilities. Wael Abdallah, an interpreter with the Coast Guard, noted that members of the institution "showed seriousness if they saw a superior, or during the courses, they would show interest to impress the training team," but engagement with short rotational courses was heavily dependent on interest. Medical and mechanical courses attracted few attendees. By 2006 the Coast Guard were still unable to maintain a presence at sea.

The neglect of these training missions was not a major concern at the time, since raids against AQ were proving successful. Along with the killing of five AQ associates in a November 2002 CIA drone strike,<sup>15</sup> a significant number of AQ figures were captured and imprisoned by the PSO. The Yemeni government also cooperated in closing religious schools for foreigners that were believed to be radicalising young men and providing AQ with recruits. By 2005 Yemen was removed from the Lloyds of London War List,<sup>16</sup> reflecting growing confidence in the country's stability. As the threat from Yemen receded, Western governments began to curtail their military aid to the Yemeni government.

Two factors would change this trend. The British government was expanding its CONTEST counterterrorism strategy, developed in 2003. In the wake of the 2005 7/7 bombings in London new resources were being moved to counterterrorism. Moreover, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan turned into protracted engagements, training local forces became a higher priority. The most debated component of CONTEST was the

domestic Prevent programme aiming to counter extremism. But CONTEST also required that "the UK provides training and other assistance to certain foreign governments, in order to help them build up their ability to counter terrorism."<sup>17</sup> In 2005 Yemen was not high on the threat list, but from 2006 became a growing concern.

## Sustained Engagement: Building a Training Strategy

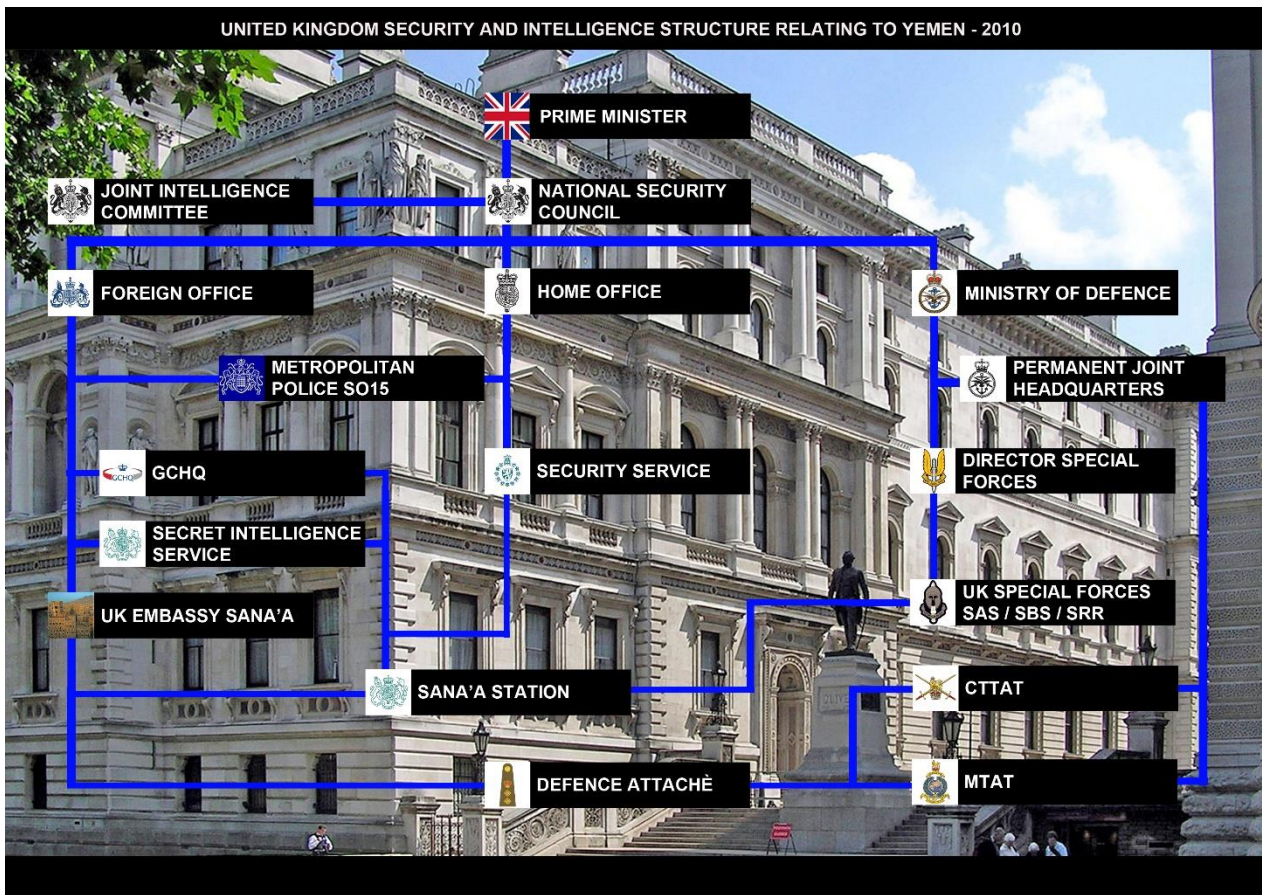
The security situation in Yemen began to deteriorate from February 2006 when twenty-three AQ members escaped from a PSO prison.<sup>18</sup> By April the country had returned to the Lloyds of London War List. Many officials suspected that the Yemeni

**An officer overseeing the training programme described the approach as "sporadic engagement" in which training teams were "dropping in from Djibouti, when they're in the area"**

authorities had enabled the escape in a bid to ensure continued security assistance. Saleh – facing declining oil revenues – had expressed frustration at declining international assistance. A former FBI agent working in Yemen commented wryly that the PSO "ran a prison – y'know – every so often they opened the doors and let everybody out. But for the most part they ran a prison."

In 2006 the British government appointed Captain Philip Holihead RN as Defence Attaché. Britain's military representative quickly set about reviewing the Coast Guard, and restructuring the training programmes. This began by testing what had been achieved to date.

"We gave them an exercise," Captain Holihead recalled. "We found a pen, a Royal Navy pen, and we gave it a stores number. And we said, 'right, we want you to find this pen in your stores system.' They spent a week trying to find this pen. They went out and bought new pens. They borrowed pens off people. But they didn't find the pen that



was in the stores system ever. How are you going to run a small boat navy without knowing where your stores are? If you can't find replacement O-Rings for your fuel pump, you're never going to go to sea."

The basic logistical, navigational, and organisational shortcomings of the Coast Guard prompted a new approach. Britain would provide a permanent group of trainers who would be with the Coast Guard day-in, day-out, to deliver consistent mentoring. This team, known as the Maritime Training and Advisory Team (MTAT) would consist of half a dozen field and junior officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, supplemented by reservists. They were to be regular military personnel, rather than Special Forces. In conjunction with the Coast Guard training officer, MTAT would build a set of training objectives, which would be presented to the various Western embassies at a monthly meeting. Countries could then bid to provide short courses that fitted into

the training programme. Groups of four to twelve trainers could come in and deliver short courses, with the permanent mentors ensuring that the training was put into practice, and that the administrative and logistical processes were in place to make it possible. Immediate priorities were sorting out the organisation's payroll, and its stores system.

The objective agreed with the Yemenis was to develop the Coast Guard to a point where they could maintain a daily presence at sea, with both routine, and intelligence-based patrols. Whereas in the past medical training, or boarding exercises, were run as and when qualified trainers were available in Djibouti, the new training programme organised these courses into sequences that built on each other. The permanent training team could then ensure that when a crew had been provided with medical equipment, someone was responsible for it, and would take it out during patrols, so that the training could actually be used if needed. Similarly.



oversight of the stores system enabled crews to practice navigation and seamanship because once vessels could be maintained, the risks of deploying them were reduced.

“The plan was to be there for as long as it took, and recognising that changing organisations is not just about teaching blokes to fire their rifles,” said an officer responsible for planning the training mission. “Changing an organisation when you know there are cultural changes involved, that takes a very long time.”

A similar reboot took place subsequently with the CTU. The CTU training officer was running a small car business and rarely turned up to work. The British Embassy started negotiating with Colonel Yahya Saleh, Chief of Staff of the Central Security Forces, to work out a long-term training programme, with a permanent team to keep the CTU operational, and short courses to build its capabilities. The training team was designated the Counterterrorism Training and Advisory Team, or CTTAT.

The objectives of the CTU training programme was set in consultation with the Yemenis to build a force that could independently plan and undertake raids, initially in Sana’a, but eventually into more remote parts of Yemen. From the British point of view, the aim was for CTTAT to ensure that lessons were implemented. For example, the CTU were taught to set up vehicle checkpoints with cut-offs, and to record who passed through it, during a short course. But in practice it was found that many soldiers did not carry pens or paper, and in any case did not know who to give the information to once it was collected, because this was beyond the scope of the original training. CTTAT, being there permanently, could go and set up checkpoints with the CTU, ensure they had the necessary equipment, and then make sure that the notes were passed to the CTU intelligence section to feed into their search for targets. CTTAT could also make sure that

these notes were logged in a consistent manner, so that the CTU could build up a picture of who was entering and leaving a particular area.

It was felt that Yahya Saleh would provide support to push some institutional changes. For example, during the jailbreak in 2006 the escape tunnel had gone through the women’s exercise yard. This prompted British trainers organising practice operations to dress some of the ‘terrorists’ in an exercise in abayas, a robe-like dress. When the CTU stormed the building, they ignored the women completely. In the after action report the British raised this with Yahya Saleh and discussed how best to address this oversight. There were already plans to expand the CTU to four platoons, and so the conclusion was to establish a platoon of female soldiers.

“I joined the police school in 2000,” recalled Captain Qobol Saadi. “In 2006 they opened the CTU to women, and I volunteered. We had British female trainers first. They gave us a test and questions. We did a medical test and the British selected from the female volunteers.”

Captain Saadi, and another former police officer, Captain Fathia Mohammed, would go on to command the female platoon. The British female trainers came in for short rotations from Britain. Some of the trainers had only just joined the British army, but their commander told them “to teach what you know.” The female trainers brought the recruits up to a basic standard so that they could be integrated into the CTU’s units, and from there participate in the units’ training.

“They never accepted females before,” explained Captain Saadi. “After the prisoners broke out they needed women to go into houses and enter the women’s part of the house. So they realised they needed us. We would go on raids and searches.”

Initially there was tension in the unit, but

over time the female section was accepted, and its value appreciated. “The funny thing was the women started to beat the men in marksmanship exercises,” noted a British officer responsible for training. “So, they gained their colleagues’ respect.”

In 2008 Yahya Saleh sponsored the two officers commanding the female platoon to attend the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. “It showed he was committed to the unit,” noted a British officer involved in the training programme. “He gave up two slots that would otherwise have gone to men, and that was political.”

### Setbacks and Roadblocks: At Home and Abroad

The new training arrangements were a dramatic improvement on the pre-2006 process. However, it also created problems. The first problem was that because training priorities evolved in consultation with the Yemenis, and because the negotiations were led in country, funding for each training component was sourced separately, with a minimal central budget. PJHQ’s country plan for Yemen was developed in 2007, a year after the new training arrangements were put in place. The result was both a shortage of funding, and a tendency to scrape money from unusual sources. Boots for the Coast Guard were purchased online using living expenses from British Embassy staff. Ammunition for training exercises was purchased off the Yemeni market with funds taken from embassy petty cash, spent by the defence section’s driver, and billed to the MOD as living costs for the training team.

Some more extensive training was funded from DFID and Conflict Pool funds, with certain questions as to their compliance with restrictions on these funds going to military spending. It would be unreasonable to suggest that the soldiers implementing the programme were involved in impropriety. They were ordered to implement a

programme, and given no fixed budget to do it. The irregularities were the result of a failure in London to establish a clear set of objectives for the project, and to fund it appropriately. This left personnel in Yemen fearing that they were navigating a grey space, and led to arguments between the FCO and MOD.

There was also confusion over who was responsible for funding the Coast Guard. In 2008 Ali Ahmed Ras'ee, who commanded the Coast Guard, told the Yemen Post that “high ranking officials believe that coalition countries provide us with unlimited support even at the level of budget. When we ask for our budget from the Ministry of Finance, they tell us that we are a supported institution, therefore, we neither receive support from foreign countries nor a budget from the government.”<sup>19</sup> US and UK officials saw this as Saleh trying to squeeze money out of them.

Another problem was over unity of command. CTTAT would work out training priorities with the CTU training officer, who would then pass this information to DAs and diplomats. CTTAT, however, reported to PJHQ. Funding came from the FCO, DFID, the MOD, and partner governments. Who exactly had ultimate responsibility was unclear. An official in the Ministry of Defence with CT responsibilities said that the project was directed by the FCO. A military officer overseeing the programme argued that “the programme in Yemen was owned by [PJHQ] CT Ops. So that is where the impetus came from. It certainly didn’t come from the DA in country. The delivery of operations was handed over to PJHQ.” Yahya Saleh was unequivocal that “the coordination was with the Defence Attaché,” a belief shared by a number of senior Yemeni officials. Various members of CTTAT noted a lack of clarity between PJHQ – overwhelmingly concerned with force protection – and the DA in country.

As with financial problems these diverging

priorities led troops to operate outside of the rules. For instance, PJHQ had forbidden CTTAT from accompanying the CTU on actual operations, though these rules did not apply to Special Forces. However, for CTTAT it was essential to observe the CTU in action in order to provide effective feedback and identify problems. The CTU would wear body cameras, which helped, but CTTAT members did occasionally accompany the CTU. In doing so they risked court martial, but as far as the soldiers on the ground were concerned, not doing so would prevent them from fulfilling their mission.

It was on the Yemeni side, however, that roadblocks began to appear as the CTU and Coast Guard gained operational proficiency. The first major issue was that as the CTU started to mount raids it became apparent that some members of the unit were letting the targets know they were coming. "They were all family connected. As soon as they knew they were going, the members of the CTU who had family members with these people were on the phone to tell them that they were being scrambled," recalled a British soldier working with the training programme. Several British officers described the same issue. Yahya Saleh complained that there was a "coalition between extremist groups and tribal units which made it difficult to fight the terrorists. They don't have to be terrorists themselves but it makes extremism worse, especially as some tribal areas refuse the presence of the state."

The dynamic appears to have been that members of the CTU would alert either their family, or their sheikh, if the unit was to operate in their territory. Sheikhs would then notify the targets, and encourage them to leave the area, so that fighting did not erupt in tribal lands.

One way that the CTU tried to address the problem was not to issue mission briefings. Ayman Mahdi, the lead interpreter with the CTU at this time, noted how the unit would

be scrambled "in 15 minutes; they would just deploy like that," without any detailed information on the area, or targets, until the unit was en route. The problem with this was that it prevented the CTU using much of the operational planning that they were trained to employ by the British. Tribal groups would also resist sudden moves into their territories. Mahdi recalled one serious incident in Marib where "they got ambushed and lost two guys, and another injured, because of the lack of intelligence sharing."

If the CTU were constrained by a non-permissive environment, the Coast Guard faced opposition from up the command chain. Several British officers recalled a Coast Guard mission in which a dhow was successfully intercepted smuggling arms. There was some shooting, but the crew was detained. The next day Yemeni soldiers came to the Coast Guard jail to demand the smugglers' release, and as a senior British officer described it, the commander of "the Coast Guard was phoned up by someone extremely close to the Presidential family and was told that if he interfered with the legitimate business of the state again not only was he going to find himself in small pieces at the bottom of the well, but that his whole family would and he was going to have to watch his children die." Given that senior Yemeni officials actively opposed the Coast Guard doing its job, the force was left unable to effectively operate.

In 2009 Colonel Mark Claydon became Defence Attaché. He had previously overseen large-scale training of the Afghan National Army. Under his time in post the emphasis on British support would shift from direct tactical training – though this was continued – to working with Yemeni institutions to try and integrate their security structures, and encourage improved intelligence sharing and analysis. This brought the CTU training programme into direct contact with a parallel training process being undertaken with Yemen's intelligence agencies.

## Intelligence and Coordination, 2006-2011

When CTTAT needed equipment from the UK the standard procedure was for it to be loaded onto an RAF C130 and flown from Brize Norton, via Cyprus, to Sana'a. To do this the RAF required over-flight permission from Yemen's Civil Aviation and Meteorology Authority, and for the Yemeni government to approve the contents of the shipment. A representative from the British Embassy would meet the training team at Sana'a airport, and inspect the shipment on the tailgate of the C130 to make sure that it complied with the manifest approved by the Yemeni government. If there was "anything that was not on that list," an official at the British Embassy recalled, "the Yemenis would take it," upon its touching Yemeni soil.

One shipment, however, was different. Rather than CTTAT the C130 was met by a member of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), a Special Forces operator, and officers from Yemen's National Security Bureau. The shipment was not inspected, and was quickly waved through customs, ending up in a room at NSB headquarters. It contained computing equipment for tracking phones, intercepting communications, and managing and analysing data. These would be set up in a joint targeting room. "It was in the National Security building," explained the former Yemeni Foreign Minister Abubakr al Qirbi.

Along with the hardware came two trainers. "The training was for joint operations, cooperation, exchanging information and intelligence," explained Ammar Saleh, who was director of the NSB at the time. "It was very helpful and without their help we wouldn't have achieved success."

"When meeting Yemeni officials they would ask not to have their photos taken, or their names mentioned," Yahya Saleh recalled. "They were special forces. God knows whether they were from somewhere else. They came as diplomats, via the embassy."

Multiple British personnel who served in Yemen confirmed that these soldiers were from Britain's Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR), but had been seconded to SIS. The rules governing this procedure are opaque. However, according to a Ministry of Defence Joint Services Publication, "Service Persons on Secondment are employed, on contract, by the host country or organisation, with all costs, pay and benefits provided by the new employer in accordance with the contract." From the MOD's point of view, "Service Persons on Secondment have effectively left military service for the duration of the contract", and are therefore logged as being on an "Unpaid Absence."<sup>20</sup> This arrangement allowed UKSF to operate in Yemen without being classified as military personnel. Given the domestic political sensitivity of foreign deployments, and the

**It was rapidly apparent that the relationship with the PSO was unpromising. "I never heard anybody say anything good about them," noted a former CIA counterterrorism officer.**

controversy surrounding assassinations outside of declared warzones, the use of Seconded Service allowed the MOD to claim in a 2014 statement to the NGO *Reprieve* that the "UK does not provide any military support to the US campaign of Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) strikes on Yemen."

The SRR trainers would provide a long-term mentoring role to the NSB and PSO. As with the CTU, the NSB and PSO would also receive short courses to develop their skills – delivered by Jordanian and British intelligence officers, and the Metropolitan Police – with the SRR mentors ensuring that the training was implemented. Some courses took place out of country, including a group of PSO officers travelling to Jordan to be



trained to use surveillance cameras.

These intelligence training programmes were developed in isolation from the military training teams until 2009. After the bombing of the USS Cole, the Western intelligence community was looking for a partner organisation in Yemen. It became quickly apparent that the relationship with the PSO was unpromising. "I never heard anybody say anything good about them," noted a former CIA counterterrorism officer. "We knew that we didn't have a reliable partner," said a former FBI agent. "In the whole [time] I was there I would be surprised if the PSO ever responded with a document to a record request."

The NSB was set up in part to provide Western intelligence agencies with a partner they could work with. However, the PSO could not be discarded. It had greater manpower than the NSB, a large network of sources, and power of arrest. The PSO surveilled the NSB and could detain its officers if it was not informed about their operations. It was therefore necessary to liaise and provide training to the PSO to buy space for the NSB to develop.

"The reason you do these operations is to hopefully make the service better; to make the service trust you more; to make the service open the file up more. And you start seeing 'oh, the NSB has some better sources'", explained the former CIA counterterrorism officer. "It may not pay off the first five [years]. It may pay off in year 10 when you really need it. It's an investment to try to secure our own country."

## Integrating the Effort

On 17 September 2008 al-Qaeda launched an assault on the US Embassy.<sup>21</sup> This reduced US capacity to stay on the ground, expanding the corresponding value of the deployed British teams. Britain's role increased again when a group of tourists, including a Briton,

was kidnapped in 2009. As a British citizen had been kidnapped, SIS took a leading role in the operation to locate them. In addition, the CTU were deployed to Saada in Northern Yemen, with two British trainers.

"A platoon of the CTU were up there at all times," said a British officer serving in Yemen. "We had two of our officers up in the North when the kidnapping of the German family and the British guy took place... because in this case the information hadn't come out of American sources to get the targeting information, we were able to get right up there."

The UK saw the joint operation as an opportunity to tackle some of the problems with the CTU, especially the lack of intelligence sharing. "It was the kidnap that was the breakthrough in that particular log-jam. People started to share information," recalled a British officer involved in these operations.

"When the kidnap broke you could see the process of fusion evolving," said Jonathan Tottman, a kidnap specialist from the Metropolitan Police who became Britain's law enforcement attaché to Yemen. "I went out there a couple of times, at the start of the kidnap, and during the kidnap investigation and hostage negotiations and I found the Yemenis to be quite receptive to British ideas on how to run the kidnap [case]."

The effort started with the British hosting a Yemeni National Crisis Cell that encouraged intelligence sharing at a ministerial level. Once this was up and running, permission was granted to set up the Office of Special Security Information (OSSI). The goal among British policymakers was to build an Intelligence Fusion Centre that would link together PSO, NSB, DMI, and intelligence provided through international liaison, and make it available to the CTU to set up operations.

Initially OSSI received little information from other agencies. It was premised on trust, which was scarce, either between Yemeni agencies, or between the Yemenis and the British. “The operations were secret. We wouldn’t tell them about the operation but share the results of the operation,” noted Yahya Saleh. British trainers complained that they rarely got to review body-camera footage from raids, and although they could piece together what had happened, there was a lack of openness that impeded training. “All our operations depend on secrecy,” said CTU Captain Saadi. “Success depends on secrecy.”

But the unwillingness to share also arose from concerns over what foreign governments would do with the information. “When I talked to the [CTU] soldiers as an interpreter they tended to see it as spying on them,” recalled Ayman Mahdi, the lead interpreter with CTTAT, who would later head the OSSI and work at the British Embassy. “One day they invited me to have lunch with them and I asked them questions because they invited me. I just wanted to talk with them. And this ended up as a report that I was trying to get information out of them.”

This was driven partly by the CTU being deployed against non-AQ targets – including the Houthis – and a concern among Yemeni officials that if details of these operations were shared, support for Yemeni forces might be reduced. It was also a result of fears that the UK was collecting intelligence on the Yemeni government.

Those fears were not baseless. “You can’t expect a J2 [military intelligence officer] to ignore his training,” commented a British training officer. And this activity went beyond officers reporting on what they saw. One British soldier recalled his commanding officer telling him to expect SIS to get in touch. “I asked what I should do and he said listen to what they have to say, but it’s probably better not to tell me about it.” The

soldier said he was asked to participate in recruiting a Yemeni official. A Yemeni involved in the same operation independently corroborated this.

Intelligence sharing by the Yemenis was also inhibited by a strong sense that they were not being dealt with as an equal partner. American and British intelligence officials acknowledged that they generally refrained from sharing intelligence with Yemeni colleagues out of concern that it would leak to AQAP. Yemeni officials, however, found this demeaning. As former NSB director Ammar Saleh put it, “the Yemeni side continued to suffer from a lack of transparency on the part of the US and UK on the operational and intelligence front.”

It is also apparent that British trainers were trying to develop a level of cooperation between Yemeni agencies that Western governments struggle to achieve. “Just getting the US elements of sharing and coordinating was frankly a job in itself,” recalled a former senior CIA official responsible for operations in Yemen. “Some folks weren’t allowed into different command centres... How do you get something from one system onto another system? How do you get it into a database? How do you use dissimilar sets of data? How do you use data that’s not in the English language? How do you turn text into data that a Palantir programme can address and manipulate and assess? How can you turn metadata and force that into a system? That’s technically quite laborious.”

The senior CIA official noted that between the US and UK there was deep collaboration, but that this had taken decades to develop. “Generally the stove pipes are less in the field... In the war zones this was done superbly, it was just imperative, mandatory, not optional. And you know the sharing there was very, very extensive... particularly with the Brits.”

## An Expanding Partnership: Trust, Trial, and Error

Between 2009-2011 the British Embassy worked to break down many of these barriers. It helped that training officers were on the ground for long enough to build personal connections with Yemeni officials. This fostered trust. With the British training the NSB, PSO, CSF and Coast Guard, there was potential to bring different arms together. The British tried to build further connections by offering close protection training to Saleh's Presidential Guard. They also considered engaging with the Republican Guard Special Forces, though this was eventually declined. The female section of the CTU was taken to mentor another female CSF unit responsible for screening women at Yemen's airports. The Yemenis meanwhile asked that the British train their Public Order Battalion, to which the British government agreed.

The first change was to the name; "it was previously called something like 'Riot Dispersal Unit' but they changed its name," Yahya Saleh said. "Also, they introduced humane concepts during training, such as human rights aspects." The British also tried to change the Public Order Battalion's equipment and tactics to favour non-lethal approaches. This did not pass without controversy. "Why would we do this if they're going to use it to suppress dissent from their own population?" an official at the US Embassy asked.

The British case for supporting the Public Order Battalion was simple: "the Yemeni solution to a riot or demonstration was 7.62," said a British officer involved in the programme, referring to 7.62x39mm ammunition, used in Soviet small arms ubiquitous in Yemen. "That's a great way of stopping any demonstration. It's a bloody awful way of stopping demonstrations plural. So what we were trying to give them was a method of handling riots and

demonstrations without having to resort to lethal force." British officials argued that this saved lives, because "if you handled a demonstration by peaceful means, usually you could get away without a firefight. As soon as you started shooting, somebody would start shooting back."

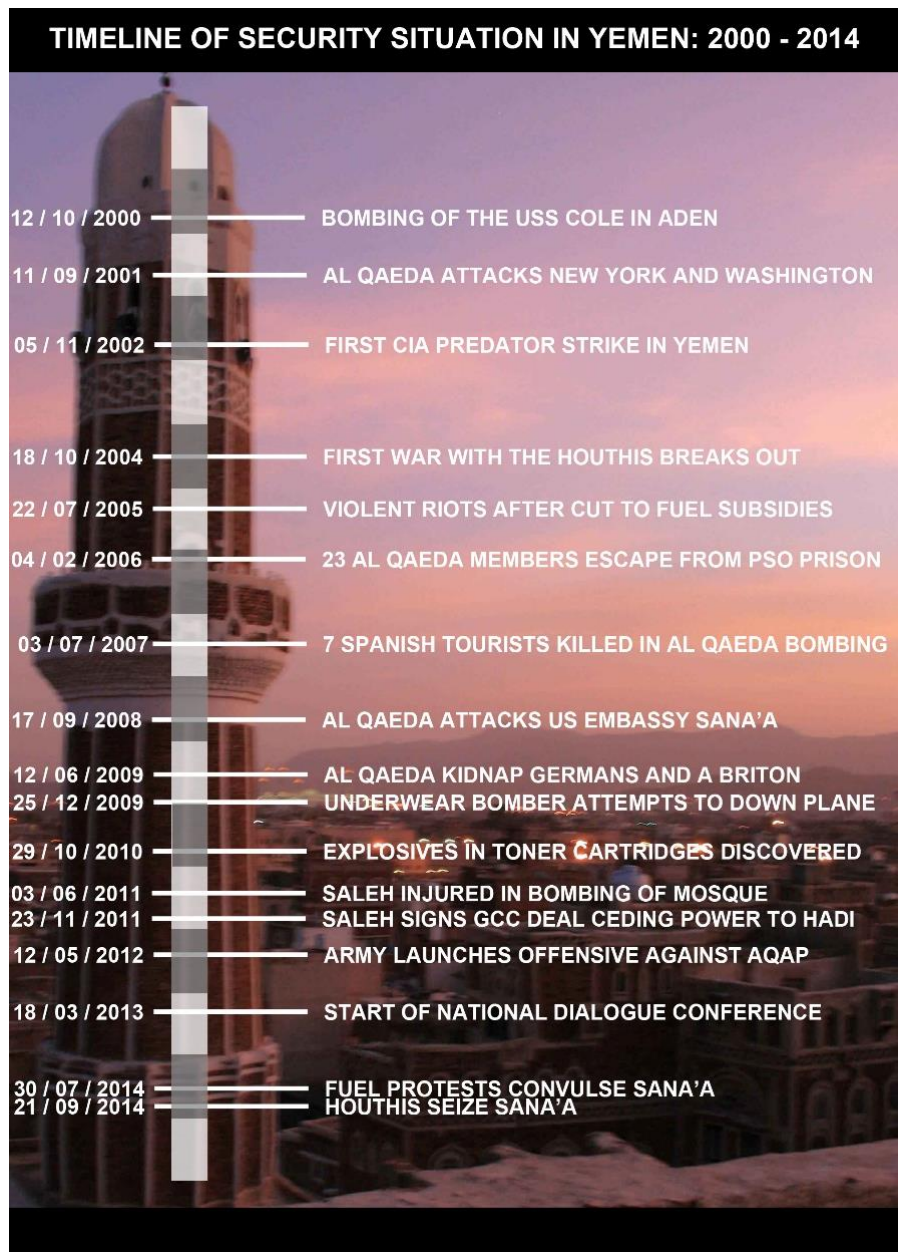
This debate would become heated in 2011 with the Arab Spring. Prior to that, however, the effect of these additional programmes was to improve British relations with Yemeni institutions and officials. Familiarity bred trust, and this process was accelerated by necessity as the security situation deteriorated.

On Christmas Day 2009 Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab – popularly referred to as the "Underwear Bomber" – attempted to blow up flight 253 above Detroit.<sup>22</sup> "Explosive devices, disguised in toner cartridges, were discovered en route from Yemen to the US in October 2010,"<sup>23</sup> and stopped at the UK's East Midlands airport. The attack was masterminded by al-Qaeda bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri. Sir John Sawers, then chief of SIS, publicly said that Yemen was one of three "real threats," arguing that "our intelligence effort needs to go where the threat is."<sup>24</sup>

The tempo of operations against al-Qaeda – which by then had merged with militants driven from Saudi Arabia to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)<sup>25</sup> – steadily increased. This helped build trust. British officials described their relationship with Ammar and Yahya Saleh as very productive. "There are those times when you really need a source or really need somebody with access, you could go to the Chief of the NSB, Ammar, and try to get shit done, because you built the relationship," recalled the former CIA counterterrorism officer. "Ammar Saleh was the principal point of contact in the NSB and he was always reachable," said Stephen Seche, former US Ambassador to Yemen from 2007-2010. "I don't think they ever balked at any strikes."

In addition to expanding security assistance, Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown set up the 'Friends of Yemen' initiative in 2010, which aimed to channel international development aid to the country, in recognition of the need to balance the counterterrorism effort. The scheme was supported by the US, the EU, and others, but largely evolved parallel to, rather than in conjunction with, counterterrorism policy.

By the end of 2010 security personnel were pleased with their progress and hoped to finally see their investment bear fruit. The disparate components of the training programme appeared to be coalescing, with increasing overlap between training to the NSB, CSF, Special Forces and others. The only exception was the Coast Guard, handicapped politically, and so MTAT started to be drawn down. Then came the Arab Spring.





## Influence and Instability, 2011-2015

The Arab Spring took security officials by surprise across the Middle East and North Africa. In Yemen political observers had been concerned for some time about President Saleh's manoeuvring to secure the succession of his son Ahmed. But military and intelligence personnel did not expect his regime to fall. "In 2011 military people here were not so interested in this Arab Spring," recalled Khaled al Radhi, a close aid to President Saleh, working with the Republican Guard Special Forces. "They didn't want it actually. Their military intelligence guy, he said all this would come to an advantage for al-Qaeda. We have tried changing regimes in Iraq and this is what you get." A number of US and UK officials made similar comments.

As protests erupted across Yemen, there were several concerns. Firstly, almost a decade of investment was about to implode. Secondly, it was feared that UK and US trained units would carry out a massacre. "The Brits were always concerned with that as a government," recalled the former CIA counterterrorism officer. "At the end of the day we get in bed with people who make us uncomfortable... You're going to feel bad because when you hear reports about Saleh's Presidential Guard double-tapping people, sniping folks that are just out there protesting... you're like 'I trained those sons of bitches but not to kill their own people. This is kinda fucked up. This is what the War on Terror made us do.'"

Military officers were also cynical about the protests. One British officer serving in Yemen described how "for some bizarre reason in 2011 we decided that three kids demonstrating in a park in Sana'a meant we

were going to abandon the President and the existing government, and let the country descend into chaos. I never quite understood that one."

On 27 January over 16,000 protesters came out in Sana'a, with demonstrations sweeping Aden and Taiz. Protests would continue for months, escalating further when the Hashid – the tribal confederation that had supported Saleh's rise to power – turned against him. Clashes erupted between tribal units and Saleh's security forces. The balance of power shifted when Ali Mohsen defected with his troops; having been at the forefront of the wars with the Houthis, he felt Saleh was marginalising him and his family. Open fighting broke out on several occasions

across the country. As the security situation deteriorated, CTTAT and MTAT were withdrawn. SIS, however, remained.

In June 2011 Saleh was severely injured in a bomb blast and left Yemen for Saudi Arabia. He resigned the Presidency following a GCC sponsored transition agreement signed in November, being succeeded

by his deputy Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. The deal brought an end to direct fighting, but by offering Saleh amnesty and the right to remain in Yemen it allowed him to contrive a means of undermining his successor, with the aim of reclaiming power.

There had long been tension between security officials and diplomats within Western embassies in Yemen. Former US Ambassador Stephen Seche was known to see things very differently to his Defence Attaché. Relations between British Defence Attaché Philip Holihead and Ambassador

**A former CIA counterterrorism officer: "At the end of the day we get in bed with people who make us uncomfortable... you're like 'I trained those sons of bitches but not to kill their own people... This is what the War on Terror made us do.'"**



Tens of thousands of protesters marching to Sana'a University, joined for the first time by opposition parties (image: Noor Al Hassan, via Al Jazeera English, 2011)

Timothy Torlot were far from amicable.

In 2011 British Defence Attaché Mark Claydon handed over his post to a forthright marine, Colonel Rupert Pulvertaft. Prepared to take risks to gain access, Pulvertaft quickly built up a close rapport with a wide spectrum of Yemeni politicians and officers. "The Yemenis loved him," recalled a colleague; a sentiment expressed by a number of Yemeni officials. But as the man responsible for bridging the widening gap between Britain's diplomatic and military efforts in Yemen he faced a slew of challenges. Between 2011 and 2012 there were extensive and robust disagreements within the British government on policy priorities in Yemen, between a desire to fight al-Qaeda, and the hope of stabilising the Yemeni state.

### Disruption and Unilateralism

For many officials, the Arab Spring in Yemen created an opportunity for rooting out corruption, building democracy, and was a component of strengthening Yemeni institutions by giving government a popular mandate. The duty of Western governments was therefore to support the transition, and to capacity build Yemeni institutions.

From a security point of view, however, 2011 was a disaster. As Alistair Burt, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, told UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash in February 2012, "The security situation in Yemen remains acute. Large parts of the country remain no-go areas and outside of the effective control of the central government. As a result of the security and economic situations, AQAP have flourished and extended the area where they can operate with little or no hindrance from the government."<sup>26</sup>

In the long term it was clear that the situation required the strengthening of the Yemeni state. In a meeting with Yemeni Foreign Minister al Qirbi, Burt was instructed to say that "we hope to continue to work closely together with you to effectively mitigate threats. The UK hopes to do this through further capacity building work."<sup>27</sup>

In the short term, however, AQAP freely roamed across large swathes of territory, and was planning attacks outside Yemen. The disruption to Yemeni military units in 2011 was extensive. After Ahmed Ali Saleh, commanding the Republican Guard, refused to cooperate with Hadi, the President set about restructuring the military to purge

Saleh loyalists from command positions. Yahya Saleh left the CSF, Ammar Saleh left the NSB, and the Republican Guard was disbanded.<sup>28</sup> Beyond new commanders, however, the units themselves had divided loyalties. Hadi wanted to keep his most professional troops close to Sana'a for his protection, and so the ability for Western forces to direct strikes through the Yemenis was curtailed.

A number of Western and Yemeni officials also believed that Saleh's allies were stirring up instability and facilitating AQAP activity in order to challenge Hadi's legitimacy. "In my note to my colleagues on the 22 February 2012, I think I was fairly in tune with the mood music," recalled Jonathan Tottman, UK and EU Law Enforcement Attaché in Sana'a, "I said to my colleagues 'Beware, the euphoria of the honeymoon period. President Hadi's premiership will soon evaporate'." He argued that Saleh was helping AQAP attackers "to remind Hadi that he was in office but not in power."

At its heart, the divide in Western policy was between the military's desire to kinetically engage AQAP versus a civilian emphasis on strengthening Security Sector Governance. As the increasingly hostile environment restricted civilian access the military won the argument on the ground. In theory these two tracks were aiming at the same ends, but between 2011-2015 it became clear that kinetic counterterrorism was being undertaken at the expense and to the detriment of efforts to stabilise the Yemeni state.

This manifested in an increase in unilateral operations. "During Saleh's [presidency], although he was cooperating with the attacks against al-Qaeda using drones, before the Americans could take any attack they had to get the approval of the Yemeni government. Under Hadi this was

abolished," noted Abubakr al Qirbi. "Hadi gave the Americans and the British much more freedom in their actions in fighting terrorism. He gave them an unsigned cheque, a blank cheque."

Raids by British Special Forces were a component of UK counterterrorism policy in Yemen since 2001.<sup>29</sup> Prior to 2011 UKSF would enter Sana'a on commercial flights, ostensibly as civilians, pick up weapons locally, and conduct raids under the direction of the SIS Station. "The planning beforehand was always done by Station. That was always Station and it was always kept very, very, low profile," noted a British Embassy official. "The only people who had involvement were the American and UK operators."

**...between 2011-2015 it became clear that kinetic counterterrorism was being undertaken at the expense and to the detriment of efforts to stabilise the Yemeni state.**

After the kidnapping of a British citizen in 2009,<sup>30</sup> the British started to expand human sources inside AQAP, working in collaboration with Saudi Arabia, and UKSF developed a reputation for getting on the ground. "The British sources!" recalled the former CIA counterterrorism officer, "they did a damn fine job. I think in CT HUMINT [human intelligence] ops, SIS and MI5 are the best... They are willing to do it and they get the access."

SIS HUMINT operations fed into a number of drone strikes on AQAP targets. "The Brits were active there. They had sources, they were involved," commented the CIA officer. "Sometimes the Brits wanted primacy on particular targets because they wanted to focus a lot of their resources and maybe they had some good access and placement. So the Brits were like 'hey, we'll take primacy on this particular guy because there's really more of a British nexus here,' and sometimes the Agency would be like 'have at it'."

By 2012, when Ali al-Ahmadi was put in charge of the NSB, the number of British

mentors had risen to at least five. “There was cooperation with most European countries, the US and the Gulf states,” al-Ahmadi recalled. “Most of the efforts were by the intelligence agencies of these countries on two fronts: fighting terrorism directly with strikes and tracking terrorists.”

“MI6 cooperated with us a lot in preparing our Yemen cadre,” he added. “They were trained in Yemen by the British trainers. They were the surveillance team, which prepares for raids and arrests, observation of targets and fixing them. That was really one of the reasons for the success by NSB units that carried out raid and arrest operations.”

In the absence of the CTTAT trainers, the NSB also started to draw upon resources from the CTU. Captain Qobol Saadi described how the “NSB was separate but sometimes if they needed females we attached to them. Because we were trained by professional people from UK, we know how to deal with this kind of operation.”

CTU Captain Fathia Mohammed similarly explained how “because we were well trained, so we were used to work with the different units. The NSB talked with our commander and they drew up a plan. They indicated what they wanted. And we’d go with them.”

In 2012 the US began to conduct signature strikes: the targeting of individuals and groups of a certain age group, exhibiting behavioural patterns, interpreted as that of AQAP members, but without positive identification of the target.<sup>31</sup> The integration of intelligence between the UK and US, and the UK’s centrality to Yemeni intelligence collection, which was often called upon to corroborate US targeting data, implicated the UK in this policy.

“What they were trying to do was they were reconfirming that the intelligence or bits of intelligence they had was confirmed by us,” recalled a British official in Yemen.

“Sometimes you’re reluctant to do anything, just in case you are wrong. For the British to be involved with their intelligence network and to take it all to the table, that supported the incidents that had to happen... during my whole time there, I cannot remember a strike where there was no British involvement.”

The former CIA counterterrorism officer briefed on Yemen said “[SIS] had a touch on many of the kinetic strikes. Does that mean they pointed out every single target? Hell no, that ain’t the case. But they had a touch. That’s fair to say.”

### Tribes and Tribulations: Institutional Decline

In Whitehall there was recognition that it was necessary to strengthen the legitimacy of the Yemeni government. The increase in targeted killings by the US, supported by the UK, had the opposite effect, however. A joint workshop, held by the FCO and UK Stabilisation Unit concluded in April 2012 that it was “relevant to the UK’s counterterrorism strategy in Yemen to better understand tribes, as the relationship between tribes and AQ can be crucial in allowing AQ to operate freely in a certain tribal area. On the other hand, tribal opposition to AQ can contribute to restricting AQ’s freedom of movement and ability to recruit. Tribal militias can also play a major role in assisting the Yemeni army to fight AQ.”<sup>32</sup> Despite identifying the importance of engaging with tribes to support counterterrorism, this was neglected by UK and US personnel on the ground, in favour of strikes that left tribesmen feeling increasingly alienated from the Yemeni government, and the police and security services.

The growing divide between local communities and Yemeni security services was recognised by intelligence and security personnel, but they did little to try and



rectify the situation. One of the British training team at the NSB explained how by 2013 “there was no community policing [in Yemen]. It is the security forces and the people. They’re not together. The treatment of each other and their respect for each other are miles apart. There’s no community engagement, there’s no community trust. You have to have the community on board for their eyes and ears... [and] there was no community support from the Yemeni people.”

Traditionally community policing in Yemen depended upon the relationships between the government and tribal sheikhs, who could choose to cooperate with investigators. In 2012 and 2014, however, major offensives carried out by the Yemeni Army to retake territory from AQAP, were opposed by tribal groups, who protected members of AQAP to avoid fighting erupting in their lands.<sup>33</sup> In large swathes of the country the government was hemorrhaging legitimacy, a situation not helped by drone strikes, which made the government appear either unable to exercise sovereignty, or else complicit in the assassination of its citizens.

### Dominance of military lens

Proponents of a short-term counterterrorism strategy were not blind to longer-term problems. Rather, they felt that long-term capacity building was, in the circumstances, difficult to implement. Pressure from Whitehall saw the redeployment of CTTAT in 2012, though it was much reduced, comprising three officers and an NCO. In 2013 it would rise to six men. They no longer had a team house, but stayed at the Sheraton hotel, between the UK and US embassies.

However, it is to be noted that long before the Arab Spring, US and UK training focused on developing strike forces at the expense of softer approaches to counter extremism. Following 9/11, the Yemeni government proposed a scheme for deradicalising young

Yemenis. A British official noted with regret that the scheme was not taken up, and as the former Director of the NSB Ammar Saleh recalled the “ambitious Yemeni project to hold dialogue with terrorist individuals who sought to reintegrate and rehabilitate themselves was not supported. Instead the project was established in another country able to fund it.” That country was Saudi Arabia, which developed the scheme from 2006, with some success.<sup>34</sup>

Jonathan Tottman, Britain’s law enforcement liaison officer to Yemen, argues that military capacity building was not what Yemen needed. “Bringing in military officers to mentor the Ministry of Interior, the very ministry that you are talking about needing blue uniforms. Now the British continued to bring in the green ones. So we were sending mixed messages.”

“The problem is the British and Americans saw Yemen through a CT prism,” Tottman explained. “The support that the British and the Americans were giving to the law enforcement community was all about counter IED, post blast forensic investigations, not really any of what I would call the softer issues about working with civil society and trying to build capacity within civil society.”

Ammar Saleh argued that the shift from intelligence led raiding to drone strikes undermined long-established relationships with tribal leaders. He explained that, “most of the tribal leaders had shared business and political interests with the government” and the NSB’s successes in detaining suspects prior to 2010 were made possible by those relationships. “Many operations were conducted in the tribal areas of Hadramout, Marib, Shabwa, al-Jawf and Sanaa – in coordination with tribal leaders – against terrorists who belonged to those tribes.” However, he noted that “in 2010 [tribal activists] blocked the arrest of Qassim al Rimi and smuggled him from Arhab to Marib, via tribal leaderships,” which became a growing



trend as the number of drone strikes increased. Although Ammar Saleh conceded that drone strikes were “one of the last options used to deal with terrorists... as the Yemeni government’s footprint decreased and lost control of many areas of Yemen, drone strikes took place without prior coordination with the Yemeni government and without its knowledge,” undermining the government’s capacity to explain strikes to tribal leaders and alienating them from the government.

Western governments tend to make a sharp distinction between law enforcement and military capacity building. In Yemen, however, the lack of state legitimacy seriously inhibited the ability for a military strike force to operate. Although Western embassies sponsored civil society projects, these were entirely separate from counterterrorism operations. But so long as tribal communities rejected a police presence, the prospects of effectively targeting AQ members among the local population would remain remote.

“Training an organisation called the CTU does not necessarily mean it is able to do counterterrorism, not because it can’t shoot people in the face but because politically and tribally it was unable to manoeuvre,” a British official involved in the programme commented. “A team was deployed which to my mind had very little effect.”

## Influence

“There is a bigger picture of course,” noted a British official involved in training the NSB. “By delivering training, it’s also at the political level that... they are getting that political buy-in. The relationship building.” While CTTAT was diminished, its presence allowed British officials to regularly meet with Yemeni counterparts. Those relationships might have proved invaluable if events on the ground stabilised. As the Foreign Office noted in a briefing in November 2012, “Behind the scenes there is

much activity, including moving from aid pledges to delivery, preparing the National Dialogue Conference, pushing forward military and security reform and strengthening the government’s CT capacity. The UK is involved in all of this. The transition remains fragile and will fail without international support every step of the way.”<sup>35</sup>

There were few easy choices to be made. Colonel Iain Smailes, formerly overseeing training in Afghanistan, then Defence Attaché in Kabul, took over as UK Defence Attaché to Yemen in September 2013. When it came to the complexity of Yemeni tribal configurations he liked to tell colleagues that “Afghanistan was for amateurs; Yemen is for professionals.”

## Collapse: The Fall of Sana’a

Where prior to 2011 the lack of coordination in Western policy enabled Western governments to spread their bets, and in theory reinforce success, after 2011 it saw a fragmentation of policy. Security officials were deeply skeptical of Yemen’s political transition, whereas diplomats saw the National Dialogue Conference as the only viable way forward. “I think that we were lulled into a sense of there’s really wonderful progress here by the UN brokered National Dialogue Conference that then ensued and was optically a stunning moment,” commented former US Ambassador Stephen Seche. “When you see Yemeni youth and Yemeni women and Yemeni tribal leaders and political elites, all coming together in a room and discussing the future of the country. But it was so process driven that it almost became in and of itself, you know the process was the thing, it was not getting a lot of result flowing from the discussions. It was just a process and a conversation that went around and around with reassuring optics, but little reassuring results.”

Over the course of the National Dialogue

Conference the Houthi movement in Northern Yemen prepared for war. When President Hadi proposed dividing the country into six federal regions, which left the Houthis without resources, they rebelled. The Yemeni military failed to contain the movement, not least because while the Republican Guard had been broken up on paper, the loyalties of many units and officers remained with Saleh, who started to reach out to the Houthis to undermine his successor. Meanwhile, President Hadi had alienated the South, with Yemeni government policy between 2011-2014 persistently bringing violence to tribal lands. This left the government brittle.

When in 2014 the cancellation of fuel subsidies brought mass protests to Sana'a, the Houthis seized control of the capital,<sup>36</sup> unopposed by the security forces. Ironically the cutting of subsidies was a policy foisted on the Yemeni government by the UK and its partners in an attempt to reform the country's finances. Instead it precipitated Yemen's disintegration. Former Republican Guards switched to the rebellion, and the government collapsed, hounded in its retreat all the way to Aden until an international coalition intervened.<sup>37</sup> UK and US forces withdrew from the country. Yemen has since fallen into civil war. Many of the officers and personnel of the CTU are dead or in exile. Taha Madani, who was a senior officer at the NSB while it received British training, is now directing the organisation in support of the Houthis.

## Objectives and Outcomes

It would be inaccurate and unreasonable to suggest that Western counterterrorism policy caused the failure of the National Dialogue Conference. Such a conclusion would greatly exaggerate Western control and influence. However, the stated aim of Western policy was ‘capacity building’, and the stabilisation of Yemen, and against this objective the verdict must be that the policy failed. It is therefore important, and worthwhile, to critically evaluate what worked, what did not, and how such operations can be delivered more effectively in the future.

With the benefit of hindsight one point is exceedingly clear: capacity building can only achieve what partner governments are prepared for it to achieve. The CTU was turned into an effective force because Saleh wanted to have a competent strike force. However, it never fully fulfilled the role that the US and UK intended. It was deployed against the Houthis and was never able to operate in rural areas with a strong AQAP presence, because Saleh was not interested in eliminating AQAP, and because to gain access to tribal territory would have required wider institutional reform that he was not prepared to countenance. The development of the OSSI shows that it is possible to convince partner governments that innovation can have utility. But until there is that political buy-in new schemes are unlikely to succeed. Yemen also demonstrates the need to place counterterrorism in a context of wider Security Sector Governance reform, and reveals the dangers of keeping these two efforts separated from one another.

It is also important, however, to consider the effectiveness of capacity building in Yemen not just in terms of the overall outcome, but also in relation to the particular objectives which brought about certain policies. Six policy objectives shaped British capacity

building in Yemen:

- The creation of an effective Yemeni Coast Guard able to reduce piracy, the smuggling of drugs, arms, and people, and to improve maritime safety in Yemeni waters to lower the cost of insurance for ships entering Yemeni ports.
- The creation of an effective Yemeni Counterterrorism Unit, supported by an intelligence structure that could identify targets, plan operations, and conduct strikes.
- The stabilisation and professionalisation of Yemeni government institutions, specifically the Ministry of Interior.
- The degradation and elimination of al-Qaeda in Yemen.
- The development and maintenance of British influence with the Government of Yemen.
- The development and maintenance of British influence with the United States.

Once these have been examined in turn, it will be possible to identify relevant lessons for practitioners and policymakers moving forward.

### The Effectiveness of the Yemeni Coast Guard

The period from 2003-2006 appears to have achieved nothing. Post 2006 the presence of a long-term training team helped to establish a stores system, and by 2008 had brought personnel to the point where they could maintain a daily presence at sea, but could not conduct operations at night.

The capacity for the Coast Guard to perform its core mission, however, was compromised. It had neither political support from the Yemeni Ministry of Interior, nor was it paid by the Ministry of Finance. Confronting smuggling was

rendered impossible by the fact that smuggling was conducted by officials partially in charge of the Coast Guard. This was known to the UK before the training was delivered. One of the primary sites in Sana'a for the procurement of drugs, arms, and prostitutes – the Russian Club – operated under the protection of these same officials.

The assessment of a senior official responsible for the programme was that “all the benefits of that programme were achieved in the first year because once they got their equipment and knew how to use it to a minimum standard and we’d helped them to achieve a basic operational framework it never improved beyond that because culturally, politically, they were incapable of it. And everything that happened for year 2 to year 5 I think was pretty much a waste of money.”

Economically too the Coast Guard made no impact on insurers. “We work out premiums purely based on the threat, rather than on prevention,” explained Peter Harris of Miller Insurance. “We wouldn’t have taken into account activity from the Coast Guard. In no particular order the key threats were detention, terrorism, piracy, and airstrikes. Unless the Coast Guard reduced the threat, its activity would have made no difference.”

### The Effectiveness of the CTU, NSB, OSSI, and PSO

Poor coordination led to two lost years at the beginning of the CTU training programme, which only began to make substantive progress in 2006. The conditions within the CTU were favourable. Colonel Yahya Saleh was personally supportive of the programme, and prepared to spend political capital to make important changes. The President also wanted an effective CTU unit,

although he deployed it several times against the Houthis. High-level support allowed the British to get obstructive and corrupt mid-ranking officers removed, such as the CTU training officer. This was crucial in ensuring that training was implemented, and in building the professionalism of the unit.

The UK training team had sustained access to the unit from 2006-2011. Over that period the unit became highly proficient, gained significant combat experience, and perceived itself as an elite force. “They were actually bloody good,” noted one trainer, evaluating progress after 2010. Several officials confirmed this assessment. CTU members felt valued. Moreover, it proved able to implement cultural change, the female

platoon becoming highly effective, and being recognised as such by other Yemeni institutions. A significant proportion of CTU officers had also been to RMAS by this point.

Difficulties arose, however, with operationalising the unit. Although the CTU conducted numerous raids around Sana'a, they were unable to effectively strike anywhere near al-Qaeda’s centre of gravity in, Shabwa, Baydha and Abyan.

Internal information security rendered it very hard to conduct raids in Marib. Relations between the Yemeni government and tribal groups did not facilitate access, and poor coordination with intelligence services made it hard to plan operations.

Training to the PSO appears to have been completely ineffective, except insofar as it was intended to prevent PSO officers obstructing other operations.

The parallel training programme at the NSB had somewhat different priorities. SIS were looking for a partner to allow them to operate in the country. While CTTAT were primarily concerned with the effectiveness of their trainees, SIS’s primary objective was

**With the benefit of hindsight one point is exceedingly clear: capacity building can only achieve what partner governments are prepared for it to achieve.**

to degrade al-Qaeda. The emphasis was therefore on training NSB personnel and using that to gain access to Yemeni sources. “You had buy-in from the senior level. You had the people on the ground, the actual practitioners who were being trained, wanted it, and were happy to do it and receptive to it,” as one British trainer of the NSB explained. “But the sticking point is the middle-management to senior management who actually managed the resources. Possibly [they] didn’t want change or weren’t interested in change, couldn’t see the point of it. And they were in a comfort zone because of where they are – they’ve got patronage issues, hierarchy. And corruption. If you could educate them, give them better leadership skills then they can manage their assets better, understand what they’re doing, understand the training they’re doing and direct the resources. That’s the biggest challenge. We never quite reached it, never got there.”

The components of the NSB involved in verifying targets, being directly mentored by SIS, appeared to have been effective. But they were working within an institutional structure wherein expensive investigative equipment was still being stolen as late as 2014.

Progress was made with the sharing of information to the OSSI, largely through the slow build-up of trust between personnel in the respective institutions. As the CTU allowed the NSB to loan its personnel, this also facilitated cooperation. The personal relationships that made this possible, however, dissolved during the Arab Spring.

Once again in order to operationalise Yemen’s intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities, the problem of government interaction with tribal groups was not given sufficient attention. A trainer at the NSB noted that “you might want to target a certain area for training, you might be pushed away from it and the reasons were tribal difficulties. It’s not necessarily

organisational challenges.”

Insofar as the CTU, NSB, and OSSI training was supposed to develop a Yemeni counterterrorism capability, building a way for the Yemeni government to gain access to tribal territories was essential. This needed to be done through the Ministry of Interior, the police, and the courts. Efforts in this regard appear to have been minimal prior to 2011. After 2011 Yemeni government institutions were already destabilised, and dysfunctional.

### Stabilising Yemeni Institutions

The military and intelligence training programmes to Yemen were dependent upon the stabilisation of Yemeni institutions, particularly the Ministry of Interior. Within the British government, however, the isolation of development aid from security assistance hampered efforts to coordinate these efforts.

In theory the Conflict Pool, later the Conflict, Security, and Stability Fund, was to facilitate interdepartmental cooperation on these areas. In reality, the fund was used by FCO and MOD personnel to fill shortfalls in their budgets. Moreover, the bidding model within the British government, whereby programmes are funded on a short-term basis, meant that reporting on the impact of CSSF programmes was largely detached from their long-term, political, and security objectives.

Almost all of the successes on the military side in Yemen arose from sustained engagement. Yet the £500,000 Integrative Justice Sector Development Programme in Yemen only ran from September 2006-December 2007. This programme, “designed to assist the Government of Yemen and civil society to develop and implement sustainable improvements in security and justice services, especially in the interest of women and the poor,” could not hope to deliver in just over a year.



Officers in country joked that Conflict Pool account managers had “no idea what their money was being spent on,” a conclusion conceded by officials responsible for overseeing it. One officer tasked with auditing what had been delivered admitted that “the reality is that I couldn’t actually get to see it. Obviously, you need to see if the physical equipment is there.” The reasons cited were those of security. In any case, the result was a lack of sustained engagement, and consequently little effect. Priorities changed after 2011, but by then the institutions had been severely weakened.

The FCO spent £3,663,942 from the Conflict Pool between 2011 and 2015. This sponsored programmes to develop Yemeni civil society organisations, to train police officers in forensic analysis, and to mentor senior officials in the Ministry of Interior. These efforts lacked the sustained institutional partnership achieved by the military, however, and specialised skills were unusable if law enforcement could not access areas to conduct investigations. What was lacking was an integrated and long-term approach.

It is important to note that the lack of strategic coordination of CSSR funded projects may have been partially resolved by the formation of the Stabilisation Unit, and its being placed under the direction of Britain’s National Security Council in 2015. Effective interdepartmental cooperation requires senior commitment to strategy. The objectives of the Stabilisation Unit’s operations are now set by one body, rather than administered jointly by the FCO, DFID and MOD, and this should improve the capacity for them to link in to military and intelligence assistance. It is also to be seen how the Fusion Doctrine, advanced as a way to improve the implementation of the 2015 SDSR, drives cooperation.<sup>38</sup> The experience in Yemen underscores the need for strategic oversight of such programmes.

## The Degradation and Elimination of al-Qaeda

The CTU proved capable of mounting raids in and around Sana’a, and captured a number of al-Qaeda facilitators, fixers, and couriers. British officials could not recall any “jackpots” – High Value Targets on the SIS list – taken down by the unit, but its personnel confronted militants. Some of the raids were highly kinetic. “I recall one mission where the lead vehicle came back shredded,” noted a British officer.

Saleh’s commitment to defeating al-Qaeda, however, was questionable, since from his perspective a continued threat from al-Qaeda was the chief basis for Western governments offering him aid, and legitimacy. It is important not to exaggerate the depth of al-Qaeda’s links to Saleh. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that during the period from 2006-2011 al-Qaeda expanded its presence and activity in Yemen.

From 2009 onwards SIS, collaborating with Saudi, German, and US Intelligence, began to systematically target al-Qaeda’s leadership in Yemen.<sup>39</sup> In 2012 alone, at least 10 strikes against AQAP members appear to have been based on intelligence from SIS agents inside AQAP.<sup>40</sup> A prolonged programme of strikes appears to have degraded AQAP’s capacity to organise and carry out offensive operations.

Conversely, however, the destabilisation of the Yemeni government – not helped by unilateral strikes, or the extensive aid given to Saleh’s family to the neglect of other elements of the Yemeni government – saw AQAP expand their membership and territorial access. These operations alienated tribes from the government, and created links between AQAP and tribal groups, since AQAP was quick to pay compensation, and those killed in strikes were often shared family members. A clear example of this arose after a US Special Forces raid in 2017, which saw operators come under fire from

local tribesmen followed by AQAP militants, leading to the death of 25 villagers, including 9 children, and a Navy Seal.<sup>41</sup>

Since the election of Donald Trump, the number of strikes against AQAP has increased dramatically.<sup>42</sup> It appears to be undermining morale inside the organisation and degrading its capacity to prepare and coordinate attacks. Since 2014 AQAP has also faced competition from Islamic State, which is attracting a growing membership inside Yemen. The grievances that fuelled membership of al-Qaeda, and sympathy for its objectives, however, are undiminished. Western policy appears to have accepted a trade-off whereby the destruction of al-Qaeda's capacity to project force is prioritised at the expense of reducing its influence in Yemeni society. In the short term this has paid off. In the long term its success is more doubtful and undermines claims that the West is supporting Yemenis in opposing al-Qaeda.

## Influence in Yemen, and the US

Influence is exceedingly difficult to measure. It is therefore often the fall-back justification for officials who cannot produce any tangible results. "Influence" was repeatedly peddled as a reason for maintaining the Yemeni Coast Guard. In reality, senior Yemeni officials did not appreciate the project. The extent of high level engagement on the project was a monthly meeting with the Coast Guard Chairman, and intermittent meetings with the Minister of Interior, at which there were generally more pressing issues on the agenda.

As for influence with the Americans, the Coast Guard was only brought up once by an American official in interview without prompting, and their testimony was far from flattering. A former official at the US Embassy recalled how "you had this Coastguard training for a Navy or Coast

Guard that can't sail *at night*." He recalled the US Defence Attaché describing the Coast Guard as a "Node of Excellence in the Yemeni Military" to the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. John McCain's response "was just brutal... He saw right through it. He saw it as a blatant play for budget... It was a 'don't waste my time with silliness'" speech.

The CTU, by contrast, enabled British officers to routinely meet with senior Yemeni officials, from Yahya Saleh at the CSF, to the Ministers of Interior and Foreign Affairs. Members of the training programme also built close relationships with the Yemeni Director of Military Intelligence, and other agencies. During the hostage crisis in 2009 the British set up a committee of Yemeni Ministers – chaired by the President – to monitor the situation. This was done to facilitate intelligence sharing, but also put British officials in the room when the Yemeni government were making security decisions and facilitated access to the President. Because of the extensive ties to lower tier personnel, many of these relationships survived 2011, and even 2015. Training for Yemeni intelligence services similarly brought tangible influence and access to Yemeni sources.

The US recognised the quality of the CTU and were interested in helping it operationalise. Department of State and Department of Defence officials expended capital trying to support the programme, and US intelligence regularly debriefed the CTU after missions, reviewing footage from operations. The US also fed intelligence into the OSSI for building target packages, when it was felt to be appropriate. The presence of UK permanent teams also meant that US officers sought British advice on a regular basis. No UK operations in Yemen generated as much influence, however, as the intelligence relationship. On this, US officials from the CIA, DOD, DOS, and CENTCOM were consistently enthusiastic, and full of praise.

## Lessons Identified

Arising from the successes and failures of training in Yemen, there are six key lessons identified by this report.

### Political Prerequisites

To contrast the Counterterrorism Unit with the Coast Guard, one had political buy-in from the Yemeni government, the other was of minimal interest. It was therefore possible within the CTU to make personnel changes that improved effectiveness, to bring institutional pressure behind cultural change, and to give the unit a sense of identity and purpose. Before deploying a training team, it should be clear that there is political buy-in from a partner government. Otherwise, the project will be ineffective.

Some projects may be perceived to be necessary despite a lack of local enthusiasm. This was the case with the OSSI. However, by engaging with the Government of Yemen, first at the ministerial level, to demonstrate the value of intelligence sharing, the British government was able to build political support for the OSSI concept. Building that support took three years. If this groundwork has not been done, to ensure political support for a partner unit, then trainers should not be deployed.

### Finding the Point of Balance

One of the central arguments for expanded capacity building is that it enables a country to achieve more with less, by building skills among partner forces to advance shared policy interests. There is a risk, however, that train and assist missions are resourced according to the minimum feasible deployment, rather than the necessary commitment to accomplish the mission.

Conversely, it is wrong to think that such missions should 'go big or go home'. But there is an important point of balance where training becomes sufficient to achieve institutional change.

Keith Mines, who worked on US training missions in El Salvador and Colombia as a Green Beret and has since worked on training in Afghanistan and Iraq for the US State Department, argues that "the officer corps was key." He contrasted the success of US South American training missions with failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, mainly owing to the fact that the US took an entire stratum of the officer corps and professionalised them out of country. "For the officers it was key that they had gotten out. Training battalions was separate." In Afghanistan and Iraq, the emphasis was on training basic soldiering at battalion level.

**"Our biggest problem was... [Yemenis trained by the UK] know that when they go back to Yemen it isn't going to change because they have not got the power to make decisions on the ground."**

In Yemen two officers a year from the CTU were sent to RMAS. Given that it was a small outfit, over time this led to a critical mass of officers having received the same instruction, establishing clear common standards. But the process could have been much more effective if those officers were put through together in one block, costing the same as putting them through separately.

"What we were trying to do is to pick the good ones out, send them back to the UK, train them to be officers, and then put them back to make their unit better," explained a British official overseeing the programme. "Our biggest problem was... they know that when they go back to Yemen it isn't going to change because they have not got the power to make decisions on the ground." The challenge was that if selected by ability then the officers would return enthusiastic to implement what they had learned, only to run up against a traditional hierarchy that

would obstruct change. Selecting influential Yemenis to go to RMAS was similarly problematic because those individuals were most invested in maintaining the status quo in Sana'a. Similarly, at the NSB the middle-tier managers were identified as key to shifting practice. Without their approval, it was exceedingly difficult for trained practitioners to implement what they had learned.

Replicating the training of an entire officer corps as the US did in El Salvador is unrealistic. However, within units and organisations it seems that training officers at scale, and together, out of country, would facilitate connections, and allow them to work together to implement changes when they return. Often the competence of trained junior officers makes them invaluable to their commanders and accelerates development. The aim should therefore be to take as large a proportion of mid-level managers or officers as possible, and put them through training together, so that they form a mutually reinforcing cadre. The aim is to identify the point of balance, and to train a critical mass of those responsible for managing a partner institution.

## It Takes Ten Years

The unanimous consensus among trainers from CTTAT, MTAT, and the NSB mentors was that any serious programme takes a decade. Sorting out payroll and supply, developing core competencies, and then operationalising the unit, was widely expected to take ten years. Although it was acknowledged that in the right circumstances training might progress faster, there was widespread agreement that any train and assist policy should work on the assumption of a ten-year relationship.

This has significant strategic and tactical implications. In the context of stabilisation operations, where partner governments may be vulnerable, being certain of a ten-year

partnership prior to deployment is an unrealistic hurdle. However, it seems vital that policymakers map out, with the partner government, what the key development goals of a partner unit should be over that timeframe. These goals ought to become markers for the success or failure of the programme. Failure to attain development goals within their respective timeframe should trigger a reassessment of the programme's ongoing worth.

This also has implications for the management of funding for train and assist operations. In order to obtain political buy-in from a partner force, it seems necessary that training priorities are decided in conjunction with the partner government. This means that assigning an exact budget will be difficult to predict in advance. However, the current model, whereby annual bids are made against various funds across Whitehall leads to short term funding, and short-term reporting on progress with regards to short term goals. In the context of the Coast Guard, it was found that reports on progress were recycled for a couple of consecutive years. Instead, funding for these missions should be earmarked with regards to the key development waypoints over a ten-year period. As one senior MOD counterterrorism policy officer noted, "at present, programmes are more likely to be killed for want of budget, than for want of utility, while programmes lacking utility are often prolonged because of pressures on fund managers to spend their budgets."

For the British military, it is important for planners to adequately support long-term deployments. One problem in Yemen was that the teams were pulled together on loan from a wide array of units. Although this allowed the training teams to draw on disparate expertise, it also meant that the trainers were unfamiliar with one another, and their absence was disruptive for their parent units. The Specialised Infantry Group should enable long-term training teams to be maintained. However, for one training

programme with a deployed team of 12, serving an 8-month tour, with one rotation for preparation, and another on leave, this would require three training teams to rotate every two years.

## Personal Relationships

“Do you know my friend Flip?” This was the third question posed to the authors when they contacted a Yemeni trainee. He was referring to Defence Attaché Philip Holihead, eight years after Captain Holihead left Yemen. The emphasis of the DAs in this report reflects the fact that many Yemenis spoke about them. Unlike the trainers, who generally deployed for six months – some stretched to 12 – the DAs were deployed for three years. In that time, they built up personal relationships with the Yemenis they worked with and developed trust. In the context of intelligence operations, and especially the OSSI, this was vital. The widespread belief that British trainers were ‘spying’ could give way over time.

There is an operational tension here. Trainers must be experienced soldiers if they are going to maintain the respect of those they are training. They will also be looking to their careers and will not remain as trainers for years on end. However, the value of persistent engagement at a personal level is immense and accelerates the progression of partner forces. It should therefore be standard practice to deploy the same trainers to a country, at least twice. It should also be encouraged for officers who have been involved in training to periodically visit the country and reconnect with their former trainees. Visits by senior officers are arguably less valuable than visits by familiar officers. If it is felt that a senior officer should visit a country – because their rank could facilitate access in a negotiation – a familiar officer should accompany them.

## Accompanying Trainees

In Yemen British officers were not allowed to accompany trainees on operations. The results were problematic. UK forces could not see whether training was actually being implemented. Often, they were not given access to after action reports. Furthermore, the lack of exposure in the field reduced camaraderie, and made it harder to build trust. In a number of cases, British officers testified to accompanying Yemeni forces without permission, because they saw it as necessary for properly evaluating the CTU. The overwhelming interest of PJHQ in these operations appears to have been force protection. However, in most hostile environments the most valuable force protection for a twelve-man team is the support and protection offered by their trainees. The CTU and PSO were ultimately responsible for the British teams’ security. The willingness of partner forces to put themselves at risk to protect a team house would, it seems, be increased if there is a sense of shared risk. Put simply, the effectiveness of deployed teams would be increased if they were allowed to accompany partner forces in the field. It would strengthen feedback, cooperation, and, crucially, would improve the status of those troops conducting Train, Advise, Assist, Accompany, and Equip missions.

## Equipment should be Restricted

The provision of equipment is often perceived to bring influence. In reality, it often opens a few doors before it is delivered, after which it is lost, stolen, or sits in stores for want of someone who knows how to use it. The provision of equipment often fuels corruption, leaks to opposing forces, and is of far less consequence than trained personnel. In Yemen, few officials failed to note how equipment, mainly supplied by the US, either went missing or could not be maintained.



The provision of distinct uniforms and personal equipment can help to build a sense of professionalism, and esprit-de-corps among partner forces. Generally, however, equipment should only be supplied when it comes with training, and a clear intended purpose, while priority should be given to equipment that can be easily maintained locally, with available or at least accessible replacement parts.

## Prestige

Delivering effective training requires good officers, prepared to immerse themselves in foreign languages, cultures, and operational contexts. They need to be able to think unconventionally, to adapt British methods for use by forces lacking Britain's supporting

institutions. It is therefore important that the military makes deployment on these missions desirable. A concern raised by several officers was that within the army Specialised Infantry, or officers dedicated to capacity building, would be penalised in their career development because they had not been leading British soldiers on operations. There is a widespread problem with the military promoting generalists at the expense of soldiers who have developed expertise. If officers are to put themselves forward to deliver training, then capacity building needs to confer comparable prestige to other military tasks. It is worth noting that allowing officers to accompany trainees, which would ensure that they continue to gain combat experience, would help to solidify the status of trainers in the eyes of their colleagues.

## Endnotes

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