

January 7, 2010

Six Questions for Gregory Johnsen on Yemen

By *Ken Silverstein*

Gregory Johnsen, a former Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Johnsen co-runs the website [Waq al-Waq](#) with Brian O'Neill, a former writer and editor for the Yemen Observer. Johnsen has held multiple fellowships from the American Institute for Yemeni Studies and was awarded the David R. Schweisberg Memorial Scholarship from the Overseas Press Club in 2006. Johnsen has also advised and consulted for a variety of different organizations on issues relating to Yemen. He recently replied to six questions about Yemen during a telephone conversation with my research assistant, Spencer Woodman. This interview was edited for length and clarity.

1. How involved is the U.S. government in Yemen's internal affairs, especially in its military operations against Al Qaeda?

U.S.-Yemeni cooperation began after the September 11th attacks and they cooperated closely when the Yemeni government arrested a number of individuals who were suspected of harboring suspects for Al Qaeda. There was the CIA drone strike on the head of Al Qaeda in Yemen, Abu Ali al-Harithi, in November 2002, and then Yemen followed that up by arresting his replacement one year later.

Then we went into a bit of an interlude in Yemen, partly as a result of the Iraq War, which drew off some of the Yemenis who wanted to fight and were more attracted to the war there than to work for the dying jihad at home. The February 2006 prison break of 23 Al Qaeda suspects really marked the beginning of the second phase. Since then, the organization has proven to be very ambitious. At the beginning of 2008 they initiated a bimonthly journal and then launched a campaign of attacks within Yemen that culminated in the September 2008 assault on the U.S. embassy. Then in January 2009 they announced a merger between the Yemeni and Saudi branches of Al Qaeda.

Clearly the U.S. is involved on some level, but on what level is something that only people who have access to classified materials can know.

2. How would you rate mainstream media coverage of Yemen? Have there been shortcomings?

There are some very talented western reporters, who have spent a lot of time in Yemen prior to the events of the past few weeks. Robert Worth of the *New York Times* comes to mind; Michelle Shepherd of the *Toronto Star* also has done very good work. There are of course other journalists who are just getting there and will have to play a little catch-up. Media companies often do not have resources to send people to Yemen so there not a lot of institutional knowledge about country.

3. On your website you recently disputed Bob Woodward's assertion that Yemen's problems are a result of U.S. successes in Iraq and Afghanistan. What is your take on that question?

I don't support the idea that if U.S. makes gains against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, then Al Qaeda will just pop up somewhere else, like a whack-the-mole game. Failures of U.S. and Yemeni policy are responsible for Yemen's instability, not our successes in other areas of the globe. There are individuals that travel back and forth between these countries all the time, and Yemenis have been active in Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but we haven't seen a huge mass of individuals moving from Pakistan or Afghanistan to Yemen. We did see in summer of 2008 an influx to Yemen of Saudis who could be involved with Al Qaeda. But my knowledge about this is limited to open-source Internet sites that inform Al Qaeda.

4. How would you characterize the Obama administration's policy towards Yemen?

There is a great deal that we don't yet know about the Obama administration's policy toward Yemen. Over the past several years U.S. policy toward Yemen has been a dangerous mixture of ignorance and arrogance. The main issue that I have with U.S. foreign policy in Yemen is that it focuses exclusively on Al Qaeda to the exclusion of all the other challenges that the Yemeni government faces. You can't deal with the Al Qaeda problem in Yemen in isolation, viewing the country solely through the prism of counterterrorism. You have to deal with Yemen as it exists, as a totality, as an entire entity.

U.S. diplomats in Yemen are mostly concerned with risk prevention—the idea that you want to avoid any risk whatsoever—rather than risk management, which means actually solving problems that create risk. American diplomats hunker down in their fortress-like embassies and are not about to get out among the population. When you have diplomats not even getting out of capital you are getting a very small slice of what's happening there.

The Obama administration is keeping a lower profile on a military side of things than the Bush Administration did, but there do not appear to have been any substantive changes. But the administration has had its hands full with Afghanistan since Obama came to office. I'm not sure Yemen has even gotten the attention it deserves until now.

5. How popular is Al Qaeda in Yemen and what can the U.S. do (in non-military terms) to minimize its influence?

The idea that Al Qaeda presents some sort of direct challenge to the Yemeni government to rule the state is incredibly overblown. Al Qaeda is growing and it is stronger in Yemen than it ever has been in the past. But just because it's stronger—that it has relative strength compared with previous incarnations, doesn't mean that it's strong enough to challenge the state.

The U.S. needs to come up with a strategy that takes into account global concepts, a more multi-faceted approach and a more nuanced approach. This is going to take a lot of time; it's going to take a lot of patience. And it's not going to be easy by any stretch of the imagination. There are a number of crises that the Yemeni government is facing at the moment, such as the Huthi insurgency in the North, calls for secession in the South, Al Qaeda, the fact that the country is running out of oil, the elite rivalry at the top. There's really no shortage of challenges.

6. What risk does Yemen run of becoming a failed state?

The talk of a failed state with regards to Yemen is quite overblown. Yemen is not like Afghanistan, it's not like Somalia — there is a government in Yemen. Power is contested in certain places and the Yemeni government works through institutions that are not always familiar to us in the West, and that has made it all difficult for us to understand