

Yemen diverted anti-terrorism aid

Cable reveals President Saleh used funds from United States to fight rebels

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London: As the US weighs another possible increase in Yemen aid early next year, WikiLeaks has revealed that Yemen is diverting at least some US counterterrorism resources to tackle other domestic priorities — including President Ali Abdullah Saleh's enemies.

According to a December 2009 cable from the US embassy in Sana'a, a counterterrorism unit (CTU) trained and funded by the Americans to hunt down Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operatives was deployed instead against militant Al Houthi rebels in the northern governorate of Sa'ada during a surge in fighting last year.

"Increasingly desperate to defeat the [Al] Houthis, the [Yemeni government] continues to insist that fighting the Al Houthis is a legitimate component of CT [counterterrorism] operations, thus justifying the use of CTU forces in Sa'ada," reads the State Department cable. "Untrained to fight this type of conflict, the overstretched CTU has reportedly sustained significant casualties, missed training opportunities and been derailed from its principal mission: to combat AQAP."

The cable underscores — and appears to at least partially validate — concerns that millions of dollars in US counterterrorism aid may be used not only to fight Al Qaida, but to address other Yemeni priorities not shared by Washington.

Yemen's weak government, an increasingly important partner in America's effort to protect itself against terrorist attacks, is not only concerned about the re-emergence of Al Qaida activity in recent years.

President Saleh, who governs the Arab world's poorest country, also faces a southern secessionist movement, tribal tensions, and a resource crunch. Some reports have warned that Yemen could become a failed state, leaving AQAP even freer to operate and launch attacks — including on Western targets.

Perhaps sensing that the US has developed a stronger interest in preventing such an outcome, Yemen's government has sought to leverage its unglamorous image in exchange for US aid.

Failed state

"If you don't help, this country will become worse than Somalia," Saleh said to US Chief Counterterrorism Adviser John Brennan, according to a cable from September 2009.

With two high-profile AQAP terrorism attempts against America in the past year — the 2009 Christmas Day bomber and the October cargo plane bomb plot — Washington has only become more anxious to shut down the Al Qaida franchise, and thus potentially more open to Yemen's overtures.

Critics of the Saleh government have long claimed that the fight against Al Qaida has been beneficial to Yemen's government so it can garner financial and military aid for its own domestic agenda.

This was the case during the last round of fighting against the Al Houthi rebels when the government not only made use of the US-trained counterterrorism squad, but also US-provided armoured vehicles and humvees.

US diplomats admitted in cables that Saleh intentionally tailors his discussions with American officials in order to "elicit the necessary level of political, economic, and military assistance," and that the US "has repeatedly questioned [the Yemeni government's] use of US military equipment and US-trained forces intended to combat AQAP in the war against the [Al] Houthi rebels."

Campaign

Yet American counterterrorism aid to Yemen more than doubled in 2010.

In the past year, Yemen has touted a stepped-up campaign against AQAP members, which have relative freedom of movement in Yemen's countryside where the central government has little control.

Yemen's government, which faces vehement public opposition to US military involvement in the country's affairs, has sought to portray itself as acting independently against AQAP. But the cables confirmed that Yemen's leaders knew about US air strikes against AQAP over the past year.

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