

Transcript of Wilson Center Director's Forum with His Excellency Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi, President of Yemen

[applause]

Jane Harman:

Good afternoon. Do we have some more room for the president's party? Let's see. Okay.

Good afternoon and welcome to the Wilson Center. I'm Jane Harmon, President and CEO. The Wilson Center, the living memorial to our 28th President, is a vibrant arena for discussion. Our charter forbids us from advocacy, but not from creating a safe political space to engage a diversity of views and to explore today's toughest policy issues. All viewpoints are sought out and heard, free from spin.

On behalf of the Wilson Center and our co-sponsor of today's event, the Atlantic Council, I am honored to welcome his Excellency, Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi, the President of the Republic of Yemen, and to welcome members of his cabinet. We are also very pleased to have in the audience with us today, Bahaa Hariri, Chairman of the Rafik Hariri Chairman Advisory Board. Mr. Hariri, where are you? He's right there. I was in Beirut, shortly after your father was assassinated, and subsequently met with your brother when he was prime minister. Your family has paid a heavy price and offers much for the future of your extraordinary country. Thank you for being here. I've also been in Yemen and met with several members of the cabinet then and others in March of 2010. I visited the presidential palace in Sana and was the only congressional representative to meet with members of the opposition parties at the time. It quickly became clear to me that Yemen had the potential to be a vibrant civil society, and the relatively peaceful transition in Yemen over the past year, leaves me optimistic about the future.

How wonderful it would be if Yemen could become a model for the region. But for now, there are daunting problems; supplies of water and oil are virtually depleted. There are over 100,000 small villages that desperately need help, yet government services are essentially absent. Yemen has the second highest unemployment rate in the Arab world, 35 percent, and the average person lives on less than \$2 a day. It also has the second highest rate of chronic child

malnutrition in the world, after Afghanistan. In the south, a troubled region where many advocate succession, Al-Qaeda militants have taken advantage of the turmoil to grow in size and force. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country are displaced, and yet it takes many years to establish peaceful transition.

It took the United States 13 years to move from declaring independence in 1776, to ratifying our constitution in 1789, and it took us nearly 75 years more to abolish slavery, 150 years to give women the vote, and 175 to outlaw racial discrimination. No one president can do it alone, but he or she can lay a foundation for the future. So, history shows us that building a democratic and secure nation is hard. It takes patience and persistence, and it requires strong and smart leadership. An important lesson that I learned from nine terms in the United States Congress and trips to many states in transition is, that their leaders have to want to move to a pluralist democracy, more than their outside supporters want them to. President Hadi has made it clear that he wants to build a democratic, with a small d, and pluralistic country. He was sworn in as president of Yemen in February, after winning the country's single candidate election with 99.6 percent of the vote.

The election was the last part of an internationally brokered accord that provided former President Saleh with immunity, in exchange for his agreement to step down after more than three decades in power, and a year of mass protest in the country. Perhaps this peaceful transition could serve as a model for Syria, something many of us are urging. As the leader of his country, President Hadi has helped lay the building blocks for a peaceful and prosperous future. He has committed -- in fact, he is partnering with the U.S. in an ambitious plan to restructure his military to combat Al-Qaida. The plans two prong strategy includes cooperation to capture or kill about a dozen of Al-Qaida's most dangerous militants, working with Persian Gulf allies to train and arm Yemenis' security forces, to respond to Al-Qaida's larger threat to destabilize the country and it's government, but there are other pieces to this, as we were discussing at lunch, this is not all about drones.

In recent months, much needed economic aid has come from the World Bank, which lifted a nearly year-long funding

freeze to the country in January, and from the IMF, which approved almost \$100 million in interest free emergency loans in April. Just yesterday, the Friends of Yemen who are the P5 in the Gulf States, pledged almost one and a half-billion dollars in aid to Yemen. President Hadi said the assistance would help Yemen avoid a civil war, which could be a regional and possibly a global threat. The announcement came after President Hadi called in his U.N. address for more practical support from abroad, to help his countries security forces fight Al-Qaida. He also said and I certainly agree, that internal as well as external support for Al-Qaeda must stop. In his first interview after his election, President Hadi said that a comprehensive national dialogue was a top priority, as his country moves forward, and he promised to involve people from all political, cultural and social factions, including youth in his wide reaching national discussion, something like the discussion we're having today.

President Hadi even said this week that he would engage in conditional dialogue with Islamic militants, including AQAP, but only provided they put down their weapons first. Mr. President, we share your desire for inclusive dialogue, and we very much look forward to talking with you this afternoon about a way forward for your country.

After president Hadi's remarks, Fred Kemp, the estimable CEO of the Atlantic Council, will moderate the Q&A discussion. Fred comes to the counsel after a remarkable career at the Wall Street journal. He's the author of several books, the most recent being, "Berlin 1961: Kennedy Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth," which was published in May and is a New York Times Best Seller. The Wilson Center last partnered with the Atlantic Council for a debate here on the Arab transitions; it was a spectacular event, and we are so pleased to be joining forces with the Atlantic Council today. So, now please join me in welcoming the President of Yemen, his Excellency, President Hadi, who will give some opening remarks and that will be followed by the Q&A.

[applause]

Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi:
[Arabic]

Interpreter:

-- name is Harman the director of the center. And ladies and gentlemen who are here today, I am very pleased to meet with you today and give you a brief overview of the security and political and economic situation in Republic of Yemen. As you all know Yemen has a strategic location. And it is in the southern tip of the Arab Peninsula and it reaches the west, the Red Sea to the west and the Gulf of Aden to the south and the east. And due to its strategic geographical importance Yemen has the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb which is one of the most important waterways in the world, because it connects the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean and through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. And also the unique geographical situation of Aden that is three miles away only from the international waterways from the other ports, of the southern shore that is 1,906 kilometers, which will allow to transportation and viable maritime transportation international lines and due to the piracy activities that is a byproduct of the Somalia civil war. And this will lead to a catastrophic International maritime, if the Yemen were to slide into civil war, especially with the presence of the terrorist organizations who are working on deteriorating the situation in Yemen, like what took place year and a half ago. Now Al-Qaeda jumped in, onto the security situation and tried to overtake many stations and states such as Abyan, Shabwah, these are the coastal provinces and, we were lucky.

And after that, and after the presidential, early presidential elections in February 21st, so there were political decision and political will in Yemen. We thwarted the Al-Qaeda attempt with a decisiveness. And we cleaned these two provinces in a record time from terrorism from less than a month which makes Yemen an active partner in the international efforts to combat terrorism.

Due to all that's mentioned, we want to say that the stability and security of Yemen is not for Yemen's sake or interest, but rather it is an international necessity also. And equally any deterioration in the situation in Yemen will have an extreme negative repercussions on the area and the region, into the global arena.

After this brief overview in Yemen I will talk in brief about the political landscape after the unification in May 22, 1990. Yemen managed to go steadily towards cementing democracy and diversity, but there were mistakes that's been made. Mostly in the mismanagement and corruption

which lead eventually to the protests in starting 2011. And the demands of change, especially after the winds of change swept over the area what's called the Arab Spring.

But the negative repercussions to the change, the complicate process nature of change lead to a more further complications in Yemen. And the country was teetering towards civil strife and it will become maybe worse than what's taken place in Somalia.

Despite all the political factors and all these and the tribal nature of the Yemeni society and the arms, they been rampant but many sage resorted to dialogue. And there were many compromises being made, so for the peaceful transition of power in order to get the Yemeni people achieve their potential in change. And we played major role in, in avoiding the civil war through the assistance of the United States, and the Gulf countries, and the EU, and the UN, and the Gulf initiative and to implement it and Yemen cosigned it in November 2011 in Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia. And it provided a political solution that helped and assisted the peaceful transition away from bloodshed and distraction. And the special envoy Commander Domer [spelled phonetically] played an important role in assisting to implementing the Gulf Initiative.

And now Yemen has executed the first step from this initiative. And we have a National Coalition Government, and the peaceful transition to power and elected new president. And this is a novelty, or a new thing to Yemen. And through the elections Yemen has expressed their will in providing or in finding a civil solution and avoiding the civil war. And therefore, yes, the Yemenis voted yes for stability and unification and a peaceful state. Civil state, modern state that is based on rule of law and respect all the rights, and which allow us to get into the second phase. And to implement what's left of the political solution and to get the Yemen out of the bottleneck and to make it land safely. And we have a law, a draft law of the transitional just, that will assist in solving all the bloodshed and all the conflicts and we still in need of the political and economic assistance that will help us a lot in implementing all the other segments of the Gulf Initiative. And this is what the Yemeni people are looking for. We got tired of conflicts and wars.

And now and through the national dialogue that we are preparing for, in order to get this dialogue as soon as possible, so we will have a blueprint of a prosperous Yemeni future that's based on social justice and freedom and equality, and the good governance through the reforming the administration and judiciary and combat corruption and focus on development. And we are steady to lead Yemen and make the Yemeni people achieve the potentials in comfort and stability that will reflect on the region and in the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, along with the economic problem that the Yemen Republic is suffering and we, since the turn of the first century thousands of terrorists and terrorism is an international phenomena. And Yemen since the appearance of these hated phenomena and we are engaged in war into terrorism and we adopted a security and political theory meaning that, terrorism has no nation and no religion and it is a common threat regionally and internationally. And it requires and necessitates a common effort to fight terrorism within the frame and along with what we did to cement the cooperation with, in combating terrorism with more than 40 nation. And that included all aspects in intelligence exchange activities and how best to combat and deter and rendition and have bilateral meetings with those nations.

And this theory that's been adopted by the Yemeni government it comes along the understanding of terrorism. And today it is not an isolated problem to a specific nation without the others. It is rather an international threat and on the political, social, and economic levels. And this will reflect the fears and its serious and real threat provided that the ways and means of terrorists are diversified and are transnational.

And there are blood and lives that's been lost. We've suffered and we are still suffering from terrorism. And we paid a lot with blood and lives. And many of the public institutions and privately owned and it effected the tourism. And now most of the hotels in Yemen are closed. And there are not tourists, no foreigners at all. And from one other side, the terrorist activities helped in displace 150,000 from the Abyan province to the neighboring provinces at the expense of the state. And we provided shelter and food for those displaced. And from May 2011 through September 2012, terrorism has caused in the

destruction of the infrastructure of schools, hospitals, buildings. 88 schools have been destroyed by terrorists. And 383 armed forces have been lost. And the wounded; 3,350. At the same time, and the civilian death toll is above 322 wounded, and 294 dead from civilian.

The Yemeni efforts in combating terrorism, we took many measures and policies in all levels and on the economic, and security, and legal, and administrative, and even intellectual engagement. We need to face and combat terrorism and extremism. We enacted many laws that are specifically to combat terrorism. And then security level we took many preventive measures against terrorist elements. And there are what -- we got rid of 344 terrorist from May 2011 through September 2012. And we detected and arrested 10 terrorist cells that contained, that required many engagement of the civil society and political entities and many social players along with those official measures that's been taken by the Yemeni government. The public committees and the civil committees, they assisted and helped combating the al-Qaeda fighters, either by providing intelligence or their whereabouts or their participation during any action against them. And now al-Qaeda are targeting the civilians from those areas by putting the IEDs or the snipers, or killing them.

The challenges that we are facing in combating terrorism in Yemen, and it comes the high rate of unemployment. And the deterioration of the GDP and there are huge numbers of people. Our friends in the United States here at this room today, they ought and should know that we have 6 million young people who are older than, the age bracket between 15 and 28 years old and these people are a serious problem. And there are 600,000 newly graduate. And they've been waiting for jobs for over 10 years now. And there are also 70 percent of the population of Yemen who are under the 20, 35 years old.

My country is facing many foreign intervention, and especially from Iran that is targeting against the development in the area. And imposing as regional power, and it is seeking a strategic loss and there are many indicators that the regime in Syria will fall. And the Iranians are seeking a foothold in my country due to the strategic location of Yemen and because of the strategic location and the Horn of Africa. And these activities of

the Iranian intervention that they've been backing many spying networks and we detected five of those who are active in the favor of Iran and we brought them to justice. And lately we detected a sixth network. And then they are backing the military action and media support and intelligence support and to be inside or the south of Yemen. And Iran also widened the targets, least, by buying political opposition figures and media figures and is trying to thwart the political solution in Yemen, and that's being adopted according to the gulf. And it called it as a Saudi-American conspiracy. And Iran created a climate of chaos and violence and it is benefitting from these situations so it will have its agenda implemented. And it makes my country a holding point in its regional power so it will target the rest of the Gulf States. And they have the intention to expand and have power in the Red Sea, and in the Arabian Sea. And it is threatening the international maritime waterways. And Yemen was and still is one of the most countries suffering from terrorism.

And we are working on a clear strategy in cooperation with the France and allies to combat terrorism. And we are looking forward that our friends will stand with us to face combating poverty, and create jobs for the youth and development that will cement our efforts in combat terrorism that is growing in the climate of poverty and unemployment. And in supporting Yemen will reflect positively in the rest of the area due to its deep connection and the correlation of Yemen's security and the regions security. And because terrorism is a threat not against one nation, it is a threat to all nations equally. And which will require cooperation and assistance on the international levels to combat and deter terrorism and face all the challenges that will lead to extremism and terrorism.

Therefore our common efforts, bilaterally and internationally, is a necessity in order to protect the lives and properties and all the civilians, and to combat anything that will threaten the international security.

Ladies and gentlemen, what is important from this participation is to shed the light on the economic situation in Yemen. Our Yemen today is facing three major problems at the same time: political crisis, economic crisis, and security crisis. And therefore, the Gulf Initiatives has created a solution on the political level.

But, and it is in the first the steps the Gulf Initiative it has two prongs.

Phase A and Phase B. Phase A was to have a government, create a government divide up between the party in power and the opposition, fifty-fifty. And we created also the prime minister from the opposition, and after that we'll go into early elections and within the frame of 90 days, of course, we held that election in exceptionally difficult situation.

Sana, the capital was divided in three zones and the firing was continuing day and night and the roads were cut-off, and the oil was scarce. Hospitals were not functioning because they need the oil and the electricity, and then we used the reserve generators and we didn't have any diesel to have the power generators. And there are a big number of people who passed away, who died especially those who are suffering from chronic disease, kidneys or during surgeries. The situation was very complicated, but 95 percent of the Yemenis, they were against going into civil war. Therefore we held elections in difficult circumstances.

People would go to the ballot boxes between the barrage and the fire. They don't go to cast their votes for anything just they will go so Yemen won't go into civil war. And we know full well if Yemen were to go into civil war it would be way worse than Somalia or Afghanistan. To the area, to the region and to the world.

Therefore we held the election and I was elected as the President for a transitional period of two years during which we'll engage into national debate that will include all the political cross-board, political spectrums and we will debate all the issues at hand and we will have constitutional amendments after which we will have a referendum over the constitution and the Yemeni people will decide the ways and means with which or how they are going to have their security and stability and the unity of Yemen.

But any other way may happen, but according to the provision 2014 of the UN Security Council it will be ideal that we in Yemen, majority of the Yemenis agree on this initiative and how it would be implemented that will preserve the stability and security and unity of Yemen, but

will eventually lead to the good government, to democracy, to social justice. There is -- after this initiative there is there will be no plaintiff and no victims be it from the north or the south, be it from the east or be it from the west. Thank you for listening to me and I am ready for any questions you might have.

[applause]

Frederick Kempe:

Mr. President first of all thank you for what was a very, very important statement. It's always an honor to partner with the Wilson Center in particular an honor with Jane Harman at the helm along with one of our most gifted legislators and public servants. So, Jane thank you very much for coordinating with us. On behalf of the Atlantic Council, and The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, and Senator Chuck Hagel our chairman and founder of the Rafik Hariri Center of Baja Hariri we're deeply honored to co-host this event.

You outlined very clearly the problems you were facing. You called it a political, economic, security crisis. You went into a great deal of detail on the humanitarian crisis epic proportions, youth unemployment, 600 thousand graduates looking for work. The number of schools ruined, 88 schools ruined, injured, dead.

We've been working these issues at Hurari Center with Project Middle Eastern Democracy. Danya Greenfield is one of the leaders on this with our Yemen policy initiative, but here's the question, and let's get specific on this. You need international support at a time when the West, particularly the U.S. and Europe is not particularly wanting to empty its pockets for that support. U.S., Saudi Arabia, other international partners met in Riyadh for donors conference yesterday in New York Friends of Yemen meeting.

Now let's get specific. What do you need? What do you specifically need from the United States now, particularly in the fight against terrorism? Question number one and be as specific as you can, if you had a wish list of three things that are absolutely crucial. Number two, drones. Big debate in this town and around the world. Some people say most effective weapon ever against terrorists. Others say it just foments more unrest and extremism. Perhaps you

can give us your point of view of where that fits into that first question?

Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi:
[Arabic]

Interpreter:

Thank you very much for this question. First off as far as the assistance from Saudi Arabia and from the other Gulf states to Yemen, I want to thank them and value the Saudi Arabia assistance because it helped us in a critical situation. They assisted us with oil and when we had no power, the cars were stopping we received oil for two months long from Saudi Arabia and for the second time for three months. And if it weren't for the support of oil we wouldn't be able to hold elections and to implement the Phase A from the Gulf Initiative.

Therefore I want to thank KSA and to the King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz. I personally called them and I explained to him the situation. We cannot go or hold elections when we don't have power. And all the hospitals and people are dying inside the hospitals and the roads between the provinces are being cut-off. And during that period -- and the early election was held for 90 days.

How can I in 90 days hold the elections and I don't have oil, I don't have electricity, roads are being cut-off between the provinces, people are dying inside the hospitals, and the fighting was still raging. There's division within the armed forces and within the security apparatus. There was division and Al-Qaeda literally took over some provinces, but the assistance we received from Saudi Arabia specially it helped us to go until we were done with the elections and directly after the elections I swore in front of the parliament and I promised the people who came from Abyan that displaced that I will -- I will do my best to extricate Al-Qaeda from Abyan and Shabwa. And with the coordination with the United States, they cooperated with the shared information with us. And they helped us in using the drones because our Air Force, the Yemeni Air Force, cannot carry out missions at night. And there were Soviet air fighter jets made in the '70s, the MiG-21 and the [unintelligible] the 22, and they cannot carry out their missions at night with the same precision. Even if they did, it's highly unlikely they will be successful.

But as far as the drones are concerned, they are -- they are linked to the satellites and they pinpoint the target, and they have zero margin of error, if you know exactly what target you're aiming at. And practically the drones, and due to my military background, and I have an expertise in Air Force management during combats, the high precision that's been provided by the drones is -- the electronic brain is precision is unmatched by the human brain.

And the United States cooperated in great length with us, but practically on the ground, the Popular Army, the paramilitary, and the assistance that provide to the subscript military. They played the decisive role in extricating Al-Qaeda from the provinces of Shabwa and Abyan. Because these paramilitary popular forces, they are also young youth, and they fought in the front lines, and the official Army was fighting behind them. And they were -- it was them who were taken by force, the [unintelligible], and that's how we managed to get rid of Al-Qaeda from Abyan. And when we get rid of the first emirate or reign they had in those two provinces. Now they are scattered all over, but they will never gain the same force they once enjoyed because when they established their reign, all members of Al-Qaeda from all over from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, all over. And even from Europe, Western Europe. They came all over. They have like kind of emirates for them.

Frederick Kempe:

That's a powerful endorsement of the drone strategy in combination with your own military. What, on top of that, would you specifically want from the U.S.? You're here in Washington. What is the most important thing the U.S. can give you right now that you're asking for to help this fight?

Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi:
[Arabic]

Interpreter:

The most important thing we ask from the United States now, the economic aid, the economic package. It -- 75 percent of the solution in Yemen is an economic problem -- economic solution, I'm sorry. Because the degree of level of poverty, it is nurturing Al-Qaeda with poverty.

Let's say when you have six million young, and the age bracket be over 15 and less than 22 years old. They will come and they will recruit him to Al-Qaeda, and then will apply the sharia law, the, Muslim law. And this way they're using, that's been adapted by Zarqawi in Iraq. And those kids, inexperienced youth, they will take them and train them for three months. And after three months, once they've been brainwashed, they will ask him to call his mom so she will pray for you, that you will -- they will be successful. It will be admitted as a suicide mission to God. This is how they convince them, brainwash them, and [unintelligible] the list. The list is way too long and probably you won't make it on the suicider's [spelled phonetically] list. Let us, your mom to pray for you and ask, you know, so you will be included on the suicider's list. And this is a very complicated problem we had. And we think that work -- working with Yemen and the cooperation on the economic level, the economic package, assistance. But as far as under the cooperation in with combating and fighting Al-Qaeda, I -- let me tell everybody here in this room now, it is the beginning of the end of Al-Qaeda when we got rid of them in Abyan and Shabwa. It was the first step to get rid of Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula.

Frederick Kempe:

Thank you, Mr. President. We know your time is short. We have about 12 minutes of your time left, I believe, so I'm going to go straight to the audience and ask you to keep your question -- and make it a question, please -- very short. And we'll go back and forth with as many questions as we can get in, Mr. President.

Jane Harman:

Where is the microphone?

Female Speaker:

Thank you for being here today, President Hadi. It's -- I'm thrilled to have had an opportunity to hear you speak about Yemen. And my question, I work for Counterpart International. We're currently implementing a governance project funded by USAID in Yemen, and my question relates to the status of women. We're quite optimistic that with the transition going on and talk about it being very inclusive, that it will include those populations that have been traditionally marginalized, including women. So I'd

love to hear your thoughts or your vision on how the status of women can be improved in Yemen in moving forward.

Frederick Kempe:

And I'd say particularly with the GCC sponsored plan and how it works.

Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi:

[Arabic]

Interpreter:

The GCC initiative outlined women's participation in all steps and levels and fields, and the commission that's been -- that I ordered to form that is working on the national dialogue, 26 percent of the quota are women, and this is approved that we are serious about implementing the GCC initiative as far as women are concerned.

[talking simultaneously]

Female Speaker:

[Arabic]

Interpreter:

-- and the Middle Eastern studies at the Wilson Center. My question is: Human rights watch lately as to get rid of the immunity from the former President Saleh, and there are fact-finding commission that -- and the Air Force usage by Saleh against the protestors. Do you agree on this?

Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi:

[Arabic]

Interpreter:

The GCC is clear. And we are working on implementing this initiative, and the paragraph number four grants him immunity. And my job includes to get -- to deliver based on the GCC initiative and not to the contrary or opposite.

[talking simultaneously]

Frederick Kempe:

There's another one in the back. And please identify yourself as you ask your question.

Maria Sala:

[Arabic]

Interpreter:

Maria Sala [phonetically] MSI. Your Excellency, you said that you wanted to help Yemen transition to a secular state. Is this still true and if yes, why have you recently appointed so many members of the Islah Party to government positions? Thank you.

Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi:

[Arabic]

Interpreter:

The GCC initiative determined all the quota of the opposition parties and the national congress political party and its partners and the common national dialogue are those political entities that are mentioned within the GCC, and they are the cosigners on the initiative. And this means -- it doesn't mean to eliminate any entity. We tried the Cold War and we were south and north and we were in fighting. One believes in Islam and one of the [unintelligible]. And we fought each other. Either so the north will fight the south, or in fighting within the south, or in fighting within the north until we were united in May 22, 1990. And we agreed on have political diversity of the Islam is formed their party, and the [unintelligible] and the [unintelligible], Syria and baathist party of Iraq and now the government is formed across the border from the political spectrum in Yemen. And therefore, any government will eliminate any component, this will not do Yemen any good. We are need inclusive approach so we will make this initiative work. Thank you.

Male speaker:

Thank you, Congresswoman Harman and Mr. Kemp. Appreciate it. Thank you very much.

[applause]

[end of transcript]