

A question of smart, strategic relationships

Countering radicalisation is a project to invest in, **PHILIP ELIASON** writes

Two places noted in the counterterrorism white paper, Yemen and Somalia, are closer to our interests than expected. Both countries have foreign nationals associated with violent Islamic groups, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its Somali ally, the al-Shabab movement.

Severe instability in Yemen will shake Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. It will reverberate more widely. Somalia is already a grave problem.

Yemen is the fulcrum in an arc-of-crisis running from Pakistan to northern Kenya. Yemen and Somalia sit athwart transport routes for more than \$A25 billion a year of Australia's trade, and affect security in the Indian Ocean. They share culture and serious stability and terrorism problems. Many Yemeni religious schools are becoming fundamentalist and train hundreds of students from Indonesia and other countries. Somali radicals and refugees worry Yemeni authorities. Poverty abounds.

Yemen tolerates aspects of al-Qaeda's ideology. Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, a senior conservative cleric, wants Yemenis to adhere to Osama bin Laden's goals. He is too popular to be silenced.

Australia could advise Yemen of our whole-of-government experience to assist Sana'a's efforts reportedly underway with the US and Britain on counterterrorism. Our ambassador for counterterrorism should visit Sana'a to establish Government contacts. As soon as an incident happens to an Australian in Yemen, he and his staff will need to assist.

The "great game" of strategic diplomacy is running again with Yemen. China wants Yemen's minerals and oil and Yemen in its sphere of influence. France is considering a base on a Yemeni island. Yemen declares Russian interest in Aden. The US and

Britain are active. Through its Government institutions, Yemen's leading tribes, clans and families run the country's affairs. Yemen suffers from a culture of "take now - not invest". Little of its falling oil-based national income is recycled via Government services or infrastructure to the people. Australia should open an honorary consulate in Sana'a to assist our embassy in Riyadh in understanding Yemen. Our embassy in Riyadh also needs a better budget to visit Yemen for firsthand information and improved liaison.

Seventy per cent of Yemen is beyond assured state control. Yemen has yet to resolve its sixth war from July 2009 to February 2010, against its Zaidi Shia people known as Houthis. The Government seeks to suppress the southern "splittists" who are increasingly frustrated over the

north's seizure of land, jobs and political control after Yemeni unity in 1990. There may be elements in Saudi Arabia which want to see an independent Hadramout in the south of Yemen. National dialogue has collapsed. Yemen's rulers, having 30 years of power based on tribal deals and patronage, are banking their survival against a growing demand for a new system. Recently, the President's convoy was attacked and the Deputy Prime Minister was shot at.

Yemen and Somalia are lodestones for young militants. Australia has concerns with its Somali community which has already spawned incipient militant activity here. Yemen's links with Indonesia need careful watching. Given the West's worry about terrorism, its reaction has been to give aid for counterterrorism and to weaken radicalisation through economic growth.

AusAID's new office in Addis Ababa will be a good base to assist the Horn of Africa and Yemen. Somalia should be formally identified as an aid priority. Australia has a political program in Africa and Canberra needs to take an initiative to grow multilateral aid and development work in Somalia. The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research's Africa assistance program should be extended specifically to Somalia and Yemen which share a future.

Stabilisation of Yemen through economic growth cannot be expected within one generation. Education, job skills, fair taxation and services such as water, electricity and health will reduce hostility towards the government and distract youth from extremist messages. Trade can be aid. Austrade should appoint a local representative in Sana'a. Any trade

improvement in Yemen will have stabilising effects. We can also help Yemen's future by offering technical education scholarships.

Arab technical assistance will be a growing part of future aid. Development needs not to be spread thin but ripple from several urban centres where jobs and state services can be established and maintained. Until now, Arab commitment has been through cash grants to the Yemeni Government with little actual impact. The Riyadh conference on Yemen in late February and the Friends of Yemen process joining Western and regional donors together may align aid interventions.

It may have more impact than decades of spending which have helped Yemen's rulers but still find its people jobless, hungry, thirsty, conservative and more easily radicalised.

■ Philip Eliason is a former diplomat, Arabic-speaker and consultant, recently returned from a year's work in Yemen.