

"High Value Target – Countering Al Qaeda in Yemen" by Ambassador EJ Hull (Ret) Dulles, Va: Potomac Books (2011) HB, DW; xxix, 162pp; 2 maps; 22 B&W photographs. Tables of Contents, Characters, Abbreviations; Foreword, Preface, Introduction; 10 chapters; Afterword; Bibliography; Index; Biography; \$27.50

Reviewed by James Spencer

This is a thoughtful and thought-provoking work about the US's successful campaign to attrit al-Qa'ida in Yemen, and deny it sanctuary there during the period 2001 - 2004. It is written not by an academic nor by a security practitioner, but by a diplomat at the nexus of multiple lines of operation, and thus able to give a nuanced overview of them all without becoming lost in the detail.

The Foreword sets the scene for the main body and the Afterword provides a neat overview of the situation in Yemen since 2004. Together, they form an excellent précis on Yemeni history and politics over the last 20 years. The relatively short (110 pages) main body discusses in detail AMB Hull's tenure in Sana'a. In particular, it focuses on his ultimately successful, behind-the-scenes struggles to identify, attract and apply human and financial resources effectively in the face of both countries' bureaucracy and political short-sightedness.

Pres Salih's domineering and mercurial presence comes across well, as does the relatively small circle of effective ministers. Less apparent (although present even in 2001) is the Presidential family's grip on key security organisations, and their prioritisation of protecting the regime over destroying al-Qa'ida. The importance of personal relationships and the mutable organisation of US Administrations will surprise many outside US Government service.

The other key theme is the excellent results to be had from a softer approach to security than a kinetic-heavy line of operation. This is especially the case with well resourced, long term (rather than quick impact) projects which meet the population's needs, not donors' politics. Coupled to this is the need to publicise subtly but widely: AMB Hull's choice of the qamariyya as an emblem of partnership being inspired.

Unlike the current crop of politicians' vainglorious memoirs, AMB Hull gives credit where it is due (often to otherwise unsung DoS staffers), and assigns blame or identifies systemic failings without fear or favour, even his own. Probably due to his submission date, AMB Hull's analysis of the key failings (and challenges) in the Afterword, while otherwise insightful, omits a reported tipping point: on his November 2005 trip "the message that really stood out to President Saleh was that without an al-Qaida problem in Yemen, Yemen was just one more poor country in a world of beggars" (Johnsen, G; NPR interview 04 Nov 10.)

There are three minor errors: Khawlan is not (formally) a Governorate (p.20); only in Texas

would Ma'rib be regarded as "near" (p.29) Shabwa, being separated by 100 miles of the Ramlat al-Saba'atayn, and Abu Bakr al-Qirbi is from al-Baydha, not the South (p.31.) The Huthis' desired end state is also less clear than the categorical "revival of Hashemite rule" (p.113.) The Yemeni regime frequently made this Monarchist charge, followed successively by allegations of Huthi links to Libya, al-Qa'ida, and Iran (fortuitously, each a US foreign policy concern.) While the Huthis would doubtless like to see an end to discrimination against Hashimites, and to Wahhabi sponsorship, the Huthis have denied seeking a return of the Imamate. As visible symbol of this, Abd al-Malik al-Huthi wears a tribesman's jambiyya dagger not a sayyid's thuma.

AMB Hull also raises an interesting point: when on "a crash course in Yemen's tribes, focusing on Ma'rib" (p.15) he made use of Dresch's seminal work. Yet it, like Caton's and Weir's works, is predominately focussed on the Zaydi tribes of the mountains. With the exception of scarce British Colonial work, very little has been published in English on the tribes of the Mashriq and further East or South – a major information gap in understanding the theatre.

Visually, the book is excellent: the layout makes for an easy to read text. AMB Hull's prose flows eloquently from his pen without jargon or pretension, while he chooses to use TE Lawrence's system of transliteration. The map at the front of the book is admirably clear, although the area in detail at the rear adds little additional detail. The photographs provide as good illustration as is possible in a book predominately concerning processes, and the book is well structured and referenced throughout.

Although many of the lead characters whose vignettes AMB Hull sketches so deftly are likely to retire soon, the problems he faced, and the nature of the politics he confronted are likely to endure for at least another decade. Historians of the GWOT, students of US diplomatic / administrative affairs, and those deploying to Yemen will all benefit from this book. Despite such a specialist audience, the open-minded general reader will also enjoy it. High Value Target is highly recommended for anyone's bookshelf and, at \$27.50, is a bargain.

James Spencer is a retired infantry commander who specialised in low intensity conflict. He is a strategic analyst on political, security and trade issues of the Middle East and North Africa and a specialist on Yemen.