

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study

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With contributions from Alexander Thurston and Pamela G. Faber

October 2017





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Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Overview of AQAP	3
Leadership and structure	3
Relationship with Al-Qaeda core.....	5
Ideology and goals	9
Funding.....	9
Evolution of AQAP by Phase	11
Phase one (A): Failure in Saudi Arabia (1996–2006)	11
Phase one (B): Failure in Yemen (1988–2003).....	12
Phase two: Rebirth in Yemen (2006–2011)	13
Phase three: Arab Spring (2011–2014).....	15
Phase four: Houthi rebellion and civil war (2014–Present)	18
Security Vulnerabilities in Yemen.....	21
U.S. Approach to Counter AQAP.....	24
Discussion.....	26
At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQAP?	26
Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQAP?	29
What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?	29
Conclusion	31
References.....	33

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List of Tables

Table 1.	Security vulnerabilities in Yemen.....	21
Table 2.	U.S. approaches to AQAP	24

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Glossary

AAS	Ansar al-Shari'a
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda Syria
AQY	Al-Qaeda in Yemen
ASD (SO/LIC)	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CSCC	Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
DOD	Department of Defense
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
UAE	United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.¹

Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

¹ Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.² The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

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The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce AQAP by highlighting its leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the security vulnerabilities in the areas of Yemen where AQAP operates. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering AQAP. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

² These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

³ McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

Overview of AQAP

Established in 2009 as a merger of Al-Qaeda units in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, AQAP (Arabic: Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab) is Al-Qaeda's most prominent formal affiliate. AQAP has a weak presence in Saudi Arabia, because Saudi authorities decimated Al-Qaeda's networks there in 2002–2006. In Yemen, however, AQAP is waging a major insurgency. AQAP has repeatedly attacked Yemen's capital Sanaa. The group has a strong presence in southern areas, with the ability to intermittently control territory.

AQAP is at the forefront of plotting Al-Qaeda's attacks against the West. AQAP plots include the unsuccessful 2009 Christmas Day "Underwear Bombing" and an unsuccessful 2010 plan to put parcel bombs on U.S.-bound airplanes. AQAP also seeks to inspire "lone jihad" attacks in the West. AQAP took credit for the deadly 2015 attack on the Parisian headquarters of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

Leadership and structure

AQAP's emir, Yemeni national Qasim al-Raymi (b. 1978), makes decisions together with the group's Shura (Consultative) Council. Al-Raymi succeeded Yemeni national Nasir al-Wuhayshi (1976–2015) after the latter's death in a U.S. drone strike. Al-Raymi was previously AQAP's deputy leader and military commander.⁴ Al-Wuhayshi, who was Osama Bin Laden's personal secretary before 9/11, rebuilt Al-Qaeda in Yemen after 2006. He was Al-Qaeda's overall deputy during 2013–2015. Other leaders

⁴ Jethro Mullen, "Al-Qaeda's Second in Command Killed in Yemen Strike; Successor Named," CNN, June 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/16/middleeast/yemen-aqap-leader-killed/>; "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," BBC News, June 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11483095>.

include Saudi Arabian national Ibrahim al-Asiri, a bomb-maker,⁵ and Sudanese national Ibrahim al-Qosi, a former bookkeeper for Osama Bin Laden.⁶

Below the emir are regional commanders and heads of functional units, such as media. AQAP's media products, released through its Al-Malahim Foundation, include the English-language magazine *Inspire* (first released June 2010) and the Arabic-language *Sada al-Malahim* ("The Echo of Battles," first released January 2008). Another key unit is the External Operations Team.⁷ AQAP also has a "shari'a group" and a "preaching/outreach committee,"⁸ although some analysts suspect that such titles are misleading, and that the group is relatively unstructured.⁹

The U.S. has killed numerous AQAP leaders. American nationals Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, two key propagandists and external operations planners, died in September 2011 in a U.S. drone strike. Saudi national Said Ali al-Shihri, who was AQAP's deputy emir during 2009–2012, died in late 2012, possibly in a U.S. drone strike.¹⁰ Other senior leaders were killed in a series of drone strikes in 2015, including Yemeni national Harith ibn Ghazi al-Nazari,¹¹ Saudi Arabian national Ibrahim al-Rubaish,¹² and Yemeni national Nasser al-Ansi.¹³

⁵ "Profile: Al-Qaeda 'Bomb Maker' Ibrahim al-Asiri," BBC News, July 4, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11662143>. See also al-Asiri, "The American Globalization Is Falling," *Inspire* 16 (November 2016): 40-47, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/inspire-magazine-16.pdf>.

⁶ Carol Rosenberg, "Freed Guantanamo Convict Returns to the Fight," *Miami Herald*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/guantanamo/article49022855.html>. See also "Interview: Abu-Khubeyb al-Sudani," *Inspire* 15 (May 2016): 50-63, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/inspire-magazine-15.pdf>.

⁷ The team regularly contributes articles to *Inspire*. See, for example, "Assassination Operations," *Inspire* 14 (September 2015): 64-71, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/inspire-magazine-14.pdf>.

⁸ See *Sada al-Malahim* 7 (January 2009).

⁹ Bernard Haykel, "Declaration of Prof. Bernard Haykel," United States District Court for the District of Columbia, *Nasser al-Aulaqi vs. Barack Obama et al.*, October 7, 2010, pp. 4-5, https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/Haykel_Declaration.100810.PDF.

¹⁰ Mark Mazzetti, "No. 2 Leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen Is Killed," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/world/middleeast/said-ali-al-shihri-qaeda-leader-in-yemen-is-dead.html>.

¹¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Influential AQAP Ideologue Killed in US Drone Strike," *Long War Journal*, February 5, 2015, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/influential_aqap_ide.php.

¹² Polly Mosendz, "Ibrahim al-Rubaish, Top Al-Qaeda Leader in Yemen, Killed in Drone Strike," *Newsweek*, April 14, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/ibrahim-al-rubaish-top-Al-Qaeda-leader-yemen-killed-drone-strike-322277>.

Since April 2011, AQAP has operated a political militia called Jama'at Ansar al-Shari'a (AAS), "The Society of Supporters/Partisans of Islamic Law."¹⁴ The U.S. considers AAS part of AQAP, and has targeted AAS leaders: Yemeni national Abu Zubayr Adil al-Abbab, who led AAS, died in a U.S. airstrike in 2012.¹⁵ Yemeni national Jalal Baleedi/Abu Hamza al-Zinjibari, another senior AAS commander, died in 2016 in a U.S. drone strike.¹⁶

Before the Arab Spring, AQAP had a few hundred members.¹⁷ By 2014, AQAP and AAS had an estimated 1,000 members.¹⁸ By 2015, the two groups had as many as 4,000 members.¹⁹

Relationship with Al-Qaeda core

Of the Al-Qaeda affiliates, AQAP has one of the closest relationships with Al-Qaeda core, reflecting the strong personal relationship between Bin Laden and AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi. Al-Wuhayshi served as Bin Laden's private secretary until fleeing

¹³ Dana Ford, "Senior AQAP Leader Nasr Ibn Ali al-Ansi Killed," CNN, May 7, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/07/middleeast/aqap-commander-killed/index.html>.

¹⁴ Basma Rao, "'Al-Qa'ida' fi al-Yaman...Hafat al-Khatr al-Da'ima...Al-Istratijiyya wa-l-Tahaddi ['Al-Qaeda' in Yemen...On the Permanent Brink of Danger...The Strategy and the Challenge]," Al-Arabiya, February 28, 2013, <http://studies.alarabiya.net/ideas-discussions/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A>.

¹⁵ "Maqtal 'Abu al-Zubayr' al-Mas'ul al-Shar'i li-l-Qa'ida bi-l-Jazira al-'Arabiyya bi-Ghara Amrikiyya fi Shabwa qabla Ayyam ['Abu Zubayr,' al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Legal Official, Killed in an American Raid in Shabwah a Few Days Ago]," Yemen Press, October 20, 2012, <https://yemen-press.com/news13735.html>.

¹⁶ Lizzie Dearden, "Al-Qaeda Leader in Yemen Jalal Baleedi 'Killed in Drone Strike'," *The Independent* (London), February 4, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/Al-Qaeda-leader-in-yemen-jalal-baleedi-killed-in-drone-strike-a6852636.html>.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*. Middle East Report 174 (February 2, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-Al-Qaeda-expanding-base>.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, p. 9 (note 33).

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, June 2016, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf>, p. 395.

Afghanistan to Iran, likely in late 2001 or early 2002, where he was arrested and then extradited to Yemen in 2003.²⁰

During Bin Laden's lifetime, senior Al-Qaeda core members regularly discussed strategy with AQAP. For example, a July 2010 letter from Atiyya Abd al-Rahman to al-Wuhayshi counseled AQAP to avoid war with the Yemeni government, and instead to "direct all our energy, and our faculties, and our capabilities toward striking the head, and that is America." Atiyya displayed serious concern for al-Awlaki's safety, reflecting his esteem for al-Awlaki as a propagandist.²¹

Al-Qaeda core did have complaints about AQAP. Bin Laden lamented in one letter that he needed "more data from the field in Yemen so as to make it easy for us, with God's help, to take the most appropriate decision regarding escalation or slowing down."²² In the same letter, Bin Laden also said that AQAP needed to more carefully manage its media output.²³ Bin Laden was skeptical of al-Awlaki because he did not know him personally.²⁴

Al-Qaeda core closely followed events during the Arab Spring, particularly in Yemen. Al-Qaeda core repeatedly cautioned AQAP against hasty action. In early 2011, al-Wuhayshi wrote to Bin Laden, "If you ever wanted Sanaa, today is the day!"²⁵ Bin Laden responded, "The enemy continues to possess the ability to topple any state we

²⁰ "Obituary: Yemen Al-Qaeda Leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi," BBC News, June 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33150212>.

²¹ Letter from Atiyya Abd al-Rahman to Nasser al-Wuhayshi (Abu Basir), recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), May 20, 2015, p. 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/arabic/Letter%20dtd%2018%20JUL%202010%20-%20Arabic.pdf>. See also letter from Atiyya Abd al-Rahman (Mahmud) to Bin Laden (Abu Abdullah), July 17, 2010, translated and declassified by ODNI, May 20, 2015, pp. 1-4, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Abdallah%20dtd%2017%20July%202010.pdf>.

²² Letter from Osama Bin Laden to 'Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, August 27, 2010, p. 2, declassified by the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Project, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Usama-Bin-Laden-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-Original.pdf>.

²³ Letter from Osama Bin Laden to 'Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, August 27, 2010, p. 2, declassified by the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Project, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Usama-Bin-Laden-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-Original.pdf>.

²⁴ Katherine Zimmerman, *The Al-Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy*, American Enterprise Institute, Critical Threats Project, September 2013, p. 10, http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/-the-Al-Qaeda-network-a-new-framework-for-defining-the-enemy_133443407958.pdf.

²⁵ "Letter from Basir to the Brother in Command," document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, likely composed in early 2011, p. 1, translated and declassified by ODNI, 1 March 2016.

establish.”²⁶ He added, “We are in the preparation stage; therefore, it is not in our interest to rush in bringing down the regime.”²⁷ Another document from Al-Qaeda core recommended seeking a truce with President Saleh, limiting military actions to defensive operations, and stepping up a campaign of preaching to spread jihadist ideology among Yemenis. Al-Qaeda’s long-term aims in Yemen, Bin Laden argued, should be the same as elsewhere: “exhaust” the United States, then overthrow the local authorities, and then create an Islamic emirate.²⁸ AQAP deferred to the core on strategy.

Since 2009, AQAP has pioneered a “new model” for Al-Qaeda’s franchises, in which affiliates plan their own external operations and cultivate horizontal relationships with one another.²⁹ Bin Laden’s death initially elevated AQAP’s importance within the Al-Qaeda network. Around July 2013, al-Wuhayshi was named deputy leader for all of Al-Qaeda.³⁰ When al-Wuhayshi was killed in 2015, however, the deputy position did not remain with AQAP but, rather, passed to Egyptian national and longtime Al-Qaeda member Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, who was subsequently killed by a U.S. drone in February 2017 in Syria.³¹ It should also be noted that in recent years, Al-Qaeda core leaders have gravitated more toward Syria rather than Yemen.

In terms of other Al-Qaeda affiliates, AQAP has the strongest relationship with Somalia’s al-Shebab, given the two countries’ geographical proximity. In April 2011,

²⁶ “Letter to Abu Basir,” p. 1, document recovered at Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>. See also Nelly Lahoud et al., eds., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Project, May 3, 2012, pp. 29-35, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/docs/UBLDocument16.pdf>.

²⁷ “Letter to Abu Basir,” p. 3.

²⁸ “Give the Tribes More Than They Can Handle,” document recovered at Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, pp. 4-8, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Give%20the%20tribes%20more%20than%20they%20can%20handle.pdf>.

²⁹ Katherine Zimmerman, “AQAP’s Role in the Al-Qaeda Network,” statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, September 18, 2013, p. 3, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20130918/101315/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-ZimmermanK-20130918.pdf>.

³⁰ Barbara Starr, “US Official: Al-Qaeda Core Chief Picks Number Two from Yemeni Affiliate,” CNN, August 5, 2013, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/05/us-official-Al-Qaeda-core-chief-picks-number-two-from-yemeni-affiliate/>.

³¹ Ali Abdellati and Ellen Francis, “Al-Qaeda Confirms Leader Killed by Drone Strike in Syria,” Reuters, March 2, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-qaeda-leader-idUKKBN16922Y>.

U.S. forces arrested Somali national Ahmed Warsame, who was subsequently charged with providing material support to both AQAP and al-Shebab.³² AQAP is the senior partner in the relationship, providing explosives training to al-Shebab and acting, especially under al-Wuhayshi, as a conduit between Al-Qaeda central and al-Shebab.³³ As of 2013, AQAP reportedly hosted hundreds of al-Shebab fighters in Yemen.³⁴ AQAP has offered public encouragement to al-Shebab.³⁵

Under al-Wuhayshi, AQAP also provided strategic guidance to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) when the latter affiliate was occupying northern Mali in 2012.³⁶ In 2014, unverified reports surfaced that AQAP's bomb maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, was working with Jabhat al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, and even with ISIL.³⁷

The rise of ISIL has affected AQAP, although ISIL's "provinces" in Yemen are relatively weak. Initially, AQAP celebrated ISIL's battlefield successes and emphasized the need for intra-jihadi unity.³⁸ In November 2014, however, ISIL announced its formal expansion into Yemen and Saudi Arabia,³⁹ which prompted AQAP to declare that ISIL's "caliphate" was illegitimate.⁴⁰ At present, ISIL does not pose a major threat to AQAP. ISIL's strategy of inspiring and masterminding attacks in the West, however, has pushed AQAP even further in that direction.

³² United States District Court, Southern District of New York, "Warsame Indictment," http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/Warsame_Indictment.pdf; and United States Attorney, Southern District of New York, "Ahmed Warsame Indictment Press Release," July 5, 2011, https://archive.org/stream/215061-ahmed-warsame-indictment-press-release/215061-ahmed-warsame-indictment-press-release_djvu.txt.

³³ Brian Bennett, "Al-Qaeda's Yemen branch has aided Somalia militants, U.S. says," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/18/world/la-fg-bin-laden-somalia-20110718>.

³⁴ Rao, "Al-Qa'ida' fi al-Yaman."

³⁵ See Abu 'Ata, "La Tahzunu Ikhwanuna fi Harakat al-Shebab al-Mujahidin [Do Not Be Sad, Our Brothers in the Movement of Mujahidin Youth]," *Sada al-Malahim* 13 (April/May 2010): 56, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/13m.pdf.

³⁶ Zimmerman, "AQAP's Role," p. 4.

³⁷ Ewen MacAskill, "The Saudi Chemist Sparking Fears of 'Invisible' Bombs on Transatlantic Flights," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/03/Al-Qaeda-bombmaker>.

³⁸ Robin Simcox, *AQAP's Ideological Battles at Home and Abroad*, Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, January 20, 2015, <https://hudson.org/research/10949-aqap-s-ideological-battles-at-home-and-abroad>.

³⁹ Islamic State, "Foreword," *Dabiq* 5 (November 2014): 3, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-islamic-state-magazine-issue-5-remaining-and-expanding.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Simcox, *AQAP's Ideological Battles*.

Ideology and goals

AQAP has several overlapping objectives. First, it shares Al-Qaeda core's goal of weakening the United States and Europe and forcing Western forces to leave Muslim-majority countries. Second, it seeks to create a jihadist emirate in Yemen. A third, often unstated objective is survival and growth amidst civil war and the intense U.S. drone campaign against its leadership.

In terms of attacking the West, AQAP spent 2009–2010 pursuing plots reminiscent of 9/11—namely, suicide attacks on airplanes. Since the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIL, however, AQAP has worked to inspire and plan “lone jihad” attacks in the West. Within the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP works to “target the bases of the Jews and Christians,” and “strike the interests of the enemy...especially the economic interests.”⁴¹

In terms of building a local emirate, the roots of AAS appeared in 2009. Al-Wuhayshi articulated several “practical steps” toward the goal of implementing AQAP's version of sharia. He urged jihadist scholars to oppose secularism, called on youth to arm themselves, encouraged ordinary Muslims to organize themselves into five-person cells, told influential people to begin calling for the total imposition of shari'a, asked tribal shaykhs to support jihadists, and exhorted ordinary people to continue demanding “justice” from the authorities.⁴² The same year, future AAS leader Abu al-Zubayr al-Abbab laid out a preaching strategy for implementing shari'a. Al-Abbab wanted preachers to convince people that the authorities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia were religiously illegitimate.⁴³ Since 2011, AQAP's strategy has involved exploiting the chaos caused by Yemen's Arab Spring while working through AAS to win popular support.

Funding

AQAP's funding has expanded progressively since Al-Qaeda's rebirth in Yemen in 2006. During the 2006-2011 period, there were serious allegations that the Saleh

⁴¹ Al-'Abbab, “Khutuwat 'Amaliyya,” pp. 17-18.

⁴² Abu Basir (Nasser al-Wuhayshi), “Ma al-Wajib Nahw al-Shari'a? [What Is Needed in the Direction of Sharia?]" *Sada al-Malahim* 10 (June/July 2009): 6-7, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/Sada-almala7em10.pdf.

⁴³ Abu al-Zubayr al-'Abbab, “Tariquna ila...Tahkim al-Shari'a [Our Road to...Ruling By the Shari'a],” *Sada al-Malahim* 10 (June/July 2009): 12-14, p. 14, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/Sada-almala7em10.pdf.

regime supported Al-Qaeda in Yemen (see below). Collusion with Saleh, and with Yemeni officials in Sanaa, likely continued after Saleh's fall from power.⁴⁴

After 2011, kidnapping became a major funding source for AQAP, which received \$20 million in ransom payments for European hostages by 2013.⁴⁵ AQAP also receives assistance from private companies in Yemen: in 2016, the U.S. Department of the Treasury blacklisted Al Omgy Exchange, a Yemeni money exchange firm, for reportedly helping AQAP.⁴⁶

As AQAP intermittently controlled territory in southern Yemen after 2011, it robbed banks, taxed local commerce, and extorted companies. When AQAP seized al-Mukalla in 2015, it stole an estimated \$100 million from the coastal city's central bank, and then earned \$2-\$5 million per day from control of the fuel smuggling trade.⁴⁷ Some extortion has a "Robin Hood" quality: AQAP funnels some of the payments it receives into services and infrastructure for the poor. These efforts are meant to boost the group's image and win greater popular support. AQAP also pays staff at certain institutions, such as hospitals, when they agree to help the group.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Nasser Arrabyee, "Saudi-Backed Extremism is Fueling Yemeni Outrage," *Sada*, September 9, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64528>; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen," December 18, 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>; and U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusrah Front, AQAP, and ISIL Fundraisers and Facilitators," May 19, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0462.aspx>.

⁴⁵ Ken Dilanian, "Al-Qaeda Group Is Operating on Ransom Money from the West," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/21/world/la-fg-yemen-ransom-20131021>.

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Financial Supporters of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," November 1, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0601.aspx>.

⁴⁷ Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning, and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Made Al-Qaeda Stronger—and Richer," Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Kendall, "How Can Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Be Defeated?" *The Washington Post Monkey Cage Blog*, May 3, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/03/how-can-Al-Qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-be-defeated/?utm_term=.d788c54e6883.

Evolution of AQAP by Phase

Phase one (A): Failure in Saudi Arabia (1996–2006)

From the late 1980s on, Al-Qaeda had strong connections to Saudi Arabia and Yemen Aided by Bin Laden's Saudi citizenship and Yemeni origins. Additionally, dozens of Saudis and Yemenis fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. A few of them joined Al-Qaeda—although it should be noted that, aside from Bin Laden, Egyptians and Libyans were more prominent in Al-Qaeda's early leadership than were Saudis and Yemenis.

Al-Qaeda's early militancy was partly inspired by political developments in Saudi Arabia. In his 1996 "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," Bin Laden accused the Saudi monarchy of succumbing to unbelief by curtailing Islamic law, accepting military assistance from the United States, and ignoring the 1992 "Memorandum of Advice" from dissident religious scholars.⁴⁹

In 1997, Al-Qaeda attempted to build an organization in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden deputized a Yemeni-born Saudi Arabian national, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, to lead the effort. But al-Nashiri's early plots in 1997 and 1998 were foiled by Saudi authorities. In response, Bin Laden shifted strategy, suspending plots in Saudi Arabia and focusing on recruiting more Saudi and Yemeni citizens to travel to Afghanistan. After 9/11, Bin Laden restarted attacks in the Saudi kingdom. At his direction, up to a thousand Saudi Al-Qaeda members returned home. Bin Laden supported two parallel networks: al-Nashiri's, and another led by Saudi national Yusuf al-Uyayri. After planning several attacks, al-Nashiri was arrested in November 2002. Al-Uyayri's group, meanwhile, perpetrated the May 2003 suicide car bombings in East Riyadh that killed thirty-five people at housing units for Westerners. In the ensuing crackdown, al-Uyayri was killed. More Al-Qaeda attacks followed in November and

⁴⁹ Osama Bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," 1996, translated by the Combating Terrorism Center, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf>.

December 2003, but Saudi security forces steadily wore down the movement. In December 2004, Al-Qaeda's Saudi members attacked the American consulate in Jeddah, killing five people, but the Saudi security forces' campaign continued to weaken the group. Also, Al-Qaeda's attacks on Westerners alienated the civilian population. In April 2005, a group of the remaining Al-Qaeda leaders were killed. By late 2006, the group was essentially defunct.⁵⁰

Phase one (B): Failure in Yemen (1988–2003)

Yemen attracted Bin Laden's attention as early as 1988, when he began financing jihadism within the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), then an independent, Soviet-aligned country. In the early 1990s, Yemeni veterans of Afghanistan, some of them connected to Bin Laden, formed "Islamic Jihad in Yemen," a jihadist organization that assassinated Marxist politicians. Islamic Jihad reportedly disbanded in 1994, when its leader received a government position in the newly united Republic of Yemen. A successor of sorts to Islamic Jihad was a new group—the Army of Aden Abyan, which operated training camps in Yemen and plotted largely unsuccessful attacks between approximately 1994 and 1999. Both groups were predecessors of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, which was formed in 1998.⁵¹

Yemen was the site of one of Al-Qaeda's earliest operations, a hotel bombing (and a second, unsuccessful hotel bombing) on December 29, 1992, targeting U.S. Marines. The attack, in which Islamic Jihad may have participated, was militarily unsuccessful but politically significant, leading to the withdrawal of Marines from Yemen. On October 12, 2000, Al-Qaeda conducted a much more significant attack in Yemen, bombing the USS *Cole* destroyer in Aden's harbor. The attack killed 17 sailors. The

⁵⁰ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia," Combating Terrorism Center Occasional Paper, February 25, 2010, pp. 11-18, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTC_OP_Hegghammer_Final1.pdf; "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," BBC; and "Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Jazirat al-'Arab [The Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Organization]," Al Jazeera, November 8, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2010/11/8/%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8>. See also "Letter from Abu al-Tayyib," 29 February 2008, document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20from%20Abu%20al-Tayyib%20dated%2029%20February%202008.pdf>.

⁵¹ Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, ed., *A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, September 2011), chapter one, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CTC_False_Foundation3.pdf. See also International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda*.

incident followed an unsuccessful plot to attack another destroyer in Aden, the USS *The Sullivans*, on January 3, 2000.

From October 2002 to November 2003, U.S. and Yemeni counterterrorism operations weakened Al-Qaeda in Yemen.⁵² In November 2002, a U.S. drone strike killed Abu Ali al-Harithi, a former Bin Laden bodyguard. Al-Harithi is suspected of helping plan the USS *Cole* attack.⁵³ Yemeni members of Al-Qaeda core were also killed and arrested, such as Abu Muhammad al-Yamani (d. 2002 in Algeria)⁵⁴ and Nasir al-Wuhayshi (arrested in Iran ca. 2002).

Phase two: Rebirth in Yemen (2006–2011)

On February 3, 2006, an estimated 23 Al-Qaeda members escaped from the detention center in Sanaa, which was run by Yemen's internal security apparatus, the Political Security Organization.⁵⁵ The escapees included al-Wuhayshi and al-Raymi, who together led the re-establishment of Al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY). AQY soon began attempting major attacks, such as unsuccessful suicide bombings of oil facilities in Marib and Hadramaut Governorates in 2006.⁵⁶ Other attacks during this period included a 2007 suicide bombing that killed seven Spanish tourists in Marib Governorate, and a 2008 assault on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa.⁵⁷

AQY benefited as other events deflected attention from it: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was focused on the Houthi rebellion in the northwest (see below), and

⁵² Christopher Boucek, Gregory Johnsen, and Shari Villarosa, *Al-Qaeda in Yemen*, Carnegie Endowment, July 7, 2009, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/07/07/Al-Qaeda-in-yemen-event-1372>.

⁵³ Brian Whitaker and Duncan Campbell, "CIA Missile Kills Al-Qaeda Suspects," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/05/alQaeda.terrorism>.

⁵⁴ Abu Akram Hisham, "Al-Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Yamani: Rihlatuhu ila al-Jaza'ir wa-Qissat Istishhadihi [Shaykh Abu Muhammad the Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom]," *Ifriqiya al-Muslima*, December 30, 2015, p. 8, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/abucc84-akram-hishacc84m-e2809cmessages-from-the-mujacc84hid_s-notebook-2-shaykh-abucc84-muhcca3ammad-al-yamanicc84-his-trip-to-algeria-and-the-story-of-his-martyrdom22.pdf.

⁵⁵ Fiona Mangan and Erica Gaston, *Prisons in Yemen*, Peaceworks 106 (March 2015), p. 19, United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW106-Prisons-in-Yemen.pdf>.

⁵⁶ "Yemen 'Fails Oil Plant Attacks,'" BBC News, September 15, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5348074.stm.

⁵⁷ Koehler-Derrick, *False Foundation*, chapter one; BBC News, "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula."

the United States was focused on the war in Iraq.⁵⁸ There have also been serious allegations that Saleh at times tolerated or colluded with AQAP. For its part, AQAP has vigorously denied the allegations, which could seriously damage its credibility.⁵⁹

In January 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al-Qaeda merged to form AQAP. The merger was partly motivated by a fresh Saudi crackdown, which caused most of Al-Qaeda's remaining Saudi members to flee the kingdom.⁶⁰ Despite the merger's name, AQAP was a Yemeni organization, with only "a small number of Saudi nationals."⁶¹ After the merger, most of AQAP's initial attacks were in Yemen and the West, not in Saudi Arabia. One exception was the attempted assassination of Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef in Jeddah in August 2009.⁶²

Regarding its attacks against the West, a key ideologue and plotter for AQAP was Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011), an American citizen of Yemeni descent. After a complex career as a religious leader in the U.S., al-Awlaki left the country in March 2002. Although al-Awlaki's departure has been widely interpreted as a sign of his radicalization, al-Awlaki likely left the U.S. due to his panic when he found out that the Federal Bureau of Investigation knew about his secret visits to prostitutes.⁶³ Subsequently, al-Awlaki based himself briefly in London and then permanently in Yemen. In 2006-2007, he was imprisoned in Yemen for eighteen months due to his violent rhetoric; after his release, he formally joined AQAP.⁶⁴

Al-Awlaki was involved in several attacks and would-be attacks on the U.S. Some analysts suspect that al-Awlaki was involved in planning the 9/11 attacks, but the available evidence is inconclusive.⁶⁵ More likely, al-Awlaki started participating in plots only after moving to Yemen. First, in 2008 and 2009, al-Awlaki exchanged emails with American citizen Nidal Hassan, who killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas

⁵⁸ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda*.

⁵⁹ Elias Groll, "The War of Words Between AQAP's Bomb Maker and Al Jazeera," *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/04/the-war-of-words-between-aqaps-bomb-maker-and-al-jazeera/>.

⁶⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," June 19, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/Al-Qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369>.

⁶¹ Haykel, "Declaration," p. 3.

⁶² "Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Jazirat al-'Arab," Al Jazeera.

⁶³ Scott Shane, "The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/magazine/the-lessons-of-anwar-al-awlaki.html>.

⁶⁴ Scott Shane, "The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki."

⁶⁵ J.M. Berger, "Did Awlaki Really Help the 9/11 Hijackers?" *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/04/did-awlaki-really-help-the-911-hijackers/>.

in November 2009.⁶⁶ It is debatable to what degree al-Awlaki was involved in the planning for the Fort Hood shootings.⁶⁷ Second, al-Awlaki met and coached Nigerian national Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to detonate an “underwear bomb” on an inbound flight to Detroit on December 25, 2009.⁶⁸ Third, al-Awlaki was suspected of involvement in AQAP’s 2010 plot to pack bombs on U.S.-bound cargo planes.⁶⁹ Al-Awlaki was killed in a U.S. drone strike in September 2011. Another key figure in these plots was Saudi national and AQAP bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri, who remains alive at the time of this writing.⁷⁰

Phase three: Arab Spring (2011–2014)

In Yemen, anti-regime protests began in January 2011 as part of the Arab Spring. President Saleh attempted to placate protesters, but after suffering injuries in a June 2011 bombing, and facing continued protests throughout 2011, he agreed to step aside in favor of his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi; the transition occurred in February 2012.⁷¹ Hadi purged allies of Saleh from the government and the armed forces,⁷² driving Saleh into opposition.

⁶⁶ David Johnston and Scott Shane, “U.S. Knew of Suspect’s Ties to Radical Cleric,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/10/us/10inquire.html>.

⁶⁷ J.M. Berger, “The Content and Context of Anwar Awlaki’s Emails with Fort Hood Shooter Nidal Hasan,” Intelwire, August 5, 2012, <http://news.intelwire.com/2012/08/the-content-and-context-of-anwar.html>.

⁶⁸ Peter Finn, “Al-Awlaki Directed Christmas ‘Underwear Bomber’ Plot, Justice Department Memo Says,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-awlaki-directed-christmas-underwear-bomber-plot-justice-department-memo-says/2012/02/10/gIQArDOt4Q_story.html?utm_term=.017639b75310.

⁶⁹ Chris McGreal, “Prime Suspect in Cargo Plane Bomb Plot: Anwar al-Awlaki,” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/31/cargo-plane-bomb-suspect-anwar-al-awlaki>. See also, “Yemen-Based Al-Qaeda Group Claims Responsibility for Parcel Bomb Plot,” CNN, November 6, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/11/05/yemen.security.concern/?hpt=T2>.

⁷⁰ On al-Asiri, see Bruce Riedel, *Ibrahim al Asiri: Al-Qaeda’s Genius Bomb Maker*, Brookings Institution, May 8, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/ibrahim-al-asiri-Al-Qaedas-genius-bomb-maker/>.

⁷¹ “Arab Uprising: Country by Country—Yemen,” BBC News, December 16, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482293>.

⁷² “Yemen’s New President Purges Army of Old-Regime Loyalists,” *Associated Press*, April 6, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/07/yemen-president-army-regime-loyalists>.

Yemen's Arab Spring unleashed an economic and humanitarian catastrophe, with rising poverty, unemployment, inflation, and food insecurity. By 2014, over half of Yemenis needed humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's expulsions of Yemeni workers reduced remittances, "one of the backbones of Yemen's fragile national economy."⁷³ After the 1991-2010 period, during which gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an annual rate of between 3 percent and 7.7 percent a year, GDP fell 12.7 percent in 2011 and 28 percent in 2015, with minimal growth during 2012-2014.⁷⁴

AQAP benefited from Yemen's crisis. Financed by bank robberies and other sources, AQAP offered money to tribes in return for support. The group presented itself as an anti-government, anti-corruption force.⁷⁵ AQAP was, in its own words, "balancing between starting a full-scale war and between letting the Government and the Houthis finish each other."⁷⁶

In April 2011, AQAP proclaimed the existence of a new group, Ansar al-Sharia (AAS).⁷⁷ AAS leader Abu Zubayr al-Abbab, a long-time AQAP member, explained: "The mujahidin in Yemen are known as the Al-Qaeda organization; regarding the name Ansar al-Sharia, this is the name we are called in the regions we control, so that people understand the aim for which we are fighting."⁷⁸ AAS is meant to carry out Al-Qaeda's new global strategy of building popular support and, when possible, taking territory. Starting in May 2011, AAS began to sporadically control some southern

⁷³ Khaled Fattah, "Yemen's Insecurity Dilemma," *Yemen Times*, February 11, 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/02/11/yemen-s-insecurity-dilemma-pub-54657>.

⁷⁴ World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) - Yemen," accessed 2 March 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=YE>.

⁷⁵ Rao, "Al-Qa 'ida' fi al-Yaman."

⁷⁶ "Letter from Basir to the Brother in Command," document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, likely composed in early 2011, p. 2, translated and declassified by ODNI, 1 March 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20from%20Basir%20to%20the%20Brother%20in%20Command.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Organizations with the same name, also bearing loose ties to local Al-Qaeda affiliates and members, emerged in 2011-2012 in Tunisia and Libya.

⁷⁸ Abu Zubayr Adil al-Abbab, "Al-Liqa' al-Sawti ma'a al-Shaykh Abu Zubayr al-'Abbab [Audio Interview with Shaykh Abu Zubayr al-Abbab]," Mu'assasat al-Shajara, 25 April 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js_fbKJN23s.

Yemeni cities.⁷⁹ AQAP/AAS also staged major attacks, such as a May 2012 suicide bombing in central Sanaa that killed 96 people, many of them soldiers.⁸⁰

To build popular support, AAS depicted itself as a force for effective governance. Videos showed AAS members bringing electricity to neglected areas. Videos featured interviews with ordinary Yemenis praising the security and order that AAS had allegedly delivered. AAS also presented itself as an organization promoting religious purity. Propaganda showed AAS destroying graves and monuments it considered un-Islamic.⁸¹ AAS hoped to “steer the people to pay *zakat* [religiously mandated alms] to the mujahidin,” and to offer simple preaching focused on the theme of monotheism.⁸²

Ironically, AQAP and AAS gained some ability to recruit because of the U.S. drone campaign. In 2012, one Yemeni critic argued that “drone strikes are causing more and more Yemenis to hate America and join radical militants; they are not driven by ideology but rather by a sense of revenge and despair.”⁸³ The drone campaign has also fueled AQAP’s criticisms of the Yemeni government, which AQAP casts as a Western puppet. AQAP has accused the U.S. of secretly ruling Yemen through its Embassy in Sanaa.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ International Crisis Group, “Yemen’s Al-Qaeda”; Adam Baron, “Ansar al Shariah Driven from Zinjibar in Major Blow to Al-Qaeda Affiliate in Yemen,” *Miami Herald*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article1940538.html#storylink=cpy>.

⁸⁰ “Al-Qaeda Claims Deadly Yemen Suicide Blast,” *Al Jazeera*, 21 May 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/201252175919491219.html>.

⁸¹ Al-Battar Media Foundation, “Nusra li-Ansar al-Sharia bi-l-Yaman [Support for Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen],” December 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/09/new-video-message-from-al-battar-media-foundation-support-for-an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-shariah-in-yemen/>.

⁸² Abu al-Zubayr al-‘Abbab, “Khutuwat ‘Amaliyya li-Nusrat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-‘Arab [Practical Steps for Supporting the Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula],” *Sada al-Malahim* 13 (April/May 2010): 16-18, p. 17, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/13m.pdf.

⁸³ Ibrahim Mothana, “How Drones Help Al-Qaeda,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-Al-Qaeda.html>.

⁸⁴ Jalal Baleedi, “Statement about the Course of the American War in Yemen,” translated into English by Fursan al-Balagh Media, Translation Section, October 2013, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/jalc481l-bulaydc4ab-al-marqishc4ab-abc5ab-elb8a5amzah-al-zinjibc481rc4ab-22on-the-crimes-of-the-american-war-in-yemen22-en.pdf>.

Phase four: Houthi rebellion and civil war (2014–Present)

Another boost for AQAP came from Yemen's civil war, which has heightened sectarian tensions. Such tensions reflect the military successes of the Houthis, a religious and political group from northwestern Yemen's Saada Governorate. The Houthis follow the Zaydi or "Fiver" branch of Shi'i Islam, which is distinct from the "Twelver" branch of Shi'ism followed in Iran. Nevertheless, the Houthis receive significant Iranian support.⁸⁵

The Houthi rebellion against the Yemeni state began in 2004, when Saleh's government cracked down on the movement and killed its leader, Hussein al-Houthi. Clashes between the Houthis and the government occurred for years in Saada, but the fighting ended temporarily with a 2010 ceasefire. After the Arab Spring began in 2011, the Houthis became one of many groups vying for power. As early as 2011, Houthis were fighting Sunnis in Saada Governorate, taking advantage of the political and security vacuum engendered by the revolution.⁸⁶

A turning point came in 2014, as the Houthis reconciled with Saleh, who was then out of power. Supported by Saleh's tribal and political allies, the Houthis began to capture territory in northern Yemen.⁸⁷ In September 2014, the Houthis captured Sanaa. In February 2015, they dissolved parliament and instated their own "Presidential Council."⁸⁸ In response, Saudi Arabia launched an anti-Houthi intervention called Operation Decisive Storm; the Saudis are supported by a broad coalition that includes the United States, which provides intelligence and other support to the Saudi-led coalition. The civil war is ongoing at the time of this writing. The Houthis and their pro-Saleh allies control much of the north; the predominately

⁸⁵ Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Supply to Yemen's Houthis via Oman - Officials," Reuters, October 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX>.

⁸⁶ Khaled Fattah, "Yemen's Sectarian Spring," *Sada*, May 11, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=48095>.

⁸⁷ International Crisis Group, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*. Middle East Report 154 (June 10, 2014), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/huthis-saada-sanaa>; Saeed al Batati, "Who Are the Houthis in Yemen?" Al Jazeera, March 29, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/yemen-houthis-hadi-protests-201482132719818986.html>.

⁸⁸ "Yemen's Houthis Form Own Government in Sanaa," Al Jazeera, February 6, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/02/yemen-houthi-rebels-announce-presidential-council-150206122736448.html>.

Sunni, pro-government, anti-Houthi forces control much of the south. President Hadi remains in exile in Riyadh.

AQAP/AAS capitalized on growing sectarian animosity and sought to fill governance voids. AQAP increased its media output, presenting itself as a sophisticated and effective military force. During 2014 and 2015, “AQAP... increasingly adopted a bifurcated strategy of targeting Houthis in Houthi areas and government targets in areas where AQAP is strongest.”⁸⁹ AQAP’s attacks on the Houthis after 2014 contrasted with AQAP’s relative toleration of the Houthis before the Arab Spring. In that earlier period, AQAP had shown some “moderation” vis-à-vis the Houthis so as not to alienate ordinary Yemeni Sunni Muslims who had no grievances toward the Houthis then.⁹⁰ As the civil war increased sectarianism within Yemen, AQAP adapted.

The civil war allowed AQAP/AAS to control territory again for the first time since 2011–2012. Most dramatically, AQAP/AAS seized al-Mukalla, a southern port city of 500,000 and the capital of Hadramaut Governorate, from April 2015 to April 2016 (AQAP/AAS was expelled from al-Mukalla by the Yemeni Army, backed by Emirati troops and Emirati and Saudi special forces).⁹¹ AQAP’s control of al-Mukalla was made possible by Operation Decisive Storm, during which Yemeni forces were largely withdrawn from the city. With its financial resources and about a thousand fighters in the city, AQAP offered residents a form of law and order, winning significant popular support there.⁹² AQAP also has temporarily controlled other southern cities during the civil war.⁹³

AQAP has benefited from Operation Decisive Storm. Beyond al-Mukalla, Saudi Arabia considers defeating AQAP a lower priority than defeating the Houthi-Saleh alliance. AAS fighters have even reportedly fought alongside the forces of the Saudi-led coalition, although in 2016 Emirati forces began to fight AQAP in southern Yemeni

⁸⁹ Aaron Zelin and Patrick Hoover, “What AQAP’S Operations Reveal About Its Strategy in Yemen,” War on the Rocks, April 23, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/what-aqaps-operations-reveal-about-its-strategy-in-yemen/>.

⁹⁰ Barak Barfi, “AQAP’s Soft Power Strategy in Yemen,” *CTC Sentinel*, November 1, 2010, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqap%E2%80%99s-soft-power-strategy-in-yemen>.

⁹¹ “Yemen Conflict: Troops Retake Mukalla from Al-Qaeda,” BBC News, April 25, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36128614>.

⁹² Bayoumy, Browning, and Ghobari, “How Saudi Arabia’s War in Yemen Has Made Al-Qaeda Stronger.”

⁹³ Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Al-Qaeda Militants Take Over Two South Yemen Towns, Residents Say,” Reuters, December 2, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN0TLOBQ20151203>.

areas where the Houthis were no longer a threat.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the civil war has hindered the U.S. counterterrorism campaign.⁹⁵

The civil war's effects on AQAP's external plotting are unclear. In 2015, an anonymous U.S. military official stated, "The initial evidence is actually that the Houthi advance has caused [AQAP's] external plotting to be sidelined while they figure out how they're going to deal with ...what appears to be an emerging civil war."⁹⁶ Assessing the status of AQAP's external plots is complicated because of how much emphasis the group now places on inspiring "lone jihad" attacks.⁹⁷ AQAP can claim responsibility even for attacks it did not plan or direct, making the attribution of many incidents murky. Most prominently, in January 2015, AQAP claimed responsibility for the assault on *Charlie Hebdo*.⁹⁸ The brothers who carried out the attack, French nationals Cherif and Said Kouachi, had traveled to Yemen, received weapons training, and met al-Awlaki in July-August 2011.⁹⁹ It is unclear, however, whether AQAP planned the attack or just "inspired and perhaps funded" it.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda*, pp. 15–16 (notes 62, 63, and 64).

⁹⁵ Greg Miller, "Al-Qaeda Franchise in Yemen Exploits Chaos to Rebuild, Officials Say," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/Al-Qaeda-franchise-in-yemen-exploits-chaos-to-rebuild-officials-say/2015/04/04/207208da-d88f-11e4-ba28-f2a685dc7f89_story.html?utm_term=.ec4a6da2cfbc.

⁹⁶ Miller, "Al-Qaeda Franchise in Yemen Exploits Chaos."

⁹⁷ Nasser al-Anisi, "Lone Jihad Between Strategy and Tactic," *Inspire* 15 (May 2016): 42-45, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/inspire-magazine-15.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Jeremy Scahill, "Al-Qaeda Source: AQAP Directed Paris Attack," *The Intercept*, January 9, 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/01/09/alwaki-paris/>.

⁹⁹ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Both Brothers Behind Paris Attack Had Weapons Training in Yemen: Sources," Reuters, January 11, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-yemen-idUSKBN0KK0F620150111>.

¹⁰⁰ Tim Fernholz, "The Unanswered Questions After AQAP Takes Credit for the Charlie Hebdo Attacks," Quartz, January 14, 2015, <https://qz.com/326588/the-unanswered-questions-after-aqap-takes-credit-for-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks/>.

Security Vulnerabilities in Yemen

The independent assessment involved analyzing the security environment in which each affiliate or associate operated. We conducted the environmental analysis on the assumption that the success of an Al-Qaeda affiliate or associate is based not solely on resources, funding and leadership structure, but also on a permissive environment with security vulnerabilities.

Table 1 below highlights key security vulnerabilities in Yemen. These vulnerabilities include internal conflict, a history of violent jihadism, state collapse, state illegitimacy, demographic instabilities, and security sector ineffectiveness.

Table 1. Security vulnerabilities in Yemen

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	• In addition to its longer history of internal conflict, including the 1994 civil war between the formerly separate north and south, Yemen has experienced several forms of internal conflict in recent years: - o Beginning in 2004, the Houthi Rebellion, which has increased sectarianism in Yemen and consumed the energies of the regime, indirectly benefiting AQAP; - o Beginning in 2011, the Arab Spring, which weakened central authority, triggered and escalated various internal conflicts, and allowed AQAP to begin holding territory; - o Beginning in 2014, the civil war between the Houthis and the Hadi government, which has strengthened AQAP; and - o Beginning in 2015, the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis, which, especially early on, distracted the attention of Saudi Arabia and Yemeni government forces attention away from AQAP
History of violent jihadism	• Jihadist and jihadist-leaning groups have periodically arisen in Yemen since the 1990s, laying the groundwork for AQAP
State Collapse	• Yemen has long been a weak state, but it began to collapse in 2011 with the Arab Spring, when it began to lose control over parts of its territory to the Houthis, AQAP, and other factions. • The civil war accelerated the collapse of the state, with the Houthis capturing Sanaa in September 2014 and President Hadi fleeing to Saudi Arabia in March 2015. • State weakness has allowed AQAP to periodically seize and rule territory, most prominently the southern city al-Mukalla in 2015-2016.

State Illegitimacy	• The government of longtime ruler President Ali Abdullah Saleh became increasingly unpopular over time. Many Yemenis came to perceive his regime as deeply corrupt and repressive. Saleh eventually fell amid popular protests (and international pressure) as part of the Arab Spring. Saleh, however, was also able for many years to hold together a society with deep fractures – north and south, Sunni and Zaydi Shi'a, etc. The government of Saleh's successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, has struggled to project authority and legitimacy. Hadi has also been hobbled by the continued influence of Saleh, who began to undermine Hadi's government from as early as 2012. In 2015, Saleh formally allied himself with the Houthis against Hadi.¹⁰¹ • AQAP benefited from these trends in two ways: - o First, there are credible accusations that Saleh at times colluded with, or at least tolerated, AQAP as part of his efforts to balance competing internal forces and mitigate open opposition to his rule (and to attract counterterrorism funding from the United States and other powers).¹⁰² - o Second, AQAP increasingly offers itself to Yemenis as a supposedly incorruptible, just, accountable form of government that can offer a form of law, order, and livelihood in conflict-prone areas. Through its popularly-oriented branch Ansar al-Sharia, AQAP explicitly tries to present an alternative to Hadi and to the former Saleh government.
Demographic Instability	• With a population of approximately 27 million, Yemen has a major youth bulge (nearly half of the population was under age 18 as of 2012).¹⁰³ As noted above, Yemen also has internal sectarian divides that have worsened considerably since 2004 and especially since 2011. Yemen is also the poorest country in the Arab Gulf region, with 17.5% of the population living below the poverty line in 2011.¹⁰⁴
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	• Yemen, with U.S. support, had greatly reduced Al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen by 2003. • But in 2006, AQAP rebounded in large part due to the mistakes and inefficacy of the security forces. That year, key commanders escaped from a major prison run by the intelligence services. • In the ensuing years, Saleh's attention was often directed toward

¹⁰¹ "Yemen's Saleh declares alliance with Houthis," Al Jazeera, May 11, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/cloneofcloneofcloneofstrikes-yemen-saada-breach--150510143647004.html>.

¹⁰² Evan Hill and Laura Kasinof, "Playing a Double Game in the Fight Against AQAP," *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/21/playing-a-double-game-in-the-fight-against-aqap-yemen-saleh-Al-Qaeda/>.

¹⁰³ "At a glance: Yemen," UNICEF, last update December 31, 2013, https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/yemen_statistics.html.

¹⁰⁴ "At a glance: Yemen," UNICEF.

other problems, and AQAP was able to steadily grow.

- When the Arab Spring and especially the civil war presented the opportunity, AQAP was able to overwhelm or chase out local security forces in several key southern areas. Notably, AQAP's rule of al-Mukalla was ended in 2016 with Emirati forces in the lead, rather than Yemeni forces.
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U.S. Approach to Counter AQAP

Table 2 below describes the U.S. approach to countering AQAP in Yemen.

Table 2. U.S. approaches to AQAP

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	The U.S. has conducted at least 250 drone strikes in Yemen targeting members of AQAP and its predecessors. ¹⁰⁵ The campaign began in 2009 (there was one, earlier strike in 2002). AQAP leaders who died in such strikes include former emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi (d. 2015). The U.S. has also conducted raids on the ground, most famously the 29 January 2017 joint U.S. –UAE raid in Al-Bayda governorate in which a Navy Seal was killed.
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	U.S. forces have advised and assisted Yemeni and third party forces on several occasions, including during the Emirati-led campaign to expel AQAP from al-Mukalla. ¹⁰⁶
Security Cooperation /Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	The U.S. provided assistance to the Yemeni security forces under 1206 and 1207 in 2009 (\$52.1 million disbursed) and 2010 (\$134.8 million disbursed). The train-and-equip programs were suspended in 2011 during the Arab Spring, and then resumed in 2012 (\$63.3 million disbursed), only to fall again in succeeding years as the assistance program was reviewed amid continued political turmoil. ¹⁰⁷ Much of this assistance focused on counterterrorism training; for example, in 2010 the U.S. and the UK launched a program to create a new counterterrorism police unit. ¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ “Drone Strikes in Yemen,” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, N.d., <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/yemen>.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Missy Ryan, “U.S. forces now on the ground supporting combat operations in Yemen, Pentagon says,” *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/06/u-s-forces-now-on-the-ground-supporting-combat-operations-in-yemen-pentagon-says/?utm_term=.09efa7c47e4b.

¹⁰⁷ United States Government Accountability Office, “Yemen: DOD Should Improve Accuracy of Its Data on Congressional Clearance of Projects as It Reevaluates Counterterrorism Assistance,” April 2015, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/669878.pdf>, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Toma Tasovac (ed.), “Britain and US to fund anti-terror unit in Yemen to combat Al-Qaeda,” DW, January 3, 2010, <http://www.dw.com/en/britain-and-us-to-fund-anti-terror-unit-in-yemen-to-combat-Al-Qaeda/a-5077975>.

"Third Party" Partners	The U.S. has worked closely with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to disrupt and dismantle AQAP, although Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen has at times boosted AQAP in that the Saudis and Yemeni government forces have concentrated on fighting the Houthis, giving AQAP freer rein.
Security Sector Reform	Security sector reform became a major priority for the Hadi government starting in 2012, as Hadi sought to remove and disempower Saleh's networks within the security forces. The U.S. supported this effort by leveling the threat of sanctions against spoilers connected with Saleh and the Houthis; ¹⁰⁹ the Treasury Department sanctioned Saleh himself in November 2014. ¹¹⁰
Civilian Military Operations	Special Operations Command Central Forward conducted civil affairs as part of its mission, but few details are available. ¹¹¹ The U.S. military constructed some health facilities in the country. ¹¹²
Messaging/ counter-messaging	From open sources, it appears that the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications took the lead in combating AQAP propaganda. ¹¹³ (The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) was replaced by the Global Engagement Center in 2016.) Yemen is one country of focus for CENTCOM's WebOps program, which has been heavily criticized for alleged incompetence and waste, ¹¹⁴ but few details are available in open sources regarding the Yemen component of WebOps.
Intelligence and Information Sharing	Up through the early phases of the civil war, U.S. and Yemeni forces collected intelligence against AQAP that enabled drone strikes and raids; al-Anaad airbase was a key intelligence analysis site where U.S.

¹⁰⁹ Katherine Zimmerman and Sasha Gordon, "Yemen's Military Restructuring: Removing Saleh's Network," AEI Critical Threats Project, December 20, 2012, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/yemens-military-restructuring-removing-salehs-network>.

¹¹⁰ Executive Order 13611 of May 16, 2012, Blocking Property of Persons Threatening the Peace, Security, or Stability of Yemen, Federal Register, Vol. 77, No. 97, May 18, 2012, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/yemen_eo.pdf.

¹¹¹ Brian Dodwell and Marielle Ness, "A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Captain Robert A. Newson, Military Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations," CTC *Sentinel*, February 27, 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-an-interview-with-captain-robert-a-newson-military-fellow-council-on-foreign-relations>.

¹¹² Sandra A. Scham, *USAID's Role in Civil/Military Cooperation in Asia and the Middle East An Assessment of Programmatic Implications and Lessons Learned Report on Phase I*, USAID, October 2009, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacr565.pdf, p. 77.

¹¹³ Camille Elhassani, "US state department fights Al-Qaeda in cyberspace," Al Jazeera, May 24, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/americas/2012/05/116116.html>;

¹¹⁴ Desmond Butler and Richard Lardner, "US misfires in online fight against Islamic State." Associated Press, January 31, 2017, <https://apnews.com/b3fd7213bb0e41b3b02eb15265e9d292/us-military-botches-online-fight-against-islamic-state>.

	personnel were posted. But the withdrawal of many U.S. personnel in 2015, combined with the chaos of the civil war, greatly reduced intelligence collection.¹¹⁵ In 2015, the U.S. widened its intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia in order to support Operation Decisive Storm; most of this intelligence has involved the Houthis,¹¹⁶ but increasingly the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the UAE share intelligence related to AQAP.¹¹⁷
Attack the Network - Counter Threat Finance	The U.S. Treasury Department has worked to blacklist firms and individuals who fund AQAP.¹¹⁸

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQAP?

By 2003, with U.S. support, Yemeni authorities had largely **dismantled** Al-Qaeda's network in the country: key commanders had been killed or imprisoned, and Al-Qaeda operations had reached a low point. Across the border in Saudi Arabia, authorities also effectively **dismantled** the group in a series of arrests and raids between 2002 and 2006. As in Yemen, U.S. support was important to the Saudi counter-Al-Qaeda effort.

Since the 2006 jailbreak that resuscitated the network that became AQAP, however, the U.S. and Yemen's successive governments, and more recently the Saudi-led coalition, have had only limited, partial, and often fleeting successes against AQAP. Yemeni forces were increasingly distracted by the Houthi rebellion toward the end of the decade, and the Arab Spring and civil war allowed AQAP to

¹¹⁵ Mark Hosenball, Phil Stewart and Matt Spetalnick, "The US Is Running Out Of Intelligence In Yemen," Reuters, January 29, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-exclusive-us-armed-drone-program-in-yemen-facing-intelligence-gaps--2015-1>.

¹¹⁶ Mark Hosenball, Phil Stewart and Warren Strobel, "Exclusive: U.S. expands intelligence sharing with Saudis in Yemen operation," Reuters, April 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-yemen-exclusive-idUSKBN0N129W20150411>.

¹¹⁷ Phil Stewart and Yara Bayoumy, "In Yemen conflict, a window into deepening U.S.-Gulf ties," Reuters, April 27, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-yemen-idUSKBN17T37T>.

¹¹⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Financial Supporters of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," November 1, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0601.aspx>.

thrive amid chaos. U.S.-trained Yemeni forces have shown a capacity to **disrupt** AQAP, for example by expelling it from Zinjibar and Abyan in 2012 after AQAP had briefly controlled those towns;¹¹⁹ yet in recent years, Yemeni forces have increasingly required outside help to confront AQAP. Meanwhile, unilateral U.S. actions failed to slow AQAP's growth and likely accelerated it. On the one hand, U.S. strikes have removed over thirty-five top operatives and hundreds of fighters.¹²⁰ On the other hand, these deaths do not amount to a **dismantling** of AQAP, given the organization's ability to replace top leaders, to grow faster than it is attacked, and even to draw some recruits among Yemenis angered by the U.S. strikes.

The U.S. and its external partners have had some success in **disrupting** AQAP. U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation has deepened considerably since the signing of a bilateral counterterrorism agreement in 2008. With AQAP's 2010 cargo planes bomb plot, "Saudi intelligence provided the critical tipoff to the American and European intelligence officials that allowed British and Emirati security personnel to intercept the expertly concealed bombs that were already en route to the United States."¹²¹ However, especially in the early stages of Operation Decisive Storm, Saudi Arabia appeared to be ignoring or even tolerating AQAP within Yemen.¹²²

In recent years, the UAE has been a key partner: when Emirati-led forces expelled AQAP from al-Mukalla in 2016, the U.S. provided intelligence support and aerial refueling.¹²³ As the war in Yemen drags on, Saudi Arabia and the UAE may devote even greater attention to defeating AQAP there.

Over the long term, there were two key weaknesses in U.S. efforts against AQAP in Yemen. First, the U.S. overrated the Yemeni government as a partner. By the late

¹¹⁹ Adam Baron, "Ansar al Shariah Driven from Zinjibar in Major Blow to al Qaida Affiliate in Yemen," *Miami Herald*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article1940538.html#storylink=cpy>.

¹²⁰ "Key Findings: Drone Wars Yemen," International Security, N.d., <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/key-findings.html?country=Yemen>.

¹²¹ Daniel L. Byman, "Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade: The U.S.-Saudi Arabia counterterrorism relationship," Brookings, May 24, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>.

¹²² Bruce Riedel, "Al-Qaida's Hawdramawt Emirate." *The Brookings Institution*. July 12, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/07/12/al-qaidas-hadramawt-emirate/>.

¹²³ William Maclean, Noah Browning, and Yara Bayoumy, "Yemen counter-terrorism mission shows UAE military ambition," Reuters, June 28, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-emirates-idUSKCN0ZE1EA>.

2000s, Yemeni leaders were more interested in self-preservation than in actual counterterrorism. As the former commander of Special Operations Command Central Forward Yemen has noted, “President Saleh was absolutely a master of manipulation and he used counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. as a tool to get what he wanted.”¹²⁴ In this atmosphere, U.S. policies were not effectively calibrated to encouraging reform. By 2009, Saleh was allegedly diverting U.S. counterterrorism funding and equipment to support his conflict with the Houthis.¹²⁵ As the former commander has argued, “Oftentimes a huge shipment of supplies or weapons would arrive at the same time we were trying to play a little hard ball with them and it undermined our efforts. So we argued to zero effect that U.S. assistance efforts should be conditional and adjusted to conditions on the ground.” The same former commander added that U.S.-trained Yemeni counterterrorism forces often remained in the capital Sanaa under the thumb of senior figures, and that those forces lacked the intelligence, supply, and logistical support that might have made them effective.¹²⁶ The Arab Spring undermined U.S. efforts even further. Key U.S.-trained counterterrorism units were controlled by Saleh, and starting in 2012 they were either sidelined by Hadi or remained focused on Saleh’s political priorities.¹²⁷

Second, there were problems with implementation. A U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that as of 2015, 40 percent of DOD train-and-equip items in Yemen had either been delivered late or could not be adequately accounted for.¹²⁸ More problematically, as Yemen’s political chaos increased, by March 2015 the DOD had lost track of more than \$500 million in

¹²⁴ Dodwell and Ness, “A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Captain Robert A. Newson.”

¹²⁵ “US: Investigate Counterterrorism Assistance to Yemen,” Human Rights Watch, December 11, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/11/us-investigate-counterterrorism-assistance-yemen>.

¹²⁶ Dodwell and Ness, “A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Captain Robert A. Newson.”

¹²⁷ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon Loses Sight of 500 Million in Counterterrorism Aid Given to Yemen,” *The Washington Post*, March 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-loses-sight-of-500-million-in-counterterrorism-aid-given-to-yemen/2015/03/17/f4ca25ce-cbf9-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html?utm_term=.3d90c604a27a

¹²⁸ United States Government Accountability Office, “Yemen: DOD Should Improve Accuracy of Its Data,” first (non-numbered) page.

equipment give to the Yemeni security forces, including “small arms, ammunition, night-vision goggles, patrol boats, [and] vehicles.”¹²⁹

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQAP?

Several pre-existing vulnerabilities worsened in such a way that the situation was transformed, largely to AQAP’s benefit. These vulnerabilities include the weakness and illegitimacy of the state, and the internal conflict that worsened with the Arab Spring and reached civil war proportions in 2014. One new vulnerability that emerged is via the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm, which exacerbated internal conflict in Yemen and drew the attention of the Yemeni security forces away from the fight against AQAP.¹³⁰

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

Major shifts in the U.S. approach came in 2009 and 2015. In December 2009, the U.S. started its campaign of airstrikes against AQAP, attempting to disrupt and dismantle the organization;¹³¹ the campaign accelerated after the November 2009 Fort Hood Shooting and the December 2009 attempted “underwear bombing.” One key target was U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who played a role in both of the aforementioned plots and who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2011. Another shift in the U.S. approach came in 2014-2015, when the civil war and Houthi control of key government agencies disrupted the United States’ ability to gather intelligence, conduct counterterrorism operations, and train Yemeni forces.¹³² In

¹²⁹ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon Loses Sight of 500 Million in Counterterrorism Aid Given to Yemen,” *The Washington Post*, March 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-loses-sight-of-500-million-in-counterterrorism-aid-given-to-yemen/2015/03/17/f4ca25ce-cbf9-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html?utm_term=.3d90c604a27a

¹³⁰ Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning and Mohammed Ghobari, “How Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen has made Al-Qaeda stronger – and richer,” Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

¹³¹ “Yemen: Reported US Covert Action 2001-2011,” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, March 29, 2012, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2001-2011>.

¹³² Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock, “Yemen Crisis Disrupts US Counterterrorism Operations,” *The Washington Post*, January 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national->

February 2015, the U.S. closed its Embassy in Sanaa.¹³³ Another shift came with the launch of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015: the operation has placed the U.S. in an awkward position as it seeks to support a key partner (Saudi Arabia) in a war against the Houthis that is going poorly, and simultaneously to make sure that Saudi Arabia and others in the coalition do not ignore—or, worse, empower¹³⁴—AQAP. Finally, the inauguration of President Trump brought an increase in the tempo of strikes and raids in Yemen, with more strikes during the new administration's first 100 days than in all of 2015 and 2016 combined.¹³⁵

security/us-counterterrorism-operations-with-yemen-suspended-officials-say/2015/01/23/03bf8826-a337-11e4-903f-9f2faf7cd9fe_story.html?utm_term=.174dc7789c66

¹³³ Mohammed Ghobari, "United States closes its embassy in conflict-hit Yemen," Reuters, February 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBN0LE25720150210>.

¹³⁴ Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has made al Qaeda stronger - and richer," Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

¹³⁵ "Trump's 100 days: US air campaign hammers Yemen with almost a strike a day," The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, April 27, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-04-27/us-air-campaign-hammers-yemen-with-almost-a-strike-a-day>.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined AQAP's leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We also examined how the group has evolved over time. We outlined the vulnerabilities in Yemen's security environment that AQAP has exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter AQAP over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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