

AQAM FUTURES PROJECT
CASE STUDY SERIESCase Study Number 3
JULY 2011PROJECT DIRECTORS
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AL QAEDA IN THE
ARABIAN PENINSULA

by Samuel Lindo, Michael Schoder, and Tyler Jones

Executive Summary

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) emerged in January 2009 from the union of two preexisting militant groups: al Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) and al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia.¹ Both organizations included several combatants that fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan with Osama bin Laden. The groups enjoyed different levels of sustained success, however, with AQY establishing a more enduring foothold than its Saudi counterpart. In the early 1990s, al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia exploited economic and political turmoil and widespread discontent about the presence of Western troops by offering its militant campaign as a singular solution to myriad grievances. The group’s activities were reduced to residual levels after 2003, however, in the face of increased counterterrorism efforts and public alienation. As a result, many Saudi operatives crossed the border to fight alongside their counterparts in Yemen.

(Executive Summary continued next page)

The Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) Futures Project is a joint study undertaken by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program. The initiative will produce a series of alternative futures regarding the state of AQAM in the year 2025 and generate recommendations to defeat the threat over the long term. Drawing on historical analysis, social science research, expert interviews, and targeted fieldwork, this project will provide to policymakers and strategists a vision beyond the next few years and will consider the trends and shocks that may shape AQAM over the next decade and a half.

This case study is one of several examining the historic evolution and future prospects of al Qaeda and its range of affiliated groups. The purpose of the case studies is to determine the key drivers that have influenced a terrorist group’s trajectory over time. Ultimately, these drivers, in conjunction with additional supporting analysis, will be used to inform projections about the future of al Qaeda and its affiliates.

AQY capitalized on public dissatisfaction as well, and met greater success in Yemen. Following AQY's 2000 USS *Cole* bombing and the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Yemeni government increased its counterterrorism efforts. By 2003, AQY was severely crippled, yet counterterrorism pressure soon abated. The United States focused on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Yemeni government struggled against a Shia uprising in the north and a socialist secessionist movement in the south. Taking advantage of a dip in counterterrorism pressure, AQY regrouped, and critical leadership was re-injected into the movement following the 2006 Sana'a prison break of 23 high-level al Qaeda operatives. In 2009, representatives from AQY and the remaining ranks of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia announced the merger of the two groups. Since then, AQAP has been al Qaeda's most-active affiliate, securing world attention with attempted bombings of a passenger airline on Christmas Day in 2009 and two cargo planes in October 2010. Under the cover of Yemen's recent political upheaval, the group may grow stronger and more dangerous still.

Key Judgments

Rise of al Qaeda Affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: 1990–Spring 2003

- *Public dissatisfaction.* Al Qaeda capitalized on civil discontent caused by the presence of foreign troops, large disparities between economic classes, and perceptions of corruption within the Saudi ruling family. By framing multiple public grievances under a single narrative, the group was able to proffer its extremist campaign as the necessary solution.
- *Leadership.* Osama bin Laden established and funded an al Qaeda affiliate in Saudi Arabia. He effectively plotted and managed the group's operations, even after his 1992 exile to Sudan. He was also a symbolic figurehead to whom all operatives and affiliates swore loyalty upon joining the movement.
- *Ideological resonance.* Saudi Arabians had been intimately familiar with Wahhabist ideology since the 1700s. Bin Laden exploited this familiarity to operationalize a more radical form of violent Islam.

Al Qaeda in Yemen: 1992–2000

- *Public dissatisfaction.* Stricken by internal social cleavages, an existing separatist movement, poverty, lack of education, and a widely held perception of government corruption, Yemeni citizens were more easily disposed to take up arms against the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.
- *Ideological resonance.* The Saleh government had encouraged radicalization in the early 1990s as a counterweight to the socialist separatist movement in the South. Al Qaeda operatives were able to exploit a deep pool of militant Islamist support for purposes of recruiting and planning attacks.

Decline of al Qaeda Affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: Spring 2003–2009

- *Local support.* As operations by al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia continued to injure and kill Saudi citizens, the group lost public support, forcing it to carry out smaller-scale, more-focused strikes.
- *Counterterrorism pressure.* In response to high-profile attacks in the spring of 2003, the Saudi regime improved military and law enforcement operations with increased border monitoring and security. "Soft" counterterrorism measures, including a militant rehabilitation program and an extensive propaganda campaign, further turned the Saudi population against terrorist operatives.

Al Qaeda in Yemen: 2000–2006

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* Following the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*, U.S. counterterrorism and financial support led to increased security in previously unpatrolled regions, prompting mass arrests of operatives, sympathizers, and supporters of AQY.

Gestation and Birth of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: 2006–Present

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* In Yemen, pressure and support for counterterrorism operations declined after Washington's focus shifted to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

By 2006, AQY was poised to re-emerge. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, remained a deeply inhospitable environment for al Qaeda cadres, eventually prompting the regional merger of the two organizations.

- *Leadership.* A February 2006 prison break in Sana'a returned critical leadership to al Qaeda. Two escapees, Nasir al-Wahishi and Qasim al-Raymi, went on to rebuild AQY, officially announcing the group's reemergence in the summer of 2007. Two years later, AQY joined ranks with its still-weakened Saudi counterparts, announcing the formation of AQAP.
- *Public dissatisfaction.* Economic, security, and social grievances remain unaddressed. In light of the political turmoil currently developing in Yemen, those concerns are readily exploited by AQAP.

Full Narrative

The Rise of al Qaeda Affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia first emerged in 1990 after Osama bin Laden returned from Afghanistan with a large contingent of followers. The 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by armed Islamist insurgents had profoundly affected much of Saudi Arabia, pushing bin Laden and many others closer to dissident activities.² In an attempt to suppress bin Laden's extremism, Saudi Arabia exiled him in 1992 and revoked his citizenship two years later. Nonetheless, many of the estimated 5,000 Afghanistan-experienced Saudi militants continued organizing and recruiting in the Kingdom.³

By 1997, bin Laden was advocating the overthrow of the Saudi regime. He cited multiple grievances against the House of Saud, including its betrayal of the Ottoman Empire in favor of the British in World War I, its complicity while the West sought to divide Saudi Arabia into smaller states, its peace efforts with Israel (thereby betraying the Palestinians), and its willingness to station U.S. troops in the Kingdom during the 1991 Gulf War.⁴ With the start of the second Chechen war in 1999 and the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000, a renewal of pan-

Islamic ideals allowed the al Qaeda message to resonate more broadly with the Saudi people.⁵

When the U.S. military took Kandahar in 2002, 1,000 to 2,000 Saudi al Qaeda operatives returned to the Kingdom from Afghanistan, joined underground al Qaeda cells, and began plotting attacks against Saudi targets.⁶ Under bin Laden's direction, many of those attacks took place in 2003.⁷ On May 12, car bombs exploded outside three Western housing compounds in Riyadh, killing 34 people, including 8 Americans, and wounding several more.⁸ On November 8, two suicide bombers drove a police van full of explosives into a residential compound in Muhayya, killing 17 people and wounding more than 100.⁹ Police thwarted an even deadlier attack planned for later that same month.¹⁰

Al Qaeda in Yemen

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, a cadre of bin Laden-trained "Afghan Arabs" returned to Yemen under the name Yemen Islamic Jihad.¹¹ Led by Tariq al-Fadhli, who had fought against the Soviets alongside bin Laden, the group received money and weapons from bin Laden to help President Saleh defeat a socialist secessionist movement in South Yemen.¹² By 1992, the group had turned its attention to U.S. targets abroad, bombing two hotels in Aden housing U.S. soldiers.¹³

In 1996, control of Yemen Islamic Jihad was transferred to Abu Ali al-Harithi, who had become a close ally of bin Laden in Afghanistan and had traveled with him to Sudan in 1991.¹⁴ When bin Laden moved back to Afghanistan, Harithi returned to Yemen. With funding from bin Laden and recruits from Yemen Islamic Jihad, he established a loosely organized group of militants, mainly in the eastern areas surrounding Sana'a.¹⁵ Under Harithi's leadership, the group evolved into what would come to be called al Qaeda in Yemen and began to channel broad public dissatisfaction into its own strategic operations and attacks. AQY was responsible for the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* in the port of Aden that killed 17 U.S. sailors, and the group is suspected of carrying out the 2002 bombing of the *Limburg*, a French oil tanker traveling off the coast of Yemen.¹⁶

The Decline of al Qaeda Affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government's reaction to the operational spike by al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was comprehensive and persistent. By the end of 2004, 400 to 500 operatives had been captured or killed.¹⁷ The last major al Qaeda operation carried out in the Kingdom came in February 2006, when operatives of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia tried to strike Abqaiq, one of the world's largest oil facilities.¹⁸ The attempted suicide car bombing failed when one of the two bombers was forced to set off his explosives prematurely and the other was killed before he could detonate.¹⁹

A Saudi-designed rehabilitation program for extremists also contributed to the decline of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. As a complement to aggressive police work, the program combines religious education with psychological counseling and social support to counter the al Qaeda narrative.²⁰ Since its inception in 2004, the six-week program, which is a function of the Ministry of Interior, has treated more than 4,000 prisoners and claims a recidivism rate of less than 10 percent.²¹ Such statistics are deceptive, however: though they align with a reduction in extremist activity in Saudi Arabia, they ignore the significant role some former detainees have played in continued militant operations in the region at large. Specifically, 11 former Guantanamo detainees in the program relapsed and fled Saudi Arabia to join AQY.²² Three in particular, Said al-Shihri, Othman al-Ghamdi, and Mohammed al-Awfi, went on to become leaders of AQAP in 2009.²³

Al Qaeda in Yemen

After the *Cole* bombing and September 11 attacks, the United States put pressure on Yemen to conduct counterterrorism operations. In the fall of 2001 the Saleh government began an aggressive counterterrorism campaign, allowing U.S. Special Forces and intelligence officers into Yemen to help eradicate al Qaeda operatives.²⁴ A 2002 U.S. drone strike sanctioned by the Yemeni government successfully killed AQY leader Abu Ali al-Harithi, and by late 2003 the al Qaeda threat in Yemen was severely reduced.²⁵ With much of the organization's leadership killed or arrested and many operatives and sympathizers incarcerated, AQY's operational capabilities were greatly reduced.²⁶

Gestation and Birth of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Despite counterterrorism successes between 2001 and 2003, the U.S. and Yemeni governments soon shifted their attention away from AQY.²⁷ U.S. forces were embroiled in two wars, and the Sana'a government—preoccupied with the Houthi Shia rebellion in the north, the secessionist movement in the south, and the economic woes crippling the nation—had fewer resources to devote to the fight against extremism.²⁸ Widespread grievances, including abysmal living conditions and pervasive corruption, continued to alienate the Yemeni people from the Saleh administration. Government attempts to modernize the economy by reducing fuel subsidies led to riots in 2005.²⁹

The ideology, infrastructure, and lack of government control that had supported al Qaeda's emergence and operation in Yemen thus remained intact, ready to be exploited anew. The opportunity arose when 23 al Qaeda members and sympathizers escaped from a Sana'a prison on February 3, 2006. Two men with particularly strong personal ties to al Qaeda Core, Nasir al-Wahishi and Qasim al-Raymi, were able to avoid recapture. Wahishi had previously served as bin Laden's secretary and had fought with Raymi at the Battle of Tora Bora, where bin Laden evaded U.S. forces.³⁰ Together over the next year, the pair rebuilt AQY, with Raymi as military chief and Wahishi as the group's emir and strongest connection to al Qaeda core.³¹ In the summer of 2007, an official statement by Wahishi announced al Qaeda in Yemen's official re-emergence.³²

Despite AQY's resurgence, al Qaeda's operations in Saudi Arabia remained limited. Accordingly, in January 2009, AQY and the remaining Saudi cells consolidated to form al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.³³ An online video featuring Wahishi, Raymi, Shihri, and Awfi announced the merger and indicated that the new name reflected their organization's broader goals of removing Western influence and promoting their version of Islam throughout the entire region.³⁴ In the time since the merger, AQAP has carried out several attacks, including four assassination attempts against Saudi counterterrorism chief Prince Muhammad bin Nayef and numerous attacks against Yemeni government forces.³⁵

AQAP's suspected head of foreign operations, American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, has emerged as a central

figure on both the operational and motivational levels, and he has assumed a prominent role in the group's ongoing propaganda campaign.³⁶ After his release from a Yemeni prison in 2007, Awlaki developed a website to address current events, publish book reviews, and release audio messages.³⁷ Although his site was shut down, he has continued to spread his online propaganda through video channels and other extremist websites, citing the value of the Internet as an inexpensive, nearly instantaneous recruitment tool.³⁸ Awlaki regularly releases recruitment videos in English, and he served as inspiration to both Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hassan and Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad.³⁹

Awlaki also has contributed to *Inspire*, AQAP's English-language online magazine, which he is believed to have developed in 2010.⁴⁰ It was through *Inspire* that AQAP announced the start of its new terror campaign, "Operation Hemorrhage." After the near success of AQAP's attempted commercial airplane bombing in Detroit on Christmas 2009, the group's leadership saw the potential for such attacks as part of a broader strategic campaign. Accordingly, Operation Hemorrhage was designed to utilize smaller, more inexpensive and frequent attacks to bleed the United States' resources through major increases in security spending.⁴¹ The campaign was first rolled out on October 29, 2010, when parcel bombs were discovered in Dubai and Britain en route to the United States.⁴²

Analysis

Period I: The Rise of al Qaeda Affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia

- *Public dissatisfaction.* Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants established al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia by focusing on two particular points of discontent. Foremost was the pervasive public perception of corruption among the al Saud family. Fueled by lucrative oil contracts, the Saudi regime appeared increasingly out of touch with the growing Saudi middle class.⁴³ As the Kingdom's economy stagnated throughout the 1990s, critics derided the royal family's waste and corruption as inhibiting growth.⁴⁴ While most Saudis did not accept bin Laden's calls to overthrow the

regime, public dissatisfaction made extremist campaigns more agreeable to an increasingly alienated public.

Compounding this sense of disaffection was the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, as the first Gulf War had brought a half million Western troops into the Kingdom in 1990–1991. Bin Laden's critique of the U.S. presence in an Islamic "holy land" combined with popular Saudi opinion to give al Qaeda a stronger ideological footing in the Kingdom.⁴⁵ When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the public again became disposed to the same anti-imperial narratives that had driven many Saudis to intervene in the Soviet-Afghan War almost a quarter century earlier.⁴⁶

- *Leadership.* Osama bin Laden's leadership was critical to the development of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. His ability to harmonize top leaders with occasionally conflicting personalities and extremist ideologies allowed the organization to expand and flourish. Drawing upon his experience in the family construction business, bin Laden implemented a hierarchical management structure, composed of assorted committees and commanders.⁴⁷ The unified chain of command cemented his position as head of the organization and allowed him to exert strong leadership over al Qaeda affiliates, even during his exile.

This leadership was tested during the extremist campaign against Saudi Arabia, which was not widely supported within bin Laden's organization. Numerous operatives, including Yusuf al Ayeri, the future leader of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, appealed to bin Laden to postpone planned attacks against the government, citing a need for more preparation time and resources from Yemen.⁴⁸ Bin Laden, with the support of his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, dismissed this argument and ordered that the attacks be executed.⁴⁹ The strikes did not necessarily have their intended effect of rallying widespread support, but they reinforced the authority bin Laden needed to make the organization function more broadly.

- *Ideological resonance.* Bin Laden's rhetorical campaign also helped supplement the rise of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Following the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Saudi regime had sought to enhance its religious legitimacy by more aggressively propagating Wahhabism.⁵⁰ This effort precipitated the rise of a "neo-Salafist jihadist movement."⁵¹ Bin Laden therefore made sure his interpretation

of Wahhabism was familiar to the Saudi populace, appropriating deep social conservatism and labeling anyone not in compliance as a *kafir*, or “unbeliever.”⁵²

Bin Laden’s interpretation was distinct, however. Going against the predominant ideology that Saudi citizens’ main responsibility was to obey their rulers, Bin Laden instead promoted his own political structure within al Qaeda.⁵³ Deeply affected by his experience fighting in Afghanistan, he saw the challenges to the Muslim world in a broader, more international light than the localized perspective of the Wahhabist Saudi ulema.⁵⁴ By portraying his religious understanding as an improvement upon an already-appreciated doctrine, bin Laden enabled his campaign to take root more easily.

Al Qaeda in Yemen

- *Public dissatisfaction.* AQY emerged from an upwelling of discontent with government corruption, a collapsing economy, and a severe demographic crisis. When Yemen was first listed on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index in 2003, it ranked in the 31st percentile.⁵⁵ By 2010, it had dropped to the 14th percentile, denoting enduring public frustration.⁵⁶ Bribery and nepotism run rampant under Saleh, who placed his son, three nephews, and half-brother in charge of the country’s security apparatus.⁵⁷ Over decades, weak state institutions, combined with emerging extragovernmental elites such as tribal factions and the business community, led to pervasive corruption.⁵⁸

The Yemeni public also grew increasingly disaffected by the prosperity of the privileged class, which remains isolated from the squalor in the rest of the nation. Yemen is the poorest of the Arab nations. Since 1990, it has consistently ranked near the bottom of the UNDP Human Development Index, with a per capita GDP roughly one-thirteenth that of Saudi Arabia.⁵⁹ Only 40 percent of Yemenis in urban areas have access to potable water, and for the 70 percent of the population who live in a rural setting, 26 percent have access to electricity.⁶⁰ Unemployment sits at approximately 35 percent, with nearly half the population below the poverty line.⁶¹ In the face of these conditions, alienated poor Yemenis were often more likely to be radicalized into a militant group, as evidenced by captured al Qaeda members who have admitted to being attracted to the monthly pay.⁶²

A demographic crisis in Yemen compounded the country’s economic struggles. In 2000, when terrorist activity in Yemen was approaching its peak, the country had a population growth rate of 3.36 percent, one of the highest in the world.⁶³ Population growth restricted Yemen’s ability to provide services, created increased demand for resources, and caused mass urban migration and falling wages. With youth unemployment near 50 percent, the younger generation was more disaffected than ever, making it increasingly susceptible to radicalization.⁶⁴

- *Ideological resonance.* Salafism emerged in the northwestern province of Saada in the early 1980s as an apolitical social movement and facilitated the emergence of al Qaeda years later, when Saudi-trained clerics adopted the group’s justification for violent action.⁶⁵ Following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the Saleh regime enlisted the support of jihadist groups who pledged to fight against the socialist separatist movement in the southern part of the country.⁶⁶ Yemen’s Islamic Reform Party, al Islah, was known to have provided shelter and support to foreign jihadists arriving in Yemen.⁶⁷ The Yemen Islamic Jihad organization also assisted the government in quelling rebellions, and was funded by bin Laden before al Qaeda even existed.⁶⁸ Thus, while Salafism originally arrived as an apolitical movement, it ultimately provided the bedrock upon which al Qaeda could introduce its violent political agenda.

Period II: The Decline of al Qaeda Affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia

- *Local support.* Al Qaeda had hoped that its surge of attacks in 2003 would create mass appeal and mobilize the public against the United States, but instead it found people progressively frightened and alienated by its tactics.⁶⁹ The organization suffered significant criticism after a November 2004 attack on a housing complex that had once housed U.S. nationals working with an American defense contractor. Few Americans were in the complex at the time, however, and instead the attack killed and injured other foreigners and several Saudis.⁷⁰ Al Qaeda’s aggressive, unorganized attacks often killed Saudi citizens, undercutting the group’s public support and severely crippling its ability to recruit.⁷¹ Unable to justify its tactics with

religious arguments, the group was forced to fill its ranks with young recruits whose inexperience hampered the organization's ability to carry out attacks.⁷²

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* In an effort to exploit public contempt for al Qaeda, Saudi authorities took steps to improve border monitoring, launching joint border patrols with the Yemeni government. A new barbed wire fence with thermal cameras and aerial patrols along the border with Iraq helped staunch the flow of insurgent fighters between the two countries. The government also restructured its military training program and provided better equipment, and security forces responded to the upsurge of terrorist attacks in 2003–2004 with a sweep of arrests and battles with various al Qaeda cells throughout the Kingdom.⁷³

Government security forces conducted frequent raids, published lists of al Qaeda operatives, launched information operations to portray the extremist ideology as a perversion of Wahhabi Islam, and even managed to infiltrate al Qaeda ranks.⁷⁴ To complement these measures, the Saudi government implemented a month-long amnesty program in June 2004 to encourage al Qaeda desertions.⁷⁵ To promote surrender, the Saudis emphasized the fine living conditions of prisoners, and surrenders were publicized on television to make desertions appear commonplace.⁷⁶

In 2004, the Saudi government also undertook an aggressive propaganda campaign designed to counter al Qaeda's narrative and reduce the group's recruitment pool. Newspapers published the confessions of jailed operatives.⁷⁷ The Saudi national television station aired interviews with the fathers of al Qaeda militants denouncing their sons, as well as jailed al Qaeda operatives' calls for militants to surrender.⁷⁸ Televised pictures of Muslim children injured by bombings further alienated the public against al Qaeda.⁷⁹

Al Qaeda in Yemen

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* The primary factor leading to AQY's decline was joint U.S.-Yemeni security cooperation. After the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing in the port of Aden, and especially after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. government was adamant about securing the cooperation of countries that hosted al Qaeda opera-

tives. Saleh's government was among those that joined these efforts, carrying out mass arrests of terrorist supporters and coordinating with the U.S. intelligence community to track and strike wanted terrorists. The United States assisted in creating a coast guard, patrolling the Bab al Mandab strait, and providing technical assistance, equipment, and training to the Yemeni Central Security forces' Anti-Terrorism Unit.⁸⁰ As a member of the UN Security Council in 1990, Yemen had refused to support the United States in the Gulf War and lost nearly \$500 million in aid from the United States and the World Bank as a consequence of that decision.⁸¹ Saleh thus saw counterterrorism support as an opportunity to regain favor with, and access to aid from, the U.S. government.

The high point for U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism efforts came in 2002 with the killing of AQY's leader, Abu Ali al-Harithi, by a drone strike in Marib province.⁸² Yemen captured Harithi's replacement, Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, the following year.⁸³ With AQY's leadership severely depleted, the war in Iraq soon became a more appealing cause to militants than the crumbling effort in Yemen.

Period III: The Gestation and Birth of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* With the United States focused on Iraq and Afghanistan and the Saleh administration facing uprisings in the north and the threat of secession in the south, both governments shifted their focus away from extremist activities in Yemen.⁸⁴ The pressure that led to AQY's decline was thus removed, allowing the group to reconstitute its strength and opening the door for the emergence of AQAP. There was not a corresponding decline in Saudi counterterrorism pressure, and this imbalance eventually led AQY to merge with its remaining counterparts in Saudi Arabia.

Today, Yemen's government still has done little to monitor its nearly 1,000 miles of borderland with Saudi Arabia and Oman.⁸⁵ It also has roughly 1,200 miles of unpatrolled coastline on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which permits the free flow of traffic with the Horn of Africa.⁸⁶ National forces are able to exert only minimal consistent control outside of the Sana'a and Aden regions, making counterterrorism operations exceedingly difficult.⁸⁷ The rest of

the country is largely controlled by autonomous, often clashing, tribal factions.⁸⁸ Illegal criminal networks and religious extremist groups also hold sway, and frequently provide sanctuary to al Qaeda cadres.⁸⁹

- *Leadership.* Al Qaeda's leadership in the region exploited the decline in counterterrorism pressure and the resultant growth in available sanctuary. Moreover, the February 2006 Sana'a prison break catalyzed AQY's resurgence. With strong ties to al Qaeda core, escapees Qasim al-Raymi and Nasir al-Wahishi quickly bolstered the command structure of the group and united elements of the disaggregated organization. In addition, the emergence of Anwar al-Awlaki as a charismatic leader and propagandist allowed AQAP to expand its influence to the West and recruit from a new base of support.

Even prior to the emergence of AQAP, the campaign carried out by al Qaeda's affiliates in Saudi Arabia and Yemen targeted both local and foreign interests. This ambiguous enemy hierarchy, known as "ideological hybridization," indicated that the organizations saw the need to attack both "near" and "far" enemies.⁹⁰ By addressing a wider range of grievances, the embattled groups were able to expand their bases of recruitment.⁹¹ To secure funds from al Qaeda core, however, AQAP was required to further broaden its international scope.⁹² With its airline-bombing attempt on Christmas Day, 2009, AQAP thus launched its first strike outside of the Middle East.

- *Public dissatisfaction.* The final factor leading to the emergence of AQAP was the Yemeni discontent that remained unaddressed by the Saleh government. Though counterterrorism pressure temporarily stemmed AQY's activities, the factors that led to the rise of AQY were only nominally addressed. With 3,000 Yemeni veterans of the Afghanistan war aggressively recruited by AQAP, the radical Islamic movement soon grew stronger than ever.

Today, AQAP has increasingly adopted and exploited the political and economic grievances of local tribes against the Saleh regime, receiving funding, protection, and recruits in return for supporting tribal causes.⁹³ Through *Sada al Malahim*, its Arabic-language magazine, the group has strengthened relations with tribes and spread anti-regime propaganda.⁹⁴

The Future of AQAP

Global Focus

In 2025, AQAP will likely operate with an expanded emphasis on international targets. Given the group's persistence, as demonstrated by two strikes against the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a in 2009, four assassination attempts against Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, and its recent airline attacks, it is probable that another plot is being developed, likely against an aviation target. Furthermore, the *Limburg* bombing in 2002 and the attempted attack on the Abqaiq oil facility in 2006 indicate the probability that AQAP will use its position to increase efforts against oil infrastructure in an effort to disrupt the global energy market.

In light of its increasingly international focus, AQAP is also likely to continue Operation Hemorrhage and expand its operations against the United States. Although the cargo bombs failed to detonate, they played well to AQAP's larger objectives, imposing higher security costs, disrupting air commerce, and signaling the group's increased standing as a Salafi-jihadi threat to the United States.⁹⁵ Operation Hemorrhage allows the group to continue carrying out attacks despite its limited ranks, estimated to be between 100 and 300 fighters.⁹⁶ Mirroring the strategy proclaimed by Osama bin Laden of baiting and provoking the United States into a costly war,⁹⁷ AQAP leadership hopes their attacks will provoke foreign armed intervention, further bleeding the West of its military and economic resources.⁹⁸

Networking

AQAP has demonstrated an interest in controlling the Bab al Mandab, a narrow maritime chokepoint at the southern end of the Red Sea that is critical for international shipping.⁹⁹ This interest illustrates a developing strategic focus on sea-based control as part of the larger effort to create an Islamic caliphate.¹⁰⁰ To expand its area of influence into such critical shipping lanes, AQAP will likely increase maritime operations. Moreover, to broaden its operations outside of Yemen, the group will continue to develop lines of communication and exchange with al Shabaab, al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia.

In April 2011, the United States captured Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, a Somali al Shabaab leader described

as an “important conduit” between his organization and AQAP.¹⁰¹ After three months of interrogation, Warsame was indicted on charges of conspiring with and providing material support to both groups, and is said to have provided valuable intelligence to U.S. officials about the two groups’ cooperation. In 2010, the Somali deputy minister of defense, Rashid al Alimi, had reported that AQAP sent two boatloads of arms to al Shabaab, along with 12 AQAP representatives who provided money and training expertise.¹⁰² Somalia’s treasury minister, Abdirahman Omar Osman, stated that AQAP operatives traveled to Somalia to determine if it would be a suitable environment to expand al Qaeda operations.¹⁰³ Although the claims of Somali government officials should be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism, al Shabaab’s hold on southcentral Somali ports makes the insurgent group an appealing partner for AQAP.

Information and Communication Technologies

AQAP’s expanded use of media will help support its international growth. Already, the impact of its online magazine *Inspire* has been twofold: tactically, it has sought to teach individuals how to carry out attacks, clean and fire weapons, and construct bombs; strategically, it has empowered individuals to believe they can take up arms, strike the enemy, and become a meaningful contributor to the jihad movement.¹⁰⁴ With AQAP’s increasing propaganda campaign, individuals can be radicalized from abroad and trained to attack the West from within. AQAP can thus be expected to expand its English media apparatus, increasing its ability to inspire lone wolf attacks like the Fort Hood shooting.

Leadership

In recent months, a number of mid-level operatives, media officials, and emerging leaders in AQAP have been killed, including Abu Ali al-Harithi, Abada al-Waeli, Abu Ayman al-Masri, Ali Saleh Farhan, and Mabkhout Ali Jaber al-Shuwani.¹⁰⁵ On June 22, 2011, however, more than 60 Islamist militants tunneled out of a prison in the eastern port city of Mukalla, roughly three times the number who escaped from the Sana’a prison five years earlier.¹⁰⁶ The 2006 escape restored crucial leadership to al Qaeda in Yemen. The June 2011 one may prove to do the same for AQAP.

A more permissive environment developing in the wake of the Arab Spring could also sustain the group’s expansion, particularly if sympathetic leadership were to replace the Saleh government. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a former general under President Saleh and now a leader of the opposition movement, may become a central figure in Yemen’s developing government. Married to the sister of Tariq al-Fadhli, who is believed to have orchestrated the 1992 hotel bombings in Aden, Ahmar is known to have strong ties to Islamist militants. Following the USS *Cole* bombing and the Saleh government’s counterterrorism campaign, Ahmar and his associates were marginalized in the Yemeni government. If Ahmar re-emerges as a key figure in the developing government, then Islamists with strong ties to AQAP will likely land in positions of power under his leadership.

Additionally, in February 2011, a prominent Yemeni cleric named Abdul Majid al-Zindani, named a “Specially Designated National” by the U.S. Treasury,¹⁰⁷ called for the ouster of President Saleh and the creation of an Islamic state.¹⁰⁸ Though Zindani is not a government official, he is said to carry “considerable political and moral weight,” so his extremist sympathies could have a significant effect on Yemen’s political landscape at large.¹⁰⁹

Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP’s expert bomb maker who was responsible for one of the assassination attempts against Prince Muhammad bin Nayef in 2009, could also provide unique leadership to the organization.¹¹⁰ Asiri crafted the device in the 2009 Christmas Day attempt as well as the explosives found in the 2010 parcel bombs, proving his ability to construct imaginative devices capable of avoiding detection.¹¹¹ According to AQAP’s special edition of *Inspire* in November 2010, Asiri is “safe and well and... currently busy teaching a new batch of students the latest in bomb making skills.”¹¹² At best, Asiri is in hiding, still plotting the next attack with increasing room to maneuver as regional instability grows. At worst, he is instructing and supervising others to produce cheap, deadly weapons.

Anwar al-Awlaki’s high-profile connection to many recent plots targeting the United States will continue to elevate his role within AQAP. Although his influence is said to be relatively low among rank-and-file Arabic speakers, his ability to radicalize individuals throughout the Western world poses a significant threat.¹¹³ Awlaki will thus continue his propaganda campaign aimed at English

speakers, who represent a deadly recruitment pool previously untapped by al Qaeda. As AQAP shifts its focus to international targets and Western media continue to trumpet Awlaki's influence, his prominence in AQAP will surely rise.

Political and Economic Turmoil

The current protests and resultant crackdown in Yemen have the potential to catalyze AQAP's expansion. With the likely transition of power from President Ali Abdullah Saleh to an interim government, a power vacuum will emerge that may not be filled quickly. Anti-regime protesters are mostly calling for a secular, democratic government, which runs contrary to the objectives of AQAP.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, the opposition is currently united against Saleh, and his ouster is likely to stir factional conflict as respective groups look for political representation. Construction of a new government, the Houthi revolt in the north, the secessionist movement in the south, and Yemen's dwindling supply of oil and water (expected to run dry by 2017 and 2025, respectively) will create sufficient distractions to allow AQAP to expand out of the spot light, much as AQY did in 2006.¹¹⁵ As it stands, the organization has already increased its area of operation by seizing the province of Abyan in March 2011 and declaring it an "Islamic Emirate."¹¹⁶

Even though most assessments point to the contrary, the current turmoil in Yemen could potentially play against AQAP's interests. Leaders of Yemen's pro-democracy movement argue that the public is willing and able to support the counterterrorism projects for which the United States currently depends on the existing government, and may even be better placed to counteract extremist rhetoric.¹¹⁷ Moreover, the merger of al Qaeda's forces in Yemen and Saudi Arabia has masked certain internal rifts and differences in methods and areas of operation that still exist between the groups.¹¹⁸ In addition, with the Yemeni government's tendency to boost U.S. counterterrorism funding by labeling any disturbance an al Qaeda attack, AQAP may get credit in the coming months and years for local hostilities it has not in fact launched.¹¹⁹ Despite the group's eagerness to deepen tribal affiliations, Yemeni tribes are said to have far more points of friction than of cooperation with AQAP, and remain wary of the modifications to their internal power dynamics that AQAP would bring about.¹²⁰

After the May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden, AQAP is poised to assume greater prominence than al Qaeda core, having already taken on the mantle of the United States' primary extremist threat. Nevertheless, the organization is not the robust, wholly united front it seeks to present. Unrest in Yemen has the potential to bring as many problems as it does opportunities for AQAP, and so the United States should focus resources on exploiting such weaknesses. If the United States can undercut AQAP's message to Yemeni communities and ensure provision of essential services during the current period of instability, it could diminish the impact of extremist activities.¹²¹

Notes

1. Until the January 2009 merger proclaimed the official name "al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," the labeling of al Qaeda's affiliates in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia was not always cohesive or consistent. Extremist cells in Saudi Arabia were occasionally referred to as AQAP, while Yemeni groups like the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army now have their attacks attributed to AQY. In line with common precedent, this analysis will refer to Yemen's pre-2009 cadres as "al Qaeda in Yemen," and corresponding operations in Saudi Arabia will be called "al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia"

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