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REPORT

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Al-Qa'eda in the Arabian Peninsula:

Does It Pose a Threat to Yemen and the West?

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Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding



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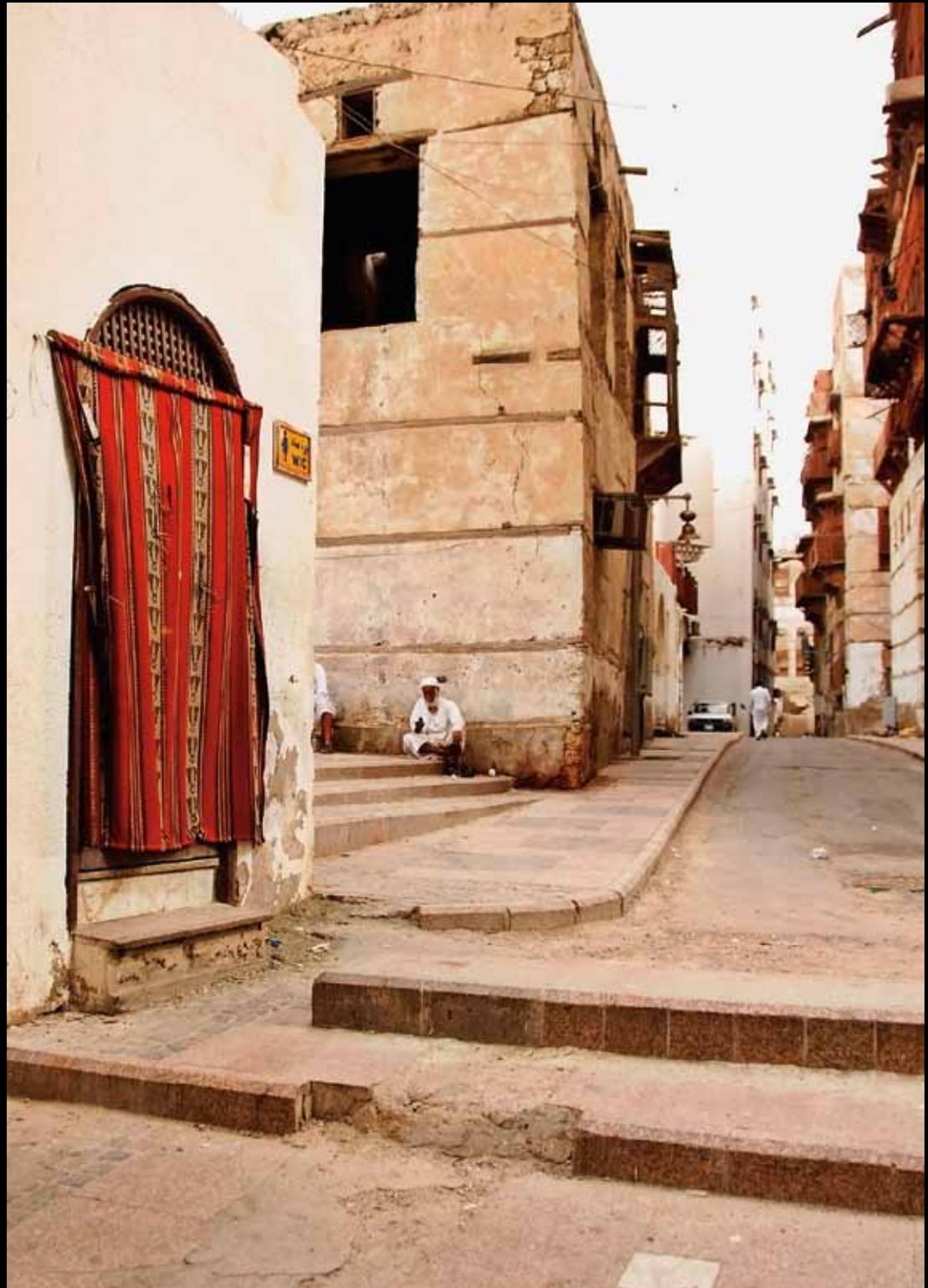
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Yemen: Another Somalia or Waziristan?

In the past eighteen months, the Obama national security team has become increasingly more concerned about the threat that al-Qa'eda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) poses to Yemen and the American homeland. According to leaked American diplomatic cables, during a March 2009 meeting between King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and John Brennan, President Obama's top counterterrorism adviser, the latter mentioned the United States' fear of Yemen becoming another Waziristan and urged cooperation between the two countries to prevent al-Qa'eda's dangerous influence in Yemen. The Saudi king replied that "having Somalia next door to Yemen only adds to the danger."¹

In a December 2010 interview with ABC's *Good Morning America*, Attorney General Eric Holder included the American-born Yemeni preacher Anwar al-Awlaki on his top list of concerns. According to him, al-Awlaki, believed to be hiding in Yemen and familiar with American ways, has been elevated to an exclusive group that includes bin Laden due to the advantage he has over other terrorists. "He would be on the same list with bin Laden," the attorney general told ABC television. "He's up there. I don't know whether he's [number] one, two, three, four — I don't know. But he's certainly on the list of the people who worry me the most."²

Indeed AQAP's Yemen branch, under the leadership of Nasser al-Wahishi (a former private secretary to bin Laden and a disciplined and experienced operative) and Qassim al-Raymi (its military commander) has become more organized and coherent. Its recent resurgence is also closely linked to the country's deteriorating social, economic, and political conditions as well as the dismantling of its neighboring Saudi counterpart. Its structure and conduct has changed since it merged with the Saudi branch in 2009 to form AQAP. The arrival of approximately two dozen seasoned and skilled fighters from Saudi Arabia, some of whom have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, revitalized AQAP by providing a sense of purpose and initiative, as well as operational know-how in bomb making, media outreach, and other areas.

For example, Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, a Saudi AQAP operator who studied chemistry at King Saud University, is believed to be the top technical expert and bomb maker. American intelligence officials assert that he designed the foiled mail bombs in October 2010 as well as the underwear explosives. This son of a Saudi military officer is also suspected of designing the body-cavity bomb that killed his younger brother in a failed attempt to assassinate Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the top Saudi counterterrorism official, last year.³ Al-Asiri, who never made it to Afghanistan or Iraq and who acquired his bomb-making skills after joining AQAP,

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shows how just one technical expert can serve as a force multiplier in a small group. He thrust AQAP into the spotlight as a major front in Washington's war against al-Qa'eda and its allies and has rattled Obama's national security team.

AQAP has also received notoriety due to Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American cleric whom the Obama administration designated in April 2010 as a legitimate assassination target. While the media's coverage of him focuses mainly on his ability to influence young, western Muslims, such as the Christmas Day bomber and the Fort Hood shooter, he is largely unknown in Yemen and neighboring countries. Although he serves as a unifying figure for AQAP, he has no social constituency inside or outside Yemen. In other words, Washington has overblown his importance.

Despite a concerted campaign by the Yemeni government and the American military to destroy AQAP, results have been mixed. As of June 2010, AQAP has carried out several attacks on security facilities in the south, killing about 100 members of the army and security forces and injuring many others. Its members have also displayed operational boldness and sophistication by launching simultaneous and coordinated raids on a *mukhabarat* (Yemeni intelligence) headquarters in Aden, freeing prisoners and killing eleven people, as well as an attack on two police stations in Zinjibar that killed three officers.⁴

Such activities represent a radical departure for al-Qa'eda. After an American strike that killed Yemeni civilians and children in December 2009, its operators joined a protest rally broadcast live on Al Jazeera, during which a speaker shouldering an AK-47 rifle shouted to Yemeni counterterrorism officers: "Soldiers, you should know we do not want to fight you! There is no issue between you and us. The issue is between us and America and its agents. Beware taking the side of America."⁵

For a brief moment, AQAP seemed to have learned from al-Qa'eda's past by avoiding the deadly trap of attacking the "near enemy." Since its founding, Wahishi and Raymi have used Internet magazines and interviews with local journalists in a concerted effort to appeal to the people of Yemen, especially to the tribes that have offered them shelter and protection. They encouraged al-Qa'eda members to marry tribal women and mediate tribal disputes. In early 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri issued an audiotape addressed to "the noble and defiant tribes of Yemen," in which he urged them to imitate the defiant Afghan Pashtun and Baluch tribes and "support your mujahideen brothers."⁶ Al-Qa'eda had learned a costly and painful lesson in

Iraq: Muslim public support, especially by the dominant tribes, was vital to its survival. Local outreach, however, soon ended.

Marking a recent shift in its tactics, AQAP has declared all-out war against the “tyrant” Saleh government and its soldiers, “who terrorize Muslims, support the crusade against our country, and are the first line of American defense in Yemen.”⁷ In an August 2010 audio message, it also threatened to overthrow the Saudi monarchy “for its participation in the U.S.-led crusade against Islam” and called on the Saudi armed forces to attack Israel.⁸ Now the al-Qa’eda branch is waging a hit-and-run guerrilla insurgency campaign against the very Yemeni officers whom it had vowed not to fight. In an audio message, al-Qa’eda military commander Raymi declared his intent to establish the “Aden-Abyan Islamic Army” (AAIA), a militia that seeks to overthrow the Saleh regime—a tall order and one fraught with hubris, but nevertheless revealing of al-Qa’eda’s new tactics.⁹

Regardless of al-Qa’eda’s rationalizing, the bloodletting will inevitably alienate ordinary Yemenis and will neither empower nor endear them to AQAP. Once al-Qa’eda’s presence becomes too costly for its tribal hosts it will become unwelcome, as happened in Shabwa province, where increasing evidence shows the situation between the tribes and al-Qa’eda to be “tense.” Al-Qa’eda operators were forced to leave some villages and flee to the mountains after locals became weary of their presence and the ensuing unwanted attention and risk.¹⁰

AQAP Embeds Itself in Yemen’s Internal Conflicts

The Yemen-based al-Qa’eda currently has between fifty and 300 core operatives, as many as those in Pakistan, although they are younger, more inexperienced, and lack the operational skills and training of al-Qa’eda Central’s members. Unlike the previous Afghanistan generation, most are rookies with little combat experience. As I learned in my interviews with a dozen or so Yemeni al-Qa’eda members during 2007-08, and contrary to the terrorism narrative that portrays AQAP as a potent fighting force, most are semi-illiterate, disfranchised, and lack the knowledge and sophistication of their predecessor generation. AQAP is more of a shadowy fringe group than an organization with a mass following.

Nevertheless, its linkage to the country’s problems (e.g., deepening social and political crises, lawless tribes, and crippled state institutions) is alarming, for this has led to the branch’s

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growing brazenness and activism. For example, AQAP is manipulating and leveraging its tribal connections in the south to gain a foothold in the region's rising secessionist movement. This strategy comes at a critical time, for the separatist movement has gained momentum. In fact, a sizable segment of southern public opinion is demanding a divorce from the union imposed by the north in the early 1990s. Jihadist chiefs, such as Khaled Abdul Nabi, who joined the Saleh government in 1994 and battled the socialists have now turned against their former allies to directly support the region's secessionist forces. Although Abdul Nabi's goal is to establish a Sharia-based state there, he is willing to ally himself with a smaller enemy—southern nationalists and socialists—to defeat a greater evil: the Saleh regime. He is frequently cited by local and foreign media and travels widely, and with complete impunity, with a large armed escort.¹¹

Al-Qa'eda's Yemeni branch is attempting to embed itself in various raging internal conflicts (viz., in the south, the Shabwa and adjacent Abyan provinces, and Marib province [east of Yemen's capital]) and position itself as the spearhead of opposition and armed resistance to the central government. Since August 2010, government forces have battled the opposition and al-Qa'eda elements to regain control over Abyan's provincial city of Loudar, leaving dozens of people in both camps dead and forcing thousands more from their homes.¹² Even after examining the statements made by the authorities and the rebels, it is difficult to tell whether the former is confronting the secessionists, the jihadis, or both. Moreover, the separatists have denied joining forces with the jihadis; however, Yemeni reporters in Abyan say that the separatists and the jihadis cooperate indirectly, thereby facilitating each other's attacks against security forces despite their ideological differences.¹³

Yemen is a fragile state. Its institutions have frayed to the breaking point, its economy has collapsed, and its political system is unstable. In addition to the secessionist movement, a rebellion has raged on and off in the north between the government and the Houthis since 2004, thousands have died and hundreds of thousands have been displaced.¹⁴ Feuding tribes, some abetted by the authorities, have taken their toll on the central government's authority and credibility. This sociopolitical upheaval is driven by the same reasons as in the south: economic grievances, massive unemployment, abject poverty, declining oil revenues, pervasive corruption, unsustainable water consumption, and an incompetent bureaucracy. Al-Qa'eda has found particularly fertile ground in the south due to the large numbers of unemployed young men who are angry with the government. In my interviews with such people since 2007, many have said that they were drawn to al-Qa'eda because

of its allure and defiant rhetoric and because the system had abandoned them to a bleak life in the desert.

Statistics do not convey the extent of the country's socioeconomic misery. Almost 40 percent of its 23 million people are unemployed, more than a third of all Yemenis are undernourished, and almost 50 percent live in abject poverty. Along with being the poorest Arab country, it also has one of the region's highest fertility rates (upward of 3.7 percent). As a result, 60 percent of its population is under the age of twenty. Yet while the population has increased dramatically, resources have declined at an even faster rate. In the next few years, Yemen's oil, its major source of hard currency, will only meet its domestic consumption needs.

Despite pledges of support by its oil-producing Gulf neighbors and the international community, little progress has been achieved on the socioeconomic front. In fact, less than 10 percent of the aid pledged by regional and international donors has been delivered due to the country's weak absorption capacity and donor fatigue. Not surprisingly, the majority of people's living conditions continue to deteriorate.

The Weakening of Saleh's Rule

Moreover, the Saleh government can no longer deliver social goods and patronage—the historically solid underpinnings of his rule—or manipulate the tribal disputes that allow it to maintain an upper hand. After more than three decades in power, Saleh's ability to co-opt adversaries and maintain friends has shrunk considerably. American diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks have revealed his calculated effort to use Yemen's daunting challenges as a kind of threat to coax Washington into providing him with more aid. In a September 2009 meeting with John Brennan, Obama's top counterterrorism adviser, Saleh pressed the American envoy to offer “deeds, not only words,” to help ameliorate Yemen's social, economic, and political crisis. “Referencing the high poverty rate and illicit arms flows into both Yemen and Somalia, he concluded, “if you don't help, this country will become worse than Somalia,” reported American ambassador Stephen A. Seche, who attended the meeting.¹⁵

This unpromising scenario, however, does not signal the Saleh regime's imminent collapse or that Yemen is on its way to becoming another Somalia and thus risking domination by al-Qa'eda. Despite its staggering problems, a frequent visitor recognizes that the government

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still guides the ordinary peoples' daily lives, either in the form of jobs, subsistence, health, education, or patronage. The security services, the bedrock of the regime's survival, provide employment and status (though with sometimes meager salaries) to many tribes, act as a shadow government, and secure the state's hold over society.¹⁶ Saudi money and patronage sustain influential tribes, thereby giving them a stake in the existing order and an incentive to prevent al-Qa'eda from setting up shop.

The problem is that by giving financial support directly to the tribes, the Saudis have further weakened the central government's hold and reach. A prime example of this was displayed in August 2010, when the newspaper *Hadeeth Al-Madana* reported that Crown Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz was threatening to stop the money that "flows from Saudi Arabia to Yemeni tribes for security" because "Saudi Arabia may be inclined to redirect the money to the Houthis," since they were the stronger faction and did not provide shelter to al-Qa'eda.¹⁷ All in all, such intervention has strengthened certain tribes at the expense of the Yemeni government.

The convergence of dismal socioeconomic conditions with deepening political and tribal fault lines has taxed the state's capacity as well as its ability to prevent centrifugal groups from threatening its integrity and sovereignty, which could lead to perpetual instability. Given Yemen's weakening institutions, the status quo is unsustainable. The country's deepening crisis can only be addressed by a concerted multiyear effort by a strong central government that is transparent and representative, one that seeks to end the existing pervasive corruption, waste, and over-securitization.

Exaggerating the AQAP Threat

Nevertheless, reducing Yemen's challenges to that of the al-Qa'eda branch and portraying it as bin Laden's headquarters for transnational jihad can be misleading. Although AQAP is extremely dangerous, as shown by its offensive against the Yemeni authorities, the failed underwear bomber, and the foiled mail bombings, it poses one of the weaker challenges to Yemen as well as a limited security menace to the West. It does not possess the material and human means, the endurance to sustain a transnational campaign, or the resources to build a social welfare infrastructure and viable alliances with Yemeni tribes. In fact, the organization is inherently dependent upon the generosity and protection of tribes that are notorious for their shifting loyalties and allegiances. Pragmatism and survival in a harsh environment, rather than

ideology, govern tribal conduct. By the end of 2010 al-Awlaki's own tribe, together with more powerful tribes, reached a sweetened deal with the government to chase AQAP operators out of its neighborhood. Feeding on sociopolitical chaos, al-Qa'eda has repeatedly shown itself to be its own worst enemy. Now AQAP is militarily confronting the Yemeni authorities and western powers simultaneously, a risky venture that will most likely considerably degrade its capabilities.

Following the Christmas Day bombing attempt, President Obama declared that Umar Farouk Abdulmatallab, the Nigerian-born suspect, had acted under orders from the al-Qa'eda branch in Yemen, which "trained him, equipped him with those explosives and directed him to attack" the United States. Vowing to hold accountable all of those involved, Obama sent a letter to Saleh, delivered by General Petraeus, then head of the U.S. Central Command, in which he pledged to double the \$70 million in counterterrorism aid to the poverty-stricken country in 2009. This figure did not include any of the of programs run by American Special Forces and the CIA.¹⁸

According to leaked American diplomatic cables, Saleh rejected Petraeus's proposal to send American advisers along on Yemeni counterterrorism operations; however, he agrees with Petraeus' proposal to replace the use of cruise missiles with fixed-wing bombers circling outside Yemeni territory "out of sight" and to engage AQAP targets when actionable intelligence became available.¹⁹

The United States has already ramped up its counterterrorism assistance to Yemen to \$155 million in fiscal year 2010 and as much as \$250 million in increased security support, from \$4.6 million in 2006.²⁰ Yemen now receives as much aid as Pakistan, a clear indication that the United States perceives AQAP as a "very serious threat," according to Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²¹ Indeed, CIA analysts reportedly see a greater threat from al-Qa'eda in Yemen than in Pakistan.²² Before the failed Christmas Day bombing, the Obama administration escalated its military operations in Yemen; since then, it has carried out at least four missile and air strikes in the country's mountains and deserts, killing dozens of civilians along with a few alleged militants.²³

But doubts exist as to whether these attacks are effective or not. For example, in December 2009, according to a report by Amnesty International, an American naval ship located offshore Yemen fired a double Cruise missile, hitting what was supposed to be an al-Qa'eda training camp in Abyan province. The Yemeni government's first report claimed that its air force had killed

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“around 34” al-Qa’eda fighters and that others had been captured elsewhere in coordinated ground operations. The next day, Obama called Saleh to thank him for his cooperation, pledged continued American support, and sent Petraeus to personally deliver a package of enhanced counterterrorism and security assistance.

While Saleh praised the strikes, during his meeting with Petraeus he said that “mistakes were made” in the killing of civilians, lamented the use of “not very accurate” cruise missiles, and welcomed the use of aircraft-deployed precision-guided bombs instead. Having publicly claimed that these had been Yemeni strikes, Saleh’s major concern was to keep up the ruse and avert any public backlash.

“We’ll continue saying the bombs are ours, not yours,” Saleh told Petraeus, prompting Deputy Prime Minister Rashad al-Alimi to joke that he had just “lied” by telling Parliament that the bombs in Arhab, Abyan, and Shebwa were American-made but deployed by the Yemen airforce.²⁴

An Unrelenting Public Backlash

The Yemeni press promptly identified the Americans as responsible for the attack and gathered to express its outrage; al-Qa’eda joined the rally to capitalize on public anger. A parliamentary inquiry found that the strike had killed at least forty-one members of the Haydara family in one of two Bedouin encampments located near the makeshift al-Qa’eda tent. Three more civilians were killed and nine were wounded four days later when they stepped on unexploded munitions from the missile. According to an Amnesty International investigation, the missile had been loaded with cluster bombs, which disperse small munitions, some of which do not immediately explode, thereby increasing the likelihood of civilian casualties. Human rights groups widely condemned their use.²⁵

The December strikes may have killed fourteen al-Qa’eda fighters, according to the parliamentary commission, but it also instigated a public outcry against the Saleh regime and his American allies, thereby providing al-Qa’eda with a propaganda coup. Further undermining the regime’s authority was the firing of a Cruise missile at a suspected al-Qa’eda gathering in Marib province, east of Yemen’s capital, in May 2010. Jabir al-Shabwani, a deputy governor in the province who had reportedly been seeking to persuade the militants to lay down their arms, was killed along with four escorts. Once again Amnesty International found evidence that cluster munitions were used. The killing of al-Shabwani, a sheikh of the powerful Abeida tribe, almost triggered another rebellion against the Saleh regime: the tribe, including al-Shabwani’s father Skeikh

Ali al-Shabwani, attacked an oil pipeline and lines of an electrical power station that provides power to the capital, causing blackouts that lasted for several hours.²⁶ Saleh, whom American officials described as “angry,” agreed to tribal arbitration and paid blood money to Shabwani’s family and tribe, a concession that averted a bloodbath. According to several Yemeni opinion-makers with whom I talked, the killing of al-Shabwani sent shock waves through the regime and undermined the hard-pressed government’s legitimacy in the eyes of tribes and the public at large. Due to the great need for American assistance, Saleh did not eject its forces or call for a halt to such clandestine operations—so long as they do not destabilize his rule.

Leaked American diplomatic cables show Saleh working hard to use the fight against AQAP as a means of leverage against his internal enemies and to extract financial and material support from the United States, but on his own terms – imposing strict limits over American operations in his country even as he helped disguise them as his own. For example, during his meeting with Brennan he repeatedly requested more funds and equipment to fight AQAP and the Houthi insurgency. According to a cable by the American ambassador, Saleh told Brennan that “this war we’re launching [against the Houthis] is a war on behalf of the U.S. ... the Houthis are your enemies too,” citing videos of al-Houthis chanting: “Death to America.” America’s failure to view them as terrorists, Saleh added, and to support the Yemeni government undermines its claims of friendship and cooperation. In his cable, the ambassador noted that the Houthis have not attacked American interests in the six rounds of fighting between them and the government forces since the conflict broke out in 2004.²⁷

Therefore, the strike that killed al-Shabwani and his four escorts reinforced Saleh’s worst fears about the danger inherent in unilateral American military actions. Attempting to preempt internal criticism, Yemen’s foreign minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi told *Al-Hayat*, a Saudi-owned Arabic-language newspaper, that while the United States has carried out attacks in the country, the airstrikes ended because the “Yemeni government ascertained they weren’t achieving results.” Al-Qirbi added that combating al-Qa’eda is the responsibility of Yemen’s security forces and that his government would not extradite al-Awlaki to the United States if he were captured.²⁸

Saleh and his advisers may be surprised by recent reports of increased American operations. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, Obama’s national security team has called for an escalation of operations in Yemen, including armed drones: “We are looking to draw on all of the capabilities at our disposal,” a senior official told the *Post*. He described plans for “a ramp-up over a period of months.”²⁹ *The Wall Street Journal* cited American counterterrorism officials as saying that Special Operations Forces

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and the CIA have been positioning equipment drones and personnel in Yemen, Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia to step up operations against AQAP and al-Shabab.³⁰

Furthermore, the foiled mail bombing of October 2010 added urgency to the Obama administration's review of expanded military options, which include placing elite hunter-killer teams under CIA authority.³¹ *The Wall Street Journal* cited unnamed officials as saying that support was growing within the administration for shifting operational control to the CIA, a move that would allow it to strike at suspected targets in Yemen with greater stealth and speed and without the Yemeni government's explicit blessing. Moreover, the White House is already considering the addition of armed CIA drones to its arsenal in Yemen, mirroring the agency's Pakistan campaign.³² This proposed escalation comes on top of the Special Operations teams already in place in Yemen that play an expanded role in the country, including an effort to kill al-Asiri, al-Awlaki, and other suspected al-Qa'eda members.³³

Instigating American Military Intervention

Underlying the Obama administration's strategy are assumptions that do not fully recognize the complexity of the situation in Yemen or the inherent risks of deepening American military involvement there. A panicky and over-reactive response might further complicate matters for the Yemeni government. In fact, AQAP's persistent efforts to attack the United States appear to be aimed at forcing it to intervene militarily in Yemen, a scenario that would feed the country's rising anti-American sentiment and supply al-Qa'eda with plenty of recruits and public support. Saleh has warned senior American interlocutors that deepening military involvement in Yemen might be costly in blood. In a previously cited meeting with Obama's counterterrorism adviser, Saleh pledged unfettered access to Yemen's national territory for American operations against AQAP. "Highlighting the potential for a future AQAP attack on the U.S. Embassy or other Western targets, Saleh said, 'I have given you an open door on terrorism, so I am not responsible,'" concluded a cable sent by the American ambassador.³⁴

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From the beginning, Yemen has provided a fertile breeding ground for jihadis. In turn, the Saleh government has used them on and off to keep its adversaries, including the socialists and southern separatists, off balance. After 11 September 2001, most jihadis accepted a tacit government deal that required them to stop launching attacks within Yemen; however, it was rather vague when it came to what the group could do outside the country.

This co-existence deal recently collapsed after several factors converged: the inability (or unwillingness) of the Saleh government to provide the jobs and benefits promised to former jihadist chiefs, such as Khaled Abdul Nabi; the deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions throughout Yemen and the ensuing growth of armed insurgencies; and the merger between the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qa'eda to form AQAP.

Despite the present danger posed by AQAP, it seriously threatens neither the Yemeni government's survival nor the West's vital security interests. Current fears stems from AQAP's efforts to ingratiate itself with public opinion and take advantage of Yemen's deepening political, tribal, and social divisions and disputes. Consensus exists among scholars who study Yemen, such as Sheila Weir (formerly of the London Museum), Sheila Carapico (American University in Cairo), Nora Colton (University of East London), Martha Mundy (London School of Economics), and Steve Caton (Harvard University), that al-Qa'eda is the least of Yemen's challenges. Instead

of squandering its precious resources on combating AQAP, these prominent scholars advise the government to invest in institution building, political economy, and good governance – all effective remedies for countering extremism.

Lumping AQAP with bin Laden's al-Qa'eda Central

American counterterrorism analysts assert that AQAP is now collaborating more closely than ever with its allies in Pakistan and Somalia to plot attacks against the West; however, the evidence, based more on risk assessment and speculation than hard facts, is unconvincing. The few AQAP-instigated plots, such as the attack on the Saudi counterterrorism chief, the underwear bombing, and the ink-jet bomb plot, seem to be the handiwork of al-Asiri, the group's main bomb maker. No evidence points to its collaboration with bin Laden's men or Somalia's al-Shabab. Indeed, some of the same officials who assert such links and connections between AQAP and al-Shabab qualify this by adding that the "trajectory" points in "that direction," and that this is "hard to measure in an absolute way."³⁵ Somalia has not had a functioning government or economy for two decades, and rival warlords have battled for supremacy. While there is a real danger that al-Shabab may overrun Somalia and establish a Taliban-like government, that is an altogether different challenge.

One does not have to be a specialist on jihadist groups to appreciate the difficulties inherent in communication and collaboration between local branches and al-Qa'eda Central. Neither bin Laden nor al-Zawahiri are in a position to coordinate tactics and strategy, and thus have hardly any operational role in plotting specific terrorist activities; rather, they serve mainly as preachers and ideologues of transnational jihad. According to CIA director Leon Panetta, bin Laden's few surviving lieutenants in Pakistan are so demoralized that they have pleaded with him to resurface; he has ignored the plea, according to Panetta, choosing personal safety and security over organizational survival. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's inability to help their own struggling lieutenants and coordinate war plans makes it unlikely that they would be able to coordinate attacks with allies in distant lands.

Regardless of AQAP's threat, it remains first and foremost a Yemeni problem, and Yemen must take the lead in educating and mobilizing public opinion, including the tribes, about the danger of al-Qa'eda. Fortunately, al-Qa'eda enjoys little public sympathy and support there; the few tribes that shelter it do so due to a tribal code of hospitality and honor, not of shared ideology, as well as from differences with the Saleh regime. Once those tribes are engaged and rewarded, al-Qa'eda's fighters will be turned away.

A Recurring American legacy: Getting Stuck in Yemen as in Afghanistan & Iraq

Although American officials pay lip service to the benefits of socioeconomic and political development, they act as if confronting al-Qa'eda requires mainly counterterrorism measures. In June 2010, the White House announced it was tripling its humanitarian assistance to Yemen to \$42.5 million – a paltry sum given the country's urgent need and Washington's \$250 million in increased counterterrorism security assistance. As shown previously, there is growing evidence that the Obama administration has put CIA and Special Operations troops in charge of the Yemeni station. Western visitors at the American embassy have noticed that it has become increasingly crowded with military personnel and intelligence operatives – the so-called “shadow warriors.”³⁶

Yemen has become a testing ground for Brennan's approach: American reliance on the “scalpel” instead of Bush's “hammer.” According to *The New York Times*, the Obama administration has transformed the CIA into a paramilitary organization, with even the Pentagon becoming more like the CIA. Across the Middle East and elsewhere, Special Forces have expanded and widened their operations with little Congressional oversight. Some former top CIA and military officers say they are concerned because of the lack of clear rules.³⁷

Beyond the legal issues involved, over-reliance on unilateral counterterrorism exacerbates America's security dilemma in Yemen and beyond. While such measures might kill AQAP fighters, they also alienate Muslim opinion and thus open the door to extremist groups. Edmund J. Hull, American ambassador to Yemen from 2001-04, cautioned that the American approach to al-Qa'eda must not rely only on force: “I'm concerned that counterterrorism is defined as an intelligence and military program. To be successful in the long run, we have to take a far broader approach that emphasizes political, social and economic forces.”³⁸

Deepening American military involvement supplies AQAP with propaganda and recruitment tools. Al-Qa'eda has worked tirelessly to exploit the unpopular American strikes, with al-Awlaki spearheading that effort. “If George W. Bush is remembered by getting America stuck in Afghanistan and Iraq, it's looking like Obama wants to be remembered as the president who got America stuck in Yemen,” he wrote in an Internet statement.³⁹ In January 2010, nearly 200 prominent clerics in Yemen signed a statement pledging to lead a jihad against any foreign occupation forces, sending a clear message that the United States should not expand its military and intelligence cooperation with the Saleh regime.⁴⁰ First-hand reports from Yemen indicate that such cooperation has turned more Yemenis against the embattled Saleh regime.⁴¹

As shown previously, there is growing evidence that the Obama administration has put CIA and Special Operations troops in charge of the Yemeni station.

Of all Arab countries, Yemenis currently voice the strongest anti-American sentiment, and any policy that neglects the local context and social conditions will fuel al-Qa'eda.

The terrorism narrative views Yemen through a narrow prism: a kind of front that is similar to those of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia. Everything has become an extension of bin Laden's transnational jihad against the West, thereby submerging the local context within the global context and not paying sufficient attention to existing differences. Following a one-size-fits-all model, the narrative elevates al-Qa'eda to the ranks of the major powers. AQAP has indeed actively plotted attacks against western targets, but that does not make it an extension of bin Laden's al-Qa'eda. Moreover, it is now pitted in a fierce military confrontation with the Yemeni government, a clash that will take a heavy toll on the small organization.

Al-Awlaki is no Osama bin Laden

Finally, al-Awlaki has emerged as a central conspiratorial figure in the eyes of American and British intelligence. In April 2010 the Obama administration designated him as a legitimate target for assassination, despite the fact that he is an American citizen. Jonathan Evans, head of Britain's MI5 domestic security service, has also declared him to be the West's Public Enemy No. 1: "The operational involvement of Yemen-based preacher Anwar al-Awlaki with al-Qa'eda is of particular concern given his wide circle of adherents in the West, including in the UK," said Evans in a rare speech.⁴² Increasingly, western intelligence officials are depicting him as a threat on the same level as bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. In Sir John Sawers' October 2010 speech, the first-ever public speech given by a head of Britain's MI6, al-Awlaki was the only militant leader singled out. Sawers describes "reading, every day, intelligence reports describing the plotting of terrorists who are bent on maiming and murdering people in this country" and cited al-Awlaki and Yemen as increasingly dangerous: "From his remote base in Yemen, [al-Awlaki] broadcasts propaganda and terrorist instruction in fluent English, over the Internet."⁴³

Although al-Awlaki has been implicated in several terrorist plots in the United States and Britain, he is no Osama bin Laden. With a few followers in Yemen and the wider Arab and Muslim worlds, his message is specifically directed toward young disaffected Muslims living in western societies. These young men turn to him and other clerics for confirmation of their anger and alienation, which fills an ideological vacuum for those who feel that their Islamic identity is threatened.

Killing al-Awlaki would transform the fugitive preacher into a martyr and likely further poison Yemeni public opinion against the United States. A more effective means would be to shut down his propaganda shop by convincing the tribe currently sheltering him, the Awalik in southern Yemen, to turn him over to the Yemeni authorities. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Sultan Fareed bin Babaker, the Awalik's leader, was asked why he allowed a wanted man to live among them. He replied that the cleric had committed no crimes in the community and that the Yemeni government had not asked him to hand al-Awlaki over. If it made this request, Babaker noted, "we will think about it."⁴⁴

Babaker is a close ally of the Yemeni government, and a deal may be reached by which al-Awlaki would be accorded a chance to defend himself and receive due process inside Yemen, following tribal tradition. After the failed air cargo bombings in October 2010, Yemen officially charged al-Awlaki with inciting the killing of foreigners and being a member of an armed gang; it therefore plans to prosecute him in absentia.⁴⁵

Indeed, the Saleh regime is growing more determined to bring this man to justice. This fact was not lost on AQAP, which has posted an ominous statement on an Islamist website to warn kinsmen of the Awlaki tribe against collaborating: "Whoever decides to stand with [the West and the Yemeni government] and be subservient to their demands should be wary of God's punishment."⁴⁶

According to a senior security official in Shabwa, Yemeni security forces and local tribes had combed Shabwa province's mountainous Said district before the air-cargo plots in an attempt to locate al-Qa'eda operatives; members of al-Awlaki's own tribe participated. The Shabwa governor and the Awlaki clan have signed a deal according to which they will "expel al-Qa'eda elements from their territories and mount a joint operation with the army (to do so)," he added.⁴⁷ Moreover, mediation by tribal chieftains has facilitated the surrender of more than a dozen al-Qa'eda fighters and lieutenants to Yemen's security agencies in Abyan province, an indication of the government's intention to co-opt the tribes and squeeze al-Qa'eda.⁴⁸ After the ink-jet plot, more al-Qa'eda fighters turned themselves in with the help of tribal mediation.⁴⁹ In November 2010, a tribal coalition led by the Dakhil, one of the country's two largest tribes, pledged to join the government in its fight against al-Qa'eda, whose members they described as "deviants who ruin the reputation of the Yemeni tribes and state."⁵⁰

The tribes hold the key to deactivating al-Qa'eda's minefield in Yemen, and any strategy that does not fully involve them will most likely fail. To spite the government, the tribes have provided AQAP with shelter and refuge, despite the lack of any substantial Yemeni support for al-Qa'eda. Moreover, if history is any guide, the tribes will go with the highest bidder. The Saleh government needs to construct a broad national coalition, one that includes the vibrant opposition and the tribes, as well as an alliance that must be fully backed by Yemen's Gulf neighbors (particularly Saudi Arabia) and the international community (mainly the United States and Britain). Saleh, who will not institute reforms if left to his own devices, must be pressured to hold free and transparent elections and agree to the formation of a national unity government. The ruling party has already introduced legislation in the Parliament that allows Saleh to remain president for life, a decision implicitly criticized by the Obama administration.

According to my interviews with reformist-minded opinion makers and activists from Yemen, only a national unity government representing most of the society's segments and political colors can begin to tackle the country's deepening structural social crisis and al-Qa'eda. And yet the Saleh regime appears unwilling to accommodate the opposition's legitimate demands for institutional reforms and transparency.

Although complicated, messy, and long-term (as opposed to short-term counterterrorism), such reform measures will ultimately turn the Yemeni people against al-Awlaki and his associates.

Afraid of unilateral American military action, Yemeni officials have called for international assistance in their battle against al-Qa'eda (and complained that the United States does not fully share its intelligence with them).⁵¹ Saleh will not wage an all-out war against al-Qa'eda if he feels marginalized, undermined, or taken for granted. A significant point that emerges out of leaked American diplomatic cables is that Saleh is using the fight against AQAP to his own advantage and setting strict limits on American military tactics. Al-Qa'eda will likely continue to have a foothold in Yemen as long as the country's leaders do not tackle the multiple structural crises currently tearing its social fabric apart.

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