Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and
Counterterrorism Strategies in Yemen.
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Introduction

The American strategic interest in Yemen first and foremost concerns national security; the United States needs to adjust its counterterrorism strategies to those of Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in order to be more effective. AQAP pursues a double agenda in southern Yemen - gaining territorial control of tribal remote areas while investing in the social field by operating charities and schools in areas where the central government is largely absent. US counterterrorism strategies must target these levels of action by coordinating its military involvement in Yemen with social solutions.

This paper examines the American counterterrorism strategies deployed in Yemen and discusses their effectiveness. As deploying boots on the ground is not part of the agenda, the United States relies on the Yemeni army for the ground confrontation with AQAP in Abyan while backing the central government divisions with drone attacks, which specifically target main leaders of the organization, such as current leader Amir Nassir Al Wuyeishi. Despite the deployment of the Yemeni army and US air strikes, AQAP is successful on the ground because it has succeeded to employ soft strategies such as the maintenance of schools and charities while it fights back against the Yemeni army. The lack of Western consideration of these different methods increases the gap between the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies and AQAP's success. Engaging southern tribal leaders and secessionists in the long-term struggle against AQAP could help to bridge this gap.

Al Qaeda Genesis in Yemen

Al Qaeda activism in Yemen has its roots in the Yemeni civil war of 1994 when the Arab Afghans and Yemeni former jihadists enrolled in the local militia, called *Islamic Jihad*, and demonstrated their military capabilities by helping the Northern Yemeni army to defeat and control the South. The United States, however, became involved in Yemen in the aftermath of the USS Cole attack that took the lives of 17 US sailors in 2000. The 9/11 attacks and the growing concern about failed states being terrorist breeding grounds added a sense of urgency to the issue, as then-US President George W. Bush outlined in 2001,

> "The events of September 11, 2001 taught us that weak states can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet, poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders" (Rice 2011).

Yemen officially joined the War on Terror in 2002, although Al Qaeda was constituted by a myriad of organizations that differed in terms of not only leadership but also agenda. Despite their alleged ties with bin Laden, the Islamic Jihad was more oriented to the construction of networks and links with local tribal leaders and other militias, whereas the Abyan Aden Army focused primarily on violent attacks against governmental and foreign targets (Derrick 2011). In 2002, the killing of the Yemeni head of Al Qaeda, Abu Ali Harithi, succeeded in disorganizing and silencing the Yemeni cell. However, the organization regrouped in 2006 when 23 of its affiliates escaped from a security prison, among them the current leader Nassir Al Wuyaishi, Al Bana, Al Badawi, and Al Raymi (Jonshen 2011). This critical event allowed for the organization's regained strength, and it began investing in southern provinces, such as Abyan, Lahj, and Shawbah. It also paved the way for the emergence of the regional franchise. Indeed, Al

Qaeda in Yemen and Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia merged in 2009 and articulated a shared agenda

that Nassir Al Wuyaishi explained in the following terms,

> "Since 1990 when the Americans occupied the land of revelation, the youth of the Peninsula of Islam are defending their religion, their holy places and their land, from which, their Messenger, peace be upon him, ordered to expel the unbelievers. They have executed a few operations against the Americans in and out of the Arabian Peninsula. The most famous are the Ulaya, al-Khobar, East Riyadh, USS Cole, Limburg, and the assassination of US soldiers in the island of Faylakah in Kuwait. The leaders of al-Qa`ida such as Shaykh al-Battar Yusuf al- `Uyairi, `Abdul `Aziz al-Miqrin, and Shaykh Abu `Ali al-Harithi and others led this war against the Americans in and outside of the Arabian Peninsula" (Derrick 2011).

Al Qaeda launched an active insurgency in 2009, and Ansar Al Shariah, an AQAP

affiliated group, is presently clashing with the Yemeni army in the town of Zinjibar.

Counterterrorism Strategies

American counterterrorism strategies have followed a dual agenda. First and foremost,

military assistance and technical training was provided to the Yemeni army while drone attacks

were coordinated with the Yemeni army and air force. This strategy helped to suppress different

leaders such as Huraithi, Awlaki, and Al Banna. The second tier of the American involvement in

Yemen targeted the national security apparatus and helped to redesign it. Yemen's internal

security forces comprise of two intelligence agencies - the Political Security Organization (PSO)

and the National Security Bureau (NSB). The PSO is a remnant of the Northern Yemen security

service. The NSB, however, was created in 2002 when Yemen decided to join the War on Terror.

It is independently funded by the US and has at its disposal 3.4 million USD provided to support

the campaign against AQAP (Knights 2010). Moreover, two new units have been set up - the

CSF, a paramilitary police that secures official buildings, and the Counterterrorism Unit. After

the failed 2009 Christmas Day attack attempted by the AQAP-affiliated Umar Farook, US

President Barack Obama confirmed the country's commitment towards Yemen, declaring, "It is a priority to strengthen our partnership with the Yemeni government, training and equipping their security forces, sharing intelligence, and working with them to strike al-Qaeda terrorists" (Ibid). As social uprising is changing the configuration of power in Yemen, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency and current US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta outlined, "We have developed over the past years a relationship where we worked together, we shared intelligence, and we focus on common targets as well, and I think that we will continue to be the case regardless of what ultimately happens to [Yemeni President] Ali Abdallah Salah" (Al Sharq Al Awsat 2011).

AQAP Soft Power Strategies

AQAP's success in South Yemen is based not on its military leadership, but on its capacity to adapt itself to its immediate social context. The support of tribal leaders demonstrates its social integration in remote areas. Indeed, it is the lack of counterterrorism strategies particularly designed to attract tribal leaders that offers to the group the necessary confidence to continue on that track. AQAP understands, for instance, that the governance in the remote areas is carried out by tribal leaders, with little Yemeni army influence. Controlling these areas is crucial to the organization for two main reasons. First, the Mujahedeen can have their own training base without being uprooted by the army, while also enrolling local youth in their project. Second, it helps the organization to implement the alternative political and social system they desire and gain popular support. AQAP maintains therefore the engagement of tribes at the heart of its local strategy; that is the reason for Al Wuyaishi and Zawahri's joint statement

through which they appealed to the tribal communities and urged them to act like the tribes of

Pakistan and Afghanistan,

> "I call on the noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen and tell them - don't be less than your brothers in the defiant Pushtun and Baluch tribes who aided Allah and His Messenger and made America and the Crusaders dizzy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen ...don't be helpers of Ali Abdullah Salih, the agent of the Crusaders...be a help and support to your brothers the Mujahedeen" (Philips 2010).

Of greater importance than broad-based popular support, AQAP's co-optation of tribal

leaders is first and foremost guaranteed by kinship. In fact, rural areas still display the Yemeni

traditional way of life where people rely on their local sheikhs or tribal chief for their daily

obligations. A consequence of sheikh allegiance to AQAP is the enrollment of young men

requested to fulfill their Islamic duties without necessarily knowing they are indeed joining a

branch of AQAP. Put simply, AQAP targets tribal leaders because their support helps them to

attain the number of jihadists they need for their ranks. In addition to the lineage affiliation,

AQAP attracts the tribal leaders by exploiting the antagonism between tribal leaders and the

central government as shown by the comments in an AQAP video released in 2009 about "the

battle of Marib." This video condemned tribal leaders' lack of commitment to Jihad and their

rapprochement with Saleh:

> "A lot of excuses were given for this military operation [in Marib], but its main aim was to break the prestige of the tribes and to disarm them. However, the government did not dare to commence its operation until [it secured] a betrayal by some of the sheikhs who allowed the tanks to invade their land...the biggest shame is for the tribal sheikhs to turn into foot soldiers and slaves of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is himself a slave to the Saudi riyal and the American dollar. And I say to those sheikhs...where is the manhood and the magnanimity ... or did it die with your forefathers and you have buried it with them?" (Philips 2010)

Moreover, collaborating with a network of charities and Quranic schools not only enables AQAP to implement an alternative system through Islamic education and social activities, but also provides the perfect smoke screen to hide the roots of its financial support. This method thus makes financial sanctions to undermine arms supplies for the organization infeasible. Dar Al Hikma al Yemenia, Al Islah, and Al Haramein are the main charities that closely work with AQAP. Al Haramain has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States in 2004, while Al Hikma al Yemenia has provided funds and technical assistance to Al Qaeda leaders in Yemen and Saudi Arabia (Yemen Times 2009). Al Iman University, on the outskirts of the capital Sanaa, represents the niche for radical teaching of AQAP. The university has hosted the American Taliban convert Johnny Walker Lindh as a student as well as Yemeni students Ali Al Jarallah and Abdul Al Razak Kamal, assassins of an opposition leader and three Baptist missionaries. Moreover, American-born Anwar Al Awlaki was a lecturer at the university between 2004 and 2005 (Johnsen 2006). Despite official reports of strong ties with Al Qaeda, the university received strong approval and protection from the government, because it was run by Saleh's political ally, radical cleric Al Zindani. Zindani was listed "as a specially designated global terrorist" (Johnsen 2006). This incident shows how any short-term calculations by the government serve to strengthen the organization in the long run. As the country is undergoing a famine with one in five children acutely malnourished, it allows these organizations to gain popularity by providing relief programs, particularly in rural areas (World Food Program 2011). AQAP's strategy is to exploit the social vacuum created by the absence of public services in rural areas and build a socially legitimate broad-based movement. Abu Abbas, Ansar al Sharia's leader, stressed,

"The name Ansar al-Shariah is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals, and that we are on the path of Allah…The situation is good in the Obeida and we are many and are growing in Ma'arib, and in Shabwa we are openly in control, with some military and government points now in our hands. In the parts of Abyan, where the mujahideen are in control, they run people's lives in accordance with Shariah law, while also inviting others to the implementation of Shariah. Here, we have moved our work from the elitist work to the populist, and took control of many areas...today, we control Ja'ar and call on the concept of monotheism while trying to meet the demands of the people. The largest problem that we face here is the lack of public services such as sewage and water, and we are trying to find solutions" (Johnsen 2011).

Last but not least, the use of Internet platforms and online magazines such as *Sada al Malahim* and *Inspire* completes the framework of the soft power strategy. The objective is to capitalize on public sympathy and communicate the organization of the project. Indeed, this strategy is not an innovation by AQAP; using the Internet for propaganda is a common tool of communication for Al Qaeda, and its Yemeni branch is applying the same method. This certainly allows AQAP to reach the masses, but it does not explain the large numbers of foreign fighters (Boucek 2009). Although there exist no accurate estimates for the number of foreign fighters within AQAP, their involvement of specific groups can be explained by particularities of their country of origin. The presence of Saudi nationals can be explained by the evident proximity and the merger, while the involvement of Somali fighters is explained by the magnitude of the Somali community in Yemen. Fighters from other Arab countries are usually from places where Al Qaeda is already operating.

Intelligence work underpins the broadest understanding of AQAP. Experts not only study AQAP's decision making, but also translate its publication. No counter-propaganda has yet been produced. "If intelligence leads, information campaign planning now sits at the heart of any effects based approach…it needs to take account of the adversary audience and within that, the

key individuals and agencies that influence and shape the thinking of the enemy's

leadership" (Taverner 2010). Put simply, there is a lack of media targeting AQAP's audience in

Arabic.

AQAP and Military Strategies

The counterterrorism strategies target only AQAP's military activities, while the gap

between AQAP's methods and American counter strategies is growing. Indeed, American

strategies do not take account of the evolution of the organization from a guerrilla warfare-style

to organized army-style warfare. Drone attacks coordinated with raids led by the Yemeni army

against Jihadists as well as massive crackdowns and jailings of young radical men destroyed the

base cell of Al-Qaeda during the first phase of the war in Yemen between 2002 and 2006. The

same methods are still being employed even though the organization's methods have drastically

changed, while their ability to anticipate America's moves has increased.

First, Amir Al Wuhayshi succeeded in implementing a network of commanders against

drone attacks. Al Qaeda militants carried out an attack against the US embassy in Sanaa in July

2008, only one month after a US drone attack killed local leader Al Rabi'i. Al Wuhayshi also

engaged in a short-term strategy of setting up different groups to confront the Yemeni central

army, such as the Tariq Al Thahab and Ansar Al Sharia. Indeed, Al Tariq Al Thahab is active in

Reda, while Ansar Al Sharia has already seized the towns of Ja'ar and Zinjubar in Abyan

province.

Second, AQAP became a regional franchise after the merger with the Saudi organization,

thus providing them with the necessary funds and arms to resist to the central government's

army. Meanwhile, the costs of counterterrorism measures are increasing - between 2006 and

2007, Yemen received $30.3 million in funding and technical assistance from the US State

Department, totaling to $221.8 million for the previous two fiscal years. In 2010, Yemen was the

recipient of the largest dollar figure of technical assistance, $252.6 million, surpassing even

Pakistan, the second-largest recipient with $203.4 million. A Congressional Research Service

report explains,

> "The Defense Department's 1206 train and equip fund aid aims to boost the capacities of Yemen's air force, its special operations units, its border control monitoring, and coast guard forces. Approximately $38 million of the FY2010 1206 assistance will be used to provide Yemen's Air Force with one CASA CN-235 medium- range twin-turbo-prop aircraft to transport its special operations units. The United States also has used 1206 funds to provide special operations units with training, helicopters with night-vision cameras, sniper rifles, secure personal radios, and bullet- proof jackets" (Sharp 2011).

Domestic political issues like political patronage can explain the inefficiency of

counterterrorism measures. First, the army is under direct control of Saleh's sons, nephews, and

General Ali Mohsen. American funds helped Saleh to consolidate his control over the army while

at the same time extending his network of political and tribal allies throughout the country. This

is also the reason why Al Zindani and Jihadists who escaped from prisons were protected.

Second, Ali Mohsen's defection last March disorganized the army. Moreover, Saleh's short-term

calculations for the future of his own power also explain the growing gap between AQAP's

methods and counter-terrorism strategies. For instance, US-trained anti-terrorism units were not

deployed at the beginning of the Abyan crisis in May 2011. The central government prematurely

announced Al-Wuhayshi's death, when the United States started to back up the GCC plan and the

political transition (Yemen Post 2011).

The Future of AQAP?

AQAP will pursue a dual strategy: the South of the country will be a stronghold for the organization in the short term, in the North it is expected to confront the Huthis. Following the seizure of the cities of Jaar, Zinjibar and Reda in Abyan, Ansar Al Sharia immediately declared both as an Islamic Emirate. Indeed, the local competition between AQAP affiliated groups and the Southern Secessionists for the control of the South explains why AQAP will continue declarations of the establishment of Islamic emirates. It is an effective tool to compete with the secularist and socialist ideology of the secessionists. It also represents an appeal to support Al Qaeda in the long-term.

Moreover, Yemen will be the scene to a sectarian war, similar to the one in Iraq, as violent confrontations between AQAP affiliated groups and the Huthis intensify. The Huthis are a Shia rebel group from the North and have been fighting against the central government since 2004. Sporadic fights between Huthis and Salafists occasionally occur; however, the conflict will have regional consequences as Saudi Arabia and Iran will likely intervene to support the groups with which they share a religious affiliation (Spencer 2011).

Recommendations

US efforts to eliminate Al Qaeda in Yemen have focused essentially on dismantling the organization by capturing or killing its members, such as Anwar al Awlaki and Ibrahim Al Bana in October 2011 by separate drone attacks. Although these operations destabilized AQAP for a short period, this targeted killing strategy merely postpones the problem and did not resolve it because the organization has significant numbers of sub-commanders waiting to fill the vacancies. The United States does have other options though, such as engaging the southern

secessionists in their counterterrorism strategies, while also brokering a peace deal between the southerners and the central government.

Why could such a move matter in this case? As a militant movement born in the South, AQAP did not target only the Yemeni government, but also the secessionists precisely because of their secular program. The United States should therefore engage the secessionist leader Ali Fadhli who controls his own militia specifically in the province of Abyan. Abyan is the stage of the current confrontation between the Yemeni army and Ansar Al Sharia, the local AQAP affiliate. Fadhli's co-optation and coordination with the central army would end the use of drone attacks and certainly reduce the costs for the US. USAID has stipulated that its projects and involvement in Yemen will increase. The overreaching strategic goal of the agency is to increase the stability in Yemen by intervening in remote, vulnerable areas. Abyan should therefore be a priority for the establishment of schools and health care facilities. Currently only Al Qaeda has assumed this role.

Last but not least, American technical assistance should include the funding of online magazines in Arabic that would target AQAP's audience to divert them from its propaganda. For that purpose, foreign aid should cooperate with Yemeni human rights NGOs because the latter are already engaged in counter-propaganda efforts by offering the Yemeni public an alternative point of view.

Conclusion

American counterterrorism strategies in Yemen are facing new challenges in the face of AQAP's evolution. However, this political transition also signals a promising opportunity. The

strategies could be more effective if American forces collaborate with local tribes, the

secessionist movement, and human rights advocates in Yemen and throughout the region.

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