

## Yemen and U.S. Security

### Assessing and Managing the Challenge of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

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#### Executive Summary

In recent months, U.S. counterterrorism authorities have focused heavily on Yemen as the next potential battleground against al Qaeda and global jihadism. Especially following the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt, in which an operative associated with the Yemen-based terrorist group al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) attempted to detonate explosives onboard a U.S. airliner, U.S. engagement in Yemen has increased dramatically, with military and development assistance far outstripping allocations from previous years.

This briefing paper chronicles AQAP's evolution and development, and identifies the threats it poses to the United States. It also outlines U.S. efforts to counter the group to date and assesses the current U.S. strategy for fighting terrorism in Yemen. The paper finds that the current policy of providing substantial military and development support to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime and stepping up military action against al Qaeda could ultimately prove counterproductive by bolstering al Qaeda's influence in Yemen rather than reducing it. Based on that finding, the report makes the following recommendations:

- Approach counterterrorism in Yemen with a long-term strategic view, taking care not to sacrifice strategic effectiveness for short-term tactical gains.
- Remain wary of backing a regime with little accountability and with which U.S. interests do not necessarily align.
- Lessen the U.S. military and intelligence footprint in Yemen to avoid further entrenching al Qaeda and facilitating the outcome we seek to prevent.

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## Yemen: Sources of Instability

Yemen, a troubled and fragile state since its birth as a unified republic in 1990, has faced a number of significant challenges to its security and stability in recent years. Several factors—including acute economic pressures, internal conflict, and shifting political power balances—have combined to substantially weaken the Yemeni government’s ability to govern effectively. These factors have created a security and governance gap that al Qaeda actively seeks to exploit.

**Economics and Demography.** Already the poorest country in the Middle East, Yemen’s economic situation is poised to worsen in the coming years. The oil supplies upon which the Yemeni economy heavily relies are dwindling.<sup>1</sup> Runaway population growth and a growing youth bulge—46 percent of the population is under 15 years old and two-thirds is under the age of 24<sup>2</sup>—exacerbate already widespread poverty and unemployment. Increasing water scarcity, largely the result of mismanagement,<sup>3</sup> threatens agricultural livelihoods and compounds population pressures.

**Poor Governance and Internal Conflict.** Governmental corruption and ineffectiveness have resulted in an inequitable distribution of wealth, resources, and political influence in Yemen—which has helped fuel multiple internal conflicts since at least 2004. In addition to generating civilian casualties and further undermining security nationwide, responding to these areas of instability has consumed much of the central government’s attention and resources. Diversion of these resources from efforts to resolve the country’s deepening socio-economic crises has helped to create an environment that has allowed al Qaeda to thrive.

Minority Zaidi Shiites in Yemen’s mountainous northwestern regions have sustained an armed insurgency against the Saleh government since 2004. The Shiite insurgents, termed “Houthis,” accuse the Yemeni government of engaging in religious discrimination and marginalizing them economically and politically. Under U.S. pressure to focus security efforts on disrupting al Qaeda, the government reached a ceasefire agreement with Houthi insurgents in February 2010<sup>4</sup>—which remains tenuous.<sup>5</sup>

1 Martin Plaut, “Yemen ‘Faces Crisis As Oil Ends,’” BBC, November 20, 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7739402.stm> (accessed May 11, 2010).

2 Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html> (accessed May 6, 2010); Christopher Boucek, *Yemen: Avoiding a Downward Spiral*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, September 2009, p. 3.

3 Ulf Laessing, “Yemen’s Water Crisis Eclipses al Qaeda Threat,” Reuters, February 17, 2010. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE61G21P20100217> (accessed May 6, 2010).

4 Huma Yusuf, “Yemen Marks Cease-Fire With Houthi Rebels,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 12, 2010. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0212/Yemen-marks-cease-fire-with-Houthi-rebels> (accessed May 11, 2010); Arthur Bright, “Will Yemen Rebels Accept a Fresh Cease-Fire Plan?,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 2010. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0207/Will-Yemen-rebels-accept-a-fresh-cease-fire-plan> (accessed May 11, 2010).

5 “Houthis Break Truce, Yemen Says,” UPI, March 16, 2010. [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2010/03/16/Houthis-break-truce-Yemen-says/UPI-21201268750915/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/03/16/Houthis-break-truce-Yemen-says/UPI-21201268750915/) (accessed May 11, 2010).

Since 2004, a secessionist movement based in southern Yemen has protested against the Saleh government, which it accuses of inequitably distributing political influence and national resources (including land and oil revenues) in favor of the north. Though the Saleh government, under international pressure, has periodically offered to engage the separatists, discussions have largely failed to address the movement's core grievances. Both the separatists and the government's response have grown increasingly violent in recent months, especially as the government has redeployed security forces from the north to conduct heavy-handed crackdowns that have further escalated tensions.<sup>6</sup>

The Saleh government has largely failed to effectively address these challenges. In addition to failing to curb rebellion and political dissent, Yemeni military and internal security services' repressive practices—including arbitrary arrests and military operations that generate significant civilian casualties—have alienated large segments of the population. The result has been that many Yemenis see the central government, rather than al Qaeda, as the most significant threat to their security and well-being.<sup>7</sup>

To date, Yemen's internal conflicts have remained largely local affairs. Though al Qaeda has made efforts to claim common cause with southern secessionists and frame the rebellion in a broader context more consistent with its global aspirations,<sup>8</sup> grievances have remained locally focused with little evidence of any ideological or operational connections between AQAP and either the northern or southern domestic resistance movements.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than taking advantage of these natural ideological divisions to minimize al Qaeda's influence in local conflicts, the Yemeni government has taken steps in the opposite direction. In an effort to gain U.S. and international support for its fight against the Houthis and southern secessionists, Saleh's regime has historically attempted to link domestic dissent to al Qaeda and justify increased repression by connecting military operations to the fight against terrorism.<sup>10</sup> Such efforts to frame local grievances in an international context could bolster al Qaeda's narrative by suggesting that the United States and the international community, like the Yemeni government they support, are targeting them for destruction; defensive violence against foreign targets may then seem to be a legitimate response.

**Shifting Power Dynamics and the Role of the State.** The central government does not exert effective control over all of Yemen's territory. The areas that are outside of central administrative control are

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6 "Secessionist Drive Becomes Violent," UPI, April 28, 2010. [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2010/04/28/Yemen-Secession-drive-becomes-violent/UPI-12361272477397/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/04/28/Yemen-Secession-drive-becomes-violent/UPI-12361272477397/) (accessed May 12, 2010).

7 Human Rights Watch, *Seven Principles for Effective International Engagement in Yemen*, January 22, 2010. <http://www.hrw.org/node/87936> (accessed May 7, 2010).

8 Alistair Harris, "Exploiting Grievances: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2010, p. 6-7.

9 Ibid, p.1

10 Laura Kasinof, "Why Yemen Could Become Al Qaeda Haven," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 31, 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0731/p06s18-wome.html> (accessed June 7, 2010).

governed by tribal authorities, who use traditional legal and governance structures to administer areas locally.<sup>11</sup>

President Saleh has historically balanced the central government's authority with that of the tribes through patronage, using oil revenue payments to provide tribal leaders with an incentive to tolerate and cooperate with the central government. This practice gradually eroded traditional tribal power structures, as access to central government patronage—rather than concern for constituents' well-being—became the key determinant of political power and influence at the local level.<sup>12</sup>

To a certain extent, this process has divorced the tribespeople from traditional leaders, who are seen as part of an inequitable wealth distribution system and no longer supportive of tribal interests.<sup>13</sup> As oil revenues dwindle and the flow of patronage declines, both the central government and the tribal leaders it supports are losing their influence over tribal populations, creating a leadership vacuum. Al Qaeda has actively sought to exploit and fill that vacuum, publicly advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state to replace discredited governance regimes that are seen as being in decline.<sup>14</sup> Though the group has not yet been able to garner widespread popular support, a lack of confidence in local and national governance structures could potentially allow al Qaeda's message to resonate in some segments of Yemeni society.

## Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

**Organization and Structure.** AQAP is a regional al Qaeda affiliate based in eastern Yemen that was created by the merging of two previously autonomous al Qaeda affiliate organizations: the Saudi AQAP and al Qaeda in Yemen (AQY). The two organizations united publicly in January 2009, with Saudi al Qaeda leaders pledging allegiance to AQY leader Nassir al-Wahayshi, a former aide to Osama bin Laden and AQAP's current *emir*.

It is difficult to estimate AQAP's current operational strength or the size of its membership; estimates range from between 100 and 300 core operatives.<sup>15</sup> The little that is known about AQAP's rank and file suggests that though Yemenis and Saudis comprise the bulk of its membership, the group also includes individuals from a variety of other nations outside the Arabian Peninsula, including Egypt, Pakistan, and Somalia.<sup>16</sup>

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11 Boucek.

12 Sarah Phillips, *What Comes Next In Yemen*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010, p. 2.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Fawaz A. Gerges, "Al Qaeda Has Bounced Back in Yemen," CNN, January 7, 2010. <http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/01/07/gerges.yemen.us.terrorism/index.html> (accessed May 11, 2010).

16 Chris Harnish and Katherine Zimmerman, "Critical Threats Project Briefing on Yemen and AQAP," American Enterprise Institute, January 12, 2010, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/critical-threats-project-briefing-yemen-and-aqap> (accessed June 17, 2010).

Unlike in previous years, in which members were almost exclusively recruited locally, AQAP now incorporates jihadists returning from fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—and individuals released from U.S. custody in Guantánamo Bay. This experience gives the organization a new level of professionalism and depth of talent, and has made the group more hard-line and potentially more ambitious in its pursuit of global jihadist goals, as opposed to strictly local or regional concerns.<sup>17</sup>

**Goals.** AQAP’s principal strategic goal is to overthrow the Saudi and Yemeni governments as a step toward establishing an Islamic caliphate throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The group also seeks to expel all foreign presence from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, including U.S. military personnel in Saudi Arabia and all foreign civilians in both countries.

Although historically the group focused primarily on local and regional issues, AQAP also shares al Qaeda central’s broader strategic goals, which include ending foreign occupation of all Muslim lands worldwide, supporting Palestinians and “liberating” Jerusalem, and overthrowing corrupt “apostate” governments in the Arab world. Since early 2009, AQAP has publicly expressed its desire and intention to conduct attacks against Western interests outside the Arabian Peninsula in furtherance of both its domestic goals and more universal jihadist aims.<sup>18</sup>

**Strategic Objectives.** AQAP’s senior leadership recognizes that in order to maintain a significant operational presence in Yemen’s remote areas and protect the group against government counterterrorism offensives, they require a degree of support—at the very least passive support—from the Yemeni tribes. AQAP has therefore sought to build support within Yemeni society by presenting itself as a champion of local causes and sympathetic to local, particularly tribal, interests. It has also gone to great lengths to portray the Yemeni government and the United States as deliberately trying to destroy the tribal system and restrict the tribes’ autonomy in an effort to exploit traditional tribal animosity toward central government authority and outside interference.<sup>19</sup>

**Operational History Before the Merger.** Al Qaeda has maintained a presence in Yemen since the early 1990s. It was only in 2000, following the group’s unsuccessful attack on the USS *The Sullivans* and the successful attack on the USS *Cole* nine months later, that al Qaeda’s involvement in Yemen received international attention.

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, the Yemeni government, wary of being viewed as a passive terrorism supporter, stepped up its counterterrorism efforts against al Qaeda cells operating in Yemen. Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh significantly increased cooperation with U.S. authorities in an effort to bring pressure on the group’s senior leadership and collapse the organization from above. Those efforts culminated in a Yemeni-assisted U.S. missile strike that killed the group’s leader, Abu

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Urges Jihad,” BBC, February 8, 2010. (accessed April 21, 2010); Raissa Kaslowsky, “Top Yemen al Qaeda Leader Threatens U.S. Attacks,” Reuters, February 23, 2010. <http://www.idUSTRE61M1ZR20100223> (accessed May 11, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, p. 4.

Ali al-Harathi, and five other operatives in November 2002.<sup>20</sup> Yemeni authorities arrested al-Harathi's replacement one year later. These setbacks effectively dismantled the group, leading to a dramatic reduction in attacks between 2003 and 2005.

Al Qaeda's fortunes changed in February 2006 when 23 suspected al Qaeda members escaped from a prison facility in Sanaa, the Yemeni capital. Among the escapees were Jamal al-Badawi, the alleged mastermind of the USS *Cole* bombing, Nasser al-Wahayshi, AQAP's current leader, and Qasim al-Raymi, who currently serves as al-Wahayshi's deputy. Al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi formed AQY shortly after the prison break.

AQY executed several attacks between 2006 and 2008, predominately targeting tourists, domestically and foreign-owned energy infrastructure, and military facilities. In September 2008, AQY operatives attacked the U.S. embassy in Sanaa using bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. Following the 2008 embassy attack, U.S. authorities began to examine developments in Yemen more closely, increasingly viewing the growing al Qaeda presence there as a threat to U.S. strategic interests in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

**Operational History After the Merger.** After the January 2009 merger between al Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni affiliates, the newly formed AQAP executed a series of increasingly audacious attacks, the complexity of which reflected a significant shift in the group's ambitions and operational capability.

Two months after the merger, AQAP operatives conducted suicide attacks against a group of South Korean tourists in Hadramout.<sup>21</sup> A second bomber executed a successful follow-on suicide attack against officials sent to investigate the first bomb. In August, the group attempted another suicide attack against the Saudi chief of counterterrorism and deputy interior minister, using a bomber with pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) explosives hidden in his rectum.<sup>22</sup>

An attempted attack in October 2009, involving an AQAP operative posing as a driver for two other operatives dressed as women, was foiled by Saudi police at a vehicle checkpoint on the Saudi-Yemeni border. The attackers, who were crossing from Yemen to Saudi Arabia to attack an unknown target, were only discovered because the Saudi checkpoint's police unit had a female officer who was capable of inspecting the "female" passengers' identities.<sup>23</sup>

The extent of AQAP's creativity and growing ambition was most amply demonstrated on December 25, 2009, when an AQAP-trained operative attempted to bomb a Detroit-bound U.S. airliner using PETN explosives secreted in his underwear. AQAP took credit for the attempted attack, claiming that it was

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20 Elaine Monaghan, "Al-Qaeda Chief Killed by U.S. Drone," *Timesonline*, November 5, 2002. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article822349.ece> (accessed May 12, 2010).

21 "Tourists Die in Yemen Explosion," BBC, March 15, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7945013.stm> (accessed May 10, 2010).

22 Gregory D. Johnsen, "AQAP in Yemen and the Christmas Day Terrorist Attack," *CTC Sentinel, Special Yemen Issue*, January 2010.

23 Thomas Jocelyn, "Another Former Gitmo Detainee Killed in a Shootout," *Long War Journal*, October 21, 2009. [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/another\\_former\\_gitmo.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/another_former_gitmo.php) (accessed March 11, 2010).



in retaliation for U.S. and Yemeni raids carried out earlier in the month.<sup>24</sup> Though AQAP had always rhetorically supported attacks against the United States and its interests, the Christmas Day bombing attempt was the organization's first effort to execute attacks outside the Arabian Peninsula.

On April 26, 2010, an AQAP operative attempted a suicide bombing attack on the British ambassador's convoy in Sanaa.<sup>25</sup> Though the British ambassador was unharmed, the attack demonstrates that, despite increased pressure from the United States and the Yemeni government, AQAP remains capable of organizing and conducting significant attacks, even in areas presumed to be firmly under the Yemeni government's control.

## Threat Posed to U.S. Security and Interests

**Attacks against the U.S. Homeland.** As the Christmas Day bombing attempt demonstrates, AQAP has both the willingness and the capability to conduct terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Since early December 2009, when U.S. and Yemeni forces significantly increased pressure on Yemeni al Qaeda cells, AQAP has stepped up its anti-American rhetoric and publicly encouraged attacks against U.S. and Western transportation networks and against Western military forces operating abroad.<sup>26</sup>

A significant concern within the U.S. intelligence community is that the near success of the Christmas Day attack will inspire more attempts by not only AQAP, but also other likeminded groups and individuals that are now more confident in their chances of success. The increase in non-Yemeni U.S. citizens traveling to Yemen and becoming radicalized is also a matter of significant concern, raising the possibility that Yemen-trained terrorists with American passports could be used to conduct attacks in the United States.<sup>27</sup>

**Attacks against Saudi Arabia.** Though AQAP's operational focus has expanded to include attacks on the United States, one of the group's primary strategic goals remains destabilizing and overthrowing the Saudi monarchy. AQAP's recent public statements have suggested that the group's regional focus has shifted more toward overthrowing the Saudi monarchy than the Saleh regime, which the group considers to already be fatally weak.<sup>28</sup> Given Saudi Arabia's role as a critical strategic ally and a major

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24 James Gordon Meek, "Al Qaeda in Yemen Claims Responsibility For Attempted Bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253," *New York Daily News*, December 28, 2009. [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/28/2009-12-28\\_al\\_qaeda\\_in\\_yemen\\_claims\\_responsibility\\_for\\_attempted\\_bombing\\_of\\_northwest\\_airli.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/28/2009-12-28_al_qaeda_in_yemen_claims_responsibility_for_attempted_bombing_of_northwest_airli.html) (accessed May 11, 2010).

25 "UK Envoy in Yemen Escapes 'suicide bomb,'" BBC. April 26, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8643419.stm> (accessed May 18, 2010).

26 "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Urges Jihad"; Kaslowsky.

27 Scott Shane, "Ex-convicts from U.S. Said to Join Yemen Radicals," *New York Times*, January 19, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/20/world/middleeast/20terror.html> (accessed May 10, 2010); Matthew Taylor et al., "Yemen Terror Camps Attract 'Stream of Britons,'" *The Guardian*, December 28, 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/28/yemen-terror-camps-britons> (accessed May 10, 2010).

28 Phillips.

U.S. oil supplier, AQAP's threats to Saudi Arabia also constitute threats to America's broader economic and security interests.

Since al Qaeda's Saudi branch executed a significant coordinated bombing attack on Western housing compounds in Saudi Arabia in 2003,<sup>29</sup> Saudi counterterrorism authorities have aggressively pursued al Qaeda elements operating within their country.<sup>30</sup> Though these actions have successfully denied al Qaeda refuge in Saudi Arabia, AQAP's attempted attacks in 2009 suggest that an established haven in Yemen could provide the group with a relatively secure base from which to plan and launch attacks across the Saudi-Yemeni border.<sup>31</sup>

**Attacks on Strategic Shipping Lanes.** Yemen's proximity to several strategic shipping lanes, including those traversing the Bab al Mandab Strait, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, raises the possibility that AQAP could threaten U.S. economic and energy interests through maritime attacks. AQAP's senior leadership has recently suggested that the group planned to conduct coordinated operations with al Shabaab to secure both sides of the Bab al Mandab—the strait located between Yemen and the Horn of Africa that is a transit point for 30 percent of global annual trade and 3 million barrels of oil per day—in an effort to bring it “back under the protection of Islam.”<sup>32</sup> U.S. intelligence officials have also suggested that AQAP operatives are thought to be acquiring small boats in preparation for attacks on commercial and military vessels operating off the Yemeni coast.<sup>33</sup>

Given that al Qaeda has historically demonstrated neither the capability nor the inclination to seize or hold territory, and that any attempt to do so would expose the group to conventional attacks from U.S. and Yemeni forces, the likelihood of AQAP attempting to seize the Bab al Mandab is somewhat remote. However, small-vessel bombing attacks against Western commercial and military ships, as demonstrated in the attacks against the USS *The Sullivans* and the USS *Cole* in 2000, lie well within AQAP's range of operational capability. Furthermore, while attempts to control critical waterways would likely cause the group to sustain losses that would outweigh any potential strategic benefits, the economic damage that attacks against individual vessels could inflict on the United States, its Western allies, and Saudi Arabia for relatively little cost could make those attacks an attractive option for AQAP to explore in the future.

**Facilitating and Promoting Homegrown Terrorism in the United States and Abroad.** Taking advantage of the central government's lack of reach and administrative control over tribal areas and its pre-occupation with internal conflicts in the north and south, al Qaeda has been able to move,

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29 “Saudi Bombing Deaths Rise,” BBC, May 13, 2003. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3022473.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3022473.stm) (accessed May 10, 2010).

30 “Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” BBC, January 3, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8437724.stm> (accessed May 10, 2010).

31 Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Mass Arrests of al Qaeda Suspects in Saudi Arabia Illustrate Security Threats from Yemen,” *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 14 (April 2010), p. 5.

32 Jamestown Foundation, “Al-Qaeda Vows to Block Strategic Al-Mandab Strait,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 2 (February 2010), p. 1.

33 “U.S. Intelligence: Al Qaeda May Target Ships off Yemen,” CNN, March 22, 2010. <http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2010/03/22/u-s-intelligence-al-qaeda-may-target-ships-off-yemen/> (accessed May 11, 2010).



train, and operate with relative impunity in some of Yemen's more remote provinces. This has raised concern in some quarters that Yemen could possibly become "the next Afghanistan," acting not only as a base from which AQAP could launch regional attacks, but also as a training ground, transit point, and source of radicalization for foreign recruits seeking to conduct attacks in their home countries and abroad. That the alleged perpetrator of the Christmas Day bombing attack is thought to have sought out and received training from AQAP after traveling from his native Nigeria is a clear demonstration of the potential dangers associated with this phenomenon.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to radicalizing and training foreign recruits in Yemen, AQAP has increasingly used its well-developed media capability to encourage individuals living abroad to conduct attacks in their home communities. In 2007, al Qaeda's Yemeni leadership began publishing *Sada al-Malahim* (The Echo of the Battles), a bi-monthly online news magazine that espouses the group's views on theological and political issues facing the global Islamist community and the Islamic world. In addition to presenting news and commentary that reflects the group's ideology, the magazine publishes interviews with terrorist leaders, biographies on rank and file fighters, tips on how to become a better al Qaeda foot soldier, lists of terrorists held by the Yemeni government, and letters and approving comments from the public.<sup>35</sup>

AQAP also promotes radicalization through more direct and personal propaganda efforts, the most notable of which are the media-based radicalization efforts of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric affiliated with AQAP who lives in southern Yemen. Awlaki, whom the Obama Administration has recently designated as eligible for targeted killing by the CIA,<sup>36</sup> encourages attacks against America and the West through online lectures and blog postings targeted to English-speaking audiences. He has been linked to several recent attacks on the United States, including the Fort Hood shootings, the attempted Christmas Day Bombing, and the May 2010 attempted bombing attempt in New York's Times Square.<sup>37</sup>

## U.S. Counterterrorism in Yemen

**Engagement to Date.** Following the U.S. embassy attacks in late 2008 and the AQAP merger in early 2009, the United States increased its pressure on the Saleh government to crack down on al Qaeda cells operating in Yemen. The Yemeni government initially responded by arresting a number of AQAP operatives in August 2009, but later turned its attention toward suppressing the Houthi insurgency

34 Brian Ross and Richard Esposito, "Abdulmutallab: More Like Me in Yemen," ABC News, December 28, 2009. <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/abdulmutallab-yemen-northwest-flight-253-terror-suspect/story?id=9430536&page=1> (accessed May 11, 2010).

35 Brian Palmer, "It's Like Slate for Terrorists: What's in al-Qaida's Web Magazine?," *Slate*, December 28, 2009. <http://www.slate.com/id/2239994/> (accessed May 18, 2010).

36 Scott Shane, "U.S. Approves Targeted Killing of American Cleric," *New York Times*, April 6, 2010. [http://www.adl.org/main\\_Terrorism/anwar\\_al-awlaki.htm](http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/anwar_al-awlaki.htm) (accessed May 13, 2010).

37 Anti-Defamation League, "Profile: Anwar al-Awlaki," May 7, 2010. [http://www.adl.org/main\\_Terrorism/anwar\\_al-awlaki.htm](http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/anwar_al-awlaki.htm) (accessed May 13, 2010).

## One Legacy of Guantanamo Bay

Several of AQAP's rank and file members and key leadership figures were formerly inmates of the U.S. military detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Many of these individuals were captured in the years following the September 11 attacks and, after having their cases reviewed in multiple military hearings at Guantánamo, were transferred to foreign custody.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the former Guantánamo detainees who joined al Qaeda's operations in Yemen did so after being transferred to Saudi Arabia. The United States has repatriated a total of 120 Guantánamo detainees to Saudi Arabia, at least 11 of whom later turned to extremist activities in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Though some of those detainees escaped from Saudi prisons, some of AQAP's most senior figures were released by Saudi authorities after passing through terrorist rehabilitation programs.<sup>2</sup>

Declassified documents detailing the Guantánamo military review proceedings suggest that several of the detainees were transferred to Saudi custody based at least in part on their denials that they had been involved in extremist activity or their assertions that they would not turn to violence if they were released.<sup>3</sup> Two of AQAP's most senior figures, Said al-Shihri and Muhammad al-Harbi, fall into this category. After multiple review hearings by U.S. authorities, al-Shihri and al-Harbi were subsequently transferred from Guantánamo to Saudi custody. They later graduated from terrorism rehabilitation programs and were released.<sup>4</sup>

1 Evan F. Kohlmann, "The Eleven: Saudi Guantánamo Veterans Returning to the Fight," NEFA Foundation, February 2009. <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefagitmoreturnees0209-1.pdf> (accessed June 4, 2010).

2 "The Guantánamo Docket," *New York Times*, May 16, 2010. <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo> (accessed June 7, 2010).

3 Ibid.

4 Mike Melia and Sarah El Deeb, "Former Gitmo Detainees help Al-Qaida Grown in Yemen," Associated Press, December 31, 2009.

in the north and the secessionist movement in the south.<sup>38</sup> This sort of diversion of resources and effort is an all-too-common consequence of U.S. counterterrorism pressure and assistance.

Faced with the Yemeni government's lackluster response, the United States continued to exert diplomatic pressure, urging President Saleh to take more direct offensive action against Yemeni al Qaeda cells. The United States also stepped up its military and development aid to Yemen, hoping that programs aimed at developing Yemeni counterterrorism capability and its economic and social infrastructure would help to minimize or eliminate al Qaeda's influence in the country.

In addition to diplomatic pressure and funding, the United States also dramatically increased hands-on assistance to and intelligence cooperation with the Yemeni government. Some of those efforts include training of Yemeni counterterrorism units by U.S. Special Forces.<sup>39</sup>

On December 17, 2009, the United States launched cruise missile strikes against suspected al Qaeda training camps north of Sanaa. These strikes,

executed in conjunction with Yemeni Special Forces raids, killed an estimated total of up to 34

38 Abigail Hauslohner, "Despite U.S. Aid, Yemen Faces Growing al Qaeda Threat," *Time*, December 22, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1949324,00.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).

39 Dana Priest, "U.S. Military Teams, Intelligence Deeply Involved in Aiding Yemen On Strikes," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/26/AR2010012604239.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).

suspected al Qaeda operatives.<sup>40</sup> Additional raids conducted by Yemeni forces on December 24 resulted in the killing and capture of several more suspected jihadists; the combined December offensives constituted some of the most significant action taken against Yemeni al Qaeda cells since the period immediately following 9/11.<sup>41</sup>

After an alleged AQAP-affiliated operative attempted to blow up a U.S. airliner on December 25, 2009, the Yemeni government ratcheted up its counterterrorism efforts still further. On January 14, 2010, the Yemeni government declared open war on AQAP, announcing its intention to pursue the group wherever it operates.<sup>42</sup> The following day, an airstrike in northern Yemen killed five suspected al Qaeda militants.

On January 19, 2010, the U.S. State Department designated AQAP a foreign terrorist organization, and declared al-Wahayshi and Said al-Shihri to be terrorists subject to U.S. sanction.<sup>43</sup> On May 12, 2010, State added Nayif al-Qahtani, a top AQAP logistician, and Qasim al-Raymi to the terrorist designation list, noting that al-Raymi played a key role in reviving the

**GTMO (Continued).** Though some AQAP figures denounced transnational terrorism prior to being transferred, others, such as Yusuf al-Shehri, Murtadha Magram, and Ibrahim al-Rabeish, were released while continuing to express an intention to continue waging war against America and its allies.<sup>5</sup> U.S. authorities ostensibly transferred these detainees to Saudi custody in the expectation that Saudi programs could successfully manage the risk posed by these individuals. However, some of the transfers may have been part of a political deal, including one designed to transfer detainees sought by the Saudi government in an effort to obtain its political support for the war in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

The apparent ease with which several committed extremists were able to manipulate both the U.S. and Saudi review processes is a matter of considerable concern. The transfer of detainees who still openly harbored hatred for the United States, however it occurred, is an even more grievous oversight. Together, these failures have dealt a serious blow to counterterrorism efforts in the Arabian Peninsula and have brought the viability of several elements of the U.S.-Saudi terror suspect repatriation system into serious question.

Part of the problem clearly lies in an apparent inability on the part of U.S. and Saudi authorities to distinguish committed radicals from misguided adventure-seekers or the truly repentant, a failing that closer monitoring and review could potentially rectify. Given the price of failure, however, it may be necessary to more carefully evaluate the rehabilitation programs' foundational assumptions and determine whether reliance on Saudi rehabilitation programs can realistically continue to form a part of U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

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5 Kohlmann.

6 Don Van Natta Jr. and Tim Golden, "The Reach of War: Detainees; Officials Detail a Detainee Deal By 3 Countries," *New York Times*, July 4, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/04/world/the-reach-of-war-detainees-officials-detail-a-detainee-deal-by-3-countries.html?scp=716&sq=By%20Tim%20Golden&st=nyt&pagewanted=3> (accessed July 7, 2010).

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40 Bill Roggio, "U.S. launches cruise missiles strikes against al Qaeda in Yemen," *Long War Journal*, December 19, 2009, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/12/us\\_launches\\_cruise\\_m.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/12/us_launches_cruise_m.php) (accessed June 13, 2010).

41 "Al-Qaida fighters killed in Yemen air strikes," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/24/yemen-strike-al-qaida> (accessed June 13, 2010).

42 Mohamed Sudam and Ulf Laessing, "Yemen in War With Al Qaeda, Urges Citizens to Help," *Reuters*, January 14, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE60D1260100114> (accessed June 17, 2010).

43 "U.S. Designates AQAP As Terror Group," UPI, January 19, 2010. [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/International/2010/01/19/US-designates-AQAP-as-terror-group/UPI-88161263935977/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/International/2010/01/19/US-designates-AQAP-as-terror-group/UPI-88161263935977/) (accessed May 18, 2010).

group after his prison escape in 2006.<sup>44</sup> On May 15, 2010, three days after this designation, media sources reported that al-Qahtani had been killed in a shootout with Saudi security forces the previous month.<sup>45</sup>

## Current Policy

The current U.S. strategy to combat al Qaeda's influence in Yemen consists of three main components:

- **Provide Yemeni government forces with training, equipment, and intelligence support.** Since 2008, the United States has substantially increased security assistance funding to the Yemeni government, including \$67 million in training and equipping assistance in 2009 and \$150 million approved for 2010.<sup>46</sup> The United States has also provided logistical backing in the form of shared intelligence and covert assistance in an effort to bolster the Yemeni government's capacity to dismantle AQAP through military and law enforcement means.<sup>47</sup> By supporting indirect U.S. engagement with AQAP, this approach is designed to allow the United States to maintain pressure on al Qaeda and minimize its threat to U.S. interests without having to engage al Qaeda cells directly.
- **Conduct unilateral kinetic operations.** Since 2002, U.S. intelligence and military authorities have selectively used cruise missile and drone strikes in an effort to eliminate key AQAP leaders and degrade the group's ability to plan and conduct attacks. General David H. Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command, also signed an order in September 2009 that approved a broader and more active role for special operations forces (SOF) in areas outside of military theaters, including Somalia and Yemen. In addition to gathering intelligence on terrorist groups and local groups with potential utility as partner or proxy forces, the order expresses the intent to use SOF to help facilitate plans for pre-emptive and retaliatory strikes in areas where al Qaeda trains and operates.<sup>48</sup>

There have been no clear policy statements suggesting that unilateral strikes will form a permanent part of U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Yemen. However, the trend of escalating kinetic operations and the explicitly ordered expansion of SOF involvement in Yemen and elsewhere suggest that U.S. strikes against AQAP will continue to form part of the U.S. effort to counter Yemeni al Qaeda cells for the foreseeable future.

- **Fund Yemeni political and socio-economic development.** The third component of the current U.S. approach involves providing the Yemeni government with development assistance to help address the poverty and lack of economic opportunity that is thought

44 Thomas Joscelyn, "U.S. State Department Designates Two al Qaeda Leaders in Yemen," *Long War Journal*, May 12, 2010. [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/us\\_state\\_department.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/us_state_department.php) (accessed May 18, 2010).

45 Hugh Macleod, "Senior Yemen al-Qaida Leader Reported Killed in Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/15/yemen-al-qaida-leader-killed> (accessed May 18, 2010).

46 "U.S. To Couple Military, Civilian Aid For Yemen," Reuters, January 21, 2010. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN21102145> (accessed May 12, 2010).

47 Priest.

48 Karen DeYoung and Greg Jaffe, "U.S. 'secret war' expands globally as Special Operations forces take larger role," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/03/AR2010060304965.html?sub=AR> (accessed June 13, 2010).

to contribute to terrorism. One of the central goals of this effort is to bolster the Yemeni government's capacity to provide its citizens with basic services and good governance, which will in turn strengthen its legitimacy and popular appeal.<sup>49</sup> In conjunction with assistance provided to help the government degrade terrorist capabilities militarily, development and governance assistance are designed to undermine support for AQAP by grappling with the political and socio-economic crises that could potentially allow the group's rhetoric to resonate more broadly with disaffected members of Yemeni society.

## The Way Forward

**AQAP's entrenchment in Yemen is not a foregone conclusion.** AQAP is attempting to deepen its relationship with Yemeni tribes, seeking client status to make itself more difficult to uproot. It is also trying to present itself as a champion of local causes, including resistance to central government control and Western influence. It is important to note, however, that many Yemeni tribes are strongly resistant to foreign influence and outside attempts to change Yemen's internal power dynamics. AQAP's core aim of establishing an Islamic government in the Arabian Peninsula, a goal on which it has demonstrated little willingness to compromise, threatens to do exactly that.<sup>50</sup> Given this tension, fears that al Qaeda will successfully find support and sanctuary in the areas lying outside the central government's control may be somewhat overblown.

**Direct or indirect U.S. military action will likely validate AQAP's anti-American narrative and entrench the organization further.** Though divergent interests currently limit AQAP's ability to comprehensively ally itself with local actors and interests, substantial U.S. military involvement could change that situation significantly. Many Yemenis viewed the U.S.-backed raids on AQAP sanctuaries in December, which generated significant civilian casualties, very negatively.<sup>51</sup> AQAP used the damage caused by the attacks to focus its narrative on the United States and the Yemeni governments as enemies of the Yemeni people and armed resistance as a valid and necessary defensive measure against aggression. Escalating U.S. military involvement, whether through missile strikes or direct military intervention, could strengthen this narrative and prompt the Yemeni population to view al Qaeda as the lesser of two evils and comparatively tolerable. If this tolerance were to evolve into an alliance of convenience to resist intervention from the United States and the Yemeni government it supports, al Qaeda would become significantly more dangerous and difficult to dismantle.

**Without significant incentives for governmental reform, neither military aid nor development assistance is likely to achieve the desired effect.** The Yemeni government under President Saleh has recently cooperated with the United States in its efforts to counter AQAP. It is important to

49 U.S. Department of State, "Yemen: Confronting al Qaeda, Preventing State Failure," January 20, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/135505.htm> (accessed June 13, 2010).

50 Phillips, p. 5.

51 Hugh MacLeod and Nasser Arrabyee, "Yemeni Air Attacks on al-Qaida Fighters Risk Mobilising Hostile Tribes," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/03/yemen-air-attacks-alqaida> (accessed May 12, 2010).



note, however, that real and perceived brutality, corruption, economic and political exclusion, and manipulative partisanship on the part of the Yemeni government were significant factors contributing to al Qaeda's resurgence in the first place. More importantly, as evidenced most recently by its increasingly repressive stance toward the southern secessionist movement and the number of civilian casualties generated in its recent offensives against the Houthis and al Qaeda, the Yemeni central government has demonstrated little desire to moderate its behavior despite increased U.S. attention and the large aid influx in recent months. Providing the Yemeni government with more military aid and development assistance is unlikely to change this pattern and may further entrench it.

Though providing aid to the Yemeni government is ostensibly part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at attacking terrorism's root causes, it does not provide an incentive to moderate the behavior that allows terrorism to thrive. Further, knowledge that the U.S. focus on al Qaeda will ensure that aid will continue whether reforms are enacted or not could provide the incentive to use that aid to centralize power without increasing governmental transparency, wealth equity, or political inclusion. This could mean that despite a significant resource investment in undercutting terrorism at its source, U.S. aid could ultimately help to perpetuate the problems it is meant to solve.

**Binding the United States closer to the Saleh regime could make extrication difficult and will likely prove to be a long-term liability.** By publicly committing to helping the Yemeni government fix the country's varied internal crises, the United States has, to a certain extent, cast its lot with the Saleh regime and allowed itself to be linked to its successes and failures. It has also steadily increased its influence on and presence in the Yemeni security apparatus, making further and deeper involvement a more likely future scenario. As U.S.-Yemeni military cooperation and diplomatic linkages become more extensive, the United States risks getting drawn into an open-ended patron-client relationship which, once begun, may be difficult to end. This could potentially provide al Qaeda with a potent propaganda tool, allowing the United States to be implicated in accusations levied against the Yemeni government, from which it will be increasingly reluctant to withdraw support.

## Recommendations

- Approach counterterrorism in Yemen with a long-term strategic view, taking care not to sacrifice strategic effectiveness for short-term tactical gains.
- Remain wary of backing a regime with little accountability and with which our interests do not necessarily align.
- Take steps to lessen the U.S. military and intelligence footprint in Yemen to avoid validating al Qaeda's anti-American rhetoric.



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The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

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