

Unpacking Terrorism, Revolution and Insurgency in Yemen: Real and Imagined Threats to Regional Security

by Alexandra Lewis

Abstract

Recent months have seen a seeming escalation in the international threat posed by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a terrorist network that has taken Yemen as its regional base of operations. In light of recent attacks, and resulting embassy closures, Yemen is a rising priority in the Western-led War on Terror. However, this has resulted in a side-lining of other security threats in Yemen, which may cause serious challenges to the authority of the Yemeni Government. In reality, the role of AQAP has been heavily manipulated throughout Yemen's contemporary history: this was most evident during the 2011 Arab Spring, when both sides in the conflict claimed that Al Qaeda operatives were working with members of the other. Two years later, the true nature of the AQAP threat in Yemen is rarely questioned by external observers, yet remains largely shrouded in mystery. There is a need for more critical approaches to the AQAP challenges, which take the broader context of Yemeni security into account.

Key Words: *Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Terrorism, Insurgency, Arab Spring*

Introduction

The terrorist threat in Yemen draws significant media attention. Attacks have resulted in repeated calls for foreign intervention as the death toll rises - with a recent Al-Qaeda assault in September resulting in the deaths of at least 38 Yemeni soldiers.[1] However, few outside Yemen assess the nature of such security threats critically; terrorist actions often elicit knee-jerk reactions that include mass international staff evacuations and drone strikes. The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of the terrorist threat in Yemen in some detail, based on the country's broader security context, so as to question common approaches to this challenge.

In August 2013, Britain, Germany and France closed their Embassies in Yemen, following a similar move by the American government, which temporarily shut 22 embassies and consulates across the Middle East and North Africa in order to protect staff and citizens from a potential Al-Qaeda attack.[2] "In response to this latest threat, the United States had unleashed a barrage of drone strikes in Yemen. Yet but it is unclear to what extent it has reduced the persistent threat from an increasingly decentralised Al-Qaeda organization." [3] As the operational base of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Yemen has been singled out as a country of high-level risk for Western and international actors - with embassies in Yemen remaining closed significantly longer than others across the region.[4]

The fragile state witnessed similar embassy closures and drone strikes in 2011, which contributed to a wide-scale exodus of international staff during the Arab Spring.

News reports on AQAP movements in Yemen from 2011 onwards have painted a picture of a state on the verge of collapse, partly overrun by terrorists and Islamic radicals,[5] and it cannot be doubted that the threats to foreign nationals in Yemen are real and immediate. Foreigners increasingly seem to be targeted in planned, opportunistic and spontaneous acts of violence,[6] while incidents of kidnapping are also on the rise.[7] However, many of these and other security threats can be linked to tribal power politics or to on-going local insurgencies that have little to no connection to terrorist movements. This distinction is important because the former category of risk (tribalism and insurgency) is associated in the short-term with local and national security, while the latter risk (terrorism) poses an immediate threat also to regional and international security. Both types of risk affect different parties in different ways and require tailor-made approaches.

The AQAP phenomenon has been highly sensationalised in the press. It has been in the interest of various actors, including that of Yemen's former President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to overplay the AQAP threat [8] and to link traditional combatant and criminal groups to terrorist organisations. This has meant that the true extent of the AQAP threat in Yemen has been difficult to determine, particularly in the context of increased violence and social chaos in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, As the International Crisis Group observed: "The group is shrouded in mystery, and questions abound about the scope of its influence and relations with other Yemeni parties, giving rise to an array of conspiracy theories on all sides." [9]

Yemen was one of the least talked-about participants in the Arab Spring. Interventions that were launched or considered in Libya and Syria in 2011 were never really considered in Yemen, regardless of its high rate of violence against civilian protesters. The conflict in Yemen remained poorly understood by the general public and the international community. What media reports did emerge from Yemen in 2011 prioritised the role of AQAP. On the outskirts of the media spotlight, Yemen emerged as a "front-line state" in the War on Terror for the United States [10], whose armed forces launched a series of covert shelling operations in southern Yemen before, during, and after the Arab Spring. Yemen is of key strategic concern for Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and other regional and international donors, to whom President Saleh proved an important ally.

The role of AQAP was heavily manipulated during the Yemeni revolution, when both pro-Saleh and pro-change activists claimed that Al Qaeda operatives were working with the other side. Distinguishing fact from fiction, myth from reality, has been virtually impossible for outsiders not directly involved in Yemeni politics. Part of the challenge is definitional, because there are by now hundreds of contemporary definitions of terrorism and this severely clouds and complicates the issue [11]: in the absence of clear terminological constraints, it is easy for

opportunistic stakeholders to play politics with terrorism and delegitimise their enemies by referring to them as terrorist agents. Another part of the challenge is the dramatic politicisation of the term “terrorism” since the infamous Al Qaeda attack on the United States on September 11th, 2001, and the growth of funding and military support offered by the international community to conflict-affected states willing to cooperate in the War on Terror. However, the main difficulty in Yemen is the severe lack of information available on the scope and impact of the terrorist threat, where conceptions of AQAP have become incorrectly and confusingly tangled with existing insurgencies.

Tamar Meisel writes that there are two types of definitions applied to terrorism: defensive definitions and critical ones. Meisel writes that defensive definitions see terrorism as “violence intended to intimidate”: they “obliterate the distinction between terrorism and other violent acts, with the clear implication that terrorism is, in and of itself, no worse than many other practiced forms of violence that are internationally sanctioned.”[12] This paper relies instead on critical definitions that posit terrorism as “a subset of politically motivated violence which falls short of conventional war” in that it is “internationally illegal and (to say the least) morally questionable”, often targeting civilian populations internationally “with the intent of spreading fear” “as a strategy designed to advance a political end.”[13]

In its prioritisation of international-level political changes, terrorism is distinct from insurgency, which often prioritises national change or the protection of land and territory. James D. Kiras writes that: “The crucial difference is the scope and scale of the violence. Terrorism rarely results in political change on its own while insurgency attempts to bring about change through force of arms.”[14] He continues to argue that “In an insurgency, the adversaries are asymmetric and the weaker, and almost always a sub-state group attempts to bring about political change by administering and fighting more effectively than its state-based foe through the use of guerrilla tactics.”[15] Such strategies are not generally prevalent among terrorist organisations. In this article, in the context of Yemen, insurgent groups are seen as being distinctive from terrorist groups through their status as entirely home-based and home-grown groups, aiming to bring about national change in order to benefit the situation of marginalised political groups: they are seen as movements that have the capacity to gain international recognition.

Moving forward from these theoretical positions, this article aims to disentangle the terrorist threat in Yemen from the one of other violent political actors, in order to help to shed some light on the true nature of the AQAP presence in the country. It will do so by drawing attention to the manipulation of the AQAP theme by various stakeholders (with the Arab Spring emerging as a key example of this) in order to unpack the real and imagined risks posed to the greater Middle East and North Africa region by Yemeni terrorism.

AQAP and the Yemeni Context

Due to its geographic location and development status, Yemen is directly affected by the political and economic fluctuations of both the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. As a result of its location, and because of its comparative stability and weak border management capacities, Yemen has attracted numerous refugees and labour migrants from the North-East of Africa through shipping and sailing lanes, the majority of which arrive from Somalia [16] and Ethiopia.[17] At the same time, unemployed Yemenis look to their wealthier Middle Eastern neighbours for economic opportunities, travelling to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and elsewhere. Yemen's porous borders and poor-but-prevalent state capacity[18] have contributed to its selection by AQAP and Ansar al Sharia as a hub for regional operations. Both of these organisations' operations are facilitated by the easy availability of weapons and ammunitions in the country.[19]

Yemen's migratory connections to Somalia and shared waters in the Gulf of Aden have led to fears that AQAP might use Yemen to connect to other radical organisations, including Al Shabaab, so as to destabilise the entire region.[20] Despite ideological similarities with AQAP, however, evidence suggests that Al Shabaab is divided on the issue of continuing links to Al-Qaeda. As one observer put it: "The connection between al Shabaab and Al-Qaeda is growing stronger but has not yet reached the level of operational control by Al-Qaeda. Al Shabaab's draconian tactics, which are imported from outside and are anathema to most Somalis, and its foreign component may be its undoing.[21] For this reason, Al Shabaab must necessarily be extremely careful about maintaining stronger ties to external terrorist networks. Meanwhile, Greater Somalia itself, as a failed state, provides a low priority target for AQAP. One factor for this is that the costs of operating in war-affected Somali areas have proven unsustainably high for Al-Qaeda in the past, due to the likelihood of attack on its bases and convoys by Somali bandits and clans, and also due to the high costs associated with corruption and travel to the Somali war zones.[22] Another factor is the relatively low presence of international staff and Western targets in Somali territories, particularly in the South Central Zone. In light of these restrictions, it seems more likely that AQAP will look to form more beneficial alliances elsewhere: Syria will probably prove to be a more interesting target for them in this sense, due to the rise of Jabhat al Nusrah (the Victory Front), and the influx of foreign fighters into the country. Syria already has a long history of acting as a "significant transit hub" for Al-Qaeda operatives, and is further strategically important to their cause, because it shares land borders with Jordan and Israel – two of Al-Qaeda's principal enemies.[23]

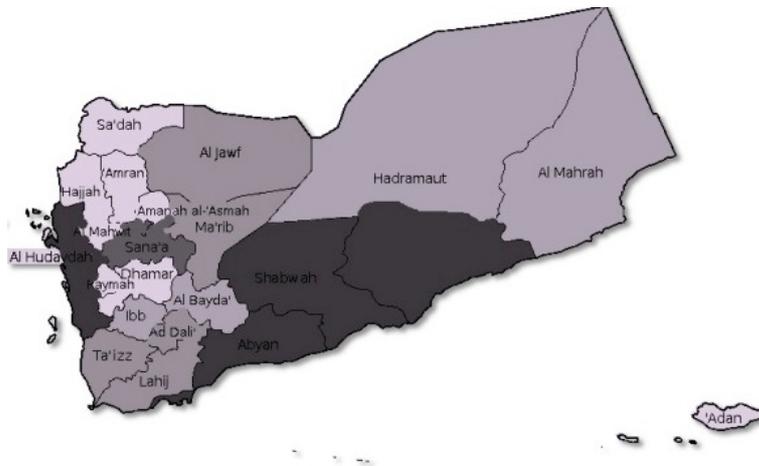


Figure 1: Areas Suspected to Contain AQAP and Ansar al Sharia Fighters in 2012

In Yemen itself, meanwhile, AQAP operatives tend largely to be clustered in southern and coastal areas, though estimates of their numbers vary. The AQAP cause has found support in impoverished areas of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South, which used to be its own state. However, AQAP groups are also associated with Houthi rebel movements in the North. These connections are linked to on-going conflicts and insurgencies.

Conflict and Security up until 2011

The far-Northern Houthi insurgency and the Southern secessionist movement are the two main unresolved political conflict issues in Yemen. Both conflicts encapsulate significant challenges for security and legitimacy within the state - challenges which are aggravated by regional political and criminal threats, including those of a terrorist nature. These are also linked to severe poverty and underdevelopment.

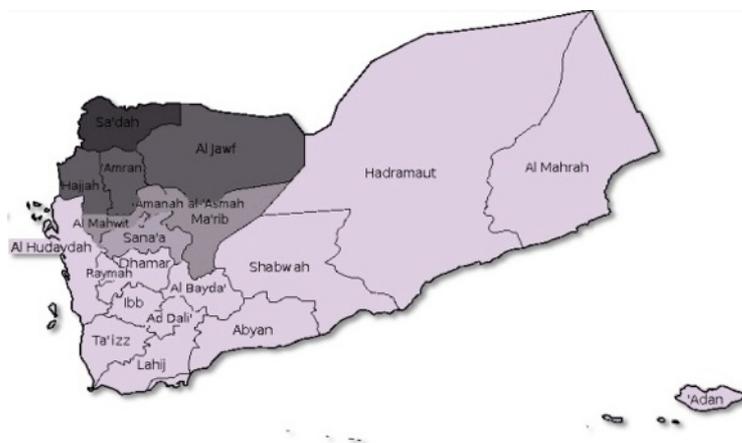


Figure 2: The Sa'adah Wars, 2005-2013

Economic competition between North and South Yemen before and after unification – culminating in a 1994 civil war for partition and followed immediately by a need to consolidate a new government leadership – meant that for a prolonged period in Yemen's recent history, the Northern peripheries of the country were marginalised by state development programmes in favour of building a strong capital city with a solid administrative base. The resulting situation of chronic underdevelopment that emerged in the North contributed to overall increases in levels of hostility among local communities towards the Yemeni Government under President Saleh.[24] When combined with historic grievances, the formation of new identities and increased social mobility, all of which came to the fore in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such hostility eventually sparked a wave of public demonstrations and then open conflict when the Government intervened to arrest protest organisers.[25] Since then, seven consecutive wars have enveloped Sa'ada and its surrounding governorates, Hajja, Amran and Al Jawf.

Due to the identity of Houthi insurgents as members of the under-represented Zaydi Shia faith, the conflict has at times taken on religious undercurrents.[26] This has made it easier for the conflict to become associated with Islamic radicalisation: in recent years, the Sa'adah wars have begun to move away from their roots in underdevelopment to become more ideological in nature. This process has unfolded mainly as the conflict has spilled over Saudi Arabian borders, becoming embroiled in an alleged regional cold war between a predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia and a Shia Iran and, moreover, gaining an international dimension through the involvement of the United States of America.[27] American involvement has helped to strengthen anti-Western rhetoric in the Houthi movement. These associations have enabled the Houthi's critics and enemies to paint them as members of a terrorist organisation, though their actions have prioritised the targeting of military and state personnel that they see as invading their territory.

Christopher Boucek wrote that: "The Yemeni government has sought to link the rebellion to the larger 'war on terrorism' and garner international support by claiming the Houthis' supporters include secular Libya [pre-2011], radical Sunni extremist al-Qaeda, Lebanese Hizbollah, and Shi'i Iran. The state has not yet produced evidence that the Houthi rebels are receiving outside military assistance, or proven its recent assertions that Iran is meddling in the conflict." [28] However, government has nevertheless found many willing ears for its narrative in recent years. Though inaccurate, associations of Houthis with AQAP have been used by Saleh's regime to garner military aid from international and regional donors. There, however, is a genuine threat that increased insecurity caused by Houthi activities in the far North could "permit the reinfiltration" of AQAP "into Saudi territory, from which it had been mostly eradicated in 2003–2006." [29] Donors therefore continued to support military action against the Houthis up until 2011. The culmination of this was a direct military involvement in Yemen by Saudi troops in 2009.

Even more commonly associated with AQAP is Al-Hirak Al-Janubi, the Southern secessionist movement. On the other side of the country, the origins of the Southern secessionist movement can be linked to the first three years of Yemeni union after 1990, a union which did not bring many material benefits to the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. In the aftermath of the "democratisation", Southern communist government structures were slowly dismantled. This included privatising services and bringing an end to a heavily subsidised healthcare system and public education in that half of the country. These and other funding cuts reinforced rumours spreading among the local population that Southern resources, and particularly Southern oil and gas, were being siphoned by the capital, Sana'a, to promote Northern interests.

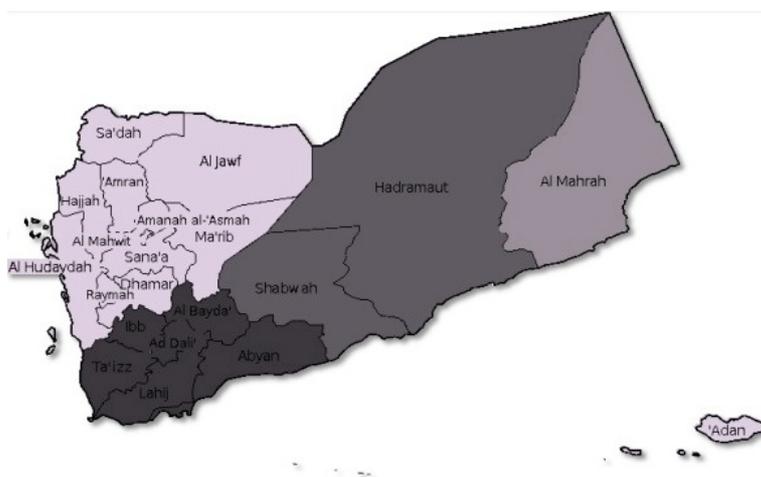


Figure 3: Al-Hirak al-Janubi Activity, 2007 - 2013

Together with the gradual reduction of the Yemeni Socialist Party's (YSP) authority and influence across the country, growing Southern dissatisfaction with the new status quo eventually led to the 1994 separatist war, in which Southern forces were, however, quickly overwhelmed by those from the North. Following the unquestionable victory of the North of Yemen over the South, President Saleh's regime set about a process of purging YSP leaders from key positions in the South. He replaced them with Northern officials in order to ensure that a second war would never occur. It has been argued that the North deliberately decimated the South and then delayed reparations as a constant reminder about the cost of further disobedience. [30]

Continuing Southern grievances have led to prolonged hostility towards the Sana'a Government and reoccurring protests. Saleh's regime responded to these protests with brutal reprisals up until 2011. After his departure, the position of ruling President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi towards the South has remained unclear.[31] The resultant Al Hiraak Al Janubi is most commonly connected to groups of disaffected military personnel, known as the Society of Retired Military Officers, who put together a large public demonstration campaign

in 2007, decrying their unfair dismissal and poor pension arrangements. This protest movement is in no way associated with AQAP. However, AQAP members have found sanctuary in dissatisfied Southern communities. The scope of this challenge is difficult to assess, though it can easily be argued that it has largely been mishandled by the Yemeni state and some of its allies, particularly by the United States.

Christina Hellmich has pointed out that the presence of AQAP fighters in the South can be directly attributed to Northern policies. She writes that: “During the early 1990s, the Yemeni government, unlike other Arab regimes at the time, welcomed fighters returning from Afghanistan (also known as the ‘first generation’ of Al Qaeda in Yemen), who integrated into all levels of society and would turn out to be useful allies to counter the influence of ‘unbelieving’ communists in the South and an ‘unbelieving’ Shi’a population in the North.”[32] Joint American-Yemeni bombing campaigns and drone strikes in the South designed to weed out this threat from 2001 onwards have helped to radicalise local communities who did not previously share AQAP’s extremist ideology: “Farea Al-Muslimi, a Yemeni activist and writer, testified to the US Senate in April that the increase in the number of strikes and casualties is turning public opinion against the US.”[33] Sustained and continuing attacks in August 2013 have had a severe impact on the safety and well-being of Southern communities.[34]

AQAP’s ability to provide members of local communities with ‘employment’ opportunities is also very appealing in South Yemen, where unemployment is at an all-time high. However, due to fundamental ideological disagreements between AQAP and Al Hiraak, as well as the Yemeni Government’s strong interest in undermining the legitimacy of Al Hiraak’s cause, there is a need to remain critical of alleged associations between the two. It is worth remembering, as Christina Hellmich notes, that: “The secessionist movement in southern Yemen is first and foremost a confrontation with the government, which has previously used the jihadis to keep the ‘socialist unbelievers in check.”[35]

Recently, Southern Separatists walked out of national reconciliation talks in Yemen, “demanding a Sanaa apology for past wars and that talks between Sanaa and Southerners be held abroad”[36], indicating a dramatic deterioration of relations between the South and the post-Saleh Government. President Hadi has tempted them back to the negotiating table by reinstating hundreds of officers who had been made redundant after the 1994 War.[37]

The Politics of AQAP in Yemen

AQAP’s role in Yemen has evolved alongside themes of Southern Secessionism and Houthi insurgency.

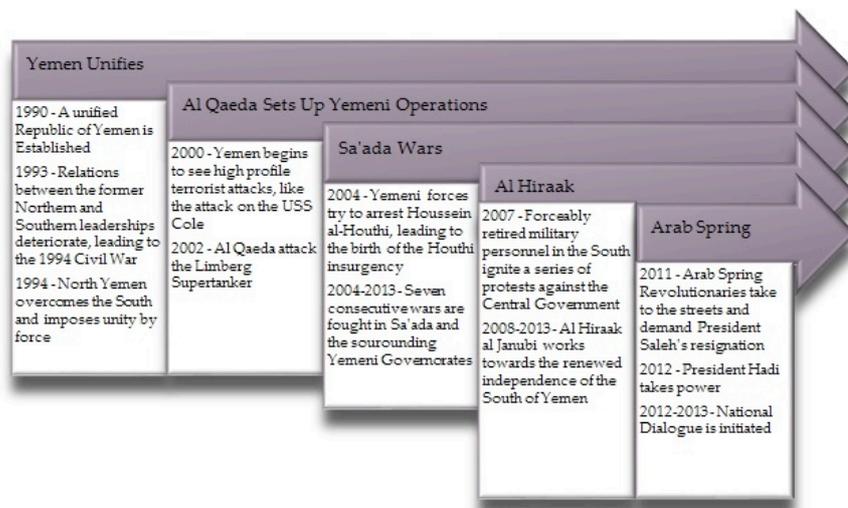


Figure 4: Timeline of Security Threats in Yemen

The Yemeni Government’s responses to Southern protests and the Houthi insurgency have been immediate and violent, with both movements being perceived as substantial threats to the integrity and continued legitimacy of the state. Casualties from both struggles are yet to be fully and systematically counted, but are likely to range, combined, in the thousands. The diversion of military and security resources to these areas has also allowed for other opportunist groups to establish a base of operations in the country, including terrorist, extremist and criminal organisations.

Yemen is the original home of the family of the late Osama bin Laden, founder of Al-Qaeda, and the new operational centre of AQAP. The Al Qaeda movement in Yemen has been linked to two major maritime attacks – the one on the *USS Cole* in 2000 [38] and the one on the French oil tanker *Limburg* in 2002. These attacks were some of the most significant early indicators of the groups’ potential impact on international strategic interests in the region. They led to the withdrawal of shippers from Yemeni ports which was a significant blow to the country's economy. Earlier, in 1992, Al-Qaeda had already hit a hotel in Aden that had formerly been used by American marines. Although this is considered Al-Qaeda first formal terrorist attack,[39] it received little media attention at the time and was widely ignored. In the year 2000, the United States responded to a suicide attack on the *USS Cole* with a large scale investigation and missile strikes. These resulted in the death of Al-Qaeda’s leader in Yemen, Abu Ali al Harithi, in November 2002, crippling the organisation for a number of years.[40] The Yemeni branch of Al-Qaeda did not recover from this onslaught until after 2006, when a large-scale prison break freed Nasser Al-Wuhayshi (currently number two in the hierarchy of Al-Qaeda) and Qasim al Raymi, who set about reconstituting the movement. In 2007 and 2008, Al-Qaeda began targeting Western tourists in Maarib and Hadramawt, as well as the American embassy in Sana’a, using car bombs and other means of attack.[41]

AQAP was formed by Nasser Al-Wuhayshi, Sa'id Al-Shihiri and Mohammad Al-Awfi[42] in 2009, when the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian branches of Al-Qaeda united in the pursuit of shared political goals that included the overthrow of key regionally located governments, including that of Saudi Arabia.[43] Soon thereafter, an AQAP suicide bomber almost succeeded in an attempt to take the life of Saudi Deputy Interior Minister – Prince Mohammed bin Nayef.[44] By 2010, AQAP had entered full military confrontations with the Yemeni Government in Lawdar, Zinjibar and Huta, three territories where the group had established a presence and was trying to bring under its full control. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda-linked parcel bombs posted in Yemen were detected in cargo planes on their way to North America.[45]

Lars Berger et al write that: “The strength and roots of AQAP nowadays are deeply intertwined with Yemeni history.[46] In recent years, AQAP has probably proved to be the most important regional wakeup call for development policies in Yemen that are meant to stabilise the country.[47] In 2009, the United States earmarked \$150 million for a stabilisation strategy.[48]

In practice, the threat of AQAP has acted as one of the main determining factors for continuing American and Saudi Arabian support for the Yemeni government, which has proved crucial for former-President Saleh's regime up until 2011 in determining domestic military policy, particularly in relation to the war against the Houthis. Military aid is proving equally important for his successor, President Hadi,[49] both in the far North and in the South. Since Hadi took power, Agence France-Press noted that “US drone strikes in Yemen nearly tripled in 2012 compared to 2011, from 18 to 53” – “The latest one came on August 1 [2013], as Yemeni President [Hadi] prepared to hold talks in Washington with US counterpart Barack Obama, killing four Al-Qaeda suspects. It was the third such strike in five days.”[50] In the aftermath of the embassy closures in the summer of 2013, joint military actions have also expanded the scope of people to be targeted by US drones.[51] As of August 13, 2013, American President Barack Obama's administration had “launched an estimated 79 drone strikes in addition to 10 air or cruise missile strikes in Yemen.” Compared to just one drone strike launched under the leadership of President George W. Bush Jr., this indicates a dramatic increase.[52] Recently, President Hadi has requested that the United States supply the Yemeni government with its own drones directly, to help combat the AQAP threat.[53]

In reality, the Houthis and AQAP in particular have little mutual ground in common. The Houthi focus on the local and frictions recently “led AQAP to initiate attacks against the Shia Zaydi Houthi population.”[54] Some observers have even argued that: “Sanaa has often supported and armed Islamist groups to balance against other factions, including the Huthis and the Southern opposition.”[55] Others have found that former-President Saleh's support of Al-Qaeda more specifically dates back to the years before Yemen's unification, when the

terrorist group's goal was simply to help overthrow socialist regimes like the one of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, 1967-1990.[56]

Rumours of Al-Qaeda's operations in Yemen are often greatly exaggerated by the state as well as others who have traditionally relied upon predominantly American security concerns to rally financial and military support to the government, especially in times of heightened local conflict and political unrest. Thus, during the Arab Spring of 2011, both President Saleh's regime and the opposing Joint Meetings Party played upon the theme of a resurgent AQAP to enlist foreign support for their causes: President Saleh claiming that his departure would see Yemen overrun by terrorists, and Abdel Rahman Ba Fadel of the opposing Islah party, claimed that Saleh was secretly supporting AQAP in order to increase their profile and justify his policies in the eyes of the international press.[57]

Due to the large-scale manipulation of security issues by multiple actors in Yemen, it is often difficult to assess their impact on the country and what it means for regional security. Leading experts on the situation, including Sarah Phillips, cast doubt on assertions of actors like Ba Fadel who said that AQAP's mission in Yemen has always been "to destroy the existing political system and establish its own." [58] The International Crisis Group concluded: "For lack of evidence, it is impossible to verify these competing and often inflammatory allegations." [59] However, there can be little doubt that Al-Qaeda poses a significant threat. In February 2012, AQAP claimed responsibility for an attack on the Presidential Palace that left 26 Republican Guards dead on the day that President Hadi was sworn in as Saleh's replacement.[60] A further 96 Yemeni soldiers were killed by AQAP in May 2012.[61]

The Arab Spring and the Reconfiguration of Security Narratives in Yemen

The Arab Spring reconfigured narratives of security in Yemen by bringing the AQAP threat to the fore and by affording Al Qaeda's operatives the opportunity to escalate their activities within the context of increased insecurity. The Arab Spring arrived in Yemen on January 27, 2011, when thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, demanding a change of leadership. The removal of President Saleh (who had been in power since 1978) was a central and non-negotiable demand for the large majority of demonstrators. Such removal, pro-change protesters insisted, needed to be immediate, without allowing for "a phased transition that would defer [the President's] departure until the end of an interim period in which constitutional changes would be agreed." [62]

As a non-negotiable issue, however, the theme of President Saleh's immediate departure proved extremely contentious, with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Qatar especially, striving from the outset to broker a deal for a phased transfer of power. Though an agreement was signed, with Saleh officially handing over leadership of the country to President Hadi in February of 2012, power transfer negotiations in 2011 and 2012 were left

lacking considerably in legitimacy and have remained largely contested throughout the country in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

At a local level, there is also considerable suspicion about the international community's future role in the country, with America having proven to be an important ally of President Saleh's regime in the struggle against AQAP, and the United Nations Security Council having taken almost an entire year to issue a formal statement decrying violence against protesters in Yemen, while actively protecting protesters in Libya.

The Arab Spring represented the opportunity for various actors who had been in conflict with the government for the past decade to advance their own individual agendas. In the far North of Yemen, insecurity generated by protests across the country offered a chance for the Houthi insurgency movement to reorganise and secure an operational stronghold, establishing a virtually self-contained and separate governance system in the Sa'ada area that may have now begun to spread its influence into neighbouring governorates.[63]

Likewise, the Arab Spring and its explicit call for a change of leadership, and therefore a change in the structures of government, also reinvigorated the Southern Separatist Movement. It used protests to vocalise grievances (although secessionism itself remained a fairly concealed element of their political narrative in 2011).

At the same time, the diversion of security forces towards containing public demonstrations led to the escalation of Al-Qaeda's activities in the country, with AQAP joining forces with Ansar al Sharia and seizing control of important cities and strongholds in the South, including Zinjibar in May 2011.[64]

A matter of concern for the international community in 2011 and 2012 was that AQAP would use its growing influence to establish caliphates in Yemen.[65] However, evidence indicates that AQAP's capacity to hold territory in Yemen was severely undermined by its lack of legitimacy on the ground. Confrontations between AQAP and the secular Southern Secessionist Movement restrict AQAP's influence, though some observers have claimed that the two have occasionally built temporary alliances in their fight against the central government.[66] Though AQAP poses a real threat in Yemen, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, anecdotal evidence linking it to insurgent groups remains suspect, indicating that the risk of terrorist contagion is possibly less severe than it is often assumed. Nonetheless, the security and political challenges posed are significant, with the AQAP abduction of an Iranian diplomat, Nour-Ahmad Nikbakhat, in July, 2013, offering only the latest challenge to the authority of the Yemeni state, both on a national and on an international level.[67]

Conclusion

The presence of local anti-regime groups and transnational jihadist actors affecting Yemen constitute both independent and interconnected security threats. AQAP forms part of this broader context, rather than dominating the broader context. The Yemeni Government, rather than addressing domestic security challenges and associated conflict drivers, has leveraged international, and primarily American, interests to focus on AQAP, while delegitimising other groups of combatants by labelling them also terrorist actors. The AQAP threat in Yemen is very real, but the issue itself has been caught up by sensationalist media coverage of the country, which prioritises “sexier” stories about terrorism over insurgency. It has also been marred in political power struggles and manipulated by the Yemeni state, among others. These two issues are historically interlinked: former-President Saleh in particular had a long history of restricting the access of foreign press office in Yemen, routinely expelling journalists who did not stick to the party line. The need for foreign powers to have an ally in the Yemeni state through which to launch counter-terrorism operations has diminished the incentive for external actors to look into other violent conflicts. The over-reliance on the state as a source of operational information on terrorist groups has skewed perceptions of the actual risk. The dangers associated with misinformation are likely to have increased in the short term under President Hadi’s leadership because many previous local intelligence contacts have been lost. [68]

This has aggravated the risks posed by AQAP, which is seen not only as a national threat – but also, crucially, as a regional and international one, with important security implications for the security of the Middle East and North Africa. Yemen is now – quite reasonably – on high alert, after more threats of suicide attacks in September, 2013.[69] Berger et al argue that: “Continuing instability in Yemen allows AQAP to regroup and pose a direct threat to the security of Saudi Arabia and other countries on the Arab peninsula. It also puts AQAP into a position to intensify its support for the ‘home-grown’ attempted terrorist attacks the United States has witnessed over the last couple of years.”[70] Ill-considered US military operations tend to enhance AQAP’s recruitment base – not to reduce it.

The current threat posed by Al-Qaeda is limited: estimates suggest that there are only between 300 and 1,000 AQAP fighters in Yemen,[71] and that AQAP’s core membership includes only between 100 and 400 fighters,[72] far fewer than the United States US \$100 million counter-terrorism strategy in Yemen appears to warrant. Meanwhile, American “drone and air strikes had killed an estimated 630 to 876 people in Yemen” by early August, 2013, with a civilian casualty rate of between 2.4 and 7.4 per cent.[73] There is, as Thomas Juneau correctly noted. “For the foreseeable future... no risk that AQAP could take over Yemen.” In this regard Saudi and United States concerns appear exaggerated.[74] This author’s own field research with key DFID and British Government personnel suggests that for every one AQAP recruit who is a “true believer” in the Al Qaeda cause, five have joined the organisation to

secure an income for themselves and their families. Contrary to the way in which the AQAP threat is conceptualised, therefore, this seems to imply that the main cause of terrorism in Yemen is not radicalisation: its unemployment. This might indicate that, rather than counter-terrorism, what the country really needs to restore security is livelihoods-generation programming.

The available evidence points in the direction that drone strikes and military interventions have not reduced the threat of terrorist activity in Yemen. It is time for a new strategy. Yemeni journalist Farea al-Muslimi has argued before the US Senate in April, 2013, that: “The US thinks it understands Yemen but the drones have been one of the most effective tools for AQAP to succeed in Yemen. A big part of al-Qaeda power at the moment is convincing Yemenis that they are in a war with America.”[75]

If there is a need to treat the AQAP threat differently in light of these concerns, however, there is also a parallel need to distinguish between terrorist and non-terrorist threats in Yemen. AQAP does pose a risk to public safety, not just in Yemen but internationally. But the Houthi and Southern Separatists Movements are likely to pose a significantly more important challenge to the long-term survival of the ruling regime than Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

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Notes

- [1] CBS News. (2013, September 20). *Yemen military says al Qaeda attack on troops has left at least 38 dead*.
- [2] Al Jazeera. (2013b, August 3). *US issues global alert over ‘al-Qaeda threat’*.
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