



Yemeni soldiers are pictured on the frontline of fighting with the Houthis near Sana'a, Yemen, on 27 January 2018. PHOTO BY REUTERS/NEWSCOM

In this monograph, Dr. Norman Cigar provides Special Operations Forces (SOF) commanders and planners with an overview of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) operational framework and presence in the area. He analyzes the strategic and operational issues that confront policymakers in responding to the threat posed by AQAP within Yemen's challenging social, political, and physical environment. This monograph presents the far-reaching implications for SOF, from recognizing the nuances of Yemen's tribal-based human terrain to understanding key relationships, rivalries, and competition between AQAP and other Yemeni players. AQAP will likely continue to represent a threat to U.S. interests and regional stability for the foreseeable future.

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JSOU Report 18-4

How Allied and U.S. Strategy in Yemen Contributes to AQAP's Survival

Cigar



JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



# *The Enemy is Us: How Allied and U.S. Strategy in Yemen Contributes to AQAP's Survival*

Norman Cigar

JSOU Report 18-4



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*Norman Cigar*

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**On the cover.** A close up of a world map emphasizes Yemen. PHOTO BY WOL-  
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**Back cover.** Yemeni soldiers are pictured on the frontline of fighting with the Houthis near Sana'a, Yemen, on 27 January 2018. PHOTO BY REUTERS/NEWSCOM

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## From the Director

We are pleased to publish this research from Dr. Norman Cigar, a research fellow at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. His examination of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) highlights one important facet of a complicated counterterrorism setting. Indeed, his nautical-themed headings remind the reader of the fluid and complex operating environment that involves a terrorist threat immersed in a civil war, a dramatic humanitarian crisis, and a contest for regional influence. Planners and others who must address operational and strategic choices can use this text and related JSOU Press publications to gain appreciation for how this particular threat manages to retain some freedom of maneuver by playing off local government, national (Yemeni) policy and forces, ISIS, tribal allegiances, rebel groups, Iranian influences, and an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia. As Dr. Cigar says, victory in this case may not mean AQAP's elimination but containment and management once the organization has been degraded to an irreducible minimum. As always, we welcome comments from readers as well as recommendations for future monograph topics.

Francis X. Reidy  
Interim Director, Center for Strategic Studies



# Foreword

The presence and influence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, long seen as a threat to U.S. interests, has grown in the midst of continuing internal conflict in that country. It threatens the stability of other states within the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia, as well as states that make up the Horn of Africa. Conceivably, it also represents a potential threat to freedom of navigation in important adjacent sea lanes of communication. Yemen, and especially the security threat posed by AQAP, is likely to remain a focus of interest for the United States and U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) well into the future.

In this monograph, Dr. Norman Cigar provides SOF commanders and planners with an overview of AQAP's operational framework and presence in the area. He analyzes the strategic and operational issues that confront policymakers in responding to the threat posed by AQAP within Yemen's challenging social, political, and physical environment. Cigar contends that understanding the complexity of AQAP's place in Yemen's largely tribal society and the characteristics of Yemen's political, social, and regional dynamics can help military and civilian officials appreciate the opportunities and limitations of U.S. policy. He further argues that successfully engaging AQAP in Yemen requires an emphasis on the desired political effects over time.

Cigar draws on his in-depth understanding of AQAP to reveal the organization's flexibility in adjusting its methods and operational locales to maintain the initiative and gain advantage over its competitors and adversaries. He explains the ways in which AQAP exploits grievances and takes advantage of a disintegrating central government and an environment that features a proliferation of warlords and shifting coalitions and allegiances.

This monograph presents the far-reaching implications for SOF, from recognizing the nuances of Yemen's tribal-based human terrain to understanding key relationships, rivalries, and competition between AQAP and other Yemeni players. AQAP will likely continue to represent a threat to U.S. interests and regional stability for the foreseeable future.

Will Irwin  
Resident Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic Studies



## About the Author

**D**r. Norman Cigar is a research fellow at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia, from which he retired as director of regional studies and the Minerva research chair. He is also a senior fellow at the Potomac



Institute for Policy Studies. Previously, he served on the staff of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting, where he taught military theory, strategy and policy, military case studies, and regional studies. Previously, he was director of the Army's Psychological Operations Strategic Studies Detachment responsible for the Middle East and Africa at Fort Bragg. He also spent seven years in the Office of the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence as the Army's

senior political-military intelligence analyst in the Pentagon responsible for the Middle East, and supported the Secretary of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Army Staff, and Congress with intelligence, and represented the Army on national-level intelligence issues in the interagency intelligence community. During the Gulf War, he was the Army's senior political-military intelligence staff officer on the Desert Shield/Desert Storm Task Force.

He has authored numerous works on politics and security issues dealing with the Middle East and the Balkans, and served as a consultant at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague. He also taught at the Defense Intelligence College and was a visiting fellow at the Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution, George Mason University.

Among his writings are *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons: How Do Countries Think about the Bomb?*; *Iraq's Shia Warlords and Their Militias*; *Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle*; and *Al-Qa'ida's Doctrine for Insurgency*.

Dr. Cigar holds a D.Phil. from Oxford (St. Antony's College) in Middle East history and Arabic; a masters of international affairs from the School of International and Public Affairs; a certificate from the Middle East Institute, Columbia University; and a master's degree in strategic intelligence from the Defense Intelligence College where he was a distinguished graduate.



# Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere gratitude and recognition to the staff of the Joint Special Operations University without whose expert guidance and interest this work would not have appeared. Dr. Peter McCabe offered his welcome encouragement throughout the process. And, in particular, Resident Senior Fellow Will Irwin contributed generously of his time, invaluable advice, expertise, and editorial assistance that enabled me to arrive at the final version of this study. Without his valued input, my task would have been intractable at certain points.

Other anonymous reviewers also provided valuable insights and recommendations for which I am indebted. Finally, my thanks to Mrs. Lisa Sheldon for her care and expertise in editing what is a technically complex manuscript.



# Chapter 1. Navigating Tribal Waves: The Political Foundations of AQAP's Military Strategy in Yemen

*Unavoidably, the situation in Yemen has evolved since the following study was written, which was based on information up to August 2017. An epilogue summarizes some of the salient recent events as of January 2018, including the death of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in early December 2017, who until then had continued to play a prominent role in the events addressed in this study, and a major Arab Coalition campaign along the country's western coast. Nevertheless, ongoing developments have not invalidated assessments on the central subject of this study, al-Qaeda in Yemen.*

## There Be Dragons: U.S. Counterterrorism Interests in Yemen

**A**l-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) presence in Yemen has long represented a terrorist threat to U.S. interests and has been the source of a number of successful and failed attacks against U.S. interests, including the attack against the destroyer USS COLE in 2000, the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa in 2008, the "underwear bombers" in 2009 and 2012, the package bombs shipped by air in 2010, and the credible terrorist threat that compelled the U.S. government to temporarily withdraw its nonessential diplomatic staff from Yemen in 2013. AQAP has continued to try and take the fight abroad, with reports in 2017 of plans to introduce laptop bombs onto airplanes and encouraging lone wolf attacks in the West, as in a May 2017 video featuring AQAP leader Qasim al-Raymi (Abu Hurayra al-Sanani) speaking in Arabic with English subtitles.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the United States has placed a \$5 million reward on al-Raymi.

Al-Qaeda has a long history in Yemen, where it has not only played a role on the local level, but over the years has also been involved in activities in neighboring Saudi Arabia and Somalia. More recently, AQAP has expanded its influence within Yemen as a result of the upsurge in internal conflict starting in March 2015. AQAP threatens significant enduring U.S. interests, including the prevention of direct attacks on the U.S. homeland and states on the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, and, potentially, the freedom of navigation in the busy adjacent sea lanes of communication. New interests

such as the planned Saudi oil pipeline and terminal on the South Yemeni coast, intended to bypass the risk of the Strait of Hormuz, only add to the necessity of dealing with the jihadist threat in Yemen.<sup>2</sup>

Although the U.S. has been working in concert with a Saudi Arabian-led coalition, and local forces can and do operate against AQAP, their focus of effort has often been directed instead to fighting against the alliance between Iranian backed Shia Ansar Allah (usually called Houthis by their adversaries) and the deposed former-President Ali Abdullah Saleh along with other local rivals.<sup>3</sup> That is, for any local actor, depending on the time and situation, AQAP may or may not be the main priority that it is for the United States. A source from Saleh's party, the General People's Congress (GPC), encapsulated this truism of Yemeni political life when he complained in 2012, just after Saleh had been ousted from power, that "the U.S. does not want a real army in Yemen. Instead, they want a force that can fight al-Qaeda. This is one of Yemen's goals, but it is not our only priority."<sup>4</sup>

Yemen, and especially the security threat represented there by AQAP, is likely to remain a focus of interest for the United States well into the future. And, in particular, Special Operations Forces (SOF), because of their versatility, agility, and ability to have a disproportionate impact in certain situations, are likely to be the option of choice to deal with military threats emanating in that country. This monograph is intended to provide planners, commanders, and instructors in SOF dealing with AQAP now or in the future with background and an analysis of the operational framework, and of the strategic and operational issues that confront the crafting of successful policy within that country's challenging social, political, and physical environment. In particular, understanding the complexity of AQAP's place in what is largely a tribal society and the specific characteristics of Yemen's political and social dynamics and interactions with its neighbors, can help military and civilian officials appreciate the opportunities and limitations of U.S. policy and the impact military actions can have on the situation and how it can contribute to U.S. policy goals. Such broader awareness is important at all levels of war, whether strategic, operational, or tactical, especially since fighting a counterinsurgency (COIN) such as against AQAP tactical actions can also have an impact at higher levels, whether positive or negative.

## AQAP's Following Seas in Yemen's Internal Conflicts

The thesis of this study is that to fight AQAP in Yemen, the emphasis must be placed first on desired political effects over time, and secondly on how the military solution shapes the environment to move the system toward that end. A counterterrorism (CT) policy in Yemen alone is unlikely to be effective against AQAP and indeed could actually ensure its relevance to the local population. AQAP has become an accepted, if uncomfortable, player in the volatile Yemeni power structure. Given the governance vacuum and competition among a spectrum of local warlords in that country against the background of the country's enduring political, security, social, and economic dynamics, AQAP will continue to represent a significant threat in some form for the foreseeable future. Understanding the strategic and operational environment in Yemen is key in dealing effectively with AQAP in terms of framing a strategy and operational plans to counter the jihadist threat in that country. This discussion is especially relevant to SOF given that U.S. forces are again in harm's way in Yemen and that the kinetic U.S. presence is likely to expand under a CT strategy.

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*Understanding the strategic and operational environment in Yemen is key in dealing effectively with AQAP in terms of framing a strategy and operational plans to counter the jihadist threat in that country.*

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Understandably, AQAP's military and terrorist operations are key to its perceived threat to the U.S. and they represent and attract the most attention locally and internationally. Although the military element of power is vital for success and even survival, al-Qaeda military thinkers have always stressed the link between military activity and objectives, on the one hand, and political objectives on the other, and that these two strands of strategy must be viewed in tandem as an integrated policy of armed combat and political activity, albeit with the military element in a subordinate role. According to one al-Qaeda military thinker reflective of the shared view of his peers, military strategy is "the use of military means to achieve political objectives" and initiative in war is "rooted in the moment when a political objective emerges from the political leadership," while "the determination of the military objective within the broad political framework is considered within the basic purview of the political leadership."<sup>5</sup>

AQAP agrees, also viewing the military effort as supporting its political objectives, as well as serving as a mechanism to recruit followers and promote AQAP's integration into Yemen's sociopolitical fabric. Significantly, the only military thinker of stature that Yemen has produced, Nasr bin Ali al-Anisi, was categorical that "there is no strategy without a policy content that shapes its basic plan and is its true energizer."<sup>6</sup> And, in discussing the Prussian theorist Karl von Clausewitz, al-Anisi agreed explicitly with the latter's emphasis on this outlook, noting that "the soldier in our age cannot operate without the politician, but must fight in cooperation with the latter, and political leaders are the ones who are always in control."<sup>7</sup>

How AQAP fights and other intangible factors are perhaps even more important than its order of battle in terms of equipment and number of personnel. By 2014, AQAP's military thinker al-Anisi had produced a video lecture series on military strategy, representing an orderly synthesis of theory and practice to guide military activity at all levels of war and a primer on operational art along the spectrum of conflict.

As he emphasized, the military objective should be to "undermine the adversary's will," but he stressed that in insurgencies, given the enemy's advantages, what may be uppermost in the early stages is to be flexible, willing to change objectives, and just avoid being defeated.<sup>8</sup> AQAP has shown flexibility in how it fights rather than adhering to a rigid plan and has been willing and able to adjust the main effort horizontally in space, varying the location of its commitments even within the short period of the recent civil war. AQAP puts emphasis on maintaining the initiative and can take advantage of targets of opportunity, as when it moved into the undefended cities in South Yemen after much of the Yemeni Army stationed there was disintegrating in 2015. AQAP has also developed a capability to move vertically, shifting the level of combat and type of forces committed from an insurgency and guerrilla operations to more conventional mobile operations, and back as a situation requires, although it has not reached a fully conventional force structure and operations yet.

## **Stranger Tides: Rethinking CT Strategy in Yemen**

As is true in any conflict, AQAP's military capabilities have to be measured in terms relative to those of other local actors, whether adversaries or potential cobelligerents. Yemen traditionally has been characterized by an

established pattern of a large number of players combining in frequently-shifting coalitions based on recalculations of the balance of power—a situation that can result in pragmatic cooperation even of former enemies.<sup>9</sup> This dynamic has only been intensified by the resumption of hostilities in 2015, with the disintegration of the central government and a proliferation of warlords and local centers of power, abetted by foreign intervention, which has made it easier for AQAP to operate not only by weakening the power of potential adversaries but also by allowing it to find a niche in the system as a player in its own right. Naturally, AQAP is not an inert object, but a reactive and adaptive adversary whose own capabilities and strategies affect and limit what is possible for its adversaries in countering it. AQAP's strengths and vulnerabilities will become clearer in tangible terms as seen in the specific military operations and political relationships that will be addressed subsequently, but a general overview here will serve as an introduction.

The implication for SOF is that AQAP is not a snake that perishes when its head is cut off; rather, AQAP is more like a hydra whose decapitation produces two new heads in its place. Effective strategy in Yemen therefore calls for a different way of dealing with the threat—one that undermines how it perceives its own strengths and amplifies its own perceived weaknesses according to the time scale it has adopted. For example, AQAP's veteran planner, organizer, and trainer<sup>10</sup> Qasim al-Raymi, assumes as “a given fact” (*waqi*) that the United States is the strategic center of gravity of the enemy bloc in what for him is a unitary global war, or “single battle” (*maraka wahida*), as he calls it. For al-Raymi, the focus of effort, therefore, should be to target the United States in what he acknowledges may be a long war.<sup>11</sup> However, given the clear overmatch that the United States enjoys in military power, al-Raymi recognizes that the *ummah* (Muslim community) is on the defensive and that engaging the United States in a direct approach is not advisable and suggests instead looking for and targeting the latter's critical vulnerabilities, or “weak points” (*da'f*), as he terms them.<sup>12</sup> In practical terms, however, the unavoidable immediate task for AQAP has been to confront in combat local and regional forces, as the U.S. homeland is out of reach.

The fight against AQAP, whether by local actors, the Arab Coalition, or the United States, remains a work in progress, as is indicated by AQAP's continued presence and activity. U.S. and coalition military contributions will be addressed later, but it is local forces that have borne and will continue

to bear the brunt of confronting the jihadists in Yemen, even if supported by outside forces. When the civil war erupted, much of the Yemeni professional officer corps and most Army units sided with former-President Saleh, who had nurtured personal networks for years within the military, and the coalition faced the daunting task of rebuilding the Yemeni Army and security establishment.

While having an effective national army is perceived by the U.S. and coalition as vital in the fight against AQAP, the group itself has figured out how to navigate local tribal relationships by flexibly adapting to circumstances as they permit. As indicated by Saleh's political colleague, U.S. and coalition CT objectives do not necessarily align with local Yemeni political dynamics, so a military solution working through an institutionally and politically tenuous central government will be subject to turbulent and constantly changing political changes.

Along with its military operations, AQAP has waged a political campaign in pursuit of its objectives. AQAP recognizes that combat operations are a supporting—although essential—effort to a political one, although both aspects of AQAP's strategy, of course, function in tandem and interact with the country's society and political system. Yemen's human terrain is an enduring reality, with informal, though very real, social and political institutions and patterns of activity within whose opportunities, challenges, and limitations AQAP or any political player, domestic or foreign, must operate.

Yet, while AQAP has been able to burrow and integrate itself into the country's social fabric, economy, and security, it faces at the same time a policy dilemma in dealing with society, one that constitutes a potential critical vulnerability. On the one hand, AQAP can accept and exploit the enduring aspects of the Yemeni political system and society but, on the other hand, if its intent is to make significant changes to the same political system and society in accordance with its ideology, it could alienate key elements of the population. Herein lies the opportunity for U.S. and coalition efforts to reconceptualize its efforts to dislodge AQAP in Yemen, but it requires a deeper understanding of how AQAP has navigated the tribal waves to throw it off track.

## Research Methodology

Rather than a narrative chronological history of AQAP, the thrust of this study is to address salient aspects of the environment in which the latter exists and operates in pursuit of its goals, as well as to analyze key events that illuminate AQAP's objectives, strategy, and prospects. In particular, understanding such key elements as the military balance between AQAP and other Yemeni players, the characteristics of the country's social and political system, and the role that the Arab Coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) plays can help clarify the challenge and the available options for the United States at both the strategic and operational levels in dealing with AQAP. Ultimately, the practical intent of this study is to provide a better appreciation of the threat from AQAP in Yemen and of the context of that country's political and security dynamics within which the jihadists operate.

The local media is an important complement to Western reporting as a source of data for this study, as it has better access to the local scene than does the foreign media, often contains more detail, and offers an additional perspective. With the outbreak of the conflict, virtually all the Yemeni media became partisan—if it had not already been—and one cannot always tell where it is published, as some of the Yemeni media on all sides are now headquartered abroad. Fortunately, it is quite obvious where Yemeni media sources stand—whether with President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or the UAE and their local allies and, on the other side, the Ansar Allah or Saleh. An appendix is provided at the end of this monograph to facilitate the reader's evaluation of the source of information. In addition, the study also relies on an “inside-out” approach, that is by also engaging AQAP's sources in order to appreciate objectives and strategies from the latter's own perspective. The information cutoff here is early August 2017 and, although the details are likely to change as events develop, conclusions should remain valid beyond the near term.

As was the case elsewhere in the Arab World during the Arab Spring, the new term Ansar Al-Sharia appeared in Yemen although, even more clearly than elsewhere, there was in practice little substantive change, as the Ansar Al-Sharia were essentially part of AQAP simply using a new name, and very often it was impossible even for Yemenis to differentiate between the two names. AQAP has even used the two terms interchangeably at times in a

single article in its publications. Al-Qaeda branches region-wide apparently assumed that the name Ansar Al-Sharia, with its religious connotation of religious law, might be more popular with the public than the prosaic al-Qaeda name and, as AQAP's chief legal officer, Adil Al-Abab (killed in 2012), noted in 2011, "this name was introduced in order to attract people in the areas under Al-Qaida's control by linking it to the Sharia."<sup>13</sup> In this study, the term AQAP will be used, unless there is a specific reference in the texts or sources cited to the Ansar Al-Sharia or to al-Qaeda with reference to the parent organization.

This study will analyze methodically AQAP within its operating environment as well as "inside out"—that is, from the perspective of AQAP's own objectives and its assessments of its adversaries and of the situation. Chapter 1 sets the parameters and methodology of this study and the significance of AQAP and Yemen for U.S. interests. AQAP, of course, does not operate in a vacuum but is very much part of the Yemeni social and political landscape, and chapter 2, in particular, sets the scene of the current conflict that erupted in 2015 against the background of AQAP's strengths and weaknesses, ideology, and leadership within the pervasive tribal environment which AQAP, the Arab Coalition, and the United States must take into consideration in any operations. Chapter 3 addresses AQAP's political and military strategy, capabilities, and vulnerabilities as an organization and a military adversary, especially in relation to what it sees as its own objectives and what this reveals in terms of prospects for countering AQAP. Given the central role that the Arab Coalition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular have played in the current fighting, chapter 4 examines how the coalition's divergent interests, objectives, and strategies have affected and often complicated the fight against AQAP, including the development of local military forces that ultimately will bear the brunt of dealing with AQAP. The final chapters draw conclusions and looks at policies that could have a desired outcome in dealing with the AQAP threat.

## Chapter 2. Tribes in Yemen: The Undercurrents of Politics and Conflict

### Pools of Trust in an Ocean of Distrust

Inherently, Yemen presents a challenging operational environment for any government, let alone conventional forces. With an area of 204,000 square miles, Yemen is larger than Iraq, but smaller than Afghanistan, and has a population of some 26 million, comparable in size to that of Iraq or Afghanistan, with over 38,000 often isolated villages (roughly the same number as Afghanistan, while Egypt with its far larger population only has 5,500), making central government as well as security, difficult. This dispersion is exacerbated by a woeful transportation infrastructure, and compounded by Yemen's rugged terrain; with an average elevation of over 6,000 feet for the country as a whole, a mountainous interior with peaks in the 9,000–12,000 foot range, a portion of the Rub' Al Khali desert, and a coastline that is almost 1,400 miles long. Tribes have long played a key political, social, and military role in much of Yemen, including in cities as a result of migration from the countryside.<sup>14</sup> As such, the tribes constitute the country's bedrock human terrain, and success or even just survival depends on the ability to operate within this social context. Major players are well aware of this fact, and AQAP, President Hadi's coalition, and the Arab Coalition partners all compete for support from the same Yemeni Sunni tribes. The Yemeni tribes' prominence has been both the result, as well as the cause, of the country's traditionally weak central state, although the tribes' disunity has facilitated the central government's uneasy balance of power over the years. Moreover, Saudi Arabia traditionally has preferred a weak Yemeni government as a neighbor, and has exercised direct relations with selected tribes, encouraging and enabling them to assert their autonomy with money, arms, and other benefits such as work permits to keep the Yemeni government from consolidating its authority. In fact, Saudi Arabia, after almost 60 years of dealing with Yemeni tribes through its ministry of defense, prides itself on being able to navigate and influence that country's tribal system. Nevertheless, Riyadh apparently woefully underestimated the tribes' independence in pursuit of their own interests during this conflict, as many of them did

not respond as expected to Saudi blandishments and pressure. For example, retired Saudi Colonel Ibrahim al-Marie—who often serves as an unofficial spokesman for the Saudi government—after an inspection visit to Yemen, noted with indignation on UAE television that progress on the Taizz front was so slow despite earlier optimistic Saudi estimates because “there are [tribal] shaykhs there who received weapons and money [obviously from the Saudis], but who have not lifted a finger ... This has also happened in a number of other provinces.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the fact that tribes—not to mention the country’s many security units that are often drawn from specific tribes, with de facto warlords commanding tribesmen in uniform—are so well armed that they inhibit what other Yemeni or foreign actors can do. AQAP recognizes this operational reality and, as one AQAP commander noted, “You know that the whole population of Yemen is armed, and the presence of weapons among the tribes is something natural in these parts and elsewhere; the presence of weapons is nothing surprising.”<sup>16</sup> AQAP, in fact, has relied on and encouraged the armed tribes, seeing them as a useful counterweight to the government, warning the tribes even when Saleh was still president that the latter “wants to disarm you and to control you and to humble you, and then what do you think he will do to you?”<sup>17</sup>

The tribes, of course, are active political players with their own interests. Even before the civil war, government writ often extended only over the capital Sanaa and other large cities, with the tribes dominant in rural areas, and, as the head of the Bakil tribal council reminded the Yemeni government “we’re not government employees” when pressured to act against AQAP on behalf of the government.<sup>18</sup> As Yemenis have concluded correctly, the collapse of the central state—weak and corrupt though it may have been at the best of times—as a result of the most recent conflict increased the importance of tribes as the individual’s primary mechanism for defense and survival.<sup>19</sup> In fact, with the disintegration of the country’s police and judicial system, the swift and relatively lenient tribal law has become prevalent even in cities.<sup>20</sup> Recently, in fact, many tribes have been acting as virtual mini-states in their own right, as when individual tribes (beginning with Hadi’s own tribal confederation) granted or withheld their approval of Hadi’s controversial order replacing Aden’s pro-UAE governor in 2017.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that most AQAP members are locals rather than foreigners and, by default of tribal origin, no doubt facilitates AQAP’s operations and

alliance-building. AQAP leaders have certainly tried to appeal to such tribal solidarity with one AQAP leader calling for support for the local mujahidin especially from those tribes in which “the enemy in cooperation with his agents is pursuing your sons the heroic mujahidin.”<sup>22</sup> Even in the high-profile case of Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni AQAP figure long wanted by the United States who was killed in a drone strike in September 2011, the head of his tribal confederation had long refused to hand him over to the Americans, claiming that was the Yemeni government’s job.<sup>23</sup> And, that tribe’s website was still carrying AQAP material in 2012. Likewise, when the authorities attempted to arrest AQAP military thinker Nasr al-Anisi and broke into his home in 2012, his tribe rallied to his support with thousands of his fellow-tribesmen protesting in front of the Ministry of the Interior in Sanaa.<sup>24</sup> Tellingly, in late 2013, the Army thought it wise to distribute leaflets in Hadramawt province warning the tribes not to shelter AQAP personnel and not to go near where the latter were to be found.<sup>25</sup> And, conversely, once the fortunes of war had turned against their organization in 2012, AQAP reportedly withdrew its northern members from the southern provinces, understanding that they would be safer in their own home tribal areas.<sup>26</sup>

In particular, AQAP seeks to exploit the tribes’ deep-seated grievances and sense of neglect by the government.<sup>27</sup> For example, pro-Hadi government assessments acknowledge that the continuing neglect of Abyan province results in a favorable environment among the tribes for AQAP and that cooperation by the local population with the pro-Hadi forces is problematic.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, the tribes’ relationships with AQAP are dynamic ones, most often based on near-term interests. From a tribe’s perspective, a working relationship with AQAP can mean an ally against any government, warlords, or other tribes, and does not necessarily mean they agree with AQAP’s principles and objectives. Even if a tribe is not favorable to AQAP ideologically, it may still oppose, for instance, the Hadi coalition for other reasons, as when a tribe in Al-Jawf province joined the Ansar Allah-Saleh forces in an attack against the Army and the Islah party (the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood angered by an earlier raid by the latter against the tribal

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market).<sup>29</sup> Tribes can also view AQAP as a counterweight to neighboring countries, as some tribes have long had confrontations with Saudi Arabia over the border, even blowing up border demarcation markers placed unilaterally by the Saudi government.<sup>30</sup>

## The Whirlpool of Recent Yemeni Conflict

The particular focus here will be on the Yemeni civil conflict that resumed in March 2015, as this conflict has reshaped the Yemeni political and security environment and has been a watershed for AQAP as well as for the country's mainstream actors. This conflict has pitted the country's former long-time president, Saleh, who was ousted in 2011 in a power struggle that coincided with the Arab Spring, in a coalition with the Ansar Allah (often called Houthis by their adversaries after the name of the family that has provided their leaders) against Saleh's successor as interim president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and a mosaic of warlords.<sup>31</sup> To be sure, fighting was already occurring between the local warring parties before 2015. However, the large-scale intervention by the Saudi and UAE-led Arab coalition catalyzed a qualitative change in the situation, as it escalated and prolonged the war. Otherwise the situation would probably have reverted to the country's more traditional, if volatile, pattern of "managed instability," with balance-of-power politics based on armed force, concrete interests, and shifting alliances, and with no one player able to establish a durable hegemony.<sup>32</sup> To be sure, Saudi Arabia, although a champion of Sunni Islam, backed the largely-Zaydi tribal base of the country's ruling Imam ousted by the 1962 revolution, since the opposing republicans were supported by the Nasser regime in Egypt (which Riyadh at the time viewed as its greatest threat). And, in later years, Riyadh often courted Yemen's Zaydi tribes to counterbalance Yemen's government. Even today, one should not view the line-up of forces in a Manichean perspective, where everyone has taken sides along sectarian lines. Many tribes and individuals have either joined the fray only recently, have shifted allegiances during the course of the war, or have remained neutral all along as suited their tangible interests. Indeed, a key element of the failure of pro-Hadi forces to advance on Sanaa has been Saudi Arabia's failure to induce the neutral tribes surrounding the capital to allow for a passage of forces.

The alliance between Ali Abdullah Saleh and Shia Houthi Ansar Allah appears superficially unnatural to the Western eye, especially since Saleh fought six campaigns against the Houthis. However, in the context of Yemeni politics, the alliance is a natural continuation of local tribal balance of power concerns superseding those of sectarian identity. It also exemplifies the fluidity of political-military alliances in Yemeni culture and ease with which AQAP can feasibly adapt and embed in Yemeni society as circumstances permit.

Absent foreign intervention in 2015, the Ansar Allah-Saleh alliance would probably soon have fallen apart and a reconfiguration of a new domestic balance of forces among the country's many players would have developed. Instead, the resulting protracted conflict created a security vacuum by removing the central government—however weak it may have previously been—resulting in a patchwork of de facto warlords within a system dominated by tribal, ideological, regional, and personal loyalties and networks including in the military and security forces. This new situation has provided a benign environment for AQAP, enabling it to emerge as a significant player due to the disruption of the local economy, unemployment approaching 84 percent, high degrees of infrastructure destruction, hunger, and a cholera epidemic in many areas resulting from the coalition's maritime blockade and kinetic actions.<sup>33</sup>

Although the focus in this study is on AQAP, of course, many of the current dynamics have a longer history, as is true of the country's underlying social and political structures and relationships. In particular, AQAP's policies and strategies have to be seen within the context of the period immediately following the Arab Spring. AQAP had already been battling against the Yemeni Army for several years by the time the Arab Spring broke out in Sanaa in early 2011 and, in many ways, the Arab Spring and its aftermath in Yemen, served as a dry-run or shaping phase for AQAP. That is, the turmoil, weakened government, and sharpened rivalries on the Yemeni political scene provided the landscape for the developing political and security patterns that have matured in the following years.

The character of the Arab Spring in Yemen in 2011–2012, more so than in the other affected countries, consisted not only of a protest movement in favor of reform, but also of a struggle for power between the regime and competing forces that were often similar in political outlook as the regime but differed in their tribal, regional, religious affiliation, or personal loyalties.

What the Arab Spring did in Yemen was set in motion events that eventually led to the downfall of the Saleh regime, and, in relation to AQAP, facilitated an accompanying disruption of the established—if rickety and always mutating—domestic balance of forces and opened the path for AQAP’s significant expansion.<sup>34</sup>

## **AQAP Fights the Ansar Allah**

AQAP views the Ansar Allah as the main enemy and, conversely, it is not surprising that the Ansar Allah have been the most consistent Yemeni party fighting AQAP over the years. In many ways, the presence of the Ansar Allah has served AQAP as a mechanism to facilitate its integration into the Sunni community, as Sunnis needed any ally they could get in the fight against the Ansar Allah. AQAP has a history of alliances with other local groups against the Ansar Allah preceding the current conflict, as in the 2013 campaign that pitted the Ansar Allah against the Salafis—the country’s ultra-conservative religious activists—who welcomed AQAP’s support.<sup>35</sup> Hostility between AQAP and the Ansar Allah has been endemic, not least because of the latter’s Shia character, which AQAP views as deviant in religious terms.<sup>36</sup> In fact, AQAP in November 2014 issued a *fatwa* (a decree handed down by an Islamic religious leader) proclaiming a jihad against the Ansar Allah, whom it claimed were out to “pollute religion and this life,” and make it legal to kill any Ansar Allah.<sup>37</sup> Conflict intensified in 2014 as the Ansar Allah surged, leading to increased clashes in numerous provinces.<sup>38</sup> The fighting escalated to major engagements such as one in 2014 in which AQAP claimed that the Ansar Allah had deployed 400 fighters to attack an AQAP stronghold in Al-Bayda’ province.<sup>39</sup>

In many ways, the outbreak of conflict in March 2015 provided an unprecedented opportunity for AQAP to be accepted as at least a cobelligent by elements of the coalition in what was to become a difficult and protracted fight against the unlikely alliance of interest between the ousted President Saleh and the Ansar Allah. In the highly fragmented political landscape on the coalition’s side, virtually any party willing to oppose the Ansar Allah-Saleh Coalition was welcome, especially in light of the unexpectedly tenacious resistance by the latter. AQAP portrays themselves as the defender of the country’s Sunnis and previously saw opposition to the Ansar Allah as a vehicle to penetrate society. As al-Anisi, AQAP’s military thinker, noted

in 2014, others were relying on AQAP to stop the Ansar Allah and, despite its differences with other elements in Yemen, he affirmed that AQAP was willing to join forces against the common threat.<sup>40</sup> Since the start of the civil war, AQAP has worked actively to promote a sectarian vision and solidify a position within a Sunni front against the Ansar Allah. As a prominent AQAP figure, Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, put it, “We call on our brother Sunnis for solidarity ... against the Houthis and their ally Saleh.”<sup>41</sup> More specifically, AQAP issued a communique in March 2017 warning that the Qayfa front—“the keystone of the war against the Houthis” it claimed—where the United States had mounted its largest raid on the ground, could fall to the Ansar Allah, and called for Sunni solidarity and for Sunni aid to AQAP in the common fight.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, local commanders and government officials reportedly have often welcomed AQAP as a cobelligerent against the Ansar Allah, according to a Popular Committee commander and former AQAP member, and have diverted arms meant for the committees to AQAP.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, AQAP apparently has long found opposition to the Ansar Allah a useful vehicle to ingratiate itself with the tribes, and in 2012 ordered its members not to clash with or otherwise alienate the tribes in the interest of a united front against the Ansar Allah.<sup>44</sup>

AQAP fighters have been active on the battlefield against the Ansar Allah-Saleh Coalition and, in fact, AQAP has claimed that it has forces committed in no fewer than 11 fronts against the Ansar Allah.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, AQAP has often shared the battlespace or participated with other Arab Coalition-supported forces. Such cooperation has been especially evident on the Taizz front, where frequent media reports and videos of operations have shown AQAP present on the battlefield with pro-coalition forces, openly fighting under its own flag, as well as with some of the more than 20 smaller jihadist militias that have sprouted up there.<sup>46</sup> AQAP reportedly played a significant role embedded in the local Popular Committee in Aden in resisting the original Ansar Allah-Saleh advance in 2015 and continued to be active in clashes against the Ansar Allah there and elsewhere, as in Al-Bayda' and Shabwa provinces.<sup>47</sup> Later, there may have been a tacit understanding between AQAP and the Hadi forces, as suggested both by AQAP leaders and the Hadi-controlled media, which assessed that AQAP would continue to avoid confronting the Hadi coalition in Abyan province and would focus instead on the fight against the Ansar Allah-Saleh, as well as against the UAE-controlled

Hizam Amni forces.<sup>48</sup> In at least one case in Abyan, the local UAE-backed militia, the Hizam Amni, complained that the Hadi government had been pressuring it to make unspecified political concessions to the local AQAP organization, although it was not clear what agreement or understanding might have been in play.<sup>49</sup>

For example, when AQAP evacuated the town of Azzan in August 2016, its forces redeployed to the front against the Ansar Allah.<sup>50</sup> In that vein, an AQAP journalist in 2016 announced that AQAP would cooperate with any other Sunni entities including Saudi Arabia in the fight against the Ansar Allah.<sup>51</sup> And, when AQAP figure Abd-al-Ra'uf al-Dhahab was killed in a January 2017 U.S. raid, a senior military officer in the Yemeni Army focused on what he termed as al-Dhahab's valuable cooperation with the Hadi faction, as commander of the Popular Resistance, against the Ansar Allah, while complaining that the Army had not been informed of the raid beforehand.<sup>52</sup> Significantly, in March 2017, the head of AQAP, Qasim al-Raymi, viewed as routine the fact that AQAP was collaborating with a range of players on the battlefield, mentioning specifically the Islah party, other Salafi groups, and various tribes.<sup>53</sup>

Operational cooperation with other anti-Ansar Allah combatants in the field has at times been close, such as reportedly sharing training camps with Islah.<sup>54</sup> Saudi Arabia, in particular, often air drops weapons and supplies to the forces it supports in Yemen, and this imprecise delivery system can easily be intercepted by AQAP units operating in close proximity to those forces.<sup>55</sup> In a number of areas, AQAP has reportedly carried out joint combat operations with other actors against the Ansar Allah, such as with the local tribes in Al-Bayda.<sup>56</sup> As a selling point for itself, AQAP has often claimed to be the most effective counter to the Ansar Allah.<sup>57</sup> In fact, many tribes reportedly joined with AQAP not for ideological reasons but as a partner already having an existing organization on the ground in the fight against the Ansar Allah.<sup>58</sup> Understandably, Yemeni forces are not anxious to publicize any cooperation with AQAP. For example, while the pro-Hadi field commander on the Balah front in Lahij in 2015 was adamant that there were no AQAP or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) personnel on his front fighting against the Ansar Allah-Saleh coalition, the Ansar Allah claimed that AQAP personnel were being killed in the fighting in that sector.<sup>59</sup> Tellingly, in late July 2017, a photograph appeared in the media of a senior AQAP official in

Taizz, Harith Al-Izzi, accompanying the pro-Hadi deputy governor as they hosted a delegation from the International Red Cross.<sup>60</sup>

## **AQAP vs. ISIS**

The emergence of ISIS in 2014 after its break with al-Qaeda complicated the security situation further in Yemen. Although it has had limited prospects, thanks in great part to the already-established position of the local al-Qaeda branch in Yemen—traditionally very loyal to the central al-Qaeda leadership—one cannot ignore the presence of ISIS. Competition between AQAP and ISIS is said to be particularly fierce in Aden, given the city's importance as a political and economic center.<sup>61</sup> However, there have also been reports by Yemeni security that AQAP and ISIS have cooperated on occasion at a local level, as in attacks against UAE-supported forces in Al Mukalla in mid-2016.<sup>62</sup>

AQAP has sought to differentiate itself from ISIS, accusing the latter of being too hasty to declare other Muslims as infidels and seeing themselves as the only true Muslims, as well as shedding Muslim blood too easily, while AQAP portrayed itself as constructive and not divisive.<sup>63</sup> However, it may be easy to exaggerate ISIS's extremism and AQAP's supposed moderation, as the AQAP in Yemen has engaged in its share of egregious actions, and differences are often a matter of personal competition rather than of ideology.

Unsurprisingly, membership in jihadist organizations can be fluid, as rank-and-file individuals can switch between groups.<sup>64</sup> However, media reports suggest that ISIS has had a difficult time attracting a following, in part hampered by the fact that many of its top leaders in Yemen are Saudis, that is, outsiders.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the ISIS leadership reportedly has been fraught with internal dissension and discontent.<sup>66</sup> The pro-Hadi media also assessed that AQAP was stronger and more popular than ISIS and more flexible in working with the local administration.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, despite their differences, AQAP and ISIS could draw closer, especially if the power and prestige of the parent ISIS recede in the Iraq-Syria theater, or if both organizations in Yemen come under significantly increasing pressure from local adversaries or from the United States.

## **Captain and Crew: AQAP's Situational Leadership**

AQAP has consciously nurtured and highlighted its ties to local society both as a recruiting tool and as a force protection mechanism to seek refuge

among the people when pressured. As an AQAP leader stressed, AQAP's members in Yemen are mostly locals, so that "we are not hobbled by any alienation from society; we are [society's] sons and part of the social fabric of our tribal and popular environment ... We are rooted in the land ... we are not outsiders."<sup>68</sup> This organic relationship was a source of strength for it afforded AQAP "flexibility and survivability," allowing it to melt away, as it did following its evacuation of Al Mukalla.<sup>69</sup> And, as a corollary, AQAP reminded Yemenis that one day the UAE would leave but that the native-born AQAP would still be around.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the local ties of AQAP fighters—as is true of all combatants in Yemen—can make them reluctant to fight far from home.<sup>71</sup> AQAP also seeks to hug the population tactically by operating in proximity to both civilians and other armed groups, and this approach can physically insulate AQAP from attacks by making it difficult to carry out strikes against it without the risk of considerable collateral damage to the surrounding population.

Over the years, AQAP has made a conscious effort to win what it calls explicitly "the hearts and minds of the population." As one AQAP leader Khaled Batarfi stressed, "We are not just an armed organization or a combat group. Yes, we are all of that but also part of the Muslim population and we offer it everything we can in the way of services in the area of social and economic services. We also engage in outreach, supervision of markets and morals, courts, and reforms in many fields. We see this as our duty."<sup>72</sup> Western news reports confirmed that AQAP did indeed provide some public services including medical help during its administration of Al Mukalla.<sup>73</sup> And, as it had after the Arab Spring, AQAP continued to view its provision of social services as a core element of its appeal so that after it withdrew from towns in 2016, it again cited as accomplishments the fact that it reduced crime, refurbished schools and hospitals, provided fuel, food, medical services, and electricity to the population, and fixed roads, bridges, and sewers.<sup>74</sup> Even as fighting raged in Taizz, with AQAP deeply involved, according to sympathetic local Sunnis, they "do not bother [the latter]; rather, they help procure water and aid for them."<sup>75</sup>

AQAP has played, what is at times, a shadowy role in the country's political system. To a significant extent, the environment of "managed instability" alluded to earlier made possible AQAP's informal integration into the country's political system, as AQAP has adapted to this pattern over the years. One can trace back the activity of al-Qaeda-linked elements in Yemeni

power politics to at least 1994, when Saudi Arabia supported the Sanaa government that during the 1994 Summer War—in which South Yemen sought to regain its independence from North Yemen by ending the union that had been formed in 1990—used the mujahidin who had fought in Afghanistan (and many of whom were still in direct contact with Bin Laden and would subsequently organize what came to be al-Qaeda in Yemen). For Riyadh, the fact that many prominent southern leaders were veterans of the earlier Marxist regime made the South suspect and a target to be crushed. Accordingly, the Saudi-backed Sanaa authorities reportedly provided training, weapons, funding, and other support to the mujahidin as part of the overall war effort against the South, who engaged in combat operations and ran death squads against southern figures, according to former key figures in the Yemeni mujahidin who took part.<sup>76</sup> At that time, Saleh, and Army Generals Hadi (although a southerner he sided with the north) and Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar (who has been deputy supreme commander of Yemen's armed forces and vice president during the current civil war) all cooperated with Riyadh and with the mujahidin.<sup>77</sup> To what degree channels with all those political actors, even if only indirect ones, have continued is unclear.

In subsequent years, Saleh mastered a pattern of an ambiguous policy toward the jihadists, modulating periodic crackdowns with tolerance.<sup>78</sup> Al-Qaeda served Saleh's interests, as he benefited from the implicit al-Qaeda threat in order to ensure southern obedience. And, as was to be expected, Saleh marketed himself to the West as the best prospect for dealing with al-Qaeda/AQAP, as well as later against the Ansar Allah when convenient.<sup>79</sup> Though lacking a domestic power base, his successor, Interim President Hadi, may have sought to continue that pattern. Indeed, in 2013 there was even a strong possibility that AQAP and the new Hadi government at one point were seriously considering striking a deal for a truce (*hudna*)—albeit a temporary one initially for two months—with AQAP prepared for a more extended peace (*sulh*). Apparently, the mediation committee composed of neutral clerics (*ulama*) had drafted a proposal for the truce, a copy of which was subsequently leaked to the Yemeni press. Nasir al-Wuhayshi, as then head of AQAP, signed on its behalf. Government representatives had also approved the deal in principle, but reneged when Hadi refused to go along—very likely in consideration of relations with foreign countries—much to the dismay of the mediation committee. The sticking point turned out to be Hadi's demand that AQAP disarm, to which the latter had countered that

all Yemenis are armed and that AQAP has to live in that environment.<sup>80</sup> This event is revealing because it indicates that within the mainstream religious establishment and the government itself there are many who could envision making a deal with AQAP as a valid partner in the political system. In fact, in early 2014, a member of Yemen's parliament publicly suggested that the

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*This event is revealing because it indicates that within the mainstream religious establishment and the government itself there are many who could envision making a deal with AQAP as a valid partner in the political system.*

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government begin a dialog with AQAP.<sup>81</sup> And, again, the pro-Hadi media reported in 2016 that General al-Ahmar had called for negotiations with AQAP in order to avoid further confrontations.<sup>82</sup> Symptomatically, AQAP, as well as ISIS, appear to have penetrated successfully into Aden's society, as they are reported to hide weapons in family homes there, making it all the more difficult to root them out.<sup>83</sup>

Another pattern related to al-Qaeda's presence over the years has been that of reintegrating its members into society. The reintegration policy carried out by such means as a broad-based amnesty for al-Qaeda fighters had long been a feature of Yemeni political practice, and one former al-Qaeda member described the policy of dealing with the state as "everyone reached an acceptance of coexisting with the other."<sup>84</sup> Such mechanisms have also been in use for Yemenis returning from detention in Guantanamo with whom the government reportedly made an informal deal to not arrest them if they agreed not to be active.<sup>85</sup> Of course, some mechanism is necessary to rehabilitate al-Qaeda militants, although the intent appears often to have been a utilitarian one, that is to have a manpower pool available for domestic power politics contingencies, leaving such a mechanism vulnerable to abuse. This pattern continues to be a feature with authorities in Al Mukalla, for example, offering amnesty and a reeducation program for anyone leaving AQAP.<sup>86</sup> And, in 2017, the governor of Hadramawt, Major General Ahmad Bin Barik, an ally of the UAE, released 18 AQAP detainees with more to follow in conjunction with the beginning of the month of Ramadan, stating that this was in the cause of social peace and as "an incentive to others who are misguided to repent and abandon extremism and terrorism and to reintegrate into society."<sup>87</sup>

Despite its ideological basis, AQAP can also act out of pragmatism when necessary. For example, it is opposed to independence for the South, calling

such nationalism counter to Islam and a trait of the pre-Islamic pagan period (*jahiliya*).<sup>88</sup> AQAP has often clashed with Hirak, the southern separatist movement, in areas controlled by the UAE, which is sympathetic to the separatists, while those also opposed to the South's separatism such as Saudi Arabia, Hadi, and Islah may view AQAP's opposition to the separatists as a positive element.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, indicative of its ability to modify its policy at the local level according to concrete interests, elsewhere, as in Lahij province, however, AQAP members are said to also have cooperated with or been members of Hirak in the past.<sup>90</sup> Even AQAP and the Ansar Allah, despite their long history of conflict, can interact out of pragmatism, as in conducting prisoner-of-war exchanges, often through tribal mediation.<sup>91</sup> Of course, there may be attempts to disguise cooperation between AQAP and other groups, as was apparently the case when unescorted shipments of arms were inexplicably sent along 700 km of insecure roads in Abyan province and predictably were seized by AQAP. The UAE authorities were quick to blame Islah and pro-AQAP elements within the Hadi government for a deliberate transfer of weapons to AQAP.<sup>92</sup> Supposedly, according to UAE sources, Hadi, knowing that AQAP would strike at the UAE and its clients, was using that group to indirectly exact revenge against the UAE following a confrontation between the latter's clients and Hadi's over control of the Aden airport.<sup>93</sup>

The tangled political and cobelligerence relationships, fluid alliances, and cross-cutting loyalties involving AQAP and the multiple roles that figures can play, are indicative of the degree to which AQAP may have infiltrated the country's social, political, and economic life.

Typically, AQAP members, even local leaders, may have multiple roles. Shaykh al-Dhahab, who was killed in a January 2017 U.S. raid, was a prominent AQAP figure, but also governor of Al Bayda' province, a tribal chief, commander of the 117th Brigade, and a senior official in the Al-Rashad political party. Most recently he reportedly had been cooperating with the Islah party and with other elements of the coalition with logistics and finance.<sup>94</sup> And, a senior Yemen Army officer insisted that al-Dhahab was not part of AQAP, suggesting that there might have been some confusion with some of his relatives, insisting that al-Dhahab was cooperating with the Hadi government.<sup>95</sup>

Another case in point is that even individuals whom the United States has designated as AQAP supporters have been prominent figures of the Arab Coalition-led team. For example, Nayif Saleh al-Qaysi and Abd al-Wahhab

al-Humayqani are on the U.S. Treasury's list as senior AQAP officials involved in financial and operational activities. However, highlighting the intertwined threads of connections with AQAP, both are powerful tribal leaders. Al-Qaysi was also one of President Hadi's advisers and a member of the coalition team during negotiations in Riyadh and Kuwait.<sup>96</sup> Al-Humayqani, for his part, represented his party in talks in Riyadh to craft a new Yemeni political coalition in 2016.<sup>97</sup> In 2017, he led a delegation of Salafi and military personalities to the Saudi border area to commemorate an earlier Salafi defeat.<sup>98</sup> Other figures in the coalition added to the U.S. terrorist list have included a prominent cleric and figure in the Islah party, Abdallah al-Ahdal, and Al Hassan Ali Abkar, a powerful tribal shaykh in Al-Jawf and also an Islah party official, who resides in Saudi Arabia. Invariably, not only the Islah party but much of the pro-coalition public opinion has expressed indignation, accusing the United States of lacking evidence of being in favor of the Ansar Allah, and of being hostile to the coalition, while treating the affected individuals as heroes.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, to illustrate this phenomenon over time one can look at Tariq al-Fadli, paramount chief of the Al Fadl tribal confederation. He was a former mujahid in Afghanistan who had collaborated with Bin Laden and had led a mujahid unit cooperating with Saudi Arabia during the 1994 civil war. Later, he was said to have helped set up a training camp for al-Qaeda in Yemen.<sup>100</sup> Still later, he was accused of having facilitated AQAP's takeover of Abyan province, and opposed the tribal committees being formed within his tribe backed by Hadi's, labeling them "mercenaries" in the service of the Americans and "puppets of the occupation."<sup>101</sup> By late 2012, clashes had erupted between the tribal committees and his followers, and al-Fadli was eased out of the province by the Hadi government through mediation. However, Hadi, who was from the same tribe as al-Fadli and shared family ties, treated him relatively leniently by only placing him under house arrest for a time in a seaside villa.<sup>102</sup> Escaping from his detention in June 2014, he then reportedly adhered formally to AQAP.<sup>103</sup> A 2016 prisoner exchange between the Ansar Allah and AQAP included two of al-Fadli's sons, members of AQAP.<sup>104</sup> In early 2017, al-Fadli suggested that AQAP and ISIS be included in a new coalition government to end the war and that former President Saleh's son be made president as a compromise candidate.<sup>105</sup>

Likewise, indicative of the often intertwined economic relationships including AQAP, in 2016 the U.S. Treasury placed the Al Omgy Brothers

Money Exchange network on its sanctions list for dealings with AQAP in Yemen, although it is an important cog in the local economy with relationships with the Hadi government, the UAE administration, and ordinary Yemenis, as well as having had unavoidable dealings with AQAP-controlled entities.<sup>106</sup> Yemenis who were part of the Arab Coalition were supportive of the firm and were critical of the U.S. decision.<sup>107</sup>

## Head Winds: Critical Vulnerabilities in AQAP's Ideological Vision

At the same time, AQAP also has critical vulnerabilities that can be exploited by adversaries. AQAP must maintain good relations with the tribes who could prove formidable armed adversaries. AQAP's ideology and its inherent agenda and harshness can alienate tribal elites and the population it needs to recruit, move through tribal territory, and shield its presence from government or foreign forces.

AQAP's vision for politics and society represents an inherent dilemma for it in interacting with the country's other political actors. The application of Sharia law and of rigid social mores has been a basic element of AQAP's platform from the onset and it instituted its social program in the territories it controlled after the Arab Spring, but the popular response had often been anything but positive and likely contributed to the tribes' hostility and to AQAP's defeat. At times, AQAP met with armed resistance, as in the case of its attempt to suppress a "sorcerer" in Rida in 2012, which led to a lethal shootout between the sorcerer's followers and the AQAP enforcers.<sup>108</sup> Perhaps recognizing the need to bend to reality on some issues, AQAP compromised on the presence of the traditional and ubiquitous addictive stimulant narcotic called khat, or "*qat*" in Arabic. In Al-Bayda' province, for example, AQAP arrested, among others, three khat sellers not for their trade but for providing the Army with information, while in Jaar AQAP did not ban the substance altogether but only relegated its sale to the edge of town.<sup>109</sup>

As AQAP's amir, or governor, in Abyan province, Jalal Bal'idi al-Marqashi acknowledged in one town that his organization had tried to negotiate an agreement with the local tribal committees, but the stumbling block had been AQAP's insistence on the implementation of the Sharia, which the tribal council had rejected categorically, asserting "We cannot apply the Sharia in the town!"<sup>110</sup> Local people reportedly often grumbled that punishments were

handed out arbitrarily, without adequate investigations.<sup>111</sup> The imposition of the Sharia to replace the more flexible and familiar traditional tribal law at times also created more than its share of armed conflict with the tribesmen subjected to it.<sup>112</sup>

How effectively AQAP adapted its lessons learned from its earlier Arab Spring experience is debatable. On one hand, AQAP realized that it had become bogged down in administration and attempts to set up an “Islamic state” during the first time without, as it later assessed, engendering “a big popular response from the local population,” whereas when it returned in 2015, AQAP wanted to involve locals in the administration, according to AQAP’s governor of Al Mukalla.<sup>113</sup> As the AQAP leadership claimed, administration this time was placed at least formally in the hands of a local Popular Council, although AQAP retained control of the police and continued to provide what it called “advice.”<sup>114</sup>

In some instances, AQAP appeared to be more flexible the second time in terms of social policy. Thus, when it retook the town of Jaar in 2015, AQAP apparently was not as strict in imposing its social mores as it had been earlier and, for example, reportedly few attended Friday prayers while women in the market did not have to wear a veil.<sup>115</sup> Although it again tried to ban the use of khat, AQAP apparently ultimately relented and only levied a tax on it.<sup>116</sup> However, the differences may only have been relative. According to the AQAP governor, Al Mukalla’s city administration again applied Sharia punishments.<sup>117</sup> In fact, whenever it was again in control of a town, AQAP banned clothes mannequins, removed women from ads, stoned them for adultery, shut down alcohol stills and brothels, introduced its own curriculum in schools, flogged those who listened to music, killed a popular female folk singer at a wedding party, and executed individuals convicted of “immorality.”<sup>118</sup> Likewise, in parts of Taizz under its sway, AQAP built an administrative substructure, battled against the Ansar Allah-Saleh forces, instituted its own courts, carried out police functions and, characteristically, reportedly invaded the local hospital to prevent the mixing of sexes.<sup>119</sup> In particular, AQAP has methodically demolished or blown up saints’ shrines—a traditional element of Yemeni religious history and practice.<sup>120</sup> AQAP has also executed clerics who have challenged its control, and while it controlled Al Mukalla it arrested and tortured journalists and lawyers who were critical.<sup>121</sup>

Operationally, AQAP is vulnerable to air power, especially once it operates outside mountain areas and in open terrain with limited air defense capabilities and largely passive air defense measures. Nevertheless, AQAP has some capabilities that can threaten at least Arab Coalition aircraft, given the coalition's limited skills, as evidenced by the shoot down of a UAE fighter aircraft by an SA-7 shoulder-fired missile, and, at a minimum, can degrade the effectiveness of adversary air operations by forcing aircraft to fly at higher altitudes and not linger.<sup>122</sup>

Operational security is another vulnerability; AQAP over the years has been penetrated—even at a high level—by agents working for foreign intelligence services who were able to provide, in particular, support for U.S. drone strikes.<sup>123</sup> Although a number of such agents were caught and eliminated, the security failure still made AQAP look ineffective and may still be a problem, especially given the group's integration within society and uneasy proximity to cobelligerent forces in the field. Moreover, personnel reportedly are often lax about adhering to AQAP's security regulations on where to shop, how to secure a cell phone, or about minimizing the number of personnel in a single vehicle.<sup>124</sup>



## Chapter 3. Safe Harbor: AQAP's Objectives in Yemen's Most Recent Round of Conflict

### Background on AQAP in Yemen's Turbulent Politics

Jihadists have long had a significant presence in Yemen, with many veterans of Afghanistan either settling back into society or continuing their activity in various jihadist groups, especially those affiliated with al-Qaeda. The present AQAP organization resulted from the January 2009 merger of al-Qaeda's branches in Yemen (itself an amalgam of groups) and Saudi Arabia, while retaining the original name. Al-Qaeda in Yemen was always close to mother al-Qaeda, a term that refers to the first generation of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Not least because of the personal ties that many leading Yemeni figures, including Nasir al-Wuhayshi (killed in 2015) who became the long-time leader of the local al-Qaeda branch, had developed fighting alongside Osama Bin Laden, who then sent al-Wuhayshi back to Yemen to become the leader of the local al-Qaeda branch. As another prominent AQAP leader, Fahd al-Qus al-Awlaqi (killed 2012), stressed, "we manage and coordinate [strategy] with the leadership of the mujahidin," that is with al-Qaeda's central leadership.<sup>125</sup> Qasim al-Raymi, AQAP's military commander since 2009, who became AQAP's leader when he succeeded al-Wuhayshi in 2015, also had personal experience fighting under Bin Laden in Afghanistan. And, AQAP has always maintained an outlook of being part of a broader jihadist movement in which Yemen was only one of multiple fronts in a single war, considering itself as one of al-Qaeda's regional armies that would converge on Jerusalem one day and set up a single Islamic state—a caliphate—in which society would be ruled according to the Sharia.<sup>126</sup> While this relationship has diminished under Ayman al-Zawahiri, who lacks the combat experience, charisma, and stature of his predecessor, AQAP nevertheless remained loyal to mother al-Qaeda when the split with ISIS occurred in 2014.

Mother al-Qaeda figures have always viewed Yemen as a favorable operational area, given the country's rugged terrain, long open borders, conservative tribal society, experienced indigenous jihadist leadership, weak

government, divided national military, and dismal economic conditions. However, Osama Bin Laden saw Yemen primarily as a refuge and reservoir for other fronts rather than as a battlefield, as he believed that the Yemeni jihadists lacked the administrative capabilities and financial resources to wage a successful insurgency and establish and run a government.<sup>127</sup> Many in the local al-Qaeda, however, argued for a more active mission, since the mujahidin would be able to organize and mass in areas outside government control, making Yemen “appropriate to adopt the idea of the jihad ... and the ideal location for the mujahidin at present.”<sup>128</sup> As an intermediate objective, AQAP believed it had a mission to first overthrow the government in Yemen for cooperating with the United States, counter the Shia/Iranian influence locally, institute the Sharia in Yemen, and overthrow the monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula, which it accused of facilitating the United States’ presence and operations.<sup>129</sup>

AQAP has long courted Yemen’s tribes, viewing them as vital for success and as a potential ally, as was the case with its past leader al-Wuhayshi, who in 2009 appealed to the fiercely-independent tribes to “fight for your religion and for the honor of your morals, protect those who seek shelter with you, and bring back those glorious pages of victory and the jihad.”<sup>130</sup> In fact, Anwar al-Awlaki had identified the tribes as key to the jihad.<sup>131</sup> Understandably, the tribes can have a direct impact—positive or negative—on vital warfighting functions for AQAP, such as mobility (tribes control territory and roads), force protection (tribes can provide refuge), intelligence, and logistics.

In particular, AQAP recruits come largely from the tribes, and it is not without reason that the tribes in Yemen are commonly known as “the stockroom of fighters.”<sup>132</sup> Individual members of a tribe may join AQAP as a means to protect tribal interests, although at times tribes have also been divided over ties with AQAP.<sup>133</sup> Although tribal identity is said to still be stronger for individuals than loyalty to AQAP, nevertheless AQAP has at times sought to target the tribal loyalty of youth, but thereby threaten and compete with tribal leaders. In 2010, for example, an AQAP communique appealed to tribal youth, arguing that “if some of your shaykhs have abandoned your ancestors’ tradition of helping the victim and honoring the guest, water cannot wash away the shame, and history will not forget that. The only hope is for you to wash away that shame with blood,” and this focus on youth has continued.<sup>134</sup> While AQAP can exploit tensions between ordinary tribesmen and their tribal notables, especially if the latter do not deliver the benefits that tribal

followers expect, that is a risky policy that could turn the tribal leadership against AQAP, as it has on occasion.<sup>135</sup>

AQAP has often been able to find refuge among the tribes whenever it finds itself under pressure—what the Yemeni government in the past has condemned as AQAP's taking advantage of the "rural population's generosity."<sup>136</sup> Tribes have long served as a mechanism to reintegrate AQAP members into society, as traditional tribal loyalties have often trumped political allegiances or ideological differences in dealing with individuals.<sup>137</sup> As even a simple soldier in the Hizam Amni recognized, "No one and certainly not the tribes feel a responsibility to stand up to members of AQAP. Whenever there has been a security operation, all the residents of a village stick together."<sup>138</sup> Of course, there have been exceptions, where the level of ideological commitment can split even a single family, as in the case of an AQAP commander, Shaykh Tariq al-Dhahab and his brother, who were killed in 2012 by their own half-brother and his followers who sided with the government, although ideological differences, as is often the case in Yemen, may have been a cover for personal rivalry.<sup>139</sup> More commonly, following the government's defeat of AQAP in the South in 2012, many AQAP personnel returned to their tribal homes around Ibb at the request of AQAP's legal officer to the tribal leadership.<sup>140</sup> Likewise, it was not surprising that after AQAP's defeat in Abyan and Shabwa in 2012, some of its personnel reportedly were able to simply melt back into their own tribes or even join the local Tribal Committees militia for protection.<sup>141</sup> As a tribal shaykh stressed, "Those who are killing or being killed are all our children, whether they are misguided or innocent," and promised that anyone who left AQAP would be allowed to return home at their families' responsibility. However, anyone who refused to do so was to leave the tribal area.<sup>142</sup> A tribe can also simply deny that there is any AQAP presence in its territory, as was the case with the al-Maraqisha tribal confederation in February 2017.<sup>143</sup>

Not surprisingly, AQAP has sought to build political and economic links with the tribes in order to solidify its local relationships. In many ways, AQAP has integrated itself into the local conflict-negotiations cycle of political life, with tribes accepting them as a player with whom they will deal. For example, a tribe mediated between AQAP and another tribe in Abyan province so that AQAP could recover the bodies of its members killed in a clash with the first tribe over control of a checkpoint, with AQAP thus functioning *de facto* within the tribal system as a quasi-tribe.<sup>144</sup> At times,

established political actors have supported a dialog with AQAP through the tribes, implicitly considering it a legitimate element in the Yemeni system. For example, tribes have mediated between AQAP and the Yemeni Army,

*In many ways, AQAP has integrated itself into the local conflict-negotiations cycle of political life, with tribes accepting them as a player with whom they will deal.*

not least because some of their tribesmen belonged to the Army and wished to avoid casualties.<sup>145</sup> In some cases, AQAP and the tribes have cooperated militarily, as in the case of AQAP's takeover of an Army base in Shabwa province in early 2015, with the local tribe negotiating the surrender of the base to AQAP.<sup>146</sup> AQAP

has also worked to create smuggling networks and other commercial ties with the tribes when it had control of several cities, and some of these links and revenue sources may have continued even after AQAP's withdrawal from those cities.<sup>147</sup> Likewise, when AQAP took over Al Mukalla in 2015, it shared benefits with the local tribes, such as allowing them to replace the oil company guards.<sup>148</sup>

At the same time, AQAP realized that the tribes are not to be trifled with, and tribal opposition had been one of the key elements in defeating AQAP in 2012. However, in the current dynamic wartime situation, maintaining good relations with the tribes may not always be easy for AQAP. In other words, AQAP is not often seen as a snake preying on Yemeni society rather, it is one of the heads of the hydra representative of the larger Yemeni body politic. Taming its bite requires a larger social bargain to restrain it since under current conflict circumstances it has the power to organically regenerate its head every time it is cut off.

Illustrating AQAP's understanding of the need not to alienate the tribes, when the Al Bu Bakr Bin Dahha tribe in 2016 accused AQAP of killing one of its shaykhs and his retinue and began revenge killings, AQAP was able to convince the tribe to accept an investigation and ruling by an impartial panel which eventually ruled that the tribesmen had been killed by an improvised explosive device (IED) that AQAP had planted that had been intended for the Army, not for the tribe. AQAP accepted responsibility and paid compensation for the tribal deaths, in line with tribal protocol, ending the matter.<sup>149</sup> Likewise, when ISIS attacked the Sulban military base near Aden in December 2016, a number of recruits from a single tribe were killed. In response, that tribe pressured AQAP to take a stand condemning ISIS, which AQAP

did in order to placate the powerful BaKazim tribe.<sup>150</sup> In another case, a tribe Al-Bayda' expelled AQAP and forced it to redeploy to another area after the latter had detained a man and his wife from that tribe.<sup>151</sup> Tribal values, such as revenge on behalf of a member, can run deep, as was the case when a tribe waited six months until there was an opportunity to avenge the death of one of its members at the hands of AQAP.<sup>152</sup> In fact, the governor of Hadramawt province appealed to revenge to incite a tribe against AQAP.<sup>153</sup> Although uncommon, a tribe—as was the case with the Jaadina tribe in Abyan, the first to do so in 2016, after a convocation of the shaykhs—may decide to ban any member who joins AQAP, which can be an effective counter to AQAP recruiting, as it removes tribal protection the individual's blood can be shed with impunity with no threat of tribal revenge, although how strictly that was followed up is not clear.<sup>154</sup>

Tribes control their territory and can exclude access to AQAP, as was the case when several tribes in Shabwa decided to do so after a tribal meeting and took upon themselves responsibility for enforcing the agreement in their area.<sup>155</sup> Competition over control of territory can also lead to friction between tribes and AQAP. In Abyan province for example, rivalry over control of the town of Lawdar led to the local tribe's forcing AQAP to leave the area in February 2017.<sup>156</sup> AQAP and tribes, including the tribally-based Hizam Amni forces, can also compete over territory for income, as with control of checkpoints.<sup>157</sup> Confrontations can develop into open fighting, as when tribes in Shabwa province attacked and blew up AQAP's headquarters in Azzan in 2016 over a dispute.<sup>158</sup>

## **AQAP's Safe Harbor Strategy**

AQAP has accumulated an impressive arsenal, profiting from the disintegration of parts of the Yemeni Army when the civil war erupted in 2015 with the coalition's entry, acquiring, for example, the depots of two Army brigades, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, multiple launch rocket systems, and artillery (up to 180mm).<sup>159</sup> AQAP also has drones, as well as a night-fighting capability, as shown in a video depicting an attack on a special forces compound in Hadramawt in June 2017.<sup>160</sup>

It is difficult to determine the number of AQAP personnel, in part because of part-time auxiliaries and sympathizers, as local officials have acknowledged.<sup>161</sup> However, the Saudi media estimated that in 2014 there were between

400 and 450 AQAP members in Yemeni prisons, who probably qualified as cadres, and all of whom apparently were set free during the subsequent fighting.<sup>162</sup> No doubt there were additional recruits over time, and some sources estimated that during the period that AQAP controlled the city of Al Mukalla in 2015-16, it was able to train more than 2,000 individuals—many of whom may have been attracted for economic reasons due to the high rates of unemployment rather than by ideology—which would likely reduce their level of personal commitment.<sup>163</sup> Traditionally, al-Qaeda's leadership has always viewed the younger generation as a focus of effort for recruitment calculating this as the section of the population that would be most likely to be responsive to its appeals.<sup>164</sup> One of the consequences of the civil war was that significant numbers of prisoners, including many belonging to AQAP, were released. For example, in the Taizz area, many members of AQAP escaped when Islah party fighters seized police headquarters in August 2015.<sup>165</sup> Likewise, AQAP freed some 300 prisoners being held in Al Mukalla when they took control of the city in 2015.<sup>166</sup> And, AQAP was able to overrun the prison in Jaar in mid-2016 and freed its members being detained.<sup>167</sup> AQAP losses are hard to determine. Saudi Arabia's military spokesman claimed that in the two years of the civil war, AQAP had lost 800 of its members in Yemen, although it was not clear whether that included the latter's losses in fighting against the Ansar Allah-Saleh forces.<sup>168</sup>

AQAP appears to have instituted a simple but functional logistics system with adequate equipment and supplies, largely by relying on the local economy. As money is the sinew of war, even for a jihadist organization, AQAP was careful to build up a war chest by looting local banks when it controlled parts of the country in 2012, and it seized the Central Bank's Al Mukalla branch when it took that city again in 2015.<sup>169</sup> While it had control of Al Mukalla, AQAP could also count on revenues from the oil trade and shipping duties which amounts to about \$2 million a day.<sup>170</sup> In addition, AQAP was able to extort money from large firms such as the national oil company and private communications companies.<sup>171</sup>

AQAP has shown itself to be tactically proficient both in the offense and the defense, with a capability to engage in a spectrum of operations ranging from small-scale hit-and-run raids employing only one or several operatives to larger more complex operations involving dozens of fighters, or even sustained conventional combat using combined arms. For example, when it took the city of Azzan in early 2016 (admittedly in a road march, without

opposition), the advancing AQAP task force consisted of over 400 fighters and included eight armored vehicles.<sup>172</sup> AQAP appears to have better tactical intelligence than its adversaries in the South enabling it to mount operations using the element of surprise, penetrating even government security units, while its local personnel know the physical and human terrain and often have tribal and family ties. In terms of force structure, AQAP has adhered to the more flexible Vietnamese school which focuses on conventional and guerrilla forces coexisting and complementing each other rather than following Mao's sequential doctrine in which once conventional forces can operate guerrilla forces are no longer necessary.

AQAP has exhibited effective command and control with its ability to convince subordinates to comply, as shown by the disciplined evacuation from positions in Abyan province in compliance with orders from AQAP's senior commanders to do so following an agreement with the local police.<sup>173</sup> And, to move significant numbers of men and equipment at short notice out of a city or a region in an orderly fashion, as AQAP has done routinely, is no mean accomplishment. Significantly, a substantial number of AQAP fighters trained and fought in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia. More than just numbers, what such returning veterans contribute to the Yemeni theater is their recent combat experience against modern conventional forces, as well as cohesion forged in battle. In particular, Yemenis fighting with al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Syrian-Iraqi theater have returned in succeeding waves. Some, such as one batch of 150 fighters in March 2014, returned home specifically citing their not wanting to have to take sides when the ISIS-Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Qaeda split occurred.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, when the Ansar Allah and Saleh went on the offensive in 2015, AQAP reportedly put out a call to its members (most of whom were said to have sided with the pro-Al-Zawahiri Jabhat al-Nusra) to return home from Syria to confront "the enemy at the gates" (*al-aduww al-sa'il*).<sup>175</sup> Yemeni sources confirmed the arrival of fighters from Syria soon thereafter.<sup>176</sup> Returnees have continued to come, especially following the recent jihadist reverses in Syria and Iraq.<sup>177</sup>

As for intangible factors, Clausewitz's moral factors, AQAP appears to have developed a noticeable degree of cohesion, sealed for many by a religious purpose and a *bay'a*, "pledge of allegiance," and buttressed at times by tribal or regional homogeneity of units. While not immune to factionalism, as is common in Yemeni society, AQAP cadres appear to be committed, which is an important element in maintaining discipline and cohesion among the

rank-and-file, and promotion seems to be largely by merit. AQAP's willingness to address, absorb lessons learned, and adapt, as suggested by its references to failures during the Arab Spring period, is a strength, although its ideology limits potential changes.

## The Maritime Facet of AQAP Strategy

AQAP and its al-Qaeda precursors have also long integrated a maritime component into their overall strategy by taking advantage of Yemen's poorly-controlled seacoast of almost 1,400 miles and over 100 islands along busy international waterways. The deputy leader of what was then called Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen, Abu Sufyan al-Azdi (Said al-Shihri), highlighted the impact his theater could have on al-Qaeda's overall strategy, citing such factors as "the geographical significance of this region, especially the maritime aspect, and the importance of the Bab Al-Mandab which, if we dominate—God willing—and return to Islamic control, would be a great victory with a global impact. The Bab [al-Mandab] would thereby be closed off and the Jews would be throttled because it is through the latter that America provides them with support, by way of the Red Sea."<sup>178</sup> Al-Shihri underlined that the mujahidin in the two adjoining theaters of Arabia and the Horn of Africa could also threaten the sea lanes used for the world's oil supply.<sup>179</sup> This outlook is indicative of AQAP's intent even if it does not have the capability to do so. However, more realistically, over the years, AQAP and its precursors have used the sea both as means to launch attacks on shipping (both military such as the *USS COLE* in 2000 and against commercial ships) and against shore-based targets, as well as an avenue of approach and supply route for its combat operations on land. In addition, AQAP has benefited economically from maritime activity whether by collecting port fees or through smuggling.<sup>180</sup>

## AQAP's Information Element of Power

AQAP's energetic information effort must be included as part of its combat power as non-lethal fires complementing kinetic operations by engaging in a war of ideas and seeking to win hearts and minds to ensure internal cohesion. In addition, the public media is a convenient method to communicate with one's own dispersed or clandestine forces. AQAP targets a variety of audiences both local and international, whether consolidating the

loyalty of existing members, trying to win over new supporters, or undermining the morale of adversaries and isolating them from the population. While it may be difficult to assess the effectiveness of such efforts, the range of media that AQAP employs is impressive.

AQAP posts official communiqués online as events warrant and disseminates material on central al-Qaeda fora, although in recent years international efforts have managed to severely limit their number. AQAP is characterized by the skillful use of communications techniques that exploit familiar and widely-accepted religious, national, and tribal themes and symbols, and has a quick reaction time to events. Its own, Madad News Agency, active since 2010, publishes local bulletins and official weekly news in their magazine *Al-Masra* (which deals with

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broader al-Qaeda issues too) online—although it seems to have stopped in July 2017—as well as video and audio products. AQAP also has taken advantage of the social media, using Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other vehicles. As al-Qaeda has done virtually everywhere else, AQAP also relies on poetry, a traditional means in Arab society, to diffuse its message.<sup>181</sup> *Anashid* (motivational chants) are particularly worrisome because they are popular among children.<sup>182</sup> In areas where the group has control, AQAP also uses field mobile kiosks and face-to-face contacts, whether with sermons in mosques or outreach lectures. In fact, pro-AQAP clerics are said to officiate at mosques in Aden and Lahij Province, although it is often difficult to verify such accusations hurled by adversaries.<sup>183</sup> AQAP's Ramadan contest in Taizz in 2017, which centered on summarizing a given book, proved an effective recruitment and propaganda tool, and showed AQAP's good knowledge of its audience by providing an AK-47 as first prize.

Al-Qaeda spokesmen are often sticklers for using the more formal literary Arabic, or *fusha*, but AQAP are more attuned to local sensitivities and are cognizant that using the colloquial language in its video products can be more effective in reaching people, as was the case with Yemeni military thinker al-Anisi in his video lectures (even if he excused himself for using foreign and colloquial terms). AQAP media also focus on combat operations both to motivate sympathetic audiences and undermine enemy morale,

using technically-proficient combat photography stills and videos (including sophisticated multiple cameras and head-cams). AQAP has an outreach effort to foreign audiences, especially with its English-language *Inspire* magazine (which also has an Arabic edition), seeking to encourage lone wolf attacks abroad. Conversely, a Saudi journalist was critical of what he characterized as the pro-coalition Yemeni media's slow and feeble response to terrorism.<sup>184</sup>

### **Tribal Politics as Military Capability: Taking Cities, Fighting, and Not Fighting Battles**

According to prominent AQAP figure Khalid Batarfi, his organization has adapted its operational art against the Ansar Allah depending on the character of a particular front in Yemen, with conventional operations in Abyan province, military operations in the urban terrain in Aden and Taizz, and guerrilla operations in Al-Bayda' province.<sup>185</sup> More specifically, as an AQAP situational report from the field noted in November 2016, "recently, the focus is against the Houthis' field commanders." Having formed hit squads specifically targeting Ansar Allah commanders, AQAP boasted of having killed eight commanders during a single month.<sup>186</sup> And, since the start of the 2015 conflict, AQAP has also offered a reward of 20 kg in gold to anyone who kills or captures the Ansar Allah leader, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, or Saleh.<sup>187</sup>

In particular, during the course of the civil war, AQAP has faced the option of whether or not to take control of territory and cities. AQAP's decision in 2015–16 to do so appears to have come about as a target of opportunity following the collapse of pro-Hadi forces, and from a desire to prevent the Ansar Allah-Saleh from taking over, although in most of the areas affected it was a case of Army units stationed there crumbling or declaring their loyalty to Saleh rather than of Ansar Allah forces advancing. And, typically, this vacuum made taking control easy. In the case of the town of Azzan, for example, AQAP took control in less than an hour without firing a shot.<sup>188</sup> In the event, AQAP seized a number of cities in the South early in the civil war, including Al Mukalla, Azzan, Zinjibar, and Jaar. Yet, within a year, AQAP had withdrawn from those same cities. In fact, in the case of Al Mukalla, local and provincial officials reportedly preferred an AQAP takeover, at least temporarily, to one by the Ansar Allah, and apparently even Riyadh saw that option as the lesser of two evils.<sup>189</sup>

A closer look at two engagements can shed light on AQAP's strategy and on the broader military balance between AQAP and its local adversaries—one well-publicized (the retaking of the city of Al Mukalla by the Arab Coalition and its local allies) and one not publicized (the Battle of Al-Masini). These two events shed considerable light on the military and political-military challenges and interests at play that continue to have a bearing on the fight against AQAP.

### **Al Mukalla: The Battle That Never Was**

In the case of Al Mukalla, the UAE claimed that as the result of a fierce battle waged by UAE-trained local forces supported by intensive air cover, planning, logistics, and intelligence by the UAE in April 2016, AQAP had been driven out from the city that the latter had taken the previous year. According to official reports, over 800 AQAP fighters had been killed in a single day during the fighting, or as some even claimed, within a 12-hour period, or “within the first few hours,” with the loss of only 10 coalition personnel.<sup>190</sup> However, the number of dead AQAP may have been decided arbitrarily by the coalition even before the operation began, as a communique it issued just as the operation kicked off already contained that information.<sup>191</sup> The Governor of Hadramawt province also reported that over 60 AQAP fighters had been captured and that over 300 more wanted to surrender.<sup>192</sup> Shortly thereafter, the commander of the 1st Military District, responsible for Hadramawt, announced that combat operations against AQAP were finished, declaring “victory,” as the Army had “achieved its objectives.”<sup>193</sup>

The UAE's local allies and the UAE media, at the time and much later, with much fanfare depicted the operation as having “broken the back of terrorism and of the extremist groups” and of having “shaken [AQAP's] foundations,” and portrayed the operation as “the biggest blow to terrorism in years,” and even much later the UAE-financed press in Yemen would continue to refer to it as “a resounding victory.”<sup>194</sup> UAE officials were quoted in the UAE press claiming that this had been al-Qaeda's single greatest loss of personnel ever.<sup>195</sup> The vice president of the UAE, Shaykh Mohammed bin Rashid, would even boast to Arab audiences that killing more than 800 AQAP fighters had foiled the latter's plans to threaten the Gulf Cooperation Council countries themselves.<sup>196</sup>

In particular, the coalition was quick to use this operation to counter criticism about their neglecting AQAP in its objectives, with the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash challenging critics: "Where are those who claimed that the coalition is not targeting al-Qaeda?"<sup>197</sup> The UAE, in particular, has continued to highlight Al Mukalla often by means of its local clients—as evidence of its key role against AQAP.<sup>198</sup> Saudi Arabia, which probably was not involved in a significant way in what was a UAE area of operations, nevertheless was anxious to be associated with what could be presented as a victory.<sup>199</sup> For example, a retired Saudi officer who often acts as an unofficial spokesman highlighted that it was the Saudi Land Forces' deputy commander who had planned the operation, while another Saudi general was said to have been the UAE field commander's deputy.<sup>200</sup> However, the Saudi media at times was hard-pressed to "spin" the story, and in one instance while the headline talked about 800 AQAP dead and Saudi special forces participating, the accompanying story quoted local sources as saying that there had been no clashes and carried no mention of Saudi forces.<sup>201</sup>

AQAP, for its part, countered that it had lost fewer than 10 personnel in the entire operation.<sup>202</sup> Significantly, the daily program on UAE television devoted to the war in Yemen "Al-Hazm wa'l-Amal," the following day repeatedly showed the same footage of only a couple of bombed buildings in Al Mukalla, and of tribal militia entering the city unopposed in pickup trucks, but no enemy corpses, prisoners, destroyed equipment, or any other evidence of recent fighting. Pro-coalition media at times admitted that there had been no fighting and that the Army and local militias had entered the city only after AQAP had departed.<sup>203</sup>

Moreover, the official version of Al Mukalla also conflicts with the usual combat pattern between AQAP and coalition-supported Yemeni forces, which typically consists of small-scale firefights rather than major engagements, with limited casualties on either side, as in one clash that the pro-coalition media characterized as a "fierce battle," even though only two AQAP fighters were killed.<sup>204</sup> Likewise, claimed successes such as the pro-coalition press report in February 2017 that "a spectacular operation" by UAE helicopters against a training camp had allegedly killed 60 AQAP fighters, are often uncorroborated and probably are to be discounted.<sup>205</sup> Instead, in the case of Al Mukalla, as some of local officials acknowledged to the media, AQAP's withdrawal had come about through negotiations mediated by tribal notables, not due to combat, for reasons that will be addressed later.<sup>206</sup>

## Al-Masini: A Battle That Was

On the other hand, one battle that did occur in Wadi, Al-Masini, west of Al Mukalla in November 2016 suggested a considerably more problematic coalition combat balance with AQAP. This time, the UAE-backed forces and media claimed that a task force composed of local special forces, supported by UAE helicopters, killed about 30 AQAP fighters, took prisoners, and destroyed equipment, with a pro-UAE source characterizing the engagement as a “massive military campaign” that resulted in wiping out the enemy without taking any friendly casualties.<sup>207</sup> However, another coalition account admitted that only six AQAP fighters had been killed in an hour-long clash.<sup>208</sup> What was more telling was an after-action report of the engagement published in the (pro-Qatar) South Yemen press. The article was based on recollections by veterans of the battle that was indicative of the continuing shortcomings of the coalition’s war effort. According to this version, the lightly-armed special forces were sent in by their commanders who told them the operation would be an easy one, and that UAE airpower would have already cleared away much of the resistance. However, the reality was that they were without adequate reconnaissance, intelligence, and any real plan. The commanders remained well to the rear. When they arrived, they were surprised to find themselves trapped in a valley at the foot of mountains and unable to exit their armored vehicles due to intense enemy fire. Timely air support was not forthcoming despite repeated calls and did not arrive until late in the day, at which time the troops tried to move forward under air cover, but were pinned down by AQAP fighters raining down a hail of fire from the mountain. Although promised reinforcements never came, eventually the special forces were able to extricate themselves, albeit with difficulty, leaving behind their dead and wounded, as well as at least one prisoner, whom AQAP executed the following month.<sup>209</sup> AQAP, for its part, later released a video, showing AQAP still in possession of the battlefield, and maintained that the fighting had lasted two days and that it had lost only five personnel to more than 30 for the attacking task force, and displayed some of the latter’s pickup trucks and U.S.-built armored vehicles that AQAP had destroyed.<sup>210</sup>

## Why Did AQAP Leave the Cities Without a Fight?

Significantly, as seen with Al Mukalla, AQAP withdrew from all the cities it had taken recently—Lawdar, Azzan, Jaar, Shaqra, and Zinjibar. Why did it leave those cities so quickly and without a fight? No army likes to withdraw without a fight and, very likely, many AQAP fighters—motivated and probably at least at the same level of proficiency as the nascent Yemeni Army—would have wanted to fight for the cities they held, which could have meant a costly and long campaign for the Yemeni Army. As suggested by the later experience in Iraq and Syria, a cohesive jihadist force entrenched in an urban environment can present a difficult tactical problem for a conventional force, and especially so in a case such as Yemen, where the army was raised recently, trained hastily, and was untested in combat. Under the circumstances, with its disciplined and rapid withdrawal from those cities, AQAP displayed a significant degree of cohesion and command and control.

In fact, where AQAP resisted government forces, as it did initially in Zinjibar in April 2016 just before the Al Mukalla events, it was able to repulse the attackers handily.<sup>211</sup> In that instance, what was described as a “major military force” attacked and succeeded in killing eight AQAP personnel in violent clashes in the perimeter defenses, while supporting UAE Apache helicopters were said to have killed another 12. AQAP displayed resilience, however, with the ability to reinforce from outside during the battle and to mount a combined-arms counterattack that obliged the coalition-backed Yemeni forces to retreat, compounded by the bombing of friendly forces by the helicopters due to poor coordination, and with an apparently greater total of casualties for the attacking force for the day.<sup>212</sup> The coalition, and especially Saudi Arabia, has relied disproportionately on airpower thanks to the coalition’s command of the skies, but this does not seem to be effective in terms of close air support to ground forces or in battlefield air interdiction, especially against small mobile AQAP elements, and even the coalition media reports that in operational situations airpower often misses its targets, not to speak of frequent incidents of hitting friendly forces, and is best suited for large stationary targets such as cities.<sup>213</sup> It would not be until the following August that Zinjibar was retaken by the government, although this was accomplished by negotiations even though the coalition press again sometimes reported that AQAP’s withdrawal had been the result of armed clashes in which air and artillery were used.<sup>214</sup>

AQAP's departure from Al Mukalla in 2016 should be seen within a broader strategic pattern rather than as an isolated event. That is, the decision to evacuate apparently was a uniform policy related to experience from the Arab Spring, and provides some insights into AQAP's longer-term political-military objectives and strategy. During the Arab Spring, AQAP had exploited the security vacuum resulting from the disruptions in the Yemeni government and military that accompanied the upheaval and the ouster of President Saleh to take control in 2011 of a number of cities in the South, including Zinjibar, Jaar, Lawdar, Shaqra, Rida, and Azzan. In its hubris, AQAP had even proclaimed that "we have laid down the first foundation on which to build the Caliphate."<sup>215</sup>

However, holding cities had tied down and dispersed AQAP forces in garrison and had entailed a loss of mobility. The decision at that time to defend committed AQAP to a war of attrition which, as a far smaller force than the reorganized Yemeni government had been able to muster that included the new Tribal Committee militias, was not to its advantage, as well as making the static AQAP forces vulnerable to U.S. airpower. During the government's Operation Golden Swords campaign of 2012, as a result of some hard fighting—including some conventional large-scale engagements in open terrain defending the approaches to the cities—AQAP had suffered significant casualties and was forced to relinquish all its gains, although by the end, recognizing the inevitable, it negotiated directly with the tribal committees to leave the town of Azzan.<sup>216</sup> To be sure, within a year, profiting from the country's continuing instability, AQAP was able to rebuild much of its lost combat power, forcing the government to launch another major campaign—Operation Armed Deterrence—in spring 2014 to again push AQAP out of its remaining territories. Although most AQAP personnel were probably able to melt away, that meant a dispersion of forces and a resulting inability to mount further significant operations until, as noted already, another catalyst—the eruption of the civil war—had enabled it to regenerate its earlier power and more.

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AQAP now again had to decide how to deal with the cities that seemed to fall into its lap, but apparently this time AQAP was prepared to withdraw from the cities it was holding much more readily than the first time, almost always without any combat. In fact, there were skeptics, including Qasim al-Raymi, who believed it was unrealistic to try to establish a state without being able to ensure the unlikely permanent control over a territory, and he cited recent failures of such attempts in other parts of the Middle East, as well as the need to orient on the enemy first rather than on territory.<sup>217</sup> AQAP was very likely reacting to the lessons learned from its earlier failure to hold on to territory after the Arab Spring. In particular, AQAP may have wanted to avoid the earlier attrition and placed its priority instead on preserving its force structure in the expectation that instability would continue and grow in the future.<sup>218</sup> By February 2016, local tribes had already helped AQAP negotiate a peaceful withdrawal from the city of Ahwar in Abyan province.<sup>219</sup> To its own members and to the local population, AQAP justified its policy of withdrawal by arguing that it wanted to “fight our enemy as we decide, not as the latter decides,” that it would not be trapped again into the same earlier policy that had provided the adversary with an advantage.<sup>220</sup> In the case of Al Mukalla, according to an AQAP journalist, AQAP withdrew because it wanted to avoid what it believed was a U.S. strategy to maneuver it into an urban war of attrition.<sup>221</sup> In fact, as an AQAP spokesman noted at the time, the intent was to place the UAE in a dilemma: If the UAE wanted to hold the cities, it would thereby lose the initiative to AQAP in the countryside or it could try to control everything and overextend itself.<sup>222</sup>

After leaving Al Mukalla, according to coalition sources, AQAP also evacuated Zinjibar and Jaar thanks to tribal mediation, reaching a deal that local forces, with the support of the coalition, were said to have welcomed, in order to “spare the two cities violence, destruction, and looting.”<sup>223</sup> Photos of evacuated cities in Abyan province, in effect, showed the Army’s armor entering on heavy equipment transporters on a routine road march, not in a combat mode.<sup>224</sup> Reportedly, AQAP also evacuated Azzan in August 2016 following negotiations, with local tribes mediating on behalf of Saudi Arabia, although some local pro-coalition media insisted that AQAP had withdrawn only after “massive losses” from air power, even though admitting that only five air sorties had been flown.<sup>225</sup> As a local official acknowledged, AQAP also withdrew in August 2016 from the town of Lawdar without offering any resistance to the Yemeni Army.<sup>226</sup>

## Post-Withdrawal Security

Nevertheless, often such AQAP withdrawals were temporary and, according to local sources, AQAP personnel usually remained in the area. One source commented that such agreements were based on the principle of *la darar wa-la dirar*, “live and let live.”<sup>227</sup> In all such cases, AQAP appears simply to have repositioned its forces in an orderly manner using the main roads, even taking its heavy weaponry for subsequent availability.<sup>228</sup> After leaving Zinjibar and Jaar, in Abyan province, for example, reports indicated that AQAP was able to simply shift its forces, with critics accusing the provincial governor of having issued at the time bogus reports of clashes and that many AQAP killed.<sup>229</sup> Significantly, after the retaking of Al Mukalla, many AQAP personnel reportedly just stored their weapons at home and often joined coalition military forces with the connivance of the local government.<sup>230</sup> Likewise, it left the town of Lawdar in February 2017, and AQAP was able to quickly melt into nearby mountains and neighboring provinces.<sup>231</sup>

The Arab Coalition portrayed AQAP in Abyan as being “weak now and unable to offer any military resistance.”<sup>232</sup> However, AQAP operatives soon reappeared in what remained a security vacuum, even retaking control of the local police station, and estimates were that AQAP retained some 2,000 personnel in Abyan province alone, while the provincial governor described AQAP's continued presence as being “as tight as a bracelet on a wrist.”<sup>233</sup> By early 2017, AQAP was said to have reestablished its earlier influence in that province.<sup>234</sup> Even in the key city of Al Mukalla and the surrounding region, the South Yemeni press was reporting that by August of that same year AQAP was returning more openly and recruiting and training tribal youths.<sup>235</sup> And, it was questionable how effectively the UAE-supported government forces were able to ensure security in Al Mukalla itself once they took over, as within a week ISIS carried out a suicide attack against a recruiting camp in the city, causing almost a hundred casualties, while weeks after that AQAP launched two suicide attacks against the security forces there killing at least 35.<sup>236</sup>

Since then, almost everywhere outside of Ansar Allah-controlled areas, AQAP has been responsible for too many small-scale attacks to mention against such targets as isolated security checkpoints, individual military personnel, or security patrols.<sup>237</sup> In 2017, rather than being brought under control, if anything, there appears to have been an upsurge of such small-scale

attacks, especially against UAE-supported local forces and police stations, particularly in Abyan and Hadramawt provinces.<sup>238</sup> Even in mid-2017, a UAE government publication acknowledged that the road between Hadramawt province and Aden was unsafe, and Yemeni military personnel were advised not to carry a military identification when traveling.<sup>239</sup> In addition to low-level engagements, AQAP also carried out larger sophisticated ones. For example, in July 2016, in a coordinated strike on Camp Sulban near Aden, a supporting attack consisting of a suicide car bomb breached the main gate, followed by another car bomb that was set off inside the camp, while the main attack was launched at the back gate, where an AQAP fighter wearing an explosive belt cleared the way for an exploitation force of 15–20 gunmen wearing military uniforms that was dislodged by a relief force only after air strikes and a gun battle that lasted hours.<sup>240</sup> In the provinces, likewise, there was a well-planned surprise attack on the Hizam Amni headquarters in Zinjibar in February 2017. A car bomb was used to breach the compound gate and a man wearing a suicide vest entered while gunmen wearing military uniforms and bullet-proof vests attacked from four directions, raining gunfire from rooftops in the surrounding neighborhood and preventing with concentrated fire quick-reaction personnel from reaching their armored vehicles.<sup>241</sup>

In a similar operation in March 2017, over 70 AQAP fighters attacked a security force headquarters in Lahij province. Wearing military uniforms, they breached the gate with a mini-bus bomb and detonated a truck bomb within the compound, while fighters on foot scaled a wall and a blocking force held off a government relief unit in town, allowing the attacking force to withdraw.<sup>242</sup> Elsewhere, in March 2017, AQAP also mounted a successful attack against a battalion of Yemeni border guards at a crossing point with Saudi Arabia, seizing arms, vehicles, and prisoners.<sup>243</sup>

Most actions undertaken by local forces against AQAP have been small-scale ones, usually consisting of the arrest of cells or individuals, the defusing of explosives, or the seizure of arms caches. For example, AQAP's number-two man, the Saudi-born Abu Ali al-Sairi, was arrested in Hadramawt in March 2017, which the UAE publicized, taking credit for having trained the personnel who made the arrest, and of another senior operative the following month, although AQAP issued a denial of that second arrest.<sup>244</sup> Typically in Aden, the year-long tally for 2016, showcased as "significant successes in the fight against terrorism," consisted of the prevention of 24 potential car bomb

attacks and defusing 235 IEDs and 301 landmines, as well as seizing maps, remote controls, and documents.<sup>245</sup> Thwarting such attacks is necessary in the fight against AQAP, although this often occurs thanks to the individual attacker's incompetence or by chance, and may be troubling as an indicator of AQAP's continuing initiative and of its opponents' posture as normally reactive. The Ansar Allah-Saleh forces, for their part, in addition to fighting against AQAP and ISIS at the front, have also arrested AQAP and ISIS cells throughout the areas under their control.<sup>246</sup>

Overall, so far, such operations have not been decisive, but the focus of coalition and local forces has often been elsewhere. Significantly, when the UAE-supported special forces stationed in Al Mukalla expanded to the interior of Hadramawt province in May 2017, ostensibly it was in response to a recent series of attacks by AQAP, but these had been small-scale raids. In part, what became a significant force deployment to Duan, supported by UAE heavy weapons, may have been intended to gain favorable publicity. Soon, the UAE press and the local pro-UAE press were reporting "crushing defeats," "the eradication of terror," and that it was now "Qaida-free" even though there appears to have been no battles against AQAP and the latter had never controlled the area.<sup>247</sup> What may have been an alternative intent of the deployment at this time may have been suggested in the pro-UAE South Yemeni press which reported that personnel loyal to General al-Ahmar, a partisan of the Islah and a rival of the UAE and of the South, were infiltrating into the area and called on the UAE-controlled special forces to move and preempt that threat and, indeed the media focus on security there remained on the Islah and its alleged backer Qatar, not on AQAP.<sup>248</sup> Nevertheless, the new exposed special forces positions apparently presented an inviting target and AQAP soon mounted an attack. Although pro-UAE quarters downplayed the incident, some press accounts acknowledged that the night attack had been coordinated along multiple axes using mortar and rocket fire, and that UAE aircraft had to be called in to repel the attackers.<sup>249</sup> In fact, throughout the summer of 2017, UAE sources admitted that AQAP also mounted "numerous attacks" in Abyan province, forcing the deployment of two additional brigades.<sup>250</sup> Likewise, in Shabwa province, AQAP in early August 2017 hit an exposed special forces position causing 15 casualties and taking prisoners while losing only one of its own.<sup>251</sup>

A day later, the UAE, with U.S. advisory and other unspecified support, began a deployment of hundreds of locally-raised special forces to their

home province of Shabwa, with the stated objective of securing the area from AQAP.<sup>252</sup> UAE officials judged the deployment a “major, spectacular, operation” against AQAP and declared a “significant victory,” while the UAE media reported that AQAP had fled the province and the UAE and UAE-controlled media in Yemen concluded that the back of AQAP was broken and that it was now disintegrating, although there were reports of only a few arrests.<sup>253</sup> Pro-Hadi and Islah sources, however, provided a counternarrative, suggesting a turf battle for influence within the Arab Coalition as the focus, rather than AQAP, and UAE sources in Yemen acknowledged that the operation was “a severe blow ... to Qatar’s clients.”<sup>254</sup> The Hadi and Islah media claimed that the UAE’s real objective was to secure control of the province’s lucrative oil and gas infrastructure, roads, airport, and port facilities held by pro-Hadi, pro-Ahmar, and pro-Qatar military units and officials, and argued that the UAE-backed forces should be helping the legitimate government instead of deploying rival units.<sup>255</sup> These sources pointed out that there had been no clashes with AQAP which, as it had done elsewhere, appeared simply to have redeployed and predicted that, as had happened earlier, it would reestablish its presence.<sup>256</sup> Pro-UAE sources themselves reported that local AQAP members were frequently simply melting back into their families, as they had done earlier on such occasions.<sup>257</sup> Not only could the situation in Shabwa lead to further confrontations within the Arab Coalition without having a significant impact on AQAP, but the perception that such operations have the political and material backing of the United States could risk creating the unwelcome impression that the latter itself is becoming a player in the country’s political system and favoring specific parties even within the same coalition.

## Chapter 4. Charting the Coalition Course

### Full Speed Ahead! Allied Forces in Yemen

In many ways, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as the principal movers of the Arab Coalition, have dominated the military landscape in areas not under the control of the Ansar Allah-Saleh coalition. Both countries have devoted considerable military power to Operation Resolute Storm (codename for the Saudi-led operation in Yemen) that, if directed against AQAP, potentially could have had a decisive impact on reducing its threat. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have committed special forces, as well as regular ground troops at various stages and mercenary contingents of various nationalities, and the UAE, in particular, has raised, funded, trained, equipped, and often led local Yemeni forces. However, this opportunity may have been squandered because of the two countries' priorities in Yemen. Moreover, to some extent their direct military participation has led to an escalation in the level of violence and hardened local warring factions' negotiating positions, prolonging the security vacuum that has favored AQAP's activity. Yemenis, whatever their political persuasion, are still nationalistic, and can often be resentful and suspicious of the objectives of such outsiders as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whatever help they may have provided. Characteristically, the suggestion a few years ago in Saudi Arabia that Yemen would be a good source for maids to replace those from Asia caused an indignant furor against the Saudis along the entire Yemeni political spectrum. Perhaps more relevant to the present situation, as one young Yemeni told journalists about neighboring countries, "some people are coming to think they [i.e. the neighboring countries] came to Yemen not because they love us and want to help us, but because they have their own interests here."<sup>258</sup> For her part, Tawakkul Karman, Nobel Peace Prize laureate noted for her activism during the Arab Spring in Yemen, while hostile to the Ansar Allah-Saleh faction, also expressed indignation at what she called the UAE's

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*Yemenis, whatever their political persuasion, are still nationalistic, and can often be resentful and suspicious of the objectives of such outsiders as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whatever help they may have provided.*

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insulting and degrading treatment of Yemenis. Accusing the UAE of promoting divisions by raising parallel armed forces and warlords, she warned in frustration, “Leave before you are forced out.”<sup>259</sup>

For Riyadh, arguably, it was not AQAP’s presence but the Iranian factor and an exaggerated view of an Iranian-Ansar Allah connection that may have been the catalyst and continuing priority for Saudi decision making in Yemen. It was also aggravated by anxiety about the then-ongoing talks between the 5+1 Group (the members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) and Iran on the latter’s nuclear program, a possible rapprochement between Iran and the West, and especially with the United States, at Riyadh’s expense, as well as to counter what Riyadh interpreted as Iran’s expansion. The emphasis in the Saudi state-controlled media for the Yemen intervention was certainly on Iran from the beginning and has continued to be so.<sup>260</sup> Even in 2017, when discussing Yemen, senior Saudi officials focused only on the Iranian angle without even mentioning AQAP.<sup>261</sup> For the UAE, a sensitivity to Iranian influence, as well as countering the Islah party (the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) may have been the key motivations, as the UAE attributed the Arab Spring uprisings as due in great part to the Muslim Brotherhood’s ability to mobilize popular discontent and has gone to great lengths to crack down on any manifestation of this movement both at home and in the region.<sup>262</sup>

## **Saudi Strategy Against AQAP**

Often, the countries in the Arab Coalition have used their claimed effectiveness in countering AQAP as a selling point with the international community for their presence in Yemen, as the coalition realizes that AQAP/ISIS may be the priority for the international community rather than the Ansar Allah, and has taken that into consideration. The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, for his part, also portrayed the Iranian and AQAP/ISIS threat in Yemen as connected, however, perhaps sees this as an effective mechanism to appeal to all facets of U.S. interests.<sup>263</sup> For its part, the UAE-controlled press in Yemen often spoke of the UAE as having the lead in anti-terrorist operations in Yemen and of achieving “great victories” against AQAP and, by 2017, it assessed that “these evil organizations are almost finished,” but also then shifted the focus to the UAE’s rivals, the Ansar Allah and the Islah (Muslim Brotherhood), as being responsible for AQAP’s persistence.<sup>264</sup>

Conversely, a pro-Saudi Yemeni newspaper downplayed AQAP's presence in Abyan in early 2017, accusing the UAE and its local clients of exaggerating the threat in order to draw in the United States further to help consolidate UAE control over certain areas.<sup>265</sup>

However, in practical terms, when asked by a journalist in April 2015 whether it was targeting AQAP, Riyadh's military spokesman then-Brigadier General Ahmad Asiri replied somewhat flustered: "The operation was clear from the first. Al-Qaeda and ISIS were not specified in the list of objectives for Operation Resolute Storm. Everyone knows that there is an international coalition operating against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, with Saudi Arabia and some other countries participating in that coalition. However, as far as Operation Resolute Storm, I want to reiterate that the specified objectives are clear: support for the legitimate government and President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, and support for efforts to return security and stability in Yemen."<sup>266</sup> Reports of the briefing in the Saudi media avoided General Asiri's direct denial, perhaps to avoid potential international criticism about the official indifference to AQAP and ISIS and the Saudi priorities that that implied.

Nevertheless, General Asiri continued to suggest that this remained the Saudi perspective when he again claimed that the Arab Coalition had a "deeper understanding" of what was at stake in Yemen than was true of the "Western countries and much of their media," whom he accused of focusing on AQAP and ISIS in Yemen while allegedly "ignoring the Yemeni citizen" and thus allowing the Ansar Allah to emerge on top. "We will not tolerate such an approach," he concluded, and argued that the focus instead should be on building a strong—presumably pro-Saudi—Yemeni state (in itself an ambitious objective) and that the AQAP problem would then resolve itself.<sup>267</sup> Significantly, after AQAP evacuated the city of Al Mukalla in April 2016, General Asiri declared that "major military operations against Al-Qaida in Yemen are nearing an end."<sup>268</sup>

Some have sought to downplay the threat from AQAP. One retired general, who often serves as an unofficial spokesman for the Saudi palace assured audiences in mid-2015 that al-Qaeda was declining worldwide as a threat and was on its way to disappearing in Yemen as well.<sup>269</sup> Likewise, another retired Saudi general asserted in 2016 that AQAP's presence in Yemen was "extremely limited," with only a few commanders active mostly in the media and only some 200 fighters—a far from realistic assessment, as suggested by even the partial numbers discussed earlier.<sup>270</sup> Often citing allied Yemeni

military officers to lend credibility to estimates, the Saudi media by early 2016 also portrayed AQAP as weak as a result of the coalition air campaign, and as consisting just of “remnants ... fleeing to peasant homes in the mountains.”<sup>271</sup> In fact, the Hadi authorities and the Saudis declared in August 2016 that Abyan province was now completely AQAP-free, something that subsequent events such as a suicide attack shortly thereafter that killed or wounded 25 troops showed to be far from accurate.<sup>272</sup> At the same time, the Saudi military leadership calculated that neighboring Shabwa province, thanks to local forces led by Saudi and UAE officers, would also be AQAP-free “within a few weeks”—again an overly-optimistic assessment.<sup>273</sup> In fact, by early 2017, the Saudi Ministry of the Interior spokesman went on record saying that, as a result of operations by the Arab Coalition, AQAP “has been paralyzed to a great extent,” while the Ministry’s CT expert added that AQAP now “lacks the ability to operate abroad.”<sup>274</sup>

As noted earlier, Saudi Arabia has a history of willingness to deal with the jihadists in Yemen for its own understandable pragmatic interests. Perhaps typically, according to tribal Shaykh al-Fadli, who at the time was an ally of Saudi Arabia thanks to Riyadh’s mediation, a deal had been struck allowing AQAP fighters in 2012 to withdraw from Zinjibar and Jaar in Abyan province without either the Yemeni or Saudi military striking them, provided that the mujahidin agreed to go to Syria to fight against the Asad regime.<sup>275</sup> The Saudis, at times, have gone out of their way to deny the presence of AQAP fighters in combat operations which the Saudis have supported, although media reporting indicated otherwise.<sup>276</sup> Eventually, AQAP fighters were said to also have participated even on the front along the Saudi border, where Riyadh had brought South Yemenis to help it repel the Ansar Allah’s penetrations into Saudi territory, and where a number of AQAP commanders reportedly lost their lives.<sup>277</sup> Likewise, during the 2017 coastal campaign that targeted the Ansar Allah ports, there were reports by the pro-Saleh media that AQAP forces were operating alongside coalition forces.<sup>278</sup> The fact that the AQAP attackers who struck the security headquarters in Lahij in March 2017 had apparently been part of the Arab Coalition force operating against the Ansar Allah along the coast and had used vehicles they had been issued by the Yemeni Army seemed to confirm such suspicions, although an embarrassed Army leadership sought to downplay the relationship.<sup>279</sup> In what may be a tacit understanding, AQAP by and large has avoided attacking Saudi forces directly—although ISIS has done so—while focusing its

attacks on the forces of the UAE and its clients, calling the UAE presence “an occupation.”<sup>280</sup> Even some of the pro-Hadi media, in fact, has suggested the existence of what one newspaper called an informal interest-based “non-negotiated truce” between AQAP and Saudi Arabia.<sup>281</sup> When the prominent AQAP figure Khalid Batarfi reacted publicly in June 2017 to the visit by U.S. President Donald Trump to Riyadh the previous month, perhaps signaling intensified anti-AQAP activity by the Arab Coalition with U.S. support, his criticism of Saudi Arabia was restrained, identifying his target generically as “traitorous rulers” rather than specifying anyone by name, and avoiding the standard harsh language of earlier times such as “apostates,” “thieves,” or “deviants,” or the insulting “Al Sallul” name for the Saudi ruling family, or calling for its overthrow, while focusing on Islamic unity instead.<sup>282</sup>

## UAE Strategy Against AQAP

The UAE's policy of presence on the ground in the South and its major role in the media, economy, security, and political life unavoidably has brought it into conflict with AQAP, especially as it has sought to play a significant role on the ground in support of its local allies. In the long run, perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of its policy that can make AQAP less attractive has been the UAE's efforts to stabilize the local economy with aid projects related to electricity, water, health, and communications, although the scope is still far from what is needed. The provision of desperately-needed aid has been limited to civilians in areas under coalition control. The UAE media has depicted their country's involvement in Yemen as an example of success against terrorism and offer it as a model for other scenarios.<sup>283</sup> Yemenis who line up with Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, often accuse the UAE of “sowing discord” and “destroying the social fabric” in Yemen with its involvement.<sup>284</sup>

Overall, however, the UAE's direct involvement in local affairs has at times complicated the fight against AQAP. For example, UAE-controlled forces have been accused of being heavy-handed with their blanket accusations and arrests of alleged AQAP suspects, reportedly often just targeting UAE opponents.<sup>285</sup> After Al Mukalla was supposedly cleared of AQAP in April 2016, UAE-controlled forces still managed to arrest 250 alleged AQAP members in the city shortly thereafter.<sup>286</sup> Likewise, in Lahij Province, a crack-down by UAE and UAE-supported forces in 2016 resulted in over 300 arrests

of alleged AQAP and ISIS members, but that was clearly not the case, since over 200 of those arrested were soon released following “their re-education and a psychological and ideological evaluation.”<sup>287</sup> In one incident in Shabwa province, a tribe blocked a key road for fuel truck traffic in protest to pressure the UAE to release two of its fellow-tribesmen that the latter had arrested.<sup>288</sup> Even after their release such an experience may alienate local tribal populations. Hadi allies, for their part, charge that the UAE-backed clients target all Islamists indiscriminately.<sup>289</sup> Elsewhere, the UAE reportedly disregarded fighters from Aden in building the city’s local Hizam Amni defense force and brought in, instead, fighters from other provinces, which was said to have resulted in many of the rejected Adenis then joining AQAP.<sup>290</sup>

Anti-AQAP clerics, and especially conservative Salafi ones, can provide a religious counterweight to AQAP’s claims of a monopoly on religious legitimacy. However, this body of potential anti-AQAP clerics has suffered in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and of their respective clients, with the Hadi faction claiming that its clerical supporters in Aden were being ousted from posts in mosques by the pro-UAE authorities, contributing to confusion.<sup>291</sup> In fact, Yemeni Salafi clerics were said to shun the UAE’s client, Minister of State and Commander of the local Hizam Amni, Hani Bin Brik, even though he is a Salafi cleric.<sup>292</sup> Significantly, clerics in Hadramawt have complained that the UAE has used accusations of belonging to AQAP and ISIS as a club to silence critics and, paradoxically, even reminisced about the Saleh era when they could speak out freely.<sup>293</sup>

## Local Military Forces

However, as important as outside players are, ultimately it is the relative balance between AQAP and local forces that will be decisive. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have raised local forces, such as the special forces (al-Nukhba) used by the UAE in Hadramawt and Aden, conventional Army maneuver units, local militia forces such as the UAE-sponsored Al-Hizam Al-Amni (Security Belt), or the Popular (or tribal) Committees, or the Popular Resistance and traditional police. In early 2017, Saudi-backed elements established a new anti-terrorist force in Aden, trained by personnel from the former Marxist People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen.<sup>294</sup> Both sponsoring countries have provided the new local military forces with large amounts of equipment including tanks and other armored vehicles, artillery, trucks,

small arms, and other equipment and supplies. They have also provided training, often abbreviated to three months or less, to Yemeni forces in camps in Eritrea, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or locally, and have continued to pay their salaries. Indicative of the seriousness of the AQAP threat, by 2016, plans were announced in Hadramawt to even recruit policewomen in order to search females at checkpoints.<sup>295</sup> In addition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have operated directly in Yemen with their own ground, air, and naval forces—whether in direct support of local forces or independently—and have embedded advisers to aid local forces with planning, intelligence, logistics, and often command and control.

In particular, the Hizam Amni militias have led in specifically providing security against AQAP in areas controlled by the UAE which finances, equips, trains, and appoints its commanders, and often provides combat support.<sup>296</sup> However, these forces have exhibited limited reliability. For example, Hizam Amni forces often withdraw from their posts, citing a lack of adequate support by the UAE in terms of pay, fuel, weaponry, and intelligence sharing.<sup>297</sup> At the same time, there have been instances of factional fighting between forces favorable to the Islah party and the UAE-controlled Hizam Amni.<sup>298</sup> There have also been clashes between units simply competing for control of turf.<sup>299</sup> Some units in the Hizam Amni, for their part, are said to resent rigid UAE control.<sup>300</sup> Moreover, the Hizam Amni is routinely accused of extortion, torture, arbitrary arrests, and of acting as a state-within-a-state, hampering the authority of any future national government.<sup>301</sup> The tribally-based Popular Committees local defense militias supported by the coalition and the Yemeni government, likewise, have been accused of abusive behavior toward the public.<sup>302</sup> The UAE-backed special forces in Hadramawt, too, have been criticized for unsubstantiated accusations against citizens of belonging to AQAP and for arbitrary arrests.<sup>303</sup> AQAP propaganda takes advantage of such transgressions to try to separate the security forces from the population.<sup>304</sup> The UAE media, for its part, has accused Hizam Amni commanders of preferring to stay in relative security in Aden rather than leading from the field.<sup>305</sup>

## Stuck in the Doldrums

Despite the significant coalition material commitment, the results of building a national army remain disappointing, with many of the Yemeni military's

traditional shortcomings now only magnified by the disruptions caused by the conflict.<sup>306</sup> Factionalism along regional, tribal, or party loyalties continues to undermine overall cohesion. While one would expect local self-defense forces to be tribally or provincially-based, this characteristic also

*Factionalism along regional, tribal, or party loyalties continues to undermine overall cohesion.*

applies to new army units. Although tribal loyalty can contribute to unit cohesion, it can also be disruptive, as in the case of the 3rd Brigade in Lahij province when the rank-and-file mutinied against their commander who was able to call on fighters from his own tribe for support.<sup>307</sup> A narrow local focus also affects operational effectiveness, with units loathe to operate out-of-area, and the debilitating North-South friction endures within the coalition-backed armed forces.<sup>308</sup> As one UAE adviser raved, “southerners would not fight beyond their borders. Taking them there [i.e., North] was a big challenge,” and in fact units have at times simply left the front and gone back to their home areas.<sup>309</sup> In addition, in the fight against the Ansar Allah, the coalition is said to also support various jihadist groups with values and an impact in local society that are similar to those of AQAP, although not part of the latter’s organization. For example, while not tolerating them in areas it controls in the South, the UAE supports selected jihadist groups in Taizz to balance the Islah and Hadi’s forces, with whom the UAE has been at odds.<sup>310</sup>

Moreover, the fragmented political situation has encouraged the phenomenon of Army and militia commanders acting as local warlords in their own areas, who can and often do ignore central directives. At times, such disparate forces, including factionalized Army units, end up clashing over control of turf, as in Taizz, rather than focusing on AQAP.<sup>311</sup> Mistrust of the intentions of foreign countries or of other Yemeni regions also looms large, with South Yemenis often suspicious that the fight against terrorism could be used as a cover for North Yemen to continue controlling the South, or for outside powers to establish control in what one editorialist characterized as “colonies run from a distance.”<sup>312</sup> While supporting warlords, tribal, ideological, regional, and party militias have been a necessary expedient for the coalition in the absence of other tools—this may also hamper building a strong state in the long run, as even pro-coalition Yemeni observers admit.<sup>313</sup>

Significantly, the problem of “ghosts,” that is absentee, soldiers and police listed on the rosters to enable commanders to collect their salaries

fraudulently, or adding the names of clients to the rolls, remains pervasive and hampers force development.<sup>314</sup> For example, information about Hadi's forces indicates that instead of the 52,000 carried on the rolls, only 10,000 are actually present for duty in the field, and that the abuse even extends to "ghosts" on the list of those killed in action in order to collect undeserved death benefits.<sup>315</sup> One Saudi-financed Yemeni newspaper complained about the lackadaisical operations in one district: "Everyone knows and can see that many checkpoints are unattended because its personnel do not care about their service and that they are not serious. This is plain chaos. They do not want to serve but at the end of the month they do want their pay in full without having been on duty."<sup>316</sup> This is by no means a marginal problem, as higher-ups in one instance reportedly ordered 5,000 fictitious names to be added to one unit's roster.<sup>317</sup> Entrenched corruption also affects arms purchases—some Hizam Amni units in Abyan reportedly sold some of their weapons and vehicles, presumably to the tribes or perhaps to AQAP.<sup>318</sup> Moreover, AQAP or ISIS military success affects the local forces' morale, as in the case of the August 2016 attack on Camp Sulban, which reportedly had a deep psychological impact on surviving personnel and hurt recruitment efforts.<sup>319</sup> At times, coalition-backed forces may not be anxious to confront AQAP. For example, the Army's 115th Brigade garrisoning the town of Lawdar in Abyan province blandly denied that AQAP was present in its area of operations.<sup>320</sup> Or, as Yemeni military sources insisted, local forces operating with UAE forces had completely cleared the Balhaf liquid gas export port in Shabwa of AQAP when they retook the city, which was called into question by continuing attacks.<sup>321</sup> Again in 2017, the governor of Abyan gave a doubtful reassurance that there was no AQAP presence in his province.<sup>322</sup> Even at a higher level, President Hadi's foreign minister in 2016 categorically denied that there was any ISIS presence whatsoever in Yemen and attributed claims to the contrary only to the Ansar Allah-Saleh media.<sup>323</sup>

At the same time, military, police, coast guard, and tribal militia units routinely complain of inadequate support, with weapons, fuel, and supplies not forthcoming.<sup>324</sup> Money provided by Saudi Arabia or the UAE for Yemeni military and security units has often not made its way down from higher echelons to the field, resulting in protests such as blocked key roads in response to late or no pay, and a general lack of support a routine occurrence in virtually every province.<sup>325</sup> One unit expressed receiving only some rice as their daily meal, and of having to rely on charity.<sup>326</sup> Not surprisingly,

salaries are key to the military's effectiveness, as many recruits reportedly joined the pro-coalition forces specifically because they could find no other work.<sup>327</sup> At times, salaries can be hostage to political rivalries, as when the Hadi-controlled Central Bank stopped paying the salaries of the security forces in May 2017 to the provinces where the UAE is dominant—a result of the Hadi (and Saudi) tension with the UAE.<sup>328</sup> Such a lack of material support, all too often, can lead to a unit withdrawing from the field, as was the case of a Hizam Amni unit guarding the approaches to the town of Lawdar from AQAP attacks.<sup>329</sup> In another case, after military police at the Ra's Abbas training camp in Aden withdrew in protest of a lack of pay, ISIS was able to mount a successful suicide attack, killing nine and wounding thirteen.<sup>330</sup> Some army units have threatened to switch sides to the Ansar Allah, angry that their commanders were stealing their pay.<sup>331</sup> One Army brigade commander on the Abyan coast even feared that his disgruntled personnel, who were not receiving pay or support despite government promises, would begin drifting to AQAP or ISIS.<sup>332</sup> Under such circumstances, some security units may be fragile, as a Hizam Amni unit withdrew from a town in Abyan province after suffering just two casualties in an ambush set by AQAP.<sup>333</sup> Moreover, even forces that the Arab Coalition specifically established to fight terrorism often are diverted to nonessential missions such as the UAE-backed Hadramawt special forces being used to pursue what they refer to as “sorcerers” and “moral deviants,” or the UAE-backed CT forces in Aden used to seize control of the Aden airport from Hadi's Saudi-backed security as part of Saudi-UAE rivalry.<sup>334</sup>

One must also take into consideration peculiarities in Yemeni society that may lower the effectiveness of local armed forces such as the daily break for the consumption of khat, a mild local narcotic that is so pervasive that coalition forces include it in daily rations for their troops at a cost greater than that of the food provided.<sup>335</sup> Moreover, units are often reluctant to fight outside their home areas. One Popular Committee commander matter-of-factly noted that his unit had no intention of defending Aden from the advancing Ansar Allah and had returned home to Abyan province instead.<sup>336</sup> And, characteristically, in the Army's 39th Armor Brigade, all but 10 of its personnel went home to spend the feast at the end of Ramadan, creating unavoidable security vulnerabilities.<sup>337</sup>

As a senior defector from AQAP assessed, the Yemeni Army had failed so far to defeat AQAP during the civil war because it contains AQAP

sympathizers.<sup>338</sup> At times, former members of AQAP reportedly also were recruited into Hadi-controlled military forces.<sup>339</sup> In some instances, AQAP has coexisted informally alongside Yemeni Army forces, as in Hadramawt during the early days of the conflict.<sup>340</sup> In 2016, Aden's chief of police was accused of appointing a number of individuals with ties to AQAP to security positions.<sup>341</sup> In some areas, moreover, the Hizam Amni is said to be riddled with personnel sympathetic to AQAP and has cooperated with the latter.<sup>342</sup> Likewise, AQAP's membership in the Popular Resistance, in a sense, may lead others to view AQAP as legitimate and may facilitate recruitment.<sup>343</sup>

Although defense mechanisms such as the tribally-based Popular Committees were originally established to operate against AQAP, members from AQAP also joined, whether as a vehicle for protection against prosecution or as a way to undermine their effectiveness, according to a former member of AQAP who became a commander in the Popular Committees.<sup>344</sup> In fact, in a clash between the Yemeni Army and the Popular Committees over funding provided by Saudi Arabia, AQAP elements were said to have been present in the Popular Committees.<sup>345</sup> Likewise, when AQAP fighters returned to the Al Mukalla area after having negotiated a withdrawal a few months earlier, many now had Southern Resistance Committee identity cards, suggesting that they had joined the latter, while others were reported to have joined the coalition-supported Army and security forces after AQAP had negotiated a withdrawal from areas in Abyan province in 2016.<sup>346</sup> And, in 2017, the governor of Hadramawt claimed that some of the AQAP prisoners they were holding had Yemen Army ID cards and had deployed from military bases.<sup>347</sup> Symptomatic of the unreliability of local security services—whether because of ideology or money—was the April 2017 jail break in Ataq, Shabwa province, in which prisoners, including AQAP detainees, simply walked out the front gate, apparently enabled by internal collusion.<sup>348</sup> In fact, at times, intelligence provided from inside the security forces reportedly has enabled AQAP to mount its ambushes.<sup>349</sup>

## **Saudi-UAE-Qatar Objectives and Rivalry and the Impact on the War against AQAP**

Rivalries within the Arab Coalition, initially between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and more recently between those two countries and Qatar, have often been played out in Yemen by their local clients, whether in armed

clashes, attacks in the local media, or the ouster of local officials, and have had an impact on the fight against AQAP. For example, pro-Hadi spokesmen (and thereby Saudi Arabia) accused the UAE of not coordinating with Saudi Arabia, much less with the Hadi forces, in their pursuit of AQAP.<sup>350</sup> In fact, Saudi sources interpreted UAE operations against AQAP as a cover to strike at the pro-Saudi resistance elements in South Yemen and were suspicious of the UAE's intentions.<sup>351</sup> This rivalry has been intense, as was the case between the Saudi-backed Hadi and the UAE which escalated in 2017, with the latter accusing Hadi of making a deal with AQAP and of coordinating with the latter in attacking UAE interests, a "stab in the back" as the UAE termed it.<sup>352</sup> Others in South Yemen have hinted more directly at Saudi collusion with AQAP, pointing to such indications as a Saudi officer intervening with the local police to allow AQAP suspects to avoid arrest, arguing that they were collaborating with the coalition.<sup>353</sup> Pro-Hadi partisans, for their part, have insisted that ISIS's members are all South Yemenis, although that must also be seen within the context of the bitter rivalry between Hadi and the UAE and the latter's clients, especially pro-independence UAE-backed Southerners.<sup>354</sup>

Saudi-UAE rivalry was apparently put in abeyance in mid-2017, as mutual opposition to Qatar erupted into the open, fueled by long-simmering regional rivalry, including Qatar's support for the Arab Spring, its benevolent view of the Muslim Brotherhood, and its improving relations with Iran and the Syrian regime.<sup>355</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE mounted an economic and political blockade of Qatar and mounted a full-scale media campaign—repeated by their local clients in Yemen—bluntly accusing Qatar of supporting not only the Islah but also AQAP, and seeking to tie together those three actors (along with Iran and Turkey).<sup>356</sup> Usually, Qatar's financial support to AQAP was alleged to have taken the form of paying ransom for the release of foreigners that AQAP had kidnapped over the years.<sup>357</sup>

Riyadh's pivot against the Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood more generally appears to have been related to its cooperation with UAE to focus on Qatar. Significantly, one journalist in the UAE-controlled Yemeni media boasted that it was the UAE that had convinced Saudi Arabia that it was now time to eliminate "terrorism" in Yemen (although identifying the Islah and Qatar as the latter) and to end Riyadh's "temporary alliance" with the Islah and the Hadi coalition, alleging Qatar's support for Islah.<sup>358</sup> UAE arguments that Islah and Qatar had obstructed attaining victory in Yemen, however

exaggerated, may have also influenced Riyadh, frustrated by being bogged down in the continuing war.<sup>359</sup> In effect, Saudi Arabia's focus on anti-terrorism in mid-2017 shifted radically to the Muslim Brotherhood, both at home and the local level in Yemen, and was reflected in a full-scale campaign by the country's media, clerical establishment, and the military's Center for Ideological Warfare.<sup>360</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the UAE did compile new terrorist lists of individuals and charity organizations in Yemen, which served as the basis for the arrest or ouster of officials said to have had ties to AQAP. Although they had long been on the U.S. Treasury's list, the driving factor for the new lists and the new measures at this time appears to have been their links with Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>361</sup> And, in fact, Saudi Arabia apparently had also cooperated with those organizations and individuals in the past.<sup>362</sup> As a case in point, Nayif al-Qaysi, whom Hadi had appointed governor of Al-Bayda' province in 2015, was, in addition, the self-appointed major general commanding the 17th Brigade, a tribal notable and prominent figure in the Islah party. Al-Qaysi made extravagant promises about his ability to achieve a victory over the Ansar Allah, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to accept him as a valid partner as noted by their media and that of their local clients, even after the U.S. had placed him on its terrorist list in May 2016 for cooperating with AQAP.<sup>363</sup> In fact, al-Qaysi had been praised in the coalition-backed media for his effectiveness in fighting against the Ansar Allah-Saleh forces and for his "coordination with the forces of the Arab Coalition led by Saudi Arabia in order to operate together."<sup>364</sup> In the end, what appears to have been key for the UAE in engineering his ouster in July 2017 was al-Qaysi's ties to the Islah and to Qatar.<sup>365</sup>

The Hadi regime (and its Saudi backers) and the UAE made compromises to replace some officials, and some forces on both sides were shifted to different areas. Whether such expedient compromises masking continuing rivalry will result in a more cohesive coalition effort or lead to further disruptions and a decreased focus on AQAP is problematic, as the coalition parties scramble to realign their alliances. Very likely, the UAE and its local clients, in particular, are likely now to focus even more on Islah and Qatar as adversaries.

And, whatever element of truth there might or might not be in the accusations swirling about in coalition circles of secret backers of AQAP, this situation illustrates how regional players have their own shifting national

interests and how events outside the country can reverberate in Yemen and rearrange and further destabilize the volatile local political balance and security situation. Such regional rivalries also indicate the level of mistrust within the Arab Coalition and among their Yemeni allies, which diverts from efforts to deal with AQAP effectively, as coalition factions focus on each other. Accusations by the local UAE-controlled press of treason by senior commanders linked to Qatar in the Yemeni Army are only likely to erode the army's cohesion and divert its attention further from fighting AQAP.<sup>366</sup> In particular, Islah retains combat power that is not negligible, including control of a number of army brigades. In the shifting coalitions, a hard-pressed Islah could be willing to cooperate more directly with AQAP as a defensive mechanism. At the very least, Islah may redirect its focus against other coalition forces and their local allies.

## Chapter 5. The Way Forward

### Sailing Past the CT Paradigm

AQAP has been able to expand during the civil war in terms of the territory it controlled, the arsenal it acquired, and the prestige it earned—even establishing a quasi-state administration in some areas. Moreover, dealing with AQAP may be difficult, especially as it has become a player during this civil war (even an accepted cobelligerent in some circles) within Yemen's fragmented mosaic of shifting tribal, ideological, religious, and personal coalitions, and has embedded itself in the country's social, political, and economic fabric. AQAP and ISIS have been able to establish relationships that may outlast the current civil war, and a United Nations (UN) report assessed that their current activity could have long-term impact, as they were “laying the foundation for terrorist networks that may last for years.”<sup>367</sup> AQAP presents a complex problem and as this study suggests, there is no one, easy, or quick solution for the problem, rather a combination of approaches and methods are needed to achieve progress. Based on the preceding assessment, a number of conclusions and recommendations emerge.

The ultimate objective should be to defeat AQAP and to achieve “victory,” but one has to define what that means in concrete terms. Given its current entrenchment in Yemen's society and political life, it may not be possible to eradicate AQAP completely without also implementing difficult systemic political, economic, and social changes. Under the circumstances, victory in the near term may mean

not so much AQAP's eradication as its containment and management by reducing to the greatest extent possible, through continuous focused, pressure at the operational level, along with a change at the strategic level in AQAP's surrounding environment, in order to reduce AQAP's capabilities and the threat it poses, especially beyond Yemen's borders.

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At the operational level, there are certain kinetic measures that are feasible and necessary, not only to prevent the current security situation from deteriorating, but also as a contributing factor to longer-term stabilization efforts for a desired end-state. While necessary, such means can only act as a temporary facilitating “shield,” providing time and security for the implementation of the “sword”—that is political and economic measures—that can bring about greater long-term stability and greater success against AQAP. In addressing military strategies, some analysts have argued convincingly that the dichotomy between population-centric approaches to COIN and enemy-centric approaches is misplaced. Rather, they maintain that a more appropriate concern is: on the one hand, whether the focus should be on the use of physical force or of political or moral actions; and, on the other hand, insofar as targets are concerned, whether they should be on the insurgents or on the insurgents’ support.<sup>368</sup> Indeed, one could add that at times the focus could be sequential, at other times simultaneous, depending on the specific situation. In the case of Yemen and AQAP, one could maintain that multiple efforts would be synergistic. In terms of targets, as the present study suggests, eliminating AQAP leaders and cadres does have an impact. However, this does not preclude, at the same time, also targeting and shaping the wider support base upon which AQAP must rely for the various combat support functions noted earlier.

### **Crossing AQAP’s “T” in Yemen**

At the time of this writing, the United States is considering an expansion of military operations in Yemen.<sup>369</sup> While this is ultimately a political decision, at the operational level, the United States should avoid a large-scale ground combat presence in Yemen, which could present the risk of developing into a long commitment and also of being drawn in as a player in local and regional politics. Significantly, Saudi Arabia itself has avoided a sustained ground presence, only committing its special forces and limited forays across the border. Saudi authorities have justified this restraint by a wish to avoid what they have described as “significant casualties.”<sup>370</sup> Riyadh instead, had sought to enlist large ground task forces from Egypt and Pakistan for that mission, but both declined. Not surprisingly, local and regional players may stress the AQAP angle as a theme to elicit greater U.S. involvement. In early 2016, for example, the UAE asked the United States to provide increased air

power, logistics, and intelligence support, casting the request specifically in terms of the fight against AQAP.<sup>371</sup>

Neutralizing AQAP's strategic center of gravity—its leadership, as a direct approach disrupts at least temporarily, AQAP's command structure and operations. While eliminated leaders are replaced, this process is sometimes far from smooth, and can be subject to factional or regional pressures that can hobble the organization at least temporarily. This was the case after the deaths in 2016 of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, AQAP's leader, and of a key AQAP field commander, Jalal Balaidi al-Marqashi (Hamza al-Zinjibari), when the latter's brother contested Qasim al-Raymi (who had been military commander since 2009) for overall leadership of the AQAP. This rivalry included armed clashes by their followers and resulted in Balaidi's retention of at least a regional leadership role.<sup>372</sup> However, decapitation alone may be insufficient, as leaders may be difficult to reach and, moreover, this is not a one-bullet regime, but relies on a broader network of command personnel who may be hard to eliminate completely.

At the same time, by default, an indirect longer-term and labor-intensive approach focusing on attriting AQAP's operational center of gravity may be necessary to weaken AQAP's ability to pose a threat. Such a strategy should disrupt AQAP's ability to field forces and generate combat support; maintain political and physical infrastructure that enables the leadership to carry out policy; and sustain such warfighting functions as recruitment, logistics, intelligence, training and education, and command and control for combat operations. Basic to enabling any such long-term military operations is maintaining the U.S. forward presence both afloat and by relying on the imposing security infrastructure that has been established on Yemen's periphery, including in the Horn of Africa. These facilities range from the major base at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, with over 4,000 personnel, to bare-bones positions (the numerous so-called "lily-pads"), strategically-located skeleton facilities with infrastructure that can provide the nucleus for a rapid expansion as needed, most often in conjunction with existing host-country facilities.<sup>373</sup>

## Eroding AQAP's Base

### Conducting Information Operations

U.S. information operations are key, given that Yemen's factions, tribes, parties, and even individuals have their own newspapers or other media outlets (often in conjunction with foreign countries). Providing accurate and balanced news, whether directly to Yemeni consumers or through local outlets, can play an important role in countering not only the AQAP information effort but also the rumors that arise and spread rapidly and provide the broader social background, often counter to U.S. interests. One area where SOF can be especially relevant is in producing and operationalizing information support, given its organic army's special forces capabilities, which can counter AQAP propaganda and provide a positive message that can support operations and contribute to stability and security at a strategic level. An information effort can also play a supporting role in the campaign against AQAP. While the nucleus of AQAP may be relatively impervious—requiring its physical defeat—a more positive effect may be possible with the periphery, although even here the impact is most likely a dependent variable of the situation. That is, it is difficult to argue with success, and unless they are coupled with the infliction of tangible failure for the jihadists on the ground, psychological campaigns may not be effective. Nevertheless, such campaigns to delegitimize AQAP could help complicate the latter's operational environment by degrading support among active and potential sympathizers on whom AQAP relies for support functions such as logistics, intelligence, or force protection. Not surprisingly, such campaigns would be most effective using trusted key communicators and, specifically, local religious or tribal ones.

### Developing Tribal Militias

In the near-term, the focus of effort can be to build up local forces to operate against AQAP by contributing money, weapons, intelligence, and training, which can be conducted in secure areas offshore. In particular, tribal militias have a proven track record of effectiveness against al-Qaeda, including in Yemen, when managed correctly.<sup>374</sup> As seen in this study, Yemen's tribes are a key element in the country's security and political equation and countering AQAP's efforts to recruit from and operate in tribal areas can go a long way toward containing AQAP and securing territory, since such militias know the

terrain and population, have a permanent presence, and have built-in cohesion thanks to tribal loyalty. As this is a zero-sum game, any development of tribal militias at the same time also represents a subtraction from the potential pool of assets for AQAP. Tribal militias not only provide security, but of equal importance, are also a source of employment and income, and can be attractive especially to tribal leaders if such forces are organized and financed using these leaders as the conduit, thereby enhancing the leadership's authority and support. Of course, if accompanying economic projects complement the enhanced security provided by tribal militias, the buy-in of tribal leaderships and their followers would likely increase, with a synergistic impact on security and an inversely negative effect on AQAP.

The United States can take advantage whenever possible of tribal tensions with AQAP, although such tensions may not always automatically translate to popularity for the United States, and not every tribe will be amenable to partnering with the United States. In fact, some tribes have remained neutral throughout the civil war. And, as one op-ed in the South Yemeni press pointed out recently, the image of a powerful United States pitted against a weak AQAP, in fact, has often won AQAP grudging popular respect for being able to survive in the unequal struggle.<sup>375</sup> U.S. special forces can play an especially important role in this aspect of the war thanks to their extensive experience in training foreign forces, their range of expertise in combat functions, and their limited footprint—and the UAE government has reported that had already begun.<sup>376</sup> As there is no real functioning national Yemeni government in place at this time, dealings with the tribal militias may have to be handled directly with the individual tribes or indirectly through the local warlords/military commanders in an area. However, one must also understand the limitations, as such militias function best when there is an effective complementary conventional force available. Special care must also be taken to ensure tribes do not use their militias for intertribal warfare instead of against AQAP. As a prospective Yemeni government emerges, understandably it may be wary of seeing the tribes strengthen, since they will compete with its authority and tighten the tribes' chokehold over oil and gas, pipelines, electricity infrastructure. A new central government should then

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become the intermediate for building tribal militias. The special forces and the Hizam Amni that the UAE has built pretty much controls tribal militias, although this has often led to resentment in the pro-Hadi camp. Fears exist that such parallel forces could lead to the country's partition and to further civil wars, as well as their use against the interests of the Hadi faction. The latter has called instead for their integration into the Hadi-controlled Army.<sup>377</sup> Illustrative of the potential pitfalls of such forces, the UAE reportedly has raised these militias only among specific tribes and, when such forces have been used for political advantage by their sponsors—as the Hadi and Ahmar camps alleged in the UAE-backed Shabwa campaign in August 2017—this can give rise to tensions within the coalition and even dispose rival tribes favorably to AQAP as a reaction.<sup>378</sup>

## Shaping Operations

### The Centrality of Intelligence

The current focus on what are often small, mobile, or ambiguous AQAP targets underscores the importance of reliable all-source actionable intelligence. Admittedly, as a result of the conflict, the United States lost its earlier permanent presence on the ground and assets used for intelligence collection.<sup>379</sup> By and large, AQAP operates in areas that are under the coalition's at least nominal control, which can still enable this process to some extent. The assets of SOF, in particular, can make a major contribution in collecting signals intelligence/human intelligence. Naturally, in Yemen's volatile environment, U.S. forces must remain cautious with intelligence provided by local or regional sources, who may shape it to promote their own objectives. Similarly, operational security remains a challenge, given that multiple players and interests with cross-cutting loyalties are involved in operations, increasing the possibility of compromised intelligence and the loss of surprise, as the media suggested may have been the case with the January 2017 SEAL raid.<sup>380</sup>

### Air and Naval Strikes

Manned and unmanned airpower or drones, as well as missile strikes, have often been the U.S. weapon of choice in Yemen as a way to avoid a significant ground presence. And, recently there has been an upsurge in the tempo of drone strikes, with 80 such strikes reported in March and April 2017.<sup>381</sup> Drone

strikes have often been a subject of controversy. On one hand, their use has made possible the targeting and successful elimination of individual AQAP cadres who would otherwise be largely immune, and they have forced AQAP leaders to restrict their movements. However, although drones cause far less collateral damage than would likely result from the use of less accurate manned aircraft, in the long run, the collateral damage drones cause from time to time may result in political harm to the Yemeni authorities' efforts to establish their legitimacy and hurt the United States' image, to the benefit of AQAP, which has certainly highlighted such collateral damage in its propaganda.<sup>382</sup> As a senior Yemeni military officer in Ma'rib province pointed out, AQAP can be said to "hug" the population, whether as a conscious defensive policy or simply as a result of being integrated in local society, which makes collateral damage always a risk in such strikes.<sup>383</sup> In one drone attack, one of Tariq al-Fadli's sons was killed, probably as an ancillary rather than a principal target.<sup>384</sup> Whether eliminating an insignificant AQAP member outweighed potentially angering the paramount shaykh of a tribal confederation and alienating wider swathes of the population may be questionable.

In general, U.S. air strikes are not popular in Yemen, and local sources may even downplay the AQAP threat or exaggerate government success in order to avoid such strikes.<sup>385</sup> As a member of parliament argued in October 2012, "these air strikes pave the way for al-Qaeda and terrorism" and "induce many to join al-Qaeda."<sup>386</sup> Even the pro-Hadi media has raised concerns at times about U.S. strikes, noting that they cause "great fear" to the local population.<sup>387</sup> U.S. planners have to perform an extensive calculus for each target in order to account for the second-order effects of such strikes, especially in light of the recent downstreaming of operational decision making to the military.<sup>388</sup>

Moreover, operationally there is limited control over the necessary sub-contracted local agents who provide intelligence and apply tracking devices, which could result in the recruitment of children.<sup>389</sup> As in any military operation, there is the element of chance, which is perhaps magnified by the remote command and control of drone strikes. In one reported case, an AQAP operative had sold his car after, unbeknownst to him, it had been tagged with a homing device, resulting in the new innocent car owner being targeted by a drone strike.<sup>390</sup> Practical support among Yemenis for the drone program may also decrease if AQAP becomes more proficient in identifying and retaliating against those it believes to be collaborating and who are, for all intents

and purposes, unprotected. When AQAP took the city of Jaar in December 2015, for example, it executed a local commander who it accused of being a distributor for the United States drone homing devices to sub-agents.<sup>391</sup> Various intelligence agencies appear to have had considerable success in generating intelligence for drone strikes by penetrating AQAP itself in the past, as indicated by the number of its own members that AQAP has executed over the years. AQAP has been trying to implement new operational security measures and such sources could dry up if AQAP counterintelligence improves.<sup>392</sup>

U.S. strikes on concentrations of AQAP fighters and operational centers of gravity are uncommon but are possible even without a large U.S. ground presence. What may have been a mixed manned and drone air strike against an AQAP training camp in March 2016, for example, reportedly resulted in some 70 militants killed.<sup>393</sup> Training camps, in fact, may provide the most suitable force concentrations, with the presence of both recruits and harder-to-replace trainers, for such strikes. Once AQAP forces are deployed to the field, especially at the front, they are likely to be collocated with other forces attached to the coalition in some way, risking friendly casualties, or nearby civilians. Although the availability of such targets and relevant intelligence may not always be forthcoming, one can create such force concentrations by targeting individuals or objectives that AQAP must mass to defend. U.S. Navy missile strikes have also been used and, again, may have the same costs and benefits as drone strikes.

### **Manned Airborne and Seaborne Raids**

When a presence on the ground is required such as to collect intelligence, target individuals, take prisoners, preempt an attack, or perform a rescue, forces with a limited footprint, high level of training, and ability to react in a timely manner to exploit opportunities with airborne or seaborne raids, such as the Marine Corps and SOF, are optimal. Recently, SOF have had the lead in Yemen.<sup>394</sup> In particular, SOF make sense in this environment due to their ability to provide small, agile, and stealthy expeditionary forces in the form of flexible force packages with multiple capabilities that can act quickly can make a contribution to the overall effort in excess of the size of the forces committed.

With raids too, collateral damage is a sensitive issue, and the January 2017 airborne raid in which a SEAL was lost and a number of civilians died was

criticized openly across the entire political spectrum in Yemen. A subsequent less-publicized amphibious landing raid in Shabwa province in February 2017 resulted in no clashes or casualties, although it is unclear whether the intent was to land in an unoccupied area or whether AQAP had received warning and left.<sup>395</sup> Such raids clearly put AQAP on edge, as suggested by the fact that the latter's leader Qasim al-Raymi—who may himself have been the target of the January 2017 raid—sought to adapt, and publicly propagate countermeasures for his followers soon thereafter.<sup>396</sup> Al-Raymi identified intelligence to avoid being surprised as key to countering such raids, including by posting sentries for early warning, drafting contingency plans, avoiding moving out into the open, laying mines and IEDs, and allowing the attacker to approach in order to draw him into an ambush.<sup>397</sup>

It appears that such special forces air-land raids were becoming part of a recurring pattern of U.S. operations, with even two near-simultaneous raids on a single day in May 2017, well into Yemen's interior.<sup>398</sup> Operationally, the recent raids have been impressive, with the use of combined arms—including a variety of air assets such as Apache helicopters, an AC-130 gunship, and drones—and have achieved surprise.<sup>399</sup> Such manned raids are subject to the same considerations of a cost-benefit calculation as drone strikes. Significantly, those killed and wounded in Ma'rib in one of the May 2017 raids all belonged to the same tribe, which would indicate the level of AQAP's penetration in tribal society. However, the tribe that insisted those killed did not belong to AQAP organized a large funeral for the victims, and criticized the Hadi authorities for their cooperation with the United States.<sup>400</sup>

### **Support to Regional Forces**

U.S. advisers were on the ground in Yemen in May 2016, supporting UAE and Hadi's troops, as were forces afloat in the area.<sup>401</sup> UAE forces participated in a number of combined operations, such as several of the raids the United States has mounted.<sup>402</sup> And, as part of the fight against AQAP in Yemen, Saudi Arabia reportedly has long hosted facilities for some of the U.S. drones that operate over Yemeni skies.<sup>403</sup> Cooperation with Arab Coalition forces in Yemen should continue, but the focus should be specifically on countering AQAP rather than allowing such support to be diverted to other priorities. Moreover, care must be taken not to become identified with some controversial coalition practices that might be difficult to defend. For

example, UAE-controlled forces have come under scrutiny from human rights organizations for their secret prisons in Yemen.<sup>404</sup>

## **Weakening AQAP by Changing the Operating Environment**

Simultaneously, the indirect approach of political action can have an even greater impact on the fight against AQAP. Looking toward the longer term, the objective should be to affect the environment in which AQAP operates by ending the war and promoting a more stable political system, as this is necessary in order to contain the jihadist threat and reduce AQAP's room for maneuver within that environment. Indeed, in the case of Yemen, a game-changer for dealing with AQAP would be promoting a viable political deal, one that would satisfy the principal mainstream combatants and reduce the foreign presence. Such a resolution would make AQAP less attractive as a cobelligerent and partner while at the same time increasing the incentive and ability of a restructured, more broadly-based, Yemeni government to pursue AQAP.

In effect, as this study notes, perhaps AQAP's greatest asset is its ability to promote itself as a cobelligerent for other players in the Yemeni conflict and its ability to provide functions that an absent government does not, such as protection, commercial dealings, and rudimentary judicial or public services. In a power vacuum made possible by conflict, the population's concrete needs can supersede ideological qualms. The most dramatic impact on that score would probably occur at the strategic/political level, with a political agreement ending the war that deals AQAP out of the equation. Ending the conflict can provide a window to reestablish greater security and a semblance of governance that can make AQAP less relevant and less attractive as a partner. A key goal of such political-military measures to promote security is to isolate AQAP by peeling away the latter's tribal allies and individuals who may have only an interest-based relationship with AQAP. This process of convincing AQAP's allies and less committed members that their interests are better served elsewhere, or that the price of alliance with AQAP is too high, would not only degrade AQAP's capability to do damage but would also make it a more vulnerable target by removing defensive layers of territory and population at its disposal. Of course, the operational and strategic levels of war are closely interconnected. Achieving such a political objective would thereby also facilitate U.S. kinetic operations against a weakened

adversary to marginalize the AQAP threat to a great extent. Conversely, U.S. kinetic operations targeting AQAP, now and in the future, can have a significant impact on preventing the latter from derailing a peace process and undermining a future Yemeni government.

All wars must end, but how they end is influenced by the military balance on the ground. There is always an interplay between military and political activity, with players seeking to achieve as strong a position in the field as possible which can be leveraged into being able to negotiate a more advantageous political deal eventually. And, a belligerent's cost-benefit calculus leading to war termination is to a great extent future-oriented. That is, assessing the likely cost of continuing a war is even more important than the cost incurred up to then.<sup>405</sup> To be sure, international and local experts have considered various potential mechanisms for restructuring the country's political system so as to foster stability.<sup>406</sup> More important than the specific formal structures and institutions that would be introduced is for the international community to promote an informal consensus among Yemenis in which all mainstream players feel that at least their core interests are addressed and that they will have an equitable share in the country's political and economic life, including in international reconstruction funds and aid, the economy, the government and the bureaucracy, and the military and security forces.

At present, there is no one with country-wide legitimacy, nor even just within the Hadi bloc. For a post-settlement government to succeed, it must include the participation of all major mainstream warring parties representative of the society including the Ansar Allah, Islah, southern autonomists, various warlords, and the Saleh grouping who represent a significant part of the country's population. The independent-minded and most consistent adversaries of AQAP, Ansar Allah, are motivated by domestic, rather than regional objectives, and it would be a mistake to view them simply as an Iranian proxy, although the war has made them need Tehran's aid.<sup>407</sup> Admittedly, what-

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ever government emerges in the post-war period is likely to remain fractious and of limited effectiveness for some time to come. Yemen's political scene

will continue to be characterized by the traditional roles of warlords, tribes, political parties, ideological movements, and factional struggles. While social and political change is a slow and imperfect process, a realistic expectation could be the reduction of conflict to a more manageable level, one where conflict, even if it occurs in peacetime, does so locally, sporadically, and at a much lower level. Such a situation would still be an improvement over the current wartime situation which has resulted in an unprecedented national disintegration resulting in the security vacuum that favors AQAP's growth and activity. Even in a post-war scenario, the U.S. military, and especially SOF, will likely still play a key role using the same warfighting tools already in use, but now in a role supporting government forces as part of a continuing campaign against AQAP, even if the latter becomes weaker and more isolated than before.

At the strategic level, the United States should play an active role in promoting a negotiated settlement of Yemen's civil war that would lead to such a national compact. Soon after the Arab Coalition's intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were able to use their considerable international clout to craft and promote UN Resolution 2216 in April 2015, which focused on pressuring the Ansar Allah and Ali Abd Allah Saleh. The Arab Coalition and its local allies have used the document as the basis for negotiations, although interpreting it in a way that would entail a literal surrender of the other side, with its provisions for the Ansar Allah-Saleh to withdraw from areas under their control and to disarm, while providing no real guarantees for their future. The prospects for such a negotiated outcome may recede if the principal Arab Coalition players and their local allies believe that the international community, and especially the United States, will continue or even increase its military support for their position. In fact, in an apparent hardening of the Saudi position based on such considerations, in April 2017, Riyadh's military spokesman excluded "the Rebels"—that is, the Ansar Allah and Saleh—from any future solution.<sup>408</sup> If an elusive military victory were to be achieved one day by the Arab Coalition to then exclude communities that may account for a third of Yemen's population, that would be destabilizing in the long-term and entrench grievances, ensuring that conflict reemerged in the future. The United States should exert an effort to convince Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that a continuation of the war is not in the interest of the region's stability and security and that a negotiated compromise settlement is the most realistic option. The United States can wield considerable, and

probably decisive, leverage with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE as, realistically, without U.S. military support (including that of civilian military contractors) both countries would be hard-put to conduct sustained out-of-area operations. In the public arena, of course, the UN has played and should continue to play a major facilitator role in peace negotiations, especially given its neutral image and the international political cover and legitimacy that it can provide to any deal on which the belligerents can agree.

### Promoting Economic Stabilization

While not necessarily the cause of AQAP's emergence, Yemen's precarious socioeconomic environment has certainly been conducive to its growth. As noted, AQAP has focused its recruitment on the country's youth, plagued by unemployment and the high costs of housing and education, exacerbated by a collapsed state apparatus. AQAP's ability to offer money, weapons, and food, has proved to be a powerful recruitment tool.<sup>409</sup> A South Yemeni political activist linked "unemployment and deadly free time," for the "overwhelming majority" of youth in Hadramawt, as rendering them "an easy morsel for recruitment" by AQAP, although he was careful to blame AQAP for being the cause of the unemployment, rather than politically sensitive official actors.<sup>410</sup> Illustrative at the micro level, in one case a young Yemeni suicide bomber joined ISIS only after he had lost hope of finding work.<sup>411</sup>

Realistically, focusing on far-reaching, central government-oriented political and social change in the near term could be counterproductive by alienating pro-status quo forces such as the tribes and conservative religious elements. However, without a commitment to basic economic improvement and the extension of social services, best brought about by a joint and multi-national effort of government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), military success against AQAP may be temporary, and the latter is likely to endure and regenerate in some form. For success, reconstruction efforts must be sufficiently substantial and broad-based to benefit all mainstream actors. Otherwise, warlords may find it profitable for the fighting to continue or resume, seeing it preferable to collect the foreign wartime subsidies that make it profitable for a small number of individuals in charge to wage war. In the near term, in order to reach even a modicum of stability,

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what will be required is a large-scale humanitarian effort (with aid extended to all communities, not just to political allies), with a follow-on longer-term reconstruction program to rebuild the damage caused by the war to the country's already inadequate infrastructure and failing economy. Widespread hunger bordering on famine resulting to a significant extent from a coalition blockade not only raises moral questions but also makes little strategic sense, and any worsening of the economy would only contribute further to instability and facilitate AQAP's expansion.<sup>412</sup>

Yemenis across the spectrum have seen the availability of social services and the alleviation of poverty as important elements in reducing AQAP's attractiveness. President Hadi acknowledged as much before taking power in 2011: "If the government fails to tackle the issue of these areas being run by armed Islamists, they will continue to expand, as people are actually satisfied with their rule since they provide services to citizens including fuel and cooking gas and maintaining security, and that is what everybody is looking for."<sup>413</sup> Likewise, a former Yemeni minister of security noted that in order to effectively counteract the appeal of organizations such as AQAP and to "uproot terrorism," what is needed is a more comprehensive approach which includes in addition to military and security means a "political, economic, educational, cultural, and media strategy."<sup>414</sup> Yemen's massive economic challenges notwithstanding, even modest progress on this front can have a positive impact on security. As former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Edmund Hull noted during his tenure, pairing development with security helped: "we adopted a broad strategy that linked security with development. Our motto, which the Yemenis adopted to a remarkable extent was, 'No development without security and no security without development.'"<sup>415</sup> Not surprisingly, a rapid improvement in bringing public services, or even an administration, to most parts of the country is unlikely as long as the war continues.

In this sector, neutral international agencies and NGOs can play a significant role in the provision and management of economic relief and social services, and the international community may have to adapt and work within Yemen's society (instead of seeking to change it) and use traditional tribal and patronage organization to its advantage for an orderly process, while working to limit corruption. Humanitarian relief and economic development, as is true of political stabilization, also have an interactive relationship with security. For example, Yemen's principal potential sources of income such as the oil and gas industry, tourism, fishing, agriculture, maritime

traffic, and the export of labor to neighboring Gulf countries are all vulnerable to domestic instability and a lack of security. Here too, U.S. special forces can play a valuable role by providing the security cover that the aid process and economic development will require, especially as AQAP is likely to try to disrupt such stabilization efforts. Admittedly, it may be difficult to convince donors to provide adequate funding for reconstruction in Yemen, especially with oil income and the demand for Yemeni labor in the Gulf countries stagnant, and with Western countries dealing with multiple crisis zones. The United States can play a significant role by convincing potential regional donors that stability in Yemen is in their interest and, in the long run, far preferable and cheaper than having to deal with an unstable Yemen.



## Chapter 6. Conclusion

Based on the preceding study, a number of take-aways or conclusions can be drawn with respect to AQAP and the situation in Yemen.

First, AQAP continues to be a threat to U.S. interests affecting not only regional stability but, potentially, it could again also target the American homeland, as it has in the past. Not only political leaders, but also military planners, commanders, and instructors will have to continue dealing with AQAP for the foreseeable future. As such, a familiarity with the strategic and operational issues that confront the crafting of successful policy within that country's challenging and unstable social, political, and physical environment will remain highly relevant.

Second, AQAP represents a complex problem, especially because of its success in embedding itself in Yemen's political and social environment, including the country's pervasive tribal structures. Taking advantage of the security and governance vacuum that has resulted from the conflict that has engulfed the country since 2015, AQAP has expanded its presence, capabilities, and influence, presenting itself as a useful cobelligerent, protector, or service provider to certain elements of Yemeni society. As long as the conditions that have favored it remain in place, dealing decisively with AQAP will be a challenge.

Third, the ultimate objective should be to defeat AQAP and to achieve "victory," but one has to define what that means in concrete terms. Given its current entrenchment in Yemen's society and political life, it may not be possible to eradicate AQAP completely without also implementing difficult systemic political, economic, and social changes. Under the circumstances, victory in the near term may mean not so much AQAP's elimination as its containment and management by reducing to the greatest extent possible, through continuous focused pressure and a change in its surrounding environment AQAP's capabilities and the threat it poses, especially beyond Yemen's borders.

Fourth, SOF will play an especially important role in dealing with AQAP. In particular, given the drawbacks of any large and long-term U.S. military commitment in Yemen that could lead to the United States itself becoming a player in the local political system, SOF, with their versatility, agility, and

ability to have a disproportionate impact in similar situations, is likely to be the option of choice to deal with military threats emanating in that country. Their small footprint, ability to enter and exit an operational zone quickly, experience working with foreign forces, and jointness provide the optimal mix of capabilities needed to deal with an elusive adversary while avoiding deeper entanglements.

Fifth, Yemenis themselves are best positioned to deal with AQAP, provided they see it is in their interest to do so and they have the resources to deal with that issue. Ending the current war should be a priority to counter the security vacuum that has enabled AQAP's expansion. The United States should play an active role in promoting a settlement of Yemen's civil war by promoting a negotiated consensus among Yemenis in which all mainstream players feel that their core interests are addressed and that they will have an equitable share in the country's political and economic life, including in international reconstruction funds and aid, the economy, the government and the bureaucracy, and the military and security forces. As part of this process, the United States should exert an effort to convince Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that a continuation of the war is not in the interest of the region's stability and security and that a negotiated compromise settlement is the most realistic option. A plausible expectation with a negotiated settlement could be the reduction of conflict to a more manageable level, one where conflict, even if it occurs in peacetime, does so locally, sporadically, and at a much lower level. Such a situation would be an improvement over the current wartime situation which has led to an unprecedented national disintegration resulting in the security vacuum that favors AQAP's growth and activity. And, a new Yemeni government, with U.S. and international support, would be able to devote a greater effort to countering AQAP.

## **An Update**

As an update to the current study, the Yemeni civil war was marked by discontinuities that at the time appeared to be potentially significant for the overarching strategic framework of the war, as well as for the subordinate fight against AQAP but that, in the end, proved to conform to existing patterns or to not be decisive. In terms of the strategic conduct of the current war in Yemen, two principal factors can be noted. While political gambits and military operations had dragged on indecisively, some in the

Arab Coalition believed there were indications heralding a decisive change in the dynamics of the war—former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's decision to switch sides, and the campaign along Yemen's west coast whose objective was to cut off the Ansar Allah (Houthis) from the sea.

Specifically, in early December 2017, former President Saleh broke openly with his erstwhile Ansar Allah allies, apparently as part of a deal reached with the Arab Coalition, leading to armed clashes in Sanaa.<sup>416</sup> Literally overnight, the Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) press that had routinely called Saleh “the deposed one,” “the good-for-nothing,” “criminal,” and worse, began to refer to him respectfully as “the former president.” The Saudis looked forward to renewing their longstanding relationship with Saleh, with one retired senior military officer contrasting President Abd Rabbu Hadi's inept officials (“hotel staff [good only] for sleeping and traveling”) with what he saw as a powerful Saleh.<sup>417</sup> The Saudi and UAE media characterized Saleh's shift as “the blessed uprising,” “a popular uprising,” and “a historic moment.” The Arab Coalition appeared to succumb to excessive optimism, with the Saudi media speaking openly of “victory fever,” predicting that Sanaa would soon be “liberated,” that the war would end rapidly in victory, and that the Ansar Allah movement would disappear forever, as Saleh was “the key player” and had now changed the balance of power.<sup>418</sup>

In the event, such calculations turned out to be grossly mistaken, as Saleh's personal coalition had been eroding over time and splintered even before he was killed a few days after changing sides, with probably the majority of his Republican Guard tribal networks, General People's Congress Party, and extended family continuing their alliance with the Ansar Allah or remained neutral, rather than joining Saleh in switching to the Arab Coalition, despite the latter's attempts to provide support in the form of air strikes and air drops of equipment.<sup>419</sup> Strangely, coordinated and optimistic Saudi press assessments continued to appear, even the day the same newspapers announced Saleh's death and into the following day, that were clearly indicating Riyadh had been taken aback in its estimates.<sup>420</sup> Instead of the expected rapid decisive victory for the coalition, the outlook appeared to be for the war of attrition to continue.<sup>421</sup>

Second, the Arab Coalition—perhaps to compensate for the disappointment with the outcome of the Saleh gambit—in December 2017 immediately following Saleh's death launched what in this case was a largely UAE-run campaign in the Western coastal theater, using mostly South Yemeni and

Sudanese forces, in a bid to take Hodeidah, the Ansar Allah's main remaining port. Despite initial gains, touted by UAE military sources as "spectacular advances" and "significant rapid victories," and the promise of "a major shift in the balance of forces in the theater" within days, by the end of the month the advance had stalled, as what was now a more cohesive Ansar Allah coalition mounted a stubborn defense, inflicting significant casualties on their adversaries.<sup>422</sup> To be sure, the coalition did impose an even tighter blockade which has, if anything, worsened Yemen's ongoing severe humanitarian crisis without proving decisive.<sup>423</sup>

In terms of the focus of this study, neither did the basic dynamics of the fight against AQAP change, as existing patterns have continued. Over the fall of 2017, the UAE-controlled Hizam Amni and Nukhba (special forces) expanded in South Yemen's Shabwa and Abyan provinces in a pattern similar to that employed earlier in other provinces. As one senior officer of the UAE-run Hizam Amni forces claimed, the operations were a "great success" and proclaimed the provinces clear of terrorist groups.<sup>424</sup> Indeed, the UAE media characterized these operations as "lightning-quick thrusts" leading to "genuine victories" that had resulted in the defeat of terrorism in Yemen.<sup>425</sup> As before, the local media indicated there was apparently no resistance or significant engagements, with AQAP melting away and repositioning to nearby mountain villages and camps and tribes, retaining its force structure, equipment, and organization, with even the "dozens" claimed as killed or detained probably inflated.<sup>426</sup> In terms of captured equipment, all that even the UAE-controlled local media could show as booty in photographs were a few old light weapons that had apparently been in caches.<sup>427</sup> Some AQAP members reportedly went to fight at the fronts, including to the developing Western Coast front, apparently as part of the government forces.<sup>428</sup>

Confident assessments notwithstanding, AQAP seemed to retain a presence even in the affected provinces, continuing small-scale ambushes, raids, and repositioning.<sup>429</sup> Endemic problems affecting the efficiency of Yemeni forces remained unresolved, and have included recent instances of army personnel selling their weapons to AQAP or to the Ansar Allah after not receiving their pay for months.<sup>430</sup>

Significantly, the coalition's focus of effort (as well as that of AQAP) may still be against the Ansar Allah and on the rivalry among local warlords supported by different political leaders and regional powers more than on AQAP, diluting the fight against the latter. Characteristically, pro-Hadi Army

forces stressed to the Saudi press that their expansion into Shabwa province would enable “clearing out the Houthi rebellious militias.”<sup>431</sup> Likewise, tensions flared over control of oil and gas facilities, checkpoints, and roads in the affected provinces and elsewhere between the expanding UAE-backed forces and those supporting President Hadi, General Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar, or local warlords.<sup>432</sup> The recent coalition coastal campaign, if anything, at least indirectly, may have diverted the focus further from operations against AQAP, requiring the redeployment of additional ground forces from other theaters in South Yemen as progress slowed on the ground.<sup>433</sup> The United States, for its part, has conducted frequent strikes—more than 120 air strikes in 2017—keeping AQAP off-balance and hampering its effectiveness, although these have not been decisive, and pro-coalition elements in Yemen have complained of civilian collateral casualties.<sup>434</sup>

Overall, the author believes the dynamics identified when the preceding study was written remain valid.↑



## Appendix: Yemeni Media Guide

In Yemen, the media became almost universally polarized after the civil war escalated in March 2015, even if outlets had been independent previously, with the major warring parties and countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar establishing varying degrees of control. This appendix indicates the current principal affiliation of media sources, although even within each major bloc the center of mass of identification may be different. For example, while media that is pro-Hadi automatically is also pro-Saudi Arabia, the degree of affinity to each patron may differ. And, a source's orientation can change for political or financial reasons. With the demise of Ali Abd Allah Saleh, the media loyal to him was either taken over by the Ansar Allah or shut down.

<b>26 Sibtimbir</b>	pro-Ansar Allah-Saleh, Army newspaper
<b>Aden Al-Ghad</b>	pro-Coalition
<b>Aden Al-Hadath</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Aden Observer</b>	pro-South Yemen independence
<b>Aden Hurra</b>	pro-South independence
<b>Aden Post</b>	initially pro-UAE, later pro-Saudi
<b>Aden Time</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Akhbar Aden</b>	defunct
<b>Akhbar Al-An</b>	pro-Arab Coalition
<b>Akhbar Al-Saa</b>	pro-Hadi, pro-Saudi
<b>Akhbar Al-Yawm</b>	General Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar
<b>Al-Arabi</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Bawwabat Hadramawt</b>	
<b>Al-Ikhbariya</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Al-Bayda' Press</b>	pro-Coalition

<b>Bilqis TV</b>	Islah Party
<b>Bu Yemen News Net</b>	pro-Saudi
<b>Al-Dali News</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Fajr Al-Jadid</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Al-Ghad Al-Mushriq TV</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Hadramawt.net</b>	pro-Hadi, defunct
<b>Hayat Aden</b>	pro-Saudi
<b>Hisad Al-Yawm</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Huna Aden</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Huna Taizz</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Iqlim Aden</b>	pro-Saudi
<b>Al-Janub Al-Jadid</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Al-Janub Al-Yawm</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Janubiya Net</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Al-Jumhuriya</b>	neutral, now defunct
<b>Al-Khabar</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Khabar News Agency</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Lahij News</b>	pro-Ansar Allah-Saleh
<b>Madad News Agency</b>	AQAP
<b>Malahim News Agency</b>	AQAP
<b>Mandab Press</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Ma'rib Press</b>	Islah Party
<b>Marsad News Agency</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Al-Masa' Press</b>	pro-Saleh

<b>Al-Masdar</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Mashhad Al-Janubi</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Al-Mashhad Al-Yamani</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Masila Press</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Al-Masra</b>	AQAP
<b>Al-Mawqi Post</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Mithaq</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Al-Mukalla Al-An</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Al-Mukalla Al-Yawm</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Al-Muntasif</b>	pro-Ansar Allah
<b>Al-Murasil</b>	leans toward Ansar Allah
<b>Al-Mushahid</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Mustaqbal</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Mutabaat</b>	pro-Ansar Allah
<b>Najm Al-Mukalla</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Nashwan News</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Nas Times</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Qari Net</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Ra'y Press</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Radfan Press</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Rasd 24</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Saba' News Agency</b>	pro-Ansar Allah-Saleh
<b>Sada Aden: London</b>	pro-Saudi
<b>Sada Al-Malahim</b>	AQAP

<b>Al-Sahwa</b>	Islah Party
<b>Sawt Al-Janub</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Sawt Saba'</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Shabwa Al-Hadath</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Shabwa Press</b>	pro-UAE
<b>Al-Taghyir</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Taqrir Ikhbari</b>	AQAP
<b>Thawrat Shabab Al-Taghyir</b>	early neutral, now defunct
<b>Al-Umana'</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Wasat</b>	neutral, later pro-Ansar Allah-Saleh
<b>Wifaq Press</b>	pro-Ansar Allah
<b>Yafa News</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Yaman 24</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Al-Yaman Al-Arabi</b>	initially pro-Saudi, later pro-UAE
<b>Al-Yaman Al-Said</b>	pro-Qatar
<b>Al-Yaman Al-Jadid</b>	pro-Saudi
<b>Al-Yaman Al-Yawm</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Yamanat</b>	pro-Saleh
<b>Al-Yamani Al-Jadid</b>	pro-Hadi
<b>Yamaniyun</b>	pro-Saleh
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<b>Yemen Monitor</b>	pro-Hadi
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