



Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

POLITICAL TURMOIL AND NEO-JIHADISM IN YEMEN



By Max Quigley

Abstract

As Yemen descends rapidly into a state of chaos, international attempts to diffuse what looks like an increasingly sectarian conflict seem unfruitful. But the strife is not only driving a deeper rift between political factions and tribal entities, but has also bolstered the position and influence of a perhaps much more dangerously capable player in the conflict, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP, an offshoot of al-Qaeda Core has increasingly moved towards acting in congruence with features of Neo-jihadism. These features, distinct in a growing number of present-day jihadi entities, include strong sectarian violence, regional ambitions, sophisticated governance and judicial apparatus, and a predilection for an offensive strain of jihad, which draws upon strong military rather than ideological discourses. Whereas AQAP were previously associated with primarily transnational and “far-enemy” tactics, their increased insurgency and regional aspirations within Yemen call attention to the increasing hallmarks of neo-jihadism within AQAP. Furthermore, with regional powers and radical groups, such as the Islamic State, all staking a claim in Yemen, there is now a distinct competitive nature to the neo-jihadi forces

Political Turmoil and Neo-Jihadism in Yemen

History of Current Unrest

In September 2014, US President Barack Obama boldly claimed Yemen, along with Somalia, to be a Middle East success story of counter-terrorism and touted it as the model for future operations in places like Iraq and Syria. But, by early 2015, underlying instability and insurrection finally came to a head with astonishing force and speed as Yemen witnessed a seemingly irreversible factious struggle between tribes, political movements and radical Salafist groups launch the country into governmental collapse.¹ The increasingly dire situation even had a Navy SEAL captain and former commander of special operations in Yemen say that the U.S. counterterrorism approach in Yemen is a "fantasy."²

Yemen has had a long history of conflict, but the current bout can be traced to when the Arab Spring contagion first hit Yemen in March of 2011 with Yemeni security forces clashing as one military wing tried to forcibly oust President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh managed to hold onto his position claiming the "majority of Yemeni people" supported him. That same year in June, Saleh was severely injured by an improvised explosive and it is suspected to have been an inside job. Ali Mohsen Ahmad, a high-ranking military commander, and Saleh had in previous years grown distrustful of each other due to certain rivalries within government and at one point Saleh is thought to

have tried to kill Mohsen by bombing his HQ under the pretext of it being an al-Qaeda lair.³

Internal governmental and military strife wasn't Yemen's only concern, however. In 2012, after the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had brokered a deal the previous year, Saleh was removed from power but clung tenaciously to whatever political, military and economic influence he still had, which was a considerable amount. When his vice president, Abd Rabboh Mansour Hadi, took over the presidency the country was in the throes of a conflict between factions loyal to Saleh and those loyal to Mohsen, internal governmental power struggles. Simultaneously, there was a growing threat from Shiite Houthis in the north, secessionist groups in the south and al-Qaeda who would all seek to take advantage of the weakened government to press their own agendas. The government had previously employed Salafist fighters and a number of tribes in the area to keep the Houthi tribe in check, but amid so much internal struggle in Sana'a, the Houthi problem was put on the backburner. The Houthis pressed their advantage expanding toward the port town of Midi in order to secure a steady supply line from their fellow Shia supporter, Iran. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and their military wing Ansar al-Sharia, who hold significant influence in the southern provinces of Aden, Abyan, Bayda and Shabwa, used the increasingly unstable situation to consolidate their influence. Their gunfights and suicide

bombings aimed at military personnel inflicted serious damage, killing 100 soldiers over the course of just one weekend. The southern secessionists saw the instability as an opportunity too and proceeded to target military personnel and bases.⁴

2012 saw some gains for the Yemeni government as several al-Qaeda controlled towns in Abyan and Shabwa were recaptured.⁵ But the struggle to maintain these positions and to react effectively against AQAP counter attacks, especially in the capital, sapped time and energy out of the Yemeni defence forces.⁶ Furthermore, it became clear that president Hadi had been unsuccessful in unifying even the Yemeni government forces, despite considerable reorganization in order to negate internal conflicts between Saleh's and Mohsen's men. In 2013 there was an incident of Yemeni troops rebelling and setting up road blocks in response to what they felt was an attempt by their commanders to strip them of their rights.⁷

Then, in July 2014, Houthi insurrection boiled over following a decision by the Yemeni government to cut fuel subsidies. The Houthis had made a serious advance and were now in control of large swathes of Yemen capturing positions close to the capital Sana'a. The Houthis alleged aim had never been to take over the government but rather to restructure it, placing more Houthi representatives in positions of influence. By August the Houthis had besieged Sana'a demanding that president Hadi reverse his decision to remove the fuel subsidies, that he dissolve his cabinet and establish a more equal representative governing body. Some analysts

predicted that the Houthis would desist from forcefully occupying Sana'a.⁸ However, following Houthi demonstrations in September which ended in clashes with government troops, the Shiite tribe took key government buildings thereby effectively assuming control over large parts Sana'a. Analysts regarded the ease with which the Houthis occupied Sana'a as suspicious, with reports emerging that certain areas were simply handed over without any resistance. These claims sparked the theory that former president Saleh, who maintains a considerable degree of influence among the armed forces, and is in fact of northern Zaidi Shiite stock himself, may have had a hand in planning an elaborately devised coup.⁹ Meanwhile, the dramatic fall of Sana'a to the Houthis saw huge protests across the country as the Sunni population and tribal members became increasingly unsettled by the Shiite successes.¹⁰ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) exploited the instability to push into areas it had previously been ousted from. AQAP also used the situation to gain influence among the local tribes by providing troops for them and recruiting Sunni tribesmen to al-Qaeda.¹¹ On September 21 the Houthis and government signed a UN-brokered deal to form a "unity government", momentarily allaying fears of a complete governmental meltdown.¹² Nonetheless, widespread protests against the Houthi occupation of Sana'a continued. Amid the increasingly deeper rift that was forming between factions, president Hadi reshuffled the government in November to balance ministerial positions between political groups. It was intended to avoid giving too much power to any one party and to ensure each group

was invested in maintaining the stability of the country. But, on January 20 2015, the Houthis stormed the presidential palace in Sana'a, killing Hadi's guards and several family members and kept him under house arrest. Two days later Hadi resigned from his presidency and the rebels took control of the government on February 6. They dissolved parliament and announced their Revolutionary Committee would assume the position of interim government while it established a 551-seat parliament charged with appointing a five-member presidential council to run the country for a period of two years.¹³

Hadi was released February 21 and fled to the southern city of Aden. Here he immediately garnered support from the Gulf Cooperation Council states, several of which almost immediately reopened their embassies in Aden. Hadi also declared Aden the new capital of Yemen and stated his intention to create a new government there. The southern secessionist movement's largest party Al Hirak welcomed Hadi, originally a southerner, but were careful to point out southern determination to separate from northern Yemen.¹⁴

Factions and Sectarianism

In light of these developments, the conflict can be broken down to a struggle predominantly between

three major groups; the northern Zaidi Shiite Houthis, al-Qaeda and the Salafist al-Islah party in the eastern and central regions and the southern secessionist movement. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 and especially after the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in 2014, the positions of all of these groups have respectively been strengthened by the power vacuum left in the wake of a collapsed central government.¹⁵ While Hadi still may see

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himself as the legitimate leader of Yemen, the conflict has devolved into an inter-factional struggle. The Houthis have no desire for a divided country but are rather determined to exert as much autonomy as possible in Shiite regions and increase their national influence with more Shiite representatives in government. The southern secessionists, however, are determined to see Yemen divided between north and south. The AQAP announcement of plans for an al-Qaeda emirate in the eastern provinces falls under what would be southern territory, prompting

some southern Sunni groups to form an alliance against the advancing AQAP.¹⁶ The struggle isn't, however, just about borders, but rather resources. Yemeni tribes have historically not fought along sectarian lines, but rather territorial. One of the reasons the Houthis are now pushing further into these Sunni tribal regions, forcing some Sunnis to align with Islamist groups, is to secure precious resources, in particular oil. Yemen is currently

suffering major water and food shortages as well as economic frailty, so the ability to secure revenue generating resources such as oil is an important consideration for all factions. In fact, a previously drawn up plan in February 2014 to turn Yemen into a federal republic failed due to tribal disagreements on how to distribute resource revenues from each province.¹⁷ Marib, previously a northern Yemeni oil province, is now a hotly contested area between the Houthis and southern Sunnis, a development that could well blur the lines between a territorial dispute and a sectarian one.¹⁸ AQAP have used this situation to their advantage too, peddling propaganda that this truly is a sectarian conflict at heart.¹⁹

Moreover, Iranian support for the Houthis coupled with ongoing US drone strikes on al-Qaeda targets in Sunni areas may very well create the by-product of the Sunni community increasingly aligning themselves with radical Salafist groups such as al-Qaeda.²⁰ Meanwhile, the Houthis are accusing Sunni dominant Saudi Arabia of supporting Sunni groups with weapons and finances in an attempt to split the country in two, sooner seeing a divided Yemen than a united Yemen with a Shiite dominant government.²¹

Neo-Jihadism in Yemen (AQAP and IS)

The instability has only served to further the aims of jihadi groups in Yemen and has highlighted their evolving methods and possible outcomes. AQAP was born out of the former Yemeni offshoot of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) in 2006.

Between 2006 and 2009 AQY carried out multiple attacks on everything from tourist targets to military complexes and foreign embassies. In 2009 al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed when the Yemeni faction and their Saudi jihadi counterparts decided to close ranks under the leadership of AQY emir, Nasir al-Wuhayshi. AQAP quickly became the most active and dangerous of the al-Qaeda offshoots, and was responsible for a host of both failed and successful foreign attacks including the “underwear bomb” plot in 2009 and the Charlie Hebdo massacre in early January 2015.²²

AQAP's isolated attacks and hit-and-run tactics on foreign targets shows a clear transnational agenda but in 2011 Wuhayshi announced AQAP's regional plans for an emirate in the eastern and southern Yemeni provinces, signalling a clear regional agenda too. However, following the considerable successes of Hadis government in beating AQAP back, they lost ground in 2012 largely negating their control over certain previously held strongholds in the Abyan and Shabwa provinces.²³

However, the recent political turmoil coupled with the complicated factious nature of the Yemeni conflict may have all of the necessary ingredients to see a regional emirate-orientated neo jihadi group emerge. It is clear that AQAP who have taken advantage of the instability are now actively pursuing two jihadi agenda's; transnational, isolated attacks such as the Charlie Hebdo massacre and national insurgency as they press their advantage in taking territory. In fact, in July 2014 they

announced once again plans for an emirate in the eastern Hadhramout region of Yemen.²⁴

The announcement for their proposed Islamic emirate came less than a month after the Islamic State announced their caliphate in Iraq and Syria in June '14, prompting many observers to claim a jihadi competition between the two groups.²⁵

AQAP, like al-Qaeda in general, have traditionally focused on fighting the "far enemy", i.e. the United States and other Western powers to undermine

foreign influence in the region and topple apostate governments so as to eventually implement an Islamic state under al-Qaeda auspices. The Islamic State has taken another approach. Their strategy from its inception was to fight a local, regional war, conquering territory and immediately implementing state authority. The competition between the two groups became

fiercer over the course of the Houthi rebellion when AQAP witnessed considerable defections to the Islamic State. AQAP and indeed al-Qaeda as a whole are aware that they have lost ground to the IS over the past year and it seemingly comes down to a fundamentally different approach to jihad.²⁶

Following the Islamic State's meteoric rise in 2014, al-Qaeda, under the leadership of Zawahiri, slipped further into the background as IS took centre-stage in the media as the newest preeminent jihadist faction.²⁷ What al-Qaeda wanted to achieve in

theory, IS was able to do in practice; establish an Islamic state. It is this fact that led to certain prominent AQAP clerics to express support for the IS.

As the competition between these groups continues, AQAP's continued affiliation with al-Qaeda's leader Zawahiri can be seen as potentially al-Qaeda's last bastion of support preventing it from becoming a somewhat disjointed and fractured alliance of jihadist factions across the Middle East and North Africa.²⁸ But as long as AQAP maintain their

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support for al-Qaeda and its leader Zawahiri, IS will likely experience problems rising to the position of prominence in Yemen it is undoubtedly looking for. AQAP is still the dominant jihadi faction in Yemen after all.²⁹

Nonetheless, its considerable advances in what looks like a free-for-all land grab have certainly been offset somewhat by the

defections to the IS with the result of potentially weakening jihadism in Yemen and the Gulf overall.³⁰ Al-Qaeda's qualm with the IS is mainly to do with issues of leadership and making decisions without consulting a 'Shura' court. ³¹ ³² The relationship between AQAP and IS has over the last year been tentative but there is nothing to suggest the two groups could not reconcile. AQAP's initial support for IS shows at least some degree of unanimity in their ideology. Salafist insurgency seems like a foregone conclusion in Yemen's future, whether there is internal unity or not between the

groups. But what would need to happen for AQAP and IS to be reconciled?³³

One of several things would need to take place. Firstly, Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's overall leader, and the Islamic State's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, could simply set aside their differences. The problem with this would be that issues of leadership and factious autonomy would remain unresolved; one of the main problems in the first place.

Another possibility would be for Wuhayshi, AQAP's leader, to move towards uniting AQAP and the Islamic State in Yemen in a coordinated effort against the Houthis or southern tribes who oppose them, simply setting aside their differences to fight the common enemy.

A third possibility would be for Wuhayshi to break his oath of allegiance (bayat) to Zawahiri and completely defect over to IS. This option, however, poses a problem for Wuhayshi, namely it would mean reneging on bayat, the Islamic oath to a particular leader. Bayat is taken seriously in jihadi circles and apart from being difficult to justify theologically, breaking bayat could also cause him a loss of credibility amongst his fellow jihadists.

A final possibility for seeing AQAP and the IS close ranks has to do with the nature of Bayat. Bayat is made between individuals, not organisations. This means that if Wuhayshi or Zawahiri were to die, the allegiance between AQAP and al-Qaeda would need to be reestablished by the leaders filling their shoes. This, in theory, means that in the case of a death in the leadership a disassociation between al-Qaeda and AQAP and a realignment with for example the

Islamic State could very well happen. In light of increased US drone attacks in AQAP regions, a serious consideration is what kind of implications a dead Wuhayshi would have on consolidating divided jihadi forces in Yemen and perhaps permanently altering the jihadi landscape there.³⁴

The jihadi landscape in Yemen seems to have been inalterably changed already. The political chaos has seen AQAP demonstrate a resurgence of their 2011 levels of armed insurgency by retaking military bases and key positions, engaging in battles with various factions including the IS and forging strategic military alliances in the region. Faced with well-funded secessionists in the south and Houthis in the north AQAP will benefit from as much help as possible. The IS, with their deep financial reserves as the world's wealthiest jihadi faction, may yet turn out to be an attractive partner for AQAP whose regional and sectarian struggle is already starting to bear a striking similarity to that of the IS.³⁵

One thing AQAP can count on is that the IS have no intentions of going anywhere. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim that his caliphate will extend to Yemen, coupled with his recent threats of “volcanoes” of jihad in Saudi Arabia, highlight the strategic significance the IS will have by securing a foothold in the country.^{36 37}

Two-State Solution and Its Problems

What the future holds for Yemen remains to be seen. According to Stratfor sources, talks over a

division have already begun, although the Houthis will be unlikely to accept the terms unless they control the oil-rich former northern governorates of Marib and Taiz. This would leave the south devoid of most of the nation's oil-fields as well as arable land. Furthermore, if a split were to happen, what of al-Qaeda and IS? The Abyan, Shabwa and Hadramawt governorates as well as al Bayda, Ibb, Marib and al-Jawf in the north have a strong AQAP presence and any territory under their control would not simply be handed over. Whether it is AQAP, IS or some sort of neo jihadi hybrid that eventually emerges in Yemen, the presence of any group with such neo jihadi tendencies will drag all other political factions into a protracted slugging match, that will ultimately serve to destabilize whichever political regime comes into effect. Both the north and south should expect a long drawn-out war of attrition between them and the radicals.³⁸

Whether or not a two-state solution is realised, Yemen looks to be wracked by conflict for the foreseeable future. Either way, both northern Houthis and southern secessionists will be hoping AQAP and IS don't eventually join forces and create a united jihadi front with the deep financial reserves and broad recruiting base the Islamic State would provide. That would surely spell disaster for what little security is left in Yemen. And with recent

reports of increased cooperation between al-Qaeda and IS in Syria and Iraq, the prospect of eventually seeing a merger would not be inconceivable.³⁹

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia will be applying as much damage control as possible with their support for Sunni tribes and southern secessionists. For the moment, Saudi's greatest concern is the threat of Iranian hegemony in the region. Iran already *threaten* regional stability with their nuclear program and the fact that they, by proxy, already control Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and now Sana'a poses a serious border security threat to Saudi.⁴⁰ So much, in fact, that the Saudis recently sought Pakistani troops to patrol their south-western border with Yemen, where Houthis had been conducting military drills.⁴¹ Furthermore, Iranian aviation deals as well as energy and infrastructural support for the Houthis marks a worrying degree of financial backing by the Islamic Republic for their Arabian Shiite ally.⁴² Iran is not Saudi's only concern. Al-Qaeda have expressed their intentions of eventually moving in to Saudi Arabia from Yemen. Iranian influence, therefore, presents a dual problem for Saudi. By strengthening the Shiite entity they have simultaneously bolstered AQAP by forcing Sunni alliances and creating a power vacuum in which AQAP can operate more freely.

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME:

Scope & Rationale:

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although Jihadism is ‘lethal’, it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging.

In retrospect; the death of Osama bin Laden, the onslaught of global war on terror, the Arab revolution and post Arab-revolution crises etc. have seriously impacted on Jihadists landscape which is constantly changing. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national i.e. Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists’ landscape changes; the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of ‘Neo-Jihadism’.

“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.

Methodology & Research areas/questions:

This programme aims to conduct fact-based analyses of actual and potential uses of militancy and Jihadism as a tactic and belief and the changing concept of ‘war’ in the Muslim world; so that we may provide policy guidance to government officials and private sector decision-makers with alternative policy analyses. The key research questions are:

- How has Neo-Jihadism developed?
- Is Neo-Jihadism a new concept of war or culture?
- How Jihadism is perceived within the Islamic world and does it still carry meanings of a ‘just war’?
- How do its adherents maintain and facilitate it to transcend borders?
- Why have neo jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring and what trends are emerging
- Why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of Neo-Jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring?

Programme Deliverables:

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape

3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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