



DEFEATING AL-QAEDA'S SHADOW GOVERNMENT IN YEMEN

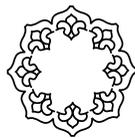
THE NEED FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE REFORM



DANIEL R. GREEN

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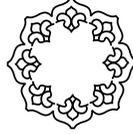
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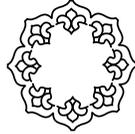
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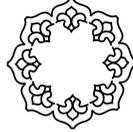
Executive Summary



WHILE RECENT U.S. ATTENTION in Yemen has largely focused on the war against the Houthis and their Iranian backers, the threat from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) endures. Historically, efforts by the United States to confront AQAP have relied on counterterrorism approaches such as drone and airstrikes, direct-action raids, as well as joining with indigenous forces and coalition partners. However, the continued resiliency of AQAP and its adaptability to the Yemeni context by adopting a “hearts and minds” strategy to secure local support, even as the war against the Houthis continues, requires a rethinking of the U.S. approach. The United States should complement its counterterrorism strategy in Yemen with an emphasis on local governance reform, capacity building, and enlisting locals in their own defense and governance to take on AQAP holistically. It should partner with the Yemeni government and coordinate with its coalition partners (e.g., United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia) to counter AQAP’s political strategy as vigorously as its military strategy.

PREFACE

AQAP—Terrorist Group and Insurgency



HAVING ENDURED REPEATED drone and airstrikes, direct-action raids, and, more recently, determined Yemeni and coalition military offensives, AQAP continues to demonstrate a resiliency and adaptability that has been difficult to overcome. It has also constantly shifted its strategy within Yemen as changing political circumstances affect its ability to operate. The terrorist group still retains a core leadership, albeit one degraded since 2015, several internal safe havens from which to operate, a robust military capability and determination to attack abroad, and a significant online and social media presence. A central aspect of AQAP's persistence is its cultivation of relationships with the Yemeni people to secure their support. In many ways, over the last decade, AQAP has morphed from a strictly terrorist group focused on external attacks with little regard for domestic Yemeni considerations to an insurgency that depends on local support, even as external attacks remain high on its agenda. This domestic political strategy reflects many lessons al-Qaeda more broadly has learned from its experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, among other conflicts. Too frequently, al-Qaeda alienated the local population through the brutality of its actions, whether during the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan in the 1990s, its slaughtering of tribal leaders on Pakistan's frontier during the 2000s, or in Iraq after 2003 against Sunni nationalists, Shia, or Kurds. Eventually, these practices turned local communities against the group, allowing the United States and its coalition partners to take advantage of this schism. Within Yemen, such

outcomes led AQAP to pursue a “softer” policy of engaging with the local population, eschewing its typical harshness.

As an insurgency, AQAP has adapted itself to the Yemeni context and is much more adept at marshaling support from the population by capitalizing on Yemeni grievances to bolster its political and military program. These grievances, whether focused on a central government, a local leader, or generally anarchic conditions, are frequently rooted in political, tribal, economic, and justice-related concerns that cannot be addressed through limited counterterrorism approaches or military clearing campaigns. Practically speaking, this means AQAP is more a part of the Yemeni community than separate from it, which makes targeting the group extremely difficult. Additionally, al-Qaeda has been adept at propagating its cause within local political movements, tribal factions, and sectarian groups, among others, in order to expand its popular support. While AQAP includes foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia, and other countries, a substantial portion of its membership is of Yemeni origin, including its former leader Nasser al-Wahishi before his death in 2015.¹ The current group does not have as strong a foreign character as that which U.S. and indigenous government forces often capitalized on in the past to separate it from the population, drawing on national pride, ethnic and tribal differences, and, in some cases, simple xenophobia. Within Yemen, AQAP's hearts and minds campaign has broadened from simply treating the local population with respect to a “population-centric” approach focused on building local governing structures. The group has also learned from past experiences, in particular from its time governing parts of Yemen during the 2011–12 and 2015–16 periods, and has constantly sought to hone its approaches. While many of its activities are more propaganda than reality, AQAP has implemented local security, justice, and service programs in areas it has controlled, however briefly, and has applied a rigorous review process to learn from these experiences. It continues to learn from its mistakes as well as spread the lessons of its successes (as well as failures) to other al-Qaeda affiliates as it assumes a central leadership role for al-Qaeda globally.

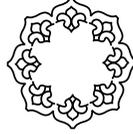
The central challenge facing Yemeni, U.S., and coalition planners is to craft a viable, effective, and legitimate governing program to counter that of AQAP, and to supplement existing counterterrorism approaches with a political strategy that can earn the trust and support of the Yemeni people. Additionally, while the United States and its coalition partners can help

advise on the strategy and implementation of local governance reforms, such efforts must come from the Yemenis themselves if they are to have credibility on the ground. Much of this approach will have to account for broader political issues facing the Yemeni government as well as the current military situation in the country. A related issue is the legacy of local governance as practiced by the Yemeni government before the 2011 Arab Spring. On this topic, a history of a unified Yemeni state combined with a population seeking broader decentralization, as well as the balance between tribal influence and state control, complicates local governance efforts. Additionally, legacy behaviors from this highly centralized system continue even as they have come under assault from rival sources of governance, including not just AQAP but also political parties, tribal groups, criminal gangs, and the Houthis.² The current administration of Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi has benefited from a status quo in local governance reform as past efforts to decentralize the government have been rolled back, often as an expedient due to the war. Further, bad habits from governing institutions have diminished the effectiveness of the Yemeni state where it exists. Deficits include weak local governance structures in general, rampant corruption and lack of accountability, poor provision of services, and an emphasis on patronage over results. Local governance, especially in southern Yemen, where AQAP mostly operates, has also suffered owing to the administrative breakdown of the Yemeni state, which has simultaneously contended with the loss of its national capital, Sanaa, the need to thwart a Houthi advance in Aden, the disruption of its financial stability, the death of numerous officials from fighting and assassinations, and the overall necessity of waging a war against the Houthis. Any strategy to effectively address AQAP's local governing and political strategy must contend with these numerous issues but should remain focused on how local governance performs in practice and the desires of the Yemeni people.

Notes

1. Daniel R. Green, "A New Strategy to Defeat Al-Qaeda in Yemen," *Orbis* 58, no. 4 (2014): 521–39.
2. Nadwa Al-Dawsari, *Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_tribal_governance.pdf.

Yemeni Local Governance Timeline



1990 (May 22): Unification between Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen); Ali Abdullah Saleh, formerly president of North Yemen, named president of the unified country

1993: Parliamentary elections

1994 (May 22): Democratic Republic of Yemen declared

1994: Civil war

1997: Parliamentary elections

1998: Governorates/districts created; governors and directors appointed

1999: President Ali Abdullah Saleh reelected

2000 (February 10): Law of Local Authority signed

2001 (February): 7,032 candidates elected to Governorate and District Councils

2003: Parliamentary elections held; scheduled local elections postponed

2006: Governorate and District Council elections held; terms extended to six years from four.

2008 (May 17): Republic of Yemen's first election of provincial governors

Defeating al-Qaeda's Shadow Government in Yemen

2008: Law of Local Authority amended, allowing governors to be elected by Governorate/District Councils

2009 (January): al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula officially formed

2011 (March–May): AQAP seizes Abyan and Shabwa governorates

2012 (February 25): Vice President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi elected president

2013 (March)–2014 (January): National Dialogue Conference

2013 (August): AQAP sends lessons learned to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

2014 (September): Houthis take control of Sanaa

2015 (February): Houthis take control of government; President Hadi escapes to Aden

2015 (March): Operation Decisive Storm, Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, begins

2015 (April): AQAP seizes al-Mukalla

2015 (June 16): Drone strike kills AQAP leader Nasser al-Wahishi

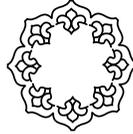
2016 (April): AQAP pushed out of al-Mukalla by Yemeni and coalition forces

2017 (December): former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh killed by Houthi forces while trying to flee Sanaa

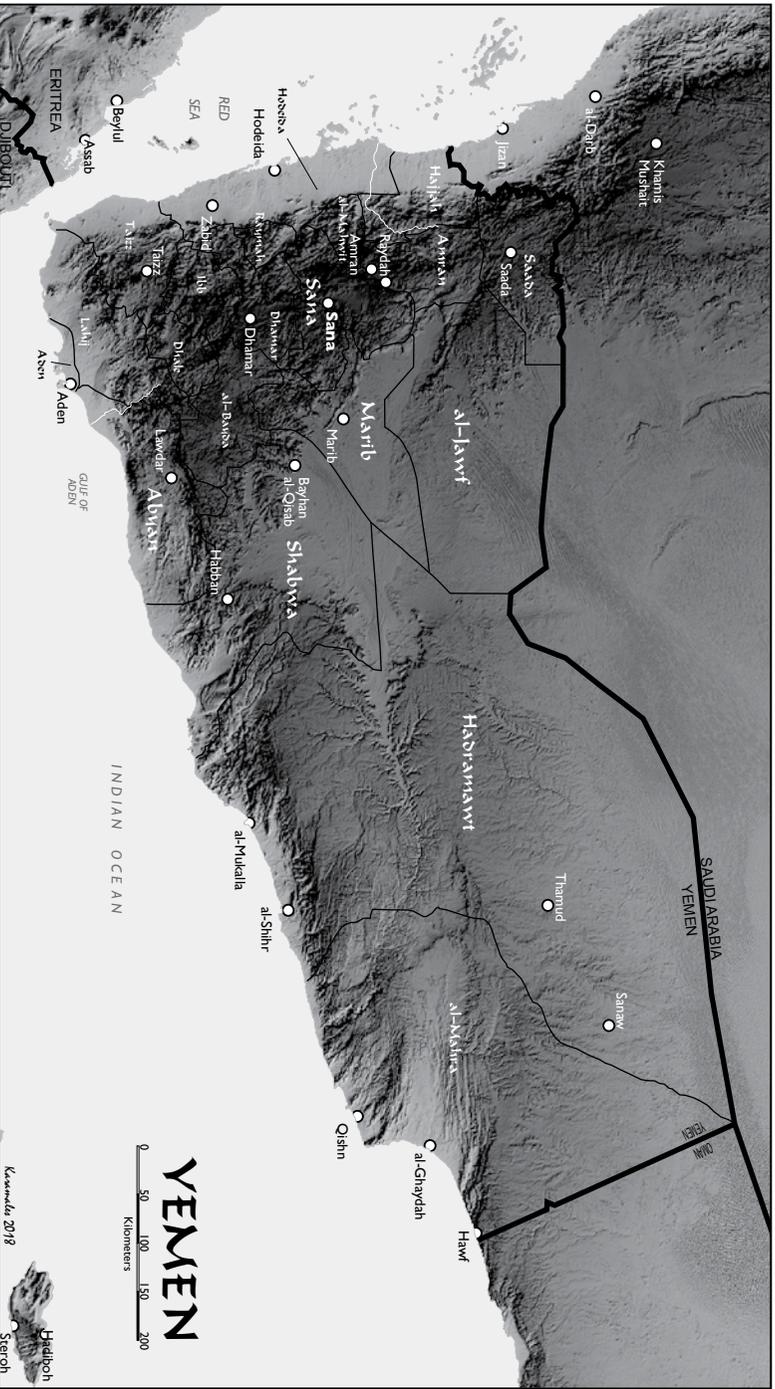
2019 (June 3): Abu Osama al-Muhajir, leader of the Islamic State in Yemen, captured

2019 (July): UAE military forces begin withdrawal from Yemen

Research Design



THIS MONOGRAPH IS BASED upon a series of interviews conducted in Yemen over November 14–23, 2013, with twenty-seven national, governorate, district, and civil society leaders. The interviews were conducted in Yemen’s capital, Sanaa, as well as in Aden, and subjects came from the governorates of Abyan, Aden, Shabwa, Marib, Bayda, Ibb, Sanaa, and Taizz. The governorates were selected to include those under the control of or heavily influenced by AQAP, as well as those under government control to serve as a contrast. Interviews included the deputy minister of local administration, four deputy governors, seven Governorate Council members, two District Council members, six directors of local administration, a representative of the UN Development Programme governance team, and six tribal leaders and members of civil society. Interviews were conducted through an interpreter. This primary research was supplemented by academic work at The Washington Institute, including reviewing reports from the U.S. government, the United Nations, the Yemeni government, and studies conducted by independent scholars and research institutions.



YEMEN

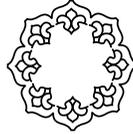
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CHAPTER 1

The Importance of Local Politics in Counterinsurgency



UNDERSTANDING THE U.S. EXPERIENCE with counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq helps contextualize the overall U.S. approach to the security situation in Yemen. Unfortunately, many of the lessons learned from those conflicts, as they have been applied to Yemen, place a greater emphasis on counterterrorism (manhunting) operations than on population-centric approaches. These latter strategies, such as enlisting locals in their own defense and improving local governance (e.g., Anbar Awakening in Iraq, Village Stability Operations program in Afghanistan), have not been systematically applied to Yemen and the fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Counterinsurgency efforts have assumed a central role in the broader U.S. strategy to defeat global terrorism since the attacks of September 11, 2001.¹ A key aspect of the struggles in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen, and, historically speaking, a fundamental difference between fighting conventional wars and insurgencies, is the role of politics and diplomacy. Unlike in conventional warfare, according to the French military officer and counterinsurgency theoretician David Galula, where “military action...is generally the principal way to achieve the goal” and “*politics as an instrument of war* tends to take a back seat,” in irregular warfare, “*politics becomes an active instrument of operation*” and “every military move has to be weighed with regard to its political effects, and vice versa.”² At their core, insurgencies are about political power struggles, usually waged by actors against a central government whose authority they reject, where

the objective of the conflict is the population itself and the political right to lead it.³ Thus, the center of gravity in this type of warfare is not the enemy's forces per se, but the population,⁴ where, as Galula states, "the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness."⁵ Because politics are at the heart of this type of warfare, counterinsurgent forces must craft a political strategy that is sensitive to the needs of the population, seeks to secure its loyalty to the government, will mobilize the community to identify, expel, or fight the insurgent, and extends the authority and reach of the central government.

To achieve these goals, a government must have, according to Galula, "a political program designed to take as much wind as possible out of the insurgent's sails."⁶ If done effectively, the political strategy will have succeeded in "separating the insurgents from popular support" so that they can be killed or imprisoned by the government's security forces.⁷ If a political plan is implemented poorly, or not at all, insurgent forces will capitalize on the grievances and frustrated hopes of a community to entice its members away from the government and toward the insurgent's political program. The community may then actively assist the individual insurgent, providing him with a safe haven to rest, rearm, reequip, recuperate, and redeploy to fight another day. In the long run, because these types of conflicts are not principally about how many casualties counterinsurgent forces can impose upon the insurgents, but upon the will to stay in the fight, foreign counterinsurgents tend to grow weary of the amount of blood and treasure they must expend to defeat the insurgent. Though the insurgent could conceivably lose every military engagement he has with counterinsurgent security forces, he can still win the war if the government does not win the population over to its program, policies, and plans. Put simply, the insurgent wins by simply enduring.

It was only in later U.S. and coalition military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq that an understanding of the centrality of politics, good governance, and regime type to combating insurgencies at the strategic (national), operational, and tactical levels developed. Many of these lessons, meanwhile, were not exported to other conflicts, such as Yemen, due to a general weariness among policymakers at the overall cost and length of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which, in turn, privileged policy options focused on reducing expenses and risk to U.S. personnel. Additionally,

some U.S. policymakers lacked awareness of more-effective approaches since many of these, undertaken at the tactical and operational levels, were carried out by Special Operations Forces. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, at the outset of war, the systems of government corresponded with highly centralized, unitary states, wherein local democracy was significantly truncated or nonexistent (see table 1). Government institutions were quite weak, even though very centralized, and local institutions were even weaker, often struggling with a lack of trained civil servants and with elected officials who had little experience with democratic processes. Additionally, regime types within both countries often maximized central authority as a means of exercising power and control, frequently viewing local institutions as potential threats rather than means of enlisting those populations in governing decisions. Toward this end, local governing institutions were deliberately designed to facilitate central government control and to empower local elites who supported the government.⁸ Local elected bodies such as Provincial Councils had little or no authority over centrally appointed directors (e.g., of health, education) and little oversight of executive officials, including the police. Provincial governors were either appointed by the central government or elected indirectly. District and municipal governments were similarly weakened by having their officials appointed by central governments. A culture of patron/client systems ran contrary to the democratic traditions of citizen empowerment. While many of the key elements for a viable, dynamic local government were in place, they lacked the necessary legal and structural components to function, creating, in effect, a democracy deficit in the war areas closest to the insurgent (the villages).

Efforts by the United States to bolster local governance in Afghanistan and Iraq often took place through a combination of United Nations and U.S. Department of State efforts and, provided security was present, NGOs, or through U.S. and coalition military units. A number of civil-military structures were established to address local governance and political efforts at the operational and tactical levels, such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams, embedded PRTs, District Support Teams, and military civil affairs units. These efforts were supported by Special Operations Forces that created in Afghanistan, for example, Provincial Augmentation Teams, District Augmentation Teams, regional Village Stability Centers, and robust central ministry outreach efforts. These

Table 1. Local Governance Structures

	Yemen	Afghanistan	Iraq	
POLITICAL				
Governor	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Indirectly elected	
District governor	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Indirectly elected	
Provincial Council	Elected	Elected	Elected	
	Little oversight	Little oversight	Moderate oversight	
District Council	Elected	N/A	Indirectly elected	
	Little oversight	No oversight	Moderate oversight	
Mayor	Appointed	Indirectly elected	Indirectly elected	
EXECUTIVE				
Provincial directors	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	
	Capacity	Moderate	Low	Moderate/high
	Efficacy	Low	Moderate	Moderate/high
District directors	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Indirectly elected	
	Capacity	Low	Low/nonexistent	Moderate
	Efficacy	Low/nonexistent	Low/nonexistent	Low/moderate
Provincial chief of police	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Indirectly appointed	
	Capacity	Low/moderate	Moderate	Moderate/high
	Efficacy	Low	Moderate	Moderate/high
District chief of police	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Provincially appointed	
	Capacity	Low/nonexistent	Low/moderate	Moderate
	Efficacy	Low/nonexistent	Low/moderate	Moderate
JUDICIAL				
Judges	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	Centrally appointed	
	Capacity	Low/nonexistent	Low/nonexistent	Moderate
	Efficacy	Low/nonexistent	Low/nonexistent	Moderate

initiatives and the focus on local governance were mirrored at the U.S. embassies in Kabul and Baghdad through the Office of Interagency Provincial Affairs (Afghanistan) and the Office of Provincial Affairs (Iraq). In Afghanistan, the government established the Independent Directorate for Local Governance to manage local governments through reviewing and making appointments and training officials (the government of Iraq did not have dedicated offices for these efforts). While the Afghan government passed a modest reform of its local governance structures in 2007 with a Sub-National Governance Law, the changes were very limited and the system remained broadly unchanged. The totality of these efforts tended to mitigate the shortcomings of highly centralized states and partially addressed the needs of populations seeking broader decentralization. Coalition efforts often eased tribal conflicts, provided civil affairs assistance, supported local government leaders, channeled reliable information to the central government, and conducted a number of other activities that bolstered local governance, reducing the appeal of insurgent governance and political efforts. Yet despite all these efforts, insurgent groups adapted their local political strategies to entice as well as intimidate local populations.

Within Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban insurgency, whose strategy most closely resembles AQAP's compared to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Iraq, adopted a tactical political program that sought to gain the support of the Afghan population.⁹ The carefully crafted Taliban political strategy tapped into Pashtunwali traditions, took advantage of U.S., coalition, and Afghan government mistakes, and capitalized on the weaknesses of the Afghan state in the villages.¹⁰ Though the United States had expended substantial effort to promote good governance in the provinces, that effort was unequal to the task, cumbersome, bureaucratic, and sometimes counterproductive. Additionally, due to the structural disconnect between regime type and community desires, these endeavors had limited enduring effects. The Taliban's positive political program had at least five aspects to it: justice, micro-politics, reconciliation, laissez-faire, and tribal democracy. While the Taliban imposed their will on villagers if necessary, and they often did so violently, they also had a positive agenda that sought to entice supporters to their banner. In the face of corrupt or murderous government officials, a nonfunctioning judiciary, and the perversion or suspension of Pashtunwali traditions, the typical villager had

limited ability to seek justice over the practices that most troubled him: murder, theft, assault, rape, and land and water disputes. For the Taliban political agent, this vein of discontent was rich and could be mined by appealing to the structures of justice created by sharia. While villagers may not have been inclined to support sharia in its totality, they were likely to do so in the absence of a viable alternative. Because the Taliban agent was sitting in the villagers' home, solicited their grievances, and then quickly sought to remedy them, the villagers were hard-pressed to instead support a government that was often distant and abused its authority.¹¹

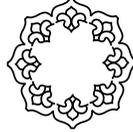
Within Yemen, efforts by AQAP to operate as an insurgency, while robust, are not as well-resourced or organized as was the Taliban insurgency; the Taliban also had greater experience with governance, having previously run a nation-state. Moreover, however "Yemeni" its membership, AQAP has long had a sizable foreign component, limiting some of the appeal of its domestic outreach efforts. Still, its persistence as a terrorist group is nourished by a weakened or nonexistent Yemeni state long burdened by corruption and performance and accountability issues that prevent it from being a viable alternative to the jihadist group. Yet AQAP is also limited in its operational reach, principally central Yemen, making it easier to target by coalition forces seeking to limit the group's size as well as administrative footprint. Challenging as it may be to confront AQAP's hearts and minds strategy, a central element of the group's persistence is the Yemeni government's history of weak local governance in particular, largely by design, and a highly centralized state. These twin conditions emerged from the terms of Yemeni unification in 1990 and the subsequent civil war in 1994, wherein North Yemen and its then president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, conquered the south, establishing a framework for misgovernance in the region and in areas heavily influenced by al-Qaeda.

Notes

1. These two paragraphs were previously published in Dan Green, “The Political Officer as Counter-Insurgent: Conducting Tactical Politics Against Insurgencies,” *Small Wars Journal* 9 (Sept. 2007), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/swjvol9.pdf>; John Hillen, “Developing a National Counterinsurgency Capability for the War on Terror,” *Military Review* (Jan./Feb. 2007): 13–15.
2. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 4–5; italics in the original.
3. Ibid.
4. Kaley I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May/June 2005): 10, available at <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/sepp.pdf>.
5. Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 4–5.
6. Ibid., p. 72.
7. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 115.
8. See also Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
9. Daniel R. Green, “Defeating the Taliban’s Political Program,” *Armed Forces Journal* (Nov. 2009): 18–21, 36–37.
10. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2002–2007* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
11. Antonio Giustozzi, “Hearts, Minds, and the Barrel of a Gun: The Taliban’s Shadow Government,” *PRISM* 3, no. 2 (Mar. 2012): 71–80, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1042581.pdf>.

CHAPTER 2

Local Governance in Yemen



WHEN THE ARAB SPRING swept through Yemen in 2011, a long-standing struggle between President Ali Abdullah Saleh, along with the highly centralized political system he created, and groups arguing for greater decentralization significantly harmed local governance. As the Saleh regime struggled to remain in power, its ability to control events within Yemen while also governing the country effectively crumbled. Although the central government had never truly ruled over all of Yemen, in areas it did control local governance became splintered as elections were postponed, elected officials' terms were extended indefinitely, financial support evaporated, programmatic and other assistance diminished, and local politics came to be dominated by violence. Additionally, as Yemeni sovereignty dissipated, competitors rushed to fill the power vacuum, including not only AQAP but also the Houthis, various tribal groups, political parties (e.g., Islah), and the Southern Movement (al-Hirak), among others. These groups offered competing visions of local governance or tried to impose these visions on the Yemeni population. Criminal gangs, unscrupulous officials, as well as tribal leaders all took advantage of a further weakening Yemeni government to seize power and gain influence. Assassinations of local officials also became commonplace. Against this dispiriting backdrop, the structures and processes of local governance sputtered along, albeit in much-reduced form, based on decisions initially made following the 1994 Yemeni civil war.

UNIFICATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE (1990–2000)

On July 7, 1994, after two-and-a-half months of fighting, the Yemeni civil war effectively ended as forces loyal to President Saleh seized Aden, the former capital of South Yemen, putting down irredentist efforts by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) to form its own country. Having defeated his foes militarily, Saleh imposed a political system upon southern Yemen that sought to unify the country administratively in Sanaa, marginalize southern political elites, and impose centralized rule on the wayward region. These decisions took place amid an ongoing conversation (and political struggle) centering on unification terms for the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), established May 22, 1990. This unification had been the goal of Yemenis for several decades, and the initial formula for power sharing was, to the extent possible, a 50–50 split, even though, numerically speaking, northern Yemen had substantially more people than the south.¹ However, after the 1993 parliamentary elections, in which Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party secured a plurality with 41% of the vote, even the power-sharing agreement came under significant pressure. The GPC's chief rival, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), based in the south, came in third with 19%, behind the Islamist Islah Party, which garnered 21%. The YSP, in the aftermath, rejected President Saleh's proposed power-sharing agreement for the country's five-person executive body, insisting on a 2:2:1 split rather than the proposed 3:1:1.²

The resulting stalemate prompted southern officials, through the YSP, to ask for a renegotiation of the 1990 unity agreement, focusing on a broader decentralization of power that would allow greater authority for local officials. For its part, the GPC under President Saleh worked to create a centralized national government, which naturally led to the marginalization of Aden, the former capital of South Yemen. The central government also began a process of replacing financial officers in southern provinces with ostensibly central (but actually northern) officials. These efforts, in turn, prompted southern officials to resist the transfer of locally raised revenue to the central government.³ In addition, the Yemeni government "retired" southern Yemeni military personnel, replacing them and local police with military and police units predominantly from the north. Numerous political meetings were held across the country

to discuss these various issues, even as rhetoric on both sides escalated, with northerners accusing their southern counterparts of treason. These discussions led to a January 1994 agreement between the main political parties and other prominent leaders known as the “document of pledge and accord.” It was signed in Jordan by President Saleh and Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh, a southerner.⁴ Although calling for decentralization within the new Yemeni political system, the agreement was never implemented amid political conditions that deteriorated into war. Following the defeat of southern military forces, Saleh concentrated political power in his office by abolishing the five-member executive board, appointed southern politicians to leadership positions such as vice president and prime minister, and pledged to support the decentralization measures called for in the “document of pledge and accord,” most notably the election of top local and provincial officials.⁵

Saleh also undertook a series of bureaucratic reforms within the Yemeni political system that further centralized decisionmaking in Sanaa while at the same time seeking to ensure southern Yemen would not secede again. He ended the role of Aden in administering the southern Yemeni governorates of Lahij, Abyan, Shabwa, Hadramawt, and al-Mahra, centralizing it in Sanaa. In each of the governorates formerly located in South Yemen, he appointed entirely new leadership—mostly northerners—including the governor, deputy governor, director of public security, and chief of political security.⁶ This process was called by one Yemeni commentator “internal colonization.”⁷ Only in Abyan, Shabwa, and al-Mahra did Saleh continue to appoint locals. In Abyan and Shabwa, however, he mainly did this because many locals had served in the faction of former southern prime minister Ali Nasir in a bloody failed uprising against southern Yemeni leaders in 1986. Nasir’s supporters, many of whom had fled to the north, backed Saleh, allowing him to fracture southern political unity while ensuring support in some parts of the region. To this end, in summer 1994 he appointed Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, a southern Yemeni military officer who was himself involved in the 1986 coup attempt, as his vice president. To prevent the return of the exiled Ali Nasir and his corresponding development of a power base in Shabwa governorate, Saleh appointed officials from the area but only those who had served prior to the 1967 independence movement, which aimed to remove British control of southern Yemen.⁸ This meant, in practice, that

tribal leaders exiled by the Nasirites/Communists in 1967 were returned to power, ensuring their opposition to Ali Nasir and their support for Saleh.

Having unified Yemen and solidified his political control, Saleh adopted an inclusive patronage system as a means of governing as well as shaping the political scene.⁹ This system allowed him to control and manage individuals, factions, and groups within Yemen while also providing an avenue to bolster his GPC party. He used robust state-sector employment (e.g., civil service, military/security forces, state-run industry) as well as other benefits (e.g., political representation, exclusive contracts, access to higher education, overseas trips) to ensure that his supporters were aligned with the interests of the state. Conversely, he refused these benefits as a way to punish wayward tribal figures, thereby seeking to dictate their behavior. He also sought to divide tribes by favoring some factions over others, or to favor a tribe in a way that caused discord within a community. This patronage system helped groom a wealthy elite, principally from his Hashid and Baqil tribal supporters, and a significant portion of its members benefited immensely from this largesse. However, the principal goal of this patronage approach was control of the Yemeni political system using “golden handcuffs” (e.g., secure employment and position) so that political opposition would be so costly as to prevent it completely. The Saleh government also used force and military power to protect its interests; this carrot-and-stick approach maintained stability, safeguarded the leadership, and built a base of political support within the country.

In 1996, two years after the establishment of the new political system, protests erupted in al-Mukalla, with thousands of protestors decriing the abusive behavior of police and army forces, most of whom were northerners appointed to serve in the south. The demonstrators also called for greater decentralization of political authority, including elections and self-rule. But Saleh rejected these demands and, using traditional (e.g., tribal) authority structures and leaders to circumvent and weaken civil leaders, appointed a special advisory council composed of tribal vice-civil officials. While this body did not develop into anything substantive, it did indicate how Saleh could balance traditional institutions and leaders (e.g., tribes) against political groups he did not support. At this stage in Yemen’s history, local governance was something done to the local population, not with it. In 1997, feeling confident in his political support, Saleh called for the second parliamentary elections since Yemen had unified in 1990. Unlike

in the 1993 vote, however, the YSP decided to boycott this time, leaving the GPC and Islah as the two main parties competing for parliamentary seats.¹⁰ Saleh's GPC won 62% of the vote, allowing it to govern without having to form a coalition in parliament.¹¹

Though Saleh did appoint a prominent southern politician, Faraj Said Bin Ghanem, as his prime minister, Ghanem's efforts to persuade the government to devolve political power to locally elected councils went unheeded. The government did decide to appoint directors to administer each district, and that these directors would report to the centrally appointed governor.¹² But while this marked a modest decentralization of authority, the changes still lacked a democratic component allowing local citizens to hold the government accountable. Indeed, during this period, most significant positions of local political leadership were appointed by the central government, with ultimate decisions made by the national government in Sanaa. As already suggested, most officials appointed in the south were northerners, and security forces, both army and police, were also led and populated by northerners. In 1998, Yemen's government enacted reforms (Republican Decree No. 23) that further divided the country administratively into new governorates and districts, creating the Amran and Dhale governorates and subdividing many larger districts in the south into two or more administrative units.¹³ Whereas following unification in 1990 Yemen had consisted of eighteen governorates and approximately 280 districts, now, after the 2001–02 splitting of municipalities and the 2004 creation of Rayma governorate, the country had twenty-one governorates and 333 districts.¹⁴

THE LAW OF LOCAL AUTHORITY (2000–2010)

In 1999, Saleh built upon his party's previous parliamentary victory by taking 96% of the presidential vote. That same year, the confident GPC party introduced legislation to allow for limited political decentralization. While Saleh had reversed his earlier pledges of support for decentralization—made repeatedly since unification—he finally decided that given significant protests across the south targeting his government's misrule, limited decentralization would play to his advantage. Saleh signed new legislation, dubbed the Law of Local Authority, on February 10, 2000. Early proponents of the law, principally from the south, wanted to use the language "local government," but central officials considered the

suggestion of local autonomy too radical. Members of Saleh's government countered with "local administration," indicating that governorates would be extensions of central government bureaucracies. The compromise name of "local authority" satisfied neither side, but the struggle over its name indicated how contentious local political empowerment remained.¹⁵

The new legislation allowed for the election of local consultative councils only, with Saleh retaining his authority to appoint top local officials. To this end, the Ministry of Local Administration was created to assign district directors and train locally elected officials.¹⁶ The law contradicted the Yemeni constitution, which required elections for all top local leadership posts and was viewed, at the time, as "sanctif[ying] central control."¹⁷ To remove this contradiction while increasing his authority, Saleh introduced seventeen constitutional amendments also to be voted on in national elections.¹⁸ One of these amendments reconciled the disparity between the Law of Local Authority and the constitution by giving the central government control over all local affairs. Another two amendments increased the president's term from five to seven years and parliament members' from four to six years (all three amendments passed).¹⁹ In the election, held in February 2001, approximately 30,000 candidates vied for roughly 7,000 Governorate and District Council seats.²⁰ The YSP and other opposition parties, which had boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections, participated vigorously in this contest. In the end, Saleh's GPC party earned 58.5% of seats on the Governorate Councils and 58.6% of seats on the District Councils, controlling all Yemen's governorates except Hadramawt and Marib.²¹ The Islah Party garnered 20.4% of Governorate Council seats and 23.3% of District Council seats.²² And the YSP won significant numbers of seats in the Lahij, Dhale, and Aden governorates.²³

The election was celebrated as the beginning of a political decentralization process within Yemen, but local governance in practice revealed the inadequacies of the local authority law. Lacking salaries and receiving few, if any, resources from the central government, newly elected officials faced significant hurdles in effectively representing their constituents. While authorities were eventually allowed to raise modest funds through limited local taxation, appointed officials often took most of this revenue for themselves or for the central government, and public representatives didn't see their financial pressure alleviated. Additionally, while elected officials were able to discuss public issues

in various Governorate and District Council meetings, as well as with district residents, they lacked the authority to fire centrally appointed local officials (e.g., directors of health, education, security; see table 2). One authority the councils did possess was the ability to withhold confidence from local officials due to corruption, incompetence, and other failings. Local councils across Yemen began to use this ability to shame the central government into removing inept officials, and President Saleh selectively ousted some who had lost public support. He also reduced the number of public employees through a forced retirement program as part of austerity measures imposed on Yemen by the International Monetary Fund. This in turn thinned out officials deemed incompetent, but allegations arose that the retirements unfairly targeted southern bureaucrats, further exacerbating regional tensions. While local councils continued to assert their roles in governorate and district politics, national political developments persisted in affecting local governance.

In 2003, Yemeni parliamentary elections solidified the influence of Saleh's GPC party, even as the YSP participated in the contest. Saleh's party secured 58% of the vote and 226 out of a total 301 seats in the parliament. The Islah Party received 22.6%, gaining 46 seats, and the YSP earned 4.7%, translating into 7 seats. Three years later, in 2006, Saleh was reelected with 77% of the vote to a new seven-year term in office. His main competitor, Faisal bin Shamlan, running on a joint slate, received 21.8%. Yemen also held its second election for council members at the governorate and district levels. Saleh's party increased its representation to 85% of governorate seats and 76% of district seats (versus 58.5% and 58.6%, respectively, in 2001), while the Islah Party received 7% of governorate and 12% of district seats. The YSP won 3% of governorate and district seats alike. By comparison, in 2001 the Islah Party had earned a significantly higher 20.4% of governorate and 23.3% of district seats, while the YSP had garnered 3.8% of governorate and 3.3% of district seats.²⁴ Voters also approved an amendment to the Yemeni constitution that extended Governorate and District Council terms from four to six years.

With his political party strongly in power and not having to seek reelection until 2013, Saleh announced on April 9, 2008, that local elections would be held to choose new governors in Yemen's twenty governorates and the one capital district, Sanaa.²⁵ An amendment to the local authority law that same year allowed for the indirect election of governors by

Table 2. Shadow Governance by Level of Complexity* and Type†

AQAP	Islamic State	AQI	Taliban
Justice			
Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Inclusive	Coercive	Coercive	Adaptive
Taxation			
Low	High	Low	Moderate
Adaptive	Coercive	Coercive	Adaptive
Education			
Low	High	None	Moderate
Adaptive	Coercive	None	Coercive
Health			
Low	Moderate	None	Low
Adaptive	Coercive	None	Adaptive
Tribal Engagement			
High	High	Moderate	High
Inclusive	Coercive	Coercive	Inclusive
Security			
Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Inclusive	Coercive	Coercive	Coercive
Sharia			
Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Adaptive	Coercive	Coercive	Coercive
Information			
High	High	High	High
Inclusive	Coercive	Coercive	Coercive

* **Levels of complexity:** Low, moderate, high

† **Types:** Inclusive, adaptive, coercive

District and Governorate Council members. The elections took place that year, but the president was displeased with the outcomes, particularly in the Saada and Dhale governorates, and resumed his former practice of appointing governors by presidential decree. For the next few years, Saleh and his GPC party governed Yemen with secure parliamentary, governorate, and district majorities. While political and security challenges still emanated from AQAP and a longstanding military struggle with the Houthis, a Zaidi religious revivalist group based in northern Yemen, the Saleh government remained relatively stable until the Arab Spring.

THE ARAB SPRING (2011–PRESENT)

In 2011, a central element of Arab Spring–related developments in Yemen was the political crisis that pitted President Saleh, who had ruled for more than thirty years, against opponents who criticized his government's corruption, leadership failings, and overall lack of services.²⁶ In response to a series of protests, Saleh initiated limited reforms, but his efforts did not satisfy the opposition's demands. Following a protracted standoff in which the leadership frequently used violence against protesters and Saleh himself was seriously injured by an assassination attempt, the parties eventually agreed to a transition overseen by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Central elements included a power-sharing arrangement between Saleh's party and opposition groups, with equal distribution of cabinet positions, a restructuring of the military, and an early presidential election to determine Saleh's replacement. Following his February 25, 2012, inauguration as Yemen's new president, former vice president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi undertook a series of reforms to professionalize the government and reassert sovereignty over areas seized by al-Qaeda and other groups. The result was a successful military offensive in the south against AQAP, which had taken advantage of political instability to seize power. This was most salient example of how new leadership and military reforms combined to reenergize government efforts against Islamist militants.

President Hadi's government, however, faced struggles in reforming the civilian government at the national and provincial levels. While the government repulsed AQAP from the areas it had overrun in May and June 2012, it demonstrated a limited ability to provide follow-on services to these areas as well as extend its pacification campaign into AQAP's

historic safe havens in central and southern Yemen (e.g., Shabwa and Abyan).²⁷ These shortcomings were reprised in the 2016 offensive against AQAP in al-Mukalla. While additional U.S. economic, military, and political assistance helped the Yemeni government address some related problems, these measures were insufficient to defeat AQAP's soft power strategy in the south and stabilize the national government. Hadi was still maneuvering to consolidate his political power in Sanaa when, in 2014, the Houthis seized the capital. Hadi eventually fled to Aden and then to Saudi Arabia, eventually returning to Aden to run the government once national forces turned away the Houthi offensive there.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARAB SPRING AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The fracturing of Yemen's government during the Arab Spring had a significant impact on local governance, however truncated its authorities and abilities. Additionally, the weakening of government authority in Yemen's countryside, the loss of the capital, Sanaa, to Houthi forces, and the rise of competitors for local power (e.g., AQAP, political parties, tribal groups, and criminal gangs) contributed to a collapse of government authority across the country. This further exacerbated instability since many areas of Yemen already lacked a government presence.

The interviews with central and local government officials conducted for this study capture these developments as well as the inadequacies of the local governance system and the "merits" of AQAP's governing approach. The overwhelming consensus among these officials is that local governance structures are poorly designed and inadequate to the tasks for which they are responsible. Many view the local governance system as an "illusion of local government" or "cosmetic democracy" and express the view that "local governance does not exist."²⁸ They believe strongly that these weaknesses are not due to the difficulties faced by the Yemeni government during the Arab Spring but are part of "a failure strategy"²⁹ wherein the "state was weak out of choice, not weakness,"³⁰ and that the government "gave the Local Councils authority but not enough to succeed."³¹ They see the "local law [as] excellent on paper but not in reality."³² Owing to inadequate salaries and other support ("Local Councils are unpaid volunteers")³³ as well as an inability to hold centrally appointed governors, district directors, and line ministry officials accountable, locally elected Governorate and

District Council members lack sufficient institutional mechanisms to perform their jobs. Additionally, “roles and responsibilities are unclear,” and local governance stakeholders have not received “enough training,” compounding the confusion.³⁴ In many parts of Yemen, centrally appointed officials act “like dictators” or have “turned into dictators” in the absence of any local accountability.³⁵ These tendencies have been exacerbated by the Arab Spring and a distracted Yemeni government, so that many officials “seize power and others do nothing,”³⁶ a situation that leads to corruption because officials “can’t monitor [themselves].”³⁷

This lack of oversight extends to security directors and local police, most of whom historically come from outside southern Yemen, as well as the Yemeni military. In 2002, implementation of the Law of Local Authority was changed so that Provincial and local councils were no longer in charge of overseeing police chiefs in their respective communities. In many senses, these elected members feel they are “scapegoats” for the problems of local governance but have none of the rights that come with such a position of public responsibility.³⁸

A significant complicating factor in local governance is the legacy of the patronage system created by former president Saleh. However weak accountability is for centrally appointed local officials, even when local councils succeed in removing an official for corruption or incompetence, the official never really leaves the government. These officials are, as one interview subject put it, “moved, not removed.”³⁹ Often, this relocation is to Sanaa, where the officials work in the central government, potentially giving them more power to interfere in local matters. Also quite frequently, they remain in the province from which they were let go, retaining a position and a salary but conducting no work or, even worse, continuing to meddle in local affairs. In several governorates, this was evident in a surge of deputy governors, including, in 2013, fourteen in Bayda, four in Aden, seventeen in Lahij, five in Shabwa, and seventeen in Abyan. These officials often lack any authority, but they add to local administrative confusion, drain national resources, and discouragingly demonstrate that corruption and a poor work record have no consequences. Additionally, they retain political networks of support and sometimes act as local spoilers for more honest officials. Corruption was always a problem in the Yemeni system of local governance since responsibility and accountability were nonexistent or based on very weak links. Finally, competitors for power such as AQAP,

political parties (e.g., Islah), and tribal leaders have seized the bureaucracies of local governments and use their influence to intimidate officials. These problems have only worsened due to a distracted central government, the breakdown of governing systems (e.g., lack of financial support, suspension of payments), the permanent nature of appointments, and the suspension of elections, including the indirect election of governors.

According to the subjects interviewed for this study, the three greatest benefits that AQAP provided local communities during the group's occupation of southern Yemen in 2011–12 were security, justice, and stability.⁴⁰ AQAP's dispensation of sharia-based justice was praised due to its "thorough and quick judges,"⁴¹ who provided justice "within days and hours"⁴² largely because "people avoid courts because of corruption."⁴³ These problems were especially acute since many officials did not come from the areas they adjudicated. Additionally, due to Yemen's general instability during the Arab Spring, many government courts were nonfunctioning, in exile, or lacked the resources or security to operate effectively. Al-Qaeda's ability to provide security also received praise: "al-Qaeda ended security problems in Shabwa,"⁴⁴ and "al-Qaeda did provide our security and justice."⁴⁵ These observations are consistent with outside analysis and with similar governing programs attempted by the Taliban and Islamic State in their spheres. It is useful to note how officials belonging to the AQAP-created front group Ansar al-Sharia evaluated their own record of governing southern Yemen:

The Sharia was implemented, security prevailed, people were safe on their properties, honors and blood, the virtue was established and the vice was removed, crime disappeared, and blackmail ended, also the aid reached to the villages of the people, and the services reached to many villages and taxes were cancelled and even the fees for services like water, electricity, municipality and others were cancelled.⁴⁶

The range of AQAP governing initiatives elicited differing viewpoints. For example, "al-Qaeda provided order but no projects,"⁴⁷ "al-Qaeda provided some courts, no projects, and effective judiciary and security,"⁴⁸ and "al-Qaeda really ruled and created a functioning government."⁴⁹ Another interview subject said that "they provided medical assistance, cleaned towns too, created jobs through better security, price controls."⁵⁰ Since these interviews were conducted in 2013, before AQAP had overrun southern

Hadramawt in 2015, as well as areas the group had initially governed in 2011–12, this ambivalence on the totality of AQAP's governing efforts is understandable. Governance efforts by AQAP in later years were better organized and resourced and more systematic.

The general consensus among interviewees was that substantial local governance reform must take place along with a broad decentralization of authority, empowering local communities and governments. The goal of these reforms would be multifold and should focus on improving governance, reducing corruption, enhancing local stability, and giving communities the tools to confront al-Qaeda holistically. At its most basic level, the disconnect between those responsible for decisions and locals lacking the means to hold them accountable has created a democracy deficit that invites corruption and weak local governance. Summing up on this point, one interview subject stated that to “break the corruption cycle,”⁵¹ there must be “greater decentralization.”⁵²

Aligning the structures of local democratic institutions with communities will substantially equip and motivate these communities to push back against corruption, poor governance, and AQAP's governing program. Further, the decentralization process must include empowerment not just of local officials to hold line directors, governors, district directors, and one another accountable, but also of police forces so that local residents can govern and protect themselves. Relatedly, a process needs to be established wherein qualified locals are selected for positions in the judiciary and police, and mechanisms created to coordinate security efforts with the Yemeni military at the local level. As one southern Yemeni put it, there is “no local mechanism to stop al-Qaeda's spread.”⁵³ Absent a viable, dynamic political program that enlists communities in their own governing decisions and defense, AQAP, among other groups, can impose its political vision on Yemenis with limited pushback. In other words, as one Yemeni explained, “Without decentralization, there is no stability.”⁵⁴

Notes

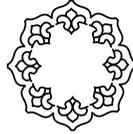
1. Stephen Day, “Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq: Lessons from Yemen,” *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 122, available at <https://www.mepec.org/journal/barriers-federal-democracy-iraq-lessons-yemen>.
2. All vote tallies here drawn from *ibid.*, 123.
3. For the dynamics described here, see *ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 123–24.
5. *Ibid.*, 124.
6. See *ibid.* for the reforms described here.
7. Stephen Day, “Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?” *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 423.
8. These developments, including those concerning Abyan and Shabwa governorates, are described in Day, “Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq,” <https://www.mepec.org/journal/barriers-federal-democracy-iraq-lessons-yemen>, 124.
9. April Longley Alley, “The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen,” *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 385–409.
10. For the 1996 protests, government response, and parliamentary election lead-up, see Day, “Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq,” 126, <https://www.mepec.org/journal/barriers-federal-democracy-iraq-lessons-yemen>.
11. *Ibid.*, 127.
12. Norman Cigar, *The Enemy Is Us: How Allied and U.S. Strategy in Yemen Contributes to AQAP’s Survival*, Report 18-4 (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2018), 44, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=813049>.
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14. Nefissa, Grabundzija, and Lambert, *Société Civile*, 51–52, <https://books.openedition.org/cefas/1242?lang=en>.
15. On proposed language and the eventual compromise, see Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186.
16. Nefissa, Grabundzija, and Lambert, *Société Civile*, 51–52, <https://books.openedition.org/cefas/1242?lang=en>.
17. Day, “Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq,” 127, <https://www.mepec.org/journal/barriers-federal-democracy-iraq-lessons-yemen>.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion*, 209.
20. Day, “Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq,” 127–28, <https://www.mepec.org/journal/barriers-federal-democracy-iraq-lessons-yemen>.

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21. "Report on the 2006 Presidential and Local Council Elections in the Republic of Yemen," prepared by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, p. 11, available at https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/2152_ye_report_elections_042407.pdf.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. For election-outcome statistics cited in this paragraph, see *ibid.*
25. Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity," 431.
26. Daniel Green, "Stabilizing Yemen's Government," PolicyWatch 2010 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Dec. 20, 2012), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/stabilizing-yemens-government>.
27. Pacification campaigns are attempts to defeat an insurgency.
28. The quotations here come, successively, from author interviews with a Yemeni human rights lawyer, Nov. 17, 2013; a Yemeni political analyst, Nov. 16, 2013; and a District Council member, Bayda, Nov. 23, 2013.
29. Shabwa Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2013.
30. Yemeni political analyst, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2013.
31. Shabwa Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2013.
32. Bayda Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 23, 2013.
33. Yemeni political analyst, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2013.
34. Bayda Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 23, 2013.
35. *Ibid.*; and former Shabwa Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 21, 2013.
36. Bayda Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 23, 2013.
37. District Council member, Bayda, interview by author, Nov. 23, 2013.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Abyan vice governor, interview by author, Nov. 21, 2013.
40. Note: the government officials, tribal leaders, and civil society members interviewed for this project do not support AQAP but were often in a position to witness the group's governing program in practice.
41. Abyan sheikh, interview by author, Nov. 20, 2013.
42. Yemeni human rights lawyer, interview by author, Nov. 14, 2013.
43. Marib Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 17, 2013.
44. Shabwa Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2013.
45. Former Shabwa Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 21, 2013.
46. Robin Simcox, "Ansar al-Sharia and Governance in Southern Yemen," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 14 (Dec. 2012): 59, available at <https://www.hudson.org/research/9779-ansar-al-sharia-and-governance-in-southern-yemen>.
47. Abyan vice governor, interview by author, Nov. 21, 2013.
48. Yemeni human rights lawyer, interview by author, Nov. 14, 2013.
49. Abyan sheikh, interview by author, Nov. 20, 2013.
50. Shabwa Governorate Council member, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2013.
51. Ministry of Local Administration official, interview by author, Nov. 17, 2013.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Marib sheikh, interview by author, Nov. 18, 2013.
54. *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3

AQAP and the Arab Spring



THE 2011 ARAB SPRING ushered in a new phase for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, allowing it to significantly widen its operational footprint. Since the group's formation was announced in January 2009 from the al-Qaeda branches in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, it had focused much of its energy on external attacks, especially against the United States and its interests.¹ On June 1, 2009, for example, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, who had been recruited by AQAP, shot two U.S. soldiers, killing one, in front of a recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas. In August 2009, an AQAP suicide bomber tried but failed to kill Saudi prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who led the kingdom's antiterrorism campaign. Later that year, on November 5, U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan shot and killed thirteen soldiers and civilians and wounded twenty-nine others at Ft. Hood, Texas, an attack later revealed to have been inspired by AQAP leader Anwar al-Awlaki. Afterward, to underscore the AQAP threat to the United States, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton designated it a terrorist organization on December 14, 2009. Eleven days later, on December 25, al-Qaeda member Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab unsuccessfully attempted to detonate an AQAP-manufactured bomb sewn into his undergarments as Northwest Airlines Flight 253 approached Detroit. Abdulmutallab had received in-depth training in Yemen and had also been in communication with Awlaki. In February 2010, British Airways employee Rajib Karim was arrested by British authorities for having links with AQAP, with an investigation showing he had engaged in extensive communications with

Awlaki. In March 2010, Awlaki said in a videotape that jihad against America was binding upon every able Muslim. The following month, President Barack Obama approved the targeted killing of Awlaki, making him the first U.S. citizen placed on a Central Intelligence Agency target list. Awlaki was subsequently killed by a U.S. Predator strike on September 30, 2011. The next month, U.S. officials thwarted an AQAP attempt to blow up two cargo planes using explosives placed within the toner cartridges of two laser printers.

The infusion of new leadership due to prison breaks, the unification of al-Qaeda's Yemen and Saudi branches, and possibly covert support by domestic political factions helped fuel the creation of al-Qaeda's most aggressive affiliate. In early 2011, before Awlaki's killing, AQAP would demonstrate more ambitious plans for power, including focusing its attention on the local scene.

Operations by AQAP reached a new, deadlier stage in 2011 as the group vigorously sought to expand its presence in the countryside, taking advantage of Arab Spring-related political instability.² On March 27, 2011, alleged AQAP members seized a munitions factory in the town of Jaar in Abyan governorate, in southern Yemen, and on May 29 more than two hundred alleged AQAP members overran Zinjibar, Abyan's capital.³ These actions were followed by a June 22 jailbreak by dozens of al-Qaeda-linked prisoners in southern Yemen's Hadramawt province. Al-Qaeda also took control of the port city of Shaqra in Abyan and waged an assassination and murder/intimidation campaign within the city of Aden, principally targeting Yemeni security forces. These national forces were unable to dislodge AQAP in large part due to their withdrawal from southern Yemen to bolster President Saleh's political apparatus in Sanaa. AQAP's southern offensive meanwhile illustrated a dramatic shift by the group, wherein it was now taking on the Yemeni military in conventional battle to hold territory, versus its former emphasis on asymmetric attacks against the United States. The ability to recruit, train, organize, and then lead this many men in coordinated attacks across southern Yemen indicated that AQAP was a much more capable and embedded organization than previously thought. Additionally, its ambitions were shown to be far more substantial than assumed, with aims including domestic territorial control as well as targeting of the U.S. homeland and its interests.

AQAP'S HEARTS AND MINDS CAMPAIGN

When al-Qaeda seized a number of southern Yemeni towns and districts in 2011, it did so not only because of its enhanced military capabilities and the removal of Yemeni security forces, which had created a security vacuum, but also because of its effective community engagement strategy.⁴ This soft power approach was a central component of AQAP's offensive and remains a key element of its broader goal of expanding its power base within Yemen. To this end, al-Qaeda created a front organization called Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law) in an attempt to rebrand itself as an Islamist reformist organization, part of a sophisticated information operations campaign to gain popular support. Capitalizing on the longstanding grievances of southern Yemenis against the central government, including a lack of services (e.g., education, health, security, justice), political representation, economic development, and rule of law, AQAP sought to replicate the functions of a nascent government throughout the region.⁵ It claimed to have "laid the first foundation on which to build the Caliphate."⁶ Al-Qaeda's political agents established a form of stability based upon sharia in which they convened regular meetings with community leaders and sought to solve local problems, supplanting a Yemeni state function. The group also, through its imposition of a "justice" system, attempted to replace a reality of chaotic tribal feuding with a more ordered and religiously inspired system.

This "supra-tribal" effort was designed to mitigate tribal conflicts, protect weaker tribes from the predatory behavior of stronger rivals, and create opportunities for ambitious locals, including weaker tribal factions, to rise beyond their social position to seize greater power.⁷ In many cases, AQAP also provided humanitarian assistance such as fresh water and foodstuffs to the indigent, basic healthcare, as well as educational opportunities, even if only through Quranic teachings. These efforts often appealed to the population by exceeding the offerings by local government, but also because residents viewed many tribal sheikhs as discredited, having failed to fulfill their responsibilities to their respective communities.⁸ Additionally, Quran-based engagement was highly appealing to a population that tended to be familiar with this text alone. A Quranic system of government was, by definition, legitimate from the perspective of many locals. AQAP's innovative approach, however, was based not only on a new stratagem; it also grew from a different relationship fostered with the population more generally.

RISE OF THE AFFILIATES

While AQAP spread its influence within Yemen, its position within broader al-Qaeda also grew.⁹ Following the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, and repeated UAV strikes against al-Qaeda in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the group's affiliates rose in importance. These various branches, in Yemen as well as Somalia, Algeria, Mali, and Syria, increasingly assumed the operational leadership of efforts against the United States. As the organization decentralized its global operations, seeking to reduce its risk for defeat by the United States and its allies, these affiliates started attracting more foreign fighters and financial support. In many respects, Yemen's al-Qaeda branch led the way, with then leader Nasser al-Wahishi also operating as the general manager within so-called al-Qaeda core. Additionally, AQAP developed links to the al-Qaeda affiliates in Somalia, Syria, and Mali, among others, providing them financial support, weapons, mentoring, and leadership.

YEMEN ATTACK ON AL-QAEDA

For most of 2011, with AQAP having overrun large sections of south-central Yemen, the national military found itself in a standoff with the Islamist group.¹⁰ Factional fighting in the capital, Sanaa, drew a great deal of the Yemeni military's attention, leaving the security situation elsewhere chaotic and tenuous. This was particularly the case in the south, from which, as noted earlier, military forces had been reassigned to other areas. Consequently, whole towns came under AQAP control, including the capital of Abyan governorate, Zinjibar, and assassinations and suicide attacks increased throughout the area, especially in the southern port city of Aden. Al-Qaeda imposed sharia on territory it controlled and, despite its hearts and minds campaign, alienated many through its harsh rule, prompting thousands to flee.¹¹ Yemen's military, caught up in political intrigue in Sanaa, could not effectively confront AQAP due to cynical attempts by Saleh to precipitate a security crisis in the country. This allowed al-Qaeda to make significant military gains, further bolstering Saleh's claim that he was indispensable to maintaining security and should stay in office. Al-Qaeda's newfound aggressiveness was also likely fueled by covert support by Saleh and his supporters. Only after Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi was elected president in an uncontested race on February 21, 2012, thanks to a GCC initiative designed to remove Saleh, did these dynamics change.

On February 25, 2012, four days after Hadi's election, Yemen's military undertook a determined offensive called Operation Golden Swords to repel al-Qaeda insurgent fighters from southern areas of the country.¹² Through a combination of tribal "popular committees" (militias) in concert with a more robust Yemeni military presence, AQAP was pushed out of most of its newly acquired territories and back into its conventional safe havens toward the center of the country.¹³ These actions, together with U.S. drone strikes and additional military assistance to Yemen, significantly degraded al-Qaeda's presence. While al-Qaeda resisted the onslaught, incurring significant casualties in the process, it did manage to strike at Yemen's military in Sanaa using a suicide vest attack on May 21, 2012.¹⁴ The attack killed approximately 120 soldiers preparing to participate in a military parade, while injuring around two hundred others.¹⁵ This particular attack as well as the repeated assassinations of Yemeni security, military, and intelligence personnel prompted Yemenis to increasingly see AQAP as more of a threat to their interests and security than simply a menace to the United States.

Having been temporarily defeated using conventional military methods, AQAP shifted tactics and undertook a murder and intimidation campaign, specifically targeting security, military, and intelligence officials working against the Islamist group, not just in southern Yemen but also in Sanaa.¹⁶ The most notable victim of this campaign in the south was regional commander Maj. Gen. Salim Ali Qatan, who was killed by a suicide attacker in June 2012.¹⁷ By one count, more than a hundred security officials, many of whom worked on counterterrorism, had been assassinated by either suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices, or small arms fire. This tactical shift also bought time for AQAP to replenish its ranks following significant losses sustained during the Yemeni military's offensive. And it indicated the temporary success of the summer 2012 offensive by Yemen's military against al-Qaeda, while underscoring the necessity for a determined effort to pacify regions used by al-Qaeda as a safe haven. Further, however much Yemen's military effort had thwarted al-Qaeda's expansionism, no sufficient follow-on strategy based on Yemeni and U.S. nonkinetic assistance (e.g., good governance, development, and reconstruction) emerged to complement the clear-and-hold efforts carried out by the national military in southern Yemen. This was due in part to a lack of understanding about the nature of insurgency and al-Qaeda's

soft power strategy to win the hearts and minds of southern Yemenis, and in part to a lack of appreciation for the human-terrain dynamics that facilitated al-Qaeda's growth in the area.

REPULSED BUT NOT REJECTED

While military operations in southern Yemen in 2012 were largely successful in pushing the Islamist group out of the areas it had overrun the previous year, the al-Qaeda threat endured.¹⁸ Having fallen back to its historic safe havens, AQAP undertook a robust assassination campaign against Yemeni officials as it reconstituted its forces. In many respects, this was an effort to "blind" the Yemeni government by preventing it from receiving intelligence from local officials about the movement. AQAP also took to robbery, kidnapping, and blackmail to collect revenue to purchase additional weapons, recruit more members, and fund its community engagement program.¹⁹ Moreover, as its forces retreated from Abyan governorate in 2012, al-Qaeda systematically stripped the area of any items of value (e.g., vehicles, equipment) to finance its operations. While the group's soft power strategy in southern Yemen initially attracted many followers, its eventual consolidation of power, joined by harsh rule, alienated many. All the same, many locals remained sympathetic to the group based not only on religious views or cultural conservatism but on a general feeling that al-Qaeda, despite its ample imperfections, was still a better alternative than the Yemeni government. While relief efforts for refugees from the areas controlled by AQAP did much to improve the image of the Yemeni government in the eyes of southerners, a sustained good governance and development initiative was not undertaken in those areas most affected by al-Qaeda.

Nor were development efforts synchronized with military clear-and-hold operations, focused on pacification, or oriented beyond short-term humanitarian needs.²⁰ Additionally, following their 2012 offensive, Yemeni military forces reduced their footprint in the area, and tribal popular committees were not provided sustained funding, which allowed al-Qaeda significant freedom of movement to undertake assassinations and launch limited incursions into surrounding governorates. Specifically, AQAP mounted attacks in 2013 in the governorates of Bayda (April), Hadramawt (May), and Lahij (June) in order to hold key villages and demonstrate its continued capabilities. Furthermore, it expanded its criminal fundraising

efforts (e.g., robberies, protection rackets, blackmail, smuggling) and used various propaganda efforts (e.g., leaflets, speeches, graffiti) to intimidate people, dishearten the government's local allies, and maintain its public profile. While the July 16, 2013, killing of AQAP's second-in-command, Said al-Shihri, by a suspected drone strike did much to temporarily degrade the organization's operational capabilities, the broader al-Qaeda organization continued to display its resiliency. In August 2013, the U.S. government closed eighteen of its embassies and consulates, including in Yemen, due to serious threats from al-Qaeda. Following the conclusion of the National Dialogue—a UN and GCC transitional process for Yemeni stakeholders from March 18, 2013, to January 24, 2014—the Yemeni government launched a multipronged offensive against al-Qaeda forces in Sanaa and in Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramawt governorates. Unlike its military offensive in 2012, the government sought to provide a sustained security presence (a hold force), albeit solely with army forces (vs. with local tribal groups), to prevent the group's return.

LEARNING TO GOVERN THE ISLAMIST STATE

A document written by AQAP in 2013 revealed an unusual degree of self-reflection regarding the terrorist group's short-lived control over parts of southern Yemen.²¹ Having retreated to its safe havens in the country's interior, the al-Qaeda affiliate turned its attention to regenerating its forces and also undertook a thorough review of its 2011–12 occupation of the south—a unique approach given that al-Qaeda has not historically devoted much attention to the details of governance or development. While AQAP's actual record of administering the area fell far short of what it presented in its self-review, the document's depth of thinking and focus on popular sentiment provided valuable insights into al-Qaeda's future strategy in Yemen and elsewhere. One of the lessons AQAP gleaned from its occupation was that selectively enforcing key sharia provisions while addressing the local population's main problems (e.g., security, justice, land and water disputes, electricity, and sanitation) is more fruitful than strictly applying al-Qaeda's interpretation of Islamic law at the outset. To this end, the AQAP document recommended to its associate al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to win locals over “through the conveniences of life and by taking care of their daily needs like food, electricity, and water. Providing these necessities will have a great effect on people, and

will make them sympathize with us and feel that their fate is tied to ours.” Predictably, AQAP made clear that this shift was only temporary and tactical, a means of achieving its eventual goal of establishing a sharia-based government.

AQAP also advised AQIM “to take a gradual approach with [the people] when it comes to their religious practices...When you find someone committing a sin, we have to address the issue by making the right call, and by giving lenient advice first, then by harsh rebuke, and then by force.” This emphasis on incremental religious instruction and enforcement indicated that al-Qaeda was adopting a more nuanced strategy focused as much on winning popular support as on seizing power. Additionally, AQAP learned that when “liberating” an area, it needed a comprehensive governance program with civil administration ready to go so that the people would see an immediate improvement in their situation. In theory, this would also blunt any outside accusations that al-Qaeda was abusing the population. The totality of AQAP’s efforts to analyze and share its experiences in southern Yemen demonstrated that the group was adapting to the new realities of the Arab Spring, incorporating lessons learned based on past mistakes, and developing a more sophisticated approach to gaining power and territory.

SEIZING AL-MUKALLA

Even though in 2013–14 Yemeni forces had, with U.S. assistance, pushed AQAP out of territory it had briefly occupied in Shabwa, Abyan, and Hadramawt governorates, the group persisted in its efforts to seize power, looking for an opportunity to exploit government weaknesses. Additionally, as already noted, it sought to incorporate the lessons it had learned from governing territory as well as having been successfully targeted by coalition forces into its future planning. Throughout 2013–14, AQAP continued to attack government and Yemeni military targets while expanding its outreach efforts with area leaders and tribes. In addition to the need to “go slow” when applying sharia to areas it administered, AQAP had learned that governing territory significantly raised its targeting profile for coalition airstrikes and drone attacks—as the AQAP “state” grew, it became easier to target. This created an incentive for the terrorist group to keep concealing its true power behind organizations that were difficult or impossible to target by coalition planners. In late 2014 and early 2015,

changing political and military conditions within Yemen provided it the opportunity to apply its new strategy to seize power and to demonstrate, once again, its organizational resiliency.

Throughout 2014, Houthi forces, assembled from a Zaidi Shia group from the northern Yemeni governorate of Saada, increased their influence in the north, pressuring the government to accede to their political demands. The group, which had long opposed President Saleh as well as Sunni Salafism and had fought numerous conflicts against the Yemeni state, became increasingly active in Yemeni national political affairs. What had begun as an effort to force concessions from the government eventually expanded into a strategy to seize control of the whole Yemeni state. On September 21, 2014, the Houthis captured the capital, Sanaa, forcing the leadership to create a new unity government. This new government was sworn in on November 9, but both the Houthis and former president Saleh's GPC party refused to participate in it. Houthi militants ultimately increased their pressure on the government and, in January 2015, attacked the presidential palace and residence of Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. On January 22, in events described earlier, President Hadi and his government resigned, fleeing to Aden in southern Yemen, where a provisional government was declared. About two weeks later, on February 6, the Houthis announced a Revolutionary Committee to govern the territory they had seized and consolidated their control over the remaining portions of Yemeni government institutions. As Houthi forces expanded their control of the north, they deepened their alliance with former president Saleh and his tribal allies in order to overrun Aden and the rest of southern Yemen. As Houthi forces pushed south in 2015, the government struggled to mount an offensive but managed to consolidate its forces in a defense of Aden, having had to reduce its already modest footprint in central Yemen—where AQAP was thus presented an opportunity to reassert itself.

On March 25, 2015, in response to Houthi advances in the south, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of a ten-nation military coalition, under the name Operation Decisive Storm, to defeat the Houthis and reinstall Yemen's government. The subsequent air campaign and support to Yemeni military forces, provided by embedded Saudi and UAE Special Operations Forces advisors, bolstered the Yemeni government, which eventually stopped the initial Houthi offensive and then began to

slowly roll it back. Into this maelstrom, AQAP reemerged and pursued a three-pronged strategy composed of (1) robust governance and hearts-and-minds efforts, (2) deeper relationships with Yemeni tribes, and (3) embedding itself with anti-Houthi forces.²² Another development during this period was the creation on November 13, 2014, of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which emerged as a competitor to al-Qaeda among jihadists and Islamists in Yemen and Muslim communities globally. The group, later known as the Islamic State, also provided a competing vision of Islamist rule, which further prompted AQAP to embrace its own distinct governing strategy. Efforts by ISIS to administer the territory it had captured in Iraq and Syria (see table 2) as well as efforts to attack the West prompted al-Qaeda and AQAP in particular, al-Qaeda's best-organized affiliate, to escalate their operations. On January 7, 2015, militants associated with AQAP attacked the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris for publishing what it deemed to be offensive images of the Prophet Muhammad, killing twelve and injuring eleven French citizens. In part, this strike marked an attempt by AQAP to assert its global leadership credentials amid ISIS's rise. Within Yemen, the attack underscored AQAP's operational reach and strategic ambitions. As 2015 began, AQAP was well positioned to launch a new offensive at home due to a Yemeni government increasingly focused on survival, the sectarian challenge posed by the Houthis, generally anarchic conditions, and the group's enhanced *wasta* (clout, community standing) following the successful *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

On April 2, 2015, forces affiliated with AQAP launched an offensive to seize al-Mukalla, a port city located at around the midpoint of the Gulf of Aden coastline, Yemen's fifth largest city, and the provincial capital of Hadramawt governorate. Historically, the city had served as the capital of the Qataban sultanate, a tribal institution that had governed the Hadramawt area until its abolishment by the state in 1967. This history infused tribal outreach efforts by AQAP, which recognized the significance of the city to tribal leaders. On April 16, after a two-week battle, AQAP finally captured al-Mukalla as well as much of southern Hadramawt.²³ The swiftness of the assault and the ability of AQAP forces to quickly establish control caught the Yemeni government by surprise. Unlike in 2011–12, AQAP did not officially announce its control of the area, instead claiming the accomplishment under the name "Sons of Hadramawt," thereby

masking its identity. As one AQAP member put it, “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.”²⁴ It also created a group called the “Hadrami Domestic Council,” which was composed of local civil and tribal leaders, to run the local government as well as to conceal its influence.²⁵ The council was heavily influenced by local Salafi groups friendly to AQAP’s views and program.²⁶ The terrorist group provided a \$4 million budget for the council in order to furnish services to the population, and maintained security in the city with its forces as well as performing small civic projects.²⁷

Local AQAP-affiliated figures also took control of area police headquarters and began to mediate local disputes using sharia as a basis, although significantly limiting its application in the city. In addition to establishing a compliant local government as part of its “invisible hand strategy,” AQAP seized approximately \$120 million from the al-Mukalla branch of the Central Bank of Yemen, and benefited from local revenue and taxation opportunities, as well as amassing significant weapons and materiel from Yemeni army and Central Security Forces bases.²⁸ Al-Qaeda militants acquired many armored vehicles, such as tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and mobile rocket launchers, helping them build greater conventional capability.²⁹ Additionally, appeals by AQAP’s leadership to Yemeni al-Qaeda fighters serving in Iraq and Syria, alongside regular returnees from those theaters, resulted in several hundred extra personnel in 2014–15.³⁰ Each of these fighters brought with him extensive combat experience, especially against conventional, nation-state forces such as the Syrian and Iraqi armies, and against their Special Operations Forces. AQAP further bolstered its ranks by freeing approximately three hundred captured members from Yemeni government prisons in al-Mukalla along with many from a prison in the Abyan town of Jaar.³¹

These additional resources, joined by deepening relationships with local tribal leaders, allowed AQAP to continue carrying out its strategy to seize and govern other parts of southern Yemen. On December 2, 2015, AQAP seized the Abyan governorate capital, Zinjibar, as well as Jaar, both of which they had controlled in 2011–12.³² Soon thereafter, on February 20, 2016, AQAP took the remaining portions of Abyan governorate, linking them to al-Mukalla.³³ Much like its al-Mukalla efforts, AQAP used the name “Sons of Abyan” to obscure its activities and limit exposure to

coalition airstrikes and drone attacks.³⁴ In part, al-Qaeda forces succeeded in retaking Abyan because the Yemeni government had not left a viable holding force to maintain security in the area after clearing out AQAP in 2012–14.³⁵ In addition to seizing al-Mukalla and Abyan, AQAP embedded its members with tribal and Yemeni government forces fighting the Houthis in Aden, Taizz, Bayda, and Marib, among other locations. These efforts bolstered the fighting abilities of AQAP units, allowing them to become “semi-conventional” while burnishing their reputations with local groups as well as acquiring intelligence on possible future competitors.³⁶ Additionally, AQAP’s ability to align its interests with a broader anti-Houthi offensive further broadened its appeal, while underlining Yemeni government weaknesses in seeking to resist Houthi efforts. Another source of strength for AQAP was Saudi attention against the Houthis, deemphasizing its own anti-AQAP strategy within Yemen.

ANOTHER YEMEN ATTACK ON AL-QAEDA

In early 2016, having repulsed the initial Houthi offensive to take Aden and southern Yemen the previous year, Yemeni military forces along with UAE and U.S. forces launched an offensive to clear AQAP from the Abyan and Hadramawt governorates, among other areas within central Yemen. Throughout 2015, in an effort to degrade AQAP operational capabilities, coalition forces conducted dozens of air and drone strikes against AQAP targets in the areas under its control. In the first four months of 2015, drone strikes took out nearly the entire top tier of AQAP’s leadership, including Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi and Harith bin Ghazi al-Nazari, the two senior religious figures who rose to prominence after Awlaqi’s death in fall 2011. They have yet to be effectively replaced. Most notably, a drone strike killed AQAP leader Nasser al-Wahishi on June 16, 2015, six days after another such strike killed an AQAP commander and three fighters in al-Mukalla. In preparation for the Yemeni government offensive in April 2016, a U.S. airstrike killed approximately fifty AQAP fighters at a training camp in al-Mukalla. The offensive, led by the Yemeni army but bolstered on the ground by UAE forces, cleared al-Mukalla and the surrounding areas within less than forty-eight hours on April 25, 2016, incurring few casualties.

Coalition forces declared their operations “a resounding victory,” stating that they had “broken the back of terrorism and of the extremist groups” and “shaken [AQAP’s] foundation.”³⁷ The fighters, consisting

of conventional, special, and locally raised forces (e.g., Hadrami Elite Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, and Security Belt Forces), bolstered by U.S. capabilities, reasserted Yemeni government sovereignty over the area.³⁸ Yet however confident the assertions of victory, in large measure AQAP had made the strategic decision to withdraw into Yemen's hinterlands, avoiding the large-scale casualties it had incurred in the Yemeni offensive of 2012. It did this under the auspices of Yemeni tribal mediation, permitting the group to preserve its forces for longer-term development and operations. Subsequent reports indicate that AQAP's withdrawal was orchestrated, in part, by the UAE in a series of negotiated pacts, allowing AQAP to retreat while letting some of its members join UAE-supported locally recruited forces.³⁹ This underscores the importance of integrating locally raised forces answerable to locally elected representative bodies tied to the Yemeni state in an overall strategy to fight AQAP. If organized along these lines, Yemeni communities are much better able to resist AQAP's influence.

Throughout 2017–18, AQAP husbanded its resources within central Yemen while continuing to build its relationships with local civic, tribal, and religious leaders.⁴⁰ It also utilized insurgent hit-and-run tactics as well as higher-profile attacks against Yemeni and UAE security forces. Strikingly, its ability to conduct attacks against high-profile targets even within ostensibly government-controlled areas, such as in Aden, yet again showcased its ability to adapt and persist. Its use of combined operations such as suicide car and truck bombs, suicide vests, mortar attacks, and small-unit tactics against military bases and security headquarters indicated great sophistication as well as determination. In July 2016, for example, AQAP attacked Camp Sulban, a military base near Aden, by using a car bomb to breach the main gate, allowing a second car bomb to detonate within the camp, which in turn allowed another force of about fifteen to twenty men to assault the rear gate after it had been cleared by a suicide vest attacker.⁴¹ All the attackers wore military uniforms, prompting confusion among forces resisting the assault.⁴² Underscoring AQAP's continued lethality and reach, it mounted other attacks such as in Zinjibar in February 2017 against the Security Belt (*Hizam Amni*) headquarters, in Lahij governorate in March 2017 against the security force's headquarters, and in March 2017 against a battalion of Yemeni border guards, a raid in which the group seized numerous arms, vehicles, and prisoners.⁴³ From early 2017

to August 2018, the United States conducted approximately 140 strikes against AQAP leaders and forces in a continuing effort to degrade the terrorist group's operational capabilities.⁴⁴ Although UAE forces arrested AQAP's number-two official, Saudi-born Abu Ali al-Sayari, in March 2017 in Hadramawt, they continue to fight AQAP in central Yemen and deploy throughout the region.⁴⁵

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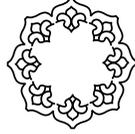
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CHAPTER 4

Harnessing the Yemeni Population Against AQAP



MUCH OF THE DEBATE surrounding U.S. policy options in Yemen has been informed by the legacies of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Arab Spring, U.S. budgetary and economic constraints, and complications arising from the struggle against Houthi forces within Yemen.¹ The current U.S. approach, based on using drone strikes, direct-action raids, and coordination with Saudi and UAE forces, is largely shaped by these overarching factors. For some administration officials, the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions and the long-running challenges associated with defeating the insurgencies there serve as evidence that large-scale U.S. military operations cannot vanquish asymmetric threats, and that small-scale solutions are therefore preferable. The Arab Spring and its aftereffects have likewise consumed significant U.S. government energy aimed at shaping the direction of the region. For many policymakers, Yemen is not considered a strategic concern when compared to developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, even though the threat from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is significant. In some respects, Yemen has become a diplomatic economy-of-force operation outsourced to the counterterrorism policy community, with the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) preoccupied with other events in the region. In light of these realities, a limited counterterrorism approach to Yemen would seem to offer a low-cost, low-casualty, and, as many view it, appropriate “solution” to the AQAP threat. But however effective a drone-centric approach might be at degrading

AQAP's operational capabilities, it is not a strategy that will defeat the terrorist organization in Yemen. A new approach must be developed, guided by prior U.S. experiences from confronting terrorist organizations as well as insurgencies.

AN ADAPTIVE ADVERSARY, A U.S. FAILURE TO RESPOND

The U.S. counterterrorism strategy for Yemen is focused primarily on narrow UAV strikes, in many ways inspired by U.S. successes against al-Qaeda in Pakistan's frontier provinces, as well as increased aid meant to help Yemen's government fight AQAP directly. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, suggests that limited counterterrorism missions, whether UAV strikes, direct-action raids, airstrikes, or sniper attacks, do not amount to a complete strategy for enduring success against terrorist groups. These efforts degrade but do not defeat al-Qaeda. This perspective is echoed by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, former commander of the Afghanistan-based International Security Assistance Force, who stated in the March/April 2013 issue of *Foreign Affairs* that "strikes alone can never do more than keep an enemy at bay."² The al-Qaeda in today's southern Arabia is different from the al-Qaeda of prior conflicts, requiring development of a tailored strategy. Additionally, U.S. security in the region depends on Yemen's willingness to pursue al-Qaeda—a job U.S. forces cannot do unilaterally. This means the United States must start exercising consistent and effective influence with Yemen's leadership toward encouraging it to confront AQAP, even though the Yemeni government may not consider AQAP the highest priority. Furthermore, as previous chapters have shown, the al-Qaeda affiliate has become much more adept at marshaling support from the Yemeni people, capitalizing on grievances to bolster its political and military program. These grievances, whether directed against a central government, a local leader, or generally anarchic conditions, are frequently rooted in political, tribal, economic, and justice concerns that cannot be addressed by limited counterterrorism approaches. Practically speaking, this means that AQAP is more a part of than separate from the Yemeni community, which makes targeting the group with UAVs extremely difficult. AQAP in this sense operates more like an insurgent group seeking to leverage the population for its own ends than strictly a terrorist organization.

For policymakers in Washington and U.S. officials in Yemen alike, a fundamental shortcoming involves insufficient knowledge of communities where AQAP operates, let alone relationships with members of these communities. U.S. information often comes from the Yemeni government itself or allied partners that have little incentive to accurately portray the drivers of instability in many of these provinces, given their location in the south. Indeed, frequently the information is incomplete or nonexistent. Additionally, lacking a formal U.S. diplomatic presence in Yemen, U.S. officials have very little opportunity to develop personal relationships with key tribal, religious, business, and civic leaders, ties that could help cast light on the people's concerns. Largely for these reasons, U.S. efforts against AQAP, limited to counterterrorism operations, do not address the fundamental issues prompting communities to tolerate the Islamist movement's presence, actively support its goals, or fall under its coercive influence. Even when it had a formal presence in Yemen prior to 2015, the United States was not well organized to exercise influence within the Yemeni government at either the national or the provincial level, where the terrorist group was strongest.³ A new approach must be informed by al-Qaeda's history in Yemen as well as by past U.S. efforts to fight the terrorist group.

BEYOND 'BUTCHER AND BOLT' AND TOWARD A 'FORWARD STRATEGY'

The perspective whereby limited counterterrorism operations are seen to constitute a low-cost, low-visibility, and relatively inexpensive "solution" to a terrorist presence often issues from a poor understanding of the human terrain exploited by such groups. Related blind spots prompt policymakers to operate based on impressionistic, incomplete, and often incorrect and counterproductive information. The limited counterterrorism "solutions" that follow might impair some of a group's operational capabilities but, as General McChrystal made clear, they never solve them. Moreover, a complementary strategy of good governance, reconstruction, and development, although attractive in principle, often suffers from an indigenous government's unwillingness to make the reforms necessary to address the underlying grievances seized upon by terrorist groups. In a larger sense, U.S. diplomatic, development, military, and intelligence bureaucracies are frequently limited in their thinking about

how to approach decentralized, locally based, long-term, and tribally oriented insurgencies that seamlessly blend civil and military approaches. These bureaucratic hurdles are more difficult to overcome when the genuine aspirations of communities are obscured or filtered through unsympathetic host governments.

Counterterrorism missions are an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to defeat AQAP but they are insufficient in the long term and, because they sometimes cause civilian casualties, may even be counterproductive. What is needed is a low-cost, low-visibility, and relatively inexpensive strategy of good governance, development, and reconstruction activities in Yemen's provinces that is realistic, complements a counterterrorism approach, and responds to communities' needs in seeking to eliminate the al-Qaeda threat. Additionally important is the continued institutionalization of counterinsurgency lessons learned from U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and their application to new theaters of conflict. Of the many lessons learned from these two conflicts, one of the most indispensable was that community groups must be enlisted in their own defense, and that any strategy short of doing so cedes the population to the insurgents. In the end, a third option exists between undertaking large-scale military invasions with mainly conventional forces and limited counterterrorism solutions: this third option focuses on enlisting communities in their own governance and defense. Failure to include them not only limits prospects for success, it also constrains other strategies, narrowing their path to a fundamental solution. The United States must strive for more than fleeting security in Yemen, and only bringing in community groups can facilitate the enduring outcome it seeks.

U.S. OPTIONS FOR DEFEATING THE AL-QAEDA INSURGENCY IN YEMEN

In confronting AQAP in Yemen, the United States should complement its UAV-centered counterterrorism strategy with an approach aimed at helping Yemen expand its security and government presence into areas where al-Qaeda's influence is most pervasive. A successful pacification campaign against AQAP would mirror the group's own structure and strategy as a means of undermining it, and be reinforced by counterinsurgency best practices. This inherently decentralized approach would strive to leverage the Yemeni population against AQAP and facilitate a larger government

presence in the countryside. In contrast to the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, a Yemen-specific approach would rely on a much smaller U.S. presence and exercise influence by, with, and through the Yemeni government to a greater extent. An austere rather than a resource-intensive expeditionary strategy would prioritize U.S. relationships with Yemeni counterparts, both in the government and among the populace, to address the root causes of al-Qaeda's strength.

The small U.S. presence in Yemen has its benefits. One is that the challenges facing the country are so great that a limited U.S. contingent is compelled to work together more closely than would a larger mission. A greater sense of teamwork can therefore emerge, despite likely inevitable friction between the security, governance, and development sectors. Through this small team, a U.S.-coordinated al-Qaeda pacification program would require not just a dedicated effort but a blending of traditional approaches, with operational design needing to compensate for diminished resources. Here again, the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq can inform U.S. stabilization efforts, including rethinking of traditional bureaucratic approaches, even as on-the-ground security conditions and diplomatic relations with Yemen will shape any future strategy. Once the U.S. diplomatic presence is reestablished, a separate entity should be created that answers to the U.S. ambassador, and has coequal status with the USAID mission director as well as the senior U.S. service member in Yemen. The director for this effort should expect to be in Yemen for as many years as it takes to eliminate the al-Qaeda threat, and should have a background in both civilian and military approaches to fighting insurgencies. Since this person and key staff will be living in Yemen for much longer than regular tours allow, they should be provided a special dispensation to bring their families with them and access to other benefits. This will not only boost the quality of potential recruits for the position but also maintain the director's morale.

This initiative could be called the Partnership and Pacification Program, or PPP, to emphasize its "by, with, and through" nature and the desired end state of AQAP's defeat. Reflecting the experience of its director, it should draw from both civilian and military organizations for its personnel, who would jointly serve in a unified chain of command. One method of recruitment would entail allowing U.S. personnel to simply extend their current tours. Additionally, the notion of a "Yemen Hands" program, based

on the Afghan precedent and offering extended tours to select personnel, should be evaluated. Running the organization and supporting field staff should be the job of dedicated staff from the U.S. military civil affairs community. In the past, teams like this known as civil-military support elements (CMSEs) operated in Yemen, and they could be reestablished as part of this effort. Members usually wore civilian clothes and conducted needs assessments and small-scale development projects while gathering atmospherics on the population and enabling civilian governance and development programming. While volunteers from the civilian agencies should be encouraged to participate in this effort, practically speaking the U.S. military's civil affairs community is best positioned from a doctrinal and resource perspective to implement it.

Once an organization such as the PPP has been created, focused on U.S. efforts in Yemen's countryside, current security, governance, and development programming must be reviewed and priority given to the areas where al-Qaeda is strongest and to those Yemeni ministries most involved in provincial affairs. This will require a reorienting of some resources away from development and toward stabilization, away from counterterrorism and toward pacification, and away from political reporting toward political action. It is not unusual, for example, for development programs to be undertaken in relatively safe areas of Yemen because working with local Yemeni officials is so much easier there when their efforts are required in dangerous sections of the country. At the same time, many safer areas often have more highly developed governance structures and greater capacity, suggesting that some development programming can be reallocated to more-unstable regions. In order to prepare the Yemeni military for an enduring presence in the countryside, U.S. military training efforts should expand dramatically beyond counterterrorism units to include conventional Yemeni military forces. Initial efforts should be made to develop relationships with these units and to disseminate counterinsurgency best practices, but these advisors should also be prepared to embed with the units as they deploy to Yemen's hinterlands. Similarly, governance mentors should be assigned to Yemen's key ministries focused on service delivery to the provinces, and a cadre should be fostered to partner with CMSEs attached to provincial governors.

Having established relationships with key Yemeni military and civilian

officials and having an organization dedicated for work in the field, U.S. pacification teams should then deploy with Yemeni security forces to the countryside, while also embedding with provincial officials. The overarching goals of these teams are to partner with the Yemeni military to provide combat advice as they confront al-Qaeda and then transition to a population-protection posture. These advisors would work with Yemeni military officials to clear areas currently held by AQAP and then transition to a holding status. Once this step is achieved, the advisors would help the Yemeni military bolster area tribes and local police forces as part of an enduring “hold” strategy to prevent al-Qaeda from returning. Much like the Anbar Awakening Councils in Iraq and the Afghan Local Police program in Afghanistan, the United States should explore the possibility, in concert with UAE forces, of helping Yemen regularize its tribal supporters into defensively oriented and legitimate security forces.⁴ These local partners have an incentive to prevent al-Qaeda from returning to their tribal areas, and if this initiative is done correctly, security will be sustainable. This is because the partners will answer to official security forces, meaning that their actions will be overseen by the Yemeni state, have legitimacy, and have a greater likelihood of being effective.⁵

Once security has been established in these regions, CMSEs should deploy to the capitals of the relevant provinces to partner with their respective governors in order to expand Yemeni sovereignty there. These teams, while focusing on extending the reach of the central government, would facilitate good governance and development, provide humanitarian aid and conduct needs assessments, and serve as enablers of U.S. government civilian development programming. While deployed in select provinces, they would mentor local leaders in ways consistent with the goals of the Yemeni government. The aims of this expanded U.S. presence in the provinces would be facilitating greater Yemeni government and security involvement in order to defeat al-Qaeda's military as well as its political strategy.

A U.S. endeavor would need to partner with not just other nations interested in defeating al-Qaeda in Yemen (e.g., the UAE) but also with international institutions such as the World Bank, World Health Organization, and GCC, among others, to facilitate a more robust international presence in Yemen's countryside. Having U.S. personnel share the risks of a forward presence with international institutions

and personnel would enhance safety, mission success, and credibility. Additionally, an expanded U.S. presence would enjoy wider acceptance if perceived as having international partners and legitimacy. A robust international field presence would also give incentives for greater Yemeni government involvement with its people outside the main cities. For the international community, the initiative would cast light on the challenges faced by Yemenis outside Sanaa and Aden, while raising awareness about AQAP and what it will take to defeat the group. Finally, the U.S. initiative and prospective greater Yemeni government engagement in the countryside would strongly counter the al-Qaeda narrative that national-level Yemeni officials do not care about their people and, further, that non-Islamic countries are at war with Islam. A Yemeni citizenry protected by its security services, enlisted in its own defense, and then empowered to make its own community political decisions could be a resilient check against the return of al-Qaeda in Yemen and its false promise of a better future. It could also safeguard U.S. interests, given that AQAP will have been defeated by the very people it sought to enlist in its cause.

A longstanding challenge in the Yemen conflict has been synchronizing delivery of sustained population protection with robust good governance, development, and reconstruction efforts. All too often, security forces have focused on short-term clearing operations or intelligence-driven raids for specific targets as opposed to adopting a population-security posture. Additionally, good governance and development initiatives frequently have emphasized short-term programs, have been insufficiently resourced, have been uncoordinated with military efforts, or have failed to address underlying structural problems with how local government is organized.

As great as these obstacles have been to adopting a comprehensive approach to combating AQAP, the additional challenge of inadequate U.S. partnering with the Yemeni government has only exacerbated them. In many respects, this has simply been for lack of a viable government to partner with or one capable of remaining present at the local level. If the political conditions are right for success, however, a synchronized effort along security, governance, and development lines of operation can have significant and quite dramatic results for the local population. The key innovation in combating AQAP—similar to efforts at fighting the Taliban, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the Islamic State—is the necessity for U.S. military, intelligence, diplomatic, and development personnel to adopt a

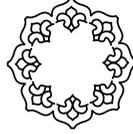
decentralized approach that focuses on bottom-up stability and organizes the local population to resist insurgent intimidation and better govern itself. In essence, as intimated earlier in the chapter, the goal is to use al-Qaeda's strategy and structure against it through a deeper partnership with the Yemeni people and their government—but this won't happen without better structuring and resourcing of U.S. efforts. A dedicated effort must be created that focuses U.S. activity on a stronger partnership with the Yemeni government, emphasizing the delivery of sustainable local security and services to Yemenis. If the United States can more effectively leverage its relationships with various Yemeni actors, this will more than make up for the modest U.S. presence in Yemen and could lead, at last, to a strategy that comprehensively defeats AQAP.

Notes

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CHAPTER 5

Conclusion and Recommendations



REALISTICALLY, A REVISED U.S. approach in partnership with the Yemeni government can only take place within a stable southern Yemen. However much the Yemeni government continues to fight Houthi forces to retake the north and the capital, Sanaa, contemporary Yemen has de facto become two countries again, with a border similar to that before unification. This reality has invigorated southern popular sentiment to push for re-separation and a declaration of an independent South Yemen; this perspective was expressed in early October 2018 by the group known as the Southern Transitional Council.¹ Whether or not an official split occurs, local Yemeni politics at the governorate, district, and municipal levels needs to be revitalized through institutional reform and a rebalancing of roles and responsibilities with the central government.² Additionally, a robust program of local-governance capacity building must be undertaken to create a dynamic political program that can compete with and defeat al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula along with other challengers to Yemeni sovereignty, including certain tribes and criminal elements, while empowering communities.

Further, despite unsettled Yemeni politics since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the local leadership has been effectively frozen since even before then. The Governorate and District Council members elected in 2006 are still serving in their positions after elections were delayed and then deferred altogether. Additionally, a policy, however indirect, of keeping friendly governors in power by then president Saleh, continued

under President Hadi, and has further calcified local politics and increased corruption. If a local Yemeni official is inclined to lead his community and solve its problems, even amid present security threats, he has few options for peacefully pursuing these goals within the current government structure and political situation. Elections need to take place to relegitimize and rejuvenate the Yemeni government as well as allow new leaders to emerge to lead a process of institutional reform.

Mirroring AQAP itself, the U.S. approach must be decentralized, locally based, long term, and holistic, blending military and civil approaches.³ It must also be synchronized and integrated with Yemeni and international efforts and foster resilient governing systems at the village, district, provincial, and national levels with effective checks and balances. Specifically, Washington should propose a more substantive training program for Yemen's security services, concentrating on both its conventional forces and counterterrorism units, and study how to build local forces as well (e.g., in the spirit of Anbar Awakening Councils and the Afghan Local Police program). U.S. trainers should also embed with Yemeni units deployed in the provinces. Government forces could then benefit directly from U.S. training and equipment as they confront AQAP in the countryside. Additionally, Washington's understanding of provincial dynamics would improve. Once this security initiative is under way, the United States should evaluate the practical aspects of decentralizing its governance and development programs, moving some of them from the capital (or Aden) to the countryside in partnership with provincial governors. This approach would bolster local governance and mitigate some of the underlying grievances that AQAP exploits to increase its support.⁴

Washington should also consider a dedicated effort to map Yemen's human terrain and gain a better understanding of its communities, which would in turn help in the effort against AQAP. Specifically, the U.S. Department of State, USAID, and the U.S. military should extend the tours of select personnel who work on Yemen in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the local situation. The United States should also develop a "Yemen Hands" initiative similar to the Afghan Hands program, wherein U.S. personnel work in the country for a number of years and return home from deployments and continue to work on Yemen issues on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Council, U.S. Department

of State, or USAID. These approaches would also even out the continuity problems that result from constant personnel rotations. Although any U.S. strategy for Yemen will be difficult to implement, it will be harder if little is known about the country outside the major cities. Only through a better understanding of local dynamics in the provinces will U.S. policymakers be able to make the crucial decisions needed to defeat AQAP and thwart any new attacks it may be planning on the United States.⁵

Further areas for attention include building sustained local security forces, fostering a revitalized judiciary that makes justice a reality for most Yemenis, and rejuvenating civil institutions. The Yemeni judicial system has long suffered from politicization, corruption, and viability issues and was frequently used as a tool by the government against its opponents. Additionally, powerful groups, including tribes, as well as individuals have used untoward influence on the judiciary to sway its decisions or prompt it to not act at all. Al-Qaeda's justice efforts have been particularly effective at tapping into the discontent this has generated. Building a Yemeni state infrastructure in the countryside must therefore include a robust program of justice reform and implementation. The security challenge is a complex one. In delivering sustained security efforts and associated stability, AQAP appealed to the needs of many southern Yemeni communities, which saw the largely northern-origin national police and military as occupying forces, not partners. Efforts to use "popular committees" to clear AQAP forces from southern Yemen in 2012 demonstrate the effectiveness of locally raised forces, as do precedents from Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶ The lack of sustained backing for these forces, however—through salaries, training, and logistical support—caused their eventual breakdown and, in some cases, led them to prey upon the local population. Additionally, many of these forces were not used to hold areas cleared of AQAP's presence, nor were related operations followed by local-level political reform initiatives or displays of leadership. This amounted to a spate of squandered opportunities.

BUILDING POLITICAL MOMENTUM

The United States should use a major military victory by the Yemeni government against Houthi forces as an opportunity to introduce a new engagement strategy with Yemen. The goals of this effort should be to legitimize and rejuvenate the Yemeni government as well as allow new

leaders to emerge to lead a process of institutional reform to bolster local governance.⁷

Reestablish a consulate in Aden. Establishing a consulate in Aden, which was closed in response to threats in 2009, would not only be a symbolic rejection of al-Qaeda's influence in southern Yemen but would also visibly exemplify U.S. support to Yemen's government and Washington's interest in fostering a robust good governance and development effort in the country's provinces. Additionally, a U.S. consulate along with a decentralized approach to good governance and development could serve as a catalyst for the Yemeni government to undertake more-dedicated efforts in southern as well as central Yemen to meet the needs of the population, blunting AQAP's appeal.

Appoint a second ambassador to Yemen. The United States should explore appointing a second ambassador to Yemen to allow the present ambassador to focus on the proposed new engagement strategy; the second ambassador would focus on regional engagement aimed at furthering U.S. interests in the country.

Announce a forward strategy. The United States should announce its intention to facilitate a political process within Yemen focused on institutional reform and decentralization of governing institutions. To this end, the United States should declare its goal to bolster local governance through facilitating U.S. and international partnerships with Yemeni governors and locally elected officials.

ORGANIZING FOR SUCCESS

In the end, effective mobilization against a well-entrenched AQAP presence will require thorough preparation taking into account these key principles:

Prepare for victory. A pacification program designed to extend Yemeni government sovereignty to the provinces where al-Qaeda is most active will require not just a dedicated effort but a blending of traditional approaches. In this case, effective operational design can compensate for diminished resources. At a reestablished U.S. consulate in Aden, a separate

entity should be created to bring focused attention to Yemen's countryside and, through its organizational emphasis, develop a deeper relationship with those Yemeni government elements devoted to service delivery to the provinces.

Focus on the countryside. Once an organization has been created to channel U.S. efforts toward pacifying Yemen's countryside, current security, governance, and development programming must be reviewed and priority given to the areas where al-Qaeda is strongest and to those Yemeni ministries most involved in provincial affairs. This will require a reorienting of some resources away from development and toward stabilization, from counterterrorism and toward pacification, and from political reporting and toward political action.

Enable a "clear and hold" strategy. Having established relationships with key Yemeni military and civilian officials and having an organization dedicated for work in the field, U.S. pacification teams should deploy with Yemeni security forces to the countryside and also embed with provincial officials. The overarching goal of these teams would be partnering with Yemeni military forces to advise them as they confront al-Qaeda and then transition to a population-protection posture.

Defeat al-Qaeda's soft power strategy. Once security has been established in these regions, civil-military support elements, or CMSEs, should deploy to provincial capitals to partner with their respective governors in order to expand Yemeni sovereignty. These teams would focus on extending the reach of the central government, facilitating good governance and development, providing humanitarian aid and conducting needs assessments, and serving as enablers of U.S. government civilian development programming. They would also mentor local leaders in ways consistent with Yemeni government goals.

Internationalize the struggle. A U.S. approach must welcome not just other nations interested in defeating AQAP but also international institutions such as the World Bank, World Health Organization, and GCC, among others, to facilitate a stronger international presence in Yemen's countryside. U.S. personnel will be at greater risk once they

deploy to these forward locations, so sharing the risks with international institutions and personnel will enhance safety, mission success, and credibility, considering that an expanded U.S. presence will enjoy wider acceptance if perceived as having international legitimacy.

Increase U.S. embassy staffing. U.S. embassy and consulate staffing will need to be bolstered to facilitate the types of governance, development, and political tasks required of the Yemeni government. A rebalancing of personnel must be achieved, with greater emphasis placed on governance and development efforts.

Advise cabinet ministers. Many of Yemen's new ministers are inexperienced in both the technical aspects of their cabinet portfolios and in leading large organizations. For this reason, the United States should partner with the international community to establish an effective ministerial-advising program aimed at mentoring Yemen's senior-level leaders and improving their ability to govern, administer their programs, and lead on their respective portfolios. This effort will not only reinforce Yemen's governing capacity but also help President Hadi assert greater control over his government.

Establish a Yemen Hands program. To make the most of U.S. relationships with local Yemeni leaders as well as government officials, Washington should consider establishing a "Yemen Hands" program modeled after its Afghan Hands predecessor. This initiative, by allowing personnel to remain in country beyond current rotations, would let a select number of U.S. officials concentrate on establishing deeper relationships with the Yemeni people. It would therefore enable the United States to more effectively confront AQAP using a rich network of relationships.

Increase international monitoring of elections. To ensure future Yemeni elections are considered legitimate and all political groups believe their votes count, the United States should evaluate supporting an enhanced international monitoring presence. These results will also need to be followed up with greater governance aid for Yemen's central government ministries and legislature. This way, elections can be perceived as a real step forward, not an empty gesture.

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