

AQAP in South Yemen: Past and Present

by [Summer Ahmed \(/experts/summer-ahmed\)](#)

Aug 30, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tnzym-alqadt-fy-jzyrt-alrb-fy-alyymn-aljnwby-byn-alams-walywm\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Summer Ahmed \(/experts/summer-ahmed\)](#)

Summer Ahmed is a writer and activist formerly at UN Women, focusing on South Yemen and Saudi Arabia.



Brief Analysis

Coverage of al-Qaeda in Yemen has always disproportionately focused on the threat that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) poses to the West, while ignoring the plight of the local population in areas under its control. However, southern Yemen's complicated history led to the development and strengthening of AQAP, and has turned the country's southern population into the primary victims of suppression and terror, both from AQAP and its predecessors.

AQAP—arguably the most powerful branch of al-Qaeda—uses a large portion of southern Yemeni territory seized following the Yemeni [revolution \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-al-qaeda-crescent-in-yemen\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-al-qaeda-crescent-in-yemen) in 2011 as its base. A few years later, it further secured its position during the instability in the south caused by Yemen's most recent conflict between Houthis and the Hadi government. However, the development of the AQAP stretches back much further than the current conflict, with its roots developing decades earlier.

In 1990, the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) united with the northern Yemen Arab Republic to form a unified Yemen. While in theory the unification was meant to be symbolic of a more peaceful future for Yemen after decades of tension and conflict between the two states, in reality the relationship between the northern and southern sections of the country remained rocky, with tensions erupting again in 1994. It was during this time period that "returning Afghan Arabs,"—as they were widely known—arrived in the south and became a useful tool for Saleh against southern socialists, with some sections of this group later developing into AQAP.

In his book, *The Last Refuge*, Gregory Johnsen addressed the discrepancies between Yemen and other Arab governments in their support for the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets, especially as more Arab fighters traveled to Afghanistan in the mid-1980s. Johnsen noted that most Arab governments "publicly supported the Jihad while privately discouraging their young men from traveling to Afghanistan." In contrast, the northern Yemen Arab Republic sent many of their "best and brightest" to the front lines, with the journey becoming a rite of passage for many. After the "Mujahidin" returned to a unified Yemen in the early 1990s, they were welcomed as heroes by northerner President Saleh's government—with some even receiving official military positions.

The enthusiasm of the north's government for the war in Afghanistan can, in part, be explained by the role of the Soviets closer to home. Before unification, the PDRY was heavily supported by the Soviet Union as the only

communist nation in the Arab peninsula. After unification, this deep rift in ideology would play a role in “returning Afghan Arabs” attitudes towards the south as well. When civil war broke out in the summer of 1994, the northern Jihadis overran South Yemen, armed with a religious Fatwa justifying the killing of Socialist infidels in the south. The [fatwa \(https://www.ye1.org/forum/threads/821415/\)](https://www.ye1.org/forum/threads/821415/) came from the northern Yemeni Justice Minister Abdulwahab Aldaylami and religious cleric Abd Al-Majid Al-Zindani, now on the U.S. Global **Terrorist** [list \(https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js1190.aspx\)](https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js1190.aspx). As the International Crisis Group [notes \(https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base\)](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base), Saleh and his general Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar relied on these forces as proxies, rewarding some of these men afterwards.

After northern groups defeated the southern military forces, the “Afghan Arabs” never left. Instead, they became the **arm of the northern government (https://www.hate-speech.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/From-Global-Insurgent-to-State-Enforcer.pdf)** in southern Yemen, used to defend and protect the Yemeni union. The government’s attitudes towards extremists in the country were called into question through a series of government appointments, most famous of these being the “returning Afghan Arabs” Tarik al-Fadhli and Jamal al-Nahdi, as well as current Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.

The former, considered one of the **founding members (https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Dawsari_FINAL_180201.pdf)** of AQAP, served in the Majlis al-Shura council and Saleh’s General People’s Congress party. Al-Nahdi was also on a permanent committee of the General People’s Congress—despite his role in the 1992 bombing of the several hotels under the direction of Osama bin-Laden.

Moreover, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who also played a major role in Saleh’s government, is widely seen in the south as a man with deep connections to the south’s extremist elements. Ultimately, through empowering men such as these and through a variety of restrictive policies, the Northern-based government took full control of the south, implementing unity by force. During this period, many southern Yemenis viewed unity as occupation. Meanwhile, the “Afghan Arabs,” thus empowered, remained and increased their hold on southern territories during this time.

On the political front, the Islah Party, the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Yemen founded by the al-Ahmar family, facilitated major changes to the south’s legal landscape. Many southerners would ultimately come to view Islah as sponsors and facilitators of the Al-Qaeda presence that would later develop, and their upper hand in the South increased southerners’ sense that extremists controlled the area.

Islah politicians oversaw the implementation of policies which shifted South Yemen from a secular socialist society to a religious conservative one. The changes with the greatest impact concerned education and women’s rights: while in the PDRY, education had been mandatory for all boys and girls, new laws in the south meant that parents were no longer required to send their children to school at all. Marriage laws were also changed. Pre-unity, the legal marriage age in the PDRY had been 18. This law was removed, and parents increasingly married their daughters off as young as 12 years old.

In addition to changing the laws in the south, the central government of Sana’a marginalized southerners and often neglected state institutions such as schools, roads, and hospitals in the south. These two policies—removing progressive legal protections and weakening state infrastructure—worked together to create a vacuum of services and support. Among other groups, the original Yemen branch of Al-Qaida active during the early 2000s and AQAP—formed from Yemeni and Saudi branches of Al-Qaeda in 2009—would come to fill this gap, which in turn increased popular opinion of the group and allowed for increased recruitment opportunities even as the region as a whole suffered.

Ironically, the terrorist group that the central government had helped foster also became a reason for the central

government to target the south. The more active al-Qaeda became in southern provinces, from kidnapping (<http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9812/29/yemen.04/>) foreigners to bombing hotels and tourist destinations, the more the local population suffered when the government retaliated brutally in the name of “fighting terror.” However, the horrors perpetrated by al-Qaeda elements on the residents of the territories in which they operated—when not affecting foreigners—often went unreported.

Nevertheless, terrorist organizations operating in South Yemen have committed horrendous crimes against southerners throughout the past decade. The rate of these crimes increased dramatically after the establishment of the Southern Movement in 2007, which demanded the restoration of South Yemen to its pre-1990 agreement with North Yemen. Al-Qaeda publicly lashed southerners who raised the former communist South Yemen flag and harassed, tortured, and threatened Southern Movement leaders—with the Yemeni National Security doing the same (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/12/15/name-unity/yemeni-governments-brutal-response-southern-movement-protests>).

In this context, many Southerners saw Al-Qaeda forces as a new iteration of the Sana’a government’s use of Jihadis to implement and defend Yemeni unity just as they had used “Afghan Arabs” during the war of 1994. These accusations were not baseless, especially as the leadership of AQAP was drawn directly from the returning Afghan Arabs—including AQAP’s current emir Qasim al-Rami, who trained in Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

However, some of the most intense violence has come as Yemen’s unity crumbled, in the midst of the fight between Yemen’s central government and the Houthis. The latest civil war provided a greater vacuum for AQAP to flourish in the south, allowing al-Qaeda to expand from the remote areas it controlled in the south to major cities, such as Hadramout province’s capital Mukalla (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/04/world/middleeast/al-qaeda-al-mukalla-yemen.html>). AQAP’s rule there and elsewhere ushered in obscene levels of violence throughout the peninsula. During the takeover of Mukalla, AQAP targeted journalists and activists, conducted house raids, and kidnapped and killed anyone who they saw as a threat to their presence. People accused of espionage for the Arab Coalition or the United States were publicly hanged and left dangling for days in order to instill fear. AQAP would decapitate (<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/mukalla-the-yemeni-city-that-defeated-al-qaeda-and-now-needs-the-world-s-help-1.769319>) young men who volunteered for the security forces, stone (<https://www.france24.com/en/20181203-yemen-city-fights-resurrect-itself-after-al-qaeda-defeat>) adulterers in public, and banned dance and music.

The southern provinces of Shabwah and Abyan also suffered from the same types of brutality: many were kidnapped, accused of espionage, and publicly executed—while residents who refused to provide support for AQAP were also kidnapped, tortured, or killed.

After decades of torture and abuse by jihadi elements in the south, southerners were highly motivated to fight back against this latest threat. When the Arab Coalition—mainly the United Arab Emirates with support from the United States—started to train local southern forces to fight AQAP, thousands of southerners welcomed the support and saw it as an opportunity to finally rid their provinces from decades of repression and increasing terror. These soldiers were motivated to fight AQAP because they were the principle victims—both of AQAP terror and the government’s war against it.

The subsequent battles between southern forces and AQAP have come at a considerable price. Members of southern security forces from the Security Belt, Hadhrami Elite, and Shabwani Elite forces have been killed liberating the south from AQAP. Just weeks ago, AQAP targeted a Security Belt checkpoint in Abyan, killing five soldiers and injuring three.

Even so, enormous progress (<https://www.acleddata.com/2019/05/09/yemens-fractured-south-shabwah-and->

hadramawt/) has been made against AQAP, with the majority of Hadhramout, Shabwah, and Abyan having been liberated and with residents starting to rebuild their lives. However, it is important to implement security and continue the support and training of these forces fighting AQAP in order to ensure that this threat to the south is permanently removed.

The southern security forces fighting AQAP have been highly effective and have proven to be a potent force against terrorism. And despite the UAE's drawdown in other regions of Yemen, their continued presence in the southern provinces of Shabwah and Hadramout allows for continued support to the elite forces there fighting the AQAP. However, going forward, the international community and the United States specifically should focus on working with local forces to help continue to improve their combat abilities. Efforts should also be made to provide resources to help the local population—removing the vacuum of services and resources that provide an opportunity for terrorist organizations such as AQAP to exploit.

As the southern region's challenging history demonstrates, southern Yemenis are the population that suffers most from the presence of AQAP, and while Yemen's civil war is complicated, efforts to fight against terror should be clear-cut and internationally supported. Now that southerners are fighting back, the international community should not miss this chance to support Yemenis in their efforts remove the presence of these terrorists from their midst. ♦

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

♦
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

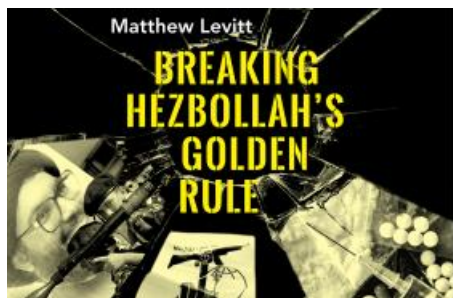
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

♦

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)