

Al-Qaeda's Shadow Government in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

Washington should help Sana confront al-Qaeda in the provinces where it is strongest, focusing less on drones and more on expanding Yemeni security forces to the countryside and countering the group's increasing soft-power savvy.

A recently captured document written by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) reveals an unusual degree of self-reflection regarding the terrorist group's short-lived control over parts of southern Yemen. Having retreated to historic safe havens in the interior following last year's Yemeni military campaign, AQAP has returned to its insurgent roots as it reconstitutes its forces. As part of this regenerative process, it has undertaken a thorough review of its 2011-2012 occupation and administration in the south -- a unique approach given that al-Qaeda has never devoted much attention to the details of governance and development nor administered such a large area in the past. Among other things, the document indicates that AQAP sees value in analyzing its experience with governance and using it as a propaganda tool to blunt criticism that al-Qaeda does not care about the people. While AQAP's actual record of administering territory falls far short of what it presents in its self-review, the document's depth of thinking and its focus on popular sentiment provide valuable insights into al-Qaeda's future strategy in Yemen and elsewhere.

UNIQUE CONDITIONS IN YEMEN

Throughout its history, al-Qaeda has usually been hosted by a foreign government, tribal/ethnic group, or other terrorist group (e.g., in Sudan, the Pakistani tribal region, and Afghanistan under the Taliban). In other cases, the group was so involved in fighting that it did not have a chance to establish a basic governance program of its own (e.g., during the Iraq war). In Yemen, however, the group has established an internal safe haven that is largely uncontested by state security forces, giving it ample opportunity to apply a sharia-based system of government.

In addition, al-Qaeda leaders have typically been of a different ethnic or racial background than the population they

lived alongside, which naturally limited their ability to propose a governing program that locals would view as anything more than a foreign import. Yet AQAP is led by a Yemeni, and much of its senior leadership comes from either Yemen or nearby Saudi Arabia, so the group is better positioned to build rapport with the local population and understand its concerns.

During its year-long occupation in the southern governorates of Abyan and Shabwa, AQAP attempted to implement a robust governance program involving community engagement, basic service delivery, administration of justice, humanitarian assistance, population security, and freedom of movement for commercial activities. Despite those efforts to win hearts and minds, however, the group's brutal rule alienated many locals and prompted thousands to flee the harsh reality of al-Qaeda-style Islamist governance. Since being forced to pull back into its traditional sanctuaries, AQAP has reviewed its brief experience with governing and is attempting to modify its approach and pass the lessons along to other al-Qaeda affiliates.

SHIFTING STRATEGY

One of the lessons AQAP learned from its occupation was that selectively enforcing key sharia provisions while addressing the local population's main problems (e.g., security, water disputes, sanitation) is more fruitful than strictly applying al-Qaeda's interpretation of Islamic law. To this end, the recently released AQAP review document advised fellow affiliate al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to try winning 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." Of course, AQAP has made clear that this shift in emphasis is only a temporary tactical modification of its eventual goal of establishing a sharia-based government.

AQAP has also advised its sister affiliates "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 indicates that al-Qaeda is adopting a more nuanced strategy that focuses as much on winning popular support as on seizing power.

In addition, AQAP has learned that it must have a comprehensive governance program with civil administration ready to go when it "liberates" an area so that the people see an immediate improvement in their situation. In theory, this will blunt any outside accusations that al-Qaeda is abusing the population. The totality of AQAP's efforts to analyze and share its experiences in southern Yemen shows that al-Qaeda is adapting to the new realities of the Arab Spring, incorporating lessons learned from past mistakes, and developing a more sophisticated approach to gaining power and territory.

U.S. OPTIONS

In many respects, al-Qaeda's good-governance approach suggests the broad outlines of a strategy for defeating the organization in Yemen. As AQAP regroups and assumes a more central leadership role in al-Qaeda writ large, its strategy for engaging local populations will be much more attuned to the concerns of the people and much more difficult to defeat through military means alone. Accordingly, the United States should use the conclusion of the ongoing National Dialogue process in Yemen as an opportunity to help Sana confront al-Qaeda's "hearts and minds" strategy more assertively.

In practical terms, this means decreasing the current reliance on drone strikes as much as possible while pushing the reforming Yemeni government to counter al-Qaeda's soft-power strategy in the countryside as thoroughly as its military strategy. This will require a persistent Yemeni security presence in the provinces -- one focused on enlisting the population in local protective forces capable of working with national army and police forces. It will also require

dedicated U.S. and international efforts to partner with Sana as it decentralizes government programs and delivers more services, justice, and good governance to outlying communities. Washington could help most by emphasizing the following issues:

Greater local administration. Defeating AQAP requires partnering with local communities that are attempting to resist violence and intimidation. Toward that end, U.S. officials should begin working with local civil authorities in those provinces where al-Qaeda is most active. This means reallocating resources away from areas that are largely secure and reorganizing the U.S. embassy with an emphasis on working outside the capital. Washington cannot undertake this work alone -- instead, it should partner with various countries and international institutions to provide direct mentoring and other assistance to local officials. Advisors would directly support governors, local officials, and elected governorate and district council members; security could be provided through the Yemeni government in partnership with the international community.

Enduring local security. Al-Qaeda is strong in many areas of Yemen because government security services have long neglected to confront it in those areas. Additionally, many local communities lack a mechanism for defending themselves from violence and intimidation. Therefore, Washington should share the lessons it has learned from building local protective forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, partnering with Yemeni forces to provide enduring security to local communities in AQAP safe havens.

Robust local development. To pacify areas under al-Qaeda's control or influence, Washington should help Sana develop a comprehensive approach to building local institutions. This means synchronizing service delivery (e.g., justice, infrastructure development) with a "clear, hold, build, and transition" strategy.

Appointing a new ambassador. U.S. ambassador Gerald Feierstein's tenure ended in September, but he has yet to be replaced. Washington should urgently appoint a new ambassador to take advantage of the fresh opportunities that the conclusion of the National Dialogue will present. Such action would also provide new U.S. leadership and new energy to a strategy focused on partnering with Sana in the provinces and confronting al-Qaeda where it is strongest.

Daniel Green is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. He recently returned from a research trip to Yemen. ❖

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