

Al-Qaeda's Dirty War in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

Yemen needs increased and refocused military aid to continue the long fight against adaptive al-Qaeda forces.

T*his is the second installment of a two-part series on the al-Qaeda threat in Yemen. [Read PolicyWatch 2021 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaedas-soft-power-strategy-in-yemen\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaedas-soft-power-strategy-in-yemen), which offered recommendations for countering the group's soft-power efforts.*

Over the past two years, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has demonstrated significant ideological flexibility and adaptive leadership in its fight against the Yemeni government. The group's ability to shift tactics in the face of military setbacks indicates that it is much more strategically and operationally dynamic than previously understood. As AQAP turns to assassination and intimidation campaigns while reconstituting its forces, Washington and Sana must adjust their military and intelligence efforts accordingly.

MILITARY REFORM

Following his inauguration last February, Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi undertook a series of personnel changes within the military in order to consolidate his authority and bolster efforts against AQAP. Having inherited forces largely run by family members and close associates of former president Ali Saleh, the new leader focused on unifying an institution riven by factional disputes.

This process required Mansour Hadi to continue accommodating some of Saleh's supporters. Yet he also removed some of the former president's relatives, such as air force chief Gen. Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar and Presidential Guard leader Gen. Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh. In addition, he diluted the power of units such as the Republican Guard (led by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali), placing it under other military commands and splitting up some of its subordinate units. Additional reforms included rotating the heads of commands in order to professionalize the military and diminish the phenomenon of soldiers becoming loyal to their commanders rather than the state.

Mansour Hadi also sought to infuse new energy and leadership into the fight against AQAP in the south. To this end, he named Brig. Gen. Salem Ali Qatan as head of the southern military region. Meanwhile, the United States helped Yemeni forces prepare for confrontation with AQAP through increased military aid. It also expanded drone strikes against the group's leadership, depleting their ranks and keeping them on the defensive.

CONFRONTING AL-QAEDA

In 2011, the security situation in many areas of the south became chaotic when government forces deployed to the capital to deal with factional fighting. As a result, whole towns came under AQAP's control, including the capital of Abyan province. Assassinations and suicide attacks also increased throughout the region, especially in Aden, the former capital of South Yemen. At the time, President Saleh saw some political advantage in AQAP's advances, which bolstered the claim that he was indispensable to maintaining security.

Upon assuming office last year, Mansour Hadi authorized a wider offensive to repel AQAP from the areas it seized in 2011. Using a mix of local "Popular Committees" (tribal militias) and a more-robust military presence under new leadership, the government pushed al-Qaeda out of most such areas and back into its historic safe havens in central Yemen.

Sana's offensive was bolstered by the fact that AQAP had imposed its harsh version of religious law on the areas it seized. Although the group's campaign to gain popular support saw some success, its oppressive rule alienated many and prompted the flight of thousands. Combined with the determined Yemeni offensive, increased U.S. military assistance, and expanded drone strikes, such sentiments helped significantly degrade al-Qaeda's presence.

A DIRTY WAR

Having been temporarily defeated using conventional military methods, AQAP has shifted tactics. Over the past several months, the group has undertaken a concerted murder and intimidation campaign targeting security, military, and intelligence officials working against it, not just in the south, but also in the capital. The most notable victim thus far was General Qatan, the southern commander who was killed by a suicide attacker in mid-June. By one count, at least fifty-five officials, many of whom worked on counterterrorism, have been assassinated by suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices, or small-arms fire.

AQAP's ability to conduct such strikes in the capital shows that its reach has grown significantly. It also suggests possible collusion with government security forces in Sana, some of whom may be allied with former president Saleh.

In addition, the shift in tactics has bought time for AQAP to replenish its ranks following losses from last year's government offensive. This underscores the need for a determined push to pacify al-Qaeda safe havens. AQAP's ability to leverage local sentiment as a means of gaining control indicates an adept understanding of why the group requires popular support to carry out its activities. While its temporary rule over large swathes of the south alienated many people, others welcomed the group's efforts to provide order, stability, dispute resolution, and modest development assistance. As long as AQAP can draw from its popular base in parts of central Yemen and elsewhere in the country, efforts to stamp out the group will have only short-lived results.

U.S. OPTIONS

As was eventually learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, confronting an insurgency requires a strategy organized like an insurgency: decentralized and village-based, with a long-term vision that blends civil and military approaches. Only Yemen's government can provide fundamental solutions to the nonkinetic problems al-Qaeda feeds off, such as good governance, development, and reconstruction. But the United States can increase Sana's ability and willingness to undertake that effort, in part by enhancing the government's military and intelligence

capabilities in both the capital and the provinces. Specifically, Washington should:

- *Expand military training.* U.S. trainers should be embedded with Yemeni units in Sana, to both bridge political differences between military factions and advise forces confronting AQAP. In addition to bolstering President Mansour Hadi's professionalization efforts, such assistance would improve the military's combat effectiveness and help disseminate U.S. lessons learned from fighting insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. This last point is especially important given AQAP's increasing embrace of insurgent tactics -- Yemen needs help protecting its military leaders from assassinations, bolstering base defenses, and engaging the population in support of counterinsurgency operations.
- *Regularize tribal Popular Committees.* Although Yemeni military clearing operations have temporarily pushed AQAP from parts of the south, a dedicated holding force must be established to supplement the army's efforts. Washington should explore the possibility of helping Yemen regularize its tribal supporters into defensively oriented, legitimate security forces much like the Afghan Local Police program and Iraq's Anbar Awakening Councils. These local partners have an incentive to prevent al-Qaeda from returning. If done correctly, such an initiative would be enduring -- the new local units would answer to Sana, and this oversight would increase both their legitimacy and effectiveness.
- *Bolster U.S. intelligence assistance to prevent assassinations.* The frequency and nature of AQAP assassinations -- personally targeting specific officials using preplanned attacks -- suggest that the group has dedicated terrorist cells focused on this task. And as mentioned previously, the ease with which they have reached high-level targets suggests some degree of collusion with current or former Yemeni officials. Washington should consider providing technical and other assistance (e.g., counterintelligence advice) to uncover any insiders who allow al-Qaeda to attack officials at will. This assistance can also be used to marginalize irredentist elements focused on undermining Mansour Hadi's authority in order to secure additional power for themselves.

Daniel Green is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute and a military veteran of Afghanistan and Iraq. ❖

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