

Al-Qaeda's Soft-Power Strategy in Yemen

by [Daniel Green \(/experts/daniel-green\)](/experts/daniel-green)

Jan 23, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Daniel Green \(/experts/daniel-green\)](/experts/daniel-green)

Daniel Green is deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, a position he began in March 2019 after serving as Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The Yemeni government needs additional development and governance assistance to effectively confront al-Qaeda's "hearts and minds" efforts in the countryside.

This is the first installment of a two-part series on the al-Qaeda threat in Yemen. [Read PolicyWatch 2024 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaedas-dirty-war-in-yemen\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaedas-dirty-war-in-yemen), which discusses the military and intelligence dimensions of the threat.

Learning from jihadist mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has become adept at aligning with local political movements and building popular support in Yemen. In doing so, it has morphed into an insurgency while retaining its roots as a terrorist group. To counter the group's political, legal, and social-welfare efforts in areas outside the capital, the Yemeni and U.S. governments must supplement their counterterrorism campaign by expanding services to the provinces in a decentralized fashion.

BACKGROUND

Since its founding in January 2009, AQAP has repeatedly attacked the United States and its interests. Washington has responded by significantly expanding its drone strikes in Yemen and bolstering the government's ability to fight AQAP itself through additional military aid and training.

When the Arab Spring began to sweep the region in 2011, a political crisis emerged in Yemen between then president Ali Saleh, who had ruled for over thirty years, and opponents who criticized the regime's corruption, lack of services, and leadership. As the crisis unfolded, Yemeni security forces became involved in political struggles in Sana, with many units moving from the south to the capital. Sensing a vacuum, AQAP launched a series of raids throughout the south that year, using conventional tactics to overrun large swathes of territory, including many districts and a provincial capital.

HEARTS AND MINDS CAMPAIGN

After seizing control of various southern Yemeni towns and districts, AQAP moved beyond its terrorist focus, adopting the characteristics of an insurgency and holding territory in order to create a nascent government. Its ability to do so was based not only on its enhanced military capabilities and the departure of government security forces, but also on its effective community engagement strategy.

Capitalizing on longstanding southern grievances regarding insufficient education, healthcare, security, rule of law, political representation, and economic development, AQAP sought to replicate the central government's functions throughout the region. Its political agents established a form of stability based on Islamic law, convening regular meetings with community leaders, solving local problems, and attempting to replace chaotic tribal feuds with a more ordered and religiously inspired justice system. This effort included mitigating tribal conflicts, protecting weaker tribes from stronger rivals, and creating opportunities for some ambitious locals, including weaker tribal factions, to rise beyond their social position and seize power in their communities. AQAP also provided humanitarian assistance such as fresh water and food for the indigent, basic healthcare, and educational opportunities (albeit only Quranic teachings).

Many of these efforts appealed to the population, not only because they were better than what the local government had provided, but also because many tribal sheiks had previously been discredited for not living up to their responsibilities. Additionally, Quran-based engagement was highly appealing to communities in which that book was often the only text residents knew.

Al-Qaeda's strategy in Yemen reflects many of the lessons it learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it frequently alienated locals through the brutality of its rule. In addition, Yemeni tribal structures are far stronger than in those two countries, and tribal leaders are much more adept at governing their traditional areas of control. AQAP has therefore pursued a softer approach not simply because it wants to, but because it must, since the tribes have far greater power than it currently wields.

AQAP has also been effective at joining its cause with local political movements in Yemen, as it did in Iraq with Sunni Arab nationalists. To date, it has aligned its interests with southern elements seeking greater autonomy from the central government or complete independence from Yemen (though it is probably not working with the longstanding Southern Mobility Movement).

Finally, al-Qaeda does not have as strong a foreign character in Yemen as it did in previous conflicts. This reduces Washington and Sana's ability to separate the population from the terrorist group by using national pride, ethnic/tribal differences, or simple xenophobia to rebuff AQAP's advances.

REPULSED BUT NOT REJECTED

Last year, in response to AQAP's gains, the Yemeni military launched widespread operations against the group's forces in the south. Although these efforts were largely successful in pushing AQAP out of areas it overran in 2011, the group continues to pose a threat. Having retreated to its traditional safe havens in the interior, al-Qaeda has since undertaken a concerted assassination campaign against Yemeni security, military, and intelligence officials as it reconstitutes its forces.

In addition, the group still commands sympathy and influence in the south. To be sure, AQAP eventually reverted to harsh rule in many communities once it consolidated power there, alienating many locals and spurring the exodus of thousands from areas under its sway. Yet many others remain sympathetic to the group, not just for religious or culturally conservative reasons, but also out of a general feeling that al-Qaeda, with all its imperfections, is still a better alternative than the Yemeni government.

Although relief efforts for war refugees did much to improve Sana's image among southerners, only a sustained governance and development initiative -- one highly synchronized with military clearing and holding operations against AQAP -- will consolidate support for the central government. Yet this sort of initiative will not come naturally to Sana or Washington. The lack of such efforts following last year's clearing operations is already undermining popular support, creating another opportunity for a chastened but resilient AQAP to leverage the south against the central government. The group is already adapting its community engagement strategy by apologizing for the excesses of its recent rule and making overtures to key local leaders to lay the groundwork for reasserting control.

U.S. OPTIONS

Thus far, most U.S. efforts against AQAP have been limited to counterterrorism operations, which are unable to address the fundamental issues prompting Yemenis to either tolerate the group's presence or actively support its goals. In fact, the heavy reliance on sometimes-inaccurate drone strikes has allowed AQAP to take advantage of U.S. and Yemeni mistakes and further bolster its support among the population.

Accordingly, Washington should supplement its counterterrorism efforts with a campaign to defeat al-Qaeda's soft-power strategy, facilitating the expansion of central government services to areas where AQAP's influence is most developed. In particular, the United States should:

- **Forward-deploy development and good-governance initiatives.** Washington should decentralize its efforts along these lines, moving some programs from the capital to the countryside in partnership with provincial officials. This approach would mitigate some of the grievances that AQAP exploits, improve U.S. understanding of tribal dynamics outside the capital, and encourage Sana to match U.S. efforts and address local needs.
- **Establish a U.S. consulate in Abyan province.** AQAP formerly controlled this province, so establishing a consulate in the local capital of Zinjibar would be a symbolic rejection of the group's influence and a visible example of America's interest in fostering robust governance and development efforts in the provinces. It could also spur Sana to undertake more-dedicated efforts in southern and central Yemen.
- **Establish a "Yemen Hands" program.** To better leverage personal relationships with local leaders and central government officials, Washington should consider implementing a Yemeni initiative modeled after the "Afghan Hands" program. This would involve a select group of U.S. officials residing in the country for longer-than-normal rotations, allowing them to concentrate on developing deeper relationships with the Yemeni people and a greater understanding of the country's problems.

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

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