The al-Qaeda Challenge in Southern Yemen

by **Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.

Brief Analysis

The growing nexus between Yemen's antigovernment rebels and AQAP presents a thorny dilemma for the United States.

The September 30 death of Anwar al-Awlaki, a key spiritual leader and operational planner for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), is a major blow to the organization's radicalization agenda. He was killed by a drone strike in al-Jawf province in northern Yemen, the seventh U.S. airstrike in the country this year. Yet even as the United States delivers blows against AQAP, it risks being drawn into the government's brutal southern counterinsurgency in a manner that could strengthen the group. Indeed, Yemen could be a place where the United States is seen by many locals as being on the wrong side of the Arab Spring, while Al-Qaeda's affiliates appear to some locals to be standing "with the people." Although resolution of the political competition between President Ali Abdullah Saleh and opposition forces in Sana is important, the first order of business should be a ceasefire in the south, where the widespread insurgency is a boon for al-Qaeda and a potential minefield for the United States.

The Southern Insurgency

In May and June, the first reports began to emerge of "al-Qaeda takeovers" in southern cities such as Jaar and Zinjibar (in Abyan province). In fact, these cities were taken from government forces by a mixture of former soldiers, tribal leaders, and members of the Southern Mobility Movement, which seeks fairer political representation and economic development for the south. An insurgency has been brewing in the region since 2007, when retired army officers collectively approached southern governors with petitions for reinstatement of military pensions, land grants, and new positions within the armed services. When peaceful approaches failed and the government began to target southern oppositionists, armed groups formed with names such as "The Armies of Liberation Movement" and "The Thawra (Revolution) Brigades."

The government's draconian crackdowns pushed together a range of opposition factions that had previously been

reticent to work together. For instance, southern soldiers had historically distanced themselves from the separatist movement and focused on parochial issues such as pensions and war widow allowances. Beginning in 2007, however, these barriers were partially broken down by the intermingling of jailed soldiers and other activists in regime prisons. During the first half of 2010, southern armed groups ramped up their activities, isolating government garrisons with harassing gunfire, excluding regime officials from certain towns, and referring to certain zones as "al-Janub al-Hur" (the liberated south).

Since then, Islamists have begun to play a more important role in the south's emerging insurgency, including some with fraternal ties to al-Qaeda. The southern governorates of Aden, Abyan, and Shabwa have long suffered from a blend of tribal and radical Islamist militancy. One key leader within this trend is Tariq al-Fadli, a long-term associate of Usama bin Laden during and after the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Once it became clear that he was tightening ties with other southern oppositionists, government forces raided his compound on March 31, 2010, killing a child. They also carried out a series of punitive demolitions to warn him against further activism. Yet the raid and other government provocations drew even more Islamists into the armed opposition. Roadside bombings and motorbike assassinations began to occur in the south in May 2010, targeting regime ministers as well as local officials and security officers.

AQAP Insinuates Itself into the Opposition

After a number of southern towns in Abyan and Shabwa fell to rebel forces in May 2011, AQAP moved quickly and surefootedly to become part of the new political landscape in these areas, cloaking its activities with a new name, Ansar al-Sharia. This movement initially undertook preaching and social-service efforts within opposition-controlled zones, including the public redistribution of money from state banks. One tribal leader, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Jifri, illustrated the effects of such activities when explaining to a reporter why his tribe sheltered AQAP fighters: "The government agreed to send us six teachers. Fahd [al-Quso, a senior AQAP operative and USS *Cole* bomber] brought sixteen."

AQAP shifted its support to the military arena as heavy-handed government counteroffensives brought artillery fire and airstrikes to towns such as Jaar and Zinjibar in mid-June. In addition to facilitating rocket attacks, roadside bombings, and assassinations, AQAP has given the rebels a unique set of "heavy weapons" -- namely, suicide-bomber vests and car bombs. These devices have been used on eight occasions since June, against government forces attacking Zinjibar and in brutal fighting with the so-called "Civilians to Defend Unity," a group of pro-Saleh neighborhood-level units recruited from northern tribes living in the south and bolstered by Republican Guard advisors.

In other countries, the experience and capabilities brought by jihadists have often led unlikely co-belligerents to work together (e.g., al-Qaeda elements and former Baathists in Iraq). The same phenomenon appears to be unfolding in southern Yemen's desperate fighting. AQAP's strategy seems to involve standing alongside the opposition and forging bonds of comradeship by making common cause against the government. This strategy has worked elsewhere, fostering strong loyalty between al-Qaeda outsiders and some local tribes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and northwestern Pakistan.

The ongoing battle for Zinjibar is a case in point. Since the government began to bludgeon its way back into the town in mid-June, AQAP fighters (including Egyptians, Sudanese, and Iraqis, according to local accounts) have stood shoulder to shoulder with the defenders in a struggle they are calling "Falluja in Abyan," referring to al-Qaeda in Iraq's iconic battles of 2004.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The growing nexus between antigovernment rebels and AQAP presents a thorny dilemma for Washington. The insurgency in southern Yemen is authentic -- it began years before the Arab Spring and has deep roots in grievances dating back to the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen. The risk for the United States is that its understandable attempts to kill AQAP leaders and disrupt their political efforts in the south will lead Yemenis to associate Washington with the government's brutal counteroffensives.

Indeed, the lines between counterterrorism and intervention on the regime's behalf can become blurry. In August, for example, the government's 25th Mechanized Brigade was surrounded and cut off in Zinjibar, spending most of the month fighting an all-round defense. During the fighting, the U.S. military provided aerial resupply drops to the encircled forces using U.S. aircraft. And on September 2, government forces operating with U.S. support reopened communications with the brigade, at a cost of 230 Yemeni military fatalities. The previous day, U.S. forces had launched two precision airstrikes near the town.

In contrast to the problems it raises for Washington, the southern insurgency is a boon for AQAP and, ironically, the Saleh regime. If resolution of the political impasse in Sana is delayed, and if the government continues to steamroll southern cities in the meantime, AQAP could well embed itself within the fabric of the southern opposition and eventually take it over from within. The group's anti-Americanism could prove increasingly attractive to tribal hosts as long as U.S. airstrikes (with their ever-present potential for collateral damage) and other visible American support for the government persist. For its part, the Saleh government seeks to perpetuate the war in the south because the fighting will force Washington to choose between reform and counterterrorism, with the latter likely to win out.

Washington's options include:

- *Brokering a ceasefire in the south.* An immediate ceasefire and a return to unconditional negotiations between southern oppositionists and the government (last held in May 2010) might pull local militias away from AQAP. In Iraq and Afghanistan, negotiations have tended to force al-Qaeda to show its true colors, prompting its fighters to attack local leaders bargaining with the government and leading to a loss of public support.

- *Crafting an information operations campaign.* If al-Qaeda affiliates overreach and try to impose their authority and social codes on the local population -- as happened in Iraq -- the United States may have an opportunity to open an information operations and tribal engagement campaign appealing to the independence of Yemen's local powerbrokers.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow in The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. ❖

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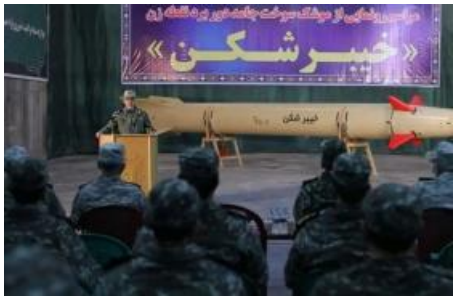

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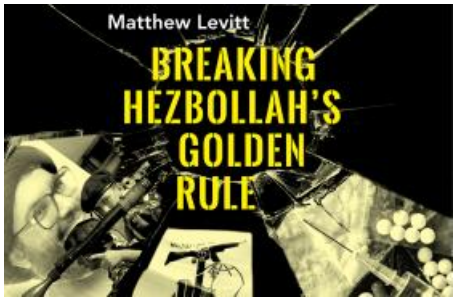

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