

# The al-Qaeda Crescent in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

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## The key battle with al-Qaeda in Yemen is in the countryside, where the U.S. government is paying too little attention.

The June 22 jailbreak of dozens of al-Qaeda-linked prisoners in southern Yemen's Hadramawt province is the latest evidence that the main battle with the group has been taking place in the countryside. Although conflicts in the capital -- such as the ongoing faceoff between supporters of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and members of the Hashid tribal confederation -- will affect Yemen's future course as a nation, efforts to control the provinces more directly affect U.S. national security interests.

### Poor Government Control Benefits al-Qaeda

Even before the current unrest in Sana'a, the Yemeni regime was never able to attain full control of the country beyond the major cities and provincial capitals. Large areas of the countryside lack government security oversight, economic development, and other services. In many of these areas, a robust tribal government system with extended kinship groups has effectively assumed responsibility for local governance. Tribal sheiks are often granted state patronage, including direct monetary payments and quasi-legal authority in the regions they control. The regime has also used its security forces to sanction tribal groups and punish individual leaders through incarceration or direct military operations.

Currently, however, many security personnel are preoccupied with either regime survival or regime change in Sana'a, creating a security vacuum in the countryside. The government's mechanisms of patronage and control have also broken down, allowing al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and tribal elements to assert themselves and expand their power. On May 29, for example, more than two hundred alleged AQAP members overran the town of Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan province in southern Yemen. This followed a similar operation in the same area, where supposed AQAP members seized a munitions factory in the town of Jaar on March 27.

In addition to these widely noted episodes, the past year has seen numerous smaller-scale killings, thefts, and

assassinations by AQAP. These incidents have contributed to a general sense of lawlessness and may indicate that the group is planning attacks on foreign targets as it raises money for future operations, intimidates security forces, and weakens local government.

## War in the Provinces

**A** QAP's activities are largely concentrated in five provinces in central and eastern Yemen, located along the old border between north and south Yemen and stretching from the country's northern border with Saudi Arabia to the Gulf of Aden in the south:

- *Marib*. Located next to the capital, this province sits astride the Incense Road, one of the main arteries out of Sana'a. It also contains one of Yemen's three main oil fields and a number of archeological sites visited regularly by tourists. An oil and gas pipeline originates in Marib and flows west until it reaches al-Salif, one of five Yemeni ports configured to handle hydrocarbon shipments. In 2006, AQAP launched an unsuccessful attack in Marib and Hadramawt in which four suicide car bombs were destroyed by security forces before they could harm the facilities. And in May 2010, an alleged U.S. strike against AQAP killed the deputy governor of Marib, which led to riots in the region and deeply alienated the local population from the government. The two largest tribes in the area are the Murab and the Abida.
- *Shabwa*. Similar to Marib, this province contains a number of oil and gas fields and has pipelines flowing south to the ports of Bir Ali and Balhaf. The Incense Road passes through this area as well. Shabwa is the ancestral home of al-Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki, a key recruiter who participates in some operational planning. The al-Awlaki and al-Dhiyayb are the largest tribes in the area.
- *Hadramawt*. This province, located directly in the middle of Yemen, contains a number of oil fields and a pipeline that flows south to the port of al-Shihr. It also has the longest border with Saudi Arabia and, together with al-Jawf, serves as a key infiltration route for AQAP members, weapons, explosives, and money. Al-Qaeda's 2002 attack on the French oil tanker Limburg, in which a bomb-laden boat severely damaged the ship, was launched from the province's al-Mukalla port. AQAP has also killed a number of tourists in Hadramawt, including two Belgians in 2008 and four South Koreans in 2009. Moreover, the previously mentioned June 22 prison break occurred in al-Mukalla. The al-Tamim and al-Kinda are the largest tribes in the area.
- *Al-Jawf*. This province borders Saudi Arabia as well as the Yemeni governorate of Sadah, the site of the Houthi rebellion for the past several years. Al-Jawf has also experienced AQAP violence. In November 2010, a car bomb killed more than a dozen Shiites, including a local councilman. The attack indicated a sectarian tinge to AQAP's strategy in Yemen and is consistent with the group's January 2011 proclamation of "holy war" against Houthi-led northern Shiite rebels. The Dhaw Husayn and Baqil are the largest tribes in the area.
- *Abyan*. This province is located next to Aden, the former capital of South Yemen, and borders the Arabian Sea. As mentioned previously, it was the site of the March 27 and May 29 AQAP attacks on Jaar and Zinjibar, respectively. The al-Yafi and the al-Fadhli are the largest tribes in the area.

## Focus U.S. Efforts on the Countryside

**M**uch like AQAP, the U.S. approach must be decentralized, locally based, long-term, and holistic, blending military and civil approaches. Saleh has typically been the greatest impediment to an expanded U.S. presence in the countryside. Yet with the president convalescing in Saudi Arabia and Yemen's political factions in a stalemate, now is the time to offer Sana'a an expanded aid package to help the government stabilize the provinces.

Specifically, Washington should propose a more robust training program for Yemen's security services, concentrating on both its conventional forces and counterterrorism units. In particular, U.S. trainers should be embedded with Yemeni units deployed in the provinces. Government forces could then benefit directly from U.S. training and equipment as they confront AQAP in the countryside. Additionally, Washington's understanding of provincial dynamics would improve.

Once this security initiative is underway, the United States could evaluate the practical aspects of decentralizing its governance and development programs, moving some of them from the capital to the countryside in partnership with provincial governors. This approach would bolster local governance and mitigate some of the underlying grievances that AQAP exploits to increase its support.

Washington should also consider a dedicated effort to map Yemen's human terrain and gain a better understanding of local communities, which would in turn help in the effort against AQAP. Specifically, the State Department, United States Agency for International Development, and the U.S. military should extend the tours of selected personnel at the U.S. embassy in Sana'a in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the local situation. The United States should also develop a "Yemen Hands" initiative similar to the "Afghan Hands" program, wherein U.S. personnel work in the country for a number of years. These approaches would also even out the continuity problems that result from constant personnel rotations.

Although any U.S. strategy for Yemen will be difficult to implement, it will be harder if little is known about the country outside the major cities. Only through a better understanding of local dynamics in the provinces will U.S. policymakers be able to make the crucial decisions needed to defeat AQAP and thwart any new attacks it may be planning on the United States.

*Daniel Green, a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, has served with the U.S. Navy and State Department in Afghanistan and a tour with the U.S. Navy in Iraq. He is currently working on a province-by-province examination of AQAP operations in Yemen.* ❖

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