

Waning Vigilance:

Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

Recent reports suggesting that al-Qaeda fighters are leaving Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the group has suffered serious setbacks, have renewed international concerns that Yemen is reemerging once again as a major terrorist safe haven. Although the assessments of al-Qaeda's resurgence in Yemen are accurate, the deteriorating situation is not due to U.S. successes elsewhere; rather, it is the result of waning U.S. and Yemeni attention over the past five years. Renewed cooperation between Sana and Washington in tackling al-Qaeda and addressing Yemen's systemic problems could help reduce the terrorist organization's appeal in this troubled country.

The Apparent Defeat of al-Qaeda in Yemen

By late 2003, al-Qaeda in Yemen had been largely defeated through the close cooperation of U.S. and Yemeni security forces. This cooperation reached its zenith in November 2002 when the CIA assassinated the head of the organization, Abu Ali al-Harithi, but the Pentagon bypassed the agreed-on cover story and leaked the operation to the press. Washington needed an early victory in the war on terror and the assassination of an al-Qaeda leader was too good to go unacknowledged.

Yemen, however, believed it was sold out to U.S. domestic concerns. Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih paid a high price for allowing the United States to carry out the attack -- something al-Qaeda still uses to great propaganda effect -- and it took more than a year for the government to publicly admit that it had authorized Washington to act.

In November 2003, the United States was still paying for this mistake when Yemen arrested al-Harithi's replacement, Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, on the streets of Sana. Instead of being granted direct access to al-Ahdal, U.S. officials were forced to work through Yemeni intermediaries; however, with its leadership dead or in jail, its infrastructure largely destroyed, and its militants more attracted to the insurgency in Iraq than jihad at home, al-Qaeda in Yemen appeared largely defeated.

Al-Qaeda Rebuilds

The United States and Yemen both treated this victory as absolute, failing to realize that a defeated enemy is not necessarily a vanquished one. In effect, al-Qaeda was crossed off both countries' list of priorities and replaced by other, seemingly more pressing, concerns. For Washington, democratic reforms and anticorruption campaigns dominated the bilateral agenda as part of the Bush administration's desire to mold a new Middle East. For Yemen, attention was increasingly diverted by a five-year-old sectarian civil war in the north and more recently by threats of secession from the south. Over the next two years of relative calm, the threat from al-Qaeda, while not necessarily forgotten, was certainly ignored. Tourism flourished, and the U.S. State Department initiated a Yemen study-abroad program.

Even the prison break of twenty-three al-Qaeda suspects in early 2006, which U.S. officials privately blamed on Yemeni government collaboration, was treated more like an aberration than the opening volley of a new battle.

Among the escapees were Qasim al-Raymi and Nasir al-Wahayshi, a former secretary to Usama bin Laden and a veteran of the fighting at Tora Bora. The nearly two and a half years of government neglect had created a great deal of space for the two men to reorganize and rebuild al-Qaeda in Yemen.

The involvement of al-Raymi and al-Wahayshi, along with numerous other Yemenis from across the country, illustrates one of the more worrying facts about al-Qaeda's current incarnation: it is the most representative organization in the country. Al-Qaeda in Yemen transcends class, tribe, and regional identity in a way that no other Yemeni group or political party can match. Al-Wahayshi and others within the organization have proven particularly talented at articulating a narrative designed to appeal to a local audience, using everything from Palestine to the plight of Sheikh al-Muayad -- a Yemeni cleric who ran a popular charity and is currently in a U.S. prison for providing funds to terrorists -- to increase their rhetorical appeal to young Yemenis. Both the U.S. and Yemeni governments have been incapable of countering this approach and have effectively ceded the field to al-Qaeda.

In June 2007, al-Qaeda officially announced its presence in the country with al-Wahayshi as its commander. It underscored its intentions within days by a suicide attack on a convoy of Spanish tourists. Since then, the organization has grown stronger. In January 2008, it released the first issue of its bimonthly journal, Sada al-Malahim ("The Echo of Battles"), and that same month it launched a series of attacks, culminating in the assault on the U.S. embassy in September 2008. Earlier this year, a pair of suicide bombers targeted South Koreans, attacking first a group of tourists and then the officials sent to investigate.

Al-Qaeda has also capitalized on its recent successes, attracting recruits from both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In January, two former Guantanamo Bay detainees joined the group as commanders, spearheading the merger of local branches in Saudi Arabia and Yemen into a single regional franchise. One of the leaders, Muhammad al-Awfi, has since turned himself in to Saudi authorities, but this gesture appears to be prompted more from a desire to protect his family than from a change of heart.

This new regional organization, which calls itself al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, is indicative of al-Wahayshi's growing ambition. Throughout the first two years of his leadership, he worked hard to create a durable infrastructure that could survive the loss of key commanders. His success in this regard is demonstrated by the fact that even though the organization lost a particularly skilled local commander, Hamza al-Quayti, in a shootout with Yemeni security forces in August 2008, it was still able to launch an attack on the U.S. embassy just one month later. Al-Wahayshi is now looking to use the undergoverned regions of Yemen as a staging ground for attacks not only in Yemen but also throughout the Arabian peninsula and the Horn of Africa.

Lessons Learned

Al-Qaeda's resurgence in Yemen does not stem from displacement of U.S. successes elsewhere. Rather, the United States and its allies need to understand that defeating one generation of al-Qaeda does not eliminate the threat completely. In conjunction with Yemen and Gulf Cooperation Council allies, Washington must develop a two-track strategy to eliminate al-Qaeda in Yemen. In the short term, the United States must discretely partner with Yemen and Saudi Arabia once again and target al-Qaeda's leadership and infrastructure. Although successfully doing so will be much harder the second time around, it can be accomplished with careful and coordinated strikes.

The long-term approach, however, is both more important and more difficult to implement. The current incarnation of al-Qaeda in Yemen has more recruits -- and younger recruits -- than ever, due to al-Wahayshi's powerful propaganda as well as the lack of opportunity and an incipient breakdown in traditional social authorities. Furthermore, Yemen is preoccupied, and its security services overtaxed with the increasingly violent calls for secession from the south, threats of renewed fighting in the north, and, most importantly, a faltering economy that makes traditional modes of patronage-style governance nearly impossible. The United States and Yemen are also

facing an al-Qaeda group that is now more accepted as a legitimate organization. Killing or arresting al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen and dismantling its infrastructure will be an important step forward, but will unlikely eliminate the problem in the long term. Tackling the underlying issues, although very difficult, will be key to ensuring that al-Qaeda does not reemerge in Yemen once again.

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