

Yemen's al-Qaeda Amnesty: Revolving Door or Evolving Strategy?

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Brief Analysis

Today, Yemeni authorities announced the capture of al-Qaeda militant Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal. This arrest comes amid a series of statements by Yemeni president Ali Abdallah Salih declaring his intent to release dozens of suspects with links to al-Qaeda in exchange for promises that they would renounce violence. Paradoxically, Salih and his advisors believe that the move will ensure continued quiet in Yemen, which has not suffered a terrorist attack since October 2002. Still, Washington has cause for concern over Salih's plans to release potential terrorists into a country that has only recently found successful methods to counter al-Qaeda.

Yemeni Counterterrorism

In the past, Yemen seemed unable to contain terrorist groups such as the Islamic Army of Aden (IAA), an al-Qaeda affiliate born in the late 1990s. Yemen's efforts increased after the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, which killed seventeen U.S. sailors, injured thirty-nine, and inflicted an estimated \$250 million worth of damage to the vessel. In the wake of that attack, Washington pressured Yemen for increased security cooperation. What began with the computerization of passport and immigration processes evolved into counterterrorism cooperation. By 2001, the State Department noted that San'a had "arrested suspected terrorists and pledged to neutralize key al-Qaeda nodes in Yemen." San'a also permitted the United States to deploy special forces on its soil after the September 11 attacks.

Yemen further intensified its cooperation with Washington following the October 6, 2002, attack on the French tanker Limburg, which killed one and injured seventeen. This included working with the CIA, FBI, and U.S. special forces, as well as undertaking efforts to deport hundreds of illegal immigrants and suspected terrorists. San'a also developed programs to monitor mosques and Islamic organizations, in addition to launching a public relations campaign urging clerics to purge extremism and warning the public of terrorism's cost to the economy.

U.S.-Yemeni cooperation reached new heights on November 5, 2002. Using intelligence from Abd ar-Rahim an-Nashiri, a previously captured planner of the Cole attack, the CIA tracked five al-Qaeda operatives driving on a desert road in the Marib governorate of Yemen. With approval from San'a, the CIA launched a Hellfire missile at them from an unmanned drone, killing everyone in the vehicle, including another senior terrorist who had participated in the Cole attack.

In summer 2003, Yemeni forces attacked an IAA hideout in the Hattat region "with the help of U.S. Special Operations Command forces and . . . helicopters, artillery and combat vehicles." In September, Yemen exchanged

terrorist suspects with Saudi Arabia; San'a extradited a top suspect in the May 12 suicide bombings in Riyadh, while the Saudis handed over two men suspected in the Limburg attack. In October, San'a captured yet another Cole suspect.

Despite this clear progress, there have been some setbacks in U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation. For instance, ten suspects from the Cole bombing escaped from their Yemeni prison on April 11, 2003, by drilling through a bathroom wall. One of the suspects reportedly gave himself up, but the others are still at large. The public account of this incident was shocking; jailbreaks are almost never reported in the Arab world, prompting questions as to whether Yemeni government officials were somehow involved in the escape.

New Strategy?

In September 2003, Yemen appeared to make some surprising changes to its counterterrorism policy. San'a announced that it would release dozens of militants with links to al-Qaeda as long as they "pledged to respect the rights of non-Muslim foreigners living in Yemen or visiting it." The move appeared to be inconsistent with Yemen's recent record. According to one Yemeni official, the announcement was a means of "feeling out" both the Yemeni public and the United States. However, a State Department spokesman stated, "It is not clear whether the U.S. was consulted first."

By October, San'a had moved forward with its plans for amnesty. According to the London-based Arabic daily al-Sharq al-Awsat, the prisoners slated for release included a number of Yemenis who were suspected of involvement with al-Qaeda and who had been in jail for up to three years. Another London daily, al-Hayat, reported that some of these prisoners were IAA members who had pledged to halt all militant activities. By late November, Agence France Presse reported that as many as 146 men suspected of having al-Qaeda links were slated to be released, although other reports indicated smaller numbers.

Yemeni officials insist that the amnesty will not detract from their country's overall efforts to fight terrorism. In private, some officials explain that the release should be seen within the context of tribal politics; by releasing the "less dangerous" suspects, San'a will be able to maintain relations with influential tribes that play their own significant role in Yemeni counterterrorism. Officials are also quick to note that the amnesty was the result of increased pressure from nongovernmental organizations accusing San'a of human rights violations (many of the suspects have not been granted trials).

According to one of Salih's advisors, approximately twenty prisoners have been released thus far. He further stated that the total number released will probably not exceed sixty. State Department officials believe that none of those granted amnesty will have direct links to the Cole bombing, the Limburg attack, or any other major terrorist operation in Yemen. Rather, those slated for release are Islamist sympathizers, or have only peripheral links to secondary players in al-Qaeda plots. San'a also emphasizes that these suspects have renounced violence in the name of Islam and have even provided intelligence to Yemeni officials to help thwart terrorist attacks. Moreover, although some of the suspects were trained in mujahedin camps in Afghanistan during the war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, San'a points out that they have not been implicated in any subsequent al-Qaeda attacks.

Yemeni officials have also noted that the prisoners will not be released entirely on their own recognizance; their families will have to sign for them, using their homes and businesses as a kind of bail bond. Still, San'a admits that it has no plans to use Yemeni intelligence services to track and monitor their activities.

Analysis

Despite some attempts against U.S. interests (often thwarted with Yemeni intelligence), there has not been a single recorded terrorist attack in Yemen since the Limburg. Moreover, Yemen's security forces have weakened al-Qaeda and its Yemeni affiliates. Overall, then, the country's counterterrorism efforts over the past year should be viewed as

a success.

Interestingly, in the time since Salih announced the amnesty initiative, more than fifty IAA members from the recently embattled Hattat region have reportedly turned themselves in. Yemeni officials cite this as an indication that amnesty during times of relative calm is an effective policy.

To be sure, the amnesty is a creative attempt to achieve the elusive and delicate balance between human rights and counterterrorism in a region that is too often known for its heavy-handed approach. If Yemen's efforts succeed, other Middle Eastern countries that have detained al-Qaeda suspects should take note (including Egypt, which still holds an estimated 16,000 Islamists in custody, most without due process). Yemen's amnesty could be a considerable gamble, however. If the released suspects resort to violence, the initiative will have been at the expense of Yemeni security, which could in turn have an impact on regional and global security as well.

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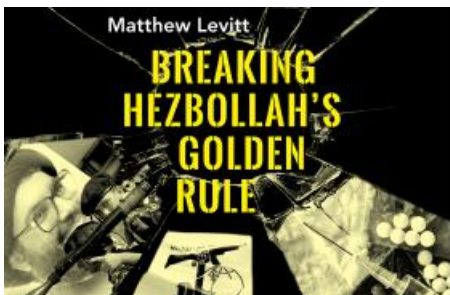
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