

Behind the French Tanker Bombing: Yemen's Ongoing Problems with Islamist Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

Since September 2001, Yemen has worked hard to shed its image as a hotbed of Islamist terrorism. That image, however, was reinforced when London's al-Sharq al-Awsat Arabic daily reported that the Islamic Army of Aden (IAA, or Aden-Abyan Islamic Army), an al-Qaeda affiliate, claimed responsibility for an explosion that crippled a French tanker on October 6 in the Yemeni harbor of Mina' al-Dabba. Moreover, a recent letter allegedly written by Osama bin Laden praises the "bold heroic jihad operations . . . against the crusader's oil tanker." The attack, which killed one crewman, underscores Yemen's importance as an area of concern in the U.S. government's "war on terror."

Background: IAA

The first attacks ever attributed to al-Qaeda took place at two Yemeni hotels in 1992. IAA, however, did not emerge until 1996 or 1997. Led by Zein al-Abidin al-Mihdar (aka Abu al-Hassan), IAA asserted that Yemen's government was not implementing shari'a law properly. One communiqué demanded that President Ali Abdullah Salih resign for this reason. Another threatened that if "ambassadors of America and Britain do not leave [Yemen] . . . the blow will be painful." After the August 7, 1998, attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, IAA praised the bombers as "heroes of the jihad."

Until late 1998, the group had only been linked to terrorist training camps, but on December 28 of that year, IAA kidnapped sixteen Western tourists in the region of Abyan. During the subsequent Yemeni rescue mission, four of the tourists (three Britons and one Australian) were killed, and one American was wounded. At the end of the standoff, Yemeni authorities captured several IAA cadres, including Abu al-Hassan. The group subsequently warned that "if negotiations [to free Hassan] fail, all foreigners in Yemen from Western ambassadors, experts and doctors to tourists have to leave Yemen. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army will not kidnap them but will kill them." Hassan was executed by Yemeni court order on October 17, 1999.

A string of bombings in 2001 was attributed to IAA, with targets including a church and a hotel. In April 2001, Hassan's successor, Hatem bin Fareed, was arrested and convicted of running the organization. Soon thereafter, Yemeni officials insisted that IAA continued to exist "only in the imagination of some people." In June 2001, however, authorities arrested IAA members plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in San'a. The suspects were found with explosives, small arms, and a map of the embassy.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen

In 1999, al-Qaeda operatives, including IAA members, failed in a plot to destroy a U.S. naval destroyer (USS The Sullivans) off Yemen's coast. A year later, however, they were more successful. On October 12, 2000, the USS Cole was crippled by a powerful bomb while refueling in the port of Aden. The attack killed seventeen U.S. sailors, injured thirty-nine, and caused some \$250 million in damage. IAA issued a communiqué claiming responsibility, although two other groups also took credit.

The day after the Cole attack, a grenade was thrown at the British embassy in San'a. Although no group took credit, Yemeni authorities convicted an IAA member and three associates for their involvement. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, Yemeni national Ramzi bin al-Shibh was named as a potential suspect in the plot. Some reports suggest that the original plan for those attacks may have included al-Shibh leading a team in hijacking a fifth plane and crashing it into the White House.

In August 2002, Yemeni authorities discovered 650 pounds of explosives hidden among pomegranates in San'a after a wire-guided missile in the shipment accidentally exploded, killing two al-Qaeda operatives. Just last month, U.S. officials dismantled an al-Qaeda cell of Yemeni nationals just outside Buffalo, New York; authorities are now seeking coconspirator Mamal Darwish, who is thought to be in Yemen.

Shaykh Abu Hamza al-Masri

IAA is inextricably linked to Shaykh Abu Hamza al-Masri, an Egyptian-born cleric based in England whose funds were frozen by the U.S. government in 2001 due to his terrorist links. Accused by G7 ministers of being a "legal officer" for IAA, al-Masri also sent members of his London-based organization, Ansar ash-Shari'a (Supporters of shari'a, or SoS), to terrorist training camps run by IAA. Al-Masri recruits have admitted to paying Abu al-Hassan for weapons and training.

Al-Masri has described himself as a "media advisor" to IAA. Indeed, several IAA communiqués have been released by him over the years. Abu al-Hassan was even said to have called al-Masri in London by satellite phone during the hostage standoff of December 1998. Moreover, IAA's claim of responsibility for the attack on the French tanker was phoned into al-Sharq al-Awsat by SoS.

In 1999, British authorities arrested al-Masri for terrorism links. They released him on bail, however, due to what the Times of London called "a loophole in the government's new anti-terrorist laws." Authorities have since banned him from preaching at his mosque, seized his passport, frozen his assets, and restricted his access to the media. The U.S. government is investigating al-Masri's terrorist ties as well, and may request his extradition. Yemeni authorities have also reportedly requested his extradition.

Yemen's Place in the Global War against Terror

Yemen's ties to terrorist groups have garnered increased attention since September 11, and, according to the State Department, U.S. officials have established "linkages between the East Africa U.S. embassy bombings, the USS Cole bombing, and the September 11 attacks." Accordingly, the Yemeni government vowed to take a more active role in fighting terrorism. As part of this effort, Yemen allowed American Special Forces on its soil. According to a U.S. military spokesman, a team of American troops is now "training, advising, and assisting" Yemeni forces. The U.S. government is also believed to have given about \$100 million to San'a to fight terror.

Yemen faces a serious problem with radical movements and tribal leaders, many of whom effectively rule remote and lawless parts of the country and are commonly viewed as outside the jurisdiction of Yemeni authorities. Affiliates of bin Laden, whose ancestral roots lie in Yemen, have found asylum in such areas. In December 2001, a shootout erupted between tribesmen and the military when Yemeni forces attempted to arrest three al-Qaeda

suspects, leaving twenty dead and allowing the suspects to escape.

The difficulty of countering terrorism in Yemen is understandable. What is hard to accept is how Yemen dismisses its Islamist problem. For ten days, Yemeni authorities vociferously denied that the French tanker incident was an act of terrorism, claiming that it was an accident even before investigators determined the cause. The government finally admitted that the incident was a terrorist attack on October 16. Such failures to face up to the Islamist problem will only result in more attacks and further embarrassment.

For its part, the U.S. government should focus increased efforts on al-Qaeda affiliates, like IAA, that are responsible for the bulk of the terrorism attributed to bin Laden's network worldwide. For example, President George W. Bush froze the assets of IAA in September of last year, but the State Department has yet to list the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Such inconsistencies hinder both the U.S. counterterrorism effort in Yemen and the broader war on terror.

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