



FIGHTING AL-QA'IDA IN YEMEN? RETHINKING THE ISLAMIST THREAT (Draft)

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This paper offers a critical assessment of the US perception and response to al-Qa'ida in Yemen. It evaluates the empirical evidence that underlies the present understanding of the group, the implications of the socio-political context within which it operates, and the uneasy position of the Yemeni government in the war against terror in the light of US policy from the early 1990s to the present. In the contested Yemeni state, al-Qa'ida is involved in a competition over political legitimacy and increasingly dependent on public support. Neither the aggressive US kill and/or capture response (the uncritical continuation of an "on-off" policy that has made Yemen vulnerable to the influence of al-Qa'ida in the past), nor direct support of the Yemeni government (which depends on the continuation of the threat to secure financial support vital for political survival) has the potential to defeat al-Qa'ida.

The near-miss attack against a US passenger flight from Amsterdam to Dallas on Christmas Day 2009 not only renewed the controversy over the continued threat of al-Qa'ida but also, after Afghanistan and Iraq, propelled the Republic of Yemen into the centre of public attention. The perpetrator, 23-year-old, Nigerian born Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab confessed that he had received training for his mission during an extended stay in the country, a group calling itself "Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP) claimed responsibility for the attack, and Osama bin Laden embraced the almost-martyr as one of his own.¹ Without

¹ Brian Ross and Richard Esposito, "Abdulmutallab: More Like Me In Yemen. Accused Northwest Bomber Says More Bombers On the Way", *ABC News*, 28 December 2009, accessed at <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/abdulmutallab-yemen-northwest-flight-253-terror-suspect/story?id=9430536>; Jason Keyser, "Bin Laden endorses bomb attempt on US Plane"



much delay, an international meeting was organized in London on 27 January 2010 with the aim of delivering a strategy to support the Yemeni government in the fight against the looming terrorist threat. On the occasion, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called on Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government to enact political and economic reforms and to combat al-Qa'ida, pledging economic and military assistance for this important task. Nine months later, CIA analysts regard al-Qa'ida in Yemen as the most urgent threat to U.S. security and senior officials have called for an escalation of U.S. operations in the country, including a proposal to add armed CIA drones to a clandestine campaign of U.S. military strikes and the provision of 1.2 billion in military aid.² "We are looking to draw on all of the capabilities at our disposal."³

In the light of al-Qa'ida's rhetorical confrontation with the both the Yemeni government and the West and the recent surge in (attempted) attacks, the scenarios for the future seem distinctly worrying. But is al-Qa'ida's posturing a meaningful indicator of its capabilities? Is the nature of the fragile Yemeni state only of benefit to the group? And does the US response, linking financial aid to an aggressive counter-terrorism campaign, have the potential to undermine the strength and appeal of al-Qa'ida? This paper offers an alternative view on the current perception of and response to the threat of al-Qa'ida in Yemen. It evaluates the empirical evidence that underlies the present understanding of the group, examines the implications of the socio-political landscape from and within which it operates, and assesses the uneasy position of the Yemeni government in the war against terror in the light of previous US policies and its consequences from the early 1990s to the present. It argues that in the contested Yemeni state, al-Qa'ida is inherently involved in a competition over political legitimacy with a variety of actors that will become more pronounced as the influence of the government recedes. With the strength of al-Qa'ida

ABC News, 24 January 2010, accessed at <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=9647388>.

² Eric Schmitt and Scott Shane, "U.S. Divided on Aid to Counter Qaeda Threat in Yemen", *New York Times*, 15 September 2010, available at www.nytimes.com/2010/09/16/world/middleeast/16yemen.html_r.

³ Greg Miller and Peter Finn, "CIA sees increased threat from al-Qa'ida in Yemen", *Washington Post*, 24. August 2010.



dependent on the ability to attract and maintain public support, neither the US kill and/or capture approach (the uncritical continuation of an “on-off” policy that has made Yemen vulnerable to the influence of al-Qa’ida in the past) nor direct support of the Yemeni government (which depends financially on the continuation of the threat) stand little chance of being successful now. Instead, it plays directly into the hands of al-Qa’ida in Yemen.

EVALUATING AQAP IN YEMEN: A PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

A survey of recent media and policy contributions addressing the issue of al-Qa’ida in Yemen reveals an overall consensus regarding the make-up of the group.⁴ More commonly referred to as “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” (AQAP) acknowledging the union of the previously separate Saudi and Yemeni branches who publically proclaimed their merger in January 2009, the newly-formed group is considered to be thoroughly “compartmentalized and hierarchical, with a distinct division of labour”.⁵ The Yemeni Nasir Abd al-Karim al-Wahayshi (a.k.a Abu Basir) is predominantly regarded as the leader: In January 2009, he appeared on a video entitled “We start from here and we will meet at al-Aqsa” to announce the merger of al-Qa’ida’s branches in Saudi Arabia and Yemen under his command. In his company were three other men, a fellow Yemeni, Qasim bin Mahdi al-Raymi (the alleged military chief of AQAP) and the Saudis Said al-Shihri (al-Wahayshi’s deputy) and Mohammed al-Awfi (identified as a field commander). In individual statements they proclaimed that AQAP would target the near enemy in Sana’a and Riyadh, Western interests in the region and the West itself.⁶ An interview with al-Wahayshi aired on Al

⁴ See for example Murad al-Shishani, “An Assessment of the Anatomy of al-Qaeda in Yemen: Ideological and Social Factors”, *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 8 Issue: 9, March 2010; Jane Novak, “Arabian Peninsula Al-Qaeda Groups Merge”, *The Long War Journal*, 26 January 2009, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/01/arabian_peninsula_al.php; Leela Jacinto, “Key figures in Al-Qaeda’s Yemeni branch” *France 24*, 05 January 2010; Stephen Kurcy, “Five key members of Al-Qaeda in Yemen”, *Christian Science Monitor*, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/1102/Five-key-members-of-Al-Qaeda-in-Yemen-AQAP/Nasir-al-Wuhayshi-head-of-AQAP>;

⁵ Barak Barfi, “Yemen on the Brink? The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Yemen”, New America Foundation. January 2010, p.2.

⁶ Al-Jazeera, January 29, 2009.



Jazeera on January 27th 2010 echoed these sentiments when he explained that the “crusades” against “Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia” have been launched from the Arabian Peninsula, and because of this, all Western interests in the region and beyond should be targeted. The surge of (attempted) attacks directed at both Yemenis affiliated with the government and foreign nationals within the country and abroad, and in particular the recent publication of what is considered to be AQAP’s English language online journal “Inspire” providing detailed guidance on how to kill Americans on US territory, is frequently seen as a confirmation of the serious threat posed by the group.⁷ A more cautious interpretation would highlight the lethal ambitions – albeit not the capability - of AQAP.

Indeed, as with all claims about al-Qa’ida, information is short-lived, contradictory and frequently contested.⁸ Simple facts from matching names with Guantanamo prison numbers to accounts of physical movements and whereabouts of key figures are subject to debate. Consider the following case: On 19 February 2009, the news made the headlines that Mohammed Al-Awfi, the same high-ranking field commander who had appeared in the AQAP merger video just a month before, had surrendered himself to the Yemeni authorities.⁹ Al-Awfi allegedly maintained that “he did not want to appear in the January 24 video” but was ordered to do so despite his objections. If both he and the reports of his surrender are to be trusted, “the message (which he was forced to read on the video) did not represent his viewpoint or ideas”, instead, he “was

⁷ On the recent surge of attacks, see for example Saeed al-Batati, “Al-Qaeda renews attacks in Yemen”, Arab News, 12.10.2010, available at <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article159019.ece>.; The full version of “Inspire” is available at <http://info.publicintelligence.net/InspireFall2010.pdf>.

⁸ Even vague assumptions are frequently reported as facts. For example, Anwar al-Awlaki’s death was widely announced in May 2010, only to be renounced shortly thereafter. <http://www.hurriyeddailynews.com/n.php?n=al-qaeda-in-yemen-announces-new-leader-ex-gitmo-prisoner>. For a detailed discussion of the challenge of knowing Al-Qaeda, see Andreas Behnke & Christina Hellmich, *Knowing Al-Qaeda: The Epistemology of Terrorism* (London: Ashgate Press 2011, forthcoming).

⁹ “Yemen Captures Al Qaeda Commander, a Former Guantanamo Detainee”, *Associated Press & Fox News*, 17 February 2009, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,494784,00.html> “Saudi Al-Qaeda Leader Outlines New Strategy and Tactics of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume VII, Issue 9, April 2009.



told to read it without changes because the wording in the message was carefully chosen.” The sincerity of al-Awfi’s latest attempt at redemption was predictably questioned, especially as the information was subsequently denied by AQAP, claiming instead that al-Awfi had been arrested by Yemeni authorities, who in turn had extradited him to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ Adding further speculation, on June 23rd 2010, the Saudi-owned London-based *Al-Hayat* daily carried in its paper edition an article by its correspondent in Riyadh Nasser Al-Hakbani which claimed that well informed security sources had revealed to Al-Hayat that Qassem al-Rimi whose name comes in the 69th place as the most wanted man in Yemen was the real leader of the al-Qa’ida organization in the Arabian Peninsula. Those sources noted that the proclaimed leader Nasir al-Wahayshi the Yemeni and his deputy Said al-Shihri the Saudi, were in fact just figureheads and mere theoreticians having nothing to do with the day to day activities of the organization.¹¹

Without wanting to pass any judgment on the validity of the above statements, it is the reality of their respective differences that are valuable for our evaluation of AQAP, putting into question the extent to which we know and understand the make-up of the group. Public statements in the name of AQAP, from videos to online journals, cannot be taken for face value and have to be seen, first and foremost, as an attempt to establish a certain status-quo to a wider audience both within Yemen and also, maybe more importantly, abroad. Thomas Heghammer makes this point convincingly when he concludes that the prominent and widely publicized merger of AQAP might amount to little more than an attempt to gloss over the fact that the Saudi-based group had largely been defeated.¹² What we can say with certainty is that AQAP will attempt to appear as unified, competent and powerful as possible - the extent to which this amounts to wishful thinking and mere pretence is another question entirely.

¹⁰ Munir Mawari, “Uncertainty Surrounds the Arrest of al-Qaeda Financier in Yemen” *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 7, Issue 19, July 2009.

¹¹ Nasser al-Hakbani, “Al-Rimi is the real leader of Al-Qa’idah in Yemen”, *Al-Hayat*, 23 June 2010.

¹² Presentation at IISS, 30 September 2010. For a detailed discussion of Jihadism in Saudi Arabia, see



Engaged in an asymmetric confrontation with the Yemeni government and the West, the strength of the organization is not one based on physical might in the traditional sense that is readily measured, quantified and countered, but the ability to manipulate, install fear and to generate a response. It is for that reason that even the failed Christmas day attack is rightfully considered a success.

If gathering meaningful and reliable insights into the leadership of AQAP is difficult, the task of assessing its size or membership in terms of active participants adds another level of ambiguity. In 2009, the Yemeni government claimed that the organization has between 200 and 300 members and most estimates in the West fall into the same range.¹³ It is, however, not clear on what data these assessments are based, and the relative agreement across most assessments might indicate a working assumption in the absence of empirical evidence. However, the current estimate has to be viewed with caution as the Yemeni government, utterly dependent on US financial aid that is explicitly linked to combating AQAP, stands to benefit from any exaggeration of the threat.¹⁴ In the light of the large number of reported arrests of militants allegedly linked to AQAP, one would have to conclude that the actual number is now significantly lower than it was at the time of the original estimate. But as numbers have remained unchanged and at times are now estimated to be higher than originally believed, it is worth considering the possibility that either the alleged arrests of AQAP members were not the individuals they were made out to be or, conversely, that the strategy through which they were detained has generated new recruits.

¹³ A quick search produces estimates ranging from 200 -1500 members or cells. See for example David Sanger and Mark Mazetti, "New Estimate of Strength of Al Qaeda Is Offered" *New York Times*, 30 June 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/01/world/asia/01qaeda.html>; Jane Merrick and Kim Sengupta, "Yemen: the land with more guns than people", *The Independent*, 20 September 2009, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-the-land-with-more-guns-than-people-179>

¹⁴ The Yemeni government has repeatedly been accused of forcing confessions from detained individuals, including those that were more credibly linked to the Southern secessionist movement, effectively turning the political opposition into terrorist threats.



The difficulty of establishing clarity over membership is maybe best illustrated through the case of US-born and raised Anwar al-Awlaki, frequently portrayed as AQAP's iconic ideologue.¹⁵ Despite his alleged links with radical Islamists including the hijackers of 9/11, Awlaki himself has never explicitly associated himself with the organization and has refrained from publishing his statements through AQAP media outlets.¹⁶ His father, former minister of agriculture and president of Sana'a University has vehemently rejected all accusations that would link his son to the group. This is not to say that the absence of a clear-cut AQAP association would rule him out of the membership ranks. Rather, his case is a reminder of the more general observation that direct association with AQAP might be of disadvantage to some, while pretending (through direct proclamations) such a connection might be valuable to others.¹⁷ The example of Samir Khan, alleged editor of "Inspire" and his self-glorifying, article-length confession of being a proud traitor to America is a point in case. In reading his account of his "closely watched" emigration from the US to Yemen in which he repeatedly ridicules the apparent inability of US intelligence to recognize his importance despite the fact that it was evident that he was "al-Qaeda from the core", one cannot escape the impression of a rather desperate young man yearning for attention. Without wanting to overstate the question of what it means to be "Al-Qaeda", the task of evaluating the structure, membership and threat of AQAP is a problem of knowledge that entails a large amount of best-guesses and speculation.

Where does this leave any attempt of evaluating Awlaki's position vis-à-vis AQAP and, indeed, about the thorny issue of membership more generally?

¹⁵ For more details on Anwar al Awlaki see "Militant Islam's Global Preacher: The Radicalizing Effect of Sheikh Anwar al Awlaki.", available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/militant-islams-global-preacher-radicalizing-effect-sheikh-anwar-al-awlaki>

¹⁶ His interpretation of the "Fatwa of Mardin", a controversial piece that has received much attention from Islamists and religious scholars alike, included in the recent version of "Inspire" appeared to be selected/copied from another source and included by the editors. For an excellent discussion of different interpretations of the Mardin Fatwa see Yahya Michot, *Mardin: Ha'egire, Fuite du Pa'echa'e et "Demeure de l'Islam* (Beyrouth: Albouraq, 2004).

¹⁷ The fact that he was put on trial in absentia should not necessarily be interpreted as proof of his AQAP connection, but has to be viewed as part of the government's effort to demonstrate its cooperation with the US who placed him on the terrorist kill-or -capture list.



What can be said with certainty about Awlaki is that his public statements echo many of the themes and rationales communicated by Osama bin Ladin, including the promotion of a violent global jihad and the stern critique of US foreign policy. Yet, while this might appear to be extremist from a US perspective, anti-American sentiments are deeply engrained into the public consciousness of Yemen, for reasons that have not received much attention in the ongoing debate. The following piece illustrates this point:

Oh those of you who believe, our brothers and sisters are suffering in Iraq at the hands of the US invasion. Iraq is on fire. The whole of the Muslim world is on fire. The crusader forces control the holy land, eating its riches and controlling its people. And this is happening while Muslims all over the world are attacked like people fighting over a piece of bread.

Oh believers, and the day will come that the Iraqi children will be resurrected and asked for what crime they were killed. What will you [singular] say to them?

The extract presented here is not actually taken from a statement by bin Ladin or Awlaki, although it could well have been. After all, the plight of Iraqis under Saddam, at the hands of the Zionist-crusader invasion, through sanctions and the recent wars is a popular theme in the rhetoric of bin Ladin.¹⁸ Yet, it is, in fact, an extract from a speech delivered in a Sana'a mosque during the Friday prayer in the spring of 2003, a place that is not otherwise known to be "radical".¹⁹ Seen in the context of public outrage and demonstrations in Yemen against the war in Iraq and various low-points in the continuing crisis in Gaza, these public expressions provide some indication of how deeply many of the political of the messages of al-Qa'ida (not to be equated with simultaneous support for indiscriminate use of violence) resonate with the wider Yemeni

¹⁸ See for example

¹⁹ Christina Hellmich, "The *Khutba* as medium for the communication of Islamic fundamentalism: The case of Yemen" Unpublished M.St. Thesis, Oxford University, 2003.



public. In comparison, Awlaki's rationale is remarkably similar but adds a local dimension to the agenda, explicitly criticizing the Yemeni government for allowing foreign interference in the country:

Yes, I support what Umar Farouk has done after I have been seeing my brothers being killed in Palestine for more than 60 years, and others being killed in Iraq and in Afghanistan. And in my tribe too, US missiles have killed 17 women and 23 children, so do not ask me if al-Qa'ida has killed or blown up a US civil jet after all this. The 300 Americans are nothing comparing to the thousands of Muslims who have been killed.

The Yemeni government sells its citizens to the United States to earn the ill-gotten funds it begs the West for in return for their blood. The Yemeni officials tell the Americans to strike whatever they want and ask them not to announce responsibility for the attacks to avoid people's rage, and then the Yemeni government shamelessly adopt these attacks. For example, the people of Shabwa, Abyan and Arhab have seen the Cruz missiles, and some people saw cluster bombs that did not explode. The state lies when it claims responsibility, and it does so to deny collaboration. US drones continuously fly over Yemen. What state is that which allows its enemy to spy on its people and then considers it as "accepted cooperation"?²⁰

These examples lead us to the fundamental challenge in the fight against AQAP: how to separate the actual members, i.e. those explicitly involved in planning attacks, from those who sympathize with its broader messages to varying degrees, and - more importantly - how to avoid those who sympathize from turning to violence. It is an uncomfortable thought to consider that we have no good way of telling who al-Qa'ida is. Sa'id al-Jamhi, author of *Al-Qa'ida fi al-*

²⁰ Anwar al-Awlaki in an interview with al-Jazeera on 07 February 2010. Full text available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2010/02/2010271074776870.html>.



Yaman (Al-Qa'ida in Yemen), attributes this to AQAP's policy of "maintaining the privacy of its members. Only the identities of the leader, the vice chairman, the military chief, legislative chief, and the media leader are public" (and even these, as we have seen, have to be viewed with a degree of skepticism), while "the most dangerous and most important ones are unknown."²¹ In the absence of any membership criteria, a more critical way of putting it would be that al-Qa'ida is what it can make us believe it is, including the elevation of individuals into its ranks after the completion of an attack, such as bin Laden's endorsement of the underpants-bomber.²² The US response in contemplating "all necessary means" and relying the familiar "kill and/ or capture" that has already failed in Yemen in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 stands little chance of undermining the rationale of AQAP.

AQAP IN YEMEN: ONE OF MANY TROUBLES

Instead of focusing on AQAP itself, a meaningful assessment of the threat posed by the group should begin with an overview of the present socio-political situation in the Republic of Yemen as a whole. Yemen, to echo recent press-coverage, is close to disaster, a fragile, failing, soon to be failed state. Although not without merit²³, it is useful to be more specific: the statehood of the Republic of Yemen is currently contested, both in terms of identity and territorial expansion.²⁴ Indeed, President Ali Abdullah Salih's government is confronting a number of interrelated problems that cannot usefully be addressed in isolation from one another.

²¹ Sa'id Ubayd al-Jamhi, *al-Qa'ida fi al-Yaman* (Sana'a: Maktaba al-Hadara, 2008). A summary of his findings in English provided by Zaid al-Alaya'a, "Al-Qaeda in Yemen", 20 July 2010, *Yemen Today*, available at http://www.yemen-today.com/go/special_reports/5327.html.

²² Rick Nelson, senior fellow at the Center for Security and International Studies, Washington D.C quoted in Rachel Martin "From Osama to Obama – Bin Laden delivers new Threats", *ABC News*, 24 January 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/osama-bin-laden-addresses-president-obama-audio-tape/story?id=9650267>.

²³ No agreement exists as to whether Yemen is about to implode or merely experiencing another period of political turmoil.

²⁴ Insert details.



The first issue is the challenge of effective and sustainable governance or, in more practical terms, President Salih's increasingly difficult task to consolidate power. That said, it would be misleading to measure Yemeni politics solely by Western standards and to view it through the lens of modern statehood. The Republic of Yemen is, above all, an amalgamation of disparate territories that lacks strong institutions to run the affairs of the state and to provide services to its citizens. Instead, Yemeni politics are characterized by elite rivalry and extensive networks of personal patronage which effectively determine political loyalty and stability and provide services where the government does not.²⁵ In large parts of the country the government is involved in complex negotiations with powerful tribes to co-opt an increasingly dissatisfied and impoverished population and to retain a certain level of political order and control. In practice, this means the provision of money, commercial opportunities and government jobs for which tribes, in return, support and take sides with the government. Although this creates a modicum of functionality, it essentially remains an ongoing process of give-and-take bargaining in which the government is at risk of losing influence and control if resources become insufficient to buy cooperation.²⁶

Secondly, there are two distinct areas of conflict in both ends of the country which undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of the government. One is the Huthi rebellion based in Saada province in the North bordering Saudi Arabia which has been ongoing with varying degrees of intensity since 2004.²⁷

²⁵ On the nature of Yemeni politics, see for example Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, (London: Palgrave and MacMillan, 2008).

²⁶ It is also worth keeping in mind that the frequently mentioned "lawless regions" of Yemen are not the wild, empty spaces they are often made out to be, but areas that are governed by tribal law (*urf*). For Yemeni tribalism, see Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), R.B. Serjeant, *Studies in Arabian History and Civilisation* (London: Variorum, 1981), and R.B. Serjeant, *Society and Trade in South Arabia* (Brookfield: Variorum, 1996). For a Yemeni account of the tribes and their role in society, see Fuad al-Salahi, *Thulathiyya al-Dawla w'al-Qabila w'al-Mujtama' al-Madani* (Taiz: Markaz al-Malumat, 2001).

²⁷ For the Huthi rebellion, see Samy Dorlian, *Les Filières Islamistes Zaydites au Yémen*, unpublished masters thesis, Université Paul Cézanne, 2005, and *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, International Crisis Group, May 27, 2009.

153 For Zaydism, see Rudolf Strothman, *Kultus der Zaiditen* (Strasbourg: K.J. Trübner, 1912) and *Das Staatsrecht der Zaiditen* (Strasbourg: K.J. Trübner, 1912), Cornelis van Arendonk, *Les*



Although there has been little first-hand reporting of the conflict because of media exclusion from the area, the full extent of civilian and military casualties is unclear.²⁸ However, reports provided by humanitarian relief agencies speak of 250.000 – 350.000 internally displaced residents, providing a glimpse into the scale of the conflict.²⁹ The other area of conflict is the secessionist movement in the southern provinces of the country. Also referred to as the “South Yemen insurgency”, the movement has become known for a series of increasingly more violent protests and attacks on government forces since 27 April 2009 (South Yemen’s independence day) as an accumulation of rising tension throughout the South.³⁰ The motivation underlying this movement is financial nature, which started when former southern military officials, forced into compulsory retirement, demanded higher pension payments from the government: The protesters accused the Yemeni President of corruption and openly called for independence from his government. It is a sad irony that the government has to rely on its military to suppress the revolt of former military staff over the unfair distribution of financial resources, thereby further draining increasingly scarce resources needed elsewhere in a manner that is not benefitting the people and therefore more likely pouring oil in the flame of public frustration. In the light of the massive budget crisis in Yemen (addressed in more detail below), it is not a stretch of the imagination to speculate over the potential consequences – such as the fragmentation of the country into multiple areas of conflict - if the government was to run out of money to pay the military on which the fragile cohesion of the country appears to depend.

Débuts de L’Imam Zaidite au Yemen, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), Wilferd Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1965), and Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁸ Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, “Media absent from Yemen’s forgotten conflict”, Arab Media Society, Issue 8, Spring 2009, available at <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=714>.

²⁹ UNHCR struggles to help the internally displaced in northern Yemen, <http://www.unhcr.org/4ab3a7d49.html>

³⁰ Stephen Day, “The political challenge of Yemen’s southern movement,” Carnegie Paper, 29 March 2010, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=40414>.



It is in the context of these conflicts and the ongoing challenge of governance that the severe structural challenges that render Yemen to the bottom of the list of low-income-countries have to be viewed. Present structural challenges include economic recession, staggering poverty, dwindling oil and water resources, rapid population growth and low literacy rates to name but a few. Put differently, nearly half the population lives on less than 2 US\$ a day, national unemployment is at 40%, less than 40% of all Yemeni households have access to safe water and electricity, 50% of all Yemenis are illiterate.³¹ The crude death rate and the crude birth are estimated at 9.0 and 39.7 per 1,000 population, the fertility rate of 4.1 rank amongst the highest in the region.³² State-funded health and educational services are abysmal. Corruption and inefficiency for which the country is notorious (but which have to be seen in the larger context of the nature of governance) are linked to the government's inability to provide adequate social services at the most basic level. Collectively, these structural challenges translate into a heightened level of public frustration and effect – and are affected by - the conflicts mentioned above. Without wanting to over-simplify the complex dynamics of Yemen's many interrelated problems, it is the lack of sufficient resources that undermine the President's grip on power - his ability buy political support, provide services to reduce public dissatisfaction and to deal effectively with the conflicts in the country. Indeed, the word in the street is one of an increasingly isolated President struggling to maintain vital alliances.³³

Within this fragile political climate, AQAP appears to add yet another, and according to various analysts, steadily increasing challenge to the already troubled regime. This is, at first sight, readily confirmed by the recent rise in the numbers of attacks against government targets as well as a flare of anti-

³¹ For a quick overview of structural challenges, see "Yemen: 10 reasons to worry", available at http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2010/Yemen/Yemen_10_reasons_to_worry/EN/index.htm

³² WHO (2010) <http://www.emro.who.int/emrinfo/index.asp?Ctry=yem>.

³³ If the notion holds that any politician, not to mention one that is desperate, will do whatever it takes to stay in power, the Amnesty International's observations of the surge in human rights violations including unlawful killings of those accused of links to Southern Movement activists, Houthi rebels and al-Qa'ida, arbitrary arrests, torture and unfair trials will not come as a surprise <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/yemen-abandons-human-rights-name-countering-terrorism-2010-08-24>



governmental rhetoric from AQAP related sources. To boost, on 30 October 2010 the President publically acknowledged the challenge posed by AQAP in a media statement responding to the latest UPS bomb threat which originated from Yemen:

We have a problem with terrorism, specifically the presence of Al-Qaeda and we continue to pay a high price. We have incurred tremendous losses in the investment and tourism sectors as well as other sectors. The Republic of Yemen lost over 70 martyrs, brave members of our security and armed forces who Al-Qaeda attacked while serving in security checkpoints.

However, the confrontation of al-Qa'ida with the Yemeni government is a relatively recent development that has to be viewed with a degree of skepticism. During the early 1990s the Yemeni government, unlike other Arab regimes at the time, welcomed fighters returning from Afghanistan (also known as the “first generation” of al-Qa'ida in Yemen) who integrated into all levels of society and would turn out to be useful allies to counter the influence of “unbelieving” atheist communists in the South and “unbelieving” Shi'is in the North.³⁴ The nature of the relationship arguably changed in response to the government's unrestrained support for the US both in the aftermath of the USS Cole incident and the events of 9/11. Yet despite the recent confrontation, the personal connections and relationships with jihadis that were established over the years continue to exist and allow the room for negotiation and bargaining on which all policy making in Yemen relies. And even if relations were to become more strained, the Yemeni government, as the following section demonstrates, effectively depends on the continuation of the threat posed by AQAP to secure the financial aid which is vital for its political survival.

³⁴ An example is Tariq al-Fadli, leader of the *mujahidin* (fighters) in Afghanistan, who later was appointed by the president to the Majlis al-Shura, the upper house of the parliament.



YEMEN'S UNEASY ROLE OF IN THE WAR AGAINST TERROR

Yemen, or so it is repeatedly stressed in the media, has been -and continues to be- a loyal ally in the war against terrorism: Both in response to the attack on the USS Cole in Aden in 2000 and the events of 9/11 the Yemeni government went out of its way to demonstrate its support for the US. Yet, to view this support solely as an act of loyalty or indeed agreement with the US position would be to miss the strategic motivations underlying this political move. It must be seen, first and foremost, as the desire to avoid the mistake that was made in 1990 when Yemen served on the UN Security Council and paid a high price for the failure to back the US in the build up to the second Gulf War. Only minutes after Yemen had casted its infamous vote against military intervention in Iraq, a senior American diplomat is on record for relating to his Yemeni counterpart that “this was the most expensive no-vote you ever casted.”³⁵ Within days, the US had effectively stopped its \$70 million aid programme to Yemen, and the World Bank and the IMF moved to bloc Yemeni loans. By early 1991, over two million Yemeni workers had been expelled from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf. By 1992, the price for milk had quadrupled. By 1993, the newly formed Republic was descending into civil war.

At a time when the new merger of formerly North and South Yemen had embarked on the most egalitarian experiment of democracy in the Arab world, it was American retaliation for a political decision it did not favor, albeit one which is an entirely legitimate under the UN Charter, that pulled the political ground from underneath the feet of Yemen's liberal reformers and directly added to the suffering of the Yemeni people.³⁶ Although quickly forgotten and certainly no longer on the political radar in the West, the notion of US double standards is deeply engrained in the national consciousness of Yemen.

Thus motivated by fear and arguably lacking foresight, in 2001, the effort of the Yemeni government to show solidarity with the US backfired dramatically,

³⁵ Geoff Simons, *The United Nations*, (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1995) p.168

³⁶ Ibid. p.168.



ironically for *both* Yemeni and US interests. In what is best described as a frantic attempt to avoid US retaliation and military intervention, the government arrested anybody it suspected of harboring support for AQ. Within no time, Yemen's jails were filled with young men from all parts of the country suspected to support terrorism. If they did not support al-Qa'ida from the outset, by the time they were released they probably did.³⁷ The simple idea that underlied the strategy other than that action had to be taken quickly and, maybe more importantly, visibly, was that the more people detained - with or without evidence - would leave fewer to carry out another attack against US targets, and in turn, prevented Yemen from becoming a target itself. In conceptual terms, the parallels to similar overreactions and arrests by other countries in the fight against terrorism readily come to mind. Overreaction in general, and overly zealous arrests in particular, have done nothing to reduce radicalization - the opposite is the case. The groundwork for radicalization was done most effectively by those trying to prevent it.

But Yemen's cooperation with Washington was not limited to proclamations of support and public arrests. It also supported, albeit in secrecy, the strike conducted by an unmanned CIA drone against Abu Ali al-Harithi, al-Qa'ida's head in Yemen at the time, in November 2002. Unfortunately, the story was made public when the US needed a victory in the war against terror - leaving the Yemeni government betrayed and having to justify its actions to an increasingly frustrated public at home. It is, in fact, worth emphasizing the significance of this event which significantly undermined the public image of the government played directly into the hands of AQAP which emphasizes the government's (secret) cooperation with the US as a betrayal of the Yemeni people in its rhetoric. The way the US (and indeed the UK - although little of this is discussed in the media) presently conduct their military support in Yemen

³⁷ On radicalization in prisons see for example Peter Neumann, "Prisons and Terrorism Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries", M. Cuthbertson, "Prisons and the Education of Terrorists", *A policy report published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)*, London, 2010, available at <http://icsr.info/publications/papers/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>; or James Beckford, Daniele Joly and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Muslims in Prison: Challenge and Change in Britain and France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).



indicates that little has been learned from the mistakes made in previous years. Lack of foresight and critical reflection appears to be hallmark of counter-terrorism policies in Yemen.

Luckily, at the time when al-Harithti was killed and a major victory against al-Qa'ida publically proclaimed in 2002, there seemed to be no need for further US involvement in Yemen. Al-Qa'ida, it was believed, was largely defeated and the humiliated Yemeni government had merely done what was right and nothing that deserved to be rewarded or recognized. This mindset, short-sighted as it may be, might explain US abandonment of Yemen in 2005 when it suspended a 20 million US\$ aid program, a set-back that was compounded by the World Bank decision to cut back aid from 420 – 280 million.³⁸ At the time, nobody predicted the crisis we now face over AQAP, and resources were needed more urgently to support the continued US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Although it is not the intention of the paper to advocate economic development as a tool for counter-terrorism³⁹, the history of ignoring the needs and well-being of the Yemeni people and caring only at times when it coincides with other key political interests has done little to endear the US to the Yemenis who quite rightly speak of hypocrisy and double-standards. As such, AQAP's criticism of both the government and the US was likely to meet a receptive audience.

We know today that al-Qa'ida was never defeated in 2002. In 2006, the escape of 23 alleged al-Qa'ida militants from prison in 2006 might be viewed as an early sign of the group's expanding a foothold – or, indeed, continued support from within the ranks of the government. After a campaign of low level attacks on Yemeni and Western targets within the country, including the US embassy on September 17th 2008, al-Qa'ida spectacularly re-emerged in the public sphere with the creation of AQAP and gained undivided international with the Christmas-day attack in 2009. To date, as both recent (attempted) attacks and

³⁸ Insert details.

³⁹ On the disconnect between state-building and counter-terrorism see Karin von Hippel, "The Roots of Terrorism: Probing the Myths", *Political Quarterly*, Vol.73, No.1, 2002, pp. 25-39.



statements in the name of AQAP indicate, the group appears to be at a new peak: It pursues an ambitious agenda that is *both* local and global, aspiring to attack the enemy - the US and its allies, the Yemeni government and other Arab leaders in Yemen and abroad. The present assumption – or fear - is that the contested Yemeni state will become the new stronghold of AQAP.

RE-THINKING THE THREAT OF AQAP IN YEMEN

At risk of downplaying the issue, it is important to place the issue into the broader context of Islamist politics in Yemen. Although anti-Americanism is a widely shared sentiment, support for indiscriminate violence in general, and that which is likely to cause Yemeni casualties, is not.⁴⁰ In a similar way, anti-governmental sentiments are held across the country – AQAP does not monopolize the issue. In the contested state of Yemen, AQAP has effectively become engaged in a context over political legitimacy in which it is competing against a number of different actors.

The secessionist movement in the South is first and foremost a confrontation with the government, which has previously utilized the jihadis to keep the “socialist unbelievers” in check and balance. Thus, it is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that there is little sympathy for AQAP its particular readings of Islam. In fact, Al-Jazeera recently aired a program in which fighters claiming to be AQAP went out of their way to explain to the secessionists that their war is against the US and its allies and not against the Yemeni army and fellow Muslims. “We carry bombs for God’s enemies, soldiers you must know that we do not want to fight you.”⁴¹ They are words that might not carry much weight in the light of AQAP’s violent attacks against the military. Rather, a lot more bargaining will have to be done to convince the secessionists (and indeed the wider audience addressed here) to join forces with AQAP in pursuit of a joint

⁴⁰ If Saudi-Arabia is an example to go by, then public frustration with AQAP can be expected to increase if its presence is having negative effects locally.

⁴¹ Extended parts of the report are available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7REIWMRdRk>



goal that is yet to be established and which, in order to be successful, might well have to involve qat rather than guns.⁴² It might well involve a change/moderation in AQAP's presently narrow interpretation of Islam to convince the former socialist unbelievers of the new friendship.

In a similar way, the Shia Houthi rebellion in the North is primarily a confrontation with the government driven by religious differences regarding the legitimacy of governance in Yemen desiring the establishment of an imamate in Yemen without, however, advancing a coherent political program. The same, in fact, can be said for AQAP which has little to offer in terms of a political strategy beyond the espousal of the violent jihad. But despite the shared enemy, there is little love between AQAP and the young rebels or believing youth who operate in ideologically different spectrums. Indeed, a report in *The Long War Journal* claims that the Yemeni government has integrated hundreds of al Qaeda fighters into a militia that has been operating in the northern Sa'ada War since 2004 and that, more recently Ayman Zawahiri promised Yemen's President more fighters in return for the release of his operatives from prison.⁴³ While it is difficult to confirm the validity of these statements, it would be reasonable to expect that AQAP and the rebels specialized in violence rather than the art of organized, political give-and-take bargaining stand little chance of searching for common ground, in a context where sectarian differences are becoming more profound. Moreover, as a bloody conflict that has dragged on for years, caused substantial casualties and displaced more than 250.000 residents, local support for the continuation of violent campaigns in pursuit of arguably unrealistic goals is not likely enjoy a broad support base.

⁴² The video also provides insights into the public reaction to the bombing, authorized by a joined US/Yemeni in which Yemeni children were amongst the victims.

⁴³ Jane Novak, "Yemeni al-Qaeda leader: State conducts terror attacks", *The Long War Journal*, 3 December 2008, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/12/yemeni_al_qaeda_lead_2.php.



These two groups, however, present only the most visible actors in the Islamist contest over political legitimacy in Yemen.⁴⁴ One would naturally take a closer look at the group of Zaydi revivalists - not to be equated with the Huthi rebellion which is only a fraction of the broader group which represents a multi-layered reaction against the government's anti-Zaydi policies gradually eradicating Yemen's Zaydi heritage. There are those with close ties to Iran, presenting an ideological departure from Yemeni Zaydism and, if Iraq is an example to go by, have clashed violently with al-Qa'dia. There is the traditional, religious wing focused on education, motivated to counter Sunni-Wahhabi influences which have come into Yemen from Saudi Arabia. The different groups within the Zaydi-revivalist movement, while also at odds with each other to varying degrees, have little in common with AQAP.

Adding further diversity to the spectrum of Islamist voices, there are the Salafis, according to Laurent Bonnefoy an a-political group around the late Muqbil al Wadi'i, which stands out for its condemnation of violence.⁴⁵ More specifically, al-Wadi'i is reported to have been an outspoken critic of jihadists' strategies who accused bin Ladin of having a preference to invest in weapons rather than in mosques. Continuing this position, Muhammad al-Imam, another charismatic member of the group, condemned jihadi violence in Iraq against the U.S.-led occupation.⁴⁶ As such, they are in direct opposition to the violence espoused by AQAP in the name of Islam.

There is the Muslim Brotherhood, represented in the political arena by the Islah party. Well integrated into the social fabric of Yemen, the internal make-up of the party contains a variety of different positions ranging from the role of women

⁴⁴ For a detailed overview of different Islamist actors in Yemen see Laurent Bonnefoy, "Varieties of Islamism in Yemen: the Logic of Integration under Pressure", *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.13, No.1, 2009.

⁴⁵ For details on this group, see Laurent Bonnefoy, "Les relations religieuses transnationales contemporaines entre le Yémen et l'Arabie Saoudite: un salafisme importé?", Ph.D. dissertation, IEP de Paris, 2007.

⁴⁶ On al-Wadi'i's criticism of Usama bin Ladin see also Brynjar Lia, "Destructive Doctrinarians': Abu Musab al-Suri's Critique of the Salafis in the Jihadi Current," *Norwegian Defence Research Institute* (2007), p. 4.



in society to the pursuit of violence which are subject to frequent debate.⁴⁷ Amongst the most radical and ambiguous members is Abd al-Majid al-Zindani who allegedly organized for Yemeni fighters to be sent to Afghanistan during the 1980s and is said to have met bin Ladin on several occasions. Although the US regards him as a close partner of bin Ladin and supported of al-Qa'ida, his position as a mainstream popular figure is widely respected while espousals of violent militancy do not appeal to many within the party.⁴⁸

There is the Sufi movement that has experienced a significant revival since the late 1990s and is playing an increasingly important role in Yemen's Islamist politics. This is done through two main channels, the communication and teaching of its religious doctrines and participation in the political arena where it has challenged the Islah party during previous elections.⁴⁹ Along the way, the group has violently clashed with other actors, which has prompted many analysts to describe the group as being "threatened on all sides by government policies and by other Islamist groups."⁵⁰

Jointly, these different actors provide a multitude of rationales on the question of governance and political legitimacy in Yemen, thereby providing viable alternatives to the narrow, violent logic of the *glocal* jihad espoused by AQAP. In the power vacuum that emerges as (or if) the influence of the Yemeni government recedes, expressions of differences are bound to become more defined. Indeed, a distinctive feature of the contemporary Yemeni landscape is an accentuation of difference: the self- and cross-identification of Yemenis as Salafis, Jihadis, Shi'a, Zaydis, Sufis, and the many variations on these

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of Islah, see Jillian Schwedler, "The Yemeni Islah Party: Political Opportunities and Coalition Building in a Transitional Polity," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamist Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 205-29, and Jillian Schwedler *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ For details on Zindani, see Gregory Johnsen, "Profile of Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4, No. 7, 2006, pp. 3-5.

⁴⁹ Alexander Knysh, "The Tariqa on a Landcruiser: The Resurgence of Sufism in Yemen," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2001), pp. 399-414.

⁵⁰ Op.cit. Bonnefoy (2009). See also "Contextualizing the Salafi-Sufi Conflict (from the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt)," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2007), pp. 503-30.



identities. In this context, it is the quality of the internal debate, (leadership within the Yemeni community), that will determine the future of AQAP. As such, AQAP's ability to establish itself in the country will depend to a large degree on its ability to effectively maneuver the realm of political bargaining – a task it is poorly equipped to master with the exclusive aid of semi-professional explosives.

CONCLUSION

The multiple, interrelated conflicts in the contested Yemeni state have the potential to empower sub-national groups of all kinds, including AQAP. However, AQAP is but one of many actors that not only lacks common ground with the other groups and has a history of violent confrontation with several of them. In the past, "jihadi tracts have denounced Shi'i practices as deviations in such emotive terms that the sense of unity or the *umma* (the community of all Muslims) seems to vanish into the ether."⁵¹ Yet, if not exactly democratic or singing from the same hymn sheet, these contribute to a hybrid political theory and an invigorated debate within the country. Violent, global / local jihad is but one of many currents presently unfolding. Yet, in the eyes of most commentators to date, it is the quintessential breeding-ground for terrorism that requires immediate intervention. What is often overlooked is that Yemen, much like other Muslim societies, is in a period of uncertain transition that is difficult to predict and, if Afghanistan and Iraq are examples to go by, even harder to influence and direct from the outside. For the Yemeni government, the biggest threat stems from the erosion of financial resources on which political survival will ultimately depend. While this means that it will do everything to convince the US and the West of its cooperation in the fight against AQAP to secure the continued flow of vital funds, it would not be in its interest to eradicate the threat. Although outwardly in opposition, it is the *continuation* of AQAP – real or perceived, and there is no way for us to know for certain - that secures the survival of the Yemeni government.

⁵¹ James Piscatori,



In the bigger picture, one of lessons learned from the global war against terror, or so one would hope, is that aggressive confrontation with the enemy – from indiscriminate arrests, indefinite detention, and military intervention – has done little to make the US and West any safer from either the anger or the violent attacks of the radical jihadis. Indeed, it has added more weight to the arguments that underlie the global jihad against the West. AQAP, the latest manifestation of the enemy in an organized and structured manner, is no exception. US intervention in Yemen and manipulation of the Yemeni government is one of the most powerful arguments at AQAP’s disposal to win favors with an otherwise unsympathetic audience, and one does not need to be a military strategist to appreciate the potential of the notion of a “common enemy”. AQAP has effectively exploited the legacy of US intervention in Yemen to support its own legitimacy in the past, and the nature of the US response to date leaves little doubt that it will be able to do so even more effectively in the foreseeable future. With its strength of AQAP dependent on the ability to attract and maintain public support, the continuation of the US kill and/or capture approach that has made Yemen vulnerable to the influence of al-Qa’ida in previous years plays directly into the hands of AQAP. In the words of Ted Koppel, nine years after 9/11, I let’s stop playing into the hands of bin Ladin.⁵²

⁵²<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/09/09/AR2010090904735.html?hp id=opinionsbox1>