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# CONTEMPORARY JIHADI MILITANCY IN YEMEN

HOW IS THE THREAT EVOLVING?

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## SUMMARY

Regional conflict and internal chaos have allowed militant jihadi groups to rise and flourish in Yemen. This paper analyzes two of the most prominent such groups, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY), by scrutinizing the factors that led to their respective ascents, and examining the challenges and pressures that have caused their respective declines.

By comparing and contrasting their operations, respective styles of leadership, and varying levels of community integration, this paper charts the path of jihadi militancy in Yemen and assesses its future in Yemeni politics and society.

## KEY POINTS

- \* The two core goals of AQAP are expelling infidels from Muslim lands and introducing an Islamic regime that would rule by Islamic law. While these goals have remained constant, circumstances and experience have refined AQAP's approaches to engaging local populations in the pursuit of these goals.
- \* The main challenges and pressures facing AQAP, some of which are shared by ISY, include increasingly frequent counterterrorism strikes, dwindling public support, weak leadership, poor communications, and decentralization and/or fragmentation.
- \* ISY's challenges are similar to those of AQAP, but its initial position in Yemen was weaker. Unlike AQAP, ISY never held territory and found it hard to integrate itself into Yemeni society.
- \* The decentralization of Yemen's jihadists should not be mistaken for a lessening of their long-term threat. However, current jihadi decentralization does provide a small window of opportunity to capitalize on the jihadists' disarray. Above all, ending the current war is imperative.



## INTRODUCTION

Yemen's rugged topography of mountains, wadis, and deserts, coupled with a lack of robust government institutions, rampant political corruption, regional marginalization, and simmering tribal conflicts have long made it both an ideal refuge for terrorists and breeding ground for terrorism. More recently, even more favorable conditions for terrorism flourished due to the chaos and sectarian polarization brought about by the current war. Houthi rebels swept into the capital in late 2014, prompting a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni Arab countries to intervene militarily in 2015. Both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which formed in 2009, and Islamic State in Yemen, which formally declared its Yemen province (ISY) in 2014, benefited from the resulting security vacuum. Various developments from mid-2016 onwards, however, have placed unprecedented pressure on both groups. The gradual decentralization and/or fragmentation of Yemen's jihad movements have made the labels AQAP and ISY no longer as relevant. This does not mean the terrorist threat is diminishing, but rather that it is evolving. This paper traces the threads of this evolution using primary sources, including the jihadist groups' operational claims, formal statements, videos, speeches, lectures, poems, and nashids, or anthems, as well as informal communications on encrypted

messaging applications, such as Telegram, and author interviews in Yemen with local communities.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the formation and evolution of jihadi militancy in Yemen. It then outlines AQAP's goals and governance strategies, focusing on four key areas that help to explain how AQAP succeeded in running a de facto state for an entire year, and why it was not usurped by the arrival of ISY. These areas of AQAP strength are local integration and branding, tribal relations, community development, and youth engagement. Next, this paper offers evidence of a recent decline in AQAP as a group, following the peak of its strength, influence, and power in 2015-16. It identifies five challenges and pressures that are symptoms of and/or reasons for this decline: increasing counterterrorism strikes, dwindling support, weak leadership, poor communications, and decentralization and fragmentation. ISY has faced similar pressures and these are explored in the following section, which traces ISY's rise and decline in Yemen and assesses where it is currently. Finally, this paper looks ahead to the future of jihadi militancy in Yemen. The operational and organizational capacities of AQAP and ISY as centralized groups look to be in decline, and the distinction between them is becoming more blurred, despite the first instance of reported clashes between them in July 2018. Nevertheless, this paper explains why the terror threat in Yemen remains serious at both

international and domestic levels. It explains why conditions on the ground in south Yemen may be setting the scene for a resurgence of militant jihad, even if a peace deal is finally concluded between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition backing the Yemeni government. The paper concludes by suggesting how the short-term opportunity that currently exists, as jihadi groups reel under recent pressures, might be used most effectively to cut off Yemen's persistent jihadi militancy problem at the grassroots level.

## PART ONE: FORMATION & EVOLUTION

Militant jihad in Yemen, as elsewhere in the Middle East, is fueled by war and civil unrest. Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was in power for over three decades until 2012, eagerly allied with radical clerics in the '80s and '90s to further his political agenda. He framed southern socialists as godless infidels and enlisted Islamic extremists to wage a 'jihad' against them. By the mid-1990s, a significant group calling itself the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army had formed around a local Yemeni veteran of the Afghan jihad, Zayn al-'Abidin al-Mihdar. It operated with support from a high-ranking military commander, 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. This is the same 'Ali Muhsin who in 2016 became Yemen's vice president and commander of the

armed forces. This is significant because it hints at possible tacit alliances between AQAP and parts of the Saudi-backed Yemeni military fighting in the current war against Houthi rebels from Yemen's north.

Since 2000, al-Qaeda has been the dominant militant jihadist group in Yemen. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army was terminated, in theory at least, after it kidnapped 16 Western tourists in 1998 and Mihdar was executed. In practice, however, the group was subsequently linked to several al-Qaeda attacks, including the suicide boat bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, which killed 17 U.S. sailors. Most likely, the group simply melted into al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's growth in Yemen was assisted by a groundswell of anger at the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This coincided with many jihadists being released from jail in the early 2000s to attend an incompetent re-education program which effectively let them loose on society.<sup>1</sup> Those who remained in jail, including both future AQAP leaders, Nasir al-Wuhayshi and Qasim al-Raymi, exploited their captivity to recruit fellow prisoners and build a strong jihad network. As opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq grew, Saleh agreed to arrest young Yemenis attempting to travel to Iraq or its neighbors without government permission. Once locked up in Yemen, they were easy pickings for the jihad networks forming in prisons.<sup>2</sup> So while it looked on the surface like



al-Qaeda in Yemen was declining in the early to mid-2000s, beneath the surface it was building.

The resurgence of al-Qaeda in Yemen followed a grand jailbreak in 2006, in which 23 jihadists escaped from a high-security prison in Sanaa, taking the international community by surprise. Among the escapees was Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who quickly became al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen. He was the ideal choice owing to his tribal origins, religious schooling, and solid jihadist experience. Like many in his generation of Yemeni militants, he honed his jihadist credentials in Afghanistan, where he became Osama bin Laden's personal secretary. Several high-profile attacks followed in the wake of the jailbreak. Most notable among these were a suicide bomb attack on a Spanish tour group in 2007 and an ambitious double car bombing against the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa in 2008.

Perversely, al-Qaeda in Yemen was actually bolstered by the Saudi crackdown on Islamist extremism. Saudi jihadists fled across the border into Yemen and in January 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda merged to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Attacks continued expeditiously,

focusing on military and international targets inside Yemen, but also a handful outside Yemen. Key to such operations was AQAP bomb-maker Ibrahim al-'Asiri, whose creativity and devotion is perhaps best exemplified by his construction of a suicide bomb to insert in the rectum of his own brother to assassinate Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayif in 2009. The bomb succeeded in blowing up his brother but barely scratched the Prince. 'Asiri is also thought to have been the brains behind the underwear bomb that an AQAP-trained Nigerian man tried to detonate in a plane over Detroit on Christmas Day of 2009, as well as two bombs hidden in printer cartridges and found on cargo planes in 2010. 'Asiri is likely still active, and in September 2017 authored a triumphant article celebrating 16 years since the destruction of New York's twin towers.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past decade, AQAP has taken advantage of war and instability to launch state-building enterprises on two occasions. The first was in 2011-12, when it capitalized on unrest following Yemen's Arab Spring uprising to declare small Islamic emirates in parts of Abyan and Shabwa. The second was in 2015-16, when AQAP resurged to run a de facto state out of Hadramawt



MOHAMMED HUWAIIS/AFP/Getty Images

in Yemen's east. AQAP took advantage of the security and governance vacuum that followed the intervention of a Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen in March 2015. As the coalition campaign against Houthi rebels began, AQAP was able to swell both its numbers and its coffers by staging another jailbreak, this time of an estimated 300 jihadists, seizing military hardware and robbing the central bank of an estimated \$100 million USD.<sup>4</sup> It ran its de facto state for an entire year until United Arab Emirates Special Forces, with help from the U.S., forced it to withdraw in April 2016. This marked the high point of AQAP's influence and power in Yemen.

## PART TWO: AQAP GOALS & GOVERNANCE

The two core goals of AQAP can be summarized as expelling infidels from Muslim lands and introducing an Islamic regime to rule by Islamic law. While these goals have remained constant, circumstances and experience have refined AQAP's approaches to engaging local populations and achieving these goals.

To reach its recent zenith in 2015-16, AQAP employed a number of parallel strategies that were at once practical, tactical, and ideological. It is important to note that populations in Yemen's east, particularly in





tribal areas, are well armed and would be difficult to terrorize into submission. The key to AQAP's success was not recruitment; even at its peak, its core fighters likely numbered no more than 4,000. Rather, AQAP worked to secure buy-in from key city and tribal leaders and to win passive toleration from local populations. It did this by focusing on four key areas: local integration and branding, tribal relations, community development, and youth engagement.

## LOCAL INTEGRATION AND BRANDING

First, regarding local integration and branding, AQAP had learned from its short period of rule in the small Islamic emirates it declared in 2011-12. At that time it had

launched charitable projects and rebranded itself as Ansar al-Shari'a (the Partisans of Islamic Law) to distance itself from any negative associations with al-Qaeda. However, its unrelenting implementation of Islamic law and overbearing governance style alienated local communities and tribal leaders. Hence, the next time around in 2015-16, AQAP consciously relaxed its dictatorial approach and instead struck power-sharing deals with local governance structures. It again rebranded itself, this time as Abna' Hadramawt (the Sons of Hadramawt) for even greater local appeal.

It is significant that only three percent of tweets from AQAP's governance feed during 2016 were about the implementation of the harsh hudud punishments of Islamic law. This apparent laxity earned AQAP the contempt of ISIS. After three separate

provinces of ISIS released videos specifically criticizing AQAP's weak implementation of Islamic law, AQAP released a full-length feature film, which it screened publicly in eastern coastal towns and also released online. "Hurras al-Shari'a," or "The Guardians of Islamic Law," released in December 2015, reaffirmed AQAP's commitment to global jihad and positioned its seemingly light touch as part of a smart long-term strategy for achieving an ultimately hardcore Islamic regime.

AQAP has since returned to favoring the Ansar al-Shari'a label, having dropped the Sons of Hadramawt label after being ousted from Mukalla in April 2016. There is no doubt that Ansar al-Shari'a is one and the same as AQAP. Ansar al-Shari'a correspondents' reports from the provinces are posted on the formal AQAP Telegram wire as official

AQAP announcements. Moreover, AQAP Sheikh Abu al-Bara' in 2018 issued a call for tribesmen to join Ansar al-Shari'a on the Houthi battlefronts. He specifically identified Ansar al-Shari'a as al-Qaeda by describing it as such in brackets on the opening page.<sup>5</sup>

## TRIBAL RELATIONS

Second, getting along with tribes has always been key to the survival of militant jihadists in Yemen.<sup>6</sup> The ability to reach some kind of understanding with local tribes—although not necessarily creating formal alliances and certainly not requiring bay'a, or an oath of allegiance—has been as central to al-Qaeda's success as it has to ISIS's relative failure in Yemen. AQAP achieved this through nurturing kinship ties through marriage and recruitment. When



asked in late 2015 why AQAP was tolerated, one Hadrami told this author: “We don’t support them. But they are our kinsfolk. We let them go about their business and we go about ours.”<sup>7</sup> On occasions when innocent tribesmen were accidentally killed in operations designed to target the Yemeni military, AQAP published formal apologies and negotiated with the relevant tribes to pay blood money.<sup>8</sup>

This arrangement of mutual, if at times grudging, toleration in tribal areas is reflected in the results of a survey conducted by the Yemen Polling Center and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient. Overall, Yemenis are more afraid of air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition or drones than of terrorism. The results obviously vary according to governorate. But even in al-Bayda’, where AQAP has been the most consistently active since December 2016, 23 percent of respondents listed air strikes as one of “the three biggest security threats” in their area, while only 14 percent listed “terrorism/al-Qaeda Organization/ISIS (Daesh).”<sup>9</sup>

AQAP was also mindful to invoke and praise the glorious history and courage of various tribes in statements, videos, poems, and nashids, or anthems. It positioned its contemporary jihad as a simple continuation of the warlike prowess of tribal forefathers who fought independence battles against British colonialists in the 1960s. But perhaps most helpful to AQAP was the eruption of war



in 2015, which gave it the opportunity to align itself with the anti-Houthi war effort. AQAP recast southerners’ historical fears of a takeover by northerners as a sectarian battle of Sunnis versus Shi’a. Thus, disputes that were essentially political were reframed as religious, and endowed with a narrative of apocalyptic jihad. In short, AQAP did and does not control tribes. Rather, it has been able to make common cause with some tribes.<sup>10</sup>

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Third, AQAP courted local populations by fronting an impressive program of community development projects, such as improving electricity, water and sewage infrastructure, building roads, renovating schools, and stocking hospitals. Fifty-six percent of tweets from AQAP’s governance Twitter feed during 2016 were about its hands-on development activities. In contrast to the war raging in Yemen’s west, where coalition bombs rained down on civilian as well as Houthi military targets, AQAP’s territory looked like a haven of stability. AQAP was able to finance such projects through oil imports and smuggling operations along Yemen’s porous eastern coastline. Ironically,

AQAP actually benefited from the Saudi naval blockade, which was focused on the west of Yemen, since this gave it a virtual monopoly over imports and generated an estimated \$2 million USD per day.<sup>11</sup> AQAP also posed as a kind of modern-day Robin Hood by imposing windfall taxes on local companies with the stated aim of improving services and utilities for local people.

## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Fourth, AQAP spent considerable effort on youth engagement, understanding full well that founding a caliphate was still a faraway prospect and that re-education of the next generation was key to preparing for a caliphate and the full implementation of Islamic law. U.S. drone strikes, air strikes, and raids were exploited to the maximum by AQAP, particularly when poorly targeted strikes resulted in the deaths of women and children or the destruction of village housing. Several AQAP videos feature interviews with grieving villagers pasted alongside footage explaining the global jihadist agenda.<sup>12</sup> Following U.S. Navy Seal raids in 2017, which killed villagers, AQAP issued statements designed to plug into



tribal anger, positioning itself as the conduit for revenge; jihadist poems lamenting the dead are still appearing.<sup>13</sup> In March 2016, AQAP even held a “Festival of Martyrs of the American Bombing” in Hadramawt, which included a competition for schoolboys to design anti-U.S. and anti-drone posters. This kind of youth outreach nurtures the next generation of angry young men for potential recruitment.

While AQAP ran its state out of Mukalla, it held several festivals which included games, such as boys eating ice cream blindfolded, and Qur’an recitation competitions with weapons and motorbikes as prizes. Thirteen percent of its governance tweets were about celebrations. Even after being driven out of Mukalla, AQAP continued its youth engagement by exploiting battlefronts. Photos have emerged of AQAP openly driving a proselytization truck around the streets of Taiz. The side of the truck advertises CDs, films, nashids, lectures, books, and Qur’ans. One way to get boys interested in jihad was to entice them to read AQAP material. In Taiz, any youth who wrote a summary of AQAP’s jihad booklet, “This is Our Mission,” was entered to win a Kalashnikov as first prize, followed by a motorbike, laptop, revolver, or money. This focus on young hearts and minds indicates that the battle against AQAP will be a long one, even though it no longer runs a state or holds significant territory.

## SIGNS OF DECLINE IN AQAP

AQAP activity—formally as a group—has declined dramatically over the past year and particularly since February 2018. AQAP had remained very active domestically despite being pushed out of Mukalla and losing its de facto state in April 2016. During 2017, it formally claimed a total of 273 domestic operations, which is roughly ten times as many as ISY during the same period. However, the frequency of formally claimed AQAP operations has declined steadily: from 145 during the first six months of 2017 to 128 during the second six months of 2017, then to just 62 during the first six months of 2018. Throughout, AQAP’s most operationally active location has been al-Bayda’, where around half of all attacks have occurred: 55 percent during the first half of 2017, 47 percent during the second half of 2017, and 50 percent during the first half of 2018. The next ranking AQAP hotspot during both 2017 and 2018 is Abyan. AQAP activity has decreased significantly in Ibb and al-Dali’ since mid-2017, but remained relatively steady in Hadramawt at around ten percent. The only area in which AQAP activity has continued to grow from mid-2017 and into 2018 is Shabwa. Ironically, the start of this uptick coincided with the launch of a major counterterrorism operation in Shabwa in August 2017; prior to this, AQAP had conducted no attacks in Shabwa during 2017. Although the numbers remain small, the Shabwa experience suggests that U.A.E.-led operations risk attracting opposition and may prove counterproductive over time. In

Geographical Distribution of AQAP Operations  
6 month Intervals 2017-18



summary, AQAP in 2018 is currently less than half as active as it was during 2017, but its core locations of activity have remained relatively constant. This indicates how difficult it is to uproot AQAP from an area once it has gained a hold.

The frequency of operations is of course only one measure by which to assess AQAP vitality. Another measure is AQAP’s release of formal statements; this too has declined dramatically. During 2017, AQAP formally released at least 17 statements. This includes three joint statements with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)<sup>14</sup> but excludes statements that were never disseminated via the official wire, most notably two from Ansar al-Shari’a in Taiz and one from Abyan, and/or formally denied as fake.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, no formal AQAP statements bearing the official black flag header were released during the

first six months of 2018. AQAP did issue a formal statement prohibiting jihadist communications via mobile phone and internet in January 2018, but it was dated 2017.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that AQAP, as a centralized group concept, is currently in decline in terms of its operational and organizational abilities. This does not mean it cannot resurge again under more favorable circumstances. There are a number of current challenges and pressures that can be considered either symptoms of or reasons for this recent decline.



## PART THREE: CURRENT AQAP CHALLENGES & PRESSURES

The main challenges and pressures facing AQAP, some of which are shared by ISY, might be summed up as increasing counterterrorism strikes, dwindling support, weak leadership, poor communications, and decentralization and/or fragmentation.

### INCREASING COUNTERTERRORISM STRIKES

The U.S. has acknowledged carrying out over 120 airstrikes on AQAP and ISY targets during 2017 as well as multiple ground operations. This is more than three times as many as during 2016. Both terror groups have therefore suffered severe losses, including of key commanders.<sup>16</sup> AQAP's own media releases suggest it is feeling these losses keenly, both practically and emotionally.

In practical terms, AQAP released a film in early 2018 designed to expose the methods and catastrophic consequences of internal spies.<sup>17</sup> It features several interviews with AQAP traitors, often boasting of how easy it was to collect fatal intelligence. AQAP presents its statistics for the number of jihadist deaths arising from each type of information leak, resulting in a total of 410 jihadist deaths.<sup>18</sup> It claims that 30 jihadist deaths arose simply from telling a secret to

just one person. AQAP's leader, Qasim al-Raymi, is featured doing an impression of a woman gossiping on the phone, and he chastises jihadists for sharing information with their chatty wives. The film ends by circulating an official statement, which describes conversation, mobiles, and social media as "out of control...reckless... and a grave danger to the jihad." It imposes a complete ban on communications via mobile phones and the internet and warns jihadists that anyone who contravenes this will be punished.<sup>19</sup> It is also significant that the first publication by AQAP's Al-Badr Media Organization, which relaunched in May 2018, was a booklet on how to avoid drone assassination. Ironically, it was written by Muhannad Ghallab, who was killed by a drone strike in 2015 on his very first night in Mukalla after the city was seized by AQAP.<sup>20</sup> AQAP's Abu al-Bara' also dedicated a lesson in his series on jihadist corruption specifically to the need to keep secrets, chastising "impatient" or "stupid" jihadists whose chat "causes damage and danger, the consequences of which he does not know."<sup>21</sup>

In emotional terms, the flood of dead jihadists has necessitated a reaffirmation of the benefits of martyrdom. To help one another cope psychologically, pro-AQAP wires on Telegram circulated a video clip from an old speech by Harith al-Nazari: "Don't think of those who are killed in the path of Allah as dead...don't worry about them. They are alive with their Lord and are receiving sustenance. And that's not all... they are rejoicing in what Allah's bounty has bestowed on them. Yes, the martyr



is in good condition. He is happy. All is well."<sup>22</sup> Naturally, a recruitment drive was necessary to replenish numbers. Poster series like al-Mujahid Media's "Join the Caravan [of martyrs!]" circulated on pro-AQAP wires in late January 2018, posing questions like "What's making you hang back from this great noble deed?"<sup>23</sup>

### DWINDLING SUPPORT

Second, there are several signs that support for AQAP is in decline. Drone strikes can increase local support for AQAP, which has positioned itself as a useful ally through which to avenge the deaths of innocents. Conversely, they can also arouse local hostility towards AQAP for attracting danger to an area in the first place.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, AQAP is now competing directly with the U.A.E. for recruits. Since driving AQAP from

Mukalla, the U.A.E. has embarked on an ambitious recruitment program across Yemen's south to enlist locals into new security forces aimed, in part at least, at countering AQAP itself. This has elicited strong reactions from AQAP that express both anger and concern. AQAP released at least three formal statements during 2017 that specifically addressed tribes through a combination of advice, flattery, and threats. In Hadramawt, AQAP reassured tribes that "the sons of the noble Hadrami tribes are neither our opponents nor targets. Rather, we are of them, and they of us." But it follows with a warning: "But if he sells his religion for a worldly offer and agrees to become a soldier in the elite forces implementing and protecting the policy of the Emirates' statelet to combat the shari'a and its partisans, then he has chosen to become an enemy of the mujahidin and he must



carry the responsibility for his actions.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in Abyan, AQAP wrote: “We call on our honorable tribes to withdraw those sons who have enlisted with these forces...”<sup>26</sup> Again in Shabwa, AQAP warns U.A.E.’s newly minted forces: “They will use you as cannon fodder [lit. firewood and fuel] to defend them and their bases from which they bomb Muslims. They steal your country’s assets...” It follows with a threat: “We will not refrain from targeting you.”<sup>27</sup> During 2017, AQAP evolved its targeting from being overwhelmingly focused against Houthis to being almost equally shared between Houthis and U.A.E.-backed forces.<sup>28</sup>

Internal publications by the former judge of AQAP’s shari’a court in Taiz, Abu al-Bara’, also point to waning tribal support. In October 2017, Abu al-Bara’ referred to a “setback” in the jihad movement, implying one problem

may be a lack of enthusiasm for jihad. He quotes al-Rabbani to encourage men to join the jihad, reminding them of their choice: “either the fire of this world or the fire of the next” and “the fire of hell is hotter.”<sup>29</sup> Abu al-Bara’ also issued a scathing call in early 2018 to tribes in al-Bayda’ to join forces with AQAP in a lengthy essay entitled “Where are You? We are Here.” He insults their manhood and tries to play on anger against the Americans. “Haven’t you heard of the raid on Yakla by the Americans? Or have you blocked your ears, have you covered your eyes, have you buried your head in your clothes, have you vehemently insisted on distorting the facts?”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in April 2018, a nashid began to circulate entitled “Of the Wrongdoing of the Tribes,” chanting insults to tribesmen for abandoning their Muslim brothers by enlisting with U.A.E. forces.<sup>31</sup>



ABDÜLNASSER ALSEDDIK / ANADOLU AGENCY/Getty Images

## WEAK LEADERSHIP

Third, AQAP is also suffering from weak leadership. Its current leader, Qasim al-Raymi, is less popular and charismatic than his predecessor, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who died in 2015 in a drone strike. Wuhayshi still features more prominently than Raymi in general AQAP media products—i.e. those that are not specifically by Raymi. AQAP’s new Madad bulletin, launched by al-Malahim Media in 2018, has not yet featured Raymi at all, even in its editorial-like “Word of Truth” section. Likewise, the AQAP Partisans’ Al-Badr Media Organization, relaunched in May 2018, has disseminated photos of Wuhayshi and extracts from his speeches, but nothing by or about Raymi. Moreover, at the time of writing, the latest AQAP video—which showcased operations in Hadramawt—included several sections featuring Wuhayshi but no footage, new or old, of Raymi.<sup>32</sup>

AQAP’s current leadership has gone to ground. This can be dated roughly to late 2017, shortly before AQAP media instructed its ban on mobile and internet communications and released its spy video. This is clearly linked to a need to preserve the leadership in the face of unprecedented threats. As of June 2018, there has been no media release by Raymi since his stultifying 40-episode lecture series on al-Harthimi’s medieval war treatise ended in February 2018. Even this was clearly prerecorded since Raymi’s clothing and surroundings were exactly the same at the end of the series as at the start in November 2017. Khalid Batarfi too has all but fallen off the

AQAP radar since the end of his 20-episode “Moments with the Prophets” video series in October 2017. He has resurfaced only twice, first prompted by Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, to deliver a fiery incitement to Muslims globally to kill Jews.<sup>33</sup> The second time was six months later in a lengthy written interview with al-Malahim Media that was clearly borne of the need to justify AQAP’s decline in visibility. Batarfi insists that AQAP is lying low while it tackles its infiltration by spies, but that it is “improving and developing” in the background and will return to full action “at the appropriate time.”<sup>34</sup> It appears that not all AQAP agree with the need for a leadership in hiding. AQAP Sheikh Abu al-Bara’ has implied that all true Muslims should stay and fight “until Allah grants victory or martyrdom” rather than play it safe.<sup>35</sup> He also blames weak leadership for failing to attend sufficiently to the religious education of young recruits and to instill discipline, complaining of “jihadist youth being more hooked on nashids than on the Qur’an.”<sup>36</sup>

## COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

Fourth, AQAP is clearly facing major communications challenges. Some of these, such as the need for the jihadists to self-impose a mobile phone and internet ban, have been referred to above. There is also a noticeably longer delay, often two months, between the production date stamped on a statement or video and its eventual release online. AQAP has also suffered various media production



setbacks. July 2017 saw the abrupt cessation of the AQAP-linked *Al-Masra* newspaper, although AQAP later denied any link. It is possible that this was linked to the droning of an unnamed media star who was lamented in *nashid* a week later. A further setback was the droning of one of AQAP's most celebrated media activists, Shakim al-Khurasani, in December 2017, which generated many laments on jihadist social media. AQAP's normally reliable official wire on the encrypted Telegram service fell silent for over two weeks in November 2017 and again for nearly two weeks in December 2017 to January 2018. This was not owing to a lack of operational claims to post because AQAP supporters' wires continued to post such claims. A more likely explanation, therefore, is that the person(s) maintaining these communications was killed or captured. What is interesting is that when AQAP's wire caught up on posting missed claims, it omitted several operations that pro-AQAP wires had claimed for "the mujahidin." This may be a simple oversight, but it may also be another sign—in addition to those outlined below—that AQAP is fragmenting as it decentralizes.

## DECENTRALIZATION AND/OR FRAGMENTATION

Given the pressures mentioned above, in particular weak leadership, decimation by drones, and poor communications, some decentralization of AQAP seems inevitable. During 2018, the frequency of operational

claims made by AQAP on its formal Telegram wire is less than half that of the preceding year. Yet the number of "extra" claims made locally on pro-AQAP wires has risen. This implies the emergence of breakaway factions or like-minded jihadist groups who have not been or are no longer embraced by the AQAP leadership.

A clear case of fragmentation can be found in the frontline city of Taiz, which has become a hotspot for rival Salafi-jihadi groups. The main rivalry appears to be between militant Salafi brigades led by Abu al-'Abbas, aligned with the U.A.E., and *Islah* factions initially led by Col. Sadiq Sarhan. The latter is considered to be linked to elements in Saudi Arabia, as well as being aligned with some who self-identify as AQAP, such as judge and Sheikh Abu al-Bara'. An early hint that AQAP in Taiz was fracturing came in June 2016 when AQAP issued a formal statement expelling two prominent Salafis from Ansar al-Shari'a in Taiz, Harith al-'Izzi and Humam al-San'ani, "owing to their many violations."<sup>37</sup> Local press sources identified these two figures as blowing up the shrine of Sufi Sheikh 'Abd al-Hadi al-Sudi in July 2017 but continued to describe them as AQAP despite, or in ignorance of, their expulsion from the group.<sup>38</sup>

Salafi-jihadi fighting flared up in Taiz at various points from August 2016<sup>39</sup> onwards, resulting in a rash of tit for tat assassinations.<sup>40</sup> The proxy nature of Salafi fighting in Taiz was well demonstrated by an incident in early May 2017. AQAP's Abu al-Bara' was to deliver a mosque lecture entitled "Who are the Terrorists?" which

intended to point the finger at U.A.E. and its Salafi brigades. He was prevented by Abu al-'Abbas.<sup>41</sup> Abu al-Bara' responded by issuing an AQAP statement positioning AQAP as the good guys and Abu al-'Abbas' Salafis as guns for hire. But he also hinted at splits within AQAP's own ranks: "We have been pleased to deliver our mission to our brothers in Taiz through da'wa, lectures and publications, not guns and rifles. We show the true face of Ansar al-Shari'a contrary to the image portrayed by the press and detractors among our own." The statement ends ominously with a slight but significant shift in AQAP's mission; jihad is no longer a means to achieve a goal, but rather a goal in itself: "America and its lackeys continuously interfere with us and with the communication of our message, which is: ruling by Islamic Law, spreading justice, and revitalizing the practice of jihad."<sup>42</sup>

Significantly, this AQAP statement by Ansar al-Shari'a in Taiz was neither acknowledged by nor disseminated on the official AQAP wires. The group issued a further statement in October 2017, also using the formal black-flag header of AQAP. It announced the closure of AQAP's shari'a court in Taiz over which Abu al-Bara' had presided: "We no longer have any court or judge who represents Ansar al-Shari'a in Taiz."<sup>43</sup> Likewise, this statement was never acknowledged by nor disseminated on AQAP's official wires. Finally, in May 2018, the newly relaunched pro-AQAP *Al-Badr* Media Organization published a damning essay on Abu al-'Abbas and his Salafis in Taiz whom it blamed for manipulating jihadi-minded youth into branding the *Islah* Party apostates in order to serve U.A.E. interests.<sup>44</sup> Again, AQAP formal wires ignored this.





During 2017, AQAP's official wires only ever issued one statement from Wilayat Taiz and it categorically denied any link to the assassinations taking place there, stressing, "We have no private agenda."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, of the 273 operations formally claimed by AQAP during 2017, only three were in Taiz. The fact that only one percent of AQAP's claimed activities centered on Taiz suggests the highly active self-identified AQAP group there was "rogue" and/or powered and assisted by external forces.

The various ills besetting the jihad movement in Yemen, or parts of it, are revealed in general terms in the writings of "rogue" Sheikh Abu al-Bara'. Although these are not disseminated on AQAP's formal wires, they are enthusiastically forwarded on many of the staunchly pro-AQAP supporters' wires. In his 2018 series on jihadist corruption, he writes: "wrongdoings are the cause of the split among the brothers." He lists the major problems as financial dealings, neglect of duty, moral flaws, loose talk, interference, and condescension.<sup>46</sup> As the series progresses, Abu al-Bara' appears to become more personal in his criticism, blaming jihadist woes on insufferable personalities, egotism, and self-aggrandizement.<sup>47</sup>

There is some broader evidence of criminality inside AQAP. The group formally expelled three members of AQAP's Ansar al-Shari'a in Abyan in June 2017 "owing to their many violations of legitimate organizational orders and their procurement of prohibited



SALEH AL-OBEIDI/AFP/Getty Images

money."<sup>48</sup> In addition, locals in east Yemen's Mahra region are able to identify specific AQAP individuals involved in the smuggling networks that bring in weapons and drugs via the vast and porous coastline.<sup>49</sup> The overall impression is of a broad Salafi-jihadi melting pot now beset with organizational difficulties, infighting, and controversial links to organized crime.

## PART FOUR: ISLAMIC STATE IN YEMEN

Islamic State in Yemen is also suffering from challenges similar to those of AQAP but its starting point was always weaker. Unlike AQAP, ISY never held territory and found it hard to integrate in Yemen. ISIS officially announced its expansion into Yemen on Nov. 13, 2014, following Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's acceptance of an oath of allegiance sworn to him by "Yemen's mujahidin" in an audio recording. For a brief period, ISY expanded. Its key youth recruiter and coordinator for Hadramawt, Abu Karam al-Hadrami, opened hostels and managed the accommodation, everyday needs, and movements of new recruits. As ISY grew, he took on

responsibility for logistics between ISY's provinces.<sup>50</sup> However, despite some early defections from AQAP to ISY, the self-proclamation of various ISY provinces around Yemen and several high casualty headline-grabbing attacks in 2015 and 2016, ISY was unable to usurp AQAP as Yemen's primary jihad group.

There are several possible reasons for ISY's inability to gain traction in Yemen. First, AQAP's launch of a successful state in 2015-16, with lucrative income from smuggling, windfall taxes, and bank robbery, likely made it a more attractive option than ISY for jihad-minded men. There is a hint in Abu Karam's eulogy that ISY jihadists may have missed the infrastructure and funding that controlling a "state" brings.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, AQAP was able to flourish and grow in its Yemen backwater while international attention was distracted away from Yemen to Iraq and Syria, and away from al-Qaeda to ISIS.

Second, the excessive brutality of ISY gave AQAP the opportunity to look like the "acceptable" face of jihad. AQAP criticized ISY's indiscriminate bombings in Yemen and pledged that, unlike ISY, it would not target "mosques, markets, and crowded places."<sup>52</sup> It apologized for its own





previous excesses, such as the storming of a military hospital in Sanaa in 2013<sup>53</sup> and the beheading of 14 soldiers in Hadramawt in August 2014, which it implicitly blamed on the negative influence of ISY propaganda.<sup>54</sup>

Third, ISY did not engage well with local communities and tribes. It failed to carry out AQAP-style community development projects in Yemen, despite early efforts in this regard in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, its leaders gained a reputation for being overbearing and bossy. In mid-2016, copies of 15 shari'a court documents allegedly filed by ISY fighters against their then leader, Abu Bilal al-Harbi, circulated inside jihadist groups on Telegram. There are also reports of some ISY fighters defecting back to AQAP and lambasting the bulldozer tactics of ISY. One defector has recounted how ISY's emirs fought over money and girls, aligned with drug lords, and deceived audiences by

filming videos in Hadramawt but pretending they were in Sanaa or Shabwa.<sup>55</sup> Finally, unlike AQAP, ISY produced little narrative that was culturally specific to Yemen aside from virulent disparagement of the Houthis as infidel agents of "Rejectionist" or Shi'i, Iran.<sup>56</sup> Hence, ISY's ability to entrench and spread in Yemen has been very limited.

Eventually, ISY withdrew to the Qayfa area of al-Bayda', presumably circa October 2016 since this is when its operational claims indicate it started to become active here. The Hadramawt branch of ISY must have decamped to Qayfa by June 2017 at the latest because ISY's eulogy for Abu Karam mentions that he participated in the Hammat Laqah raid. An indication of ISY's diminished circumstances lies in the changed role of Abu Karam himself—

he went from being ISY's cross-Yemen logistics coordinator to being a water-carrier at the Qayfa front.<sup>57</sup>

ISY has tried to consolidate and expand from its location in Qayfa, al-Bayda'. As a major frontline against the Houthis, ISY has been tolerated by some local tribes as long as it focuses on fighting Houthi invaders. In early 2017, ISY set up two training camps in al-Bayda'. The first, the Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani camp, was specifically designed to graduate inghimasiyyun, or suicide fighters. This was quickly followed by the Abu Muhammad al-Furqan camp, which, as well as training suicide fighters, provided more sophisticated weapons training including for heavy weapons and night operations.<sup>58</sup> Naturally, suicide fighters require indoctrination, and this was provided via 50-day shari'a courses.<sup>59</sup>

It is, of course, possible that ISY exaggerated the extent of its training capabilities. But the U.S. did locate and obliterate two ISY training camps in al-Bayda' in airstrikes in October 2017, killing dozens of jihadists. Thereafter, the frequency of ISY reports from al-Bayda' diminished significantly for several months, which indicates that its operational capacity was severely impacted by the U.S. strikes. However, ISY appeared to have regrouped to a limited extent after March 2018 if the uptick in its martyr claims is a measure.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the names of its martyrs indicate that it is still struggling to harness local tribes. Of the 26 ISY martyrs named for Wilayat al-Bayda' during the first five months of 2018, less than a handful were local to al-Bayda'. The largest source of martyrs, 20 percent, was the battlefield city of Taiz.



In short, ISY has never succeeded in holding territory in Yemen and is now largely confined to the Qayfa front in al-Bayda'. While some operations further afield continued to be attributed to ISY, particularly around Aden, these appeared to be politically motivated and false flagged to ISY, likely by Saleh-Houthi forces targeting southern separatists. It may be no coincidence that, after a flurry of ISY attacks in Aden during November 2017, there was a total hiatus for almost three months following Saleh's death on Dec. 4, 2017.

## CONCLUSION: LOOKING AHEAD

ISY and AQAP are becoming less distinguishable. When ISY first showed up in force in Qayfa, AQAP was dismissive. Pro-AQAP wires accused ISY fighters of being lazy, not getting up before lunchtime and only going to the battlefield for photo opportunities rather than to help fight. AQAP took the trouble to refute ISY claims in the initial months following ISY's arrival in al-Bayda'. For example, it roundly rejected ISY's claim, prominently placed in the main ISY weekly "Al-Naba'" bulletin, that it had repelled the "largest" Houthi advance in Qayfa to date.<sup>61</sup> AQAP claimed it was they, not ISY, who had pushed back the Houthis and immediately released a video "Elite Attack" to prove it.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, pro-AQAP wires angrily mocked ISY using an Arabic hashtag meaning "Exposing the Deceit of Yemen's Da'ish."

However, such open rivalry between ISY and AQAP declined significantly from 2017. There are likely several reasons for this. First, the two groups now have more in common. AQAP no longer needs to criticize ISY for indiscriminate mass casualty attacks as it is now focused mainly on the Houthi frontline. Batarfi stated in June 2018 that AQAP's relations with other Islamist groups is "generally at its best yet" and that they are cooperating on the Houthi battlefronts.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, ISY no longer needs to criticize AQAP for failing to implement shari'a law since AQAP no longer runs a "state." Second, an uptick in shared pressure from mutual enemies, especially the U.A.E. and U.S. Special Forces and drones, has likely created a grudging solidarity in adversity. Third, a vacuum of strong leadership and organized training, owing to deaths—and the need to go to ground—from increased drone strikes and ground operations, is likely driving the rank and file to become more fluid in their loyalties.

One apparently major exception to this occurred in July 2018 when a pro-AQAP wire on Telegram reported that AQAP had killed 25 ISY fighters in retaliation for ISY killing 13 AQAP fighters.<sup>64</sup> For several days, some pro-AQAP wires urged the annihilation of ISY fighters on the Qayfa front in al-Bayda' where the clashes allegedly took place. A two-minute video was then released bearing the logo of the central ISY news agency, A'maq, claiming to show that ISY had simply captured the AQAP fighters, not executed them.<sup>65</sup> There are several puzzling elements to these claimed clashes. Only half of the captives depicted in the alleged

A'maq video wore beards, suggesting that they were not all AQAP. Meanwhile, the main ISIS weekly bulletin made no mention of any activities in Yemen, not even in its weekly roundup of ISIS operations in all its various provinces globally. Likewise, AQAP's formal wire has to date made no mention of any AQAP-ISK clashes, and some pro-AQAP wires have urged caution, reminding jihadists not to be distracted from the real battle. Possible explanations for these seemingly inconsistent elements are that: the clashes were essentially tribal in nature and not specifically related to jihadist rivalry; or they were a blip—possibly stoked by agents provocateurs—and are being dealt with; or they are just another indication of the lack of central control over fragmenting groups. One pro-AQAP wire cautioned jihadists not to speak about the events "as it fans flames that the wise are trying to extinguish."

The decentralization of Yemen's jihadists should not be mistaken for a lessening of the long-term threat. The overall Salafi-jihadi melting pot remains. Often, even when coalition forces declare an area free of AQAP following a ground offensive, this simply means that the jihadists move location, not that they suffer crippling losses.<sup>66</sup> The threat, therefore, remains alive, both at the international and domestic levels.

As for the international threat, there are several reasons why AQAP still harbors ambitions to conduct an attack. First, the pressure it is under means it needs to reassert and prove itself. Second, it needs to avenge the large number of deaths by

U.S. drones. Third, any détente that it may have once agreed to with local tribes to refrain from international attacks in order to avoid attracting retaliation is now off.<sup>67</sup> Fourth, Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem has sharpened the focus on hitting back, particularly given that AQAP's slogan has long been "Jerusalem, We're Coming." AQAP's Khaled Batarfi briefly broke his long silence to issue a bloodthirsty call to Muslims globally to "kill every Jew by driving over him, stabbing him, using a weapon or setting fire to their houses." He also called for revenge on America as well as those deemed historically responsible for the Palestinian issue including Britain, France, and the Arab states.<sup>68</sup>

AQAP has also continued to incite so-called lone wolf attacks in the West through its "Inspire" range of media products. AQAP leader Qasim al-Raymi in May 2017 released an "Inspire Address" calling on Muslims in the West to kill Americans at home, assuring them that Allah would bestow on them a higher grade in Paradise for a suicide attack. He advised them to "keep it easy and simple" like Omar Mateen who opened fire in an Orlando nightclub in 2016. To ensure the message reached its target audience, Raymi's Arabic was subtitled in English and the background soundtrack was the popular nashid in English "The Battle for the Hearts and Minds."<sup>69</sup> AQAP's bulky English language "Inspire" (2010-ongoing) magazine has become increasingly infrequent but no less virulent. Its latest issue in August 2017 consisted of 96 pages of rationale, advice, and instructions for conducting



train derailment operations. The magazine has been supplemented since 2016 with a series of occasional "Inspire Guides" that offer lessons learned from various terror attacks in the West, including the Orlando gun massacre in 2016, the Nice truck massacre in 2016, and the Westminster attack in 2017.

There is ample evidence that AQAP has inspired international attacks without the need for direct operational links. Online sermons by Yemeni-American AQAP ideologue Anwar al-'Awlaqi, who helped found "Inspire," before being killed in a drone strike in 2011, have been linked to numerous international acts of terror. These include the 2013 murder of a British soldier in London, the 2013 Boston marathon bombing, and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris. Such attacks highlight an important strength of AQAP media in recent years: it endows its most charismatic figureheads with an enduring ability to inspire long after they have been droned. This occurs in three ways. First, much AQAP material remains readily available online, particularly as security agencies were heavily focused on stemming the flow of propaganda from ISIS rather than al-Qaeda. Second, AQAP sermons and films are reposted frequently online,

with entire channels on encrypted applications devoted to reposting archival material. Third, old footage of AQAP figureheads is reworked into new videos, giving the impression that "martyred" heroes continue to address the faithful from Paradise.

The international threat is not limited to the West. Arab regimes are considered agents of the West and therefore legitimate targets too. The threat has intensified against members of the Saudi-led coalition intervening in Yemen, particularly following the U.A.E.'s recruitment of local forces in the south and the resultant increase in counterterror operations. In June 2017, AQAP issued a nashid containing lyrics that directly threatened the U.A.E.: "Your time has come, O nest of clientelism and crime, Like explosive thunder, We're coming to blow up your towers, We'll leave them in heaps."<sup>70</sup>

At the domestic level, there is a risk that the recent successes of U.A.E.-backed forces in countering terrorist activity will be short-lived if the methods they use generate long-term popular resentment. Local anger has already erupted over U.A.E.-backed forces' involvement in forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture, and the establishment of several "secret"



MOHAMMED HAMOUD/ANADOLU AGENCY/Getty Images

prisons.<sup>71</sup> Anger has occurred at all levels, from inside the government down to the grassroots level where it ranges from women's demonstrations to young men's sung poetry like "O Elite [Forces] of Shame."<sup>72</sup> U.A.E.-backed forces are also widely held responsible for the assassination of over 25 imams and preachers across South Yemen, particularly in Aden, over the last two years.<sup>73</sup> AQAP Sheikh Abu al-Bara' has tried to exploit this for recruitment, publishing an essay in which he suggested that clerics should die on the battlefield of jihad rather than wait around to be assassinated.<sup>74</sup> Such practices play directly into the hands of terrorist propaganda that frames U.A.E. violations as part of a war on Islam, which can only be countered by jihad.

AQAP has also tried to exploit suspicions and anger over the U.A.E.'s potential commercial and political ambitions in Yemen. U.A.E.-backed forces have fought terrorism, but they have also helped to consolidate U.A.E. control of key ports and oil and gas producing areas, and the U.A.E. has been the main backer of the Southern Transition Council (STC) which seeks secession from the north. This is problematic for three reasons. First, there are significant regions inside the former south that object to secession. Second, it is unclear how representative the STC is, even of those who favor secession—and there is a risk that the new power brokers and security forces are awakening age-old



tribal/political fault-lines. Third, the U.A.E.'s alignment with militarized Salafism, where religious ideology is married to a political agenda for southern secession, is a recipe for further conflict beyond the current main war with the Houthis. AQAP has already latched onto such concerns and its framing of local suspicion and anger at the U.A.E. to fit its narrative of global jihad is likely to increase, even if, or when, the Houthi threat recedes.

However, there is some cause for hope. Current jihadi decentralization does provide a short-term window of opportunity for preventive initiatives to capitalize on the jihadists' disarray, internal suspicion over informers, poor communications, trauma at the relentless loss of 'brother martyrs,' dwindling tribal support, and the challenges of regrouping and rebuilding camps.

This window of opportunity should be used to address the underlying reasons behind the persistent phenomenon of militant jihad in Yemen. This needs to happen at two levels: First, at the level of actual recruits—often disillusioned young men, hardened by war, with few aspirations and opportunities, seeking a higher purpose, sense of belonging, and both mental and physical sustenance; and second, at the level of local populations and tribes, who often put up with such groups because they address their grievances after long years of marginalization by government. Any preventive initiatives will require careful, thoughtful, non-military strategies that are locally led. They should build on ideas and activities that have been locally

generated rather than cooked up intuitively by well-meaning stabilization outfits in the West or simply lifted wholesale from what may have worked elsewhere like Libya or Afghanistan. For this, highly localized knowledge is invaluable. It might be gained through training grassroots organizations to gather data in simple surveys that use robust sampling methods.<sup>75</sup> For long-term success beyond the obvious need to build genuinely representative institutions, an immediate focus on educational peace-building initiatives and enterprise-generating programs is key. It is Yemen's young people who will ultimately need to rebuild Yemen if the country that emerges is to function.

Above all, ending the current war is imperative. This means increasing the pressure on the various actors, including the Saudi-led coalition, to make concessions that go beyond the unrealistic framework of U.N. Resolution 2216.<sup>76</sup> Leaving aside the obvious humanitarian toll, the continuation of the war fuels militant jihad. The war economy enables seriously organized crime networks to flourish, often in collaboration with terror groups. Famine, cholera, and air strikes in Yemen's west encourage migration east towards regions that are currently mainly held together by tribal law. A large influx of outsiders puts pressures on this system which groups like AQAP can exploit. Lastly, war makes it impossible to tackle other urgent problems, such as Yemen's rapidly depleting water resources, which if unaddressed will trigger future instability.<sup>77</sup> These are precisely the conditions that allow terror groups to thrive.



## ENDNOTES

1. Gregory Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda and the Battle for Arabia*, New York: Oneworld, 2012, Kindle Loc 2158.
2. Johnsen, o.c., Kindle Loc 2466-8.
3. Ibrahim Hassan al-'Asiri, "Fi Dhikra 11 September al-Mubarak: Masirat al-Intisar wa-Hazimat Amrika" (On the Anniversary of the Blessed Attacks of 11 September: The Path of Victory and the Defeat of America), AL-Malahim Media, Sept. 2017.
4. Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning, and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has made al-Qaeda stronger – and richer," Reuters Special Report, Apr. 8, 2016.
5. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "Ayna Antum? Nahnu Huna" (Where are You? We are Here), Jan. 22, 2018, 1.
6. The difficulty of integrating among Yemen's tribes was a source of disappointment to Ayman al-Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad group in the mid-90s, who had anticipated that Yemen with its turmoil and rugged topography would be an ideal place to regroup after a crackdown in Egypt. Many ended up returning to Egypt.
7. Author interviews with community leaders from Mukalla, al-Ghayda, Nov. 7, 2015.
8. See, for example: AQAP Statement "Tawdih Hawla Qadiyat Qutla Qabilat Al Bu Bakr bin Daha wa-Ibn al-Hayj" (Clarification about the Issue of Killings of the Al Bu Bakr bin Daha Tribe and Ibn al-Hayj), Oct. 20, 2016; AQAP Statement "Bayan Nafy al-'Alaqa bi-'Amaliyyat Qatl fi 'Ubar Laslum" (Denial of Link to Killings in 'Ubar Laslum [al-Aslum]), Jun. 24, 2017. This is in addition to circumstantial evidence in the form of local accounts on Telegram.
9. Marie-Christine Heinze and Hafez Albukari, "Yemen's War as seen from the local level," *Politics, Governance, and Reconstruction in Yemen*, POMEPS 29, January 2018, 34-8: 37. The area in which terrorism was mentioned most as one of the three biggest security threats was Abyan (34 percent), followed by al-Bayda' (14 percent) and Shabwa (11 percent). The survey data was gathered in February and March 2017.
10. Nadwa al-Dawsari has written convincingly on the pragmatic and at times volatile relationship between AQAP and tribes in al-Bayda'. Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jan. 10, 2018.
11. Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning, and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has made al-Qaeda stronger – and richer," Reuters Special Report, Apr. 8, 2016.
12. A good example is "Rad' al-'Udwan 6" (Repelling Aggression 6), November 2016, a 30 minute film produced by AQAP's AL-Malahim Media.
13. AQAP Statement "Bayan Hawla al-Majzara al-Amrikiyya fi Mintaqat Qayfa" (Statement on the Recent American Massacre in the Qayfa Region), Jan. 29, 2017. AQAP Statement "Bayan Hawla al-Inzal al-Amriki 'Ala Qabilat Murad" (Statement on the American Raid on the Murad Tribe), May 26, 2017.
14. The joint AQAP-AQIM statements were all on international matters: "Condolences of the Islamic Umma on the death of Sheikh 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman in the Jails of Crusader America," Feb. 19, 2017, "Letter from al-Aqsa," Jul. 16, 2017, "Warning of Doom on Saudi Rulers," Sept. 28, 2017.
15. For example, AQAP firmly denied that it had issued an official looking statement dated May 21, 2017, about targeting Hadramawt University.
16. CENTCOM, "Update on recent counterterrorism strikes in Yemen," No. 20171220-01, Dec. 20, 2017.
17. AL-Malahim Media, "Asrar wa-Akhtar wa-Rahil Akhyar" (Secrets, Dangers and the Departure of the Best), December 2017 (released Jan. 27, 2018).
18. AQAP claims its statistics are based on direct spy confessions over the past nine years.
19. AQAP Statement, "Ta'mim li-L-Ikhwa al-Mujahidin fi Jazirat al-'Arab" (General Announcement to Jihadist Brothers on the Arabian Peninsula), Dec. 3, 2017.
20. Muhannad Ghallab, "al-Nasa'ih al-Yamaniyya li-Tajannub Qasf al-Drunz al-Amrikiyya", republished by Al-Badr Media Organization on Telegram, May 24, 2018.
21. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "Ifsha' al-Sirr" (Divulging Secrets), lesson 4 in the series "al-Ma'a fi Mufsidat al-Ikhwa" (100 Corruptions of the Brothers), Mar. 20, 2018, 3.
22. Untitled video clip of speech by Nazari, published on various jihad support wires including that of Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, Jan. 4, 2018.
23. AL-Mujahid Media, "Hal Ta'lam?" (Do You Know?) poster, "Join the Caravan" Series, published on various jihad support wires including that of Layth al-Mukalla, Jan. 19, 2018.
24. Nadwa al-Dawsari has laid out several reasons why tribes might wish to dissociate with AQAP in "Foe not Friend: Yemeni Tribes and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," POMED (February 2018), 21-7.
25. AQAP Statement, "Risala ila Ahli-na fi Hadramawt" (Message to Our People in Hadramawt), Mar. 16, 2017.
26. AQAP Statement, "Bayan Nasiha wa-l'dhar" (Declaration of Advice and Absolution), Aug. 17, 2017.
27. AQAP Statement, "Ila Ahli-na fi Shabwa" (To Our People in Shabwa), Aug. 22, 2017.
28. During the first six months of 2017, 75 percent of AQAP operations targeted Houthis and 25 percent U.A.E.-backed forces. During the second six months of 2017, 49 percent of AQAP operations targeted Houthis and 51 percent U.A.E.-backed forces.
29. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "al-Irjaf" (Spreading Lies), no.3 in the series "Asbab al-Intikasa" (Reasons for the Setback), Oct. 25, 2017, 1.
30. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "Ayna Antum? Nahnu Huna" (Where are You? We are Here), Jan. 22, 2018, 6.
31. Abu Muhammad al-'Awlaqi (words) & Mus'ab al-'Adani (singer), "Min Zulm al-Qaba'il" (Of the Wrongdoing of the Tribes), Apr. 4, 2018.
32. "Ala Darbi-him Sa'irun" (On Their Path We Proceed), March 2018 (released May 27, 2018).
33. AL-Malahim Media, "Wajibu-na Tujaha Qudsi-na" (Our Duty Towards Our Jerusalem), December 2017 (released Jan. 21, 2018).
34. AL-Malahim Media, "Liqa' Suhufi ma' al-Shaykh Khalid bin 'Umar Batarfi", June 2018.
35. Abu al-Bara' does not specify which leader(s) are being targeted by his criticism. He may be targeting Salafi commander Abu al-'Abbas in Taiz or ISY leaders rather than AQAP's Qasim al-Raymi. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "al-Irjaf" (Spreading Lies), no.3 in the series "Asbab al-Intikasa" (Reasons for the Setback), Oct. 25, 2017, 3.
36. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "Saw' al-Tarbiya min Qibal al-Murabbin" (Poor Education from Their Educators), no.5 in the series "Asbab al-Intikasa" (Reasons for the Setback), Nov. 5, 2017, 1.
37. AQAP Statement, "Bayan Bara'a" (Declaration of Disavowal), Jun. 18, 2016.
38. "Tanzim al-Qaeda fi Ta'izz yufajjir Qubbat al-Hadi al-Athariyya", Barakish online, Jul. 30, 2016, and "al-Qaeda tufajjir Qubbat al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Hadi al-Sudi bi-Ta'izz", News Yemen online, Jul. 30, 2016.
39. "Ba'da Sa'at 'Ala 'Awdat Abu al-'Abbas min al-Sa'udiyya.. Ma'arik Bayna al-Salafiyyin wa-l-Islah Wasta Madinat Ta'izz", al-Yemen al-Yawm, Aug. 15, 2016.
40. 'Adil Bashar, "Fasa'il al-'Umala' ta'bathu bi-Ta'izz" (Proxy Factions to Mess with Taiz), al-Yaman al-Yawm, Feb. 20, 2017.
41. 'Adil Bashar, "Ta'izz taghraqu fi Wahl Fasa'il al-'Umala'" (Taiz Drowns in the Mud of Proxy Factions), al-Yaman al-Yawm, May 9, 2017.
42. Statement by Ansar al-Shari'a in Taiz, 3 May 2017 (never disseminated on AQAP's formal wire)
43. Statement by Ansar al-Shari'a in Taiz, 7 Oct. 2017 (never disseminated on AQAP's formal wire)



44. Abu 'Abd Allah al-Ma'arifi, "Haqiqat al-Manhaj al-Jihadi: Nasiha li-Jihadiyyi Wilayat Ta'izz" (The Truth of the Jihadi Way: Advice for the Jihadists of Wilayat Taiz), al-Badr Media, 31 May 2018.
45. AQAP Statement, "Ila Ikhwani-na wa-Ahli-na fi Ta'izz" (To Our Brothers and Our People in Taiz), 25 Apr. 2017.
46. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "al-Dhunub wa-l-Ma'asi" (Sins and Wrongs), lesson 1 in the series "al-Ma'a fi Mufsidat al-Ikhwa" (100 Corruptions of the Brothers), 15 Feb. 2018, p.2
47. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "An Yakun Thaqil-an" (Being Unpleasant) and "al-Ananiyya wa-Tafkhim al-Nafs" (Egotism and Self-Aggrandizement), lessons 7 and 8 in the series "al-Ma'a fi Mufsidat al-Ikhwa" (100 Corruptions of the Brothers), 22 and 26 Apr. 2018.
48. AQAP Statement, "Bayan Bara'a" (Announcement of Disavowal), Jun. 17, 2017. The statement is signed by Ansar al-Shari'a in Wilayat Abyan and carries AQAP's black-flag header. However, it did not appear on official AQAP channels. This may simply be to avoid airing internal problems in public.
49. Author interviews with Mahri locals in al-Ghayda, Mahayfif and the northern deserts, Aug. 5-8, 2017.
50. "Abu Karam al-Hadrami", al-Naba' 133 (24 May 2018): 9.
51. Abu Karam had asked to leave Yemen to join IS in Syria since this would be more "prosperous" for him. "Abu Karam al-Hadrami", al-Naba' 133 (May 24, 2018): 9.
52. AQAP "Bayan Nafy al-'Alaqa bi-Tafjirat Masajid al-Huthiyyin fi San'a" (Statement Denying Links to the Bombings of Houthi Mosques in Sana'a), Mar. 20, 2015.
53. Al-Malahim Media, "Ta'liq 'ala Istihdaf Wizarat al-Difa' bi-San'a' li-l-Qa'id Qasim al-Raymi" (Commentary on the Targeting of the Ministry of Defence in Sana'a, by Commander Qasim al-Raymi), December 2013.
54. Al-Malahim Media, "al-Mu'tamar al-Suhufi al-Duwali al-Awwal, ma' al-Shaykh Nasr bin 'Ali al-Anisi" (First International Press Conference, with Sheikh Nasr bin 'Ali al-Anisi), December 2014.
55. On Nov. 1, 2017, messages started circulating on pro-AQAP Telegram wires celebrating the "repentance" (i.e. defection) of ISY fighters. The reasons given for defection were ISY's irreligious approach, mistreatment and its leaders' behavior. See also al-Sarim al-Battar, "Shahada li-Ahad al-Munshaqqin 'an Far' Tanzim al-Dawla fi al-Yaman" (Testimony of an ISY Defector), al-Badr Media, Jul. 24, 2018.
56. For a fuller comparison of AQAP and IS local engagement strategies in Yemen, see Elisabeth Kendall "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: a battle for local audiences," in Simon Staffell and Akil Awan (eds), *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas* (London: Hurst, 2016), 89-122: 103-08.
57. "Abu Karam al-Hadrami", al-Naba' 133 (May 24, 2018): 9.
58. "Mu'askar al-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-Furqan" (Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Furqan Camp), al-Naba' 76 (Apr. 13, 2017): 15.
59. "al-Dawrat al-Shar'iyya fi Wilayat al-Bayda'" (Sharia Courses in Wilayat al-Bayda'), al-Naba' 77 (Apr. 20, 2017): 14.
60. During 2018, ISY's Wilayat al-Bayda' released no martyr claims during January and February, but during March, April, and May it announced 26 martyrs. In reaching this total I have been careful to avoid double-counting (owing to name variations in photo releases and galleries of martyrs on video) by cross-checking martyr headshots.
61. "Junud al-Khilafa yusdiruna Akbar Hujum li-l-Hutha 'Ala Mawaqi'i-him fi Mintaqat Qayfa" (Caliphate Soldiers launch the Biggest Attack against Houthi Positions in the Qayfa Region), al-Naba' 51 (Oct. 20, 2016): 3.
62. AQAP video, "Sawlat al-Akhyar: Sadd al-Mujahidin li-Taqaddum al-Huthiyyin 'Ala 'Iddat Mawaqi' bi-Wilayat Rada'" (Elite Attack: The Mujahidin Resist Houthi Advances on a Number of Fronts in Wilayat Rada'), Oct. 26, 2016.
63. Al-Malahim Media, "Liqa' Suhufi ma' al-Shaykh Khalid bin 'Umar Batarfi", June 2018, p.1.
64. Guardians of Tawheed Media, Telegram post, Jul. 12, 2018.
65. IS video, "'Anasir min Tanzim 'Qa'idat al-Yemen' Asara-hum Muqatilu al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Qayfa Shimal Gharbi al-Bayda'", Jul. 15, 2018.
66. AQAP's account of U.A.E.-led Operation al-Faysal to clear it from Wadi al-Masini in Hadramawt in February 2018 was obviously very different from the coalition account. It claims it killed over 40 soldiers before withdrawing to "a nearby area." Abu Suhayb al-Hadrami, "Hal Khasara al-Mujahidun Ma'rakat Wadi al-Masini bi-Sahil Hadramawt?!" (Did the Mujahidun lose the Battle of of Wadi al-Masini in Coastal Hadramawt?!), released on Telegram by Ansar Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab, Feb. 26, 2018.
67. Erlend Ofte Arntsen, "Yemen's al-Qaida: Entered agreement with tribal leaders not to attack the West", VG, April 16, 2017, and unpublished correspondence with the Yemen representative of al-Qaeda -linked Al-Masra newspaper, Apr. 18-24, 2017.
68. Khalid Batarfi, "Wajibu-na Tujaha Qudsi-na" (Our Duty Towards Our Jerusalem), December 2017 (released Jan. 23, 2018).
69. Qasim al-Raymi, "Mujahid Munfarid Am Jaysh fi Mujahid" (A Lone Mujahid or an Army in [One] Mujahid) (video), al-Malahim Media, May 2017.
70. Al-Basha'ir Audio Productions, "Khabbaru-hu al-Tahaluf" (Tell it to the Coalition), Jun. 30, 2017.
71. These practices were listed in the U.N. Security Council "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen", Jan. 26, 2018, 48-9. However, it is possible that the true extent of the violations may be greater. As early as May 2017, locals had compiled a list of 560 violations perpetrated by U.A.E.-backed forces in the governorate of Lahj alone (circulated on Telegram, May 4, 2017) although these cannot obviously not be verified. Regarding women's protests, see for example "Waqfa Ihtijajiyya li-Ummahat al-Makhfiyyin Qasriyy-an fi 'Adan Januba al-Yaman" (Protest by Mothers of Those Forcibly Disappeared in Aden in South Yemen), Dec. 20, 2017,
72. "Ya Nukhbat al-Dhull" (O Elite of Shame), a sung poem which includes the refrain "We are Hadrami and free," circulated on Telegram during April 2018.
73. "Killing Spree of Clerics Spreads Fear in Yemen's Aden," The New Arab online, Apr. 5, 2018.
74. Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, "Waqafat ma' Ightiyalat al-Mashayikh wa-l-Du'ah" (Positions on the Assassinations of Sheikhs and Preachers), Oct. 31, 2017.
75. This is labor intensive but it can be done. This author partnered with a grassroots youth NGO in east Yemen's Mahra region in 2012-13 to organize the training of around 70 fieldworkers to conduct a scientifically sampled face-to-face survey of over 2,000 tribesmen and women.
76. For a good summary of what is wrong with U.N. Resolution 2216, read Stephen A. Seche, "Give Peace a Real Chance in Yemen: The time is now to redraw outdated UN plans to end the war," IRIN online, Apr. 18, 2018.
77. See Helen Lackner, "Water scarcity: Why doesn't it get the attention it deserves?" in Helen Lackner (ed), *Why Yemen Matters* (London: Saqi, 2014), 161-82.

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