

### The other vanguard of international terrorism: despite setbacks Al-Qaeda profits from Yemen civil war

Steinberg, Guido

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# The Other Vanguard of International Terrorism

Despite Setbacks Al-Qaeda Profits from Yemen Civil War

Guido Steinberg

Yemen has been in the grip of open civil war since spring 2015. The biggest beneficiary of the conflict is the Yemeni al-Qaeda, whose recent capture of territory in southern Yemen opens up new opportunities. Its current gains will hinder a future stabilisation of Yemen and exacerbate the terrorist threat to Saudi Arabia. It also presents new dangers to the West, given that the Yemeni al-Qaeda is by far the strongest group in the network, and has already made repeated attempts to bring down transatlantic airliners. The danger it presents was underlined by the attack it instigated on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015. Although al-Qaeda in Yemen has lost important leaders since then, and a number of its fighters and commanders have defected to the Islamic State (IS), the collapse of the Yemeni state increases the risk that it will exploit its expanded radius of action and prepare new attacks on the United States and Europe.

The Yemeni civil war pits the internationally recognised government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other allies, against Houthi rebels and forces loyal to ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Although the Saudi-led coalition captured Aden and has advanced towards the capital Sanaa, the strength of the Houthis and their allies in the north presages a protracted civil war. One outcome of the conflict is already clear: the government has completely suspended its fight against the local al-Qaeda and the US military has had to withdraw its personnel. This has considerably strengthened

al-Qaeda, as indicated by two developments in particular: in April 2015 it took control of the important port of Mukalla, and since the summer has been visibly present in Aden. By autumn 2015 al-Qaeda in Yemen controlled a significantly larger area with a much larger population than in 2011/12, when it was previously able to exploit the weakness of the Yemeni state in a similar manner.

## The Organisation

The Yemeni al-Qaeda was founded in January 2009 as “al-Qaeda in the Arabian Pen-

insula". It profited from the particularly strong representation of Yemenis in Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, stretching back to the 1990s. In fact, though, it is not a purely Yemeni organisation, but more an alliance of Yemenis and Saudis, since joined by smaller groups of foreign fighters.

In 2005 the Saudi security authorities succeeded in ending a campaign of terror that had begun in May 2003, and completely eliminating the al-Qaeda group there. From 2006 Saudis seeking to join a jihadist organisation were forced to look abroad. Until the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013 they almost always opted for Yemen and the al-Qaeda group there. About one third of its fighters are Saudis, who are also strongly represented in its leadership. Although the long-serving leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi is Yemeni, his deputy was the Saudi Ali al-Shihri. After Shihri was killed in 2013, military commander Qasim al-Raymi became the new number two. Although he is a Yemeni citizen, some sources report he was born in Saudi Arabia. After Wuhayshi was killed in June 2015 Raymi took over the leadership.

The new group profited from the weakness of the Yemeni state and the numerous domestic conflicts, which hampered any effective fight against the terrorists. The most important difference between al-Qaeda in Yemen and its precursors in the country is the new organisation's irreconcilable hostility towards the Yemeni state, whose representatives and institutions first came into its sights from 2009. Since then al-Qaeda has conducted numerous attacks on Yemeni security forces. As well as major suicide bombings it has also carried out hundreds of assassinations on individual members of the army and security forces, accelerating since 2012, with the aim of demoralising its adversaries.

### **Goals and Strategy**

The Yemeni organisation has developed a set of objectives of its own. First of all, it wishes to destabilise Yemen, bring territory

under its control, and establish an Islamic state. Secondly, it seeks to topple the ruling family in Saudi Arabia. Thirdly, like its parent organisation in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it aims to force the United States out of the Islamic world. In pursuit of these objectives, al-Qaeda conducts attacks on Yemeni, Saudi and American (as well as British and French) individuals and institutions.

### **Capturing Territory**

Alongside its traditional terrorist activities, al-Qaeda in Yemen has worked since 2011 to capture and hold territory, and establish state structures there. This new strategy became possible after protests in spring 2011 weakened the regime of President Saleh and caused the government to withdraw forces from remoter parts of the country. From its stronghold of Azzan in the province of Shabwa, al-Qaeda went on the offensive between March and May 2011 and captured a string of towns in the neighbouring province of Abyan, including the provincial capital of Zanjibar. It declared the area it controlled an "Islamic emirate" and strove to establish a functioning administration there.

At the same time it founded a civilian arm, named Ansar al-Sharia (supporters of sharia). This echoed a suggestion made by Osama Bin Laden in 2010 in a letter written from Abbottabad, calling on his followers to find a new name for al-Qaeda that better reflected the organisation's religious and political goals. This was part of a broader strategy designed to win the populations of Muslim countries for al-Qaeda and its agenda. In the towns of Jaar, Shaqwa and Zanjibar the Yemeni branch consequently tried to operate not only as a militant organisation but also to secure the population's supplies of water, electricity and food. It also promised a functioning justice system and set up sharia courts to that end. But this approach only partly succeeded, because Ansar al-Sharia also enforced Salafist codes of dress and behaviour and had local oppo-

nents executed. When the new Yemeni government launched a counter-offensive in May 2012 al-Qaeda was quickly forced to retreat to the southern mountains.

When civil war broke out in spring 2015, al-Qaeda again grasped the opportunity, initially joining Sunni tribal militias from the south against advancing Houthi rebels. After the Saudi-led coalition began air strikes in March, al-Qaeda again captured large parts of the provinces of Abyan, Shabwa and Hadramaut. At the beginning of April, together with allied tribes, it captured Mukalla, the country's fifth-largest city and capital of the south-eastern province of Hadramaut, where it took over the administration together with its allies. In August reports also appeared of the presence of al-Qaeda units in Aden, shortly after it was taken by the Saudi-led coalition. With the number of Saudi, Emirate and Yemeni troops too small to fight both the rebels and al-Qaeda, the latter was able to operate largely unhindered.

### **Stoking Religious Tensions**

In the course of the advance of the Houthis and their allies, al-Qaeda modified its strategy, now seeking to profit from growing religious tensions in Yemen through attacks on the Shiite Houthi rebels. In this way it hoped to win the support of the numerous opponents of the Houthis among the country's Sunnis.

The Houthi rebels belong to the Zaydi minority whose leaders – “imams” – ruled Yemen until 1962. Although the Zaydis are Shiites, they are much closer to Sunni Islam than the other currents of Shiism. Zaydis represent considerably less than half of Yemen's overall population, but are heavily concentrated in the capital Sanaa and above all in the north of the country. The provincial capital Saada became their most important centre, and is the stronghold of the Houthi rebels. Initially, in the early 2000s, the Houthis demanded cultural and religious rights, which they felt were threatened by the central government's encour-

agement of Salafist missionising among the Zaydis in the north. The government, they asserted, was seeking to block potential political competition from leading Zaydi families. The result was civil war, which has erupted on seven separate occasions since 2004. In the most recent round the Houthis joined with forces loyal to former President Saleh, who has never accepted his ouster in 2012. After first capturing Sanaa in September 2014, they toppled the Hadi government and marched south, provoking the intervention by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Since 2004 the Saleh regime branded the Houthi rebels as Islamist terrorists and, on the basis of their “Shiite” identity, as agents of Iran. Riyadh shared this assessment of the Houthis as Tehran's fifth column and consequently backed the Yemeni government in its fight in the north. In the Arab world, where tensions between Sunnis and Shiites have heightened enormously since 2003, the view that the Houthis were fighting on behalf of Iran has become increasingly accepted.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen always regarded the Zaydis as heretics on a par with the Shiites as a whole, presenting them as the Yemeni arm of an alliance consisting of the United States, Iran and their respective allies fighting against (true) Islam. Nevertheless al-Qaeda concentrated on its war against the Yemeni state. One reason for this was that al-Qaeda's strongholds were in the south of the country, whereas until 2015 the Houthis operated exclusively in the north. Another is that this strategy corresponded to the priorities set by Bin Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had long insisted that al-Qaeda should restrict itself to the struggle against the United States and its allies. Al-Qaeda in Yemen only abandoned that narrow line after the Houthis captured Sanaa and marched south towards Aden. Since then the intensity of attacks on Houthi soldiers and officials has increased in all parts of the country, including Sanaa and occasionally even Saada. In its propaganda al-Qaeda

emphasises that it is resisting the Iranians and Houthis jointly with the Sunni tribes of Yemen. In this way it has forged tribal alliances enabling successes like the capture of Mukalla.

### **The al-Qaeda Vanguard**

By 2010 Washington already regarded the Yemeni al-Qaeda as the greatest terrorist danger to the West. Among the “al-Qaeda branches” or “affiliates” of the parent organisation in Pakistan, the Yemeni group was (after its Saudi counterpart was smashed in 2006) the one with the closest relationship to the al-Qaeda headquarters, thanks above all to personal contacts. Yemenis and Saudis were strongly represented there into the 2000s and served as fiercely loyal followers of Bin Laden. This applies especially to the first leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who stood in correspondence with Bin Laden until his death and accepted his ideological, strategic and tactical instructions. Wuhayshi was also so close to Zawahiri that the latter appointed him number two in the global al-Qaeda network – and thus his own successor – in July/August 2013.

Under Wuhayshi’s leadership the Yemeni branch quickly became the avant-garde of al-Qaeda terrorism, and was the first regional organisation to attempt to conduct attacks inside the United States. Al-Qaeda in Yemen also became an important pioneer of jihadist propaganda.

### **Attacks on the United States, Saudi Arabia and Europe**

Zawahiri’s promotion of Wuhayshi represented little more than an acceptance of the new reality after the al-Qaeda headquarters in Pakistan had been greatly weakened by the loss of Bin Laden and the killing of numerous leading cadres by US drones. Al-Qaeda in Yemen, on the other hand, had already planned and prepared two attacks on the United States that both only narrowly failed. The first was on Christ-

mas Day 2009, when vigilant passengers prevented Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab from detonating explosives hidden in his underpants as their plane was coming in to land at Detroit. The young Nigerian had received training in Yemen. A second attempt failed in October 2010, when the organisation smuggled printer cartridges packed with explosives onto two cargo jets bound for the United States.

Although both attacks were ultimately prevented, they were the closest al-Qaeda had come to striking inside the United States since 2001. By 2010 therefore the US security authorities regarded the Yemeni organisation as a greater danger than al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan, largely on the basis of the skills of its legendary bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri. He originates from Saudi Arabia, where he broke off his chemistry studies before fleeing to Yemen in 2006. With al-Qaeda he quickly acquired the reputation of a creative explosives expert, building the bombs that initially remained undetected on Mutallab’s body in 2009 and in the printer cartridges in 2010.

In another case one of Asiri’s bombs did actually explode. In August 2009 Asiri’s brother managed to arrange a meeting with the then Saudi deputy interior minister Prince Muhammad bin Naif Al Saud in Jeddah, on the pretext of wishing to give himself up. While the explosives concealed on his body only killed their bearer, the attack demonstrated in no uncertain terms that the Yemeni al-Qaeda could also strike in Saudi Arabia. Muhammad bin Naif, who is today crown prince and interior minister, was targeted because since 2003 he had turned the Saudi security forces into an effective instrument against al-Qaeda, and increasingly deployed them in Yemen too. To this day he remains the Saudi politician most hated by al-Qaeda.

Although these attacks against the United States and Saudi Arabia were prevented or failed, the danger of similar operations remains. For Asiri still lives in southern Yemen and is reported to have trained other al-Qaeda members in bomb-making.

## Propaganda

At roughly the same time as the attempted attacks described above, al-Qaeda in Yemen also placed itself at the forefront of jihadist propaganda, using the English-language online magazine *Inspire* whose first issue appeared in July 2010.

In the interim fourteen issues have been published, with the early editions demonstrating particular long-term impact. The goal of the publication was always to mobilise supporters and sympathisers in the West. In it the Yemeni al-Qaeda repeatedly called on its supporters to conduct attacks in their home countries using simple means, rather than undertaking the dangerous journey to training camps in South Asia, the Arab world or Africa. In the following years there were indeed increasing indications that numerous activists in North America and Europe had been “inspired” by these instructions. This was especially consequential in the case of the Boston Marathon Bombers in 2013, who sourced their bomb-making instructions from the magazine (“Make a bomb in the kitchen of your Mom”).

Another reason why *Inspire* was so influential was the presence of the Yemeni al-Qaeda’s religious mentor, the Yemeni-American Anwar al-Awlaki, in the team of authors. Awlaki left the United States in 2002 and joined al-Qaeda a few years later. He was the first jihadist religious authority who was able to address supporters and sympathisers in the diaspora in perfect English, and became a decisive influence on many of them. This was especially visible in the case of the Palestinian-American US Army major Nidal Malik Hasan, who shot dead thirteen of his comrades at Fort Hood in November 2009 and injured forty-two others. Before the shooting spree he had been in lively e-mail contact with Awlaki. Even after Awlaki was killed in an American drone strike in September 2011, his influence on jihadists in the West lives on. To this day his publications are found in their possession, and even years after his death he remains the most important English-speaking jihadist preacher.

## Danger to Europe and the United States

Despite all these efforts, it was 2015 before al-Qaeda in Yemen conducted a successful operation in the West: the attack on the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on 7 January, in which twelve people died (the attack on the Jewish supermarket was a separate action).

The attackers Said and Chérif Kouachi were French of Algerian extraction, and at least one of them had trained in Yemen around 2011. After the brothers fled to the outskirts of Paris following the attack, Chérif Kouachi gave a telephone interview with a journalist in which he claimed to have acted on behalf of al-Qaeda in Yemen, and to have been trained and funded by Anwar al-Awlaki. Al-Qaeda in Yemen itself subsequently claimed responsibility for the attack. This information not only fits with the brothers’ known movements, but also with the al-Qaeda headquarters’ designation of *Charlie Hebdo* as a prime target in Europe. In issue ten of *Inspire* in 2013, al-Qaeda in Yemen explicitly called on its supporters in Europe to attack the satirical magazine’s editor-in-chief, Stéphane Charbonnier.

The act of terror in Paris was the first successful al-Qaeda operation in a Western state since the London bombing of July 2005. Notably, the al-Qaeda-leadership in Pakistan appears to have played no role at all in the planning. The event demonstrated yet again the organisation’s great strategic patience in its efforts to strike the United States and its allies. The target was carefully chosen for its potential to shock French politics and society. The terrorists’ objective was to provoke France into overreacting not only against jihadists but more generally against Muslims at home and abroad, in order to prove their own assertion that the West was waging war on Islam.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen will continue to attempt to conduct attacks in the West. It should be a warning to Europe that the preparations for the Paris attack were made back in 2011, when al-Qaeda first controlled territory in Yemen. In winter 2015/16 the

situation in Yemen is even worse, with al-Qaeda controlling not only a larger area but also the major city of Mukalla, and a presence in Aden. The organisation can still draw on the know-how of its bomb-maker Asiri, and in recent years has lacked only recruits from Western states.

That is why the news about the so-called Khorasan group in Syria is especially concerning. While “Khorasan” historically designates a region now occupied by parts of north-eastern Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, among Arab jihadists today the name is a synonym for Afghanistan. The Khorasan group is not an autonomous organisation, but is made up of members of al-Qaeda, including leading figures, who travelled in 2013 and 2014 from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran to Syria, where they joined the local al-Qaeda organisation, the Nusra Front.

The group worked to win recruits from Western countries, who had travelled to Syria in their thousands since mid-/late 2012, for attacks on airliners flying between Europe and the United States. To that end Khorasan is also reported to have pursued contact with the Yemeni al-Qaeda for bomb-making expertise. American terrorism warnings in July 2014 underlined the concrete nature of these plans, requiring air passengers travelling to the United States to demonstrate that the batteries of their electronic devices were charged (and therefore contained no explosives). Washington spoke of involvement of Yemeni bomb-makers, and some observers even asserted that Asiri had played a decisive role in the planning.

US airstrikes in September and November 2014 killed numerous members of the Khorasan group. In July 2015 Washington confirmed that its Kuwaiti leader Muhsin al-Fadhli had been killed in a drone attack, while the same fate befell French Khorasan bomb-maker David Drugeon. It is too early to tell whether the group will be able to continue to pursue its plans despite these losses. But it is clear that there is a large recruitment pool of Americans and Euro-

peans in Syria. In the coming years they present a great danger to the West.

### **IS in Yemen**

Despite its gains through the civil war, al-Qaeda has come under pressure on two fronts in 2014 and 2015. Firstly, an IS offshoot has emerged in Yemen, exposing al-Qaeda to competition at home. Secondly, a string of leading members have been killed in US drone strikes.

In November 2014 a group of previously unknown Yemeni jihadists swore allegiance to IS leader and self-appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They appear to have been largely former al-Qaeda members. The real existence of local structures having joined the Iraqi/Syrian organisation was demonstrated in March 2015, when an IS group conducted suicide attacks on two Zaydi mosques in Sanaa, in which almost one hundred fifty people died. This represented a new development, as al-Qaeda had hitherto always sought to spare civilians. IS, on the other hand, explicitly seeks to stoke confessional tensions through spectacular attacks on Shiites and other religious minorities, in order to seize power in the ensuing chaos.

Numerous similar acts of terror followed in the subsequent months. The bombing of a Zaydi mosque in Sanaa on 22 May 2015 was especially striking, because a similar attack occurred simultaneously on a Shiite mosque in Qatif in eastern Saudi Arabia. Given that IS claimed responsibility for both, it can be assumed that the operations were coordinated. This would suggest that the Yemeni IS, like the local al-Qaeda, has its sights on neighbouring Saudi Arabia as well as Yemen, and that the IS groups in the two countries work together or are perhaps even a single organisation. Evidence for this theory is also found in propaganda videos showing that many fighters in the Yemeni IS are Saudis. The same also applies to the group’s leader to date, Abu Bilal al-Harbi, who is reported to accept the oaths of allegiance of new IS members in Yemen on behalf of the “caliph” Abu Bakr.

It is especially striking that IS has been able to conduct attacks in Saudi Arabia, where al-Qaeda had failed in the preceding years. The operation in Qatif in May was preceded by a string of less spectacular attacks – successful and unsuccessful – in which an IS connection had only been suspected. Just a week after Qatif, an IS suicide bombing of a Shiite mosque in Dammam was averted, although the premature detonation still killed four. Finally, in August 2015 a suicide attacker killed fifteen in a Sunni mosque in Abha in south-western Saudi Arabia used largely by members of the security services. IS appears to be capable of recruiting new fighters in Saudi Arabia and conducting repeated attacks at longer intervals, suggesting that the organisation has established structures on the ground.

Al-Qaeda did all it could to resist IS in Yemen, including sharply criticising the attacks on civilians and mosques. But it was unable to avoid losing recruits and even commanders. The best-known was Jalal Bal'idi (alias Abu Hamza al-Zanjibari), a field commander in southern Yemen feared for his brutality. In August 2014 the group he commanded kidnapped fourteen soldiers in the province of Hadramaut, killed them and beheaded four – the latter an occurrence not hitherto seen in Yemen. The al-Qaeda-leadership's sharp criticism of Bal'idi is likely simply to have driven him further into the arms of the IS. In January 2015 the local press reported that he had joined IS and opened a training camp in Hadramaut. The case of Bal'idi demonstrates the pressure al-Qaeda faces from IS: if it wants to stem the loss of recruits it has to at least tolerate more brutal tactics.

The weakening of al-Qaeda by IS was further amplified by its loss of important leaders. By 2009 the United States had recognised the Yemeni al-Qaeda as a great danger and expanded its successful Pakistani drone war to Yemen in December that year. But apart from the liquidation of Anwar al-Awlaki in September 2011 and Said al-Shihri in 2013, the United States initially failed to make significant inroads

into the organisation's leadership. That did not change until 2015, in parallel with the outbreak of civil war. Several important leaders were killed in the course of the year, including on 12 June Emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi. This represented al-Qaeda's perhaps greatest loss since the death of Bin Laden in 2011. Ironically the killing of so many leading figures in Yemen in 2015 benefited above all IS, because men like Wuhayshi and the religious leader Ibrahim al-Rubaish killed in April enjoyed strong reputations. Their mere presence in the ranks of al-Qaeda made it easier to recruit young fighters and acquire donations. The fewer prominent members of al-Qaeda survived, the more dangerous the competition of IS became.

### **Al-Qaeda Remains Strong**

Despite competition from IS, there is much to suggest that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is the stronger organisation in Yemen and (in coalition with allies like the Nusra Front in Syria) will remain a terrorist danger to the West. The group is firmly anchored among jihadists in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and can count on assistance from local allies in southern Yemen. Its leadership structure also appears to have survived the losses of 2015 intact. Even when the civil war comes to an end, it will be a great deal more difficult than in 2012 to retake the territory it controls. Beyond that it is unclear when and how the civil war can be ended at all, and whether there will be any kind of functioning Yemeni state again in the coming years. The longer the fighting lasts, the greater the danger that al-Qaeda will be able to consolidate its grip and use its territory as a base for planning attacks in Saudi Arabia and the West.

In its conflict with IS, al-Qaeda also has the advantage of the better strategy. For the IS groups in Yemen (like in Iraq and Syria) are fighting against all others, whereas al-Qaeda frequently enters alliances and thus improves its own chances of success. But this could become more difficult, as



the rivalry could force al-Qaeda to act with greater brutality than hitherto. This applies above all to the fight against the Houthis, who are already increasingly coming into al-Qaeda's sights. These acts of violence will strengthen the religious dimension of the conflict in Yemen, enormously complicate future conflict-resolution, and play into the hands of IS. Rivalry with IS is also likely to increase the pressure on al-Qaeda to conduct attacks on Saudi Arabia and/or the West.

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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