



INSURGENCY IN YEMEN: THE NEW CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGY

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Introduction

American strategy against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen relies on local Yemeni forces to defeat terrorists and the militias that support them.¹ The challenge has historically been finding and eliminating AQAP leaders, since the group has held relatively isolated safe havens until recently. The advent of the Arab Spring and the subsequent contraction of the Yemeni state, however, allowed AQAP and a nascent insurgent arm, Ansar al Sharia, to expand their sanctuary in Yemen dramatically. They have even threatened Aden, Yemen's second city, advanced toward Sana'a, and fought Yemen's military to a draw. American assistance programs aimed at helping Yemen build and maintain counter-terrorism forces will not suffice in the face of a real and growing al Qaeda-affiliated insurgency.

Yemen's military capabilities enhanced through American security assistance programs were not designed to counter an insurgency. In the wake of the Yemeni government's crackdown on protests in 2011, in fact, the U.S. government suspended many forms of support even within that counter-terrorism assistance program that might have been used to suppress demonstrators. But defeating the insurgency will require regular Yemeni troops, not just elite counter-terrorism units. These regular troops do not have advanced training, nor are they well equipped. Ongoing political challenges in Sana'a, security challenges elsewhere in the country, and the steady collapse of Yemen's economy and infrastructure will all compete for the attention of the government in Sana'a and hinder the prosecution of the counter-insurgency campaign in the south. If the assumption that Yemeni forces will be successful proves to be false, then America's counter-terrorism strategy in Yemen fails. Amidst the many challenges facing American policy in Yemen today, we must now add the requirement to design a dramatically different approach to helping Yemenis fight the Islamist threat that also threatens the United States.

The Growth of the al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Insurgency

The outbreak of widespread unrest in Yemen in 2011 severely affected Yemeni counter-terrorism operations. Significant challenges to the regime from popular protests drew limited resources away from the fight against AQAP. Prominent military defections in mid-March 2011 following a bloody crackdown in Sana'a further detracted from the fight. Yemeni security forces deployed to Sana'a when politically-driven fighting broke out there in early April 2011 between armed opposition elements, including defected troops from the First Armored Division and Hashid tribal militiamen, and Yemeni Central Security and Republican Guard forces. Taiz, a major city in Yemen, also drew on the limited pool of Yemen's security forces when armed tribesmen united in the city to protect the protesters against government troops.² The withdrawal of forces from the south to protect regime interests elsewhere created a noticeable security vacuum: residents of Aden, a former capital

Abyan is not the only Yemeni governorate in which AQAP safe havens have expanded. Shabwah governorate, a historical sanctuary for al Qaeda operatives that borders Abyan to the east, has fallen increasingly under AQAP's control. Local reports and posts on radical Islamist internet forums show that Ansar al Sharia members now essentially govern some of the towns in Shabwah governorate.⁷ The Yemeni Interior Ministry announced on March 7, 2012 that AQAP leaders, including the military commander Qasim al Raymi, were planning to seize al Mukalla in Hadramawt, and were using 'Azzan in Shabwah as a base of operations.⁸ Moreover, the AQAP-linked militants, having held territory in Abyan, pushed northward into al Bayda governorate in mid-January 2012. Tribal negotiations, backed by military reinforcements on the outskirts of town, eventually persuaded the insurgents to withdraw from Rada'a, the targeted town.⁹ Subsequent attacks on military targets in al Bayda governorate, however, indicate that the militants still operate north of their Abyan stronghold.

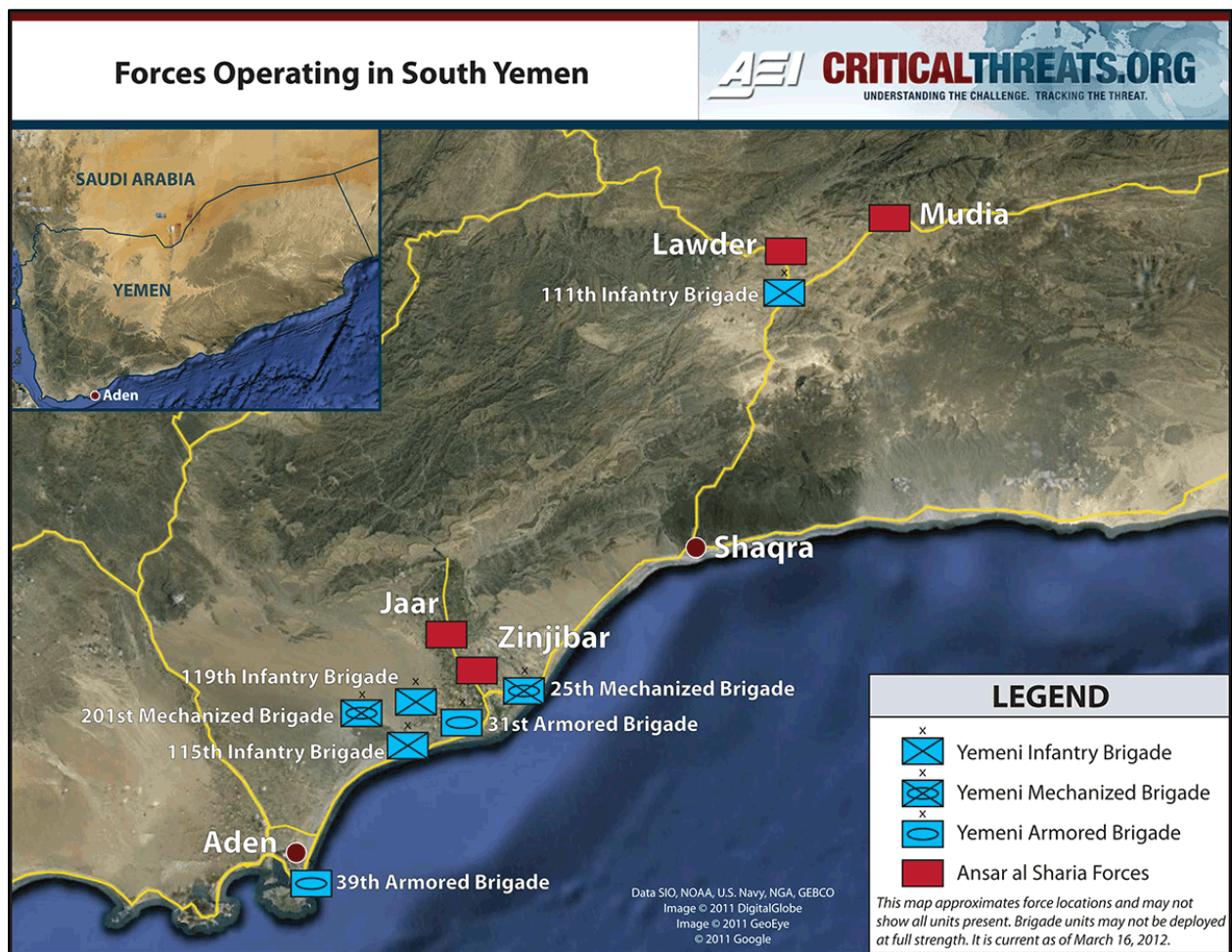
The tempo of AQAP attacks increased following President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi's February 25 inauguration. A suicide car bombing at the presidential palace in al Mukalla killed 26 Republican Guard troops hours after the ceremony in Sana'a. Days later, the Yemeni Interior Ministry announced that it was searching for three explosive-laden cars in Sana'a. Two attacks on Yemeni security forces occurred on March 3: two suicide car bombers blew up their vehicle at the Dar al Nasr Republican Guard base in al Bayda city, the capital of al Bayda governorate, killing at least one soldier, and bombings along the perimeter of a Central Security building in al Mukalla in Hadramawt governorate killed another soldier.¹⁰ Ansar al Sharia militants conducted a coordinated attack on Yemeni military forces in Zinjibar district of Abyan governorate the following day. The militants detonated two car bombs outside a military base in al Kod, southwest of Zinjibar, and then attacked the base.¹¹ They made off with heavy weaponry, including a Katyusha rocket launcher, a 120-millimeter mortar, five DShK heavy machine guns, and three PK machine guns, among other materiel, according to their report.¹² The militants then used the newly acquired weapons against the Yemeni troops, reportedly killing 185 soldiers and capturing 73 others.¹³ Ansar al Sharia paraded the captured soldiers in Jaar and has sought to bargain their release for the release of prisoners.¹⁴ A stepped-up military response to the March 4 attack has not yet affected Ansar al Sharia's and AQAP's capabilities.

Challenges to Defeating the Insurgency

The developments in south Yemen indicate that the counter-terrorism fight in Yemen has changed from one targeting AQAP's terrorist networks to one that must also defeat an insurgency. Ansar al Sharia has created conditions, particularly in Abyan, where for the first time, AQAP-linked militants administer territory, provide public goods, and even impose their strict interpretation of *shari'a*. These militants are holding their ground against the Yemeni military and, having established their positions, are unwilling to cede control in the face of limited advances. Yemeni ground forces must be able to clear and hold the territory currently under militant control, requiring a substantial

Yemeni military commitment to roll back Ansar al Sharia’s territory. Further, there must be continued operations targeting AQAP leadership in order to defeat the terrorist threat in Yemen.

The requirements to defeat AQAP and Ansar al Sharia will strain the capabilities of Yemen’s security forces. The Yemeni military has not been able to counter challenges successfully from insurgent groups in the past. A faction of Zaydi Shiites in Yemen’s north has fought six different wars against the Yemeni military since 2004; the last iteration at the end of 2009 ended in a draw.¹⁵ These Shiite rebels, the al Houthis, carved off territory over the course of 2011 that remains under their administration to this day. The Yemeni government may begin negotiations with the al Houthis to bring them to the table at a national dialogue; this course of action should not be an option for the Yemeni government to pursue with Ansar al Sharia. Ansar al Sharia’s existence increases AQAP’s strength, and therefore the group must be eliminated to truly weaken, and eventually defeat, AQAP. Negotiations with such a group also lend it political legitimacy and weaken the Yemeni state’s position against AQAP. Unlike the al Houthis, therefore, Yemeni security forces must be able to defeat Ansar al Sharia.



The Yemeni military faces significant challenges that will impede its ability to defeat any insurgent group. Past conflicts in Yemen, particularly the Sa'ada wars against the al Houthi rebels, revealed fissures within the military that have degraded its effectiveness. Competition between powerful individuals in the military has created distrust between units and has undermined efforts to defeat the enemy force. General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, commander of the northwest military zone and the First Armored Division before his March 2011 defection, was one of the most powerful men in Yemen's military. Opposing him was former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's son, Ahmed, the commander of the elite Republican Guard. The Sa'ada wars fell under General Ali Mohsen's command, but the largely local conflict bore out a national power struggle between the general and the Saleh family. The First Armored Division, which had fought in each iteration of the Sa'ada war, did not receive new military hardware in 2007; the Republican Guard did.¹⁶ Additionally, it is widely believed that Saleh's military planners provided the Saudi Air Force, which conducted air raids in the sixth round of fighting, with coordinates for an air strike. The Saudis recognized that the provided location was General Ali Mohsen's headquarters.¹⁷

The arrival of the Arab Spring in Yemen exposed the fault lines within the military, and the military restructuring promised as part of the resolution of that protest movement will likely exacerbate tensions.¹⁸ Former President Saleh's family members and close associates remain in positions of power within the military, despite some recent command changes. President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi appointed a new commander of the southern military zone, Major General Salem Ali Qatan.¹⁹ MG Qatan replaced Major General Mehdi Makwala, a Saleh associate. The full scope and timing of the military restructuring remains unclear, but it could potentially touch on issues of allegiances to the Saleh family, distribution of power between tribal leaders, and political actors in Sana'a without historical influence in the military could seek to expand their own power.²⁰ Saleh's nephew and son head Yemen's elite special operations and counter-terrorism forces, moreover, raising concerns over the continuity of operations against AQAP should there be a change of command. A restructuring of the chain of command within Yemen's armed forces could also affect ongoing operations against AQAP and Ansar al Sharia.

The Yemeni military operation in Abyan governorate has not been successful in regaining control of territory. Though divisions between defected and loyalist brigade commanders may have hobbled initial efforts, it is more likely that limited resources and training are the greatest impediment to success.²¹ Yemen's conventional ground forces are historically weak, often challenged by tribal militias, and Ansar al Sharia's capabilities—militants armed with light and medium weapons and aided by the use of asymmetrical attacks—may come close to matching those of the Yemeni army. Additionally, political drama in Sana'a and the conflict in Taiz likely distracted Yemeni decision makers from the fight against AQAP and Ansar al Sharia and limited the resources available to southern commanders engaged in the fight. The unrest caused by the Arab Spring will likely force the continued commitment of military forces to secure key cities, such as Sana'a and Taiz, and the Yemeni military may rapidly become overstretched should additional troops be required to combat Ansar al Sharia. The outbreak of Yemen's "Parallel Revolution," local protests against regime officials and military commanders, could also impact operations as the military focuses on regaining

control of its units instead of on a counter-terrorism fight.²² The new Yemeni government's willingness and ability to continue counter-terrorism operations against AQAP and Ansar al Sharia remains a concern. President Hadi pledged to do so, but more exigent threats to the state may require a diversion of resources, as they have in the past.

Past American security assistance has not been dedicated toward improving the general army's capabilities. Instead, programs enhanced specific counter-terrorism capabilities.²³ The greatest beneficiaries of American security assistance have been the Yemeni units dedicated to fighting terrorism.²⁴ Specifically, Yemen's Special Operations Force (YSOF), a unit in the Republican Guard, has received American military training, vehicles, weapons, and night vision goggles. Separately, but in support of the counter-terrorism mission, the U.S. donated four Huey II helicopters to the Yemeni Air Force to transport small units on day- and night-time raids and a CN-235 aircraft to assist Yemeni counter-terrorism forces. Additionally the U.S. has assisted the Air Force in maintaining its C-130H aircraft and fighter jets as well as the training the Central Security Forces' Counter Terrorism Unit. The Yemeni military capabilities improved by American security assistance do not play a large role in the fight to roll back Ansar al Sharia's territory, but should go toward targeting AQAP's terrorist network.

Conclusion

American policy-makers must have no illusions about the scope of the counter-terrorism fight in Yemen; it is now a counter-insurgency effort. The fight changed during the Arab Spring when Ansar al Sharia seized and held territory. The expansion of AQAP's safe haven through Ansar al Sharia's activities has strengthened the group, and although AQAP has been focused locally on Yemeni targets, it is creating on-the-ground conditions that will support transnational attacks in the future. Yemeni forces are not designed to conduct counter-insurgency operations, and local capabilities enhanced by past American security assistance will not suffice to defeat Ansar al Sharia. The militants' continued expansion both northward and eastward is concerning, and is evidence that the current Yemeni efforts will not be enough to defeat the group. A more robust counter-insurgency effort will be required of Yemen to prevent further growth of AQAP's safe haven and to begin to reverse the gains that AQAP has made through Ansar al Sharia over the past year. Additionally, AQAP's terrorist network must also be dismantled, a task that local Yemeni forces have yet to undertake seriously.

American counter-terrorism strategy relies on having a willing and able partner in Yemen. The new government has pledged to be such a partner and voiced a commitment to defeating AQAP and Ansar al Sharia. It may be challenged to prioritize and dedicate limited resources to the counter-terrorism fight for an extended period of time, however. Elite counter-terrorism units have not pursued AQAP when more direct threats to the government have arisen in the past.

Additionally, the forthcoming restructuring of the historically weak Yemeni military will be a key variable in the success of Yemen's counter-terrorism operations against Ansar al Sharia.

The challenges to success could well prove to be insurmountable and policy-makers need to be prepared for a complete reassessment of that strategy should signs emerge that our counter-terrorism strategy is failing. Continued expansion of insurgent-held territory would be the first indicator of failure. The aggressive push northward begins to place Ansar al Sharia fighters within striking distance of Yemen's capital, Sana'a. Their push eastward exposes the country's oil infrastructure to further attacks. It is unlikely that Yemeni forces with their current capabilities can succeed against Ansar al Sharia. American policy-makers should therefore work now to identify how best to support Yemen's counter-insurgency operations to improve the likelihood that the operation will be successful in the future. It is also time to start serious planning for the possibility that the Yemeni government will not be able to wage successful counter-insurgency now or in the future and to consider what America's interests require in such a case.

Notes

¹ For further information on American strategy toward Yemen, see Katherine Zimmerman's "Recipe for Failure: American Strategy toward Yemen and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *AEI's Critical Threats Project*, February 17, 2011. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-recipe-for-failure-american-strategy-february-17-2012>

² Taiz, a former capital of Yemen, has been a pivotal city in the development of Yemen's Arab Spring. The start of popular protests in the city after the fall of Egypt's former President Hosni Mubarak provided momentum behind Yemen's protest movement. For further information, see Sasha Gordon's "Taiz: the Heart of Yemen's Revolution," *AEI's Critical Threats Project*, January 12, 2012. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/gordon-taiz-heart-yemen-revolution-january-12-2012>

³ Factions of the Southern Movement have openly called for secession from north Yemen. For further information on Yemen's Southern Movement, see Katherine Zimmerman's "Yemen's Southern Challenge: Background on the Rising Threat of Secessionism," *AEI's Critical Threats Project*, November 5, 2009. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemens-southern-challenge-background-rising-threat-secessionism>

Alexandra Sandels, "Yemen Explosion: Yemen Weapons Factory Explosion Kills at Least 80," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2011. Available: <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/mar/29/world/la-fg-yemen-blast-20110329>

⁴ Katherine Zimmerman, "Quick Take: al Qaeda and its Affiliates Exploit Yemen Unrest," *AEI's Critical Threats Project*, April 4, 2011. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/quick-take-al-qaeda-and-its-affiliates-exploit-yemen-unrest>

⁵ Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Qaeda's Gains in South Yemen," *AEI's Critical Threats Project*, July 8, 2011. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/al-qaedas-gains-south-yemen-july-8-2011>

⁶ These attacks include a July 24, 2011 suicide car bombing that targeted a Yemeni military convoy outside of Aden and a September 3, 2011 suicide car bombing at a military checkpoint along the Aden-Abyan road. See:

Yasser Alarami and Laura Kasinof, “Suicide Bomber Hits Troops at Port City in Yemen,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2011. Available:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/25/world/middleeast/25yemen.html>

Hakim Almasmari, “Six Killed in Car Bomb Explosion in Yemen,” *CNN*, September 4, 2011.

Available: <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/09/04/yemen.bombing/index.html>

⁷ Ansar al Sharia, for example, has claimed to have provided drinking water, collected and transported garbage, and provided other basic services in ‘Azzan in Shabwah governorate. The organization has operated openly in ‘Azzan since June 2011.

Hakim Almasmari, “Al Qaeda Militants Take Control of Another Yemen Province,” *The National*, March 12, 2012. Available: <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/al-qaeda-militants-take-control-of-another-yemen-province>

Fuad Mused, “Military Plan to Attack Abyan, Returnees Flee Again,” *Yemen Times*, March 1, 2012.

Available: <http://yementimes.com/en/1551/news/490/Military-plan-to-attack-Abyan-returnees-flee-again.htm>

“Madad News Agency Releases Issue 11 of its Report on AQAP’s Activities,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, March 6, 2012. Available at SITE. [subscription]

⁸ “Security Apparatus UnCOVERS Terrorist Plot Targeting al Mukalla City in Hadramawt Governorate,” *Yemen Ministry of the Interior*, March 7, 2012. Available:

<http://www.moi.gov.ye/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=12517%20> [Arabic]

⁹ See Sasha Gordon’s “Yemen Crisis Situation Reports: Update 124,” *AEI’s Critical Threats Project*, January 17, 2012. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-reports-update-124-january-17-2012>

¹⁰ Mohammed Ghobari and Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Four Dead in South Yemen Blasts, al Qaeda Blamed,” *Reuters*, March 3, 2012. Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/03/us-yemen-explosion-idUSTRE8220BD20120303>

¹¹ Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Al Qaeda Clashes, Blasts Kill 35 Soldiers in Yemen,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2012. Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/04/us-yemen-attacks-idUSTRE82305C20120304>

¹² “AQAP Claims Bombing Military Plane, Killing Over 100 in Various Attacks,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, March 7, 2012. Available at SITE. [subscription]

¹³ Ahmed al Haj and Maggie Michael, “Yemen Reels From Army’s Defeat by al-Qaida,” *Associated Press*, March 6, 2012. Available: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/185-yemeni-troops-dead-weekend-al-qaeda-attack-15855693%23.T1YYuXngf5w>

¹⁴ “AQAP Offers Prisoner Exchange for 73 Captive Yemeni Soldiers,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, March 12, 2012. Available at SITE. [subscription]

¹⁵ Saudi military forces also participated in the 2009 Sa’ada war, which ended with a negotiated ceasefire.

For further information, see Chris Boucek’s “War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Middle East Program*, No. 110, April 2010.

Available: http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf

¹⁶ Sarah Phillips, “Yemen: Developmental Dysfunction and Division in a Crisis State,” *Developmental Leadership Program*, February 14, 2011. Available: <http://www.dlprog.org/news-events/new-paper-yemen-developmental-dysfunction-and-division-in-a-crisis-state.php>

¹⁷ Ginny Hill, “Yemen Unrest: Saleh’s Rivals Enter Elite Power Struggle,” *BBC*, May 26, 2011. Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13560514>

¹⁸ The power transition agreement stipulated that a newly established Committee on Military Affairs for Achieving Security and Stability “shall also work to create the necessary conditions and take the necessary steps to integrate the armed forces under unified, national and professional leadership in the context of the rule of law.” Full text of the implementation mechanism for the Gulf Cooperation Council agreement is available through the *Yemen Peace Project* at: <http://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/wordpress/?p=458>

¹⁹ “Republican Decrees Appointing New Military Leaders Issued,” *SABA News*, March 1, 2012. Available: <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news261986.htm>

²⁰ The al Ahmar family, not related to General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, for example, could seek to exert influence in the military.

²¹ See an interview conducted by *Asharq al Awsat* with Brigadier General Mohammed Abdullah al Somali from the 25th mechanized brigade on July 30, 2011. Available: <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=26076>

Agence France-Presse reported on September 10, 2011 that loyalist and defected commanders fought Ansar al Sharia “side-by-side.” Available:

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/10/166281.html>

²² For further information on the impact of the Parallel Revolution on Yemen’s security forces, see Sasha Gordon’s “The Parallel Revolution in Yemen,” *AEI’s Critical Threats Project*, March 6, 2012. Available: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/gordon-parallel-revolution-march-6-2012>

²³ American concerns over the end use of its security assistance to Yemen have also shaped the assistance programs.

²⁴ For an overview of American security assistance to Yemen, see “Uncertain Political and Security Situation Challenges U.S. Efforts to Implement a Comprehensive Strategy in Yemen,” *U.S. Government Accountability Office*, February 29, 2012. Available: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-432R>