

HSPI Commentary Series

AQAP LOSES ITS CHIEF OF EXTERNAL OPERATIONS: COUNTERTERRORISM IMPLICATIONS

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Anwar al-Awlaki's death further demonstrates the U.S.' ability to implement smart counterterrorism strategies proportional to the threat of al Qaeda and its affiliated groups. Today, the U.S. again employed a surgical strike to eliminate a threat to its national security. As we noted in our June article "[Yemen and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula \(AQAP\): Exploiting a Window of Counterterrorism Opportunity](#)," and our later discussion "[Countering the threat posed by AQAP: Embrace don't chase Yemen's chaos](#)," the immediate threat AQAP poses to the U.S. emanates

from AQAP's Foreign Operations Unit — until this morning that unit was led by Awlaki.

Awlaki's demise improves U.S. security for several reasons. Awlaki's elimination marks another in a recent series of setbacks for al Qaeda globally. More specifically, it immediately degrades AQAP's operational planning capacity — especially with respect to plots against the U.S. homeland. Yet, killing Awlaki by no means signals the death knell of al Qaeda generally or even of AQAP specifically. As we argued previously, now is not the time to reduce the pressure being applied through the intertwined efforts of the U.S.' intelligence and special operations communities.

Significance of Awlaki's death for the U.S. and al Qaeda

We noted this past summer that Awlaki held unique value to al Qaeda. With al Qaeda's senior leaders pinned down in Pakistan, Awlaki in Yemen inspired and planned viable attacks on the United States homeland. While never as important as Osama Bin Laden or as

capable as abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Awlaki provided al Qaeda global relevance amidst its darkest period. Overshadowed by the Arab Spring and reeling from the decapitation of some of its most valuable leaders, Awlaki initiated al Qaeda's most sophisticated attacks on the West over the past three years and attracted the majority of al Qaeda's dwindling supply of recruits. Awlaki's ability to 1) attract Western recruits with access to Western targets (so called "clean skins" with U.S. passports) and 2) exploit U.S. security and psychological vulnerabilities helped al Qaeda remain relevant amongst a string of defeats. Awlaki's death will immediately limit AQAP's ability to attack the U.S. and likely degrade al Qaeda's recruitment globally.

For the U.S., Awlaki's removal demonstrates ten years of improved counterterrorism strategy and implementation utilizing a mix of intelligence and special operations forces. Not only is the U.S. safer post-Awlaki, but the country has begun forging a new counterterrorism strategy improved by costly lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. counterterrorism approach in Yemen and more broadly in the Horn of Africa demonstrates how avoiding tribal conflicts and focusing more narrowly on the threat of terrorist actors can prevent our country from becoming needlessly engulfed in local conflicts and bled financially — two key objectives of al Qaeda's global strategy. Awlaki's death provides further evidence that the U.S. is learning to avoid such traps and instead leverage the synergies provided by robust intelligence, sophisticated drones, and the deft use of Special Forces to provide the efficient, flexible, and lethal counterterrorism capabilities necessary to protect American lives.

Significance of Awlaki's death for Yemen

Anwar al-Awlaki, while perhaps not a household name to many Yemenis, is someone who generated popular support globally and virtually, and elevated AQAP's and Yemen's stature as a hub for global terrorism. Awlaki's presence in Yemen and the repeated global terrorist attacks he orchestrated from this locale significantly altered U.S. counterterrorism operations with respect to the country. Awlaki and AQAP's Foreign Operations Unit persistently elevated the terrorist threat to global levels constraining U.S. counterterrorism options and broader policy options with regard to Yemen.

Eliminating Awlaki through drones allowed the U.S. to maintain its focus on terrorist threats without becoming overly embroiled in Yemeni tribal conflicts. The AQAP threat to the U.S. remains. However, post-Awlaki the U.S. is less constrained by immediate counterterrorism priorities and may now consider a broader spectrum of policy options in Yemen. Before Awlaki's death, an active AQAP Foreign Operations Branch forced the U.S. to focus on eliminating terrorists in Yemen above all other issues. Now, rather than focusing strictly on

defeating AQAP, the U.S. can examine policy options for dissuading AQAP aggression and possibly inducing a more reasonable and peaceful settlement between all parties involved in Yemen's instability.

Still counterterrorism work to be done against AQ globally and AQAP in Yemen

Awlaki represented only one key component of AQAP. Removal of Ibrahim Hassan Asiri, AQAP's talented bomb maker, remains a top priority — he not only trains other AQ bomb technicians but has demonstrated a unique ability to continuously develop increasingly sophisticated devices capable of evading U.S. security measures. Additionally, the U.S. must continue to evaluate how best to remove AQAP's remaining top leaders, Nasir al Wahayshi and Said al-Shihri, who will continue to pursue attacks against the West to the end of their existence.

Globally, the intensity of U.S. counterterrorism operations has significantly degraded al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is losing seasoned operatives at a pace greater than they can be recruited and trained. Yet, the threat remains and can easily regenerate. Now is not the time for the U.S. to scale back its efforts to defeat al Qaeda. The U.S. must vigorously pursue al Qaeda to its absolute end removing the possibility of its reincarnation in another form.

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