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YEMEN AND AL QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: EXPLOITING A WINDOW OF COUNTERTERRORISM OPPORTUNITY

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This week's escape of 63 suspected al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) fighters from a Yemeni prison exemplifies how President Saleh's departure to Saudi Arabia and Yemeni instability embolden this lethal al Qaeda affiliate.¹ In recent weeks, the writ of government in Yemen has evaporated under the twin strains of the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen and the Secessionist movement in southern Yemen. AQAP leaped into the security vacuum created by Yemen's political volatility. As the Yemeni military consolidates its strength in an attempt to maintain state control and fight twin insurgencies, AQAP has further expanded its safe haven in the country's interior, further increasing their operational capacity.



Photo Credit: Al-Jazeera English

AQAP's ascension in the wake of the Yemeni government collapse again illustrates the dangers of un- and under-governed states as terrorist sanctuaries. As seen in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, the Sahel and many other places, al Qaeda exploits underlying conditions in these safe havens to plan, train and

execute global terrorist attacks. Thus the question becomes this: how does the U.S. counter AQAP amidst pending state failure in Yemen?

Surprisingly, Yemeni unrest provides U.S. counterterrorism efforts a unique opportunity to interdict and significantly reduce AQAP. AQAP's proven capability and their intent to strike the U.S. homeland, those of our allies, and our interests in the region, coupled with Yemen's shift from under- to un-governed territory and the

collapsing of the Saleh regime all suggest that an immediate escalation in drone operations and targeted Special Operations Force missions could rapidly mitigate the threat posed by AQAP.

AQAP- Determined, Capable, and Growing AQ Affiliate

AQAP is the only al Qaeda affiliate to attempt multiple high profile attempts against the U.S. mainland since 2001, nearly succeeding in its 2009 Christmas Day airliner bomb plot and paralyzing the air cargo industry in 2010 through the use of sophisticated bombs embedded in computer printers. AQAP's potency arises from its hybrid organizational structure uniting long-time veterans of al Qaeda with the most talented members of its new generation. Nasir al Wahayshi, a former personal secretary to Bin Laden, and Said al-Shihri, a Guantanamo detainee released in 2007, lead AQAP. These two jihadists combine long established ties to al Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan and a sustained penchant for attacking American targets.

For the U.S., AQAP's Foreign Operations Unit is of greatest concern. The unit was described by Dr. Thomas Hegghammer as a small cell, "which specializes in international operations and keeps a certain distance to the rest of the organization."² Anwar al-Awlaki, an American born cleric, allegedly leads this group, steadily morphing his role from an Internet ideologue to full-blown operational planner. Awlaki's online sermons, recruitment of U.S.-based Americans and production of AQAP's English-language jihadi magazine *Inspire* with Samir Khan (another American AQAP member) have inspired lone wolf attacks on Americans. Ibrahim Hassan Asiri, AQAP's talented bomb maker, transforms the Foreign Operations Unit's threats into sophisticated attacks. Asiri and his well-trained bombmaking protégés have demonstrated their capabilities repeatedly by devising undetectable devices that nearly killed Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in 2009, almost brought down an airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, and halted air cargo shipments from Yemen in 2010.³ The Foreign Operations Unit's special knowledge of the U.S. and unique destructive capabilities make AQAP an immediate threat to the U.S.

AQAP appears well positioned to sustain and grow al Qaeda's influence regionally and globally. AQAP's Saudi leadership and Middle East proximity will likely garner increased donations from wealthy Gulf contributors looking for a new cause after Bin Laden's death. Moreover, AQAP acts as a critical conduit for regional AQ activities linking al Shabab and other East Africa-based AQ operatives with sustained resources

and foreign fighters- some of whom were recruited from Europe and North America. Al Shabab's consolidation of power, leadership, homicide/suicide bombing tactics and targets are likely indicative of AQAP's regional influence. Perhaps most troubling is Al Shabab's growing international ambitions as evidenced by recent attacks in Kenya and Uganda and complete alignment of their goals with those of Al Qaeda's.

Elimination of key AQAP members, especially those in the Foreign Operations Unit, would immediately increase U.S. security. Removal of Wahayshi, al-Shihri, Awlaki, Asiri or any other key AQAP leaders could short-circuit AQAP's operational capability and disrupt their regional coordination of AQ efforts. As Dr. Hegghammer noted, "AQ in Yemen is short on this type of human capital," suggesting targeted leadership decapitation would seriously weaken AQAP's proven international terrorism capability.⁴

Yemen's shift from under- to un-governed state: an opportunity to mitigate AQAP's immediate threat

The U.S. must act to counter AQAP now. Pursuing the status quo, by waiting for the Yemeni governance situation to solidify and then build a strategy through a weak host-nation partner, provides AQAP an exceptional amount of time to plan, prepare and execute an attack on the U.S. -- an attack likely accelerated by the opportunity to rise in stature after Bin Laden's death.

Yemen's under-governed regions have provided al Qaeda operatives safe haven for more than a decade. Weak, under-governed states, in many ways, prove more vexing from a counterterrorism perspective than failed, un-governed states. While failed (un-governed) states provide al Qaeda safe haven, weak (under-governed) state sovereignty restricts and usually distorts U.S. counterterrorism options. Yemen's persistent under-governance has provided AQAP safe haven and created significant operational constraints on the U.S.



Photo Credit: AFP

U.S. counterterrorism funding and support through President Saleh's regime often had the effect of exacerbating rather than ameliorating the threat of AQAP. Saleh

predominantly used U.S. counterterrorism funding to expand his military capability and counter the Houthi and Secessionist insurgencies in his country while lightly pursuing AQAP. Saleh's strategy, supported by American dollars, created two adverse consequences. First, Yemenis saw U.S. aid to the Saleh regime as America supporting a corrupt regime against an oppressed people, further enhancing Yemeni popular support for AQAP vis-à-vis the U.S. Second, counterterrorism aid and military support actually encouraged Saleh's regime to maintain a persistent low level of AQAP activity in Yemen to justify sustained U.S. counterterrorism funding.

Saleh's removal presents the U.S. with a unique opportunity to target AQAP. Saleh's absence effectively shifts Yemen's AQAP safe haven from an under-governed state to an un-governed status. While the ungoverned security vacuum of Southern Yemen provides AQAP an opportunity to expand and secure its safe haven, this same vacuum also allows the U.S. greater flexibility of counterterrorism options and maneuverability. Yemeni limitations on direct U.S. counterterrorism operations, created by the Saleh regime, are less of an issue today. For the first time, the U.S. can pursue AQAP targets in Yemen without being embroiled in Yemeni government politics and trapped in Yemen's dual insurgencies.

What are the options?

Yemen's current situation makes long-term diplomatic and whole of government strategies entirely infeasible for countering the immediate threat posed by AQAP.

First, arming, training and assisting Yemeni security forces will not adequately address the most clear and present danger facing the U.S. Any financial aid or military support provided through the Yemeni government will undoubtedly be used to quell the country's dual insurgencies. This approach further empowers AQAP's recruitment narrative with the Yemeni populace and solidifies the terrorist group's sanctuary.

Second, diplomatic and other "soft power" strategies to tackle AQAP lack sufficient partners and will be far too slow to prevent AQAP from executing future attacks. The U.S. does not have the needed military security structure, trained Yemeni cultural advisor cadre, or host nation partnerships to implement a Yemeni tribal engagement strategy similar in fashion to those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tribal engagement strategies take years to mature and provide AQAP significant operational space to execute an attack in the short-term. Additionally, eliminating AQAP leaders through

tribal engagement entices tribes to harbor AQ members. As seen in Afghanistan and Pakistan, tribes realize that slowly bartering AQ operatives while maintaining a low-level of AQ presence will result in sustained resources from the U.S. over time. Tribes know the loss of an AQ presence means the end of U.S. support.

Third, a large-scale military deployment to Yemen is infeasible. Large-scale counterinsurgency operations have proven to be an expensive, time-consuming and indirect approach to eliminating a terrorist organization numbering in the hundreds or thousands. And given that the U.S. already has two wars and a half-dozen uprisings to contend with, a significant commitment of troops and materiel to Yemen is likely not possible.

Fourth, Saudi partners will likely assist in countering AQAP. However, aligning our hopes for disrupting AQAP in the short-term will likely result in counterproductive Saudi alliances hindering long-run options in Yemen.

With none of these options realistic or sufficient, we now consider one that has the most potential for success.

Drones and SOF: Our Best and Only Option

Light-footprint drone and special operations force (SOF) missions specifically focused on short-term tactical counterterrorism objectives can help avoid the long-term quagmire of Yemeni insurgencies while immediately degrading AQAP's ability to strike the U.S. Increasing drones and SOF operations now is the best and only sufficient U.S. option for several reasons. First, AQAP presents an immediate threat to all Americans. AQAP's recent safe haven expansion in Yemen allows for unmitigated attack planning and operational movement. Second, targeted attacks on AQ's leadership in Pakistan severely disrupted the terror group's ability to plan and execute terror attacks abroad. Information recovered from the Bin Laden raid details how drone operations, "frustrated Bin Laden indicating that he could no longer direct terrorist attacks by lieutenants who feared for their own lives."⁵ Third, the fall of the Saleh regime and the lack of a host nation partner provide the U.S. a unique opportunity to



Photo Credit: AFP

increase its security without being constrained by weak state sovereignty. Fourth, as described above, all other available options appear infeasible for eliminating AQAP's immediate threat capability. Fifth, eliminating AQAP's terrorist leadership in the near term through drone and SOF operations allows the U.S. to lay the groundwork and move toward a long-term Yemen strategy unencumbered by the immediate terrorist threat of AQAP.

Maintaining a light footprint

Successfully implementing a drone and SOF approach in Yemen requires a light military footprint accompanied by integrated intelligence and a deliberate information operations campaign. Precisely eliminating AQAP's senior leadership while minimizing civilian casualties requires interagency intelligence assets leading the effort and appropriately transitioning direct military action to SOF as needed. As evidenced in the Bin Laden raid, seamless coordination between these two elements can maximize the effectiveness and minimize the costs of this strategy.⁶ Additionally, the drone and SOF program should utilize a dedicated information campaign consistent with counterinsurgency doctrine signaling to Yemeni tribes that removal of AQAP members from their territories will bring an end to U.S. engagements.

Don't create seams in our fight against a seamless enemy.

Debates over the legality of pursuing AQAP in Yemen through drones and SOF create unnecessary seams in our nation's fight against a seamless terrorist enemy. The threat environment we face today predicates the further synchronization of the military and intelligence community. This evolution in the operational environment demands that the authorities under Title 10 (legal basis for the military services and the department of defense) and Title 50 (procedures for covert actions) be equally synchronized and coordinated. The many corridors inside the Beltway must not stymie operational performance in the field. The U.S. State Department officially designated AQAP a Foreign Terrorist Organization in January 2010 and most of AQAP's leaders are now Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order.⁷ Under this legal designation, the U.S. should use all available assets to eliminate the immediate threat of AQAP.

Conclusion

Increased use of drone and SOF strike missions is not without risks – yet the ratio of possible risks to potential benefits is far better than any other viable option. Leaning

forward and seizing this window of opportunity with such a policy will provide the U.S. time to develop a strong, long-term relationship with Yemen's successor government that addresses the persistent threat of AQAP and jihadi radicalization in the country. Pursuing this approach will also provide the U.S. an additional litmus test for creating a new long-run counterterrorism strategy in a post-bin Laden world. However, the present window of opportunity will close quickly – the U.S. must act now to prevent an inevitable attack from AQAP.

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¹ Mohammed Hatem, “Yemen Jailbreak by Al-Qaeda Fighters Highlights Risk of Descent Into Chaos.” Bloomberg News, June 23, 2011. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-06-22/al-qaeda-fighters-escape-from-yemeni-jail-via-tunnel-after-killing-guard.html>

² Thomas Hegghammer, “The case for chasing al-Awlaki.” Foreign Policy. November 24, 2010. Available at: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/24/the_case_for_chasing_al_awlaki

³ Associated Press, “Al-Qaida bomber leaves behind a fingerprint.” May 24, 2011. Available at: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110524/ap_on_go_ca_st_pe/us_al_qaida_bomber

⁴ Ibid, Hegghammer

⁵ Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, “Qaeda Woes Fuel Talk of Speeding Afghan Pullback.” New York Times, June 18, 2011. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/19/world/asia/19policy.html>

⁶ Frank Cilluffo, “After bin Laden the Threat Remains: Drones, CIA and SOF Still the Only Game in Town.” Homeland Security Policy Institute Commentary, May 2, 2011. http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/commentary022_after_bin_laden.cfm

⁷ U.S. Department of State. “Terrorist Designations of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) Operative Othman Al-Ghamdi.” Washington, DC. June 16, 2011. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/06/166288.htm>