Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula:

From Global Insurgent to State Enforcer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is intended to peel back some of the layers of deliberate obfuscation and misunderstanding that have pervaded orthodox thinking on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP) over the past 8 years that the group has been in existence. The authors of the overwhelming majority of media articles, reports and studies into the organization have chosen to portray it as an insurgent group challenging the state. The evidence that will be brought to bear here is a concerted attempt to challenge that fixed narrative. We seek instead to demonstrate that AQAP is part of a continuum of Islamist entities in Yemen that have been utilized by the government in Sana’a to function as a kinetic security enforcer on behalf of the state. This paper will also attempt to draw a distinction between the group’s rhetoric, which portrays the group as a defender of the people and enemy of the state, and the group’s measurable actions, which are almost always in diametric opposition to its public message.

One of the least studied and least documented aspects of AQAP’s measurable actions is the violence that it visits inside Yemen against Yemeni targets. Its media publications in English and in Arabic, its Twitter accounts, and its threats against the US – all much reported and much referred to by various terrorism analysts, most often based at some remove from Yemen – are often supplemented by some of the few media articles that emerge from Yemen on the topic but provide only one small part of the actions of the group and are highly partisan or unsubstantiated. The focus of this paper is instead to home in on the lower-level leaders and their ties to other actors higher up the command chain. The thrust of the report overall is to examine the specific aspects of AQAP’s violent actions and demonstrate that in their targets of choice – almost exclusively southern members of the security services, and, latterly, southern resistance members – are acts of highly selective and discriminate violence that require substantial infrastructure to conduct, belying AQAP’s status as a group under attack from the state and the US. The authors have chosen to highlight less well-known personalities rather than recite passages on the more infamous leadership, which has been comprehensively covered by many other authors. This focus will serve to shed some light on the inner workings of the group at ground level and demonstrate direct linkages between these operatives and their connections with Sana’a, which trump the supposed “overt” chain of command that the group is supposed to have with AQ leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Gulf coalition has found itself fighting alongside and supporting elements of AQAP in Marib and in al-Bayda. This paper however focuses most of its attention on southern Yemen. While AQAP has a presence across Yemen and is reportedly established in areas such as Marib, Taiz, and Sana’a, the areas where it has long had free reign are all in the South, such as Abyan, Shabwa and Hadramawt. Furthermore, the overwhelming number of its violent actions have been focused on the South and almost exclusively against southern personnel. If AQAP started out as an insurgent group fighting the state, that period was short lived in comparison to the actions over the past decade as it has shifted into a group working on behalf of the state.

Proposed solutions to the problem presented by a terrorist group that seems immune to the US drone programme have ranged from improved governance to better local service delivery and from job-creation schemes to anti-violence projects. But, as is set out below,

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1 The difference between discriminate and indiscriminate violence in civil wars in order to coerce actors into compliance has been addressed by Stathis Kalyvas in his 2003 paper “The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War”. http://stathis.research.yale.edu/files/Paradox.pdf

2 See papers carried by Carnegie Endowment, Critical Threats, Brookings Institution, Jamestown Foundation, International Crisis Group, as well as individual writers and analysts such Michael Knights, Gregory Johnson and many others have written extensively on AQAP leadership.
the problem is related less to central or local government function and more to AQAP’s role as a tool of coercion directly funded, directed and supported by the state. There can be no doubt that poor government and lack of employment are push factors for recruitment, but for a country where youth unemployment rates are huge, participation in or interaction with the state is minimal, and services are universally poor across the country, the real question must be why AQAP is not a huge movement drawing on a groundswell of dissatisfaction. The question is rhetorical and a matter for other authors to consider; but the simple answer is that Yemenis reject AQAP because by and large they understand that it is a tool applied against them, rather than a political entity that represents their views and legitimate demands. Instead, as is laid out here, AQAP is employed to target those people who do embody the demands of the population and therefore represent yet one more security “institution” of control to add to the myriad others (CID, police, Central Security Force, various army units, military intelligence, National Security Bureau, etc.) that enforce state policy.

BACKGROUND: HOW JIHADISM TOOK ROOT IN YEMEN

GENERAL HISTORY OF THE YEMENS

Until the outbreak of the civil war in 1962, Yemen – either as the Hashemite Mutawakkilite Kingdom or the Yemen Mutawakkilite Kingdom as it later became – was traditionally ruled by a succession of Mutawakkilite Kings as it later became – the Yemen Arab Republic, or the Yemen – either as the Hashemite

The state was characterised by its Zaydi religious ideology and frictions with the Sha’fi’i parts of Yemen which caused many Sha’fi’i to flee to the British controlled Aden Protectorate during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, due to repression and poverty. Many of the new migrants built religious schools of their own in Aden, something that they had been unable to do under the Imamate. In 1962, tensions eventually boiled over and a full blown revolution against the Imam erupted, quickly leading to a civil war between “Monarchists” – those supporting the deposed Imam – and “Republicans”, as supported by Nasser’s Egypt. This bloody struggle, compounded by international competition, pitted Saudi Arabia, Israel and Britain against Egypt and continued for the remainder of the decade. The result was a pyrrhic victory for the Republicans and the formation of the Yemen Arab Republic, or YAR.

The arrival of the Egyptian army in 1962 also heralded the beginning of turmoil in British-administered South Arabia. Egypt fomented an insurgency in Aden and the rest of the protectorate, supporting trade unions and the Arab Nationalist Movement, which eventually became the National Liberation Front (NLF). This was a clandestine group of determined men, organized into secret armed cells with a focus on Aden.

Much of the core of the NLF was comprised of Sha’fi’i from areas in and around Taiz, and whose families had fled the Imam’s repression. NLF leaders did not have the long-term goal of establishing a separate state but looked first to free their country from British occupation and then to unify it with their northern neighbour. Unitification was, at the time, much in vogue as Nasser’s ideas of creating a unified pan-Arab nation moved people across the Arab world, not just in Yemen. In 1967, a new state was born, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, the socialist state.

The NLF did not enjoy widespread support and had to fight other movements that were more popular but less organized. As soon as the British left Aden in 1967, the NLF moved to solidify its hold on power by attacking political rivals (a group known as FLOSY). Private businesses were nationalized, land was appropriated and given to NLF loyalists, homes were looted. In the early 1970s the NLF directed its attention to the traditional, and popular, ruling families – sultans, Hashemites and tribal sheikhs – of the areas beyond Aden. Hundreds were killed, some in horrific circumstances such as being dragged to death while tied to the back of a vehicle. Those lucky enough to escape settled mainly in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries. The murder, theft of land, and deposing of the old order left a festering sore at the heart of society that lingers to this day, almost 50 years later. It was the sons of these people who would, in time, exact revenge.

With the outbreak of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, many of the refugees from the PDRY joined the jihad. The former USSR was the strongest supporter of the PDRY. The Saudis funded military camps in the YAR as well as the more infamous camps in Pakistan to train jihadis, or mujahideen, to fight the Russians. These fighters would be utilized by the state in two internal wars: a rebellion centred in the area of Taiz, Ibb and al-Bayda and the struggle for unity with the south since 1990.
STATE FORMATION AND THE SPINE OF SALAFI-JIHADISM

As north Yemen came under the financial influence of its oil-rich neighbour, Saudi Arabia, in the 1970s, cultural changes were not far behind. President Ibrahim al-Hamdi was the first to employ Islamist shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani in the government, a man who remains on the US terror list as a sponsor of Al Qaeda. Through him and others like him, such as Muabili al-Wadari, who set up the Dammaj institute in Sa‘ada, the Saudis began to build a network of religious institutions and schools.

From the late 1970s, there was a five-year on-and-off insurgency in the YAR, roughly coinciding with the arrival of Saleh to power. The war was between the National Democratic Front (NDF), a socialist movement, and the centre of power in Sana‘a. The NDF was supported by the PDRY, backed on paper in this by the USSR, the YAR’s army had been unable to make headway against the NDF.

When Saleh took power in YAR, much of the population was against him and the powers he represented. The strongest resistance was centred around Taiz and Ibb, which managed to retain a degree of autonomy from Sana‘a by 1978. Saleh, new to power in that year, was clearly threatened on many sides and was in need of a victory to secure his rule.

ISLAMISTS PROVE THEIR FIGHTING CREDENTIALS

A meeting between Saleh and a well-established religious group in YAR was arranged by Judge Mohammed al-Akwa’. Both parties were united by their belief that the rise of the socialist movement represented a mutual threat and that only a military crackdown would work. The bulk of the population of north Yemen reside in the fertile mountain region around Taiz and Ibb, and most are Shafafi’s rather than the Zaydis of the northern highlands that stretch from Dharnar to Sana‘a up to Sa‘ada. The threat of a rebellion in the central region was thus one that brought together Zaydis, some Shafafi’s republicans, the middle class commercial elite, and the Islamists.

Saleh first employed Islamist fighters in 1980 in support of the regular army and soon began to push the NDF out of its strongholds in the mountains. By 1982 the joint forces had compelled the NDF to surrender. At the end of the war, Abdullahin Bin Hussain Al-Ahmar noted in his diaries that President Saleh considered us (i.e. the religious militiamen) as backup for him and we took upon ourselves most of the burden to defend the country and the religion”. He was, in other words, explaining that the religious militia – known as the Islamic Front – had become a key pillar of the state.

From this point onward, many of these militants were rewarded by positions in civilian government institutions, mainly in education and media, as well as in the military and security organs. "Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar was the man appointed by Saleh to handle this amalgamation, alongside Ghaib Al-Qamish, who was appointed in 1980 as the head of National Security,

JIHADI FIGHTERS MORPH INTO A STATE BODY

The 1980s was a time of state consolidation and steady expansion of influence of the government of Saleh throughout the YAR. Remittances from workers in the Gulf provided a stream of income and, with oil discoveries in Marib, Sana‘a was able to undertake a number of infrastructure projects and, more importantly, fund weapons purchases and expand the army in order to consolidate Saleh’s grip on power.

The 1980s had been less kind to the PDRY. Economic mismanagement and political infighting resulted in the devastating fratricidal war of 1986. When the Soviet Union collapsed and could no longer subsidize the PDRY, President Al-Salim al-Beidh threw the country into a hasty merger with its northern neighbour. Later that same year, the islamic party was founded on the advice of Saleh to Abdullah Hussein Al-Ahmar. Al-Ahmar made reference to this in his diaries, stating that the main intention of founding the party was “to disturb the agreement of unification” and ensure that the political and social status the elite enjoyed pre-unification in YAR remained ascendant after unification.

Almost from the first weeks of unification, a wave of assassinations commenced, with many top military and security personnel targeted by the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) exclusively the victims. At the time the finger was pointed at the authorities in Sana’a but specific blame was reserved for the returning Mujahidin fighters from Afghanistan who had been sheltered by the GPC and Islah parties in the north. Tensions and killings continued for four years until a war erupted between “North” and “South” in 1994. After about 10 weeks of war, Saleh and the north emerged as clear victors. It was clear to everyone that he managed to do so for many reasons, but prime among them was his judicious use of Islah’s militias and utilizing southern Islamists who had previously fought in Afghanistan, such as Tareq al-Fadhlial. Al-Fadhal was the son of the last sultan of Abyan. The imagery was powerful for the people of the south, their former rulers had come back to take revenge for the murders of the socialists.

Al-Fadhal was not alone in targeting socialist officials. A close associate was Jamal Al Nahdi who carried out the first operation against an American target in Yemen in late 1992 who he bombarded two hotels housing US military personnel in Aden. He famously lost his hand in the bombing. Two years later he was invited to become an official with the ruling GPC party after the 1994 war, and to this day remains on the Sana‘a payroll. In public he withdrew from direct operations with jihadis or Al Qaeda operations, but was content in his assigned role as the quiet middleman between AQ/AQ and top officials. As of

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3 Available here: http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/44.pdf
4 Available here: http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/44.pdf
8 Available here: http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/44.pdf
9 Mohammad Al Abi Blog: http://mohamedalabi.blogspot.com/2014/03/blog-post_9238.html
10 Dr. Sayed Al Emam Shareef, “Confessions”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlLpXQJdjGY
12 Brejony, Noel, “Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia” IB Tauris, 2011, p. 188.
13 Dr. Sayed Al Emam Shareef, “Confessions”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlLpXQJdjGY
14 Available here: http://mohamedalabi.blogspot.com.tr/2014/03/blog-post_9238.html
15 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28osU26eDmk
16 Available here: http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/44.pdf
17 Al-Qamish has been at the heart of the regime in Sana‘a since 2001.
18 Mohammad Al Abi Blog.}

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www.hate-speech.org
mid-2014 al-Nahdi admitted to having an official position with the government as assistant to the Secretary Director of Mukalla in Hadramawt. Similarly, veteran Afghan volunteer and Al Qaeda member Ali al-Kurdi was also co-opted to work for the state. From 2011 he headed the Popular National Committee for Defending Unity and was based in Aden, where he busied himself making threats against the Hiri separatist movement. In 2016 he was discovered to be behind a number of killings of southern security officials, and his home was full of explosives, weapons and ammunition after he fled to Saudi Arabia in March 2016. It is a notable feature of Saleh’s constant pragmatism that he prefers to co-opt his challengers than use the ultimate sanction. Those who can be brought to heel with offers of position and salary are the most useful to him. Jamal al-Nahdi and Tariq al-Fadhli were both brought into the official security services with the honorary rank of colonel and a generous salary. He attempted to bring in Badr al-Din al-Huthi by means of a similar offer in order to end the Huthi uprising in the early 2000s, but was rejected. This practice mirrors Saleh’s efforts – known as “cloning” by Yemenis – at neutralizing political movements that may oppose him or as a way of offering the illusion of choice where none exists. Islah, which indeed exists largely on paper, and there are even several Hiri parties that have risen briefly only to die out. The TAJ, the Southern National Gathering and the Aden Born Community all possess grand titles but are simply one-man shows with opaque sources of money that fund media activities. The political landscape is thus atomized and indistinguishable from Saleh’s own party, the GPC, and even Tariq al-Fadhli described Islah as “no different.” This can be seen in the apparent plethora of political parties today in Yemen. There is a mirror of the Huthi movement in the Zaydi Hizb al-Haq, a Yemeni Socialist Party long seen as toothless and which indeed exists largely on paper, and there are even several Hiri parties that have risen only to die out. The TAJ, the Southern National Gathering and the Aden Born Community all possess grand titles but are simply one-man shows with opaque sources of money that fund media activities. The political landscape is thus atomized and fragmented, leaving the public confused as to who represents what. In a similar way, Saleh was co-opting Islamists to work for him and to channel any genuine support from the public for such figures so that he could maintain control and direct that energy in a way to keep the state stable. This concept is key to appreciating the driving argument of this paper: that AQAP has been turned from a mere terrorist organization to a state antagonist to state enforcer.

EARLY ITERATIONS OF AL QAEDA

After the 1994 war, power structures and the wealth of the former PDRY were divided among the GPC, the Islah party and their business affiliates. The amalgamation of Saleh’s clan, selected northern tribes, and the jihadists from across the country was working well. By the late 1990s, Al Qaeda had formed in Afghanistan, but jihadists filtering back to Yemen were not yet organized in a separate body to those attached to the state, and, as stated above, many of the more senior Jihadis were judiciously employed in the army and security forces. Considering this fluid membership between the organs of the state such as the PSO and membership of Al Qaeda or its earlier entities, it is difficult to isolate the group as a distinct entity with a distinct and separate chain of command from the state. Such integration was suggested in the US interrogation report from Guantanamo of Abdul al-Salam al-Hilah in September 2008. He had been a member of the PSO from the mid-1990s. The file states that at a member of the PSO he had advance knowledge of the attack on the USS Cole in Aden, and that his brother, Nabil al-Hilah, was the “mastermind” behind the attack on the USS Cole. He then provided travel documents for the other members of the cell involved in the bombing so they could escape Yemen. The file goes on to implicate the rest of the PSO higher command and the upper echelons of the regime itself in involvement with Al Qaeda:

Detainee stated that since 1996, numerous high-ranking employees in the Yemeni government and PSO were involved in aiding al-Qaeda and other extremists through the provision of false passports and by giving them safe haven out of the country under the guise of deportation. These PSO officials included detainees: Muhammad al-Sumri, Deputy Chief of the PSO; Ghalib al-Qamish, Director of the PSO; Colonel Ahmad Ditham, Commander of the Deportation Department in the PSO; and Abdallah al-Zekri, an officer in the Yemeni Passport Authority. According to detainee, the second highest ranking person in the Yemeni government, Ali Muhini, was aware of the involvement of al-Sumri and al-Qamish in these activities since at least 1999.

Examples abound, but one of the more high profile cases involving collusion between the state and jihadis was the trial of the man accused of killing the assistant secretary general of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), Jarallah Omar, in San’a in 2002. Defence lawyers for the alleged killer, a jihadi militant by the name of Ali al-Sawwani, insisted that he had been employed by the PSO to kill Omar. At the time Omar, the driving intellect behind the YSP, had masterminded the coalition of the YSP and Islah to form a powerful opposition bloc against the ruling GPC party of Saleh. Jarallah Omar was a former military leader in the NDF and had spearheaded the insurgency against San’a in the late 1970s, with backing from the PDRY, before becoming an advocate of democracy and unity with the south. In 1989 he warned of the rise of political Islam, which had become a major ideological, political and social force over the previous decade and a half. Despite his reservations of more than a decade previously, in 2002 he decided to combine his YSP with the Islamists of Islah. While it is certain that he was murdered by an Islamist who had connections to the state security bodies, we cannot say which exact part of the state ordered his killing. The
The late 1990s was also a period of friction between the state and certain sections of the jihadi community. In 1998, a group of returning jihadists coalesced around Zain Al-Abideen al-Mihdar in the southern governorate of Abyan. Most were local to the area but the group, which called itself the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, also comprised a smattering of international elements. They chose a rugged mountain area as its base and equipped themselves with locally bought weapons. In the group’s notorious and defining operation they kidnapped a group of 16 foreign tourists in 1998. The army was forced to act, but in doing so four of the hostages were killed. Saleh saw this act as a challenge to his rule and gave the order for Al-Mihdar’s execution in late 1999. He was not alone however, and was part of a wider group whose members were scattered across the country, many of whom were now speaking Al-Mihdar’s coin. With the attacks of 9/11 against the United States in 2001, the US began to pay more attention to Yemen and to demand closer cooperation in terms of access to Al Qaeda suspects and extradition, before finally settling on an under-the-table agreement to use cruise missiles, and later, drones, against suspects. The first drone victim, in November 2002, was a friend and colleague of Al-Mihdar, and was the early leader of Al Qaeda in Yemen. Qaid Bin Senyean al-Harthi, known as Abu Ali al-Harthi, had also fought alongside Bin Laden. He represented a break with the past and the jihadi’s close cooperation with the state. His group of men began to challenge Saleh and his right to rule but their actions against the state were limited to a few IED’s in Sana’a and an attack on the PSO and the Civil Aviation Authority in 2002. Their major attack against a foreign target in this period was the MV Limburg, a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen struck in a similar manner as the USS Cole.

In a combination of US strikes and Yemeni security service arrest sweeps, most of the leadership and membership of Al Qaeda were either killed, detained or co-opted by the end of 2005. Al Qaeda was almost finished and Saleh had bigger problems on his hands with the Huthi wars starting in 2004. Meanwhile, a new leadership was forming from the many suspects who had been rounded up in 2002 and thrown in the prison cells of the country. AQAP EMERGES

The third phase of Al Qaeda in Yemen started with the spectuous escape of 23 AQ members from the Political Security prison in Sana’a on 3 February 2006, through an improbable 44-metre-long tunnel through from their jail to a nearby mosque. The story given to the media was that they had tunneled their way using metal spoons and wires extracted from the ceiling fans. How cutlery could be used to chisel through the hard Sanaani rock was a detail never fully explained. The leader of AQAP at the time of the breakout was Fawaz al-Rabii, who would later be killed by Yemeni security forces in a shoot out.

The man who would go on to lead AQAP was Nasser Abdul Karim Abdullah al-Wahayshi, known also as Abu Basir, was also one of the 23 escapees. On his escape, he was able to establish training camps and set up lines of communication with the leadership in hiding in Afghanistan. His deputy was Qasim Yahyah Mahdi Al Raimi, known as Abu Hurairah Al Sana’ani. Whilst AQAP was formally announced in January 2009, the real founding is generally traced to that Spring 2006 prison breach. Many of those core operatives had an established pedigree of international jihad. Nasser al-Wahayshi, for example, was Bin Laden’s personal assistant. Saudi national Ibrahim al-Rubashi was a former inmate of Guantanamo, as were the other Saudis: Sa’id Al-Shihri, Uthman al-Ghamdi and Muhammad al-Harbi.

It is important to place the economic situation of Yemen into the context of AQAP in order to understand the motivations of Saleh to cooperate on counterterrorism with Washington. From 2004, the American government had been working with a number of government reformers, including Dr Abd al-Karim al-Iriyani and Jalal Yaqub, to get access to the Millennium Challenge Cooperation soft loan, in return for implementing a checklist of good-governance measures. As deadlines for compromise ran out, Saleh refused to compromise and this period also saw the release of USS Cole suspect Jamal al-Badawi from prison. The US, incensed, cancelled the MCC loan at the end of 2005. This was a different Saleh to the one who had rounded up an AQAP cell in just a few days after it had briefly threatened the US embassy in Sana’a in early 2005.

Saleh felt snubbed by the US. Washington was made to realize that the threat from Al Qaeda was, once again, alive. Previous disagreements were forgotten and the US started to fund aid to Yemen once more to tackle the problem. This coincided with the Department of Defence creation of a separate budget to fund counterterrorism activities by overseas militaries. Since the creation of the budget, Yemen was the single largest recipient of this aid, which amounted to $401 million. Add to this an additional $164 million from the State Department’s Foreign Military Financing budget and it is obvious this generous package has been directed in order to combat AQAP.

It is important to note that during this same period, state revenue from oil and gas began to significantly decline. The ability of the state to maintain its system of patronage was starting to crumble and Washington offered a way to alleviate this stress. While oil production peaked in 2002, oil revenues were steady right through to 2009 because of the rise in global oil prices. When the oil price shot up in the fourth quarter of 2007 and first quarter of 2008, the state was able to balance its books despite declining oil production. Revenue then tanked from 2009 onwards. The money that Washington was offering was thus doubly important as it ensured the patronage system could be maintained. Behind the headlines of US-Yemen relations, among the most revealing information from that time is from work by Al Jazeera and its televised interviews with a former Al Qaeda veteran, Hani Mohammed Mujahid. Mujahid, who had fought in Afghanistan until 2002 and then fled to Pakistan, where he was detained before being sent back to Yemen in 2004 and placed in prison. He was released in 2006 after agreeing to become an agent for the National Security Bureau (NSB). Yemen’s pre-eminent intelligence agency, on a monthly salary of $500. He was also an informant for the PSO and received an additional $250 per month.

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According to Mujahid, the government in Sana’a was involved in establishing AQAP and subsequently supporting it. He revealed that the government focal point for AQAP was Ammar Saleh, the president’s nephew, who was the deputy director of the NSB. Mujahid explained that he personally informed Ammar of a number of attacks by AQAP inside Yemen, including one against the US embassy. Not only did Ammar fail to inform the embassy, but three months prior he had helped AQAP to obtain the bombs.

Mujahid worked for a period with AQAP military commander Qasim al-Raimi and said that al-Raimi had a close working relationship with Ammar Saleh. In this way Sana’a was able to subvert an organization that had been focused on international jihad and turn it into one that was an “organized gang”.13 This gang was used to threaten the US in such a way that, while the actual damage to American interests was minimal, the threat appeared constant and dangerous so that Yemen could be the recipient of CT funding. This method of conducting international relations amounted to little more than a diplomatic protection racket.

A THREE-PILLARED STRATEGY

There are three main focuses to AQAP activity. Broadly these are its efforts to involve itself in international terrorism, its media profile and how it likes to project and mould its image, and its violent actions in the national arena.

Since 2009 AQAP has made a grand total of three attempts against US and Western targets outside of Yemen.14 The first was the infamous Christmas Day 2009 attempt by Umar Abdellatif Alsuaidi to set off an explosive device he had concealed in his underwear on board a plane over the US. Almost one year later, in October 2010, there was an attempt to post a number of devices with explosives hidden inside printer cartridges to synagogues in Chicago. This was reportedly foiled with the assistance of Saudi intelligence. There was a third attack, similarly thwarted by Saudi intelligence, in 2012, again using the concept of concealing a device in a person’s underwear.15

For an organization that is apparently the most deadly of the Al Qaeda franchises, these attempts seem remarkably few in number. By comparison, so far in 2016 there have been nine European attacks attributed to ISIS in Belgium, France, and Germany, with more than 120 dead. The Orlando nightclub shooting in the US in June 2016 took 49 lives and there are many other examples that could be included. It is startlingly obvious that AQAP is neither especially deadly nor successful when it comes to the realm of international terrorism.

Media operations form the second pillar, and this is where AQAP remains particularly successful, reaching a wide audience both inside Yemen and beyond. The organization has maintained a high-profile English language publication, Inspire, first published in July 2010. Its Arabic-language bulletin, Sada al-Malahim, or The Echo of Battles, has been published since 2008. It is active in Arabic on Twitter and on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram. There are also the video releases of statements from leaders as well as professionally produced and edited images from its operations, such as attacks on poorly defended military bases, or its targeted killings. Much of the nature of the threat from AQAP can be seen in the flurry of media reportage around the high-profile releases of such videos, which, arguably, give the impression that it enjoys more support than it actually does, or that it succeeds in gaining beyond the limited, local actions that it is primarily engaged in.

Al-Malahim Media Foundation is the AQAP media arm. Besides its video and audio propaganda output, it has a periodical online magazine, Sada Al-Malahim,16 as well as print-outs, books, and press releases that follow various events documenting its actions.

The third pillar accounts for the real bulk of AQAP efforts. It is clear that the majority of operations have been against predominantly local security figures, many from the Political Security Organization (PSO) and the majority of those being southern officers with long records of work history in their local areas. A collation of Arabic media sources from 2009–2014 shows that no less than 106 PSO officers were murdered, purportedly by AQAP, of whom 83 were southerners. Instead of targeting security officers from the National Security Bureau (NSB) or the military with links to the north – those who are the backbone of the real state power in Yemen – the victims of AQAP violence were all local, southern, and nationalist in politics. In other words, the same network of people who form the bulk of opposition to the continuance of Sana’a-based, northern tribal dominance of the south. The argument that the PSO formed the frontline of the fight against AQAP is not credible. The US is well documented to have lost faith in the PSO and instead switched its funding and training to the NSB, whose officers operate in a clandestine manner. The PSO’s officers are effectively local policemen, well known to all in their local communities and therefore easy targets.

This concept can be extended when we try to link AQAP to the difference between its statements (what it says) against the Sana’a government and its measurable actions (what it does) against the state. For example, members of the military in the oil-producing areas of Hadramawt are the key suspects in oil pipeline explosions, despite military statements to the media and the oil industry blaming AQAP. Oil security officials interviewed at the time were convinced that the attacks were directly implemented by the

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13 http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/al-jazeeraspecialprograms/2015/6/4/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%81-13
14 Not including the attempt on the British ambassador or Saudi minister Muhammad bin Nayef.
15 There is also the Charlie Hebdo attack in France, which had some connections to Yemen in that one of the two attackers, who were brothers, had previously traveled to Yemen. But there has been no evidence to suggest the attacks were planned or organized from Yemen or with AQAP involvement.
16 Often translated as “The Echoes of Battles”.

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www.hate-speech.org
military in order to extort further cash for “security provision.” In the event, the companies coughed up the money and there were no further attacks despite no further investigation or arrests.

Nor has AQAP successfully launched an attack on the international staff of the oil and gas industry. The group has the capacity to construct complex vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), or to launch complex attacks of IEDs and small-arms fire, or to shoot at vehicles using small arms, or to kidnap foreign personnel. Yet the records demonstrate not one such attempt, save the kidnapping of a British diplomat in 2013, and exactly who carried out that action remains in doubt, whether a disgruntled tribe member or someone else.

The group has tried to launch an attack on the national working for an international catering services company in 2013, and exactly who carried out that attack remains in doubt, whether a disgruntled tribe member or someone else.

The group has also attempted to kidnap foreign personnel. Yet the records demonstrate not one such attempt, save the kidnapping of a British diplomat in 2013, and exactly who carried out that action remains in doubt, whether a disgruntled tribe member or someone else.

In other words, the victims were viewed as part of a problematic and potentially disloyal network by Sana’a. The murders were never investigated and not one person ever stood trial accused of committing the killings, much less ordering them. The fact that AQAP admitted to the series of assassinations, claiming that they were targeting the Sana’a authorities, rang hollow to southerners and the relatives of the victims. Whether AQAP or elements of the formal security sector were responsible for the murders matters little; the effect of the killings was the same, ensuring that organized, interconnected and influential individuals were taken out of the equation and that the most effective opposition to the unitary state was decimated.

As can be seen above, the killings expand as the crisis evolves in the South. Hirak emerged as a political entity in 2007, predating the formal establishment of AQAP. The fact that almost 80% of all selective political violence was committed against southern members of the security services is remarkable. Moreover, those people were targeted by AQAP, an organization that is not secessionist and views unity of Yemen within the same continuum as political unity among all Arab and Islamic states. The implication is that the area of greatest political strife in Yemen was not witnessing an insurgency against the state—which is actually underwritten by the northern elements of the security services who provide the spine of the military, the Central Security Forces, and the NSB—but that the victims were all southern, and all from either the PSO or the CID, organisations that had lost out to the US-backed, Sana’a-dominated NSB. Those southerners who were killed were nationalist, in many cases with declared leanings towards southern secession, and came from communities that were rapidly becoming secessionist in outlook.

The resistance comprised a coalition of Hirak/nationalist fighters and Salafis. The author was informed of conversations between southern PSO officials and a western diplomat in which the officials claimed that the pro-Saleh elements of government were targeting them specifically because they were southern. Several of those who spoke to the diplomat were subsequently murdered.

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confessed to receiving finance and direction from Sana’a.16

Such actions by AQAP directly benefited Sana’a in two ways. First, it disrupted the ability of local networks – whether “resistance” or “Hadi loyalists” – to organize politically or militarily. Second, it sowed fear in the local community and echoed for them the words of Saleh that without him there would be only chaos, and served as propaganda directed at the West that without him Al Qaeda and terror would run free.12

CONNECTING THE DOTS BACK TO SANA’A

By examining individuals involved in AQAP in specific locations it is possible to understand the larger pattern of activity in which these individuals participate and consequently to reveal the wider policy they help implement. Such examination also reveals their connections to the centres of power in Sana’a.

The following three short case studies, spanning several decades, will highlight the linkages between Sana’a and the actions of Al Qaeda.

THE OCCUPATION OF ABYAN

One example of how Saleh was able to use his allies in AQAP was the group’s occupation of the towns of Jaar and Zingibar in 2011 at the height of the political crisis of the Arab Spring demonstrations in Sana’a amid international pressure for Saleh to step down. In response to this he issued lightly veiled threats to the international community, explaining in stark terms that the alternative to AQAP takeover of the south would be only chaos, and served as propaganda directed at the West that without him Al Qaeda and terror would run free.13

On 27 May 2011, more than 200 AQAP members captured the town of Zingibar in Abyan. Many civilians fled the town and AQAP fighters took over all government facilities. The Yemeni opposition accused Ali Abdullah Saleh of allowing AQAP to take control of Zingibar to play on the fears of the West over international terrorism and to demonstrate to the same powers that he was the sole force capable of defeating AQAP.14 However, some government sources accused army officials affiliated with Saleh, particularly within the Republican Guard, of direct collusion with AQAP to take over areas in the south.15

Saleh was able to manipulate the world into thinking that AQAP had taken over part of the country, close to the world-famous port of Aden, while he was under international pressure to step down. His message was clear: that without political support from the West, AQAP would take over.

The only military base in the entire area was in Zingibar, the local capital of Abyan, right in the heart of AQAP controlled territory. The 25th Infantry Brigade, then headed by General al-Somali, was apparently surrounded and under siege the whole time that AQAP controlled Abyan until late 2012. It is interesting to note that in order for AQAP to achieve the takeover, the military was not forced to cede one inch of ground; it merely had to confine itself to base. The AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia militants were armed with little more than Kalashnikov rifles, RPGs and IEDs, while the 25th Infantry Brigade had, on paper at least, 3,000 soldiers and links to the other brigades in the area nearby, including Aden, Shabwa and Lahij. Moreover, in the aftermath of the war a huge 4-km-long tunnel was discovered that went from just outside of the gates of the base right into the centre of the town.

On 22 March 2011, Saleh gave a particularly “animated speech” in which he warned of chaos and civil war should he step down. See http://www.pomepis.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/POSTS_BriefBooklet_A_Saleh_WEB.pdf

MAP BY EVAN CENTANNI, POLGEONOW (WWW.POLGEONOW.COM).
now feared by AQAP, which had tried to kill him on a number of occasions, leaving him blind and badly scarred from multiple suicide bombing attempts against him and various IED attacks on his vehicle.

In early May 2016, AQAP agreed to pull out from cities in Abyan; the negotiator from the AQAP side was Tawfiq Beleidi, the brother of Jalal Beleidi, along with his uncle, Mansur Beleidi, both of whom are from the Maraqishah tribe of Abyan. Mansur was acting as the head of the civil mediation committee but was also well known as an acting as the head of the civil mediation.

The takeover of Abyan amounted in effect to the local military standing down, and AQAP being allowed a free hand to govern, in a loose sense, which included public execution of alleged spies, public trials using Shari'a law, and adjudication in land disputes, and a claim of providing free electricity and water services to the populations. The fact that the electricity and water came from nearby Aden and was under full control of the government was no matter. The media and distant analysts claimed instead that Al Qaeda was on the march and winning the battle for hearts and minds, generally feeding the media frenzy of the situation.

The Abyan occupation was a perfect example of AQAP’s utilization of its media access for maximum effect while suggesting that the threat of international foreign fighters taking over territory was a threat to the west. The takeover was preceded by an extensive murder campaign of PSO and other security officials who formed a credible, local alternative to both Sana’a-based rule and to AQAP. This loose modus operandi of utilizing a three-pillared approach is examined in the following section.

ADEN, POST-AUGUST 2015

The resistance in Aden, with assistance from the Emiratis, succeeded in pushing the Huthi-Saleh forces out of the city in mid-August 2015. Al Qaeda did not play a significant role in the fighting, which was primarily shared between the Hirak, or “nationalist” resistance, and lastly the Salafi fighters. The first hint of trouble occurred on 20 August when a PSO officer was murdered by an IED attack. Ten days later a man called Abd al-Hakim al-Sunaydi was murdered by small arms fire. At the time, reports were unclear as to who was behind the killings, but there were rumours that they had been carried out by Al Qaeda.

The first day of September saw two murders, again with small arms fire, against Rashid Khalid Sayf, a Hirak activist, and an artillery commander, Abd al-Hakim al-Yafai. The following day Brigadier Fadhl al-Ghazi was killed in a similar manner. Three days later resistance leader Imad Ali Hadi was gunned down and on 13 September Brigadier Abd al-Nasir al-Dhalai was shot dead. These murders marked the start of a distinct trend of killings. What the victims shared in common was a leading role in fighting the Huthi-Saleh forces. The victims continued to pile up, with CID officers killed and with police officers, military commanders, Hirak resistance figures, military police and even judges targeted. It did not take long before fingers were pointed in the direction of Al Qaeda, and at one man in particular.

A man who went by the nom de guerre of Abu Salem al-Taiz had established himself and his men in a number of key government buildings vacated during the war, and had established zones of control emanating from these buildings, enforced through checkpoints on the main roads. Many of the murders had taken place on main roads within close proximity to these buildings. Abu Salem and his men had busied themselves purchasing large amounts of weaponry during the war and it was clear they had financial support to do so. By the end of the war they were a formidable force.

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Ali Muqbil. He was the son of two well-known socialist academics at Aden University, whose names were very familiar to the majority of Adenis. His father, Dr Saif Ali Muqbil, is a historian who written a number of books on the war against the British by the National Liberation Front. Interestingly, he himself played a murky role as part informer for and informant for the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Aden some time prior to 2010 where his brother worked as a full time officer. He was alleged to have played a central role in the arrest of Hirak Khormaksar December 2015. The governor’s security services raided his house and discovered explosive material, devices, weapons, communications equipment, jihadi documentation, ISIS flags, and cash. He fled to Sana’a from where he denounced the security services in Aden and denied he was linked to ISIS or AQAP.

The man that linked both Abu Salem and Hilmi al-Zinki was found during the security drive to push Al Qaeda out of Aden. His name was Ali al-Kurdi. As mentioned in section 2.2 above, al-Kurdi was a veteran from Afghanistan and had shown himself to be a dedicated anti-secessionist from at least 2011, declaring to the media at the time that “it is an honour for me to be an agent for Saleh” and “we are ready to carry out martyrdom operations against southern movement activists”. When a premature explosion occurred in his house on 16 March 2016, security forces raided his house and discovered explosive material, devices, weapons, communications equipment, jihadi documentation, ISIS flags, and cash. He fled to Sana’a where he denounced the security services in Aden and denied he was linked to ISIS or AQAP.

The security services, under new governor Aidaroos al-Zubaydi, finally organized themselves enough to challenge Al Qaeda in mid-March 2016 and flushed the suspects from all government buildings and other safe houses. Instantly the killings abated. But Abu Salem was never caught and remains at large. According to many local media sources, by the time he and the ISIS leader Helmi al-Zinki were forced out they had killed no less than 49 specific individuals, most notably the governor of Aden, Jaafar Sa’d, in December 2015. The governor’s security services released media statements saying that Al-Zinki admitted under interrogation that he was part of a network organized by Anf al-Zoka, the general secretary of the GPC party and Saleh’s key man in the south. Al-Zinki also admitted his role in the assassination of the previous governor, Jaafar Sa’d, and resistance leader Ahmad al-Idrisi. He added that the operations were carried out with some well-trained individuals – implying they were possibly from the north but the statements did not specify.” Reports also stated the group was given YR1 billion (around $4 million), which is probably a large exaggeration: the group was obviously getting large amounts of funding from outside of Aden. A security source in Abyan further explained that al-Zinki was in fact the second in command of AQAP in Aden, reporting to Abu Salem.”

Once again, in this context AQAP was being used as a tool for local action that was both deniable to the local population and to the international community. There was rhyme and reason behind the campaign of murder beyond ensuring that the new authorities were unable to easily control Aden and demonstrating that AQAP “terrorism” was the alternative to rule from Sana’a. Those involved in the murders, such as Abu Salem, had never been known in the past for any religious extremism; his family background was socialist and nationalist, and many of those in his group were not religious extremists either. They were guns for hire. The lack of understanding of such nuance by the US ensures that it involves itself in a never-ending battle against minor gang leaders supported by Sana’a rather than against the leadership of a jihadi movement that the US believes them to be.

THE OCCUPATION OF MUKALIA 2015

When AQAP took over the city of Mukalla in early 2015, a local action group called the Hadramawi National Council (HNC) appeared shortly afterwards and announced that it had volunteered out of civic duty to mediate between AQAP and the distant government authorities. The group claimed it had the blessing of the exiled government in Riyadh to launch this initiative. In fact the members of the HNC were mostly Islah Party officials, Salafi NGO members or security force members linked to Saleh’s ruling GPC party.

Mukalla has a sizeable population and by 2015 many of the inhabitants had become
announced effectively left the local government structure completely powerless and isolated from the government based in Riyad. It also meant that the HNC became a political representative to the military side of AQAP.

The genesis of the HNC actually lay in the small Salafi-jihadi group of the CSS. This group has been associated with helping lay the groundwork for the expansion of AQAP in various parts of Hadramawt since 2011 when it was first formed. It is headed by a religious shaykh, Ahmad al-Mu‘allim, with Ahmad Bara‘ud and Abdallah al-Ahdal. Al-Ahdal was also associated with a specific trend within the Salafi movement, and had long ties to Saleh.29

The CSS set up the HNC to act as the primary body to take charge of civil affairs in Mukalla and placed a man called ‘Umar Salih bin al-Shakl al-Ju‘aydi in charge, and supported him with a deputy from the CSS called ‘Abd al-Hakim bin Mahfuz, who was also a member of the influential Salafi NGO al-Hikmah al-Yamaniyyah. This leadership was then supported by dozens of other men from various backgrounds, including the business community. Al-Ju‘aydi was a very well known personality throughout Hadramawt. He had helped to establish the Islah Party in Yemen in the early 1990s and had even fought in the jihad and Religious Police Battalions in 1994 in Hadramawt against the remnants of the southern PDRY army.28 He had established a number of Islah-linked charitable organizations across Hadramawt, and had been elected to parliament in Sana‘a as an Islah representative for the Hadramawt. He was known to be close to the most senior government figures in Sana‘a, including Ali Muhsin, former President Saleh, and Muhammad Isma‘il al-Ahmar.30 His deputy, bin Mahfuz, was related by marriage to Ahmad al-Mu‘allim, the head of the CSS.

In turn their administrative decisions, and overall security provision for the city, were implemented by AQAP, which renamed itself the Sons of Hadramawt. Part of the group was then called al-Husbah, or the religious police, which was headed by a local man called Ali bin Talib al-Khatiri, or Abu Nura to give him his nom de guerre. Overseeing the al-Husbah was a Military Security Committee headed by a relative of Abu Nura’s, General Khalid bin Talib al-Khatiri, who was placed there by ‘Umar al-Ju‘aydi in order to retain some influence over his relative.31 Khalid’s most recent military appointment, in January 2014, had been as commander of the Oil Companies’ Protection Force in Hadramawt.32 He was reportedly very close to Ali Muhsin and had served in a number of different units that comprise Muhsin-aligned First Armoured Division, including a staff command role in the 2nd Military Region and was a member of the Islah Party.33 He was assisted by Ali Ahmed Bad Hakeem, another Islah Party figure in Hadramawt.34

Alongside them were some northerners, such as Abu Ahmad al-Dhamari, who operated in the shadows because their presence as AQAP commanders gave the lie to the movement - the Sons of Hadramawt - being a purely local affair. Al-Dhamari was previously a senior officer with the Central Security Forces in Mukalla and a man whose face was familiar to many in the city.35

Another interesting figure in the al-Husbah was Muhammad Saleh al-Ghurabi who had occupied a position within the CID for a number of years in Hadramawt.36 Al-Ghurabi occupied a large grey area, including service to the state as an intelligence official, organized criminal activities in smuggling, and involvement - if not outright membership - in AQAP. He worked alongside his nephew, Sattar al-Ghurabi, who was reported to be an assasin for hire and was suspected of a number of murders of business rivals.37

Dr Rob‘i Ali al-Obthani was the official spokesperson of the HNC and at the same time held a government position in the Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training. He, too, was an Islah Party member.38 Other members of the HNC

28 http://shabwaahpress.net/news/27840 Muhammad Isma‘il al-Ahmar murdered Hadrami tribal shaykh Ali bin Habraysh, the father of Shaykh ‘Amr bin Habraysh, the leader of the anti-AQAP militia, the Hadramawt Tribal Confederation.

29 In Yemeni society and politics nepotism carries a far less negative connotation than it does in the West. Tribal obligations demand understanding the links by marriage or blood are the lens through which Yemenis understand their own institutions and body politic.

30 http://www.hadromoutpress.com/index.php?ac=38&no=7860

31 Interview with confidential source: A. BS. formerly part of a Hadrami NGO with al-Ahdal. Works as a youth activist in a local social group in Hadramawt.

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33 Two separate author interviews with locals in Mukalla at the time of the AGAP takeover said al-Dhamari was a member of the CSS and played a central role.

34 Al-Ghurabi is a well known figure in coastal Hadramawt. The author was informed of his background in the CID and in organized crime by three different local sources who had come into contact with him.

35 Sattar was named as a gang leader and relative of AQAP leader Muhammad Saleh al-Ghurabi in a number of media reports including Shabwa Press http://shabwaahpress.net/news/27865/ in April 2015 and, most damningly, in a Shara al-Wasat report on AQAP in Hadramawt of 2 September 2015 naming Sattar as responsible for a horrific murder on behalf of AQAP against two sons of a local MP: http://iwaasti-ye.net/ac=38&no=4971. This information was also corroborated through author interviews with local figures who knew Sattar al-Ghurabi.

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also members of the CSS.

Shaykh Abdullah Muhammad al-Yazidi, both included Shaykh Ahmed bin Ali Bar’ud and NSB.

local authorities working with Sana’a.

have been recruited into AQAP by members of the movement and said that 57

investigated and all stated that they had

individuals from AQAP who had surrendered
gave a press conference about security
developments in Mukalla and said that 57

The dominant thread running through both the HNC and many of the figures in AQAP is the Islah Party link. The HNC was in reality a pre-existing network of individuals primarily associated with the Islah Party, Salafi NGO’s and charitable societies, many of whom knew each other or were related to each other, but all of whom were supported politically and financially by Sana’a. It also included members of the business community, the military, the Central Security Forces and the CID, all of whom had been in their official positions immediately prior to the AQAP takeover. There was no “takeover” as such, but, rather, an increased marginalization of those figures in local government who supported President Hadi or were secessionists, who in turn enjoyed large amounts of support from their communities in Mukalla.

As far as the international media were concerned this was a bonafide AQAP takeover. Problematically, this remains the dominant narrative in the media and the central prism of analysis for the problems of the country. In fact, the HNC represented a continuum of quasi-governmental institutions, all linked to Sana’a. It was the coup that wasn’t. AQAP once again demonstrated that it excelled at playing the role of state enforcer for Sana’a rather than that of a popular insurgency. This is not to deny that AQAP has a level of support, but this support is, critically, state support, and as an organization it is vastly outnumbered by those it (and Sana’a) have alienated over the years.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that AQAP is an inheritor of the Salafi-jihadi movement that has repeatedly been harnessed by Sana’a from the 1980’s to the present day. Nationalist, secessionist and religious (Zaydi) opposition. What has changed is that the movement has morphed from one that operated relatively openly between the late 1970s and mid-1990s into the clandestine movement of more recent years.

The wider Salafi-jihadi movement became increasingly distant from Saleh’s government from the early 2000s. It was still employed as the hammer of the state against the Huthis, using religious doctrinal differences as motivation for fighting but with minimal success in the various iterations of those wars. Clearly, AQ attacks against US targets also presented Saleh with a challenge. The Arab Spring protest in 2011 was the catalyst that served to finally rupture the ruling contract between Saleh and the Islah Party, under whose umbrella were the Islamists and many other Salafi groups. While the agreement appears to still extend to southern areas such as Mukalla in 2015-2016, this did not include the wider political contract in Sana’a that involved to power sharing. Eventually Saleh turned to the Huthis in 2013-2014 to form a new partnership that set the stage for the open conflict in Taiz and the south in 2015. While the split with the wider Islamist movement is apparent, with Salafi groups fighting in Taiz, Aden, Sa’adah and elsewhere, there has been a seamless transition for AQAP, as it has continued performing the role it occupied before 2015.

That the vast majority of AQAP action since the start of the war has not shown the group to be involved in the fight against the Huthis in the south, in Taiz, or in many other locations across Yemen. The fact that it has instead chosen to kill southerners, or Saudis and Emiratis, suggests that the group’s real political direction. Along with all the examples shown in the sections above, this paper asserts the case that AQAP has essentially reduced itself to the status of a death squad for hire rather than an organization with pretensions of governing capability or credible plans for social change.

While Al Qaeda in other parts of the Middle East acts as an insurgent group, fighting the central state, as in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Libya, its actions in Yemen contribute to furthering state policy – namely ensuring that no alternative centres of power emerge that can challenge the government in Sana’a. Specifically it works to ensure that the Saudi doesn’t secede or, at the very least, that a more popular and representative movement is given room to establish itself.

This paper argues three main points. First, that the bulk of AQAP attacks have been against alternative power structures to those established and supported on the ground by the Sana’a authorities. Second, that AQAP personnel are given licence to operate and recruit by Sana’a and are not seriously interdicted in their movements or are given safe houses and safe passage across the country. And, third, that AQAP functions as an executive, if extra-judicial, arm of the state as a security provider and guarantor. The conclusion is that AQAP is far from a threat to the state. While it operates in the so-called ungoverned spaces, it serves as an adept proxy security enforcer for Sana’a. The benefits for the state are evident, as using AQAP provides the convenience of plausible deniability of the group’s actions. The state, therefore can execute its enemies indirectly without incurring criticism from the international community and human rights organizations. The state can also deflect the blame for such killings away from its own security institutions and onto a faceless, amorphous, clandestine body, thereby redirecting the anger of the local population.

The degree to which the lower ranks of AQAP are unwittingly involved in this prescribed role as state enforcer, and the degree to which AQAP is its own entity, remain open questions. There is an element of the conspiratorial for such questions, but Yemeni politics has a long history of complexity and nuance that is often beyond the comprehension of Western observers, as first noted by Paul Dresch in his discussion of the Yemeni civil war in the 1960s.

Analysts who point to AQAP’s “resilience” in the face of battlefield losses from drone strikes miss the key point that all AQAP commanders are replaceable precisely because they are low-level field operatives and the real command and control – the real source of ideas, orders and direction – emanates from Sana’a and not from the scattered individuals in Shabwa. There is also a ready source of potential recruits, particularly in the South, due to the many years of support to mosques and religious institutions and the high level of dissatisfaction of unemployed, directionless young men unhappy at years of occupation and dominance by the North.

Finally, if we are to consider AQAP’s achievements in relation to its voiced ambitions, firstly to establish a caliphate in Yemen, and secondly to further its wider war with the US, then AQAP can be written off as a failure. AQAP is no nearer establishing this religious state than in 2009, when it first emerged. If we judge it only as an international terrorist organization, with a pathy three attempted attacks on the US, then on this evidence it does not amount to a serious, demonstrable, serious or terror threat. There has been much written in the Western media about these attacks and

In addition they are founders of al-Ethran Salafi NGO, which is purported by former members to be supported financially by the NSB.

http://shabwaahpress.net/news/36506/

In Mukalla, the GPC party historically played less of a role but they still retained influence on the HNC.

Some elements of AQAP fight the Huthis in al-Bayda but they appear to be part of a local, tribal-based resistance, and are somewhat separate to the rest of AQAP. Certainly their actions there are all odds with the vast bulk of AQAP activities which are directed precisely against the resistance to the Huthi-Saleh side.
About some of AQAP’s high-profile attacks inside Yemen, but almost nothing has been written in terms of its domestic activities. The motivation for writing this paper was to shed some much-needed light on those activities.

AQAP is responsible for at least 238 targeted, selective assassinations – excluding suicide bombs targeting civilians – from its inception in 2009 to the end of February 2016. Of that figure, a staggering 84% of the victims were southerners. AQAP’s “success” lies in its primary ability to eradicate secessionist enemies of the unifying state. In this respect it must be viewed as a death squad for eradicating domestic enemies rather than an international terror organization.

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