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Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula:

From Global Insurgent to State Enforcer

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

2

3	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
4	BACKGROUND: HOW JIHADISM TOOK ROOT IN YEMEN
6	STATE FORMATION AND THE SPINE OF SALAFI-JIHADISM
12	A THREE-PILLARED STRATEGY
16	CONNECTING THE DOTS BACK TO SANA'A
24	CONCLUSION

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.¹ 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.² 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,

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 as 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

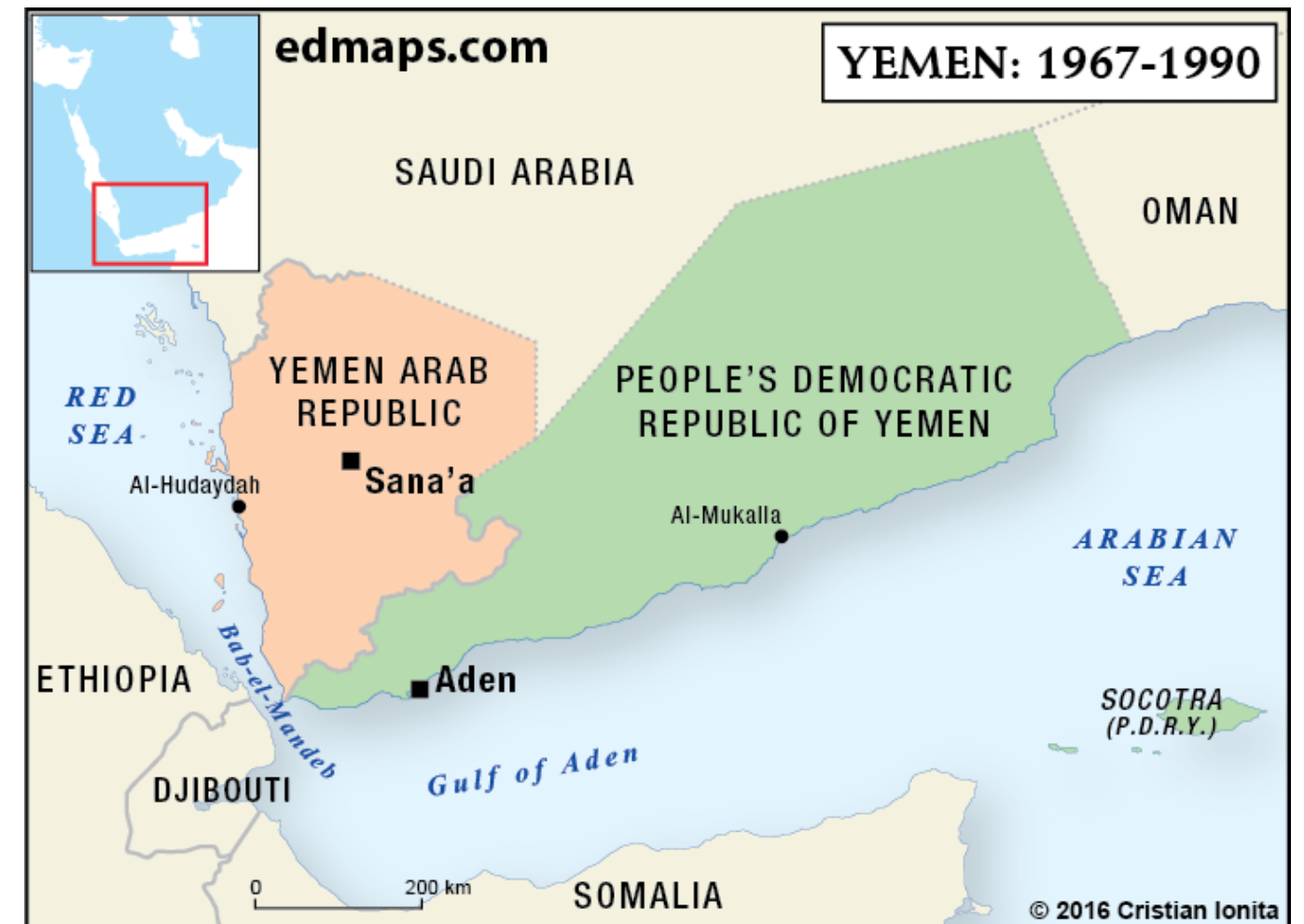
GENERAL HISTORY OF THE YEMENS

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 imams. This kingdom was founded on the Hashimite³ dominance of society, particularly Zaydi society, and used the Zaydi tribes of the north as guarantors of the state and the predominant tool of coercion and expansion.

The state was characterized by its Zaydi religious ideology and frictions with the Shafa'i parts of Yemen which caused many Shafi'is 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 presence across South Arabia but a particular focus on Aden.

Much of the core of the NLF was comprised of Shafa'is 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. Unification 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



MAP BY CRISTIAN IONITA (www.edmaps.com). Reproduced with permission.

PDRY, the Arab world's first – and only – 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 shaykhs – 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.

³ The term Hashemite refers to those who can trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad and who formed an educated elite, traditionally known for brokering tribal conflict deals and being specialists in traditional law. Although it is a phenomenon that cuts across all Muslim societies, it is especially prominent within the Twelver Shia and Zaydi branches.



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,⁴ a man who remains on the US terror list as a sponsor of Al Qaeda. Through him and others like him, such as Muqbil al-Wada'i, who set up the Dammaj institute in Sa'adah, 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 population⁵ 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'.⁶ Both parties were united by their belief that the rise of the socialist movement represented a mutual threat and that only a military crack down would work.⁷ The bulk of the population of north Yemen reside in the fertile mountain region around Taiz and Ibb, and most are Shafa'is rather than the Zaydis of the northern highlands that stretch from Dhamar to Sana'a up to Sa'ada. The threat of a rebellion in the central region was thus one that brought together Zaydis, some Shafa'i republicans, the middle class commercial elite, and the Islamists.

Salah first employed Islamist fighters in 1980 in support of the regular army⁸ 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, Abdullah Bin Hussain Al-Ahmar noted in his diaries that President Salah “considered us (*i.e. the religious militants*) as backup for him and we took upon ourselves most of the burden to defend the country and the religion”.⁹ He was, in other words, explaining that the religious militia – known as the Islamic Front¹⁰ – 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.¹¹ Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar was the man appointed by Saleh to handle this

amalgamation, alongside Ghalib Al-Qamish, who was appointed in 1980 as the head of National Security,¹² the precursor of the Political Security Organisation, the main intelligence body in the YAR. Al-Qamish was handed responsibility for funnelling the jihadi fighters to Pakistan since he had accumulated experience with them in fighting the NDF.¹³ Since 1980 Al-Qamish has been at the heart of the regime in Sana'a and it wasn't until 2014 that he was dismissed as head of the PSO.

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 underwrite 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 Ali Salim al-Beidh threw the country into a hasty merger with its northern neighbour. Later that same year, the Islah 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.¹⁴

Almost from the first weeks of unification, a wave of assassinations commenced, with many top military and security personnel targeted of the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) exclusively the victims.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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-Fadhli. Al-Fadhli 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-Fadhli 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 when he bombed 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.¹⁷ In public he withdrew from direct associations with jihadists or Al Qaeda operations, but was content in his assigned role as the quiet middleman between AQ/AQAP and top officials.¹⁸ As of

⁴ Dresch, Paul, "A History of Modern Yemen", p. 142, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁵ Dresch, Paul, "A History of Modern Yemen", p. 149, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁶ Al-Tawil Nasir Muhammad Ali, "Al-Harakah al-Islamiyyah wa al-Nizam al-Siyasah fi al-Yaman", p. 81 Available here: <http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/البنين20في20السياسي20النظام20الاسلامي20الحركة.pdf>

⁷ Al-Tawil Nasir Muhammad Ali, "Al-Harakah al-Islamiyyah wa al-Nizam al-Siyasah fi al-Yaman", p. 81 Available here: <http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/الحرارة%20الإسلامية%20والنظام%20السياسي%20في%20اليمن.pdf>

⁸ Dresch, Paul, "A History of Modern Yemen", p. 173, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁹ Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, "Diaries: Issues and Positions", p. 237 - Chapter 8.

¹⁰ Dresch, Paul, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 173 (2002 paperback edition).

¹¹ Al-Tawil Nasir Muhammad Ali, "Al-Harakah al-Islamiyyah wa al-Nizam al-Siyasah fi al-Yaman" pp. 81-2 Available here: <http://www.arabsi.org/attachments/article/4645/النظام%20السياسي%20والحركة%20الإسلامية%20في%20اليمن.pdf>

¹² Mohammed Al Absi Blog: http://mohamedalabsi.blogspot.com.tr/2014/03/blog-post_9238.html

¹³ Dr. Sayed Al Emam Shareef, "Confessions": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KILpXQJdGY>

¹⁴ Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, "Diaries: Issues and Positions", p. 256, Chapter 9.

¹⁵ Brehony, Noel, "Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia" IB Tauris, 2011, p. 188.

¹⁰ Dr. Sayed Al Emam Shareef, "Confessions": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLpXQJdjGY>; Nabil Naeem, "Confessions": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28osU26Dmk>

¹⁷ <http://www.al-omanaa.net/news1942.html>, and interview with confidential source: H. Al.H. Interviewee met Jamal al-Nahdi before 2003 when al-Nahdi told him about his involvement in attacks on US Marine forces in 1992 in Aden; he further informed him about receiving money from Saleh as a government employee.

¹⁸ Interview with confidential source: M. Al-J. Source has military background and is a tribal figure from Hadramawt who is very close to one of “Husba” members. Has an excellent knowledge of NGOs, particularly Islamic NGOs in Hadramawt.

mid-2014 al-Nahdi admitted to having an official position with the government as assistant to the Security Director of Mukalla in Hadramawt.¹⁹ 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 Hiraq separatist movement.²⁰ 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 Sana'a in March 2016.²¹

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 2000's, but was rejected.²² 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.²³ Islah was, at the outset, in many ways indistinguishable from Saleh's own party, the GPC, and even Tariq al-Fadhli described Islah

as “no different”.²⁴ 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 Hezb al-Haq, a Yemen Socialist Party long seen as toothless and which indeed exists largely on paper, and there are even several Hiraq 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 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 state antagonist to state enforcer.



ALI AL-KURDI. SCREEN GRAB FROM YEMEN TODAY BROADCAST.

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.²⁵ 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 jihadists 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 prison of Abd al-Salam al-Hilah in September 2008. He had been a member of the PSO from the mid-1990s. The file states that as 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-Qaida 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 detainee; Muhammad al-Surmi, Deputy Chief of the PSO; Ghalib al-Qamish, Director of the PSO; Colonel Ahmad Dirham, Commander of the Deportation Department in the PSO; and Abdallah al-Zirka, an officer in the Yemeni Passport Authority. According to detainee, the second highest ranking person in the Yemeni government, Ali Muhsin, was aware of the involvement of al-Surmi and al-Qamish in these activities since at least 1999.²⁶

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 Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), Jarallah Omar, in Sana'a in 2002. Defence lawyers for the alleged killer, a jihadi militant by the name of Ali al-Sawani, insisted that he had been employed by the PSO to kill Omar.²⁷ 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 Sana'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.²⁸ 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

¹⁹ Hill, Evan & Laura Kasinof, “Playing a Double Game in the Fight Against AQAP”, Foreign Policy, January 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/21/playing-a-double-game-in-the-fight-against-aqap-yemen-saleh-al-qaeda/>

²⁰ <http://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=1934>

²¹ <http://www.aden-tm.net/NDDetails.aspx?contid=6315>

²² Johnsen, Gregory D., “The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al Qaeda, and the Battle for Arabia”, Oneworld Publishing, London 2013, p. 156.

²³ Dresch, Paul, “A History of Modern Yemen”, Cambridge 2002, p. 211.

²⁴ Dresch, Paul, “A History of Modern Yemen”, Cambridge 2002, p. 198.

²⁵ “Basurrah Hilal Report”: <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/32000/> and <http://www.hic-mena.org/news.php?id=pG9taQ#.VypGglR97IV> and Dr. Hussein Muthanah Al Aqil, “Draining the Oil Wealth in the South”. This is a report by a professor of geography at the University of Aden, available here: <http://www.alshibami.net/saqifa/showthread.php?t=41717>

²⁶ From the interrogation file of Abd al-Salam al-Hilah in Guantanamo Bay <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/prisoner/1463.html>

²⁷ Carapico, Sheila et al., “The Death and Life of Jarallah Omar”, 31 December 2002, The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), available online <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero123102>

²⁸ Dresch, Paul, A History of Modern Yemen, Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 173 (2002 paperback edition).



accusation of Islah at the time was that the new opposition bloc with YSP represented a major political threat to Saleh's GPC, and that Saleh was directly responsible.²⁹

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 jihadis 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.³⁰ Saleh saw this act as a challenge to his rule and gave the order for Al-Mihdar's execution in late 1999.³¹ 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 out against Saleh's rule. 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 2002,³² was a friend and colleague of Al-Mihdar, and was the early leader of Al Qaeda in Yemen. Qaid Bin Seniyan al-Harithi, known as Abu Ali al-Harith, had also fought alongside Bin Laden. He represented a break with the past and the jihadis' 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 Sana'a.

AQAP EMERGES

The third phase of Al Qaeda in Yemen started with the specious 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 tunnelled 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.³³

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.³⁴ Whilst AQAP was formally announced in January 2009, the real founding is generally traced to that Spring 2006 prison break.

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-Rubaish 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 Corporation, a \$27 million 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 2005.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷

²⁹ Carapico, Sheila et al., "The Death and Life of Jarallah Omar", 31 December 2002, The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), available online <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero123102>

³⁰ Carapico, Sheila et al., "The Death and Life of Jarallah Omar", 31 December 2002, The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), available online <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero123102>

³¹ <http://www.alwatan.com/graphics/2003/06jun/28.6/heads/ff5.htm>

³² <http://www.masralarabia.com/تحليلات/586491-لماذا-اهتمت-القاعدة-باليمن-وكيف-نشأت-فيها>

³³ Al-Rabii was found guilty and sentenced to death for the attack on the French ship MV Limburg in 2002, and along with two of his brothers had also served with Bin Laden in Afghanistan <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/prisoner/508.html>

³⁴ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/02/11/21040.html> and <http://marebpress.net/articles.php?id=5804>

³⁵ Sharp, Jeremy M., "Yemen: Background and US Relations", Congressional Research Service, 13 January 2010, p. 28.

³⁶ Hill, Evan & Laura Kasinof, "Playing a Double Game in the Fight Against AQAP", Foreign Policy, January 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/21/playing-a-double-game-in-the-fight-against-aqap-yemen-saleh-al-qaeda/>

³⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/informant-yemen-saleh-helped-direct-al-qaeda-150604073415522.html>





FORMER AL QAEDA VETERAN HANI MOHAMMED MUJAHID. SCREEN SHOT FROM THE AL JAZEERA DOCUMENTARY AL QAEDA INFORMANT.

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".³⁸ 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.³⁹ The first was the infamous Christmas Day 2009 attempt by Umar AbdelMutallab 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.⁴⁰

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 enjoys a success 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,⁴¹ 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 Organisation (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



COVERS OF AQAP MAGAZINES INSPIRE AND SADA AL-MALAHIM.

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

³⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/al-jazeeraspecialprograms/2015/6/4/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9>

³⁹ Not including the attempt on the British ambassador or Saudi minister Muhammad bin Nayef.

⁴⁰ 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 travelled to Yemen. But there has been no evidence to suggest the attacks were planned or organized from Yemen or with AQAP involvement.

⁴¹ Often translated as "The Echoes of Battles".

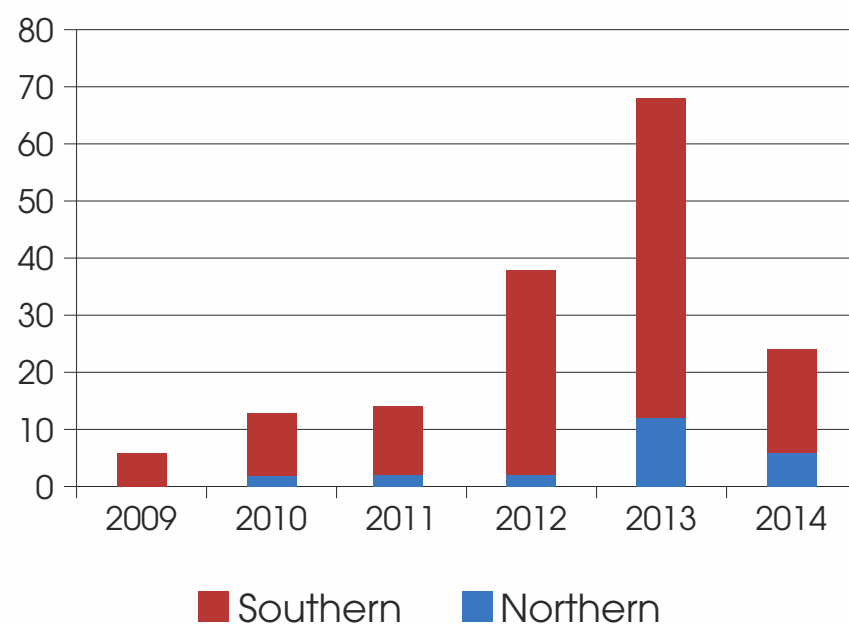


military in order to extort further cash for “security provision”.⁴² In the event, the companies coughed up the money and there were no further attacks despite no further investigation or arrests.

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 national working for an international catering services company in 2013, and exactly who carried out that action remains in doubt, whether a disgruntled tribe in Marib, AQAP, or, as was widely believed in security circles at the time, trained forces under the command of Ali Abdallah Saleh.⁴³ The only confirmed attack against Yemen's oil infrastructure was a failed double-VBIED attack on 15 September 2006 against Safer in Marib and the al-Dabba terminal in Hadramawt.⁴⁴ The only damage caused was to the bombers and their vehicles.

Starkly contrasting the declared strategy have been AQAP's actual activities and measurable deeds in terms of violent actions within Yemen. Drawing on research from Arabic media sources from 2009 to 2015 it has been possible to discern the tempo of actions (see Table 1 below).

During that timeframe there were no



Source: Yemen media reports 2007–2014, collated by the author since 2013.

assassinations against key PSO personnel with northern origins who were based in southern areas; those targeted from the north primarily came from flashpoint locations such as Taiz and Marib. Shockingly, a total of 110 officers from one service – the PSO – were murdered or suffered attempts on their lives, including 87 who were southerners.⁴⁵ The fact that 79% of the victims hailed from the south is the more remarkable given that the population of the north is roughly five times larger than that of the south.

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.⁴⁶

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 implementing 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 men. 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.

This pattern becomes clearer when the killings after the Huthi withdrawal from Aden are considered. In the months from August 2015 to end December 2015 a total of 35 informal and formal security providers were murdered by AQAP or Islamic State.⁴⁷ In January 2016 a

further 29 were killed and in February 2016 another 10 were shot dead.⁴⁸ This issue is looked at in detail in section 4.2 below.

During the Huthi-Saleh invasion of Aden, AQAP was present on the frontlines but was not the driving force that ejected the Huthis; nor did AQAP enjoy much support from the Adeni population.⁴⁹ From August 2015 AQAP began a series of assassinations against three distinct groups. The first killings were against key leaders of the resistance who had formerly been part of the Hirak movement, such as Ahmad al-Idrissi; the second were against the political, military and intelligence network directly linked to President Hadi (including the killing of the Governor of Aden in December 2015); and the third were against Saudi and Emirati military support personnel. Such a sustained effort requires personnel, intelligence gathering, surveillance, targeting and operations; it was an astonishing feat. In the seven months from August 2015, when the Huthis were forced from Aden, to February 2016, there were no fewer than 48 successful assassinations of key personnel associated with the fight against the Huthi-Saleh forces.⁵⁰

Even though AQAP's sworn enemies – the “Shia” Huthi movement, ostensibly backed by Iran – were still in control of areas of Lahij just to the north of Aden, or al-Bayda governorate, or fighting in Marib, none of these areas of battle appealed to AQAP. Instead it chose to murder fellow Adenis, fellow southerners, fellow Sunnis, whom it claimed to represent. As it turned out, those responsible were eventually identified and either arrested or fled. Security authorities said that the evidence collected directly implicated Saleh and released the video statements of those arrested where they

⁴² Interviews with oil industry security personnel in Sana'a, 2013.

⁴³ Interviews in Sana'a with multiple international and national security sources.

⁴⁴ Johnsen, Gregory D., “The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and the Battle for Arabia”, Oneworld Publications, London 2013, p. 205.

⁴⁵ Author's own figures compiled from Arabic media 2007–2014.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ Author's own compilation of political assassinations from open sources.

⁴⁸ The murders since February 2016 have not been compiled, but a steady string of assassinations of southern military and militia leaders have continued to be carried out.

⁴⁹ The resistance comprised a coalition of Hirak/nationalist fighters and Salafis.

⁵⁰ Author's own figures compiled from Arabic media and interviews 2015–2016.



confessed to receiving finance and direction from Sana'a.⁵¹

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.⁵²

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

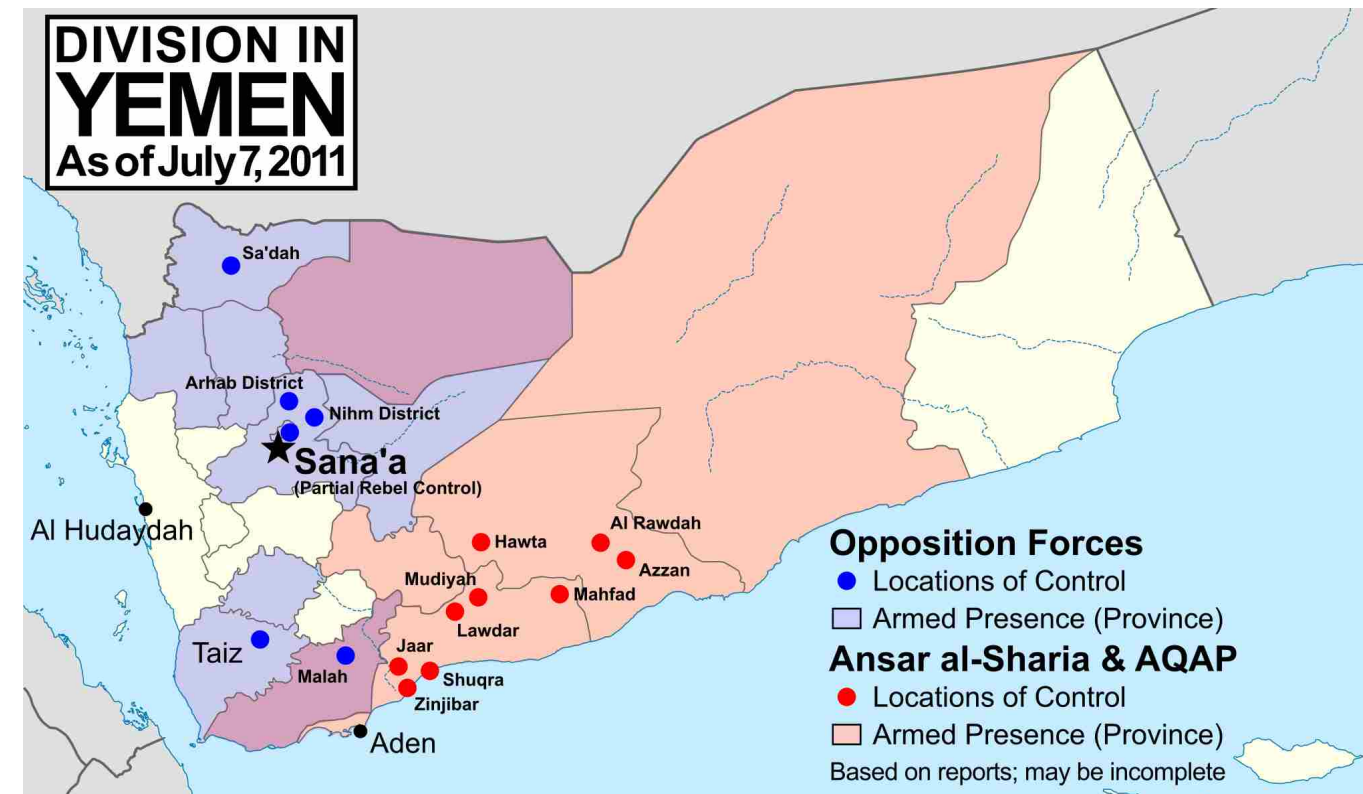
One example of how Saleh was able to use his allies in AQAP was the group's occupation of the towns of Jaar and Zinjibar in 2011 at the height of the political crisis of the Arab Spring demonstrations in Sana'a amid international pressure for Saleh to step down. In response to this he issued lightly veiled threats to the international community, explaining in stark terms that the alternative to him in power was an AQAP takeover of the

south.

On 27 May 2011, more than 200 AQAP members captured the town of Zinjibar in Abyan. Many civilians fled the town and AQAP fighters took over all government facilities. The Yemeni opposition accused Ali Abdulllah Saleh of allowing AQAP to take control of Zinjibar 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

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



MAP BY EVAN CENTANNI, POLGEONOW (WWW.POLGEONOW.COM).

Zingibar.⁵⁵ The tunnel was there to ferry supplies back and forth so that the surrounded base didn't have to actually go without food and other supplies.

Alluding to this interplay between President Saleh and AQAP, Captain Newsom, former commanding officer of the US Special Operations Command Centre in Yemen, explained how AQAP was effectively allowed to take over a swathe of the country in 2011:

What appeared to occur was that there was a general evacuation of the south by Yemeni forces and AQAP was allowed to move in. They took over territory and cities without much of a fight, and then the frontline was drawn not far outside of Aden. And that is when we tried to get the Southern Regional Commander engaged. It was clear there were mixed messages from the Saleh regime. President Saleh was absolutely a master of manipulation and he used counterterrorism

cooperation with the U.S. as a tool to get what he wanted. He played everyone. He played the tribes. He played the political parties. He played us.

(Captain Newsom in CTC Sentinel, Volume 8, Issue 23, February 2015.)

The takeover was led by three figures: the head of Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen, Jalal Beleidi; Khaldun al-Sayyid; and a Ja'ar-based gang leader, Abd al-Latif al-Sayyid, who would later fall out with Beleidi and become leader of the Popular Committees, the primary opposition to AQAP's presence in Abyan.⁵⁶ Al-Sayyid informed the author in 2013 that he opposed the presence of the international elements of AQ trying to assert their own ideas on the local people. He further explained that the connection between AQAP and the local military was organized via Sana'a. Whatever the truth of those statements, it was evident that he was

⁵¹ <http://www.aden-tm.net/NDetails.aspx?contid=6315> and <http://www.adengd.net/news/196949/#.WAEU1jfSZTc>

⁵² 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.pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/POMEPS_BriefBooklet3_Yemen_WEB-Rev.pdf

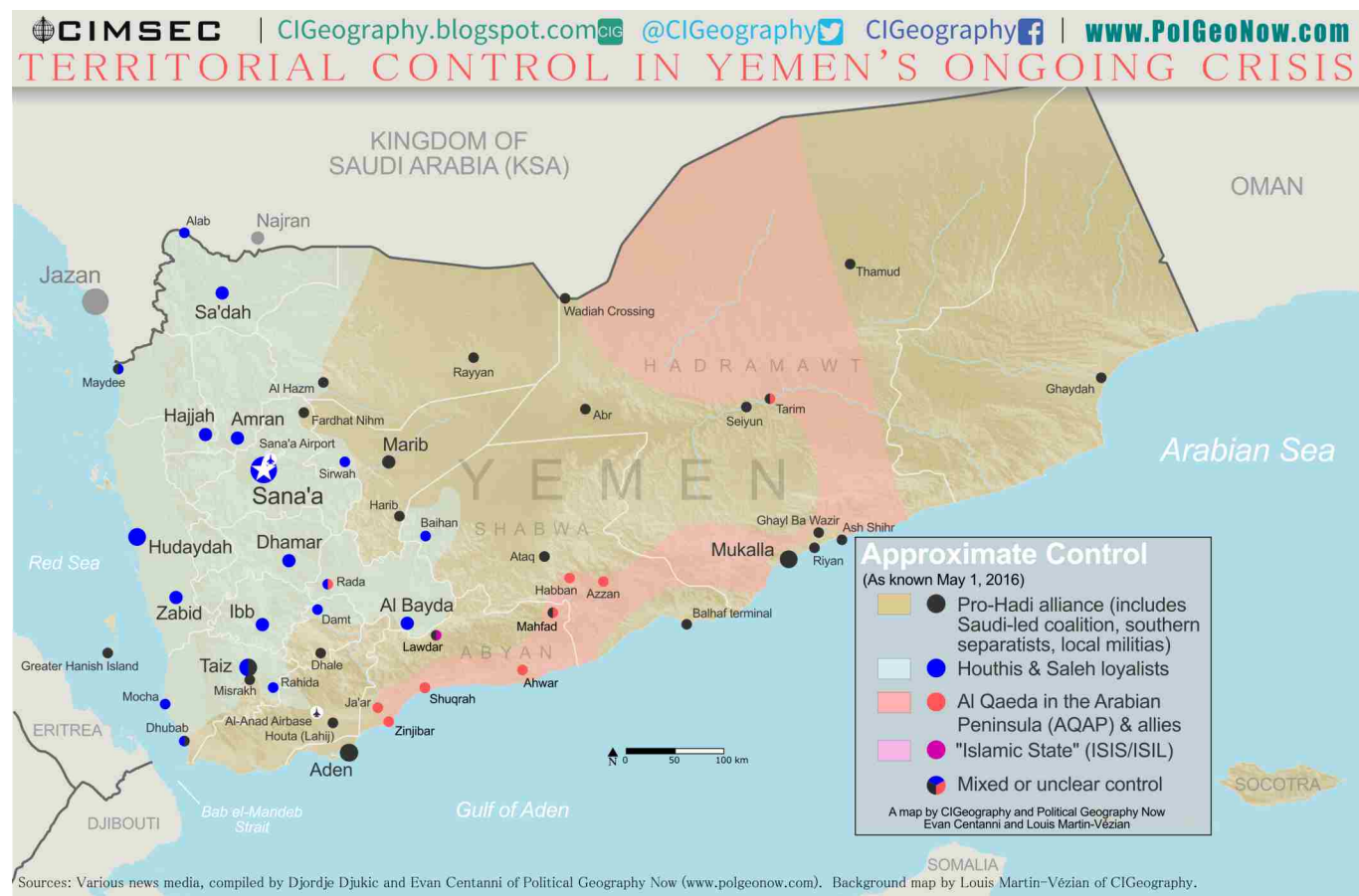
⁵³ <http://www.france24.com/en/20110529-suspected-al-qaeda-militants-seize-yemeni-town-zinjibar>

⁵⁴ <http://www.alkalimaonline.com/?p=560022>

⁵⁵ Author visited and entered the tunnels. The tunnels were clearly not for attacking the base, as had been suggested, but for movement of supplies. The army was in clear collusion with the AQAP militants.

⁵⁶ Author interview with local intermediary between an international organization in Aden and AQAP leadership in Abyan.





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 Islah party leader in Abyan.⁵⁷ The accusation is that the regime, whether represented by GPC or Islah, is never far from those who represent AQAP.

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, 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 into the narrative by many international analysts that AQAP was a credible threat to both the Yemeni state and to the West. The huge internal displacement that resulted, with 167,000 people⁵⁸ voting with their feet to

leave Abyan, was little mentioned. Serious studies were even undertaken by the UK Foreign Office to determine whether direct support in weapons and money to Yemeni tribes could act as a counterweight to AQAP.⁵⁹

In the event, the Popular Committees and the army, headed by southern Major General al-Qatn, were able to push AQAP out of Abyan in 2012. Al-Qatn was, soon after, murdered by a suicide bomber in Aden. The person who was alleged to have organized the bombing was Sami Dayan, a young AQAP leader, whose father was a judge in Saleh's regime for many years, and Sami himself was reported as meeting Saleh and the minister of defence before December 2012.⁶⁰ He was captured in Aden in 2012 and imprisoned for his role in the murder of al-Qatn. He was later freed in Sana'a in February 2015 when the prisons came under the direct and uncontested control of Houthi and Saleh forces. His whereabouts since have not been reported.

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 also 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 Hiraq, or "nationalist" resistance,

military units under Hadi's chain of command, 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 Hiraq activist, and an artillery commander, Abd al-Hakim al-Yafa'i. 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-Dhala'i 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, Hiraq 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-Taizi 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.

Abu Salem was in fact a man called Wa'il Saif

⁵⁷ <http://aden-time.net/NDetails.aspx?contid=8588> تقرير دولي - يكشف - علاقات - صالح - مع - القاعدة - والحوثيين

⁵⁸ <http://www.fmreview.org/fragilestates/mooney.html>

⁵⁹ A record of the Stabilisation Unit/FCO workshop can be found here: http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/attachments/article/523/Tribes%20and%20Tribalism%20in%20Yemen%20-%20workshop%20report_FCO%20and%20Stabilisation%20Unit_2012.pdf

⁶⁰ Interview with confidential source: M. Al. J. Source has military background and is a tribal figure from Hadramawt who is very close to one of "Husba" members. Has an excellent knowledge of NGOs, particularly Islamic NGOs in Hadramawt. Also see: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/4/24/>



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 part spy against British intelligence in the 1960s.⁶¹ Wa'il's uncle played a central role in establishing the PDRY and had a direct hand in assassinating several British intelligence officers and a number of political figures, including senior civil servants. If his family pedigree in socialist political intrigue is impeccable, then Abu Salem's route to becoming Al Qaeda's leader in Aden was just as remarkable. He was employed as an informant for the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Aden some time prior to 2010 where his brother worked as a full time officer.⁶² He was alleged to have played the central role in the arrest of Hirak Khormaksar neighbourhood leader, Ahmed Darweesh. While under detention in the CID jail in Aden, Darweesh was murdered, and when news of his death spread it sparked major street disturbances. At the time the public blamed the Aden Security Manager, Saleh loyalist Abdullah Qairan, but the investigation launched by his colleagues revealed the central role of Abu Salem. Consequently he disappeared from his home, only to emerge back in Aden some time in early 2015.⁶³

The majority of the assassinations after August 2015 took place in the area of Caltex roundabout and 90 Street, which were both firmly controlled by Abu Salem and his men. At first he denied any involvement but according to the authorities it was clear he was behind the string of high-profile murders. Infamously, he attended the funeral of one of



WA'IL ALI MUQBIL AKA ABU SALEM AL-TAIZI. SCREEN GRAB FROM ADEN TIME.

the primary Hirak militia leaders, Ahmad al-Idrissi, who was shot dead in his vehicle on 30 December 2015. Despite being under suspicion, Abu Salem and his men arrived at the funeral to announce that he was innocent of the murder and, furthermore, he would take personal revenge for al-Idrissi's killing.⁶⁴

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-Zingi were forced out they had killed no less than 49 specific individuals, most notably the governor of Aden, Jaafar Sa'd, in December 2015.⁶⁵ The governor's security services released media statements saying

that al-Zingi admitted under interrogation that he was part of a network organized by Arif al-Zoka, the general secretary of the GPC party and Saleh's key man in the south. Al-Zingi also admitted his role in the assassination of the previous governor, Jaafar Sa'd, and resistance leader Ahmad al-Idrissi. 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ A security source in Abyan further explained that al-Zingi was in fact the second in command of AQAP in Aden, reporting to Abu Salem.⁶⁸

The man that linked both Abu Salem and Hilmi al-Zingi 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”.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ He fled to Sana'a from where he denounced the security services in Aden and denied he was linked to ISIS or AQAP.

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.⁷¹ 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 MUKALLA 2015

When AQAP took over the city of Mukalla in early 2015, a local action group called the Hadramawt 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.⁷² In fact the members of the HNC were mostly Islah Party officials, Salafi NGO members⁷³ 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

⁶¹ British Library, India Office Record reference IOR/R/20/C/2431. A memo dated 20 March 1965 from Aden's Chief Intelligence Officer warns other agencies from dealing with Saif Ali Muqbil due to his consistently unreliable information and determination to make as much money as possible.

⁶² Author interviews January 2016 in Aden.

⁶³ Interview with Hirak leader in Khormaksar, Aden, September 2015.

⁶⁴ Interview with person who attended the funeral.

⁶⁵ Author's records compiled from local media. This figure does not include those collateral victims such as guards or bystanders or relatives, nor does it include the many attempted killings.

⁶⁶ Interview with confidential source: N.A. Interviewee is from Aden, works as journalist and is close to the local authority.

⁶⁷ <http://www.yemensaeed.com/news54077.html>.

⁶⁸ http://adenalhadath.net/news_details.php?sid=14352

⁶⁹ http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=29873, <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/34123/>, <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/34121/>, <http://aden-time.info/NDetails.aspx?contid=6316> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3cMnUYDtsE>

⁷⁰ <http://aden-time.info/NDetails.aspx?contid=6315> and <http://www.alomanaa.net/news32842.html>

⁷¹ Interview with source who met with Abu Salem on a number of occasions and knew some of his men.

⁷² <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/yemen-truth-al-qaeda-takeover-mukalla-150914101527567.html>

⁷³ These NGO's include al-Hikmah al-Yamaniyyah and al-Ihsan.





AQAP HOSTS A MAJOR RALLY, INSIDE THEIR CAPITAL, AL MUKALLA MARCH 4, 2016. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA.

tired of heavy-handed government in Sana'a and an AQAP problem that had festered for a number of years. In addition most of the local members of the PSO, and a handful of CID officers, had been murdered by AQAP since 2009 (see Table 1 in Section 3 above). This left the military, security and intelligence structures loyal to the northern elites, represented by Islah and the GPC. By early 2015 the only people left nominally loyal to President Hadi were in the local government. Despite media reports citing a violent takeover of the city by AQAP in April 2015, the senior officers of 27 Mechanised Brigade actually negotiated with AQAP the terms of their withdrawal and the city fell without a shot being fired in anger.⁷⁴

It is telling that in short order the HNC dismissed the heads of the local government, stripped the governor of any executive power, and stood down the security services and police. The group then declared that the sole legal reference for its actions was the Council of Sunni Scholars (CSS). This

announcement effectively left the local government structure completely powerless and isolated from the government based in Riyadh. 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 Hadramawt⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

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-Shaki 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.⁷⁷ 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 Ahmad Isma'il al-Ahmar.⁷⁸ 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-Kathiri, 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-Kathiri, who was placed there by Umar al-Ju'aydi in order to retain some influence over his relative.⁷⁹ Khalid's most recent military appointment, in January 2014, had been as commander of the Oil Companies' Protection Force in Hadramawt.⁸⁰ 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 Region⁸¹ and was a member of the

Islah Party.⁸² He was assisted by Ali Ahmed Ba Hakeem, another Islah Party figure in Hadramawt.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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, Saddam al-Ghurabi, who was reported to be an assassin for hire and was suspected of a number of murders of business rivals.⁸⁶

Dr Rabi'a 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.⁸⁷ Other members of the HNC

⁷⁴ <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/27840> This article goes further and states that the 2nd Military Region staff command officers along with al-Suwayri Battalion of 27 Mechanised helped the HNC to physically take over Mukalla.

⁷⁵ <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/27840> One of the authors of this paper was informed by a Hadrami, who was previously close to the CSS, that it was established with funds from the National Security Bureau and regularly reports back to them on its activities. It was set up to provide an in-road for Saleh into Hadramawt's Salafi-jihadi community and bring the various Salafi groups under one umbrella.

⁷⁶ Confidential source, formerly part of a Hadrami NGO with al-Ahdal, A. BS. Works as a youth activist in a local social group in Hadramawt. Was also a member of the HNC for a few months.

⁷⁷ <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/27840>

⁷⁸ <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.

⁷⁹ In Yemeni society and politics nepotism carries a far less negative connotation than it does in the West. Tribal obligations demand relatives be employed. At the same time this also serves to regulate the behavior of individuals. Relationships are key and understanding the links by marriage or blood are the lens through which Yemenis understand their own institutions and body politic.

⁸⁰ <http://www.hadrmoutpress.com/index.php?ac=3&no=7860>

⁸¹ <https://yemen-press.com/news26354.html>

⁸² 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. Was also a member of the HNC for a few months.

⁸³ 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. Was also a member of the HNC for a few months.

⁸⁴ Two separate author interviews with locals in Mukalla at the time of the AQAP takeover said al-Dhamari was a member of the CSF and played a central role.

⁸⁵ 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.

⁸⁶ Saddam was named as a gang leader and relative of AQAP leader Muhammed Saleh al-Ghurabi in a number of media reports including Shabwa Press <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/27856/> in April 2015 and, most damningly, in a Sharq al-Wasat report on AQAP in Hadramawt of 2 September 2015 naming Saddam as responsible for a horrific murder on behalf of AQAP against two sons of a local MP: <http://alwasat-ye.net/?ac=3&no=43971>. This information was also corroborated through author interviews with local figures who knew Saddam al-Ghurabi.

⁸⁷ 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. Was also a member of the HNC for a few months.



included Shaykh Ahmed bin Ali Bar'ud and Shaykh Abdullah Muhammad al-Yazidi, both also members of the CSS.⁸⁸

In August 2016, the Hadramawt governor gave a press conference about security developments in Mukalla and said that 57 individuals from AQAP who had surrendered to the governorate authorities were investigated and all stated that they had been recruited into AQAP by members of the local authorities working with Sana'a.⁸⁹

The dominant thread running through both the HNC and many of the figures in AQAP is the Islah Party link.⁹⁰ 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 bona fide 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 1980s to the present against socialist, 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 real 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 majority⁹¹ 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, speaks volumes of 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 South 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 wittingly 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 to 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 Yemen 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 paltry three attempted attacks on the US, then on this evidence it does not amount to a serious, demonstrable international security or terror threat. There has been much written in the Western media about these attacks and

⁸⁸ In addition they are founders of al-Ehsan Salafi NGO, which is purported by former members to be supported financially by the NSB.

⁸⁹ <http://shabwaahpress.net/news/36506/>

⁹⁰ In Mukalla, the GPC party historically played less of a role but they still retained influence on the HNC.

⁹¹ Some elements of AQAP fight the Huthis in al-Baydah 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 at 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 unitary 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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