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ANALYSIS

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## AL-QA'IDA, TRIBES AND INSTABILITY IN YEMEN

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Over the last year Yemen has been at the centre of increasing concern about the re-emergence of a significant al-Qa'ida presence on the Arabian Peninsula. In a country where the government is already facing security threats from a Zaydi Shi'a rebellion in the north and simmering secessionist unrest in the south, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is finding a fertile environment in which to establish a base of operations to continue the radical jihadist fight. Central to AQAP's ability to cement a long-term presence in Yemen will be its relationship with Yemen's tribes. But long-term relations with tribes are fraught with difficulty. Western policy should focus on degrading AQAP's leadership and breaking this developing tribal nexus in a timely fashion without becoming too overtly involved.*

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Over the last year Yemen has been at the centre of increasing concern about the re-emergence of a significant al-Qa'ida presence on the Arabian Peninsula. The attack on the USS Cole in October 2000 (and an abortive earlier attempt on USS The Sullivans in January that year), the 2002 attack on the French oil tanker Limburg off the Yemeni coast, and the existence of radical Salafist educational institutions and a number of key terrorist figures, all illustrated the early potential for Yemen to provide a permissive operating environment for al-Qa'ida. After a period when it appeared that the threat had been largely contained, fears have grown since 2006 that Yemen's multiple political and economic crises will make the country an even more attractive sanctuary for al-Qa'ida, or more specifically, for its affiliates. As the United States Director of National Intelligence said, Yemen is 're-emerging as a jihadist battleground and potential regional base of operations for al-Qa'ida to plan internal and external attacks, train terrorists, and facilitate the movement of operatives.'<sup>1</sup>

But the ability of militant jihadi organisations to operate with impunity even in a country as loosely governed as Yemen is not a *fait accompli*. As al-Qa'ida found in Iraq and even in Pakistan, insinuating itself into local communities and societies is not always a straightforward proposition. In Iraq in particular, its often heavy-handed and poorly planned efforts to build ties with local Sunni tribes proved to be its undoing. In Yemen, too, a key factor in its efforts to turn the country into a workable and attractive base for its operations will, in large part, depend on its ability to build good relations with local tribes. The goal of this paper is to make an initial assessment of the efforts of al-Qa'ida (or

specifically its local affiliate, al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula) to forge such ties. It will also briefly touch on ways in which Western responses to the al-Qa'ida presence in Yemen might affect those efforts.

**Yemen's crises**

Yemen has for many years seemed perched on the edge of state failure, been hamstrung by civil and tribal conflicts, foreign intrigues, poor levels of education and deficient infrastructure and governance. In the last few years, however, these problems have grown even more acute. Today, Yemen faces enormous challenges: it is the poorest state in the Arab world; it has an under-employed and under-educated population; one of the highest rates of population growth in the world; and is rapidly running out of both water and oil.

Oil exports have been the government's economic lifeline, contributing about 75 per cent of revenue to the national budget, but Yemen reached its peak oil production of around 465,000 barrels per day (b/d) in 2003,<sup>2</sup> and production had slowed to around 280,000 b/d in January 2009 – a dramatic drop in such a short period. In response to this fall, the Ministry of Finance issued a directive that all ministries were to cut expenditures by 50 per cent in early 2009. The drop in oil revenues is unravelling the government's ability to maintain the vast informal networks that form the bedrock of the state.

Despite dwindling state incomes, the ruling regime has continued to extend largesse in order to bolster its populist legitimacy. Fuel subsidies account for over ten per cent of the

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GDP and public service wages and pensions have both increased when external donors have been calling for fiscal restraint.<sup>3</sup> It is widely believed within Yemen, including by ranking officials within the Ministry of Finance, that the government may have problems paying civil and military salaries within the foreseeable future if oil prices drop back to what they were at the beginning of 2009.<sup>4</sup>

These economic challenges are in turn undermining the regime's ability to manage a range of internal conflicts and security challenges. In the northern province of Sa'ada, which borders Saudi Arabia, Zaydi Shi'a anti-government insurgents have led a sporadic uprising against the regime since 2004,<sup>5</sup> and in the south a secessionist movement has gathered momentum and popular legitimacy since 2007. At the same time, the president is narrowing the group of people from whom he will take advice and relying heavily on his inner circle, who have a vested interest in portraying an idealised version of Yemen's political options.<sup>6</sup>

None of this is to suggest that the complete failure of the Yemeni State is a foregone conclusion. Despite the government's lack of fiscal discipline, it is likely that the regional repercussions of a failed state in their midst would force the wealthy Gulf Arab neighbours to provide increased financial assistance to bolster the government's ability to survive. Saudi Arabia already reportedly provides \$2 billion of direct financial assistance annually,<sup>7</sup> as well as the larger discretionary funding that flows to many of Yemen's political stakeholders, particularly within the tribes. Nevertheless, as the regime muddles aimlessly from crisis to crisis, its options for dealing with

these various problems, including security challenges, are contracting at an alarming rate.

**Sensing an opportunity?**

It is in part this growing state crisis that al-Qa'ida affiliates are exploiting to build a significant presence in Yemen, and through Yemen, to re-establish a significant presence on the Arabian Peninsula. This was necessitated by the decline of the Saudi branch of al-Qa'ida, which had carried out a number of brazen and effective attacks against expatriate targets in the kingdom in 2003 and 2004. With the increasing effectiveness of the Saudi security forces, and following the death of its most charismatic leader Abdul-'Aziz al-Muqrin in June 2004, the organisation's operational effectiveness deteriorated. By early 2008 there was an acknowledgement in Saudi Arabia by local al-Qa'ida elements that their continued survival necessitated a move of its operatives to the more permissive operating environment available in Yemen.<sup>8</sup> Al-Qa'ida activity in Yemen can be traced back to 1992 when two hotels were bombed in an unsuccessful attempt to target US troops transiting to Somalia. Since that time it has maintained a constant operational tempo, but one that has noticeably increased in frequency since the February 2006 escape of 23 members from a Sana'a prison including a former associate of Usama bin Laden, Nasser al-Wahayshi.

In January 2009 Nasser al-Wahayshi, by now the leader of Yemeni al-Qa'ida, announced the establishment of al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Wahayshi announced this joint Yemen-Saudi al-Qa'ida cell alongside his compatriot Qassem al-Raymi and two Saudi

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former Guantanamo detainees Sa'eed al-Shihri and Mohammed al-'Awfi.<sup>9</sup> Al-Wahayshi's Saudi counterparts pledged allegiance to him, reinforcing the fact that the Yemenis were in the ascendant. Al-Wahayshi has allegedly worked closely with bin Laden himself and has to a degree already reinvigorated the ailing AQAP franchise. His ties to bin Laden may allow him to steer the organisation in the direction that al-Qa'ida central would wish without the need for explicit direction from Pakistan's tribal areas.

AQAP's potential importance for al-Qa'ida central should not be underestimated. With an economically depressed, young and poorly educated population, Yemen offers a significant recruiting pool for the organisation. It would also allow the movement to show, through its resurrected AQAP franchise, that it is still active and even capable of regeneration, particularly as it comes under increasing pressure in Pakistan. Yemen's strategic location also offers a number of opportunities to target areas of particular interest to the organisation. The first is its proximity to the 'near enemy', and AQAP has already demonstrated its willingness to continue targeting the Saudi state, as evidenced by its unsuccessful assassination attempt on the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister, Prince Mohammed bin Naif, in August 2009, and the October 2009 shootout with al-Qa'ida operatives who had infiltrated the Kingdom from Yemen.

In addition, a strong foothold in Yemen would potentially provide al-Qa'ida with the ability to launch attacks on shipping through the strategic Bab al-Mandab chokepoint on the Red Sea, through which over three million barrels of oil and countless tonnes of trade

travel toward Europe and the United States every day. Already the proximity of many of the recent Somali pirate attacks to the Yemeni coast has prompted speculation that elements within Yemen are collaborating with the pirates. The NATO Shipping Center identified five Yemeni ports that it believed were providing logistical assistance to ships used by Somali Pirates.<sup>10</sup> While these allegations have not been proven, fears are strong that a collapse in Yemen would greatly increase the freedom of movement for pirates or other criminal networks in the region.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, there have even been suggestions that figures from al-Qa'ida's central leadership might consider relocating to Yemen. *The New York Times* suggested, for example, that 'a small handful of the terrorist group's leaders, are moving to Somalia and Yemen from their principal haven in Pakistan's tribal areas.'<sup>12</sup> There are few signs at this stage that the core al-Qa'ida leadership is willing or indeed able to relocate. Indeed, its links in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan are too deep and the risk of exposure by moving to another country too great to make this a very likely option.

**Engaging the tribes**

If al-Qa'ida and its local offshoot, AQAP, are to grasp this opportunity in Yemen, their ability to build a good relationship with local tribes will be critical. Indeed, it already appears that the respective leaders of the two organisations understand this. In February 2009, both al-Qa'ida's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri and Nasser al-Wahayshi (the leader of AQAP) demonstrated their intent to engage

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Yemen's tribes in an effort to oppose the Yemeni state. Al-Wahayshi called on them to resist pressure to grant the state control of their territories<sup>13</sup> while al-Zawahiri called on Yemen's tribes to act like the tribes of Pakistan and Afghanistan and support al-Qa'ida:

*I call on the noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen and tell them: don't be less than your brothers in the defiant Pushtun and Baluch tribes... noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen... don't be helpers of Ali Abdullah Salih... support to your brothers the Mujahideen.*<sup>14</sup>

The statements of both leaders played on notions of tribal honour, autonomy and on the tribes' longstanding hostility to the central authorities.<sup>15</sup> Both speeches illustrated the recognition that al-Qa'ida may be able to capitalise on the tribes' distrust of the Yemeni state. AQAP's actions to date have also demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of local conditions and appear to have adopted several lines of operation with respect to the tribes:

**Not endangering Yemen's tribes.** While there have been significant battles between AQAP operatives and government forces in Marib (a tribal area of Yemen in which the group's leadership is believed to be hiding), Marib has not been the site of a major AQAP attack against foreigners or oil infrastructure since 2007. Distancing Marib from its more spectacular attacks means that AQAP is less likely to antagonise the tribes that they rely on for refuge by directly exposing them to violence and to government reprisal. Furthermore, the tactic of assassinating key officials both in Yemen and in Saudi Arabia also gives the

organisation a tangible victory against the states they oppose without unnecessarily endangering the tribal communities with which they wish to consolidate ties. Part of the reason that al-Qa'ida in Iraq was marginalised in 2007-8 was that its actions placed the tribes squarely in the middle of its violent campaign. Focusing more on targeting Saudi Arabia while hiding in Yemen may also help to achieve that goal.

**Establishing long-term linkages.** The longer AQAP is able to exist in Yemen's tribal communities without exposing them to major violence, the more likely it is that they will be able to become entrenched in the tribes through marriage and shared experiences.<sup>16</sup> This was a key factor in al-Qa'ida's ability to hide successfully in Pakistan's tribal areas, and would help AQAP to consolidate a territorial base and thus pose a more serious threat than it currently does.

**Emphasising local, rather than global, grievances.** In the August 2009 edition of AQAP's online magazine, *Sada al-Malahim*, one of the articles also attempted to explicitly link the issue of oil extraction to local tribal concerns. The article argued that the oil in Shabwa, Hadhramaut and Marib is being exploited by the government and the West and that the local people are not benefiting: 'The inhabitants of [these areas] are paying for their own oppression [with the oil wealth misappropriated by their government].' This represented a more localised approach to the issue of oil than is typically the case in an al-Qa'ida narrative. Instead of arguing that the West props up greedy and illegitimate regimes to secure its access to oil, the issue was portrayed as being about local communities not

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being paid for what is rightfully theirs. In other words, the issue is more one of livelihoods and justice than international politics. AQAP appears to be trying to sell itself as a resistance movement for issues that tug at the tribes' central concerns – the government undermining their economic and political autonomy.

*Appealing to tribal honour.* In September 2009, an AQAP video about the 'Battle of Marib' – a recent military operation against AQAP in Marib – went even further in its appeal to Yemen's tribal heartland. One of AQAP's deputy leaders, Qassem al-Raymi, makes a stinging critique to shame Yemeni tribal sheikhs who support Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Al-Raymi suggests that tribal sheikhs who support the president do not represent Yemeni tribes and have lost their magnanimity and betrayed their forefathers. Like the statements noted, by al-Zawahiri and al-Wahayshi, this was a strong pitch toward notions tribal honour and the way that a tribal sheikh 'should' behave. In Yemen's tribal culture these accusations resonate strongly, particularly because it is now so common to hear tribespeople complain of the way that the government has undermined their traditions. AQAP appears to be consciously attempting to construct itself as an alternative to the state patronage system that is so often decried for delivering wealth to some of Yemen's sheikhs at the expense of their tribes.

Experiences in Somalia and Iraq have demonstrated that the international ambitions and exclusive ideology of al-Qaida groups carry a strong tendency to conflict with tribal traditions and desire for political autonomy. However, unlike Somalia and Iraq, militant jihadi ideologies have been fostered in Yemen

for decades. Yemeni returnees from the first war in Afghanistan number in their thousands and the government went to considerable lengths to both reintegrate them into Yemen's political life and mobilise them as fighters against the south in the 1994 civil war. While the government has maintained relations with this older generation of al-Qa'ida affiliates, for the younger generation that has come of age in Yemen's oil era, militant jihadism has come to form part of a discursive resistance to the government's authority.<sup>17</sup>

*Difficult partners?*

It will not, however, be entirely easy for AQAP to navigate Yemen's complex tribal politics. The increasing preoccupation in the West with al-Qa'ida's virtual presence on the internet and in the media, and its emergence as a narrative of discontent after 9/11, sometimes obscure the fact that both al-Qa'ida central and its franchises are still real organisations that require secure territory in which to plan, train and operate. And it is this need for territory that is likely to bring the movement into competition with Yemeni tribes, as it did in Iraq.

Even if AQAP attempts to align itself with the tribes against the state, the fact that one of the group's broader objectives – establishing jihadi-governed spaces – is largely exclusive and consigns tribes to a subordinate status is likely to eventually put the organisation in confrontation with the tribes. This risk may be mitigated, however, if AQAP is able to focus on operations in Saudi Arabia or on assassinations of Yemeni officials, while providing practical benefits to the tribes that the Yemeni government is unable to provide. Thus, rather than competing with Yemen's tribes for

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territory in which to establish a jihadi-controlled entity, it may be possible for AQAP to win support by portraying itself as part of an alternative governance solution, rather than just an Islamist group fighting the government.

Even if AQAP could achieve these outcomes, though, the complex cleavages in Yemeni society that make it so hard to govern pose even more problems for an organisation that is so ideologically rigid. This was illustrated by Nasser al-Wahayshi's May 2009 announcement of his support for 'the people of Southern Yemen' in their struggle to secede from Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime.<sup>18</sup> Al-Wahayshi maintained an explicitly jihadi frame of reference and emphasised that Islamic law (*shari'a*) offered the only way for southerners to overcome the injustices of the Saleh regime. Another suspected member of the group, Ghalib Abdullah al-Zaydi, added that the adoption of *shari'a* was a necessary condition for jihadi assistance in the south: 'If they *continue* adopting socialist or communist ideas, we will not join them' (*italics added*).<sup>19</sup> As al-Zaydi's statement suggests, there are ideological competitors to AQAP in the south, and in trying to find common cause with southern Yemenis, AQAP may have difficulty maintaining such a hardline ideological stance. The problem for al-Qa'ida groups is that this stance largely defines their organisational mandate. Al-Qa'ida cells such as AQAP are becoming more adept at integrating themselves into local political struggles, but they do so at the risk of a significant tension being formed between local ambitions and the broader aims of their internationalist Islamist ideology.

## How does the West respond?

As Yemen becomes a greater focus for Western counter-terrorism efforts, there is a need for governments to be extremely careful in the way that any counter-terrorism effort there proceeds. Western governments need to seize a still-open window of opportunity to give Yemen's tribes tangible reasons to reject AQAP's overtures. Ideally, the Yemeni state would take the lead in this, but its ability to do so at the moment is highly questionable. The state is fighting a rebellion in the north at the same time as it faces a secessionist movement in the south. Like most Yemenis, the tribes see little incentive to protect a predatory state that appears reasonably likely to collapse. But while al-Qa'ida may be able to help undermine the Yemeni state, it will never be able to substitute for the patronage a state can provide. This provides an opportunity for sensitive and adept intervention by third parties.

In this there are lessons to be learnt in the way that al-Qa'ida has been undermined in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and targeted in Pakistan. Two elements of any successful strategy will be the targeting of key AQAP leaders, and addressing the grievances of average Yemenis, particularly the tribes, that give al-Qa'ida groups oxygen. In terms of targeting AQAP leaders, it will be important for the West to work through Yemeni security forces. Overt Western involvement in targeting AQAP's leadership risks fuelling the anti-Western sentiment amongst the tribes that would be far more likely to strengthen, rather than weaken, their support for AQAP. However, the difficulties in replacing experienced and competent operational leaders that this creates for al-Qa'ida franchises mean that this must be a



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cornerstone of any strategy to blunt AQAP's effectiveness.

The second element involves tackling the deeper causes of disaffection within Yemeni society and is, therefore, far more complex. It involves taking a much broader view of the problems that Yemen faces and recognising that the country's potential to host militant organisations is just one symptom of Yemen's fragility. Regional countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, whose interests are best served by eradicating AQAP's presence in Yemen, will need to take a lead role in engaging with Yemen and are best placed both to understand the country's situation and to remain involved over the long term. However, this is also problematic, because the more involved any foreign government becomes in Yemen's internal affairs, the more likely it is that it will pursue an agenda based more on its own domestic concerns than the needs of the Yemeni state.

In short, there is no ideal quick-fix solution to rising militancy in Yemen; Yemen is in its current predicament as a result of a prolonged period of developmental neglect by its leadership and no outsider can hope to remedy the vacuum in the short term. However, to be effective in the long term, any engagement by the West will have to work in the background with the Yemeni government and its neighbours to first target AQAP's operatives and infrastructure and then to forge more inclusive institutions and political processes..

Defeating AQAP in Yemen will be a difficult task, but the consequences of not addressing the situation will be felt internationally in the future. The longer AQAP is allowed to operate

in Yemen the more its message resonates among disaffected youth regionally, and in the event that core al-Qa'ida is neutralised in Pakistan, Yemen may well become the torch-bearer for the movement and evidence of its resilience. It also has the potential to provide a training base, and even stronger recruiting base for an organisation being squeezed in its Pakistani safe haven. It is also symbolically important for the organisation to maintain a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula in order to carry the fight in the heartlands of Islam. The potential for AQAP to establish close linkages with al-Shabab in Somalia and thus extend its reach after consolidating in Yemen would further extend the life of the international militant jihadi threat. The key to AQAP's future in Yemen lies with the tribes. If the tribes can be co-opted then AQAP's future security is compromised – if they cannot then the West faces a longer-term threat from al-Qa'ida.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Boucek, *Yemen: avoiding a downward spiral*, Carnegie Papers No. 102, September 2009, p 13.

<sup>2</sup> EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit), *Yemen country report*, August 2005: [http://www.mophp-ye.org/DocDB/docs/MoPHP\\_224\\_544.pdf](http://www.mophp-ye.org/DocDB/docs/MoPHP_224_544.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Yemen country profile, Library of Congress Federal Research Division, August 2008, p 9: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Yemen.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with various officials and political analysts, Sana'a: November 2008, and on the telephone in January 2009.

<sup>5</sup> It is misleading to frame this conflict in simple sectarian terms; it also gives expression to a complex array of tribal, military, and elite rivalries. The longer the fighting continues, the more it becomes entrenched in the mindset of local residents who continue to see their livelihoods suffer.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on the nature of political leadership in Yemen see Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's democracy experiment in regional perspective: patronage and pluralized authoritarianism*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, particularly chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Meyer, Saudis threatened by al-Qaeda terror, Yemeni rebels, *Bloomberg*, 9 September 2009:

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=aapKi2HaofqU>.

<sup>8</sup> Boucek, *Yemen: avoiding a downward spiral*.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi were two of the 23 al-Qa'ida convicts who 'escaped' from the prison in Sana'a in February 2006. Both of the Saudi men were participants in the Saudi de-radicalisation program.

<sup>10</sup> Alisha Ryu, UN warns of ties between lawless groups in Somalia and Yemen, *VOA News*, 7 May 2009: <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2009-05/2009-05-07-voa47.cfm?CFID=313991930&CFTOKEN=98227923&jsessionid=0030721ce53b5b622e8f2a436cd14361d21c>.

<sup>11</sup> April Longley Alley, and Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani, Southern aspirations and Salih's exasperation: the looming threat of secession in South Yemen, *Middle East Institute Viewpoints*, No. 11, June 2009: <http://www.mei.edu/Portals/0/Publications/Yemen.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, Some in Qaeda leave Pakistan for Somalia and Yemen, *The New York Times*, 11 June 2009: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/world/12terror.html>

<sup>13</sup> Al-Wahayshi's audio speech was posted on various jihadi websites. For English language commentary, see: *Thaindian News*, Al Qaeda leader urges Yemeni tribes to fight government, 20 February 2009: [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/al-qaeda-leader-urges-yemeni-tribes-to-fight-government\\_100157355.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/al-qaeda-leader-urges-yemeni-tribes-to-fight-government_100157355.html).

<sup>14</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, From Kabul to Mogadishu, statement released 22 February 2009: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefazawahiri0209-2.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Brian O'Neill, AQAP a rising threat in Yemen, *CTC Sentinel*, 2(4) 2009, pp 17-19: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss4.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that al-Qa'ida operatives are now working to marry into the tribes with which they have sought refuge. Gregory Johnsen, Waning vigilance: Al-Qaeda's resurgence in Yemen, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch No. 1551, 14 July 2009: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3088>. Johnsen's argument is consistent with anecdotes relayed to the one of authors by sources in Yemen.

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory Johnsen, Al Qaeda's generational split, *Boston Globe*, 9 November 2007:

[http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2007/11/09/al\\_qaedas\\_generational\\_split/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2007/11/09/al_qaedas_generational_split/).

<sup>18</sup> Arafat Madayash and Sawsan Abu-Husain, Al Qaeda call for Islamic State in Southern Yemen, *Asharq Alawsat*, 14 May 2009:

<http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=16728>.

<sup>19</sup> *News Yemen*, Al-Qaeda: we'll help southerners if they rule with Islamic laws, 19 May 2009:

[http://www.newsyemen.net/en/print.asp?sub\\_no=3\\_2009\\_05\\_19\\_7760](http://www.newsyemen.net/en/print.asp?sub_no=3_2009_05_19_7760).



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