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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Editor's Note: In response to the failed terrorist attack targeting a Northwest Airlines commercial aircraft on December 25, 2009, the Combating Terrorism Center is releasing this special issue of the CTC Sentinel. Early indications suggest that the suspected bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, received explosives training in Yemen, drawing further attention to the role played by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which claimed credit for the operation. To provide context on al-Qa`ida's activities in Yemen, this special issue includes a new article by Yemen expert Gregory D. Johnsen assessing the current threat posed by AQAP. The issue also includes previously published CTC Sentinel articles focusing on al-Qa`ida in Yemen.

AQAP in Yemen and the Christmas Day Terrorist Attack

By Gregory D. Johnsen

The failed attempt by Nigerian bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to destroy a Northwest Airlines commercial aircraft on Christmas Day has re-focused Western attention on al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the potential dangers emanating from Yemen. The importance of this event drove British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to announce shortly after the botched attack that London would host a conference devoted to combating al-Qa`ida in Yemen. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton echoed Brown's concerns days later, calling the situation in Yemen a threat to the entire world. But Yemen's problems are neither new nor unknown.

The Christmas Day attempt was the logical extension of AQAP's ambitions to date, but one that few believed the group was capable of at this time. AQAP and its predecessor, al-Qa`ida in Yemen, have quickly moved through the stages of development in their bid to be capable of such an attack. The attempt also illustrates the extent to which Nasir al-Wahayshi, the current *amir* of AQAP, has modeled not only his own leadership style on that of Usama bin Ladin, but also fashioned his organization's goals on the template constructed by Bin Ladin in Afghanistan.

This article will show why lapsed vigilance allowed al-Qa`ida to regroup in Yemen, explain the significance of the group's merger in January 2009, identify the recent U.S.-Yemeni response, and finally examine AQAP's decision to attack the U.S. homeland.

Lapsed Vigilance and a Resurgent Al-Qa`ida

In recent years, al-Qa`ida has grown increasingly active and ambitious in Yemen. The current version of the organization, AQAP, is the second incarnation of an al-Qa`ida franchise in Yemen. The initial group was a loosely organized collection of individuals that fought a largely reactionary war against the U.S. and Yemeni governments from 2001 to 2003. The roots of al-Qa`ida's involvement in Yemen pre-date the September 11 attacks by nearly a decade, but it was only those attacks and the implicit threat of U.S. retaliation that finally compelled the Yemeni government to take the fight to al-Qa`ida operatives in the country.

During what this author has described as the "first phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen,"¹ the U.S. and Yemeni governments cooperated quite closely, even working together to kill the then head of al-Qa`ida in Yemen, Abu Ali al-

¹ Gregory D. Johnsen, "Securing Yemen's Cooperation in the Second Phase of the War on al-Qa`ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

Harithi, in an unmanned CIA drone strike in November 2002. Yemeni forces arrested his replacement, Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, a year later. The successive losses of two key leaders as well as numerous other arrests effectively crippled the organization in Yemen. Within months, as the threat from al-Qa`ida decreased and finally disappeared, the United States and Yemen believed that they had decisively defeated the organization. Instead of building on their victory, however, both governments turned their attention elsewhere.²

This lapsed vigilance opened up space for al-Qa`ida to regroup and rebuild following a major prison break in Sana`a in February 2006.³ Among the escapees were Nasir al-Wahayshi, a former personal aide to Usama bin Ladin and current commander of AQAP, and Qasim al-Raymi, a military field commander for the organization. Hizam Mujali and Muhammad al-`Umda, who are both still at large, also escaped from the Political Security Organization prison.

The prison break marked the beginning of the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Since then, al-Qa`ida has passed through three distinct stages of development in Yemen. First, in 2006 and 2007 al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi worked to resurrect the organization up from the ashes, essentially taking a long view of their project in Yemen and laying a durable foundation. In January 2008, the organization launched the first issue of its bi-monthly journal *Sada al-Malahim* (*Echo of Battles*) and followed it almost

2 The United States reduced its interest in the country, as illustrated by aid to Yemen in 2004-2007. What little attention the United States was paying to the country was directed toward initiatives such as anti-corruption reforms and encouraging the country to take steps toward becoming a fully-formed democratic republic. The Yemeni government, on the other hand, became intimately involved in a bloody insurgency in the country's north. The rebellion, which is led by the al-Huthi family, is a complex local conflict with deep roots in Yemeni history and contemporary politics. At its heart, it is an attempt by Zaydi purists in and around Sa`da to avoid what they believe is an attempt at cultural and theological extinction.

3 Gregory D. Johnsen, "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadis - Part 1," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:18 (2007); Gregory D. Johnsen, "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadis - Part 2," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:19 (2007)

immediately with an attack on a convoy of Belgian tourists in Hadramawt. This initiated the 2008 campaign, which culminated in the September 2008 assault on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a. Then, in January 2009, the group announced that the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qa`ida were merging to form a single, unified organization to be known as AQAP. The merger, which effectively transformed al-Qa`ida from a local chapter to a regional franchise, indicated the organization's desire for regional reach and moved it one step closer toward becoming a group capable of global action.

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

The United States only began paying significant attention to the threat posed once again by al-Qa`ida in Yemen in late 2008, and especially after the attack on the U.S. Embassy in September. Following the merger in January 2009, this attention increased but never matched 2001-2002 levels of focused military and security cooperation.

Throughout 2009, AQAP executed a number of attacks that illustrated the group's growing ambition and capabilities. In March, it dispatched a suicide bomber who killed South Korean tourists in Hadramawt. Days later it struck again, attacking a convoy of South Korean officials sent to investigate the attack. Later that summer, in August, the group launched one of its most ingenious attacks, an attempted assassination of Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism chief and deputy minister of the interior, Muhammad bin Nayif. The bomber, Abdullah Asiri, reportedly hid pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) explosives in his rectum as a way to avoid detection. That attack, of course, was eerily echoed by Abdulmutallab's attempt on Christmas Day.

AQAP learned from its initial failure with PETN. Many analysts believe that the reason Asiri's attempt was unsuccessful is because his body absorbed the majority of the blast—evident from the gruesome pictures of the bomb's aftermath—which is possibly why Abdulmutallab hid the explosives in his underwear instead of inside his body.

Saudi Arabia dodged another major strike in October 2009, when a roving police checkpoint stumbled across an al-Qa`ida cell. The three al-Qa`ida members had already made their way across the border into Saudi Arabia from Yemen when their Chevy Suburban was stopped at a checkpoint. One was driving and the other two

“The January 2009 merger, which gave birth to AQAP, was a carefully considered move designed not only to increase the group’s standing internationally, but also to allow it to expand operations outside of Yemen.”

were disguised as women in the back seat. The Saudi police unit had a female officer accompanying them and when she approached the car to inspect the women's identities the two individuals in the backseat—Ra'id al-Harbi and Yusif al-Shihri, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and the brother-in-law of Said al-Shihri, AQAP's deputy commander—opened fire. Both men were killed in the fighting while the driver was arrested and interrogated. His confessions led Saudi authorities to a number of other al-Qa`ida operatives in the country.

The above account appears to be confirmed by the release of al-Harbi's and al-Shihri's wills by AQAP in December 2009. The wills, recorded before the pair traveled to Saudi Arabia, appear to indicate that they were on a suicide mission, the target of which is not known.

The attempt on Muhammad bin Nayif as well as the foiled attempt by al-Shihri and al-Harbi illustrates that the January 2009 merger, which gave birth to AQAP, was a carefully considered move designed not only to increase the group's standing internationally, but also to allow it to expand operations outside of Yemen.

The U.S.-Yemeni Response

Shortly after the wills were released online in December 2009, the United States and Yemen coordinated a trio of strikes against al-Qa`ida targets in the country. It is still unclear what role the United States played in the strikes but, according to the *New York Times*, it was intimately involved in the operations.⁴ One target was reportedly an al-Qa`ida training camp

“AQAP has always welcomed attacks on U.S. interests anywhere in the world, but this was the first time the organization attempted to carry out an attack outside of the Arabian Peninsula.”

in the southern governorate of Abyan, although others have disputed that characterization. The raid, which likely involved U.S. firepower, killed a number of individuals, including al-Qa`ida suspects as well as a number of women and children.⁵ The casualty numbers vary widely depending on the source, but Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs Rashid al-Alimi told members of parliament on December 23 that an investigation was being conducted into the deaths of civilians.

Yemeni forces also conducted raids on two other al-Qa`ida hideouts in and around Sana`a on December 17. In Sana`a, they arrested 14 individuals accused of providing material assistance to al-Qa`ida.⁶ Northeast of the capital in the Arhab tribal region, Yemeni counterterrorism forces raided a suspected al-Qa`ida safe house. The raid resulted in the deaths of

4 David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “Threats Led to Embassy Closings in Yemen, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2010.

5 Thom Shanker and Mark Landler, “US Aids Yemeni Raids on Al Qaeda, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2009.

6 “Security Report Discusses the Details of Operations Targeting al-Qaeda” (Arabic), *Marib Press*, December 27, 2009.

three al-Qa`ida suspects, including a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, Hani al-Sha`lan.⁷ Yet the target of the raid, Qasim al-Raymi, escaped the government’s siege along with fellow al-Qa`ida suspect Hizam Mujali. Days later, on December 21, an al-Qa`ida member later identified as Muhammad Salih al-`Awlaqi returned to the scene of the strike in Abyan and gave a short, impromptu speech to a rally protesting the attack that al-Jazira caught on video.

On December 22, fighter planes, apparently acting on U.S. intelligence, tracked al-`Awlaqi back to his tribal region in Shabwa and attacked a position where he was believed to be hiding. The initial bombing raid was unsuccessful, but two days later another strike on the same position succeeded in killing al-`Awlaqi as well as a handful of other al-Qa`ida suspects. Subsequent rumors that the target of the attack was a leadership meeting between Nasir al-Wahayshi, Said Ali al-Shihri and Anwar al-`Awlaqi appear to be unfounded and none of the three are believed to be dead.

The Christmas Day Attempt

The next day Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to destroy a plane over Detroit. The subsequent statement released by AQAP on December 28 said that the attempt was in retaliation for the week of strikes, which it claimed were carried out by the United States with Cruise missiles, but the chronology of Abdulmutallab’s travel make this more propaganda than fact.⁸

There is still much that is not known about Abdulmutallab’s time in Yemen. Not only where he went and with whom he spent his time, but also whether he was a trial balloon for AQAP or just the first of several bombers. For AQAP, this was a relatively low-cost and low-risk operation. It did not send one of its own members, but rather someone who sought the group out and who was, from an organizational perspective, dispensable. One development that

7 Ibid.

8 Abdulmutallab purchased his ticket on December 16. See, for example, “US Officials Investigating How Abdulmutallab Boarded Flight 253 as More Missed Red Flags Surface,” *New York Daily News*, January 3, 2010.

may help shed light on the subject is whether or not Abdulmutallab recorded a will that he left with AQAP leaders in Yemen. Yet even if he did it is doubtful that the organization would release it given his failure.

Much has been made of Abdulmutallab’s possible connections to Anwar al-`Awlaqi, but so far little evidence has emerged to match the speculation. One worry is that by focusing so exclusively on possible ties to Anwar al-`Awlaqi, the United States is overlooking other lesser-known individuals. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the February 2006 prison break, the U.S.

“The concern for many intelligence analysts and security officials is that AQAP’s success in getting one bomber into the United States will breed more success by attracting other individuals who can move easily through Western countries.”

government focused on Jamal al-Badawi and Jabir al-Banna, two individuals it knew well. Yet it was actually two escapees it did not know—Nasir al-Wahayshi and Qasim al-Raymi—who would prove to be the biggest threat to U.S. interests.

AQAP has always welcomed attacks on U.S. interests anywhere in the world, but this was the first time the organization attempted to carry out an attack outside of the Arabian Peninsula. Even in the statement released by AQAP claiming credit for the failed attack it focused on “expelling the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula,” the group’s stated *raison d’être*. It did, however, raise the rhetoric slightly, calling for “total war on all Crusaders in the peninsula.”

It is difficult to know why the group decided to target the United States at this point in time: whether it saw a vehicle of opportunity in Abdulmutallab, who had a U.S. visa, or whether it was part

of a larger strategy. The concern for many intelligence analysts and security officials is that AQAP's success in getting one bomber into the United States will breed more success by attracting other individuals who can move easily through Western countries.

Another worry is that the reaction by the United States to the unsuccessful attack may induce AQAP to devote more time and resources to similar attempts in the future. This, however, is largely dependent on the group's resources. Currently, the group appears to be under little pressure in Yemen and it has a great deal of space to not only plan but also to launch attacks from hideouts in the country. Certainly there are talented and innovative individuals working within the organization in Yemen and these tend to attract motivated students and recruits. The future targets AQAP selects will depend on the individuals it has at its disposal.⁹ This should be a cause for concern.

At this point, however, the only conclusion that can be known with any degree of certainty is that the attempted Christmas Day attack demonstrates that AQAP's imagination matches its ambitions.

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The Expansion Strategy of Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

By Gregory D. Johnsen

** This article was originally published in the September 2009 issue of the CTC Sentinel.*

DURING THE PAST YEAR, the United States has grown increasingly concerned about the dangers of instability in Yemen. This fear has translated into a sharp increase in aid to the fragile state. It also helps to explain the slow but steady trickle of official U.S. visitors to the Yemeni capital, Sana`a. General David Petraeus, for example, traveled to Yemen on July 26, 2009, bringing with him both official confirmation of the uptick in aid along with the warning that the United States would expect a significant return on its money.

The extra funding is largely a result of a resurgent al-Qa`ida threat in the country. In less than four years, al-Qa`ida in Yemen has transformed itself from a fractured and fragmented group of individuals into an organization that is intent on launching attacks throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The development of al-Qa`ida into a regional organization, known as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has been quick but methodical as the group has articulated and then attained each goal set for itself. AQAP is increasingly establishing roots in Yemen, allowing it to plan and execute attacks across the region.

Take Two in Marib

A large part of Petraeus' visit was devoted to counterterrorism. During the meeting with President Ali Abdullah Salih, Petraeus pressed him to take the fight to al-Qa`ida. Salih dutifully responded by dispatching his nephew, `Ammar Muhammad, who is the principal deputy with the National Security Bureau, to the eastern governorate of Marib, which has been the center of al-Qa`ida activity in recent years. `Ammar negotiated the terms of the offensive with local shaykhs, but the operation four days later did not go as planned. First, a Yemeni supply truck got lost and was subsequently captured by al-Qa`ida fighters. Second, Yemeni

counterterrorism forces mistakenly shelled a tribal house rather than an al-Qa`ida safe house. Their error sparked a firefight with tribesmen and a handful of al-Qa`ida fighters opposing the military.

The "Battle of Marib," as al-Qa`ida is now calling the incident, illustrates the dangers and pitfalls of attempting to navigate the murky and multifaceted conflict that fighting al-Qa`ida in Yemen has become. Al-Qa`ida's budding alliance with some tribes in the region means that any fight that is designed to be a two-sided affair

"Al-Qa`ida has reached the point where it is no longer satisfied with local activity. It has its sights set on something bigger."

between the government and al-Qa`ida will not remain that way. The logic of these conflicts will evolve in a way that increasingly incorporates more actors, as tribesmen and other fighters are brought into the fight not out of any ideological loyalty to al-Qa`ida, but rather as a way of reacting against government action and aggression.¹

In the end, the Battle of Marib cost the military five tanks, a number of dead and wounded as well as seven soldiers captured, at least according to a statement released by AQAP.² The Yemeni government disputed the statement, but a video about the battle was subsequently released by AQAP, showing the seven captured soldiers and further confirming al-Qa`ida's claims.³ The video also backed away from the claim made in the initial statement that al-Qa`ida had shelled the Republican Palace in Marib while `Ammar Muhammad was in the building. Instead, al-Qa`ida used the

⁹ For example, AQAP will likely use Saudi and Yemeni recruits for operations in the Peninsula. If it is able to recruit individuals who can travel freely in Western countries, then it may designate those recruits for operations in the West.

¹ Tribes in this region of Yemen have often accepted money and assistance from a variety of sources, which they use as leverage against the central government in Sana`a.

² Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement on the Battle of Marib," August 1, 2009.

³ Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Video on the Battle of Marib," September 8, 2009.

video to modify its earlier statement, saying only that officers were in the palace when it was shelled.

The clarifications and running commentary throughout the video by Qasim al-Raymi,⁴ one of al-Qa`ida's military commanders, is a calculated attempt by the organization to seize the moral high ground in Yemen. In a country where many are often distrustful of government spokesmen and official statements, al-Qa`ida is attempting to show that its statements are grounded in fact. This was most forcefully illustrated in the video by footage of Yemen's minister of information, Hasan al-Lawzi, discussing the government's version of the events in Marib, which was then followed by al-Raymi's suggestion that people are beginning to turn to jihadist web forums for a more accurate accounting of events.

In addition to brand protection, al-Qa`ida also utilized the captured soldiers to its advantage, portraying them as pawns duped into obeying an un-Islamic regime. At the end of the video, al-Qa`ida announced that it would not execute the soldiers, as this was not permitted, but that if the soldiers would not fight with the mujahidin then neither should they fight against them by assisting the "tyrants." The soldiers were eventually released as a result of tribal mediation, which `Ammar was forced to rely on after his unit's embarrassing performance.

In many ways, the Battle of Marib and the events leading up to it were eerily similar to another series of incidents eight years earlier. In that case, President George W. Bush pressured Salih to arrest three al-Qa`ida members during a November 2001 visit to Washington. The ensuing operation in Marib by Yemeni Special Forces was a disaster. The target of the attack, Abu Ali al-Harithi, escaped along with a comrade, while local tribesmen took

4 Qasim al-Raymi graduated from one of Yemen's religious institutes in the late 1990s before traveling to Afghanistan where he met Usama bin Ladin and spent time in an al-Qa`ida training camp. He comes from a family of fighters. One brother, Ali, is currently in Guantanamo Bay and another, Faris, fought in Iraq and Afghanistan before being killed in mysterious circumstances in June 2007. Al-Raymi was one of the 23 men who escaped from a Yemen Political Security prison in February 2006.

several Yemeni soldiers hostage. Tribal mediators later secured the release of the soldiers, but not before the government was warned against a heavy footprint in Marib. Al-Harithi was killed less than a year later by a U.S. unmanned aerial drone.

Yet this is not 2001, and Yemen is less inclined toward seeing U.S. priorities as its own. It has other security problems—a civil war in the north⁵ and calls for secession in the south—that it deems more pressing than the al-Qa`ida threat. Moreover, it has learned that the United States and its allies can be inconsistent when it comes to rewarding risk.

Establishing Roots

Both the statement and the video about the Battle of Marib express some surprise that the Yemeni government would even carry out an attack in the governorate. In the video, al-Raymi explained the military operation by suggesting that Salih is a "slave to Saudi riyals and American dollars." Al-Qa`ida is increasingly viewing Marib and some of the surrounding governorates, most notably al-Jawf and parts of Shabwa, as its own sphere of influence where the government has no role.

With a few exceptions—the two suicide attacks in March 2009⁶ and the Battle of Marib—al-Qa`ida has been largely silent since its attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a on Ramadan 17, 2008.⁷ Yet this silence does not equate to inactivity. Instead, al-Qa`ida has been building a durable foundation for the future. Specifically, it has been actively working to establish links and put down roots

5 The sixth and most violent round of fighting to date between the government and the Huthis began on August 11, 2009. This sporadic conflict has been ongoing since 2004 and continues to be a drain on both the government's political and military capital.

6 A suicide bomber killed four South Korean tourists and their local Yemeni guide on March 15, 2009. On March 18, a convoy of the victims' relatives along with South Korean investigators was targeted in another suicide attack, although only the bomber was killed in the second incident.

7 The date is significant, as was pointed out in a later issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, as the anniversary of the early Islamic Battle of Badr. It corresponds to September 17, 2008. The recent attempted assassination of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayif is the beginning of something new for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

with the tribes in Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwa governorates.⁸ Most notably, it is accomplishing this by attempting to marry into the local tribes. The personal piety of many al-Qa`ida members also resonates strongly with tribesmen as do cell phone videos of the fighting in Iraq. At the moment, al-Qa`ida is in the early stages of a budding alliance with some of the tribes in these governorates.

Despite early concerns immediately after September 11, 2001, al-Qa`ida has not traditionally had a strong alliance with the tribes in Yemen. There have

“Al-Qa`ida first wanted to rebuild in Yemen, and then it aimed to make itself relevant within the country. Now that it has accomplished both goals, it is taking the next step by expanding regionally.”

been cases of al-Qa`ida members being provided refuge by tribes, but often this was an issue of a tribesman who was also a member of al-Qa`ida playing on his tribal identity to receive refuge. What is happening now is entirely different.

Said Ali al-Shihri, the deputy commander of AQAP, recently brought his wife and children to Yemen from Saudi Arabia.⁹ Not only did this put them beyond the reach of the Saudi government so it could not exert the same sort of pressure on him as it did on Muhammad al-`Awfi,¹⁰ but it also indicates al-Shihri's comfort

8 Much of the analysis in this section is based on the author's recent trip to Yemen in July and August 2009. The author is indebted to the help and generosity of many Yemenis who shared their views and thoughts with him.

9 Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement of Congratulations," *Sada al-Malahim*, No. 9, May 2009.

10 Muhammad al-`Awfi, a former Guantanamo detainee, was one of the four individuals featured in the video that announced the merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qa`ida into the unified al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula in January 2009. One month later, al-`Awfi turned himself in to Saudi authorities. It is widely believed that Saudi Arabia used a variety of different tactics—including pressuring the women in his family—to force his surrender.

level in the country. Al-Qa`ida is not on the run in Yemen, but rather is largely free to do what it wants in certain areas. Al-Shihri's move is also indicative of a growing attempt by al-Qa`ida to become part of the local scene by integrating itself into the entire community in a way that a single man is unable to do.

Specific details on individuals marrying into particular tribes is difficult to acquire, but anecdotal evidence received in Yemen combined with some specific cases indicates that it is part of al-Qa`ida's long-term strategy. In the latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim (Echo of Battles)*, for instance, al-Qa`ida congratulated one of its members, Muhammad al-`Umda, on his marriage.¹¹ It is unclear from the statement who al-`Umda married, but the belief in Yemen is that he married into one of the tribes and that his action is being replicated by other fighters from both Saudi Arabia and Yemen. This development is both new and worrying because it has the potential to turn any counterterrorism operation into a much broader war involving Yemen's tribes.

The Perception and The Reality

Another worrying indicator for the future of counterterrorism operations in Yemen is the general apathy toward al-Qa`ida in the country. There is a culture of passivity and victimhood within the government. Nearly every sector of society has bought into this idea, arguing that the al-Qa`ida problem is really a foreign problem, an outgrowth of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹² This is not the case, and by failing to acknowledge the problem Yemen has never adequately addressed it.

There is silence from major clerics who could speak out against attacks from al-Qa`ida. The shaykhs and clerics who do preach against al-Qa`ida do not have the intellectual weight or popular following to counter al-Qa`ida's arguments. This has essentially ceded the field of debate and discussion within Yemen to al-Qa`ida. The United States has been

11 Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement of Congratulations," *Sada al-Malahim*, No. 10, July 2009. Al-`Umda is one of three escapees from the February 2006 prison break still at large.

12 This conclusion is based on a number of interviews and conversations the author conducted with ministers, parliamentarians, journalists and tribesmen in July and August 2009 in Yemen.

complicit in this failure by neglecting to seize opportunities to counter the organization's propaganda in any meaningful way.

The United States, for example, had a unique opportunity to go on the offensive in August 2009 when it released Muhammad al-Mu`ayyad and his assistant from U.S. custody.¹³ The case has been a contentious domestic issue in Yemen since 2003, with everyone from the president to al-Qa`ida calling for the pair's release. The United States could have easily placed an Arabic op-ed in the official

“Al-Qa`ida’s budding alliance with some tribes in the region means that any fight that is designed to be a two-sided affair between the government and al-Qa`ida will not remain that way.”

daily, *al-Thawra*, explaining its rationale for the release.¹⁴ Articulating that like every country the United States makes mistakes but that it also attempts to learn from those mistakes would have went a long way toward repairing the tattered image of the United States in Yemen. Al-Qa`ida has used al-Mu`ayyad's case as a powerful piece of propaganda for years, but when he was finally released the United States was silent and did not benefit. U.S. public diplomacy in Yemen is all defense and no offense.

13 In January 2003, the United States lured al-Mu`ayyad and his assistant to Germany as part of a sting operation in which they were promised money for groups such as Hamas and al-Qa`ida. The men were arrested and extradited to the United States where they were convicted in 2005 of supporting Hamas but cleared of charges related to al-Qa`ida. Al-Mu`ayyad's popularity in Yemen stems not only from his role as a religious figure, but also from his charity work. He is often referred to as the "Father of orphans" in the Arabic press.

14 The author asked a Yemeni official about the difficulty of placing such an op-ed, and he assured that such an op-ed would have no problem getting printed.

Public diplomacy is not the only U.S. problem in Yemen. There is a frightening mix of ignorance and arrogance when it comes to U.S. policy toward Yemen as well as among many of those tasked with implementing this policy. The United States must learn that its insistence on seeing everything through the prism of counterterrorism has helped to induce exactly the type of results it is hoping to avoid. By focusing on al-Qa`ida to the exclusion of nearly every other challenge, and by linking almost all of its aid to this single issue, the United States has ensured that the issue will never be resolved. There is growing fear in Yemen that the country would be forgotten and neglected in the absence of the threat from al-Qa`ida.¹⁵

This short-sighted and narrow focus by the United States has translated over time into a lack of influence within the country. The United States is not the most important player on the domestic Yemeni scene. During the past several years, Washington has not spent nearly enough money in nearly enough different places in Yemen to have its desired diplomatic leverage. U.S. perceptions of its own importance and influence within Yemen are inflated and do not square with reality.

The Recruiting Ground

While the United States and Yemen have both been distracted by other, seemingly more pressing issues in recent years, al-Qa`ida has been working single-mindedly to create a durable infrastructure that can withstand the loss of key leaders and cells. It has done an excellent job of tailoring its narrative for a local audience.¹⁶ With the exception of suicide attacks within Yemen itself, much of the group's message is broadly popular within the country. As one Yemeni said, "I can no longer tell the difference between al-Qa`ida in the caves and al-Qa`ida in the mosques," illustrating just how popular the group's rhetoric is on many issues.¹⁷

15 This is based on the author's interviews and conversations with government officials, as well as his own analysis of the situation in Yemen.

16 This is particularly evident from the group's videos and issues of *Sada al-Malahim*, where al-Qa`ida uses popular grievances to criticize the regime.

17 Personal interview, a Yemeni who requested anonymity, Sana`a, Yemen, August 2009.

The organization is also benefiting from other government mistakes. The overreaction of governments such as Yemen, largely as a result of U.S. pressure, of arresting nearly everyone suspected of harboring sympathy for al-Qa`ida in the aftermath of September 11 and periodically since then is not reducing radicalization; instead, it is having the opposite effect. Young men are leaving Yemen's security prisons more radical than when they were initially incarcerated. The country's revolving door prison policy is compounding the problem as more young men spend significant time in prison. In a sense, many of these young men have been prepared for recruitment by their time in prison. The initial groundwork is being laid not by al-Qa`ida but rather by the government's actions, which makes these men tempting recruitment targets when they are eventually released.

Yemen refuses to allow monitoring of its security prisons, which is a major cause for concern. Many of these men are being housed together, which only facilitates a sort of mutual encouragement and strengthening as more radical members are able to influence younger individuals.¹⁸ The various clerics and religious shaykhs who visit the prisons to preach also appear to be playing a role in the radicalization process.¹⁹ Al-Qa`ida's potential recruiting pool in Yemen is not drying up but is expanding.

AQAP's Growing Ambition

Since its reemergence in Yemen in 2006, al-Qa`ida has shown itself to be an ambitious but tempered organization, methodically taking the steps needed to rebuild and expand. The attempted assassination of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayif is part of the organization's shift in priorities since the January 2009 merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qa`ida into a single regional franchise. The attack was an early attempt by AQAP to match action with rhetoric.

¹⁸ Yemen does allow monitoring of its central prisons, but these are different from the country's many security prisons.

¹⁹ Personal interviews, various Yemeni journalists and officials familiar with the security prisons in the country, Sana'a, Yemen, July and August 2009.

Following the merger, al-Qa`ida has prioritized attacks in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states²⁰ in an attempt to make itself regionally relevant. For al-Qa`ida, this is the logical extension of its development to date in Yemen. Al-Qa`ida first wanted to rebuild in Yemen, and then it aimed to make itself relevant within the country. Now that it has accomplished both goals, it is taking the next step by expanding regionally.

This process has followed a familiar pattern: each new phase of activity begins with al-Qa`ida announcing its rather ambitious goals and then working to meet those goals. The attack on Muhammad bin Nayif was an early attempt to accomplish this, but it is unlikely to be the last. AQAP currently feels little pressure in Yemen. It has both the time and space to plot and launch attacks throughout the region from its base in the country. This is not to say that the organization will no longer carry out attacks in Yemen, but rather that these attacks are no longer its top priority. Al-Qa`ida has reached the point where it is no longer satisfied with local activity. It has its sights set on something bigger.

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²⁰ AQAP has not yet been found responsible for attacks in other Gulf states. Its statements and some circumstantial evidence, however, imply that it is plotting such operations.

AQAP a Rising Threat in Yemen

By Brian O'Neill

** This article was originally published in the April 2009 issue of the CTC Sentinel.*

ON MARCH 15, 2009, a suicide bomber attacked a group of South Korean tourists in Yemen, killing four of them along with their Yemeni guide. Less than a week later on March 18, the South Korean delegation sent to investigate the attack was targeted by another suicide bomber, who detonated his explosives in the middle of their convoy.¹

These two attacks show that a rumored peace treaty between al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni government is false.² More importantly, the terrorist attacks demonstrate that this reconstituted and renamed terrorist group³ is more adaptable, tactically flexible, and strategically nimble than previously believed. Although the attacks lacked the reach of the 2008 mortar assault on the U.S. Embassy, they proved that AQAP remains a threat to both foreign nationals and to the Yemeni government. This article examines the implications of the two attacks, and how AQAP has evolved its propaganda to achieve better resonance with the Yemeni population.

Implications of the Attacks

Taken separately, both of the March 2009 suicide attacks are worrisome. Taken as a set, they reveal an organization that is both gaining strength and demonstrating a willingness to be influenced by the larger jihadist movement. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen had, before the destruction of its initial cadre around 2004,⁴ been largely

¹ There were no casualties, except for the life of the bomber, in the March 18 attack.

² In early March, several newspapers reported that there was a potential peace treaty between the government and AQAP. The terms were rumored to be a one-year cessation of terrorist activity in exchange for the release of prisoners. It was never confirmed and was shown to be clearly false.

³ Al-Qa`ida terrorists in Yemen were formerly known as al-Qa`ida in Yemen. In late January, it announced that it was merging with the al-Qa`ida faction in Saudi Arabia, and that the two groups would now be known under one name, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

⁴ Gregory Johnsen and Brian O'Neill, "Yemen Faces Sec-

as idiosyncratic in tactics and ideas as the country's politics. It was willing to use the time-honored Yemeni culture of negotiation, and abided by what were essentially non-aggression pacts with the government. Under the new leadership of Nasir al-Wahayshi and Qasim al-Raymi, who reorganized the outfit following a 2006 prison escape, it has shown an ability to weave itself into the larger jihadist framework while remaining tied to Yemen's cultural norms. Their leaders have shown respect for and knowledge of Yemen's complex tribal system and are able to use it to their advantage. Their narrative within Yemen, for example, has focused largely on the traditional tribal distrust of the government in Sana'a. While Yemeni nationalism exists, the tribal areas are wary of centralization, and al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi expend great effort to paint themselves as being on the side of the tribesmen against the government. This narrative is a powerful one, and its appeal is rooted in Yemeni tribal culture. In this way, AQAP is different, and in the long-run more dangerous, than al-Qa`ida's troubled franchise in Iraq.

The March 15 bombing near the iconic mudbrick towers of Shibam highlighted several important aspects of the group's strength. The first is that the bomber, identified as Abd al-Rahman Mahdi Ali Qasim al-Ujayri, used his body as the weapon. In the past, al-Qa`ida-affiliated operatives in Yemen used vehicles or boats in their suicide attacks; while effective, these attacks did not allow for as great a flexibility in target selection. This change demonstrates the ability to draw from jihadist tactics used elsewhere, such as in Iraq and Palestine.

The second aspect involves the nature of the bombing itself. AQAP said in a statement that the Koreans were killed partly in revenge for their government's cooperation against Islamic terrorism,⁵ as well as "the role of these tourists in corrupting the ideology of Muslims and their morals." It seems more likely that this justification was developed after

the attack. According to witnesses, the bomber, rather than targeting a group to avenge grievances, selected the largest group he could find to maximize the impact; they happened to be Koreans.⁶ The fact that al-Ujayri was able to select his target shows an increased level of training and commitment, as

"AQAP is at the forefront of the next wave of jihad."

he presumably did not detonate his explosives prematurely and was able to wait until he found a target that would achieve the most impact.⁷ This could plausibly be tied to the training he purportedly received in Somalia.⁸

The second attack, although a failure in terms of body count, was a psychological success that demonstrated AQAP's operational abilities as well as sending a message that even official status does not guarantee protection from its reach. There are two scenarios of how this attack occurred. The first is that the attack had been planned in advance. The second is that the operation was born quickly from a presented opportunity. At this time, not enough reliable information exists to determine which scenario occurred; both, however, are troublesome.

If the attack had been planned in tandem with the first bombing, it reflects that the strategists of AQAP have the foresight to maximize the impact of their assaults. The second scenario, that of a rapidly-seized opportunity, would show that al-Wahayshi, in addition to being able to adapt and rapidly plan an operation, has a pool of recruits who are both ready to deploy at a moments notice and are already trained well enough to successfully conduct an operation (successful in terms of avoiding arrest before the mission is completed).

AQAP's Dominance in the "Virtual Space"

All of these tactical abilities show al-Qa`ida's flexibility to adapt in the physical environment. While impressive, the aftermath of the attacks is where AQAP has demonstrated its real power and danger—its increasing strength in what analyst Andrew Exum describes as their "virtual space."⁹ This refers to the world of jihadist forums, statements, and publications. In it, AQAP has developed a remarkable ability to finesse its ideological message to strike resonant chords with disparate audiences. Their flagship publication, *Sada al-Malahim (Echo of Battles)*, is frequently timed for release shortly before or after a new operation, and provides justifications that are both political and theological, and manages to target both what they see as the apostate regime of Ali Abdullah Salih and the far devil of Islam's Western enemies. Al-Wahayshi's propaganda wing is on a steep learning curve since its initial media forays in 2007 and has seemed to increase in sophistication with each message. While its reach may have been enhanced due to the merger with al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia, its reputation for professionalism was developed entirely on the Yemeni side. They gained a reputation for both skilled presentation and rapid response time well before there were even rumors of Saudi influence in al-Qa`ida in Yemen.

In the latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, Nayf Muhammad al-Qahtani, a Saudi citizen and AQAP leader, discussed both the recently published list by Saudi Arabia of their 85 most wanted terrorists and the alleged rape of Muslims by U.S. soldiers in Iraqi prisons.¹⁰ The issue demonstrates al-Qahtani's skill in linking the depredations of the West with the quisling, "heretical" governments of the peninsula. In doing this, he is attempting to tie together several sources of frustration. The near and far enemies are a usual trope in jihadist literature, but the real talent of AQAP is to not lose sight of what makes their home terrain unique.

ond Generation of Islamist Militants," *Terrorism Focus* 4:27 (2007). By 2004, through a combination of arrests, assassinations and negotiations, the al-Qa`ida franchise responsible for the bombing of the USS *Cole* had ceased to be a viable organization.

5 "Al-Qaeda Claims Killing South Korean Tourists in Revenge," *News Yemen*, March 27, 2009.

6 Inal Irsan, "Qaeda Suicide Bomber Behind Yemen Suicide Attack," Reuters, March 17, 2009.

7 Lin Noueihed, "Qaeda Bomber Behind Suicide Attack Trained in Somalia," Reuters, March 17, 2009.

8 Ibid.

9 Andrew Exum, "No Place to Hide," *The New Republic*, March 31, 2009.

10 The latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim* was released on March 21, 2009 and is available on various jihadist web forums. Also see Gregory D. Johnsen, "Al-Qahtani in Sada al-Malahim," *Waq al-Waq*, March 29, 2009.

Indeed, the statement of responsibility for the dual bombings, despite its after-the-fact rationalizations, was itself a minor masterpiece that revealed several dueling but linked strategies for the group. It is easy for an organization with broad ambitions to lose sight of its domestic objectives, just as it is easy for an organization to become overly concerned with settling scores at home and fail to carry out larger missions; the latter of which increase recruitment by enhancing the organization's reputation and maintain positive morale among the more restless foot soldiers. These conflicting objectives can potentially overwhelm even the most fervent. It must be noted that despite its regional ambitions, AQAP shrewdly has not abandoned parochial issues, and in its statement claimed that the bombing was in revenge for the government's August 2008 killing of al-Qa`ida leader Hamza al-Q`uyati.¹¹ AQAP has a few reasons for making this claim. First, there is truth to the statement. Second, it reflects a broader strategy. AQAP has frequently alleged that its men have been tortured in Yemeni prisons, and this is not a charge that is beyond the pale. By tying in its specific grievances to issues held by the public at large, and specifically by attempting to make claims that will resonate with tribesmen, who are always wary of interference from Sana`a, AQAP is helping themselves establish safe zones outside the government's writ.

This strategy is what makes AQAP a dangerous force. Its predecessors—al-Qa`ida before 2004—were willing to compromise with the government. Under the inflexible leadership of al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi, however, there is no compromise with a “compromised” government. Eschewing negotiations does not mean they are abandoning all Yemeni traditions; they are just exchanging one inconvenient tradition with the more appealing system of revenge. In utilizing a tit-for-tat justification, such as the death of al-Q`uyati, they are tying themselves into the fabric of Yemeni culture, as well as brandishing their anti-government credentials. This is important in tribal areas that have a strong libertarian bent.

¹¹ “Al-Qaeda Claims Killing South Korean Tourists in Revenge,” *News Yemen*, March 27, 2009. Al-Q`uyati was an al-Qa`ida leader killed in a raid by security forces in Tarim on August 12, 2008.

Conclusion

It is by accusing the government of torture, addressing what they see as specific government misdeeds, connecting with people on a tribal level and not losing sight of their global struggle that the reconstituted al-Qa`ida has managed to outstrip its predecessors in threat potential. AQAP is at the forefront of the next wave of jihad. The Yemen-dominated merger of the two al-Qa`ida franchises adds Saudi knowledge to an outfit that has grown in strength. It has integrated into the bewildering morass of Yemeni politics, exploiting the institutional weaknesses of the government, and is far-sighted enough to further chip away at its shaky foundation. AQAP's goal is to weaken and bring down the Yemeni government to create a safe haven for their group; their strategy is to attack tourism and the oil industry, the two tottering pillars of a desperate economy.

The suicide attacks demonstrated that AQAP is equally skilled at both operations; their concurrent propaganda outlined the organization's overall strategy. These developments prompt the need for an equally intelligent counterstrategy. The framework of this strategy would have to involve a deeper knowledge of the tribal system in Yemen, and the ability to play competing factions in AQAP against each other to fragment what is now a well-run and stable hierarchy. This would have to work hand-in-hand with strengthening the economic stability of the Yemeni government, while helping it to increase its legitimacy with its disaffected citizenry. Presently, however, the militants are growing in strength while the government is being inversely weakened. If AQAP is successful, it could bring the most important front in the struggle against jihad from the wilds of Afghanistan and Pakistan home to the holy lands.

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Assessing the Strength of Al-Qa`ida in Yemen

By Gregory D. Johnsen

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ON THE EVENING of August 10, 2008, acting on a tip from a local resident, a Yemeni security patrol approached a suspected al-Qa`ida safe house in the eastern city of Tarim.¹ The patrol came under fire, at which point it retreated, called for back-up and established a perimeter around the area in an effort to prevent any of the suspects from escaping. This tenuous stalemate lasted throughout the night. Fighting resumed in the morning, slowly escalating throughout the day. Government forces brought in two tanks, while the al-Qa`ida militants responded with rocket-propelled grenade attacks. Eventually, the militants were able to slip out of their safe house to a neighboring building, but they were unable to escape the security perimeter. By the end of the fighting, five militants, including leading operative Hamza al-Q`uyati, were dead while two more were captured.²

The raid was widely seen as a much needed victory for Yemen.³ Yemen claimed that with al-Q`uyati's death it had killed the mastermind of a string of terrorist attacks that had plagued the country in recent years. According to the government, al-Q`uyati was behind every major terrorist attack since he and 22 other militants escaped from a Political Security Organization prison in February 2006, beginning with the

¹ This account of the Tarim shootout has been compiled from statements posted on the jihadist web forum al-Ikhlās, in addition to the following article: “Marib Press is Unparalleled in Publishing Details of the Operation in Tarim, Hadramawt” (Arabic), *Marib Press*, August 11, 2008.

² In addition to al-Q`uyati, the dead included Abdullah Ali Batis, Hasan Bazar'a, Mubarak bin Hawil al-Nahdi, and Mahmud Baramah. The two captured militants were identified as Ali Muhsin Salih al-'Akbari and Muhammad Said Ba`awaydhan. The Yemeni military lost three soldiers. For a good overview, see the excellent reporting of Muhammad al-Ahmadi, “Yemen and al-Qaeda” (Arabic), *al-Ghad*, August 18, 2008.

³ Both the United States and the United Kingdom used the success of the raid as a pretext to relax travel restrictions to the country.

failed dual suicide attacks in September 2006 and ending, most recently, with the July 25 suicide attack on a military base in Sayyun.⁴ The government also claimed that al-Q`uyati was planning further attacks in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, given what is known about this period of al-Qa`ida's operations in Yemen and the local make-up of al-Q`uyati's cell, this is unlikely to be true.⁵ Instead, al-Qa`ida, while temporarily weakened, remains a security threat within Yemen.

The September 17 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a, which left more than a dozen people dead, illustrates this threat. The attack, while shocking, was not necessarily unexpected. Days after al-Q`uyati's death, the Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen posted a statement threatening retaliatory attacks.⁶ The proof, the statement said in a common Islamist phrase, "will be in what you see and not what you hear."⁷ Then, on September 9, a teaser was posted to al-Ikhlās⁸ indicating that the fifth issue of al-Qa`ida's *Sada al-Malahim* journal was due to be released in the coming days.⁹ The combination of these two indicators should have triggered warnings in Yemen, as during the past year al-Qa`ida has developed a pattern of linking its attacks to its rhetoric.

Successes Reveal Al-Qa`ida's Composition

The September 2006 attacks were most likely planned and organized by Fawaz al-Rubay`i, who was killed by Yemeni security forces in October 2006. Al-Q`uyati, on the other hand, first reappeared publicly this summer in a July 23 videotape released by the "al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula: The Soldiers'

Brigades of Yemen."¹⁰ Al-Q`uyati's appearance in the video was the first crack in the facade of anonymity that had surrounded the organization. While he does appear to have been the mastermind of the July 25 suicide attack in Sayyun,¹¹ it is unlikely that he was as prolific as government reports suggest. Furthermore, the local nature of al-Q`uyati's cell—five of the individuals, including al-Q`uyati, were from al-

"Although al-Q`uyati's death is a significant blow to al-Qa`ida, it did not defeat or even cripple the organization in Yemen."

Mukalla, while the other two came from the neighboring towns of Shabwa and al-Qatin¹²—suggests a more limited reach than the government's claim assumes.¹³ Part of this verbal overreach is designed to deflect criticism by Western allies, which have grown increasingly strident in publicly questioning Yemen's commitment to the war on al-Qa`ida.

Yemen has further underscored the rhetorical nature of this claim by the moves it made following the August 11 shootout. Almost immediately, Yemen announced that it had arrested a number of al-Qa`ida supporters, and within a week it claimed to have discovered and dismantled a separate terrorist cell in Hadramawt.¹⁴ Days later, following a visit by Muhammad bin Nayif, Saudi Arabia's assistant minister of the interior for security affairs, Yemen announced that it was extraditing eight Saudi militants back to their country of

birth.¹⁵ By the beginning of September, according to most media accounts, Yemen had managed to arrest at least 30 al-Qa`ida suspects since the Tarim raid. On the surface, these appear to be significant victories for Yemen at the expense of al-Qa`ida, but closer examination suggests they are more symbolic than substantive. According to Nasser Arrabyee of *Gulf News*, five of the al-Qa`ida suspects that Yemen arrested in one security sweep "were not hiding, but [rather] they were under lenient house arrest."¹⁶ Likewise, the eight suspects returned to Saudi Arabia do not appear to have been arrested recently, but rather held until their extradition would guarantee maximum benefit.¹⁷

The narrative of a quick and forceful reaction meets both of Yemen's goals at once. First, it allows Yemen to appear strong and in control of the security situation to its Western allies and foreign businesses, which have been growing increasingly concerned. Second, it suggests that the two militants who Yemen captured in the Tarim raid—Ali Muhsin Salih al-'Akbari and Muhammad Said Ba`awaydhan—have "talked"; the appearance of which, Yemen believes, will turn up the pressure on remaining al-Qa`ida cells, helping to flush them out into the open. Despite these choreographed moves, the Tarim raid and the events that preceded it help to explain much about al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Most notably, it sheds light on the relationship between the "al-Qa`ida Organization in the South of the Arabian Peninsula" and the "al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula: The Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen." These two alternate group identifications had confused many analysts.

Theory of a Split Loses Credence

One theory that has gained strength in recent months is that the two groups had split over tactics.¹⁸ This explanation

4 Ibid.

5 The author dates the "second phase of the war against al-Qaeda in Yemen" to February 2006. For more information, see Gregory D. Johnsen "Securing Yemen's Cooperation in the Second Phase of the War on al-Qa`ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

6 Posted on www.al-ekhlaas.net, August 19, 2008.

7 Ibid.

8 Al-Ikhlās is a prominent jihadist web forum located at www.al-ekhlaas.net.

9 The al-Ikhlās website was taken offline, most likely by hackers, before the fifth issue could be posted. As a result, analysts are unable to determine what al-Qa`ida in Yemen is saying in regard to the attack. This makes predicting and analyzing the group's future activities extremely difficult.

10 This group also goes by the name Jund al-Yaman.

11 For more information on the attack, see "Yemen's Two al-Qaeda's," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 21, 2008.

12 Al-Q`uyati was born in Saudi Arabia, but his family was originally from al-Mukalla and he seems to have made his way back to his ancestral home after escaping from prison in 2006.

13 In addition to the local make-up of al-Q`uyati's cell which has not been stressed enough, one should also note that the local tip that led to the Tarim raid is a positive development that has been under-reported.

14 Husayn al-Jarabani, "Yemen: The Governor of Hadramawt Discovers a New al-Qaeda Cell" (Arabic), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 16, 2008.

15 Faysal Mukrim, "Yemen Delivers to Saudi Eight Suspects in Security Issues" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, August 22, 2008.

16 Nasser Arrabyee, "Five Al Qaeda Suspects Detained in Yemen," *Gulf News*, August 19, 2008.

17 This information was confirmed in personal conversations with Yemeni government officials.

18 This theory has been most forcefully expressed by Nicole Strake of the Gulf Research Centre. See, for example,

held that the original group, which calls itself the “al-Qa`ida Organization in the South of the Arabian Peninsula,” favored a “lie low” strategy that involved building up its internal network and recruiting new members, while the splinter group—the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen—was eager to strike immediately. Further strengthening this theory were reports in the Yemeni press of a split between Hamza al-Q`uyati and two of his colleagues, Nasir al-Wahayshi and Qasim al-Raymi, respectively the *amir* and second-in-command of al-Qa`ida in the South of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet a closer examination of the evidence—statements, videos and attacks—suggests that talk of an acrimonious split within the current generation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen may be premature or misleading. The overlap of rhetoric and individuals is strong enough to indicate that the two groups are more like loose cells of the same organization than separate entities altogether.¹⁹

To fully appreciate this overlap, it is necessary to reexamine the history of al-Qa`ida in Yemen since it was reconstituted following the February 2006 prison break. Of the original 23 escapees, three—Nasir al-Wahayshi, Qasim al-Raymi and Muhammad al-`Umda²⁰—are still at large, according to official government statements. This information, however, is contradicted by a fax sent by Yemen’s Ministry of Interior to real estate agents warning them not to rent to any of the 33 at-large militants listed in the fax. Included in this list are al-Wahayshi, al-Raymi, and al-`Umda as well as Ibrahim al-Huwaydi and Jamal al-Badawi, both of whom Yemen has repeatedly claimed were in jail.²¹

Nicole Strake, “Al-Qaeda in Yemen Divided, but Dangerous,” *The Peninsula*, June 2008.

¹⁹ The author would like to thank Thomas Hegghammer for a series of enlightening conversations, which did much to help clarify thinking on this matter. Of course, any mistakes that remain are solely the author’s responsibility. For more details, see “Yemen’s Two al-Qaeda’s,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 21, 2008.

²⁰ Al-`Umda, who is also known by the *kunya* Abu Ghrayb al-Taizi, appears to be the same individual who writes under that pseudonym for *Sada al-Malahim*.

²¹ The fax, of which the author obtained a copy, is dated May 25, 2008, and in addition to the five names listed above it also includes al-Wahayshi’s brother, Fahd, Nayif al-Qahtani, seven Egyptians and a Jordanian.

The first attacks attempted by a reconstituted al-Qa`ida in Yemen were the failed September 2006 dual suicide bombings on oil and gas facilities in Marib and Hadramawt. Months later, in March 2007, Ali Mahmud Qasaylah, the chief criminal investigator in Marib, was assassinated. This would later be the first attack for which the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen would take credit in a statement released in February

“Yet a closer examination of the evidence suggests that talk of an acrimonious split within the current generation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen may be premature or misleading.”

2008.²² For its part, *Sada al-Malahim*, the bi-monthly journal edited by al-Qa`ida in the South of the Arabian Peninsula’s al-Wahayshi, would later eulogize one of the attackers, `Abd al-`Aziz Jaradan, in its second issue, following his death in August 2007. The overlap of individual operatives such as this between the supposed two groups is some of the strongest evidence that the split, if it exists as such, is more a tactical ploy than a divisive rupture within the organization

In late June 2007, Qasim al-Raymi released two statements, one of which was a warning to the government. Within days, these statements were followed by a suicide attack on a convoy of Spanish tourists in Marib on July 2. This attack was also later claimed by the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen. It stated that the attack was in retribution for the deaths of five individuals at the hands of Yemeni security forces²³; one of whom, Yasir al-Hamayqani, was later eulogized in the first issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, which was released in January 2008.

²² Jund al-Iman, “Statement 1,” Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen, February 24, 2008. The statement misattributed the date of the attack, placing it in April instead of March.

²³ Ibid.

The timing of the attack, following so closely after al-Raymi’s two statements, suggests some level of coordination. Likewise, the identity of the suicide bomber, at least circumstantially, suggests a possible link to al-Raymi. The bomber was identified as Abduh Muhammad Sayyid Ruhayqa, a 21-year-old Yemeni originally from the district of al-Rayma, who was living in the eastern Sana`ani neighborhood of Musayk. Like al-Raymi, whose *kunya* Abu Hurayrah al-Sana`ani reflects his birthplace, Ruhayqa was known by the *kunya* Abu al-Maqdad al-Sana`ani. His last will and testament, which was posted to al-Ikhlās on March 29, 2008, the anniversary of the assassination of Qasaylah, also provides some clues. In the video, Ruhayqa, who is identified only by his *kunya*, states unequivocally that he is carrying out the attack for the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen. He states that the attack is revenge for the death of Fawaz al-Rubay`i and to “expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula.” As he continues to deliver his will, however, he mentions both the al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Country of Yemen and the al-Qa`ida Organization in the South of the Arabian Peninsula. He appears to use the names interchangeably, which could mean that they are synonymous for the members of al-Qa`ida in Yemen. The video definitively demonstrates the existence of the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen as early as late June 2007, well before the group first appeared online in February 2008.

In addition to the rationale of revenge, Ruhayqa’s desire to “expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula” is a common theme among both al-Wahayshi’s group and the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen. For the latter, it has appeared at the top of all 13 of the group’s statements, and has consistently been invoked as a reason for carrying out attacks. It has also appeared often in issues of *Sada al-Malahim*. In the first issue it was quoted by Abu Hammam al-Qahtani, who cited it as the most important reason not to travel to Afghanistan or Iraq to fight but rather to stay in Yemen.²⁴ Abu Hammam is the *kunya* of Nayif Muhammad al-Qahtani, who has been linked by the Yemeni government to the July 2007

²⁴ “Interview with One of the Wanted Ones” (Arabic), *Sada al-Malahim*, January-February 2008.

suicide attack against tourists in Marib. The hadith commanding Muslims to “expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula” is also cited in the second issue of *Sada al-Malahim* in a statement explaining the group’s thinking. The statement, which opens the journal, says that any infidel entering the Arabian Peninsula is fair game to be attacked or killed, regardless of whether they call themselves a tourist, a diplomat or a journalist.²⁵

Al-Qahtani was also linked to al-Q`uyati’s Tarim cell through passports and plans, which were discovered in the safe house following the August 11 raid. Subsequent reports in the Saudi media that al-Qahtani had received funding from individuals in Libya and Iran is a likely distortion by overzealous Yemeni officials.²⁶ The preponderance of evidence strongly suggests a level of cooperation and even coordination between what some analysts had pegged as two separate groups.

Al-Qa`ida Remains Viable Threat in Yemen

Although al-Q`uyati’s death is a significant blow to al-Qa`ida, it did not defeat or even cripple the organization in Yemen. Indeed, eight days after his death the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen posted its 13th statement to al-Ikhlās. The statement, which threatened attacks in retribution for his death, was posted by the same user in the same manner as the previous 12 statements. This continuity demonstrates that the group’s electronic infrastructure was not destroyed in the Tarim raid. Instead, there are two possible explanations.

In the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen’s 13 statements, it has referenced three separate brigades, crediting each with different attacks. These divisions were originally dismissed by most as jihadist hyperbole designed to give an artificially inflated sense of the group’s strength. It is possible, however, that there is some truth in the claims of three different brigades, which would mean that the Tarim raid destroyed one, but left the other two intact. The second likely possibility is that an individual escaped

the raid and has continued to post and threaten the government on the internet, while lacking the necessary tools to act. A similar occurrence happened in Saudi Arabia in April 2005 when a “bonus issue” of *Sawt al-Jihad* appeared months after most of the organization had been eliminated.²⁷

The core of al-Qa`ida’s leadership in Yemen—al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi—remain at large, as do a number of other known militants. While it is difficult to quantify the remaining strength of al-Qa`ida in Yemen in terms of numbers, it does appear that the organization remains capable of carrying out attacks. By far the most worrying indicator is the localized nature of al-Q`uyati’s cell. Of the seven individuals killed or captured in the Tarim raid, only al-Q`uyati was known to security forces. This suggests a diffusion of strength, which should concern Yemen. Already there has been discussion on al-Ikhlās about a new way forward for al-Qa`ida in the aftermath of al-Q`uyati’s death. In one widely circulated letter of advice, a user on the site wrote that what was happening in Yemen reminded him of the fall of al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia.²⁸ To avoid a similar fate in Yemen, he suggested the selective targeting of security officials.²⁹ What is clear is that despite al-Q`uyati’s death, al-Qa`ida remains a significant security threat in Yemen.

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²⁷ The author is grateful to Thomas Hegghammer for the reference.

²⁸ Posted on www.al-ekhlaas.net, August 19, 2008.

²⁹ The suggestion was widely reported in the Arabic media. See, for instance, Faysal Mukrim “Al-Qaeda in Yemen is Incited to Target Leader in Security and Intelligence” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, August 22, 2008. Strangely, Mukrim refers to the letter as an official al-Qa`ida statement, which it is not. It is not clear whether the suggestion of targeting security officials will be adopted by al-Qa`ida.

Al-Qa`ida in Yemen’s 2008 Campaign

By Gregory D. Johnsen

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FOLLOWING THE DRAMATIC escape of 23 al-Qa`ida suspects from a Political Security prison in Sana`a in early February 2006, there has been a fear that Yemen could once again become an active theater of operations for Islamic militants. That fear has now been realized. During the past few months, al-Qa`ida in Yemen has embarked on an aggressive propaganda campaign that has been accompanied by a series of equally aggressive attacks. Tourist convoys, army checkpoints, oil fields, the U.S. Embassy and most recently a housing compound for foreigners have all been targeted as part of the group’s stated goal to “expel the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula.”¹

Given Yemen’s reputation for violence and the journalistic clichés that accompany nearly every English report of a country teeming with guns and its importance as Usama bin Ladin’s “ancestral homeland,” it may seem that this latest series of attacks is merely a continuation of the past. This, however, is not the case. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen took a major step forward in January 2008 with the publication of the first issue of its online journal *Sada al-Malahim* (*Echo of Battles*), which articulated in bold, broad strokes the group’s new strategy. Instead of the large, one-time attacks favored by the previous generation, this group under the leadership of Nasir al-Wahayshi has initiated a policy of constant offense consisting of small, continual attacks. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen seems to understand that there is no one knockout blow that will force Westerners out of Yemen and bring the government to its knees, but rather that it must maintain a constant barrage of activity.

¹ This phrase has appeared at the top of all four statements released by The Soldier’s Brigade of Yemen on February 24, 2008, March 21, 2008, March 30, 2008 and April 7, 2008. All statements were accessed via the al-Ikhlās website.

²⁵ “Opening,” *Sada al-Malahim*, March-April 2008.

²⁶ Muhammad al-Malfi, “Abu Hammam al-Qahtani Receives Support from Iranians and Libyans and Invites the Terrorists in the Kingdom to his Refuge on the Yemeni Border” (Arabic), *al-Watan*, August 20, 2008.

The Mistakes

The past four months should not have come as a surprise to close observers of the situation in Yemen, as the group has grown increasingly bolder and more active since it was reorganized by al-Wahayshi. The latest attacks illustrate the dangers of lapsed vigilance of which both the U.S. and Yemeni governments are guilty. It also demonstrates the fallacy of attempting to isolate counterterrorism from other U.S. policy objectives; this can be done on a spreadsheet, but not always in the minds of foreign counterparts.

There is also a lesson on the dangers of negligence. Yemen is quickly becoming a failed state. It is running out of oil and recently it has increased production in an attempt to ease budget shortfalls. Yet, it is only borrowing against its future, and even this is not sufficient. Disaffected youth in the south have taken to the streets to protest the lack of jobs and rising prices. Not surprisingly, these protests have turned violent and further exacerbated long-standing tensions between the north and the south. The nearly four-year-old al-Huthi revolt continues to sporadically flare-up despite the numerous cease-fires and half-hearted peace negotiations. As a result, the Yemeni government may now be too concerned with its own survival to give the al-Qa`ida issue the attention it deserves.²

The United States has failed to understand the situation in which President `Ali `Abdullah Salih's regime sees itself, and instead of helping to ensure regime stability it has seemed more eager to threaten the country for perceived betrayals such as the Jamal al-Badawi case.³ Both countries have

² For example, in early April when much of the English language reporting on the country was focused on al-Qa`ida attacks against foreigners, the majority of the Arabic reporting on Yemen focused on protests in the south.

³ The United States withheld aid to Yemen once it became public knowledge that Jamal al-Badawi was free. It is likely that the public nature of U.S. disapproval was a contributing factor to Jabir al-Banna's surprise appearance in court in February 2008. Yemen security reportedly reacted to the public snub by the United States by encouraging al-Banna to appear in public. Despite their past crimes and continued support, neither al-Banna nor al-Badawi are part of the current al-Qa`ida campaign in Yemen.

also failed to understand that Yemen is witnessing something both new and dangerous. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen was defeated by the close cooperation of the United States and Yemen during the first phase of the war (2000-2003), but it learned from the loss. Now, while al-Qa`ida in Yemen has adapted to the changing environment, both the United States and Yemen appear ready to fight what it was instead of what it has become.

The First and Second Phases

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Yemen, like many countries, was eager to appease the United States. It had unpleasant memories of the last time it thwarted U.S. policy and was eager to avoid repeating the same mistakes.⁴ During a November 2001 visit to Washington, President Salih made sure the United

“Al-Qa`ida in Yemen has already shown that it can rise from the ashes of defeat stronger and better organized than it ever was originally.”

States knew what side his country was on. Yemen followed Salih's words with actions, arresting anyone it suspected of harboring sympathy for al-Qa`ida. It also worked hand-in-hand with U.S. intelligence services, coordinating the November 2002 strike on al-Qa`ida's head in Yemen, Abu Ali al-Harithi, which was conducted by an unmanned CIA drone. Yet this represented the zenith of U.S.-Yemeni cooperation, as a Pentagon leak, intended for domestic political consumption, destroyed the cover story on which both countries had agreed. Salih paid a high price domestically for allowing the United States to carry out an attack in Yemen, and it took

⁴ Yemen served on the UN Security Council during the 1990-91 Gulf War, and its continued abstentions on security resolutions threatening Iraq won it the displeasure of the United States, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. All three cut off aid to Yemen, while the latter took the even more damaging step of expelling roughly 750,000 guest workers, which cut off worker remittances and helped destabilize the Yemeni economy.

more than a year for the government to publicly admit that it had authorized Washington to act. The United States was still paying the price for hubris a year later in November 2003, when Yemen captured Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, al-Harithi's replacement, at a wedding in Sana`a. Instead of being granted direct access to the prisoner, U.S. officials were forced to work through intermediaries.

In retrospect, however, al-Ahdal's capture marked the end of the first phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. With most of the suspected militants either in jail or drawn to the fighting in Iraq, al-Qa`ida faded into the background alongside a host of other more pressing concerns faced by Yemen. For Yemen, al-Qa`ida and Islamic militancy has always been largely a Western problem that affects the country indirectly, but is nowhere near as pressing as a religious uprising among Zaydis in the north or economic woes that exacerbate tensions between the north and the south. These latter two issues are security challenges that directly threaten the survival of the regime, while al-Qa`ida, at least in Yemen's calculus, does not.

Both Yemen and the United States slowly began to act as if the threat from al-Qa`ida had been neutralized. Yemen became increasingly more occupied with putting down the al-Huthi uprising in the Sa`da governorate and with implementing bitter economic reforms that led to riots and widespread dissatisfaction.⁵ On the U.S. side, there were a lack of clear policy goals. During a November 2005 trip to the United States, Salih was told that Yemen was being suspended from a U.S. government program, the Millennium Challenge Account. The suspension shocked Salih, who was under the impression that he was going to be rewarded for Yemen's help in the war against al-Qa`ida. Instead, he was hurt by the loss of \$20 million in aid. The following day, his anger was compounded when the World Bank told him that it was cutting its aid from \$420 million to \$280 million. Both of the cuts were attributed to rampant corruption within the Yemeni government.

⁵ Gregory D. Johnsen, "Salih's Road to Relection," *Middle East Report Online*, January 13, 2006.

American claims of corruption were on the mark. Yemen is plagued by “double-dippers,” employees who draw two or more government salaries, as well as by “shadow employees,” workers who exist only on paper but still receive paychecks. Nevertheless, it is important for U.S. policymakers to understand that Washington cannot have everything it wants in Yemen. The United States must decide whether it wants a partner in the war against al-Qa`ida, or whether it wants a country that is attempting to meet democratic benchmarks. No matter the goal, the starting point has to be a stable Yemen. Withdrawing aid from Yemen, whatever the reason, only makes stabilizing the country that much more difficult. Already the government does not have firm control over the hinterlands, which is why the recent attacks in Marib and Hadramawt are not that surprising. The more worrying trend is the two attacks on the U.S. Embassy and the Haddah housing complex in Sana`a. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen has learned from watching the fighting in Iraq that it can thrive in an unstable and chaotic environment. Yemen’s ever increasing slide toward instability only provides al-Qa`ida with more operative freedom.

Mistakes of policy and vigilance could be concealed when al-Qa`ida was largely dormant in the country. That dynamic changed, however, with the February 2006 prison break. Within months, al-Qa`ida was once again a security threat in the country, attempting what would ultimately be failed suicide attacks on oil and gas facilities in Marib and Hadramawt.⁶ This early and haphazard attempt was soon eclipsed by a more professional attack in July 2007 when a suicide bomber struck a convoy of Spanish tourists in Marib. This attack followed on the heels of two al-Qa`ida statements, both of which were essentially a call to arms by al-

6 For more on the aftermath of this attack, the trial of which is still ongoing, see Robert F. Worth, “Wanted by the F.B.I., but Walking out of a Yemeni Hearing,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2008. For more background on the February 2006 escape, see Gregory D. Johnsen, “Tracking Yemen’s 23 Escaped Jihadis – Part 1,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5:18 (2007) and Gregory D. Johnsen, “Tracking Yemen’s 23 Escaped Jihadis – Part 2,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5:19 (2007). Also see “Al-Ghad Publishes the Names and Information about the Escapees” (Arabic), *al-Ghad*, June 25, 2007.

Qa`ida in Yemen’s new commander, Nasir al-Wahayshi.⁷ He has worked hard to rebuild and reorganize al-Qa`ida in Yemen and has been careful to apply the lessons he learned from the organization’s early failures to his current task.

The 2008 Campaign

One of al-Wahayshi’s major accomplishments was the publication of the online journal *Sada al-Malahim* in January 2008. The first issue features an interview with a Saudi fighter, Abu Hammam al-Qahtani, who explains his rationale for remaining in Arabia instead of traveling to Iraq. “This choice was made for two reasons,” he said in the interview. “The first is a legal reason.” He then proceeded to quote a Qur’anic verse and a hadith that command Muslims to

“For the United States, the stability of Yemen is the first and most important step in winning the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen.”

“expel the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula.” His second reason is a military one. Remaining in Yemen, he explained, will allow him to strike at oil supplies in Arabia that aid the West in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁸ The journal was quite clearly an opening salvo in a propaganda war. It was aimed at a broad audience, with small features on some of the classical figures of the jihadist world including Sayyid Qutb, `Umar `Abd al-Rahman, and the Saudi fighter known as Khattab.⁹

7 Al-Wahayshi was introduced as the new head of al-Qa`ida in Yemen by Abu Hurayra al-Sana`ani, the *kunya* of Qasim al-Raymi. Both men were among the 23 escapees. For more on the events of July 2007 and al-Wahayshi’s background, see “Al-Wahayshi the Leader of al-Qa`ida in Yemen” (Arabic), *al-Wasat*, June 27, 2007; Gregory D. Johnsen and Brian O’Neill, “Yemen Attack Reveals Struggles Among al-Qaeda’s Ranks,” *Terrorism Focus* 4:22 (2007); Gregory D. Johnsen, “Al-Qaeda in Yemen Reorganizes under Nasir al-Wahayshi,” *Terrorism Focus* 5:11 (2008).

8 “An Interview with One of the Wanted Men – Part 1” (Arabic), *Sada al-Malahim* #1, January 2008, p. 8.

9 Khattab was poisoned by Russian forces in Chechnya

Within days of releasing the first issue of *Sada al-Malahim* in January 2008, al-Qa`ida in Yemen attacked a convoy of tourists in Hadramawt on January 18, killing two Belgians and two Yemeni drivers. The attack seemed to fit a pattern that al-Qa`ida had developed in June and July 2007 of conducting an attack on the heels of a public statement.¹⁰ Little more than a month later, on February 24, a previously unknown group calling itself The Soldier’s Brigade of Yemen released a one-page statement on al-Ikhlās claiming credit for the attack on the Belgian convoy, as well as the March 2007 assassination of Ali Mahmud al-Qasaylah, the July 2007 attack on Spanish tourists in Marib and two attacks on military checkpoints in Hadramawt in November 2007.¹¹ Initially, there were thoughts among intelligence officers in Yemen that this group was a fiction that existed only on the internet and was trying to steal credit from al-Wahayshi’s group. More recent evidence, however, indicates that this is not the case.

On March 29, for example, the same user, Jund al-Iman, posted a 13-minute video on al-Ikhlās that included the last will and testament of a suicide bomber who identified himself as Abu al-Miqdad al-Sana`ani. The footage on the video indicated that al-Sana`ani was the bomber who carried out the July 2007 attack on the Spanish tourists in Marib. Al-Sana`ani, whose real name was Abdu Muhammad Said al-Ruhayqah, clearly states on the video that he is carrying out the attack for The Soldier’s Brigade of Yemen.¹² There is also the fact that

in 2002. His real name was Samir Salih Abdullah al-Suwaylim.

10 For more, see Gregory D. Johnsen, “Attacks on Oil are a First Priority for al-Qaeda in Yemen,” *Terrorism Focus* 5:5 (2008).

11 “Statement 1,” The Soldier’s Brigade of Yemen, February 24, 2008. The full name of the group is: The al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula: The Soldier’s Brigade of Yemen. There are a handful of mistakes and typos throughout the four statements that this group has released, all of which have posted on al-Ikhlās by a user identified as Jund al-Iman (Soldier of Faith). For example, in the first statement the group said that al-Qasaylah was assassinated in April 2007, but he was actually killed in March 2007. Other mistakes are mainly limited to typos and misspellings in Arabic. For more on al-Qasaylah, see Gregory D. Johnsen, “Is al-Qaeda in Yemen Regrouping?” *Terrorism Focus* 4:15 (2007).

12 Al-Ruhayqah was from the Musayk neighborhood

Sada al-Malahim, which is being directed by al-Wahayshi, neglected to deny that The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen was speaking for it in its second issue, which was released on March 13. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen's information officer, Sayf Muhammad, did put out a statement denying that a January interview between the local Yemeni paper *al-Wasat* and an individual claiming to be al-Qa`ida in Yemen's information officer was legitimate.¹³ "We say that we are the al-Qa`ida organization of jihad in the South of the Arabian Peninsula and that the callers are ignorant of the situation and have no relationship with the group."¹⁴ While it is far from clear whether the same people are putting out both *Sada al-Malahim* and the statements of The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, it appears that they are either united under al-Wahayshi's leadership or at least working in concert.

The second issue of *Sada al-Malahim* is both smoother and more authoritative of tone than its earlier version. Just like the first issue of the journal, the second was followed almost immediately by an attention-grabbing attack. On March 18, the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a was the target of three mortars that fell short of the embassy, killing one guard and injuring a number of girls at a neighboring school.¹⁵ Almost immediately, The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen released a statement claiming credit for a March 1 clash with government soldiers in Mukalla and the attack on the U.S. Embassy. The statement expressed regret at the injuries to the schoolgirls and asked God for their quick recovery. It went on to say, however, that "previously we

of Sana`a, which would fit with his *kunya* of Abu al-Miqdad al-Sana`ani. Furthermore, the age of the man on the video seems to match with al-Ruhayqah, who was 21-years-old.

¹³ *Al-Wasat* has since lost its license for domestic political reasons that have nothing to do with al-Qa`ida, in another mistaken move by the Yemeni government as it feels threatened.

¹⁴ "Statement of Denial" (Arabic), *Sada al-Malahim* #2, March 2008, p. 8. It should also be noted that in the second issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, al-Qa`ida in Yemen changed its name to: "Al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the South of the Arabian Peninsula." The group is referred to as al-Qa`ida in Yemen throughout this article for the sake of continuity and brevity.

¹⁵ "Families and Teachers Concerned Post Attack," *Yemen Times*, March 19, 2008.

have warned Muslims about not getting too close to government and foreign offices."¹⁶ A little more than a week later, The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen put out its third statement claiming that it had attacked a French oil pipeline on March 27 and a Chinese oil field on March 29.¹⁷ The Yemeni government acknowledged that there had been a pipeline explosion, but denied that it was a terrorist attack.¹⁸ Al-Qa`ida in Yemen followed these attacks up with its most recent strikes on two military checkpoints in Hadramawt and a mortar attack on a housing compound for foreigners in the Haddah district of Sana`a. In the statement, the group reiterated its claim that it would not rest until the last unbeliever had been driven from the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁹

Securing the Future

This campaign is likely to get stronger before it gets weaker for two reasons. First, al-Qa`ida in Yemen has effectively exploited U.S. and Yemeni negligence to carefully lay the groundwork for a successful campaign by linking its rhetoric to action. Tied to this is the fact that it has slowly increased the number and focus of its attacks, which appears to have increased recruiting. The more successful and vocal the group is, the more recruits who want to join. Second, al-Qa`ida in Yemen will continue to benefit from the lack of stability in Yemen. Not only is government attention directed elsewhere, but so is the attention of the population at large. This means that while the government is unable to devote its finite resources toward combating al-Qa`ida, there has also not been a visceral public backlash to the deaths of Yemenis during this campaign such as what has helped to derail other campaigns like the one in Saudi Arabia in 2003.

For the United States, the stability of Yemen is the first and most important step in winning the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Unfortunately, this will not be easy to

secure. Washington must be realistic about what is and is not possible in Yemen. It must decide on clear, realistic policy goals and accurately articulate these to the Yemeni government. The previous carrot-and-stick approach is not a sustainable policy. Washington will have to put more money, not less, into the country if it wants to prevent full collapse. Simply throwing money at the problem and clearly articulating policy goals, however, will not be enough to stabilize Yemen. Washington will also have to work in concert with its allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, which has much more influence in Yemen than does the United States. None of these steps will be easy, but failure to carry out any of them will almost certainly result in the continued instability of the country, which will in turn allow al-Qa`ida in Yemen more strategic freedom.

Al-Qa`ida in Yemen has already shown that it can rise from the ashes of defeat stronger and better organized than it ever was originally. The United States and Yemen have yet to prove that they can adapt as quickly and as ably as al-Qa`ida has done, but both must be flexible if they hope to win the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen and prevent future incarnations.

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¹⁶ "Statement 2," The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, March 21, 2008.

¹⁷ "Statement 3," The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, March 30, 2008.

¹⁸ "Yemen Says Pipeline Explosion not Terror," UPI, April 1, 2008.

¹⁹ "Statement 4," The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, April 7, 2008.

Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen

By Laurent Bonnefoy

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IN THE MIDDLE EAST, Salafism has gained prominence during the last two decades. This is especially true in countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia where a political version of Salafism, often labeled *sabwa*, emerged as a significant social movement.¹ In Yemen, however, the main Salafist trend is characterized by an apparently apolitical stance. It was developed by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i in the early 1980s around the Dar al-Hadith institute in the small town of Dammaj in Sa'da Province. Al-Wadi'i was a cleric educated in the 1960s and 1970s at various Saudi religious institutions (including the famous Islamic University of Medina) and maintained ambiguous links with that country's rulers and religious elites until his death in July 2001.² Rapidly, Dar al-Hadith expanded and educated thousands of students coming from Yemen and abroad; other institutes spawned in other regions of the country. Theoretically, the main features of that version of Salafism include a claim of loyalty to the political ruler (*amir*, king or president) even when that ruler is corrupt and unjust, as well as a will to transcend local and national contexts by delivering a universal message based exclusively on the Qur'an and the hadith. These Yemeni Salafists aim to preserve Muslims from strife by not engaging in politics, nor participating in elections, demonstrations, or revolutions. Yet, they believe they can play a role in orienting state policies through advice given in private to the ruler.

Such positions clearly distinguish Yemeni Salafism from other Islamist trends and figures—including radical Muslim Brotherhood-associated figures

such as 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani³—who at least formally endorse elections and are stigmatized as sources of division and corruption by al-Wadi'i's followers. Apolitical Salafists typically condemn violence and terrorist operations targeting civilians. In fact, al-Wadi'i was highly critical of the jihadist strategy at the global level as well as inside Yemen from the early 1990s onward. During that time, he accused Usama bin Ladin, who was then trying to launch new wars after Afghanistan, of preferring to invest in weapons rather than in mosques. He even apparently botched some of Bin Ladin's planned operations against the socialist elites of South Yemen.⁴

While bridges between apolitical Salafists (or "purists," as Quintan Wiktorowicz describes them⁵) and armed movements may exist, its frequent association with jihadist groups or its depiction as the antechamber of terrorism can be misleading. By focusing on the issue of violence, this article intends to show how the Salafist doctrine is often flexible and reinterpreted by clerics and activists.

Yemen's Salafists as Allies of Government?

In the post-9/11 period and after al-Wadi'i's death, condemnation of violence became a way for Yemen's Salafist movement to legitimize its position in a precarious context. Such a condemnation was obviously not new but grew more explicit as state repression became a possibility.⁶ Saudi sources condemning terrorism written by clerics close to the official religious establishment became more and more popular inside of Yemen.⁷

3 Gregory Johnsen, "Profile of Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani," *Terrorism Monitor* 4:7 (2006): pp. 3-6.

4 On al-Wadi'i's criticism of Usama bin Ladin, see Muqbil al-Wadi'i, *Tuhfat al-mujib 'ala as'ilat al-badar wa al-gharib* (Sana'a: Dar al-Athar, 2005), p. 281. Also see Brynjar Lia, "Destructive Doctrinarians": *Abu Musab al-Suri's Critique of the Salafis in the Jihadi Current* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2007), p. 4.

5 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 9:3 (2006): pp. 207-239.

6 "Zawjat Bin Ladin ta'ud ila al-Yaman ma'a 'asharat min 'anasir al-Qa'ida," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, December 29, 2001.

7 Zayd Bin Muhammad al-Madkhali, *Al-Irbab wa atharuhu al-sayyi' 'ala al-afraad wa al-umam* (Cairo: Dar al-Minhaj, 2003), p. 128.

Essentially, these sources blamed the politicized Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and some political Salafists—including famous Kuwaiti cleric 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khalik and Syrian Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin—for upsurges of violence. They also considered al-Qa'ida an anomaly.

In such a context, the wide spectrum of Salafists in Yemen was eager to stress the fact that it would not endorse violent strategies against the state or its allies. Abu'l-Hasan al-Ma'ribi, the leader of a dissident Salafist fringe and writer of an anti-terrorism manifesto,⁸ along with his rival, Yahya al-Hajuri, supported Yemeni President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih's reelection for a new term during the 2006 presidential ballot. A few years before, Muhammad al-Imam, probably the most charismatic heir of al-Wadi'i, had delivered a speech at a conference in 2003 indirectly condemning jihad in Iraq against the U.S.-led occupation.⁹ He claimed that in order to be legitimate, jihad had to be endorsed by the Yemeni government, which as a new ally of the United States in the "global war on terrorism" would obviously not do. Such an assertion considered Yemenis leaving for Iraq as illegitimate fighters.

Through these steps, Salafists undoubtedly transformed themselves into allies of the Yemeni government in a matter that was reminiscent of the Saudi religious authority's capacity to endorse its state's policies and decisions in all circumstances. Despite their conservative and radical interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, the Salafists appeared as advocates of loyalty or even moderation and as actors able to efficiently delegitimize violent strategies through theological arguments.

Potential for Violence Remains

This image, however, is incomplete, and it obscures many of the practical inconsistencies of the Salafist movement in Yemen. Deeds might at times appear to directly contradict the peaceful and apolitical doctrine. In parallel to such condemnations of violence, Salafist individuals have supported actions

8 Abu'l-Hasan al-Ma'ribi, *Al-taffirat wa al-ightiyalat: al-asbab, al-athar, al-'ilaj* (Riyadh: Dar al-Fadila, 2004), p. 295.

9 Muhammad al-Imam, "Hay 'ala al-Jihad... lakin," recorded conference, 2003.

1 Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

2 Laurent Bonnefoy, "Salafism in Yemen: A Saudisation?" in Madawi al-Rasheed ed., *Kingdom without Borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious and Media Frontiers* (London: Hurst, 2008), pp. 245-262.

against various other political and religious groups, including socialists¹⁰ and Sufis.¹¹

The brutal rebellion in Sa`da between the national army and a group of Zaydi revivalists¹² headed by Husayn al-Huthi and then his kin since June 2004 emerged as another way for the Salafists to portray themselves as companions of the government. It also highlighted the Salafists' potential for violence. Indeed, Salafists actively participate in the stigmatization of Zaydi identity. Their propaganda often associates Zaydism to Iran and to a global Shi`a conspiracy that seeks to divert the Muslim world.¹³ In March 2007, two foreign students of the main Salafist center, Dar al-Hadith in Dammaj, were killed, supposedly in combat against Zaydi groups in the wider framework of the war against the "Huthis."¹⁴ These killings confirmed the rumors that Salafist groups assisted the Yemeni army in the war.

From a more global perspective, the positions defended by many Salafist clerics regarding the issue of jihad outside of their country (or more precisely outside of the Arab world) also show that both apoliticism and pacifism are not automatic options and that positions have been shifting. A clear example of internal practical contradictions appeared when al-

Wadi`i's endorsement of jihad in the Molucca Indonesian Islands in 2000¹⁵ is confronted to his earlier criticism of Muslim Brotherhood Yemeni clerics, such as 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Daylami who labeled the 1994 war against the socialist-led secession a holy war. For al-Wadi`i, this was not the case, as labeling the war in this way would cause Muslim civilian casualties.

Although September 11, 2001 and other operations were generally considered illegitimate and wrong since they had, in retaliation, fostered further casualties and war in the Muslim world, the condemnation of violence targeting Western interests is not systematic. In fact, the principle of confrontation between the West and the Muslim world is usually something that is acknowledged and supported. Nevertheless, in the dominant apolitical Salafists' perspective, use of violence is considered counterproductive: Muslims are first of all not ready to fight as they are too weak and divided, and Muslim governments have not raised "the banner of jihad," so fighting would only cause turmoil. In that context, while the general objective of targeting a dominant West might be supported, it can only be attained in the long run; all current attempts are then bound to fail and as such are negative.

In various instances, al-Wadi`i showed an anti-imperialist rhetoric not very different from that of al-Qa`ida-type groups. In a 1996 conference, for example, he asked God to destroy America by sending "a heroic nation like the people of Afghanistan who destroyed Russia," yet he denies being a terrorist, claiming he "is even incapable of shooting a gun correctly." Furthermore, in the same conference he said the Salafists "are currently preparing the people to fight America through jihad" and recalled how "America corrupted the nations by supporting the governments and the tribes but never the Salafis."¹⁶ Rather than a double standard discourse, these variations are better understood as ways of dealing with potential repression by

not appearing as dangerous proponents of overt violence, while at the same time showing the movement's independence of speech in order not to lose its legitimacy among activists.

Conclusion

The ambiguous positions expressed by Yemeni Salafist clerics would tend to suggest that apolitical Salafists and jihadist groups only diverge in matters of strategy. Consequently, apolitical Salafism (such as the one forged by al-Wadi`i and his successors) would, according to this argument, be considered the antechamber of terrorism

"These variations are better understood as ways of dealing with potential repression by not appearing as dangerous proponents of overt violence, while at the same time showing the movement's independence of speech in order not to lose its legitimacy among activists."

10 Muhammad al-Imam, *Al-Hizb al-Ishtiraki fi rubu' qarn* (Sana`a: Dar al-Athar, 2008), p. 32.

11 Alexander Knys, "Contextualizing the Salafi-Sufi Conflict (from the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43:3 (2007): pp. 503-530. Also see Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim. Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 5.

12 Zaydism is a branch of Shi`ism present in the Yemen highlands. The elites of this religious sect, which claimed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (the sayyids), ruled, under the authority of the imam, over parts or the whole of Yemeni territory for more than a millennium, until the 1962 Republican Revolution. Since then, Zaydism has been in crisis and has experienced important theological and political evolutions, some of which blunted the main features that distinguished it from Sunnism.

13 For examples of such stigmatization, see "Al-judhur al-fikriyya lil-fitna al-Huthiyya," *al-Muntada*, April 2005 or Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Mahdi, *Al-Zaydiyya fi al-Yaman: Hiwar Maftuh* (Sana`a: Markaz al-Kalima al-Tayiba, 2008), p. 98.

14 "Al-Huthiyyun yuhaimun ma'had Dammaj al-salafi," *al-Taghiyir*, March 26, 2007.

15 Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jibad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2006), p. 115.

16 Muqbil al-Wadi`i, "Jawahir al-sunniyya fi al-as'ilat al-faransiyya," recorded conference, 1996.

or its ideological roots. While not systematically incorrect (John Walker Lindh, the famous "American Taliban," allegedly spent time in al-Wadi`i's institute in Dammaj before leaving for Pakistan¹⁷), such an interpretation is biased. Indeed, it misinterprets the profile of most jihadist militants in Yemen as they in fact seldom have a strong religious background and do not use the apolitical Salafist clerics as legitimizing sources for their actions.¹⁸ Drawing a genealogy of violence through the writings of Salafist clerics is therefore insufficient as it often means overlooking the environment in

17 François Burgat and Muhammad Sbitli, "Les salafis au Yémen ou...la modernisation malgré tout," *Chroniques yéménites*, 2003, p. 143.

18 See, for example, Sa'id 'Ubayd al-Jamhi, *Al-Qa`ida fi al-Yaman* (Sana`a: Maktabat al-Hadara, 2008), p. 424; Mustafa Badi al-Lawjri, "Afghanistan: Ihtilal al-Dhaki-ra," undated, p. 218.

which these ideas are either produced or reinterpreted. For example, the case for loyalty is only bearable as long as the Salafists are not themselves the main victims of authoritarianism and indistinct criminalization. That is precisely what al-Wadi'i meant when he said:

If I am censored, there will be strong reactions...That is why I advise the government not to do it. You were courageous when people abroad accused you of harboring terrorists and you answered "No, we only have 'ulama' that teach the Qur'an and the sunna." My brothers, I tell you, if the government was intelligent, it would leave us alone.¹⁹

As such, state repression and torture are probably more efficient incentives for violence than any given doctrine. As a fugitive militant accused of involvement in various attacks (including the one on the U.S. Embassy on September 17, 2008) asserted in a press interview, "The operations that are happening in Yemen are reactions from young people tyrannized by torture in the prisons."²⁰ While these words should be interpreted cautiously, they nevertheless show how the general political context plays a fundamental role. It is largely this context that will most often determine whether the Salafists, from the apolitical starting point, will be violent or will stick to the principle of strict loyalty to the state, or possibly start playing a more overtly political and inclusive game.

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The Current State of Al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia

By Michael Knights

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ON MAY 12, 2003, the al-Qa`ida Organization in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) launched three simultaneous car bombing attacks on Western compounds in Riyadh, killing 35 civilians and short-circuiting the initiation of a long-planned terrorist campaign within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government responded quickly and fought a tough counterterrorism campaign throughout 2003 and 2004, reducing violence to a residual level from 2005 onwards. Five years after the 2003 bombings and seven years after the September 11 attacks, the state of AQAP is difficult to judge. On the one hand, the number of major terrorist-initiated attacks in Saudi Arabia has dropped from 30 in 2004 to a combined total of just six in the years since.¹ On the other hand, there is a constant trickle of disconcerting indicators from Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Interior, for example, announced 701 terrorist-related arrests on June 25, 2008, the sequel to other announcements of mass arrests. Various Saudi ministries release a busy stream of alerts to other government departments and major Western businesses in the country, and the diplomatic security community regularly amends its security advice.²

What is the true state of AQAP five years after the May 2003 attacks? To scratch the surface of this query, this article draws upon a range of sources within the corporate security community in Saudi Arabia, within the Interior Ministry itself, and within the growing academic community focused on radicalization in the kingdom. These findings suggest that at present

Saudi-based AQAP cells appear to be almost exclusively sympathizers, internet propagandists, recruiters and fundraisers focused on foreign jihad. Saudi Arabia does, however, face a potential threat from terrorists outside the kingdom, primarily from Yemen.

Recovery of Capability?

Since the collapse of high tempo terrorist activity in Saudi Arabia by the end of 2004, the government has sought to maintain public vigilance and prevent the onset of complacency about the terrorist threat. This has been achieved by developing a series of strong themes in its public communications. The first of

"Yemen-based militants, on the other hand, present a significant threat to Saudi Arabia."

these themes is the assertion that AQAP is constantly attempting to recover capability, reconstitute networks and plan and undertake attacks within the kingdom.

One or two major planned attacks have been foiled in Saudi Arabia each year since 2005. The most recent operation to have reached an advanced stage of preparation was the November 2007 plot to undertake an attack on an Eastern Province oil facility by employing an assault team working in concert with a tactical rocket attack using weapons smuggled in from Yemen. The plot was foiled on November 25, 2007, just days before an execution date of November 27-28. The assault group involved seven Saudis and one Iraqi, who the Ministry of Interior stated was the group's leader.³

Other major plots exposed in Saudi Arabia since 2005 have demonstrated serious intent but have lacked capability. In April 2007, videos released by the Ministry of Interior after a series of arrests showed small quantities of light weapons instead

1 Also of note is that compared to 38 expatriate deaths in terrorist attacks in 2004, there have been four since.

2 The most recent of which occurred in August 2007, when both the Australian and UK Embassies issued warnings about a raised threat during Ramadan and with the U.S. State Department issuing a remarkably detailed alert about a threat to Westerners in downtown Riyadh in the "14-17 August 2008" period.

3 This information is drawn from personal interviews with government and corporate security analysts working in Saudi Arabia, as well as Saudi Ministry of Interior contacts.

19 Muqbil al-Wadi'i, "Hadhihi al sururiyya," recorded conference, undated.

20 "Interview of Hamza 'Ali al-Dabyani," *al-Nahar*, December 4, 2008.

of the well-stocked caches of AK-47s from 2005 and before. No grenades or pipe bombs were recovered from any of the cells raided in 2007, and explosives in general—homemade or military—have become rare. Ministry of Interior spokesman Major-General Mansur al-Turki admitted that such groups tend to be unrealistic in their targeting intentions and haphazard in their collection of weapons.⁴

The cascading series of mass arrests seen in the kingdom and the extreme rarity of terrorist sieges and “last stands” indicates that support operatives rather than true militants make up most of the suspects being detained. This category entails Saudi sympathizers who visit *takfiri*⁵ websites and perhaps propagate such materials to friends and relatives. More serious support elements may assist with the production of jihadist videos or provide shelter and succor to militants. Recruitment pipelines for Iraq and other theaters of jihad and fundraising cells also fall into this category. These elements are rarely armed and do not fight to the death when cornered, and their hard drives and phone address books typically implicate many other sympathizers.⁶

These kinds of leaderless, isolated and fragile support networks cannot compare to the long-prepared system of large arms caches and safe houses developed by the first head of AQAP, Yusuf al-`Uyayri, in the 1990s. Although it is always possible that such support cells will morph into attack cells,

experience since 2004 has shown that such large networks of inexperienced junior militants tend to be detected and disrupted easily. Post-2003 Saudi Arabia is generally a harder place to build and maintain covert networks.

The Threat from Outside?

The potential for an “expeditionary” threat projected inside Saudi Arabia by militants based outside the kingdom is a second theme being developed by the Ministry of Interior. Although there is some fear of an attack sponsored by al-Qa`ida’s core leadership, such an attack would require a local militant community to act as a launch pad. The possibility of “blowback” or “bleed out” from Iraq looms large in this regard. Attacks by Saudi returnees from Iraq—either self-guided or commissioned by some broader network—are considered plausible by Saudi “securocrats” for a number of reasons. First, the Sinjar Records show that Saudis compose the largest single national contingent among al-Qa`ida in Iraq fighters (41% of 606 profiled fighters). Second, the same records also hint that the number of Saudis who traveled to Iraq to be suicide bombers was lower than initially thought (50.3% of the 151 Saudis covered by captured records, which was less than the 56% average across the sample).⁷ This means that a larger pool might survive to return.

Perhaps the key driver for this fear is the experience suffered by Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the collapse of Taliban control in Afghanistan in 2002. The exodus of around 1,000 Saudi militants back to the kingdom transformed the militant threat in a short period of time, witnessing hundreds of hardened Arab-Afghan fighters falling into al-`Uyayri’s terrorist infrastructure as attack or support personnel. Saudi Arabia’s experience in 2002-2004 has probably been formative on the views of Western as well as Saudi counterterrorism thinking, creating the image of an exodus from Iraq to mirror that of the exodus from Afghanistan. In reality, the rotation of militants between Saudi Arabia and Iraq has been constant, multidirectional and has not had a significant negative

effect on security in the kingdom. The majority of Saudi recruits appear to be “mainstream classical jihadists” focused on the “legitimate defensive jihad” against a perceived U.S. occupier. Were Iraq to decisively collapse as a jihadist theater, it is questionable whether such Saudi recruits—even after in-theater radicalization—would choose to fight in their homeland rather than another iconic theater such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict zone.⁸

Yemen-based militants, on the other hand, present a significant threat to Saudi Arabia. Saudi-born fighters of mixed Yemeni descent have played key roles in al-Qa`ida since the mid-1990s. Usama bin Ladin, whose ancestral homeland is Yemen, recruited extensively from the mixed demographic to boost the representation of Saudi and Yemeni foot soldiers in al-Qa`ida’s ranks. Saudis of Yemeni descent filled all but one of the positions as “muscle” hijackers in the 9/11 attacks and have been highly active on the Arabian Peninsula, using Yemen as a base.⁹

The prospect of establishing bases in Yemen has been mentioned prominently in militant communiqués and in Saudi government statements since 2006. The emergence of the al-Qa`ida-linked Jund al-Yaman Brigades saw Saudi-born militants such as Fawaz al-Rubay`i, Hamza al-Q`uyati and Nayif bin Muhammad al-Qahtani become cell leaders. Literature in *Sada al-Malahim*, a jihadist publication in Yemen, claims the group’s mission is to “expel polytheists out of the Arab Peninsula,” further pointer to the group’s potential focus beyond Yemen. In the March 2008

4 “Saudi Counter-Terrorist Arrests,” Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Center briefing, May 1, 2007.

5 The term *takfiri* in this article refers to Sunni insurgent groups that justify violence against some Muslims and all non-Muslims because their religious beliefs are not compatible with the group. AQAP has become a shorthand way of referring to *takfiri* cells in Saudi Arabia (and Yemen).

6 In 2003-2005, contacts in Saudi Arabia frequently reported gunfire at police checkpoints, and major arrest operations tended to involve gunfire and seizure of major weapons caches. Since 2005, announcements of arrests have not coincided with increased security force presence or movements, and practically no armed stand-offs or weapons seizures have occurred. The last major firefight was the April 6, 2007 raid on the Jidda hiding place of 22-year-old Walid Mutlaq al-Radadi, listed 12 of the 15 Saudi-based terrorist suspects on the 36-strong most wanted list issued by the Saudi government in June 2005.

7 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

8 Opinion polling in Saudi Arabia has frequently shown fairly strong opposition to the Iraq war alongside very strong opposition to AQAP activities in Saudi Arabia. As analyst Thomas Hegghammer has outlined, Saudis are relatively resistant to any militant movement with a “social revolutionary” grudge against the establishment in the kingdom itself. See “Jihad, Yes, but not Revolution: Explaining the Extraversion of Islamist Violence in Saudi Arabia,” speech given at the conference “The Jihadist Phenomenon: A Social Sciences Perspective” in Menton, France, October 26-28, 2007.

9 More recently, 11 of the 23 militants who escaped from a Yemeni Political Security Organization prison in February 2006 were Saudis of Yemeni descent who were either expelled from Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s or extradited to Yemen from the kingdom after their return from Afghanistan in 2002.

edition of *Sada al-Malahim*, al-Qahtani explained his reasons for fighting in the Arabian Peninsula rather than Iraq or Afghanistan, calling for Saudi fighters to shelter in Yemen and asserting that the “liberation” of the land of the two holy places “starts from here.”¹⁰

There are signs that operational coordination between Yemeni- and Saudi-based cells has periodically been achieved, notably the case of the November 2007 attack cell. In that instance, a Yemeni militant associated with Hamza al-Q`uyati used Yemeni smugglers to move rockets into Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Al-Q`uyati's group thereafter undertook rocket attacks on an oil facility in Wadi Hadramawt in Yemen on March 29, 2008 as well as a Yemeni Central Security Force base in Sayyun on April 22, 2008. Before his death in an August 11, 2008 raid in Tarim, al-Q`uyati was planning to undertake an attack on a Western expatriate target in Riyadh—the cause of the subsequent August 13, 2008 U.S. State Department warning in Saudi Arabia. Four individuals arrested in Hadramawt were extradited to Saudi Arabia in the days after the rolling up of the al-Q`uyati network.¹²

A final category of potential outsiders to threaten Saudi Arabia in the emerging narrative is the Third Country National (TCN) worker community and Muslims traveling to Saudi Arabia on the annual hajj and minor pilgrimages. On June 25, 2008, the Ministry of Interior highlighted the role of South Asians such as Pakistanis, Afghan Waziris and African economic migrants in recent arrests. Maj. Gen. Mansur described a cell largely composed of Mauritians in their mid-30s studying for religious qualifications whose “concern was to get close to people working in the oil sector in order to find work in oil installations.”¹³ Although there is a theoretical threat from TCN communities, Ministry of Interior

insiders are candid that many of the foreigners described as “deviants” (terrorists) by the Saudi government in recent years have been economic migrants with tangential connections to forging, people-smuggling and drugs or weapons-trafficking networks that are also utilized by terrorists.

Target: The House of Saud?

A third theme being developed by the Interior Ministry is that the Saudi ruling family and government organizations such as the oil and security sectors are increasingly being targeted by militants. In terms of AQAP targeting strategy, this might be characterized as a transition from the focus on the “far enemy” (Western presence in the country) to the “near enemy” (the “House of Saud” and its religious, security and economic underpinnings). Additionally, by attacking the oil and gas sectors, it allows AQAP to target “far enemy” interests while at the same time striking the “near enemy,” allowing al-Qa`ida to recognize success in both spheres.

In the hydrocarbons sector, Saudi oil continues to be prominently discussed as a target.¹⁴ In contrast, actual plots have been thin on the ground since the February 2006 car bombing attack on the Abqaiq oil processing facility. The June 25, 2008 Interior Ministry announcement noted that the aforementioned African-led Eastern Province cell planned to attack “an oil site and a security target with car bombs.”¹⁵ Yet, the ministry did not adduce any evidence that the cell had actually developed any real capability and there were no indications that any cells captured in 2008 held weapons, let alone explosives. Indeed, while every Saudi Interior Ministry announcement or alert takes care to stress the threat to the oil and gas sector, the only real credible plot since February 2006 was the aforementioned November 2007 rocket and breach plot. Expressing interest in a target is quite different from developing a workable plan and executing it.

A second target highlighted by the Ministry of Interior is the security forces and moderate clerics who are accused of supporting the government's counter-radicalization program. Ministry officers have been sporadically targeted for the last decade, with deep-seated feuds developing between security forces and citizens in some areas, such as in ultra-conservative Burayda. More recently, leading jihadist ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi has been more aggressive in criticizing Saudi Arabia's security establishment for betraying various

“Yemen is already beginning to serve as a launch pad for attacks into Saudi Arabia.”

Islamist causes, describing the Saudi services as “the villainous troops of the tyrants of al-Sauds.”¹⁶ The Saudi government's active use of clerics to undermine jihadist recruitment in Saudi Arabia has also drawn the scorn of jihadist ideologues, and appears to have prompted plans to intimidate or liquidate pro-government clerics. In April 2007, for instance, the Ministry of Interior announced the arrests of 22 individuals involved in plotting the assassination of pro-government clerics and senior security force officers.¹⁷

Likewise, in the June 2008 announcement, the Interior Ministry alluded to a “plot” to target security forces, which related to a planned attack on the Khafji Muhabith (General Security Service) offices.¹⁸ All these activities are energetically

10 *Sada al-Malahim*, March 3, 2008.

11 Personal interview, Saudi Ministry of Interior contact, March 2008.

12 Other indicators included the May 12, 2008 alert on the Saudi-Yemeni border, when around a dozen suspected militants were sought related to a potential plot to strike a west coast Saudi target on the fifth anniversary of the May 2003 attacks.

13 Samir al-Saadi, “Terrorist Groups Destabilizing Saudi Arabia,” *Arab News*, June 26, 2008.

14 Discussions occurred in Abeer al-Bassam's “Bin Laden and the Oil Weapon” (in the February 8, 2007 issue of *Sawt al-Jibad*) to new discussions in the January and March 2008 issues of *Sada al-Malahim*.

15 Al-Saadi, “Terrorist Groups Destabilizing Saudi Arabia.”

16 Michael Scheuer, “Abu Yahya al-Libi: Al-Qaeda's Theological Enforcer – Part One,” *Terrorism Focus* 4:27 (2007).

17 These individuals were detained in a range of Saudi cities, including Riyadh, the Eastern Province tri-city area and Jidda.

18 Personal interview, Saudi Ministry of Interior contact, July 2008. The June 2008 statement also claimed that multiple disrupted cells may have been influenced by Abu Bakr Naji's book, *The Management of Savagery*, which recommends the weakening of target states through attacks on economic infrastructure and government forces to create failed states or even failed cities or provinces that al-Qa`ida affiliates can more easily dominate.

publicized by the government, which derives useful propaganda from the portrayal of AQAP fighters as anti-establishment “social revolutionaries.”

Outlook for AQAP in Saudi Arabia

There is no doubt that the Saudi government now publicly exaggerates the scale of the known militant problem in Saudi Arabia to stave off a return of complacency. This is a stark contrast to the 2003-2006 period, when the government was still actively trying to downplay the extent of the threat as it rooted out truly dangerous networks. The number of counterterrorist arrests is frequently massaged; for instance, the 701 arrests announced in June 2008 included arrests previously announced by the Ministry of Interior in November 2007 and March 2008. The number of arrests in the first half of 2008 was approximately 450, with a proportion released. Likewise, the ministry occasionally repackages old “most wanted” lists from 2005 to give the impression that they are new lists of Iraq returnees active in the kingdom.¹⁹ Support cells that have undertaken any form of target identification, however rudimentary, are often portrayed as attack cells, despite a lack of weaponry and a lack of resistance when called to surrender. The ministry is erring on the side of caution, perhaps understandably so.

In reality, it would appear unlikely that a strong AQAP network will emerge again to rival the infrastructure laid down by Yusuf al-`Uyayri in the 1990s. Saudi-based cells are isolated, and the little communication existing between cells—chat room discussions or the sharing of documents and videos—represents a critical vulnerability and the frequent cause of cascading patterns of arrests. The overwhelming impression of AQAP remains that of a destitute movement, as conveyed in the April 2007 issue of *Sawt al-Jihad*, where the editor notes: “None of the jihadi fronts were deserted as much as the jihadi front in the Arabian Peninsula.”²⁰ Saudi-based cells appear to be almost exclusively sympathizers, internet propagandists, recruiters and fundraisers focused on foreign jihad.

Of the various narratives put forward by the Saudi government, the most convincing is the assertion that Saudi Arabia faces a credible terrorist threat from outside the kingdom, albeit probably from Yemen rather than from Iraq or Afghanistan. The latter two theaters of jihad attract a certain type of Saudi militant, a volunteer who chose to fight outside Saudi Arabia rather than at home, and there are strong reasons to believe that such militants will continue to patronize iconic theaters of foreign jihad in the future. The Yemeni-based militants are another matter; they have chosen to fight in the Arabian Peninsula in preference to other theaters and they frequently have a historic connection to Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, Saudi and Yemeni terrorist cells already share a strong co-dynamic relationship; it is notable that the attack on Abqaiq in February 2006 was mimicked closely by the September 2006 car bombings on Yemeni oil facilities; the Saudi shooting of four Frenchmen outside Medina in February 2007 was likewise mirrored by remote shootings of expatriates in Yemen in January 2008; and indirect fire attacks attempted in Saudi Arabia in November 2007 have become a staple of Yemeni terrorist cells in 2008. The two theaters are thus loosely coupled but the flow may be slowly changing direction. Yemen is already beginning to serve as a launch pad for attacks into Saudi Arabia. Although the gradual whittling down of Yemen’s al-Qa`ida leadership, particularly older Saudi-born militants, will significantly reduce the prospect of future attacks, the possibility exists of attacks on iconic Saudi oil targets or exposed expatriates.

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Examining Saudi Arabia’s 85 Most Wanted List

By Christopher Boucek

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IN FEBRUARY 2009, the Saudi government released a new list of 85 most wanted terrorism suspects. All of the individuals on the list are suspected of being outside the country’s borders. The publication of the list followed the January release of an al-Qa`ida video featuring Saudi returnees from Guantanamo Bay who are now operating out of Yemen. The video was the first public confirmation that former Saudi Guantanamo detainees had returned to militancy and fled the kingdom.

This article seeks to place the list in context and provide a brief overview of the suspects, including travel patterns, suspected current whereabouts, and details of the charges against them. It is based on discussions with Saudi officials and a review of Saudi documents detailing the allegations and charges against the 85 individuals.¹

Release of the List

In late January 2009, news broke that two Saudi returnees from Guantanamo Bay had surfaced in Yemen and assumed leadership positions with the newly formed al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The returnees were identified as Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372) and Mohammed al-Aufi (#73 and ISN 333).² The news was compounded by the fact that the two were also graduates of Saudi rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returnees from Guantanamo Bay.³ Al-Shahri and

¹ The author’s discussions with Saudi officials occurred in February and March 2009 in Saudi Arabia. Most of the officials were from the Interior Ministry. Much of the information, however, was discovered after studying the 85 most wanted list in addition to the accompanying dossiers on the suspects written by the Saudi government.

² Individuals are identified in this article by their number on the list of 85 as issued by the Saudi government. Returnees from Guantanamo Bay are also identified by their Internment Serial Number (ISN). Transliterations are based on the official government list as published in English by the Saudi Press Agency. The numbers and English spellings differ from the Interpol list.

³ Robert Worth, “Freed by the US, Saudi Becomes al

¹⁹ These figures and views were derived from close scrutiny of Saudi government announcements and access to translated Interior Ministry warning statements in 2008.

²⁰ *Sawt al-Jihad*, April 2007.

al-Aufi appeared in a video alongside al-Qa`ida in Yemen commander Nasir al-Wahayshi and deputy commander Qasim al-Raymi announcing the formation of AQAP, a product of the merger of the Yemeni and Saudi al-Qa`ida affiliates.⁴ In addition, the statements in the video focused on the war in Gaza and criticism of Arab leaders, including Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Hizb Allah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and Saudi

“All of the Guantanamo returnees who fled Saudi Arabia went to Yemen, and there are additional militants who traveled with them.”

Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Na`if bin `Abd al-`Aziz. Al-Shahri and al-Aufi both spoke about Guantanamo, accusing regional governments of cooperating with the U.S. government by sending interrogators to the U.S. detention facility to extract confessions later used against detainees. Al-Shahri discussed prison conditions in Saudi Arabia, while al-Aufi railed against the Saudi care program, mentioning by name Prince Muhammad bin Na`if⁵ and Dr. Turki al-Atyan.⁶ Publicity generated by the video focused attention on the relative “success rate” of Saudi efforts to reintegrate returnees from Guantanamo Bay.⁷

Qaeda Chief,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2009; Caryle Murphy, “Ex-Guantanamo Inmates Return to Militancy in Yemen,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 27, 2009.

⁴ The video was likely produced on or around January 12, 2009.

⁵ Prince Muhammad bin Na`if bin `Abd al-`Aziz is the assistant minister of interior for security affairs, the overall official responsible for the Saudi rehabilitation program.

⁶ Dr. Turki al-Atyan is the head of the Psychological and Social Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee, which runs the rehabilitation program.

⁷ Initial returnees from Guantanamo went through a different process than later returnees. For more information, see Christopher Boucek, “After Guantanamo: How Effective are Rehabilitation Programmes in the Muslim World?” Royal United Services Institute, February 10, 2009.

Shortly after this news, on February 2, 2009 Saudi authorities released a new list of 85 most wanted terrorism suspects.⁸ The list of 85 persons—83 Saudi nationals and two Yemeni nationals—included only suspects who were located outside the country. It is unclear why the two Yemenis—al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi⁹—were included in a list of suspects that the kingdom wanted repatriated to face Saudi justice. According to Saudi sources, the two Yemenis were not on the original list, while Yemeni officials have noted that they were added at the last minute.¹⁰

The list of 85 was provided to Interpol, which in turn issued an Orange Notice requesting information about the suspects. It was not until March 25, 2009 that a Red Notice was issued for 81 suspects. Red Notices can act in part as an international arrest warrant, and it indicated the kingdom’s desire to extradite the 81 suspects. It is not clear what accounts for the differences in the two lists. It is possible that the 81 figure excludes the two Yemenis and two Saudis, the latter of whom have already been repatriated to Saudi Arabia since the issuance of the original list.¹¹

Missing Guantanamo Returnees

Included on the list of 85 were 11 Saudi nationals who had returned from Guantanamo Bay and are now believed to be in Yemen. Prior to the release of the list, it was understood that the Saudi government was unable to locate several returnees who had passed through rehabilitation. The disappearance of the

⁸ The Saudi government had previously issued two other most wanted lists, with the last being issued in June 2005 that included 36 suspects.

⁹ Among the charges against the two Yemenis, al-Raymi is charged with plotting to assassinate the U.S. ambassador in Yemen.

¹⁰ Their inclusion on the list is odd in light of Article 44 of the Yemeni constitution that prohibits the extradition of Yemeni nationals. This has previously contributed to difficulty in the cases of Jamal al-Badawi and Jabir al-Banna.

¹¹ On April 8, 2009, Agence France-Presse reported that three of the 85 had been repatriated to Saudi Arabia, although no names were provided. The two Saudis known to have been repatriated are al-Aufi (#73 and ISN 333) and Abdullah Abdul Rahman Mohammed al-Harbi (#43). Fahd Rikad Sameer al-Ruwaili (#61) is believed to have surrendered to Yemeni authorities. The author has not seen a copy of the Red Notice list.

11 returnees was well-coordinated in advance and they traveled to Yemen in several groups.¹² The flight of the Saudi returnees was allegedly coordinated with other non-Saudi former Guantanamo detainees who have been repatriated to other countries, indicating that returnees have maintained ties from Guantanamo.¹³ Since the first returnees were repatriated to the kingdom in 2003, the Saudi government has been able to exert significant social control over returnees by explaining that their continued good behavior would facilitate the return of the remaining Saudis held at Guantanamo. The 11 Saudis fled once it became clear that the roughly 13 remaining Saudi nationals at Guantanamo Bay would not be released from U.S. custody.

Several weeks before the list’s public release, Ministry of Interior officials visited the families of the 83 Saudi suspects and urged them to help facilitate the return of their loved ones. Families were informed that their relative’s name would appear on a list of individuals wanted in connection with terrorism and security offenses. The families were encouraged to facilitate their relatives’ return in exchange for leniency. The use of family pressure is common in Saudi reintegration programs, often producing results. On this occasion, however, none of the 83 Saudis availed themselves of the opportunity.¹⁴

Saudi Most Wanted Suspects

When the list was released, authorities provided little information about

¹² At least one group was delivered into Yemen by Saudi criminal smugglers unconnected to al-Qa`ida who have since been arrested by Saudi authorities. It has been claimed that others traveled disguised as women. See Huda al-Saleh, “Saudi Most Wanted Suspects Used Disguises to Flee Country,” *Sharq al-Awsat*, February 11, 2009.

¹³ Personal interview, senior Saudi official, February 2009.

¹⁴ Al-Aufi was repatriated to Saudi Arabia in mid-February. After his appearance in Yemen, his family was visited by a senior Saudi official who informed them they would be taken care of—financially and otherwise—in his absence. His wife and brother then began to pressure him to return to the kingdom. Before he returned, he was in touch with staff from the Care Center who facilitated his return. After first going to prison, he and his family are allegedly resident in a rehabilitation facility. It is also thought that Saudi government funds to Yemeni tribes helped close off al-Aufi’s (and others’) options.

the suspects or for what they were wanted. According to senior Saudi security officials, everyone on the list is alleged to have either participated or plotted to participate in attacks against Saudi targets, both within the kingdom and abroad. The charges against the suspects include allegations of al-Qa`ida fundraising, recruitment, communication and travel facilitation, and document forgery. The list includes one sub-group charged with seeking to attack Saudi oil facilities and assassinate government officials,¹⁵ while another sub-group is alleged to be connected with a cell in Yemen led by the late-Hamza al-Q`uyati. Those charged with targeting oil or “vital facilities”—a term frequently used to describe hydrocarbon infrastructure—includes Ibrahim Hassan Tali Assiri (#1), Salah Abdullah Saleh al-Qaraawi (#34), Abdullah Hassan Tali Assiri (#40), Obaid Abdul Rahman Abdullah al-Otaibi (#50), Mohammed Abdul Rahman Suleiman al-Rashid (#71), Naif Mohammed Saeed al-Kodari al-Qahtani (#81), and Waleed Ali Mishafi al-Mishafi Assiri (#83). Several on the list are accused of belonging to a cell in Iran led by Saleh al-Qaraawi (#34), the alleged leader of an al-Qa`ida group in Iran.¹⁶

Statistics on Alleged Locations of Suspects

The suspects on the list are believed to be in several countries. Privately, Saudi officials have expressed confidence in knowing where most of them are located. Most are believed to either be in Yemen or Iran and the Afghan-Pakistan region. The documents state that 26 of the 85 are thought to be in Yemen (including the 11 Guantanamo returnees¹⁷), while eight are identified as being in Iran. According to Saudi documents, a further 27 are listed as last being in

Iran, Pakistan, or Afghanistan.¹⁸ A breakdown of the locations of others on the list includes 14 in Iraq, two in Lebanon, two in Syria, one moving between Syria and Lebanon, and one moving between Syria and Yemen. The whereabouts of four suspects are unknown. Most of the 85 last left Saudi Arabia for other Gulf states, including 22 through the United Arab Emirates and 15 via Bahrain.¹⁹ Many others are believed to have transited through Yemen.

Social and Family Connections

Examination of the list reveals a number of family and social connections among the suspects.²⁰ Family and social connections are useful in understanding the list; it helps place in perspective that these are not merely 85 unconnected individuals, but rather a group of people connected by a series of social networks.

Ibrahim Hassan Tali Assiri (#1) appears to be the brother of Abdullah Hassan Tali Assiri (#40). Abdullah Farraj Mohammed Hamoud al-Juweir (#46) is the brother of Fahd al-Juweir, who was killed by Saudi security several days after the February 2006 Abqaiq oil facility attack.²¹ Fahd allegedly led the attack against the massive Abqaiq facility and was #2 on the list of 36 most wanted released by Saudi Arabia in June 2005. Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (#49) is the brother of two Guantanamo returnees, Abdulhadi (ISN 231, repatriated September 2007) and Abdulrazaq (ISN 067, believed repatriated September 2007). A fourth al-Sharikh brother was killed in Chechnya sometime around 2000.²² Guantanamo returnee Adnan Mohammed Ali al-Sayegh (#55 and ISN 105) fled to Yemen with fellow returnee Othman Ahmad Othman al-Omeira al-Ghamdi (#53 and ISN 184) in January 2009.²³ Moreover,

al-Sayegh is married to al-Ghamdi's sister. Yousef Mohammed Mubarak al-Jubairi al-Shahri (#85 and ISN 114) is the brother of Saad al-Shahri (#34 on the June 2005 list of 36 most wanted), and is married to the sister of Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372). In a further family connection, Abdul Ilah Mustafa Mohammed al-Jubeiri al-Shahri (#38) is believed to be a cousin of Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372).

Who's Who on the List

The list includes individuals charged with being involved in a number of serious plots and ongoing operations.²⁴ In addition, several high level facilitators are also included, as are alleged bomb makers and trainers from camps in Afghanistan and other locales.

Ahmad Ibrahim Mohammed al-Tuweijiri (#5) is charged with belonging to Asbat al-Ansar, a Sunni extremist group based in the `Ayn al-Hilwa refugee camp near Sidon in southern Lebanon. It is alleged that he left Saudi Arabia for Syria in August 2004 and is believed to currently be in Lebanon. Al-Tuweijiri is also accused of being linked to an unspecified bombing in Beirut in 2004. According to the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Asbat al-Ansar has no formal organizational ties to al-Qa`ida, although Saudi documents charge that al-Tuweijiri oversees al-Qa`ida finances in Lebanon and has funded groups in Bekaa and in the Badawi refugee camp in northern Lebanon. Saudi authorities also charge that al-Tuweijiri worked as an organizer with the late Iraqi insurgent leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi.

Little is known about Badr Saud Owaid al-Aufi al-Harbi (#15). His present whereabouts are unknown, and it is charged that he participated in the production of the online journal *Sawt al-Jihad*. According to Saudi documents, he left Saudi Arabia for Bahrain on September 21, 2001, one day before Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372) also left for Bahrain.²⁵ Badr Saud Owaid al-Aufi al-

15 Similar charges have been alleged in the past by the Ministry of Interior. Following arrests in summer 2008 and spring 2007, it was alleged that plots targeting oil facilities, senior officials, security installations, and anti-extremist clerics had been foiled.

16 The allegations of an al-Qa`ida group located in Iran are made in dossiers on the suspects that were part of the 85 most wanted list. Saudi officials have also spoke about this group in Iran in numerous press reports, one of which is: Turki al-Suhail, “Saudi Arabia: Al-Qaeda Using Iran as Base of Operations,” *Sbarq al-Awsat*, February 5, 2009.

17 Al-Aufi's return to Saudi Arabia leaves 10 Guantanamo returnees believed to be in Yemen.

18 A senior Saudi security official told the author in February 2009 that roughly 35 of the 85 are in Iran, protected by elements of the Iranian government who facilitate the Saudis' movement and transit in official vehicles.

19 No travel data is available for 14 of the 85.

20 These connections are drawn from regional press reports, the author's discussions and consultations, and the author's examination of the list.

21 Stephen Ulph, “Al-Qaeda Leader al-Juweir's Testament and Warnings in Saudi Arabia,” *Terrorism Focus* 3:11 (2006).

22 See “Summarized Sworn Detainee Statement,” ISN 067, undated.

23 Mansour al-Shahri and Khaled A-Shalahi, “Names

Keep Climbing on Infamous Terror List,” *Saudi Gazette*, February 7, 2009.

24 The details in this section are drawn from Saudi documents outlining the charges against the 85 suspects.

25 Al-Shahri is alleged to have traveled through Iran to Afghanistan, before being apprehended and transferred to the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. See Evan

Harbi is likely a cousin of Mohammed Otaik Owaid al-Aufi al-Harbi (#73), as well as being related to Saleh al-Aufi.²⁶

Khaled Ibrahim Ahmad al-Sunbul al-Assiri (#25) left Saudi Arabia for Bahrain on February 24, 2000, and Saudi documents allege that he intends to return to the kingdom on a forged non-Saudi passport to commit terrorist acts. He is currently believed to be operating between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Similarly, Rayed Abdullah Salim al-Zahiri al-Harbi (#29) is also accused of intending to return to Saudi Arabia. Al-Harbi is currently in Yemen and does not possess a Saudi passport. He is charged with planning to help support attacks inside the kingdom, specifically with a plan to secure a safe house in Qassim.

Sultan Radi Sumeilil al-Otaibi (#32) left Saudi Arabia for Syria on October 9, 2006 using a fraudulent passport he obtained with his brother's ID.²⁷ Two other suspects left Saudi Arabia within days of al-Otaibi's departure: Abdullah Mohammed Abdullah al-Ayed (#47) to the UAE and Obaid Mubarak Obaid al-Kufeil (#51) to Bahrain, who then ventured on to Syria and Lebanon. It has been asserted that both al-Otaibi and al-Ayed are deceased, although this remains unclear.²⁸ Al-Ayed, said to be in Iran and allegedly connected to al-Qaraawi, is wanted in connection with the April 2007 decapitation of Saudi Arabian General Intelligence Department Colonel Nasir al-Othmani in Buraydah.²⁹ Al-Kufeil has been linked

to al-Qa`ida and is charged with fighting in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon. Saudi documents claim he was last moving between Syria and Lebanon.

Saleh Abdullah Saleh al-Qaraawi (#34) has been charged by Saudi officials with leading an al-Qa`ida cell in Iran. Press reports, quoting Saudi sources, have claimed that some 100 other militants are in Iran with him.³⁰ Al-Qaraawi is married to a daughter of Khalil al-Hakaymah, an alleged al-Qa`ida media coordinator formerly affiliated with Egyptian Jama`a al-Islamiyya. Saudi documents charge him with holding a senior position with al-Qa`ida, of having a relationship with al-Zarqawi, and having helped escapees from al-Malaz prison in Saudi Arabia.³¹ He is also accused of having trained in explosives and targeting vital facilities in Saudi Arabia.

Others on the list include Mohammed Abdullah Hassan abul-Khair (#72), accused of being a former bodyguard for Usama bin Ladin. He is also believed to have married one of Bin Ladin's daughters. Saudi authorities charge that abul-Khair had links to accused 9/11 conspirator Ramzi bin al-Shibh. Azzam Abdullah Zureik al-Maulid al-Subhi (#56) is accused of working at an Afghan training camp and of linkages to Abdel Aziz Migrin and Sayf al-Adl.³² Fahad Rikad Sameer al-Ruwaili (#61), who possibly turned himself in to authorities, is charged with recruiting fighters for Iraq and of working in camps along the Syrian-Iraqi border. One of the more interesting suspects is Naif Mohammed Saeed al-Kodari al-Qahtani. In the most recent issue of *Sada al-Malahim*³³ released in March 2009, he penned an article about the list of the 85 most wanted. Saudi authorities charge

that he has funded attacks in Yemen. These include the Marib bombing in July 2007, the July 2008 attack on a Sayyun security building, and a series of other attacks against oil facilities and foreigners in Yemen.

Conclusion

The Saudi list of 85 most wanted suspects includes a number of dangerous individuals. The timing of the list's public release is obviously in response to a jihadist video featuring al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372) and al-Aufi (#73 and ISN 333). The list was likely an effort to draw attention to the situations in Yemen and Iran, in an attempt to boost both cooperation and international regional coordination.³⁴ The flight of 11 Guantanamo returnees to Yemen highlights the difficulties in repatriating Guantanamo detainees. It is also clear that the manner in which detainees have been held has resulted in former inmates maintaining contact over time and space. It is all but guaranteed that there will be recidivists among former Guantanamo detainees.

Most importantly, the list highlights the risk posed by the reconstitution of al-Qa`ida in undergoverned regions of Yemen. All of the Guantanamo returnees who fled Saudi Arabia went to Yemen, and there are additional militants who traveled with them. There is a real fear that the newly formed AQAP is taking advantage of conditions in Yemen to prepare for attacks in Saudi Arabia. The recent arrests of 11 Saudis near the Yemen border with an alleged 35 suicide vests underscores this perception.³⁵ Al-Qa`ida currently has significant growth opportunities in Yemen, with potentially dangerous implications for security in Saudi Arabia.

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Kohlmann, "The Eleven: Saudi Guantanamo Veterans Returning to the Fight," NEFA Foundation, February 2009.

26 On August 18, 2005, Saudi police gunned down al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia commander Saleh al-Aufi in Medina. See Roger Harrison and Javid Hassan, "Al-Qaeda Chief in Kingdom Killed," *Arab News*, August 19, 2005.

Thanks to Thomas Hegghammer for bringing to the author's attention the connection with Saleh al-Aufi.

27 At least four of the 85 left Saudi Arabia with fake passports. Three of the four used their brother's ID to obtain fake passports in their sibling's name.

28 "Al-Qaeda Says Two of Saudi's 85 'Most Wanted' Already Dead," NEFA Foundation, February 2009. This report claims that al-Otaibi was killed in Baghdad in January 2007, although Saudi documents claim he is presently in Yemen. Al-Ayed was also profiled by NEFA as deceased in early 2008 based on his appearance in an Afghan martyrdom video.

29 Samir al-Saadi, "Terrorists Likely Killed Officer," *Arab News*, April 16, 2007; "Security Officer Decapitated

in Saudi Arabia," *Terrorism Focus* 4:11 (2007).

30 Turki al-Suhail, "Saudi Arabia: Al-Qaeda Using Iran as Base of Operations," *Sharq al-Awsat*, February 5, 2009.

31 "Terror Suspects 'Flee Saudi Jail,'" BBC News, July 8, 2006.

32 Abdel Aziz Migrin led al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia until he was killed in a shootout with Saudi police in June 2004. See Raid Qusti, "Abductors Behead Johnson," *Arab News*, June 19, 2004. Sayf al-Adl is a senior member of al-Qa`ida wanted by the U.S. government in connection with the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings.

33 *Sada al-Malahim* is an online jihadist publication produced in Yemen.

34 The list can also be viewed as a way to pressure these governments; to encourage Yemen to be more proactive on issues of concern to Riyadh; and to re-raise Saudi concerns about Iranian behavior in the region.

35 None of the Saudis arrested on April 8 were included on the list of 85. For more information, see "Questions about AQAP's Return as Saudi Arrests Point to Ambitious Jihadist Plans," *Gulf States Newsletter* 33:851 (2009): pp. 7-8.

The Dilemma of the Yemeni Detainees at Guantanamo Bay

By Gregory D. Johnsen and Christopher Boucek

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MORE THAN ONE-THIRD of the remaining 255 detainees at the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay are Yemenis, representing the single largest national contingent. Since the detention facility opened in early 2002, Yemenis have consistently comprised a sizeable percentage of the population. Other countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, have successfully repatriated many of their nationals, but Yemen has been unable to convince the United States to release detainees into its custody. There is even widespread speculation in both the United States and Yemen that the Yemeni government does not actually want the detainees back and is content to let them remain in U.S. custody.

The Yemeni government, however, maintains in private its stated, public goal to return the detainees to Yemen, charge those it has evidence against and release the rest. For the United States, this has been insufficient, and it has repeatedly sought assurances from the Yemeni government that it will set standardized restrictions before any individuals are released. Part of this hesitation stems from security concerns about what would happen to the detainees once they are returned to Yemen.

This article seeks to examine the dilemma posed by the detention of Yemeni nationals at Guantanamo Bay. Following an overview of Yemen's previous attempts to engage Islamists, the article will focus on some possible risks associated with the repatriation of the Yemeni detainees. This will include identifying individual detainees who have connections to al-Qa`ida members involved in the recent upsurge in terrorist violence in Yemen. It will conclude with a brief look at some possible solutions under consideration.

Extremist Disengagement in Yemen¹

In recent years, the Yemeni government has engaged in a series of ambitious programs designed to counter Islamist radicalization in the country. These have included traditional poetry recitals, the internationally-supported "Shaykhs Against Terror" initiative, and the use of religious dialogue. While admirable unconventional approaches, some of these efforts—such as religious dialogue—have left many in Washington dissatisfied.

In September 2002, the Yemeni government established the Committee for Religious Dialogue. Led by Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, it was created to interact with security detainees held by the government on suspicion of involvement with Islamist extremists and terrorists. The committee sought to dialogue with these men, and through their religious discussions and debates demonstrate that terrorism based on religious grounds was impermissible. The initiative was the first post-9/11 prison rehabilitation program for extremists, a format that has now been adapted in a number of Arab and Muslim countries.

On September 15, 2002, al-Hitar and three other *ulama* met for the first time with prisoners at the Political Security Organization Center in Sana`a.² The committee met with prisoners collectively, and they exchanged questions and responses directly. At the first meeting, it was collectively decided that the Qur'an and the sunna would serve as the basis for the dialogue, with the hadith providing a firm foundation. The dialogue sessions were explained to participants as being comprehensive and that detainees were encouraged to persuade the *ulama* that their understandings of Islam were correct, just as the committee would seek to convince the detainees of their position. Some sources have questioned the effectiveness of the process.³

1 Section based on Christopher Boucek, Shazadi Beg, and John Horgan, "Opening up the Jihadi Debate: Yemen's Committee for Dialogue," in Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 181-192.

2 Boucek et al., "Opening up the Jihadi Debate: Yemen's Committee for Dialogue," p. 185.

3 Ibid.

Initial discussions were focused on whether or not Yemen was an Islamic state, and the legality of President `Ali `Abdullah Salih's rule. Sana`a's foreign treaty obligations and relations with non-Muslim states were also discussed, as was the permissibility of killing non-Muslims. The committee worked to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Yemeni government and attempted to show the appropriate rules for jihad. It was clearly stated that those who renounced violence would be eligible for release through a unique presidential amnesty program.⁴

Much of the committee's efforts focused on getting participants to recognize the authority of the state and obtaining assurances from them that participating in violence within the country was forbidden. The "covenant of protection"

“Yemen’s once promising rehabilitation program now appears to be a failure, while its recent record of releasing convicted al-Qa`ida members has done little to ease U.S. fears.”

(when the government issues a legal visa) that exists between the state and foreigners was also stressed. In essence, once detainees acceded to these points, they were released. Unlike in other countries that have since adopted extremist rehabilitation programs, the Yemeni government provided freed detainees with little external social support. Many released detainees were absorbed into the military and security services,⁵ and there was some attempt made to assist others through a non-governmental organization. These efforts, however, were minimal. Passports were reportedly not confiscated, nor did the Yemeni government maintain close tabs

4 Abd al-Mun'im al-Jabri, "Yemeni Interior Minister Discusses Terrorism Issues, Cooperation with US," 26 September, October 17, 2003.

5 Eric Westervelt, "Growing Repression in Yemen May Feed al-Qaeda," National Public Radio, November 10, 2005.

on former prisoners.⁶ A total of 364 individuals were released through the dialogue process. Some have escaped while others have reportedly been killed in Iraq. After some initially promising results, the committee was eventually suspended for a variety of reasons.

The committee's primary objectives were to get participants to recognize the legitimacy of the Yemeni state, not commit violent acts within Yemen, and ensure that foreigners were not targeted in the country. With respect to these objectives, the committee achieved some relative successes. It appears, however, that the committee was less concerned with affecting actual ideological change in participants than it was with obtaining their acquiescence on sensitive political matters. Following the 9/11 attacks, Washington exerted

“Unlike in other countries that have since adopted extremist rehabilitation programs, the Yemeni government provided freed detainees with little external social support.”

considerable pressure on Sana`a to round up Islamist extremists, terrorists and activists. Many of these individuals had broken no laws. Others had gone abroad to fight in Afghanistan, and some were suspected (tangentially) of involvement in the October 2000 attack on the USS *Cole*. It has been argued that religious engagement and dialogue was thus used as a method to process the large numbers of security detainees, and, in exchange for their allegiance to the Yemeni government, release them from prison.

The first participants in the program are believed to have fared better than later participants, aligning with those individuals radicalized at home versus those radicalized through the global jihad. Initial participants recognized authority and were thus more susceptible to dialogue and negotiation.

6 Personal interview, Yemeni analyst, Sana`a, July 2007.

Individuals who participated later, the so-called younger generation, did not do as well. When the government eventually attempted to use the committee to deal with combatants from the conflict in Sa`da in the north, it met stiff opposition within Yemen.⁷

Yemeni Population at Guantanamo: Gauging the Risk

Yemen's once promising rehabilitation program now appears to be a failure, while its recent record of releasing convicted al-Qa`ida members has done little to ease U.S. fears. With the exception of a handful of cases, most Yemenis remain in Guantanamo. According to a list produced by the Yemeni government, there are 101 Yemenis currently being held in Guantanamo. Of these, only two—Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Walid bin Attash—have been designated “high value” detainees. Two others have recently been convicted by military commissions in Guantanamo.

The remaining 97 are an eclectic group of intentional, unrepentant combatants and accidental warriors. Yet, separating the detainees into two groups, and determining where different individuals fall on a spectrum of past and potential violence, is a nearly impossible task. Part of the problem in such determinations stems from the circumstances of their incarceration. How capable, mentally or physically, such individuals will be of taking up arms against the United States after years in Guantanamo is difficult to predict from the outside. The situation in Yemen has also changed. Some of these detainees were born and raised in Saudi Arabia and will be returning to a country they know only superficially, if at all. Others will be returning to a country where close family members have been arrested and mistreated as a result of being related to a Guantanamo detainee.

Another difficulty in determining who the detainees are and what they are likely to do if returned to Yemen has to do with the list of detainees initially provided by the Department of Defense in 2006 as a result of a lawsuit brought by the Associated Press. It is possible to read the list either as evidence of an uncooperative Department of Defense or as illustrative of the confusion and lack

7 Ibid.

of knowledge that hampered U.S. efforts in the fearful months after the 9/11 attacks. The most accurate description is probably a combination of both. The Department of Defense seemed to be genuinely confused in the first few years, compiling lists of detainees that identified them as citizens of the wrong country, listing the equivalent of only a first name and the detainees' father's name, or even in some cases merely the *kunya* or nickname of a detainee. Gradually, as its information about the detainees improved, it seems to have corrected many of the early mistakes. By and large, however, these corrections do not seem to have made their way into the public list of detainees. Nor is there a public list in Arabic, which hampers predictions and analysis, as the current list has a number of curious transliterations of Arabic names, many of which appear not to adhere to any standard other than the interrogator's transcription.

Broader Connections

Some of those for whom full and fairly accurate information does exist have been linked to the new generation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen, which has been responsible for, among other operations, the recent September 17 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a. For instance, four detainees currently being held in Guantanamo had brothers among the 23 al-Qa`ida suspects who escaped from a Yemeni prison in February 2006. The prison break was the opening salvo in the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen, which is still ongoing.

Among the Yemenis currently in Guantanamo are two of four brothers, Ghalib and Tawfiq al-Bayhani, from one of Yemen's leading jihadist families. The other two brothers, Mansur and Zakariya, were among the 23 escapees. Both turned themselves in to Yemeni authorities in late 2006 and were placed under loose house arrest, which required them to periodically sign-in with authorities. Mansur, however, was able to flee the country and made his way to Somalia, where he was killed in a U.S. naval strike by the USS *Chafee* on June 2, 2007.⁸ If eventually released

8 For more information, see Gregory D. Johnsen, “Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadi Operatives – Part I,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5:18 (2007); Gregory D. Johnsen, “Track-

in Yemen, it is impossible to predict how the two brothers would react to the news of their brother's death at the hands of U.S. forces. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen, for example, has developed a rationale of revenge during the past few years, and it has effectively utilized this in its statements and journals as justification for a number of attacks. While al-Qa`ida has morphed and changed during the years in Yemen, it has clearly demonstrated the existence of a long institutional memory.

The rationale of revenge could also be a factor with Salman al-Rabi`a, whose older brother, Fawaz, was killed by Yemeni forces in October 2006 after masterminding a dual suicide attack a

“For instance, four detainees currently being held in Guantanamo had brothers among the 23 al-Qa`ida suspects who escaped from a Yemeni prison in February 2006.”

month earlier. Another brother, Abu Bakr, is currently in a Yemeni prison on terrorism charges. One of the other Guantanamo detainees, Ali al-Raymi, is the younger brother of the current deputy commander of al-Qa`ida in Yemen, Qasim al-Raymi, who likely had a leading role in the September attack on the U.S. Embassy. If eventually released by the Yemeni government, it is probable that Ali al-Raymi and other like-minded detainees would join al-Qa`ida in Yemen, giving the organization an influx of new and dedicated members. The last time al-Qa`ida received such a shot in the arm was in the wake of the February 2006 prison break, which sparked the most recent al-Qa`ida campaign in the country.

Next Steps

There appears to be growing consensus that Guantanamo will eventually need to be shut down. During the campaign, President-elect Barack Obama was critical of the facility and pledged to close it. One

ing Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadi Operatives - Part II," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:19 (2007).

notion apparently under consideration by Obama advisers would be to prosecute some detainees in the domestic criminal court system, repatriate others to their countries of origin, and possibly send the remaining highly classified cases to a new special court.⁹

How this will impact the Yemeni nationals remains to be seen. One now abandoned notion had been to finance the construction of a supermax-style prison in Yemen to house returnees. It appears that there is renewed interest in reviving Yemen's Dialogue Committee as a reintegration program for former Guantanamo detainees; however, some recent information that possibly three of the seven U.S. Embassy attackers may have been graduates of al-Hitar's program makes this extremely unlikely.¹⁰ To be modeled in part on Saudi Arabia's relatively successful program to care for Guantanamo returnees,¹¹ it is presently unclear how such a reintegration system would operate in Yemen. While there had been hope that some Yemenis would be sent back before the end of the Bush administration, this appears increasingly unlikely. Facilities have reportedly been created to accommodate returnees; however, a successful reintegration program will require a detailed program, thorough curriculum, trained and qualified personnel, and massive financing. One possible way to move forward on addressing the plight of the Yemenis held at Guantanamo could be for Washington to financially underwrite the costs associated with applying some of the methodologies being developed in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere to reintegrate former detainees. All told, the costs of finding a solution to this dilemma are far cheaper than the costs of maintaining the status quo.

In the end, the best option could be for the United States to prosecute in civilian courts those it believes it can convict based on the lawful evidence it possesses. Transparency, due process,

9 Matt Apuzzo and Lara Jakes Jordan, "Obama Planning US Trials for Guantanamo Detainees," Associated Press, November 10, 2008.

10 Personal interview, anonymous Yemeni political analyst, November 2008.

11 Christopher Boucek, "The Saudi Process of Repatriating and Reintegrating Guantanamo Returnees," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

and the power of the rule of law are some of the strongest weapons in the struggle against violent extremism. For the remainder of the Yemeni detainees, which would likely be a sizeable portion, the United States may find that its best option is to silently partner with the Yemeni government and support a modified hostage system,¹² which has a long tradition in Yemen as a tool of governing. Historically, the United States has found this practice unpalatable, but the current situation may render such criticisms moot. Yemen has also shied away from any private deals with the United States, particularly after 2002 when such a deal was made public by a U.S. leak. Intense

“The alternative of just releasing the detainees whom the United States cannot convict will almost certainly result in more deaths in Yemen at the hands of individuals who were once in American custody.”

and concentrated pressure, however, should ensure Yemen's cooperation. The alternative of just releasing the detainees whom the United States cannot convict will almost certainly result in more deaths in Yemen at the hands of individuals who were once in American custody.

There are already signs that such a system could work. According to a number of sources in Yemen, during the late summer Yemen was negotiating an agreement with Qasim al-Raymi that

12 Different governments in Yemeni history (for instance, the imams in addition to the current republican system of government) have utilized a hostage system that kept relatives, traditionally males, under the control of the state to ensure the good behavior of their relatives. The United States could use this option with the "in-between" detainees—those it does not have enough evidence against to prosecute but are considered too dangerous to release—as a weapon to splinter al-Qa`ida by turning the organization against itself. This is not so much outsourcing detention as it is using one of al-Qa`ida's main strengths, tight-knit relationships, against it.

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would have taken him off the warpath. Although negotiations eventually broke down, what al-Raymi reportedly wanted is telling: the release of al-Qa`ida suspects in Yemeni prisons. The outline of the story seems to be confirmed by al-Raymi's authorial absence from the fifth issue of *Sada al-Malahim*,¹³ which was written in August and September, but only released on November 9. Had the negotiations been successful, it is possible that the September 17 attack on the U.S. Embassy would have never taken place. It did, of course, and al-Raymi returned to writing for *Sada al-Malahim* in its sixth issue.

The hostage system would also further fracture al-Qa`ida in Yemen by exacerbating tensions and loyalties within the group. Such a system would force Qasim al-Raymi and numerous others to ask themselves whether they are more loyal to Nasir al-Wahayshi—the *amir* of al-Qa`ida in Yemen—or to someone such as Ali al-Raymi—who was once in Guantanamo and is now being held by the Yemeni government. The answer is far from clear, but even forcing individuals in al-Qa`ida to face such a question would likely do more to disrupt the group's Yemeni branch than have years of counter-attacks. This system would require the United States to temper many of its criticisms of Yemen's opaque practice of individual deals with terrorists, such as Jamal al-Badawi and Jabir al-Banna. Years of Guantanamo, however, have removed the good courses of action from the table and left the United States with only a limited set of options.

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¹³ *Sada al-Malahim* is a jihadist publication in Yemen.