



# BULLETIN

No. 6 (82) • January 15, 2010 • © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Mateusz Gniazdowski,  
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## Al-Qaeda in Yemen

by Patrycja Sasnal

*The build-up in recent years of al-Qaeda in Yemen has come chiefly on the back of this country's internal problems: the poor condition of its economy, its all-prevailing poverty, and the political weakness of its government, which has been incapable of containing the centrifugal movements in the south and north of the country and of dealing with terrorism. Given the instability in Yemen and the strong public support for al-Qaeda, an overt armed intervention by the U.S. is as unlikely as it would be ill-advised. Yet the international community should make an effort to increase development aid to Yemen, because, failing this, the country could plunge into an even deeper instability.*

**Determinants.** The al-Qaeda ideology has enjoyed relatively broad support and expansion opportunities in Yemen. This is due to the frailty of Yemen's statehood, undermined as it is by internal frictions and economic woes. The country's integrity has been threatened by a secessionist movement in the south (until 1990, Yemen was divided into two states) and a rebellion by Houthi tribes in the north. The Sanaa government's crackdown on local populations supporting these movements has had the effect of compounding their destabilizing impact and fueling the existing antagonisms. The matter of succession of President Ali Abdullah Salih, who has been in power for over 30 years, has already sparked a conflict within the ruling elites. An internal power struggle, possibly of a long duration, will additionally weaken the central government.

Security problems are an offshoot of the poor condition of the economy and the country's low development level. The Yemeni economy is dependent on exports of oil, the reserves of which will soon run out. There is a shortage of drinking water and, with the country's high birth rate, more than half of the Yemeni people already live below the poverty line. This has bred a feeling of lack of prospects and prompted part of the population to espouse radical political programs. Except for the urban areas, the territory of the country is out of the central government's control and it is the different clans and tribes that impose and maintain public order there—a situation which has much to do with the easy availability of firearms.

The Yemenis' religiousness and traditionalism are another factor behind the support for al-Qaeda as part of the population identifies with the ideology and aims of this organization. The popularity of al-Qaeda also reflects the Yemenis' resentment of U.S. policy in the region, including the detentions of Yemeni citizens at Guantanamo and other American incarceration facilities.

**Al-Qaeda in Yemen.** The beginnings of al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen go back to the 1990s, when veterans who had fought against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan started flowing into the country. At the time the Yemeni authorities took no steps to counteract the development of al-Qaeda structures, and the latter refrained from conducting terrorist operations in the country. The situation changed following the 2000 bombing of the *USS Cole* in Aden and the 11 September 2001 attacks. Fearing a backlash by the U.S., the Yemeni government established close cooperation with the Americans to fight al-Qaeda, with the result that the organization was broken up. The second phase of the al-Qaeda build-up in Yemen began in 2006, on the heels of the escape from the prison in Sanaa of 23 al-Qaeda members, including present leader Nasir al-Wahishi, who had served as secretary to Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. In January 2009 the Saudi faction of al-Qaeda recognized the Yemen-based command by forming an "al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula" group. Owing to these changes, the Yemeni arm of al-Qaeda is now capable of mounting attacks in Yemen and in

Saudi Arabia, but its operational capabilities in the other parts of the Arab Peninsula, in the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere have remained severely limited.

Uncharacteristically for Yemen, the relatively broad public support which "al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula" enjoys transcends the society's clan divisions and only 6% of Yemenis perceive al-Qaeda as a threat. The organization numbers several hundred members, Yemenis and Saudis, scattered across the country and forging local alliances with clan chiefs. The al-Qaeda militants based in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland claim affiliations with "al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula," but the two structures remain autonomous in terms of organization and funding. Neither is there convincing evidence of an alleged flow of al-Qaeda members from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Yemen. Although there are some 150,000 Somali refugees residing in Yemen, relations between al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, the foremost grouping of Somali radical Islamists, are not close. More worrying is the impact of the situation in Yemen on stability in Saudi Arabia. The collapse of Yemen, even if caused by factors other than the activity of al-Qaeda, would give al-Qaeda a boost and make it capable of hitting prominent targets in Saudi Arabia. This could destabilize the country—with far-reaching economic and political repercussions for the region or, indeed, for the entire international system.

**Policy of the Yemeni Government.** The Yemeni government has conducted a two-pronged policy towards al-Qaeda. On the one hand, it has condoned the activities of al-Qaeda members not involved in attacks carried out on Yemeni territory; on the other hand, it has tried to respond sternly to the attacks and operations mounted in Yemen against the U.S. and its allies. From the perspective of the Sanaa government, the secessionist movement in the south and the Houthi rebellion in the north remain the gravest challenges. Accordingly, the government has been focused on dealing with these two existential threats rather than with al-Qaeda, which it perceives primarily as a U.S. concern. Possibly, the Yemeni government will attempt to capitalize on the current international concern about the situation in the country to rally support for its struggle with the opposition in the south and in the north. This could be inferred from the putting of al-Qaeda members and other oppositionists at the Interior Ministry's list of suspected terrorists, and from allegations, albeit unsupported by evidence, that Iran (as a sponsor of terrorism) has been helping the Houthi rebellion.

The swift reconstruction of the al-Qaeda potential after 2006 suggests that this organization will be a growing threat unless the government of Yemen tackles its activities. So strong are the al-Qaeda structures and the backing it enjoys (partly due to its connections with local groupings and clan formations) that it cannot be totally suppressed even if its present leadership were liquidated. For the Yemeni government, fighting al-Qaeda is likely to be a long-term effort.

**Involvement by the U.S. and the International Community.** In his 1 December 2009 address on a strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, President Obama named Yemen and Somalia as the countries where the U.S. will be engaged in containing a revived al-Qaeda. In the same month two air attacks on al-Qaeda members took place. Probably U.S. forces participated in preparing these raids, yet the U.S. will attempt to avoid an official admission of involvement, for not only would a disclosure to that effect put President Salih at risk of losing the support of a proportion of the Yemeni society, but it could put the central authorities in danger of being undermined even more and facilitate recruitment by al-Qaeda. This was one of the reasons why President Obama has ruled out any overt armed intervention in Yemen, although the U.S. has announced an increase in aid and in military and intelligence cooperation.

There is yet another reason why, given the present circumstances which are in al-Qaeda's favor, a U.S. intervention (whether mounted single-handedly or with allies) would be ill-advised: notably, that by adding to the risk of disintegration of the country and to the society's resentment of the U.S., it could increase the likelihood of expansion by al-Qaeda of its currently modest capability to strike at targets in Europe or in North America. The preferable option is to step up the war against terrorism in Yemen using non-military measures, such as more development aid (which in 2008 was just a small fraction of that for Afghanistan). Clearly, such aid could not be provided to the complete exclusion of cooperation with the government of Yemen—regardless of the risk that the funds supplied will be embezzled or used to fight the opposition in the south and in the north. At the same time, channels independent of the central authorities should be established to handle the flow of services of non-Yemeni NGOs, subject to ensuring appropriate security levels for their staffs. A reasonable approach would be to make the scale and scope of aid to the government of Yemen contingent upon periodical comprehensive reviews of the effectiveness of this aid and of its real impact on the stability of the state. Yet, although some states (the U.S., the UK) have already announced their intention to boost support for Yemen, it is doubtful whether they will address this task with the determination it deserves now that the impact of the economic downturn is still perceptible and the potential main donors are focused on the Afghanistan and Pakistan conflicts.