

14 June 2012

Unresolved Tensions in Yemen

A new al-Qaeda affiliate threatens Yemen's post-revolutionary political transition.

By Casey L. Coombs for ISN

"Yemen's transition is taking place against a backdrop of serious security concerns, an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and many unresolved conflicts," United Nations special envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, stated before the 15-nation Security Council (UNSC) on May 29 in New York.

"Al-Qaeda in particular continues to pose a major threat," he warned, referring to the unprecedented expansion of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its local insurgent arm, Ansar al-Shari'a, along the Gulf of Aden in Abyan governorate.

In response to the threat, Yemen's new President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi deployed six military brigades in mid-May to retake Abyan, which abuts the country's largest seaport Aden. One of the president's [top advisors](#) called the 10,000-strong troop surge, which has received the support of American military advisors and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), a "full-scale war."

After only one month of fighting, on June 12 Hadi's forces [regained control](#) of several strategic cities in Abyan that the militants had seized during the tumult of last year's Yemeni Spring. While these swift military victories do augur well for the president's early May [pledge](#) to "eradicate [al-Qaeda's] presence in every district, village and position" in Yemen, the al-Qaeda affiliate may simply relocate to other parts of the country and improvise new tactics.

Derailing fragile progress

Back in New York, Benomar highlighted some of the tactical adjustments al-Qaeda had made in preceding weeks. "AQAP and Ansar Al-Shari'a have extended their reach into areas previously not associated with their activities," he said, alluding to jihadist encroachment into neighboring tribal-controlled governorates, where antigovernment sentiment runs high. He also recalled the May 21 suicide bombing at a military parade in Yemen's capital Sana'a, which killed at least 90 soldiers, wounded some 300 others and signaled a potentially dangerous new dimension in a conflict that had largely been confined to Abyan.

That incident, together with "the recent foiled airliner bomb plot," Benomar said, "are reminders that AQAP remains the most lethal al-Qaeda affiliate intent on striking both Western and regional targets." Indeed, up until last year AQAP was primarily known for the global scale of its jihadist ambitions.

The recent turn toward insurgency threatens to derail Yemen's fragile political transition outlined in the US- and UN-backed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative signed in November 2011. Under the GCC plan, President Hadi is tasked with organizing a national dialogue among myriad competing political blocs, drafting a new constitution and reforming entrenched nepotism in the country's military and security forces, all in preparation for multiparty democratic elections in early 2014.

Given the geostrategic importance of the broader region, President Hadi's implementation of the GCC road map is being scrutinized by more than just Yemenis. The Horn of Africa to Yemen's south and west is itself reeling from multiple armed conflicts, humanitarian crises and rampant poverty, and the world's number one oil supplier, Saudi Arabia, ships billions of barrels of crude oil per day down the center of the restive regions via the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Roots of the Yemeni insurgency

This most recent chapter in Yemen's long history with al-Qaeda history can be traced back to 2011, when President Ali Abdullah Saleh's security and military forces split into two feuding camps during the early days of the 'Yemeni Spring'. [Defecting soldiers](#) lined up behind Saleh's chief military adviser, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, whose 1st Armored Division vowed to protect antigovernment demonstrators from Saleh's Revolutionary Guards as they scrambled to save the sinking regime. The country's main centers -- Sana'a, Taiz and Aden -- became [urban battlefields](#) while peripheral regions were abandoned; this in turn afforded heavily armed militia, rebel and separatist groups sufficient operational space to expand in rural areas.

Against this backdrop, AQAP exploited Abyan's yawning security void and cultivated its new affiliate. The group's chief Yemeni cleric Adil al-Abab (alias Abu Zubayr) unveiled Ansar al-Shari'a in an online jihad forum that April:

"We control Jaar and call on the concept of monotheism while trying to meet the demands of the people," he said, spelling out plans to restore sewerage and electricity and provide other basic public services that the central government had long failed to supply."

Once "the people see us meet their demands," the cleric continued, "We hope...they will accept the methodology of the mujahideen and accept the implementation of Shari'a [Islamic law]" (ICSR, April 18, 2011).

Ansar al-Shari'a's unprecedented expansion in southern Yemen would suggest that the insurgent strategy has been working up till now. But significant military victories across Abyan on June 12, in which Yemeni forces claim to have purged the militants from most of the province, may well signal a shift in the balance of power there, as Ansar al-Shari'a's key strength has been its ability to seize territory and build political support from local populations. Indeed, Ansar al-Shari'a's Emir, Jalal Muhsin Balidi al-Marqashi (alias Abu Hamza), expressed the group's longer-term aspirations in a January 2012 interview to "circulate the Islamic model like the Taliban who did justice and provided security."

Destabilizing factors

The al-Qaeda threat in Abyan is further exacerbated by mass movements of national and international migrants. Teddy Leposky, a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Aden, told ISN that "more than 103,000 refugees from the Horn of Africa came to Yemen last year. And as of April 2012, there have been over 44,000 new arrivals, paving the way for another record-breaking year if the trend continues."

Most of these refugees hit land along Yemen's southern coast, which poses two security risks. The first, as tribal analyst Abdul-Hakeem Al-Ofairi told ISN, is that Ansar al-Shari'a has begun recruiting Somali refugees who come ashore along Abyan's coast. The second, [according](#) to one of President Hadi's top political advisors, Abdul Karim Al-Eryani, is that "al-Qaeda is coming very close to the Port of Aden."

"A few hundred kilometers west you have Bab el Mandeb, the choking point of international trade (from the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden). There is great concern that if al-Qaeda captures Aden they could gain control of the Strait of Bab el Mandeb," though he said he doubts that would happen, given the direction in which the 'full-scale war' in Abyan is going.

In addition to the mass exodus of refugees from Africa to Yemen, the conflict in Abyan has displaced upwards of 160,000 Yemenis, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Aden, which is only a short drive from Abyan's western border, has already taken in more than 100,000 internally displaced people (IDP). As of April, [OCHA reported](#) that Aden's residential areas were already "saturated" with IDPs and 74 schools were "fully occupied" by the conflict migrants.

The next battlefield

Despite the recent success of President Hadi's US-backed military campaign to retake Abyan governorate and "eradicate" AQAP and its local franchise, Ansar al-Shari'a, from Yemen's shores, a litany of security threats loom over the southernmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

And even if the military campaign succeeds in purging Abyan of Ansar al-Shari'a, antigovernment sentiment remains high throughout peripheral, tribal-controlled regions where al-Qaeda fighters are currently seeking refuge. If President Hadi can convince tribes in these areas that the central government intends to make them shareholders in the new Yemen -- as opposed to bargaining chips for Sana'a to play off other political actors -- al-Qaeda may slowly be edged out. Indeed, the only time an al-Qaeda affiliate has been [decisively eliminated](#) was in Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006, when the local population demanded their exit.

Although "Yemen's transition remains largely on track, it cannot take place under the shadow of continued military threats," Benomar noted in the conclusion of his UNSC briefing. While the start may be shaky, those in the region -- and indeed around the world -- are hoping that the process may solidify and provide a guideline for other states facing similar challenges.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Yemen's Increasing Importance for Al-Qaeda and the US Anti-Terrorism Effort](#)

[A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen](#)

[Yemen: The Way Forward](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's featured [editorial content](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

Casey L. Coombs is a freelance journalist currently based in Sanaa, Yemen. You can follow him on Twitter at @Macoomb.

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=143842>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland