



Executive Summary



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THE STRUGGLE FOR YEMEN AND THE CHALLENGE OF AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

W. Andrew Terrill

In early 2011, the Arab World began going through a process of systemic political change that initially came to be known as the Arab Spring, although less optimistic references were increasingly used to describe these developments over time. In this struggle, which began in Tunisia and Egypt, a number of long-standing dictatorships were overthrown or at least fundamentally challenged by frustrated citizens seeking an end to corruption and the abuses inherent in an authoritarian state. Following the Tunisian and Egyptian examples, Yemen rapidly experienced serious street unrest that was directed at the over 30-year presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh struggled for over a year to maintain power but was ultimately unable to do so in the face of an enraged public and international disapproval for the corruption and violence of his regime. Under intense pressure, President Saleh turned over governing authority to Vice President Abed Rabbu Hadi in November 2011 under the conditions put forward by a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) transitional document. He formally remained president (without the powers of the office), until a referendum-type election confirmed Hadi as his successor. As President Hadi took office in February 2012, he faced not only serious demands for reform, but also a strong and energized insurgency in southern Yemen. The al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) insurgency had no ties to the activities of the pro-democracy demonstrators, but it had

flourished during the year-long power struggle in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa. Just as the AQAP insurgency was not linked to the pro-democracy movement, so also it was not closely linked to the larger al-Qaeda movement outside of Yemen. Thus, with local leadership overseeing operations in Yemen, Osama bin Laden's 2011 death was not a serious blow to AQAP.

AQAP functioned primarily as a terrorist organization prior to 2010, but it later expanded its operations to include efforts to capture, hold, and rule territory in areas where the Yemeni government had only a limited ability to maintain security. This new strategy of seizing and retaining territory was implemented prior to the onset of the Arab Spring, although it was later accelerated due to the Arab Spring-inspired turmoil in Yemen. As Yemen became increasingly unstable, it was racked by violence between the regime and its opponents. In such an environment, AQAP used its insurgent arm, Ansar al-Shariah (partisans of Islamic law), to seize some promising opportunities to capture and retain Yemeni territory while the government was too absorbed in its own problems to respond in a decisive manner. According to a variety of sources, including Amnesty International, Ansar al-Shariah implemented an array of extremely harsh punishments for any action that was viewed as an infraction of their version of Islamic law. Such punishments included crucifixions, public beheadings, amputations, and floggings.

In his February 2012 inauguration speech, Hadi called for, “the continuation of the war against al-Qaeda as a religious and national duty.” AQAP responded to his assertiveness with considerable ferocity by striking Yemeni government targets with suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism. These strikes were made in order to further challenge the government before Hadi could consolidate his authority. Even more significantly, AQAP won a major battle in southern Yemen during this time frame by attacking unprepared troops, most of whom appear to have been asleep after posting inadequate security. Despite this defeat, the government launched an offensive in the summer of 2012 to remove AQAP and Ansar al-Shariah from the territory they had seized in southern Yemen. The Yemeni offensive was conducted with a force of around 20,000 regular army soldiers, supported by significant numbers of paid local tribal auxiliaries. Saudi Arabia provided considerable financial assistance to support the operation, and it appears that a large share of the Saudi funds may have been used to hire the tribal militia auxiliaries requested to support the army. These types of fighters have often been highly effective in the kinds of combat that take place in Yemen. In the face of this attack, AQAP fought back proficiently and also conducted several spectacular terrorist attacks in Sanaa. Fortunately, the military prevailed against this resistance, and AQAP forces were ultimately driven from the urban areas that they had previously occupied.

In the 2012 government offensive, the international press reported the widespread use of U.S. drones, which, according to those same reports, may have tipped the tide of battle by gathering intelligence and serving to eliminate key insurgent leaders at important points in the campaign. While drone use has many political drawbacks, the possibility that it helped determine the outcome of the summer offensive is worth considering. If the Yemeni military had been defeated by AQAP in this effort, the government might have collapsed at an excruciatingly sensitive time, possibly leaving the country in anarchy. Such a defeat would also create the conditions for an even more deeply

rooted AQAP presence in southern Yemen, with no countervailing Yemeni authority capable of moving against it. The success of the government’s southern offensive would therefore seem to have been vitally important to U.S. national interests in the region. If Yemeni forces had failed, and particularly if they had failed ignominiously, a newly energized terrorist movement could have plagued the region and the world.

Unfortunately, despite the 2012 victory, the struggle for control of Yemen is still subject to uncertainty, and an AQAP insurgent comeback there remains a disturbing possibility. Moreover, the use of U.S. drones to ensure Yemeni security has already been seen to be deeply unpopular among many Yemeni citizens. Consequently, drones should not be treated as a long-term solution to that country’s security problems. A more optimal long-term solution is a Yemeni military that is capable of maintaining national security without the direct involvement of foreign forces. Military reform, therefore, remains a vital aspect of dealing with Yemen’s security issues. Yemeni forces are currently making some progress in this regard, and President Hadi has made a strong effort to modernize the military’s structure and eliminate the warlord-style leadership of some Yemeni commanders.

During the 2009-12 timeframe, AQAP also maintained a vigorous effort to strike against the United States, despite its increasing focus on expanding the southern insurgency, and then resisting subsequent government advances in that region. AQAP leaders considered terrorist strikes against the United States and efforts to defeat the Yemeni government as overlapping priorities despite the potential for a dissipation of resources with an overly ambitious agenda. Additionally, AQAP leaders did not seem to fear possible U.S. intervention with ground forces into Yemen in the aftermath of such a strike and may even have welcomed it. If the United States had invaded Yemen in response to a spectacular terror strike, it is almost certain that large elements of the population would have been willing to fight any foreign invader, no matter how valid the reason for intervention might have been. In such circumstances, the U.S. leadership would have

an overwhelming need to strike back hard and might easily choose the wrong way of doing so.

U.S. support for Yemen at this time of transition remains important, and the United States must not regard the fight against AQAP as largely over because of the 2012 defeat of insurgent forces in southern Yemen. AQAP remains a dangerous and effective force despite these setbacks. Moreover, there are important reasons for defeating AQAP and its allies in Yemen, even if this does not destroy the organization and instead leads it to move operations to other prospective sanctuaries in remote parts of the world. Yemen is one of the worst places on earth to cede to terrorists due to its key strategic location, including a long border with Saudi Arabia. It also dominates one of the region's key waterways, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, which controls access to the southern Red Sea. Outside of the region, the problem of Yemen based-terrorism remains an important international threat which cannot be ignored.

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