

The Emergence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Effectiveness of US Counterterrorism Efforts

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Abstract

The United States' Global War on Terror following September 11th, 2001 brought about a sense of focus by the US and members of the International Community to engage transnational actors; specifically terrorist organizations within Afghanistan and Iraq in a conflict in which these groups would collapse and lose resolve in their goals and ambitions. However, while efforts to thwart terrorist threats have had varying success within Afghanistan and Iraq, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has emerged onto the international scene with full force and vigor in recent years. This organization has reestablished the reality that while US counterterrorism efforts have crippled factions of Al Qaeda, the organization remains resilient and committed its political goals. US failure to understand the resolve and complexity of these organizations may have ultimately led to the untimely rise of AQAP— the old adage holds true... "Current efforts are simply sowing the seeds for the next conflict." This article aims to examine the rise of AQAP while examining the shortcomings of US counterterrorism strategies, offering insight into the controversial use of drone strikes as a current counterterrorism policy and offering policy considerations moving forward.

Key Words: Al-Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Arabian Peninsula, Drones, Counterterrorism, Yemen, Arab Spring, Nasir Al-Wahishi, War of Ideas, Anwar Al-Awalki

Introduction

Since September 11th, 2001, the United States has engaged itself in an international campaign to eliminate terrorism— specifically, international terrorist organizations that threaten the US domestically and its vital interests abroad. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) continues to sit near the top of international news. The conflict has polarized nations and a solution is yet to be found. The Global War on Terror has affected many diverse groups: from Afghani civilians to US civilians, each has been bombarded with information about the war every day for over a decade; the Islamic religion has been thrown into a limelight of scrutiny; and the historical conflict between the west and east has re-emerged. However, this Global War on Terror is anything but traditional, "It's not the traditional air onslaught or artillery barrage designed to weaken an intended enemy before the offensive goes in— rather this war is a "war of ideas" (Marcus, 2010).

This war of ideas bleeds into this simple point - combating terrorism is difficult. Simply put, defeating terrorism is a struggle, even a nearly impossible mission because at its very foundation, terrorism is a tactic with which the international community has struggled to uniformly define. Without some universal definition, it is a demanding task to find uniformity in counterterrorism methods and this is precisely one of the major reasons as to why terrorist groups

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have continued to remain relevant in a landscape, which many argue they should be trampled by now. In short, the international community has failed to tackle the issue of terrorism together and this lack of congruence in the goal to eradicate terrorist organizations surely means the continued resilience of these groups as viable entities in the game of international relations.

The Shortcomings of Counterterrorism

It is obvious with hindsight that the international community has failed in a number of situations to be proactive in defeating terrorist threats. In large part however, this failure has come from incorrectly assessing the threat posed by terrorist groups (knowing the enemy) – a theme the US has seen continue to repeat itself over the last decade. Following the United States' invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq at the beginning of the century, the US incorrectly calculated the resilience of Al Qaeda within the region and its ability to spread. In 2011, a decade after the US invasion of Afghanistan, Bruce Hoffman, Director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service and a specialist in the study of terrorism and counter-insurgency, spoke at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and outlined three critical errors made by the US in their pursuit of and war against Al Qaeda: 1) that the organization was portrayed as weak and on the verge of strategic collapse following the assassination of some key figures in the organization's hierarchy, 2) the Arab Spring was a welcomed wave of revolutions that would result in the spread of democracy and Al Qaeda would no longer be a relevant threat in the region – the idea that with democracy comes freedom from terrorism, 3) the inaccurate evaluation of Al Qaeda's internal structure; believing it to follow a hierarchical top-down approach in terms of leadership (Hoffman, 2011). These three errors have been significant, specifically because in recent years, the international community has witnessed the rise of Al Qaeda affiliates across the globe. From Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Qaeda has demonstrated resiliency not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan (where the international community knows them as Al Qaeda Core – AQC), but has also been able to expand globally.

According to Hoffman, the organization (Al Qaeda and its affiliates) has expanded by more than 50% since 2008, in large part due to the organization's ability to take advantage of failed states in the Middle East and in East Africa (Hoffman, 2011). Furthermore, during this time, Al Qaeda demonstrated the ability to develop and mobilize faster than any other time in their history (founded in 1988). While some scholars have argued that the organization has been greatly hindered by current efforts to kill off the organization's leadership, others have argued that AQAP not only remains operational, but also has used the Arab Spring as a catalyst to increase the organization's capacity and longevity.

In order to fully understand Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its current operational capacity, it is necessary to retrace the history of the organization. The evolution can be complicated, but the important distinction to make is that AQAP as it is known today is the result of a merger between two separate Al Qaeda operations - Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia (AQSA) and Al Qaeda in Yemen (AQIY).

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia

Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia has its roots beginning in 1998 when Yusuf Al-Uyayri was released from a Saudi prison where he had been held for his suspected participation in the Khobar Tower bombings of 1996 (Porter, 2009). Al-Uyayri focused intently on establishing an Islamic Jihadist group that would threaten the Saudi regime and began recruitment efforts shortly after his release. Four years later, in 2002, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Nashiri returned to Saudi Arabia following

his involvement in Afghanistan combating coalition forces (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). Al-Nashiri was one of numerous members of the Saudi Mujahedeen that were returning to Saudi Arabia to escape the ongoing conflict, recruit membership and continue to advance Al Qaeda's strategic goals throughout the Islamic world. However, the two leaders— Al-Uyayri and Al-Nashiri— had very different visions for the advancement of Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia.

Al Uyayri can be equated with that of the strategist— very meticulous in his ideology of what the organization should look like. Al-Uyayri developed a plot to recruit membership for five distinct cells to operate under Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. The logic behind this five cell operation was to ensure the continuation of strategic goals should one cell be compromised (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). While the plot demonstrated immense calculation and favorable probability, it would take time and this is something that Al-Qaeda Core was not energized about.

On the opposite end of the spectrum sat Al-Nashiri, whose plan would take significantly less time and enabled Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia to operate almost immediately upon his arrival back from Afghanistan. Al-Nashiri's plot emphasized immediate action in which Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia would carry out attacks against the Saudi regime, government targets, and security forces in order to demonstrate Al Qaeda's intent to not be fazed by the war in Afghanistan (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). Al Qaeda Core strongly supported the vision of Al-Nashiri and this resulted in the financing and backing by AQC for Al-Nashiri's plot. For a period of ten months, Al-Nashiri carried out attacks across Saudi Arabia; however, the Saudi government and intelligence community along with the assistance of the United States were able to rapidly mobilize a counterterrorism effort in which Al-Nashiri himself was arrested (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). This was a huge blow to his operation— an operation that was unable to continue without his leadership— ultimately demonstrating the necessity for Al Qaeda in the region to develop a multiple-cell structure.

With Al-Nashiri imprisoned in late 2002, AQC turned to Yusuf Al-Uyayri to carry on the Al Qaeda brand in Saudi Arabia. By 2003, Al-Uyayri had completed his necessary recruitment efforts in order to fulfill the necessary quota to establish five distinct AQ cells operating in Saudi Arabia. However, while recruitment efforts were complete, training and establishing self-sustaining factions was still in the elementary stages according to Al-Uyayri's philosophy. Nonetheless, with the pressure mounting from AQC for Al-Uyayri to take action, Al-Uyayri initiated the organization's first significant attack since Al-Nashiri's arrest. On May 12, 2003 several car bombs were detonated outside of a housing compound in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia's capital). The attack killed 34 and wounded over 200 people (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). While AQ consider the attack a success, the crackdown on the organization that ensued demonstrated Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was anything but successful. Saudi Arabia strengthened efforts to capture and/or kill Al Qaeda operatives in the state and before long, over 100 AQ operatives were arrested and another 26 were killed in one of the most successful counterterrorism campaigns seen in the region (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). Al-Uyayri was one of the 26 killed in the Saudi onslaught against Al Qaeda and this clearly demonstrated the failure of the organization to exercise patience and precision.

What is interesting about this juncture is that although the Saudi government was able to push out Al Qaeda from its territory (or at least send them into hiding), the organization demonstrated extreme resilience through a media/propaganda campaign. This is perhaps the organization's turning point as Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was able to release an internet publication— Sawt Al Jihad— and effectively rally the troops. The media campaign served as a tool with which AQSA was able to successfully falsify their operational capacity in order to rebuild and recover the diminished recruitment base. As a result of this media crusade, Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was able to reemerge as a legitimate entity in Saudi Arabia. However, the organization focused largely on attacking Saudi security targets in order to diminish the Saudi's capabilities to

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deal with the Al Qaeda threat—the logic being that if it were possible to eliminate the security forces cracking down on the organization then sustaining an Al Qaeda presence would be easy. While this worked for a while, it wasn't long before Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia began to become chaotic and incompetent. Attacking Saudi security meant attacking Muslim targets and this was seen as contradictory to enhancing Al Qaeda's support in the region and also against the ultimate goal of eliminating Western presence. In addition, Sawt Al-Jihad gradually began to fade once the organization gained momentum with a recruitment pool. Eventually the publication ceased and this was detrimental to Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia's continuation (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011).

Al Qaeda in Yemen

While Al Qaeda Core has its roots traced back to 1988 during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the organization did not carry out (claim responsibility) for a terrorist attack until 1992 in Aden, Yemen when two hotels were bombed. This not only signified the start of a legitimate and serious terrorist threat to international community, but noting the location is also important as the world has seen in recent years that Yemen has continued to be a quagmire for the war against terrorism.

Al Qaeda in Yemen as a legitimate organization dates back to around 1997. According to former US Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine, in 1997, there was already an Al Qaeda presence. We knew about it. The Yemenis knew about it. Everyone knew about it (Khan, 2012). Bodine's recollection of the region reveals the tragic reality that the US was well aware of the terrorist activity in the region but more or less failed to be proactive (enough) in combating a terrorist threat that would eventually be robust enough to attack the United States domestically. Obviously, Al Qaeda in Yemen was not the same group that struck the US on September 11th, 2001; however, as Bodine points out, terrorist activity was not something the US was oblivious to or blindsided by.

While Al Qaeda in Yemen demonstrated an ability to sustain, it wasn't until 2000 when the entire US population took notice of the Al Qaeda threat in terms of their impact on US security. In October of 2000, two suicide bombers detonated explosives from a small vessel as it approached the USS Cole. The attack killed 17 US service persons and brought about a renewed sense of attention from the US and international community towards the problem of international terrorism.

The pivotal juncture in the current state of affairs with US relations with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula can be traced back to 2006. In May of 2006, 23 jihadist prisoners escaped from a military intelligence prison in Yemen's capital of Sana'a (Wilkinson and Barclay, 2011). This was categorized as being a very high security prison and suspicions have since risen about the jailbreak and foul play that may have been surrounding the escape. What is important to note is that two prominent individuals escaped during this time—Nasir Al-Wahishi (Nasser Abdul Karim al-Wuhayshi,) and Qasim al-Raymi. Al-Wahishi served as a personal assistant to Bin Laden and also fought at Tora Bora in Afghanistan in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks. He is responsible for re-establishing Al Qaeda in Yemen and serves as the head of the organization (or emir). In addition, Qasim al-Raymi became the chief military commander of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This is an alarming event on the timeline of AQAP because these two terrorists were effectively 'locked up' and not posing a significant threat to the stability of the region or the security of the US interest domestically or abroad. However, their escape was a significant blow to counterterrorism efforts in the Arabian Peninsula as these two individuals have effectively changed the landscape of terrorism in Yemen and the surrounding states.

In January of 2009, Nasir al-Wahishi announced the formal merger between Yemeni Al Qaeda operatives and Saudi Al Qaeda operatives—establishing the current Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that the US is dealing with today (Rollins, 2011). As previously stated, Al-Wahishi has

served as the Emir of AQAP and contrary to a report published in 2011, Al-Wahishi is still alive and active in running the organization as it continues to operate and remain relevant in the region.

Why Build in Yemen? Before and After the Arab Spring

At this juncture, it is important to analyze the reason Yemen seems to be a sufficient state for AQAP to base itself out of. After 9/11, US relations with Yemen appeared to be moving in a positive direction especially in the realm of combating terrorism and more specifically Al Qaeda. During this period of time shortly after 9/11, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh flew into Washington with the intention of pledging to President Bush and the US a sense of loyalty and commitment towards combating terrorism. Many scholars have argued that this act came as a result of the Bush administration's "You're with us or against us" mentality (Khan, 2012) a statement which Saleh very much took to heart. However, most experts believed Saleh's commitment to combating extremism was highly suspect--claims supported by several reports of militant releases or escapes (Masters and Laub, 2013) (especially the 2006 Sana'a jailbreak).

Prior to the Arab Spring, Ali Abdullah Saleh served as president of Yemen before stepping down and bestowing power to his vice president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Saleh was a notorious dictator with motive to maintain his power within the state for personal gain. The result of his administration was poor central governance, rampant with corruption, and unable/unwilling to address growing concerns of the populace in a number of provinces. This has been attributed to neglect of addressing the tribal structure of some of these remote provinces and under President Saleh's rule, Yemen offered Al Qaeda a prime location to establish itself. Saleh served as the central leader of Northern Yemen beginning in the late 1970 and expanded his rule in 1990 when Yemen became unified. According to John Rollins, Saleh had a long history of allying himself with Sunni Islamist militants against Communist or Shiite domestic opponents. These ties have led in the past to his government's somewhat complacent attitude toward Al Qaeda sympathizers (Rollins, 2011).

Examining this situation, it is possible to see that while Saleh spoke in terms of combating terrorist activity and assisting in the GWOT, the reality is that Saleh played both sides Al Qaeda and the US. Katherine Zimmerman of criticalthreats.org stated that: "Saleh had been America's counter-terrorism partner in Yemen, but in reality did little to take on AQAP and regularly used the Al Qaeda presence as a bargaining chip to better his political and personal fortunes (Zimmerman, 2012a)." Additionally, when the US Special Forces trained Yemeni forces for combating the terrorist threat, Saleh neglected to dispatch these forces throughout the country. Instead, Saleh utilized these forces to maintain his status and power as President of Yemen.

Even with the fall of Saleh in late 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring, Yemen is still in a difficult situation. With the state of Yemen in anguish and the people of the country suffering from food shortages, a poor economy, and little prospects for a prosperous future, Yemen has offered AQAP the "perfect storm" blending corrupt leadership with humble military capabilities. Since the 2006 jailbreak, Yemen has seen growth of AQ in the state and only time will tell if President Hadi will move in a different direction than Saleh. Strategypage.com reports that "most Yemenis are giving the new government some time to show they can do something about all this ("Turkish Pistols," 2011)." However, how much time Yemenis will give the new administration is unknown.

AQAP Today

Figure 1 provides a visual of the most significant members to the operational aptitude of

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AQAP. As can be seen, four prominent members have been killed, one captured, and seven remain at large. This figure assists in demonstrating the difficulties that the US and Yemeni forces have had in tracking down the central leadership and decapitating the organization. The big issue is that it takes time to find these individuals and even more time to determine the proper means of stopping them—whether it be assassination or capture.

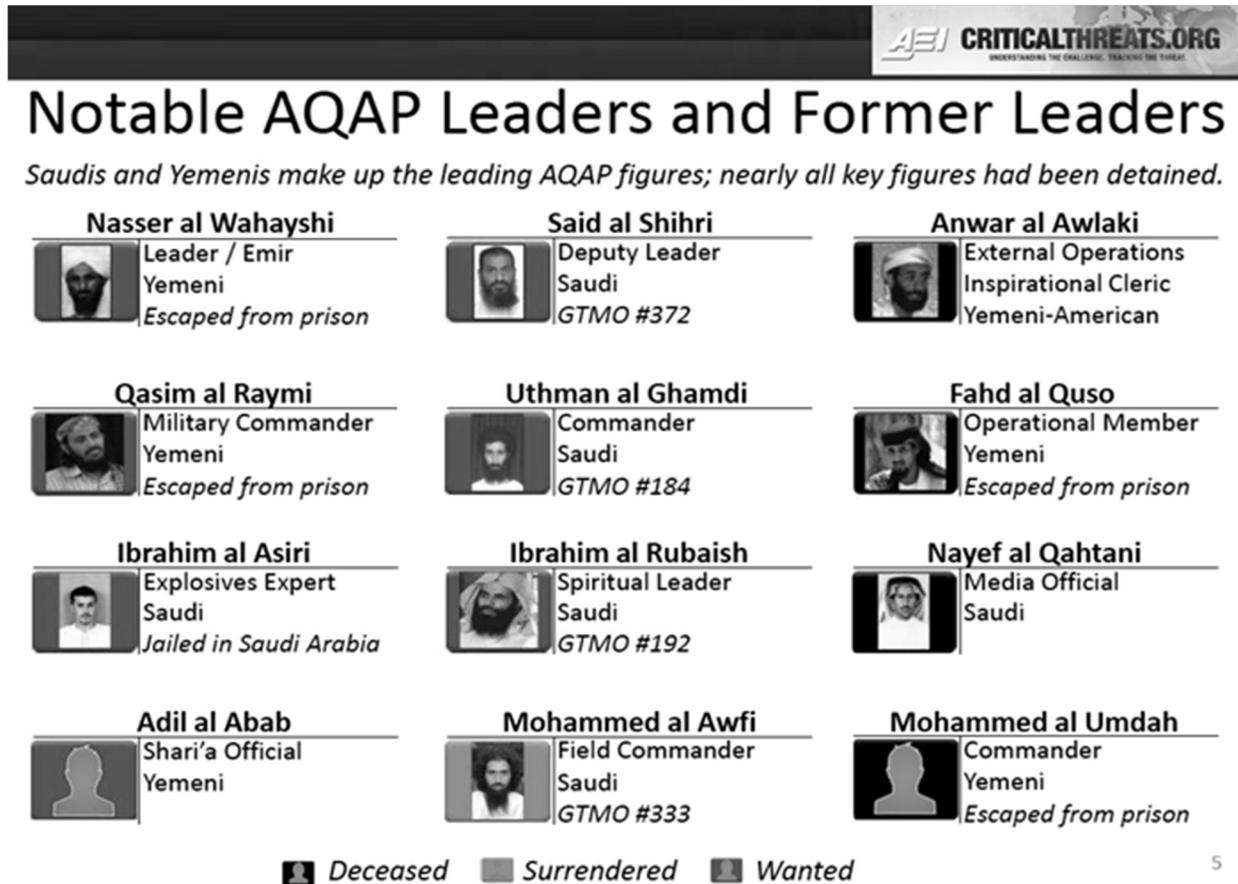


Figure 1: Notable AQAP Leaders and Former Leaders
Source: Zimmerman, 2012b

The strategic goals of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula are consistent with that of militant jihadist. According to Jonathan Masters from the Council on Foreign Relations, AQAP's goals are as follows:

- É Purge Muslim countries of Western influence and replace secular governments with fundamentalist Islamic regimes observant of sharia law.
- É Destabilize the Yemeni government—leading to the overthrowing the regime in Sana'a.
- É Assassinate Western nationals and their allies, including members of the Saudi royal family.
- É Strike related interests in the region, such as embassies and energy concerns.
- É Plan and implement attacks against the U.S. homeland. (Masters and Laub, 2013)

AQAP has demonstrated (since its re-establishment) that it is committed to longevity and the ultimate strategy of the Al Qaeda brand. In essence, AQAP continues to flourish despite the

growing US presence in the region. However, this is not to say that counterterrorism efforts have failed— at least yet. Currently, US and Yemeni efforts to cripple the organization seem to be at least minimally effective in pushing AQAP underground for a duration— however, sustaining this permanently in the region is still quite a hefty question mark.

While AQAP is not the only active and operational Al Qaeda affiliate, it has something unique that separates it and has pushed the US to label it as one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations in the world— an English media strategy which was designed to reach out to Westerners, recruit them, and encourage them to attack the US domestically (Sharp, 2012). The media mastermind— Anwar Al-Awaki utilized YouTube as a forum to post anti-western propaganda. In addition, INSPIRE online magazine— Figure 2— offered an English media outlet through which AQAP established the ability to get their messages out to a vast audience and gain support and at the very least a forum to articulate their grievances with the West.



Figure 2: Cover and Table of Contents of INSPIRE Magazine (in English)
 Source: Ambinder, 2010

Countering the Terrorist Threat—Drone Strikes

As previously mentioned, combating terrorism is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks facing the states of the International Community. Attempting to diagnose the best way of dealing with terrorists and terrorism is still a heavily debated topic— and justifiably so. Should terrorists be attacked militarily or does it require some non-military response? Sitting at the root of this question are fundamental arguments amongst numerous scholars who point out that in certain cases rehabilitation of terrorists simply is not possible (they are too far socialized to be reintegrated into society), while others argue that killing terrorist may actually bring about unintended negative

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consequences creating more terrorist. According to a brief report by Strategy Page, Saudi Arabia has been quite successful in its counterterrorism efforts utilizing a hybrid model:

Because of the intense anti-al Qaeda attitudes in Saudi Arabia and energetic counter-terrorist operations by the police. Thus, if pro-al Qaeda Saudis want to operate freely, they have to get out of Saudi Arabia. Several thousand suspected and actual Islamic terrorists have been captured in Saudi Arabia in the last nine years. Those guilty of murder are usually beheaded, while the rest went through several years of indoctrination and rehabilitation. Most of those released stayed away from Islamic radicalism but 10-20 percent didn't, and some of those leave the country to continue their Islamic terrorist ways (Turkish Pistols, 2012).

Currently the United States has taken on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (within Yemen) through semi-military means. While the US has not utilized traditional military tactics in Yemen as of yet (and likely will not pursue any traditional means with the current administration in office), the use of drones as a military weapon has been part of the strategy to eradicate terrorism from the region. President Obama stated in an interview with CNN that, "Drones are one tool that we use, and our criteria for using them is very tight and very strict. It has to be a target that is authorized by our laws; that has to be a threat that is serious and not speculative (Woods, 2012).

The logic behind this strategy is that intelligence gathering operations have provided detailed enough information to confirm that targeted suspects are actually involved in terrorist activities. With thorough intelligence, the United States has utilized predator drones to launch targeted strikes against these suspected/confirmed terrorists.

Obama further stated that these strikes are not simply done "on the fly" and without serious calculations. As the president stated:

"It (a drone strike) has to be a situation in which we can't capture the individual before they move forward on some sort of operational plot against the United States. And this is an example of where I think there has been some misreporting. Our preference has always been to capture when we can because we can gather intelligence. But a lot of terrorist networks that target the United States, the most dangerous ones operate in very remote regions and it's very difficult to capture them (Woods, 2012).

This statement is pivotal towards providing justification of drone strikes. The US under the Obama administration has been extremely proactive with the use of drone strikes throughout a number of states in the international community some where governments have been involved (Yemen) and some where governments have not (Pakistan). Regardless of government consultation, President

Obama has continued to emphasize the cautious and calculated procedure of determining drone usage. As outlined again in his CNN interview Obama definitively declared that:

"We (the United States) got to make sure that in whatever operations we conduct, we are very careful about avoiding civilian casualties, and in fact there are a whole bunch of situations where we will not engage in operations if we think there's going to be civilian casualties involved (Woods, 2012).

This is perhaps the most important part of deciding the usage of a drone strike. The Long War Journal, along with a number of other independent reporting agencies, has tracked the United

States' drone strikes throughout the international community over the last decade' and some figures are alarming in terms of civilian casualties. While evidence has been disputed in terms of how accurate it may or may not be, the US government has yet to come out and publicly denounce the findings that show that drone strikes have in fact been responsible for a significant number of civilian casualties.

The trouble arises because Yemen is such a slippery slope as its political system is fragile as a result of the Arab Spring and there is potential that it will become a failed state. The country has an extremely 'limited (amount of) natural resources (including fresh water), low literacy rates, high unemployment, and rapid population growth (Masters and Laub, 2013).' This all spells frailty and actions to combat the terrorist threat in the region must not neglect to take this into account. Combating terrorism undoubtedly must blend the use of military tactics with efforts to reach out to the civilian population and develop trust' or at the very least an understanding that the intentions are to improve the lives of those civilians, not damage their lives or jeopardize their futures. However, an article appearing in *The Economist* in September of 2012 explained the mixed messages that US drone strikes have had on the Yemeni civilian population.

'People are afraid to go to weddings because, whenever large groups of men gather, they are afraid a drone will hit them ('Don't Drone,' 2012).'

 This statement came from a local sheik in Yemen and depicts the very real concern that the US should have about its actions over the past decade in Yemen. The argument here is that drone usage has actually resulted in a polarization of the civilian population. While a number of Yemeni civilians dislike Al Qaeda and have come out in resistance stating that they don't support their efforts in the region, the actions of the United States drone operations have made them question the intentions of the US and have put the local tribesmen at a crossroads. In particular, an interview conducted with a friend of the sheik who issued the statement above commented on the drone program stating:

'Our people ask how these foreign planes have a right to come here and kill them, even if some of the people they kill are al-Qaeda. The other thing is that they think the drones are taking photos of them and spying on them. Because of this, our people have finished with America. They see America as this, (hand gesture the letter X) ('Don't Drone,' 2012).'

Obviously this is counterproductive to the ultimate goal of ousting the terrorist presence within Yemen. While the main intention of the drone strikes is to deter future/potential terrorist from partaking in terrorist activity and to stop those already involved from continuing to operate, the results of these drone strikes comes, with at the very least, concern over how the local population will continue to act in regard to AQAP.

To draw a parallel to US drone strikes, The Israeli government views terrorism, as an act of warfare and therefore, Israel believes that preemptive actions are warranted. This stance is one that the US has shifted towards in recent years' to be more proactive as opposed to reactive in the fight against terrorism (with 9/11 serving as the springboard for this change). However, Israel differs in that to support this ideology, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) ruled that assassinations and killing of terrorist was warranted and legal when 4 criteria are met:

1. Documented information exist that an active terrorist organization is going to attempt an attack.
2. Israeli appeals to the Palestinian Authorities to arrest the terrorist have been ignored.
3. Attempts by Israeli troops to arrest the suspect have failed.
4. The killing is not intended as retribution for past acts of terror but is designed to prevent an incipient attack that is likely to inflict multiple casualties. (Tucker, 2003)

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This policy as outlined by the IDF displays imperative calculations before attacks are launched and the US should develop and release a similar checklist for drone strikes against suspected/known terrorists. While a list similar to the one above is likely already in place, it is still ambiguous to the American populous and the rest of the international community. As a result, questions and speculation is rampant in terms of US policy do they (the US) shoot first and fill in the blanks/ask questions later? This should be avoided at all costs as it is perceived as deceitful and untrustworthy characteristics that damage counterinsurgency strategies.

In June of 2012, the Campaign For Innocent Victims In Conflict, Amnesty International, the Center for Constitutional Rights and a half a dozen other organizations drafted a letter to President Obama addressing the lack of transparency with US drone strikes. The letter specifically stated that changes be made to the policy of the US administration's information on drone usage, in particular stating that:

“We echo Congressional requests that information be released to Congress regarding US drone use including: targeting criteria for “signature” strikes; mechanisms used by the CIA and JSOC to ensure that such targeting is within the confines of international law, including which laws are being applied to these cases and definitions of a civilian; the procedure in place for investigations when civilians are known to have suffered losses of life, limb or property as a result of strikes; and mechanisms in place to track, analyze and publicly recognize civilian casualties (Naiman, 2012).”

The argument made by these organizations is that contrary to Obama's rhetoric, the criteria for drone strikes is still ambiguous and leaves too many unanswered questions. The Long War Journal released information tracking US drone strikes in Yemen since the first attack occurred in 2002. What this research has demonstrated is that while civilian casualties are not astronomical, they do in fact exist. The question that then must be answered is whether civilian casualties (no matter the number) are acceptable. While publicly they may not be, it is obvious that in certain situations, civilian casualties have been deemed “collateral damage” or unavoidable in order to protect the security and interests of the US and its allies. However, how can you then convince civilians to “trust” you? This is where the answers are hazy and policy decisions become even more challenging. Looking at Figure 3 it is possible to see the recorded casualties (civilian vs. AQAP) from drone strikes in Yemen since 2002 (when the first drone strike in Yemen occurred, killing Al-Harithi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Yemen).

Since 2002, the rate of drone strikes in Yemen has increased exponentially from 1 single strike in 2002 to now a total of 47 airstrikes in Yemen since May of 2011 (Roggio, 2012). According to Bill Roggio of The Long War Journal, US efforts in terms of drone strikes have been centered not only around decapitation strategies but have also focused on taking out simple foot soldiers of AQAP. The logic is that taking out the foot soldiers aids the Yemeni military forces in their efforts to eradicate the AQAP presence less AQAP members theoretically translates into a force that is easier to contain and defeat. While this seems rational, there is significant concern about the ability of the Yemeni military to sustain efforts to fight terrorists especially in Southern Yemen and isolated provinces. In addition, as the chart demonstrates, while 182 AQAP operatives were killed, 35 civilians were also killed by US drone strikes. The repercussions of these civilian deaths cannot be discounted and the impact they may have on counterinsurgency efforts may be more significant than the United States can anticipate.

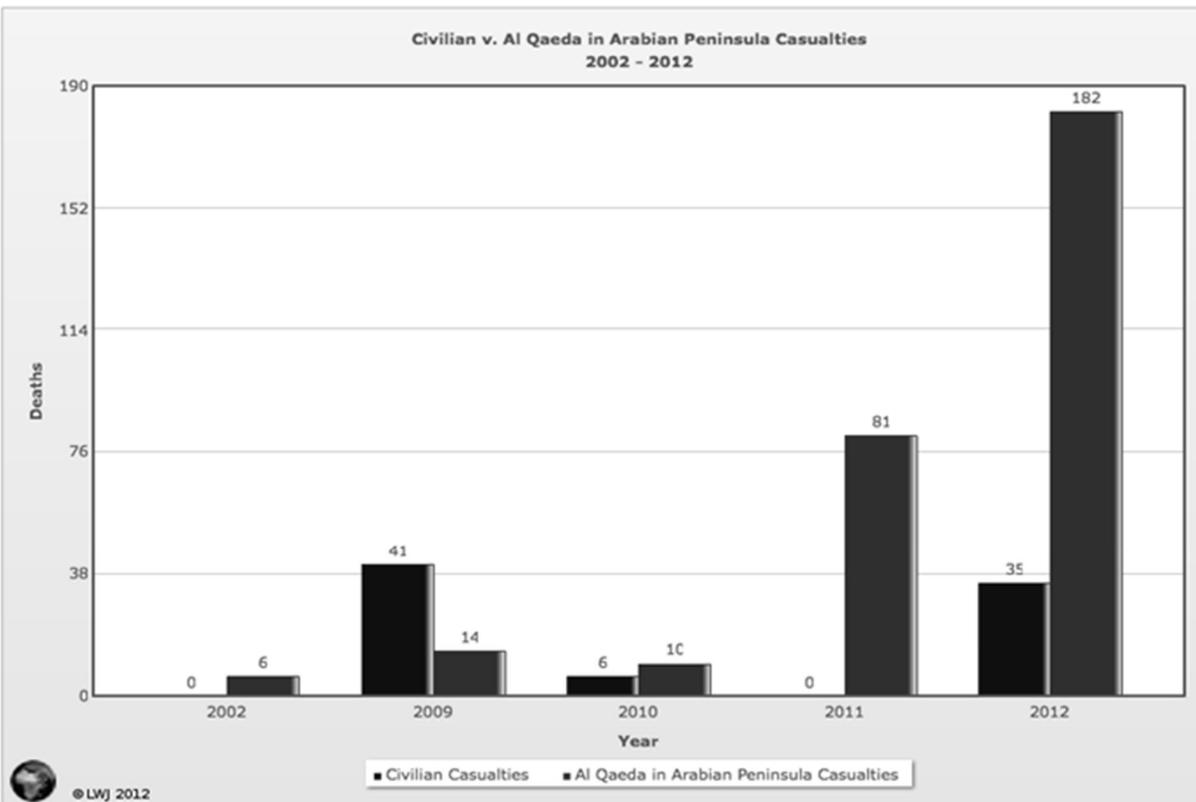


Figure 3: Civilian versus Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Casualties
Source: Roggio, 2012

In a recent Al-Jazeera op-ed by Baraa Shiban, member of the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference, Shiban outlined a number of concerns with ongoing drone warfare within Yemen. Shiban outlines a few specific occasions in which drone strikes carried out by the United States failed to take out believed terrorist operatives and instead resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. In particular, one individual was simply at a market buying clothes for his family and on his way home was hit with a missile from a drone strike (Shiban, 2013). Tragic doesn't begin to describe this situation and countless others; not to mention the potential repercussions that these errors may eventually have on US efforts within not only Yemen, but the entire region. As Shiban explains, "How can we convince our citizens to support democracy and the rule of law when they see those very same principles abandoned and disregarded by Obama and Hadi (Shiban, 2013)?"

This certainly demonstrates the complexity of the situation because US officials, Yemeni officials, and the rest of the world can point to the fact that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is still very much active and engaged in terrorist activity within Yemen's borders. As The Long War Journal reports, AQAP members killed over 50 Yemeni soldiers and police forces on September 20, 2013 in a series of coordinated attacks on military complexes throughout the Southern region of Yemen (Roggio, 2013b). These attacks utilized suicide bombers to carry out the acts and demonstrates why the US along with Yemen is committed to drone strikes. Furthermore, ten short days after these attacks, AQAP fighters launched another attack on a Yemen Army compound dressed as soldiers of the Interior Ministry's paramilitary Central Security Organization (Roggio, 2013a). This attack coming so shortly after the previous attack sent a statement that AQAP, despite the continued pressure of US drone strikes, would not be silenced. The organization has continued to demonstrate its resilience and has even reestablished control over some areas of the country notably on September 25, 2013 when the organization declared new emirate in Habban

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district in Shabwa province (Roggio, 2013a). Indeed attacks such as these assist the US in reinforcing its policy on drone strikes and enable the US to continue to perpetrate drone warfare against AQAP. Nonetheless, this drone warfare is a slippery slope that the US and Yemen have attempted to navigate with varying success. Obviously, killing 182 known terrorist operatives in 2012 can be considered a success; however, the resulting 35 civilian deaths may ultimately result in the ability of AQAP to reach out and recruit those whose lives have been forever by the loss of loved ones by US drone strikes.

In addition, the International Community has witnessed a dramatic shift in the Middle East since 2011 with the Arab Spring. The events that transpired in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and so on cannot be neglected, as an analysis of drone strikes is considered. This means that examining how the events of the Arab Spring gained momentum must be taken into account when examining the potential repercussions of US drone strikes in Yemen. In particular, the role of social media has forever changed how states should view foreign policy and the potential for an everyday civilian to snap a picture, tweet out said picture and spur reaction from the world. This cannot be overlooked, as doing so is irresponsible. Dr. Curtis Ryan, expert on the Middle East and faculty member at Appalachian State University explains that social media has impacted the ability of people—specifically the youth—to congregate, resist oppression, and demand change (Ryan, 2013). It has provided a forum through which those who have traditionally been seen as having little to no voice can now reach every corner of the globe. This is vitally important when considered the current US policy on drone strikes. Asking the questions of what role social media may play in terms of failed drone strikes is important. Will these strikes that hit civilians garner more attention as the youth in the region witnesses these events, utilizes Facebook, Twitter, etc., and demands change? This intriguing idea is unquestionably important for US policy makers to consider.

Drones, No Drones, or a Hybrid: Policy Considerations and Recommendations for the Future

Jeremy Sharp, specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs published a research paper on November 1st, 2012 regarding Yemen's background with AQAP. Within the research Sharp addresses a statement made in May of 2012 by U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta—in particular the conversation was centered around whether or not the United States could defeat AQAP without having direct military engagement on the ground (in other words, boots on the ground in Yemen). Panetta's answer:

“The answer is yes, because very frankly, what we're targeting, the operations we're conducting, require the kind of capabilities that don't necessarily involve boots on the ground, but require the kind of capabilities that target those that we're after who are threats to the United States. That's what this mission is about. It isn't about getting into, you know, their tribal differences and controversies. It isn't about getting into a civil war. It's about going after those who threaten our country. That's what this mission is about (Sharp, 2012).”

At its very essence, Panetta's statement falls short of what the goals should be for combating AQAP. History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes and neglecting to involve US forces in efforts to assist in state-building tasks necessary to win the game of counterinsurgency is a failure of US policy. How long can the US continue to utilize asymmetrical warfare tactics to attempt to defeat AQAP and will it ever be 100% successful? The answer isn't crystal clear; however, what is certain is that the cost effectiveness of drone usage may ultimately become too expensive or too controversial to continue without looking into more comprehensive approaches to

defeating AQAP.

At the same time, while it is possible to see through the interviews with the local Yemeni population that drones send mixed messages, the US and its allies cannot discount their effectiveness in pushing AQAP underground. Drone strikes have obviously diminished the number of Al Qaeda operatives in the Arabian Peninsula, but it will take time before it is possible to uncover the ramifications of these drone strikes in terms of AQAP's ability to reach out to civilian victims and recruit them for their organization. Nonetheless, the idea that drones are ineffective is certainly a fallacy if one looks at the purpose of these attacks— to kill the enemy. In that regard they are working, but still, they are a short-term solution.

To defeat terrorism it is imperative that the state where terrorists operate make intentional and committed efforts to address the terrorist threat. Without a state's commitment to defeating terrorism, a foreign presence can only do so much. US drone strikes should be complemented by increased pressure on President Hadi to eradicate AQAP from Southern Yemen in isolated provinces. The drones should be utilized for espionage and blended together with Yemeni boots on the ground that actively engage the terrorist threat and establish a legitimate force to oppose the AQAP presence. Neglecting to pressure Yemeni forces to increase counterterrorism efforts simply means that the terrorist threat will pop back up once the US determines drone strikes are no longer needed. It is a mistake the US cannot afford. Furthermore, deploying US Special Forces in Yemen to gather intelligence, coordinate and target drone strikes, and train the local authorities to address the AQAP threat is imperative to a counterterrorism strategy that maintains longevity in the region. Again, the goal should not only be to stop immediate threats, but should also address long term threats and AQAP will certainly continue to rear its ugly head over and over again in the region if the effort to challenge them is done haphazardly.

Lastly, The Obama Administration has provided roughly \$350 million in aid to Yemen in a number of different forms, from military, economic (job creation, infrastructure rehabilitation, micro-finance, and agriculture development), to democracy (reforming the electoral system, youth engagement), and humanitarian programs (water and sanitation, emergency food, health services) (Sharp, 2012). This has demonstrated some promise in the commitment of the US to fight terrorism with counterinsurgency tactics. US strategists cannot overlook state-building as one of the most important ways to combat terrorists as offering improved living conditions, education, jobs, and an overall increased standard of life can change the attitude and perceptions of an entire population— shifting their perspective on terrorists and ultimately leading toward their cooperation in defeating the threat of terrorism in the region.

Overall, a reevaluation of the criteria necessary to launch a drone strike coupled with a continued commitment to state-building and pressure on the central government of Yemen is the most effective means to combat AQAP. AQAP cannot be defeated by military alone and the United States along with its allies must utilize semi-military tactics and not deviate from them. In addition, the US must break the cycle of terrorist recruitment and regeneration with the understanding that decapitation strategies rarely work in stopping terrorist organizations— it takes a significantly more intentional effort to help the civilian population grasp the idea that terrorist organizations are not people they should be supporting. The mistakes in the past cannot repeat themselves and there must be a reminder issued that AQAP is likely far more networked than the organization is often times credited. There is no easy answer or quick fix to the threats posed by AQAP and other AQ affiliates; however, security is the number one goal of any state and it is an interest that is worth the investment both monetarily and in time. One thing is certain; while terrorism has been around for decades, even centuries, the international terrorism that emerged in the US at the turn of the century (9/11) will likely remain a difficult issue for years/decades to come. Whatever the US currently does, it is imperative that it understand it is potentially sowing the seeds for the next problem in the future. Focusing attention on strategic interests that benefit

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the US is not necessarily a negative thing for it is important in maintaining a hegemonic status in the international community. However, while the US has demonstrated its ability to arm itself with an incredible security and defense apparatus, it must focus on arming itself with the knowledge and understanding of these groups and the dynamics surrounding terrorism in order to better prepare for the future.

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