

**Suppressing the Growth of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula:  
An Examination of the Resurgence of AQAP in Yemen and Policies the  
United States Can Employ to Mitigate the Threat**

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**Abstract**

Yemen is the latest country in the Middle East to fall victim to internal conflict caused by divisive political rifts, poverty, tribal disputes, and the pervasive Sunni-Shia rivalry. The country is now fully engulfed in a civil war involving three primary actors: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); Houthis, a Shia group of Yemenis militants; and remnants of the U.S.-backed, Sunni government. Following the exile of Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Hadi, these three groups are competing for control over the increasingly destabilized country. While a Saudi-led coalition has been launched to drive out Houthi rebels, AQAP has largely benefited from a lack of international focus on the group. According to United States Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, “AQAP has seized the opportunity of the disorder there and the collapse of the central government” (Cooper and Schmitt 2015). With regional actors focused on averting Houthi-control of the region, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has positioned itself to gain control of the resources and territory necessary to reestablish itself as one of the most dangerous terror organizations in the world. If AQAP gains control of the region, consequences for the Western countries and their regional partners will be grave. This paper will examine the current resurgence of AQAP in Yemen, how its growth might affect the United States and its allies, as well as approaches the U.S. and the international community should take to mitigate the threat.

**Key Words:** Abd Rabbuh Hadi, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Arabian Peninsula, Drone Presence, Houthi Rebels, Intelligence Capabilities, NATO, Regional Actors, Sectarianism, Signals Intelligence, Sunni-Arab Coalition.

**AQAP Background**

*al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)* is a jihadist terror organization based in Yemen. The group, a reformed version of al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY), was formed in early 2009 when Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda members announced they would unite, citing shared interests and common goals (U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, 2015). Leadership of the group consists of the group’s amir, Nasir al-Wahishi, and its military commander, Qasim al-Rimi (U.S.

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National Counterterrorism Center, 2015). Wahishi spent several years working closely with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2015). Like its affiliate al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, AQAP is considered a follower of Sunni Islamic law. Following constant pressure from the Saudi government, the group took refuge in Yemen, where it currently holds considerable amounts of territory.

Funding for AQAP comes through a variety of sources. Drug sales, illegal taxes, bank robberies, and fake charities all contribute to the group's financial capabilities (Council on Foreign Relations, 2015). According to U.S. Treasury officials, the organization has yielded tens of millions of dollars through hostage ransoms (United States Treasury Department, 2014). Additionally, it was determined by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that private donations from Saudi Arabia made up the "most significant" portion of the group's funding (Lichtblau and Schmitt, 2010).

Though not as well financially equipped as other extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, AQAP has demonstrated a strong desire to carry out attacks on the United States and its Western Allies. In one statement, representatives from the group claimed AQAP will "continue to strike blows against American interests and the interests of America's allies" (Abedine, 2010).

### **Previous Attacks**

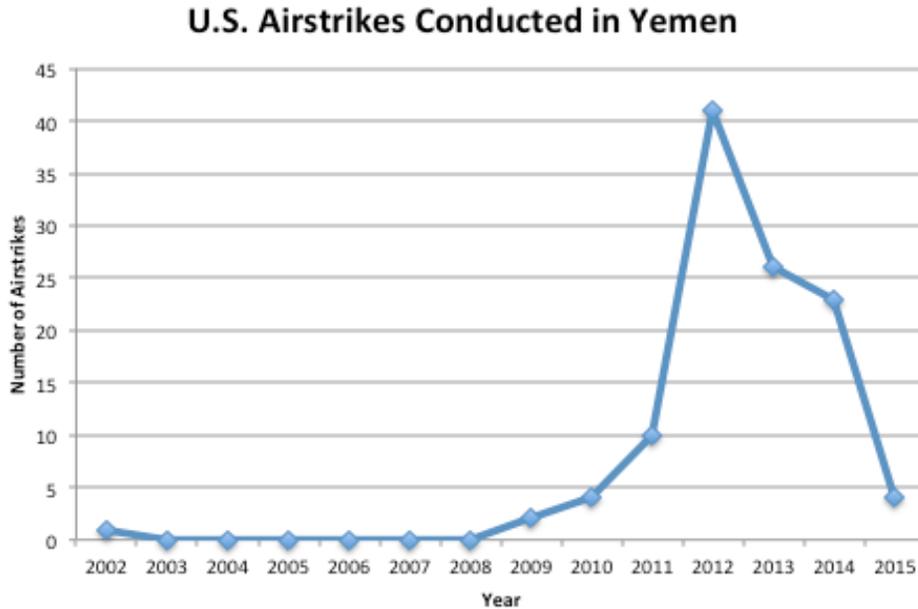
Since the organization's inception in 2009, the primary target of its attacks has been the Yemeni government. However, the group's reach extends far beyond its territorial parameters. In December of 2009, AQAP claimed responsibility for an attempted Christmas Day bombing, where an operative tried to detonate a plastic bomb he was carrying aboard a flight bound for Detroit, Michigan. AQAP has also claimed responsibility for several other plots intended to blow up civilian and cargo aircraft.

AQAP strikes on its targets are not limited to simply aircraft, however. In May of 2012, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt in an attack against Yemeni military personnel. The blast left over 120 people dead and more than 200 injured, making it the deadliest attack in Yemeni history (Al Jazeera, 2012). Most recently, two AQAP operatives equipped with AK-47s stormed the headquarters of French satire newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 11 citizens and wounding 11 others.

### **American Involvement**

The United States' current policy in Yemen consists of three core pillars. These are (1) suppressing and controlling AQAP in the short term; (2) assisting the development of country; and (3) creating international support to help stabilize the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2015).

Since 2002, the United States has conducted 111 drone strikes in Yemen, killing an estimated 546 AQAP operatives. These actions are a result of a covert U.S. program designed to eliminate senior al-Qaeda members (Roggio and Barry, 2015). However, American involvement with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has decreased in recent years. The number of airstrikes has begun to fall rapidly, as outlined in the figure 1 below:



*Figure 1: Number of U.S. airstrikes against AQAP in Yemen from 2002-2015 (Roggio and Barry, 2015).*

While the number of strikes has diminished, the efficacy has not. In April 2015, the organization announced American drone strikes had eliminated the group’s chief spiritual leader, Ibrahim al-Rubaish, whose primary role was to “[provide] spiritual guidance to the group and theological justification for its attacks” (Robertson and Botelho, 2015). Later in the month, a CIA drone strike killed Nasr al-Ansi, a senior AQAP leader believed to have held close ties with Osama Bin Laden. Al-Ansi had previously claimed responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris (CBS and Associated Press, 2015).

In addition to drone capabilities, American involvement on the ground has also begun to dwindle. United States intelligence and military personnel were all pulled from the region following spikes in violence throughout the country (Miller, 2015). Many of these forces have relocated in neighboring areas in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar to assist with coalition efforts.

### **Destabilization of Yemen & the Arab Response**

With the war in Yemen slowly deteriorating into a state of chaos, various actors have actively sought to establish themselves as the predominant authority in the region. The exile of Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Hadi in February 2015 epitomized the collapse of the central government and signified the birth of Houthi rule. In response, Saudi Arabia formed a ten-nation Sunni-Arab coalition consisting of forces from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates. Yemen is now subject to a full-blown offensive attempting to relieve the area of Iranian-backed Houthi control (Spencer, 2015).

Meanwhile, experts argue AQAP has taken advantage of the lack of a central government by taking major steps to revitalize its forces and tighten its grip on the region. In April 2015, AQAP successfully helped stage a prison break that freed nearly 300 inmates, including several operatives and one senior AQAP leader (Miller, 2015).

## **Implications for Regional Actors**

While the focus of the coalition may not be centered on AQAP, its actions will play a critical role in AQAP's growth. Coalition forces will undoubtedly encounter al-Qaeda operatives in their mission to stabilize control of Yemen, yet it remains to be seen to what extent the coalition will prioritize AQAP in their efforts.

If AQAP manages to seize control of Yemen amid the Saudi-Houthi conflict, the organization will gain access to extensive financial, militaristic and logistical resources necessary to run a large terror network. This, in conjunction with the right personnel, will likely give rise to smarter and deadlier attacks on opponents of the organization. Therefore, if countries in the region wish to seriously stabilize the area, it is vital that the Saudi-led coalition is successful in their mission. A permanent Arab-Coalition is a necessary security measure as only it can address the region's unique complexities. Yemen will serve as a test to see whether this coalition can actively stabilize an area prone to such conflicts. If successful, this offensive will likely set a precedent for conflict intervention within the region and would mean a decreased reliance on American intervention in the future. In response to the international pressure, it is highly likely that AQAP will view coalition members as potential targets for future terror strikes.

Consequences of dealing with AQAP will extend far beyond simply security measures, however. The nature of such a coalition response will likely give rise to sectarian consequences. The "unified Arab force," though embryonic in nature, is almost entirely composed of Sunni countries. Though a cohesive, multi-national coalition effort will undoubtedly be more effective at stabilizing the region, it is highly likely that the forces' sectarian tendencies will likely give way to inclusiveness (Bröning, 2015). Thus, the potential for greater sectarian division and the resulting conflict between Sunni and Shia factions will increase.

In addition, action taken against insurgent groups like AQAP will continue to exacerbate the current humanitarian crisis in Yemen. According to the World Health Organization, over 330,000 Yemeni citizens have been displaced by the conflict, while another 15.9 million families have been affected (World Health Organization, 2015). Airstrikes carried out by the Saudis have played a key role in this development. While the coalition's efforts have been intended to push back Houthi and AQAP forces, it is possible that the collateral damage imposed on civilians might push locals to favor these organizations. Therefore, it is highly likely that AQAP will recognize this as an opportunity to brand itself as a protector of local interest against foreign influence. As a result, it is anticipated that al-Qaeda will experience more robust support from local populations and enjoy stronger recruiting successes in getting locals to join their cause.

Finally, even if the AQAP presence is eliminated in Yemen, factors that helped foster its growth must still be addressed. This responsibility will ultimately fall on the Saudi-led coalition attempting to stabilize the area. If humanitarian and sectarian considerations in the country remain ignored, the coalition will continually find itself trying to suppress uprisings triggered by preventable causes.

## **Implications for American Interests**

The resurgence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula will undoubtedly result in increased American presence in Yemen in the near-term. As noted earlier, the creation of a jihadist-state would give AQAP access to a wealth of resources and territory necessary for sustain long-term

expansion. It is anticipated that AQAP would use the region to recruit and train members, as well as plan and launch operations against Western countries. Consequentially, suppressing the growth of al-Qaeda will become a central priority for the U.S. and its NATO allies. The threat alone will likely drive some Western countries to provide coalition air strikes and intelligence to support regional and Saudi-led ground forces attempting to stabilize the area.

Logistically speaking, however, these operations have become more difficult in the past few months. In 2012, the United States benefitted heavily from President Hadi, who actively sought to dissolve the internal AQAP presence in Yemen. Following his ousting, however, AQAP has seen its growth go unchecked. This, in combination with the recent drawdown of American drone presence, has played a critical role in AQAP's recent resurgence. Without a domestic presence backed by American drone capabilities, it is likely that AQAP will continue to exploit the instability of the region. According to retired four-star Army Gen. Jack Keane, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have nearly quadrupled its size in the last five years. Though definitions of al-Qaeda and which branches are considered 'affiliates' vary, it is clear the group has been able to sustain its growth internationally (Carroll, 2015). These trends will likely continue as Yemen continues to deteriorate.

Additionally, the collapse of Yemeni government means Americans lack a strategic position to directly launch counterterrorism efforts against the group. U.S. officials have confirmed that increased fighting in the area has severely hindered their ability to conduct drone strikes and Special Forces operations against AQAP (Groll 2015). While the United States still maintains intelligence capabilities in Yemen, the withdrawal of American intelligence and military personnel means it lacks eyes on the ground to closely monitor developments within the situation. This in turn will result in greater difficulty collecting intelligence, reduced accuracy of target assessments, and slower response times to events happening on the ground.

If current trends continue, it is likely that the United States will continue its support role for the Saudi-led coalition going forward. This would mean greater American involvement in the Arabian Peninsula in the near-term. While the Saudi focus is primarily on winning the proxy-war with Iran, it is likely that the United States will focus its efforts on suppressing the growth of al-Qaeda. It is expected that American drone and special operations presence will increase accordingly.

## **Diplomatic Recommendations**

Given the increasingly complex situation involving multiple violent actors, it seems that political negotiations will not be a viable means of settlement between parties involved in the Yemeni conflict. From an American standpoint, the resurgence of an al-Qaeda terror threat means the organization's expansion cannot go unchecked. Consequences of inaction would be grave.

It is therefore the United States' responsibility to see that this conflict supports a resolution that reflects American and regional interests with regards to the dissolution of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It is unclear to what extent Saudis oppose AQAP, however if the coalition is serious about stabilizing the region and not just reducing Iran's influence, then the Saudis will go after them. AQAP has targeted Saudi security forces in the past (Byman and Williams, 2015). By not addressing this threat, the Saudi-coalition would be ignoring a central pillar of their mission.

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It is then critical that the United States persuade the Saudis to actively engage AQAP as part of their stabilization efforts. Applying diplomatic pressure from the International Community will be a critical component to this task. In order to fully convince the coalition to revise its approach, the United States should use operational support, weapons sales, and Houthi-rebel intelligence as leverage in these discussions. If the United States is to be successful in achieving its goals across the board, it should exercise caution with *how much* assistance it provides to the Saudi-Coalition. Too much assistance might upset the already-fragile Iranian nuclear deal, while too little might allow Iranian and AQAP influence to grow unchecked.

The United States and the International Community should also play a guiding role in the restructuring of the Yemeni government. If the coalition manages to secure Yemen, the Saudis will likely reinstate Hadi as the President. In order to prevent future sectarian uprisings, the United States should work directly with the Sunni coalition to ensure Shia minorities receive more equal consideration under the law. Though this will prove to be difficult, it is a necessary step in establishing a government strong enough to control such a volatile area. To sustain this improved stability, the international community should also take steps to modernize the country's workforce by providing literacy campaigns to adults. An educated workforce would attract foreign investment as well as bolster economic growth internally, lessening the pull of organized crime as a means of socio-economic advancement.

Finally, the International Community must address humanitarian needs in Yemen. According to the World Bank, Yemen's poverty rate in 2012 was 54.5% (The World Bank, 2015). Experts predict parts of the country could run out of water by 2017 and that 14.7 million Yemenis currently depend on humanitarian aid (Whitehead, 2015). As fighting begins to calm, international aid workers will be able to better provide their services to refugees who have been cut off from such help. This process is easier said than done, however. In early May of 2015, Saudi King Salman announced the establishment of a "Committee of Evacuation and Humanitarian aid operations" in Yemen, aimed at coordinating humanitarian assistance between regional countries and the United Nations (Al Arabiya, 2015). This announcement came shortly after Saudi Arabia pledged approximately \$274 million in aid to the war-torn country (al-Jabiri, 2015). In context, though, this pledge seems little more than a makeup check. Continued bombing amidst ceasefires by the Saudi-coalition and Houthi Rebels has largely corrupted this effort by preventing aid workers from treating those displaced or injured by the conflict. Restrictions on imports by the coalition have crippled the flow of international aid into the country. Without critical staff, fuel reserves, and medical provisions, restrictions on imports and breaks in the ceasefire have overwhelmed hospitals with patients while starving them of necessary supplies (Fakih, 2015). If this effort is to succeed, Saudi Coalition forces must first adhere to the ceasefire and allow all humanitarian aid to flow freely into the country. Without it, the lure for joining powerful organizations like AQAP with control over such resources increases.

In addition, this effort must be sustained over time if the international community wishes to curtail al-Qaeda recruitment in Yemen. The lure of war, religious fulfillment and financial gain creates a strong pull for impoverished young men who have little hope of success elsewhere. By sustaining programs that bring medical help and economic prosperity to these areas, there will be less reliance on crime for economic gain. Additionally, these programs will work to improve the image of the West and its regional partners, reducing animosity towards Americans and building local pockets of resistance to AQAP influence. This humanitarian

campaign would likely take between two to four years until the Yemeni government is reestablished as the predominant authority in the area.

### **Military Recommendations**

To complement the revised role of Saudi forces in the battle against AQAP, Washington will need to reestablish its presence in the region. This calls for an expansion of the current American drone campaign. By using Saudi Arabia as a forward operating base, drone strikes would effectively disrupt AQAP operations, destroy supply routes, and crush enemy moral. In addition, increased strikes targeting AQAP leaders would make administrative tasks more costly for the organization. If a strike eliminated such a high-level target, it would take AQAP several weeks to a few months to resolve inner-organizational disputes when trying to find a replacement. By killing senior leaders, an increased drone presence would effectively minimize risk to American personnel in the area while disrupting an AQAP network dependent upon private donors for assets and funding.

Additionally, the United States National Security Agency (NSA) should focus its signal intelligence (SIGINT) operations towards AQAP leadership. In letters between Osama bin Laden and his associates, the former al-Qaeda founder wrote of the crippling effects such operations had on al-Qaeda's effectiveness. Because al-Qaeda did not have the expertise or technical capabilities to covertly communicate through electronic devices, the organization was forced to revert to operating under a system with written letters and couriers. When trying to run a global terror network, coordinating meetings and operations without the use of electronic communications is devastating (Williams, 2015). Intelligence gathered from NSA should be used in conjunction with the United States Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM). This would allow the U.S. military's cyber warfare component focus its capabilities on disrupting operations and freezing the financial assets AQAP relies upon.

Finally, the United States will need to provide more accurate targeting intelligence to Saudis to create a more effective strike force. This requires a limited redeployment of American intelligence capabilities to the field. Information provided by these officials will result in less civilian casualties, and thus improve the image of an American-sponsored campaign. With a reduction in collateral damage stemming from the coalition air and ground campaign, coalition forces will experience less blowback amongst local populations. This would help avoid a prolonged conflict and occupation of Yemen.

### **Conclusion**

Collectively, this approach allows the United States to achieve its national security objectives while limiting its direct involvement with the conflict. If these strategies are properly employed, the Saudi coalition will become much more effective fighting force and will successfully stabilize Yemen in two to three years. During that timeline, the United States, in conjunction with the Arab-Coalition, will cripple al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and address the factors that led to its uprising.

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