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Al-Qaeda's Future in a War-torn Yemen

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The Saudi-led coalition's focus on driving out the Houthis has given Al-Qaeda more room to regroup in Yemen.

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Focusing its military efforts on Hodeidah, on September 18 the Saudi-led coalition renewed its offensive on the city in its attempt to crush Yemen's Houthi rebels. Yet not only has its three-year long intervention been fruitless and come at the cost of civilian lives, its overwhelming focus on the Houthis has given Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) room to expand.

AQAP, Al-Qaeda's strongest franchise, captured much southern territory after Yemen's 2011 revolution. It once again flourished following the Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthis in March 2015, peaking in its strength later that year after capturing Mukalla, Yemen's fifth largest city, in September. Despite a U.S.-backed crackdown on AQAP by the Saudi-led coalition since late 2016, which led the group to withdraw from Mukalla, it still has a hold in Yemen, largely owing to the coalition's primary focus on the Houthis and its willingness to use AQAP as allies against them.

Emirati commanders have admitted that AQAP fighters have in some instances been absorbed into their forces, conceivably to strengthen their anti-Houthi campaign, while also indicating AQAP fighters are willing to cooperate with the coalition. Abu al-Abbas, commander of a Salafi militia in Taiz who is listed on the U.S terrorism list for his ties to AQAP, receives coalition money according to his own aide and fighters.

Moreover, the UAE's claims of a successful campaign against AQAP over the past year are likely

misleading, considering Emirati officials in August 2018 falsely claimed only 200 AQAP fighters remain in Yemen—in contrast to the Yemeni government's estimates of 6000–7000 fighters. Rather, the group still continues its assaults in Yemen, including an August 28 attack on an Abyan military checkpoint that killed five Yemeni soldiers, and poses a threat to the southern provinces of Aden, Lahij, Ibb, and Hadramawt.

Furthermore, in June 2018 the UAE launched the military operation to capture Hodeidah from the Houthis, and the battle does not look set to end soon, as seen by the coalition's renewed push to capture the city. Although in August Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash claimed that UAE forces would still target AQAP too. His assertion that the Houthis are nevertheless the biggest obstacle to a political solution in Yemen suggests the coalition, will continue to prioritize targeting the Houthis—first in Hodeidah and then likely a long struggle to retake Sanaa.

AQAP is currently focused more on controlling Yemen than on international attacks, owing its success to establishing financial networks, tailoring its ideology to attract disenfranchised Yemenis, and cooperating with local tribal factions. While it still upholds Al-Qaeda's extremist Salafi ideology, including enforcing an Islamic penal code in Abyan and an inconsistently applied ban on the popular narcotic qat, AQAP has often moderated its image to gain Yemenis' trust and support. AQAP shows a desire to bring stability in impoverished areas by providing basic services including water, electricity, and fuel, while creating security and providing some form of governance. Its social media accounts overwhelmingly emphasize these projects, compared to other content such as descriptions of punishments carried out, which were only in 3 percent of posts. It has also promoted a narrative that both the Houthis and the Saudi-backed Yemeni state are responsible for citizens' humiliation, grief, and injustice. This both appeals to Yemenis whose livelihoods have been damaged and shifts their focus away from the group's own violent extremist image.

Some marginalized Yemenis, particularly in interior provinces such as Abyan and Shabwa with limited access to state resources, see AQAP as a remedy for their suffering, which explains how they have gained support and even acquired recruits from tribal factions and local populations. In 2010, it was estimated to have just several hundred members, but its numbers soared to 4,000 by 2017—and as many as 6000–7000 by 2018. It has a stronger presence than other militant groups such as the Islamic State (IS), which is believed to have just a few hundred members.

AQAP's financial prowess helps it capitalize on Yemen's destabilization. In 2015, it reportedly stole around \$100 million from the central bank branch in Mukalla. It has used this money to pursue a "robin hood" strategy to win public support, for example by paying doctors' salaries and repairing bridges and streets—leading some Yemenis to voice approval for AQAP's presence. It also continues to make some money by looting smaller banks and overseeing oil smuggling operations along Yemen's eastern coastline—which ironically benefited from the Saudi-imposed blockade against the Houthis, giving AQAP a monopoly on fuel that brought in an estimated \$2 million per day. This is in addition to estimated millions of dollars through ransoms from kidnappings, which tend to target foreigners, who are more likely to bring in large sums of money. For example, in 2012–13, Qatar and Oman mediated ransom payments worth \$20.4 million for the release of four European nationals.

AQAP has further benefited from even stronger ties with local tribes who also oppose the Houthis and seek AQAP's protection. During the war it has formed alliances with tribes such as al-Awaleq in Shabwa and al-Dhahab in Bayda, which allegedly helped plan operations in exchange for security. This has been boosted by AQAP's tactical efforts to establish kinship with tribes, either through marriage or recruiting, while leaving them relatively free to continue governing as AQAP proxies. Furthermore, staging numerous attacks against the Houthis from 2014, such as multiple assaults on Taiz, helped it gain popularity among these tribal factions. This is not just because AQAP is seen as a viable resistance against the Houthis—whom local populations, especially in central Yemen, see as a grave security threat—but because it evokes a sense of sectarian defense against the Zaydi

Shia Houthis and their range of local allies.

To contain AQAP, the UAE has reportedly trained tens of thousands of Yemeni troops in a ground campaign against the faction, and claims credit for pushing it from Mukalla. Although these efforts, along with U.S. airstrikes, dealt a blow to some of AQAP's financial links that relied on strategic control of ports and urban centers, the extent of the campaign's success appears to have been exaggerated. An Associated Press investigation in August 2018 indicated that rather than defeating AQAP fighters, parts of the Saudi-led coalition have cut deals with AQAP, "paying [fighters] to leave key cities and towns and letting others retreat with weapons, equipment, and wads of looted cash." Even in Mukalla, AQAP fighters were given a safe retreat and have merely relocated. While this push forced the group to move further into the interior in the provinces of Hadramawt, Bayda, and Bayan, it still has freedom to operate, indicating the coalition has little determination to eliminate them while it is focused primarily on driving out the Houthis.

While the Yemeni state continues to disintegrate and warring factions focus on a military rather than a diplomatic solution, AQAP will likely continue to expand and capitalize on Yemenis' frustrations—made worse by the coalition's blockade and bombing campaign that has damaged state infrastructure and contributed to Yemen's dire humanitarian crisis. If AQAP continues to present an image of stability, and locals continue to see the Houthis as a threat, then the terrorist group will have a greater potential support base with which to stage another comeback.

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