

RSC Policy Brief:
Yemen and the Threat from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
September 10, 2010

“The sheer numbers...suggest that one of the plots in the United States will succeed.”
- Philip Mudd, former FBI and CIA senior official referring to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

At the end of August, [The Washington Post reported](#) that, “For the first time since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, CIA analysts see one of al-Qaeda’s offshoots – rather than the core group now based in Pakistan - as **the most urgent threat to U.S. security, officials said**” (emphasis added). This offshoot, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), is now seen as a more aggressive enemy to the United States than it has been in years – and one that should be taken very seriously if a future attack is to be prevented.

What’s Happening in Yemen?

Haven for Terrorists. Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world and it is at risk of becoming a failed state. According to the CRS report entitled [Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations](#), “In 2009, Yemen ranked 140 out of 182 countries on the United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Index, a score comparable to the poorest sub-Saharan African countries. Over 43% of the population of nearly 24 million people lives below the poverty line, and per capita GDP is estimated to be between \$650 and \$800.” Apart from these troubling issues, Yemen is also a country with widespread corruption, serious internal strife between competing extremists and the government, an increasing issue with abuse of the drug “qat,” a growing population and illiteracy rate, a water shortage, and a massive Somali refugee problem. All of these factors and more make Yemen a perfect safe haven for terrorist cells.

Al-Qaeda. In recent years, Yemen has become home to AQAP, a terrorist organization composed of Saudi and Yemeni extremists, whose goal it is to establish an Islamic caliphate on the Arabian Peninsula. They are strongly anti-American, anti-Jewish, and work to overthrow the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian governments. It was not until Saudi Arabia denied Al-Qaeda a stronghold in the country that Al-Qaeda members from Yemen and Saudi Arabia merged, set up operations in Yemen, and eventually began calling itself AQAP in January 2009. The group is now reportedly led by Nasir al Wuhayshi, a former bin Laden crony and is based in an area near Sanaa, which is not under the control of the Yemeni government, but has ties across the country.

Internal Rebel Groups. Yemen also faces serious internal threats. Al-Houthi is a violent anti-American rebel Shi’ite group alleged to have Iranian ties. They are located in Northern provinces of Yemen and seek to overthrow the central Yemeni government. A southern resistance also exists, which has increased its desire to secede from Yemen in recent years. Each of these groups presents a threat that could topple the government, create a failed Yemeni state, and create a more serious security threat to the United States and the international community.

*For more information on AQAP, the other rebel groups in Yemen, and their potential threats, see [this American Enterprise Institute report](#).

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

According to the August 24th *Washington Post* article citing an anonymous CIA official, “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, is ‘on the upswing,’ the official said. ‘The relative concern ratios are changing. **We’re more concerned now about AQAP than we were before.**’” (emphasis added) The article goes further to state that “The concern about al-Qaeda in Yemen is remarkable considering that the group was all but stamped out on the peninsula just a few years ago and is known more for near-misses than successful, spectacular attacks.” There is no doubt that AQAP has gotten much stronger in recent months.

AQAP presents a threat not only to the United States, but also to the Yemeni people and its government. While Yemen and the United States have cooperated (and hope to cooperate more) in fighting AQAP, Yemen’s president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has not always been the best partner to the United States. In its August 16, 2010 report on Yemen, *The New York Times* describes President Saleh in the following way: “...a wily political survivor who cultivates radical clerics at election time and has a history of making deals with jihadists. Until recently, taking on Al Qaeda had not been a priority for his government, which has been fighting an intermittent armed rebellion since 2004.” While President Saleh has not been ideal to work with, the increased threat in recent months seems to have caused him to take a more stringent stance against AQAP and be more willing to cooperate with the U.S. in counterterrorism activities.

Al-Qaeda Attacks

The situation in Yemen has become more apparent to the American public due to the failed attack of the Christmas Day Bomber, 23-year-old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who claimed ties to AQAP and asserted he was trained in an AQAP camp in Yemen. For more information on the Christmas Day Bomber, please see [RSC’s National Security Working Group brief](#) from January 2010. Below are a few more examples of Yemeni terrorist activities – proof that it is undeniable that Yemen is a home for terrorists and terrorist sympathizers (this is by no means an exhaustive list):

- 2008, Al-Qaeda suicide bombers attacked the U.S. Embassy in Yemen killing 19 people, including one American.
- 2007, Al-Qaeda killed eight Spanish tourists in Yemen.
- 2000, Yemeni suicide bombers killed 17 people on the USS Cole.
- 1992, Al-Qaeda attempted to blow up a hotel in Yemen where U.S. military forces were staying.
- According to a report by the Heritage Foundation entitled, “[Yemen and the Resurgent Al-Qaeda Threat](#),” Anwar al-Aulaqi, an extremist Yemeni-American Muslim cleric, has reportedly influenced terrorists such as the Fort Hood murderer and a number of the September 11th hijackers. The Christmas Day bomber has also been linked to al-Aulaqi.
- Approximately 100 Yemenis have been held at Guantanamo Bay since 2002. According to a July 28, 2010 [CRS report on Yemen](#), there are currently between 60 and 90 who are still there to date.

What’s Next?

Many policy experts assert that the United States must work with the Yemeni government to quell terrorist activity in the country. Others have suggested that our efforts need to be focused elsewhere in the Middle East. However, since the recent CIA reports on the threat from AQAP, there is little doubt that the United States must keep a watchful eye on the activities of AQAP in Yemen, and be proactive in halting its influence.

Administration Reaction. *The Washington Post* article from August 24, 2010 suggests that the new assessment “has helped prompt senior Obama administration officials to call for an escalation of U.S. operations there – including a proposal to add armed CIA drones to a clandestine campaign of U.S. military strikes...” According to Obama administration officials quoted in the article, the administration is going to “ramp-up over a period of months.”

CRS reports that Yemen had been receiving approximately \$20 and \$25 million per year from the United States. However, in FY2010, it is receiving \$58.4 million in aid and \$150 million in training and equipment – indicating the desire for the U.S. to have a serious positive impact in Yemen. For FY2011, the Administration has requested \$106 million for both economic and military aid.

What the Experts Are Saying. Some, such as Heritage expert, James Phillips, suggest that the U.S. should leverage our funding to Yemen in order to ensure Yemen is stronger in the ways it fights AQAP. He also suggests that the U.S. must enhance Yemeni counterterrorism capabilities focused on AQAP, rather than the other internal issues they face such as the southern secessionists or al Houthi rebels. He argues that drones strikes are also effective ways to target AQAP leadership. [American Enterprise Institute experts](#) have suggested that the U.S. should enhance aid and development support to Yemen so as to prevent AQAP from gaining a further stronghold.

In a *New York Times Magazine* piece entitled, "[Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan?](#)" Robert Worth explains the reasons that Al-Qaeda has gained a stronghold by recounting a story about a tribesman in the small town of Rafadh which housed Fahd al-Quso, a known member of Al-Qaeda: "But the tribesmen of Rafadh continued to shelter Quso and his men and not just because of their shared hatred of the government. Quso had offered to supply teachers for the village school. Local families knew he was with Al Qaeda but welcomed the news for a simple reason: there were no teachers in the school at all." Al-Qaeda offered hope to a people that have little.

Whatever combination of methods we choose to pursue, we cannot afford to ignore AQAP. They are a powerful force in Yemen and are stretching their influence as far as they can, in schools, in tribal areas, and across the Arabian Peninsula. The United States can and must play an important role fighting AQAP.

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