

Assessing the Strength of Al-Qa`ida in Yemen

By Gregory D. Johnsen

ON THE EVENING of August 10, 2008, acting on a tip from a local resident, a Yemeni security patrol approached a suspected al-Qa`ida safe house in the eastern city of Tarim.¹ The patrol came under fire, at which point it retreated, called for back-up and established a perimeter around the area in an effort to prevent any of the suspects from escaping. This tenuous stalemate lasted throughout the night. Fighting resumed in the morning, slowly escalating throughout the day. Government forces brought in two tanks, while the al-Qa`ida militants responded with rocket-propelled grenade attacks. Eventually, the militants were able to slip out of their safe house to a neighboring building, but they were unable to escape the security perimeter. By the end of the fighting, five militants, including leading operative Hamza al-Q`uyati, were dead while two more were captured.²

The raid was widely seen as a much needed victory for Yemen.³ Yemen claimed that with al-Q`uyati's death it had killed the mastermind of a string of terrorist attacks that had plagued the country in recent years. According to the government, al-Q`uyati was behind every major terrorist attack since he and 22 other militants escaped from a Political Security Organization prison in February 2006, beginning with the failed dual suicide attacks in September 2006 and ending, most recently, with the July 25 suicide attack on a military

base in Sayyun.⁴ The government also claimed that al-Q`uyati was planning further attacks in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, given what is known about this period of al-Qa`ida's operations in Yemen and the local make-up of al-Q`uyati's cell, this is unlikely to be true.⁵ Instead, al-Qa`ida, while temporarily weakened, remains a security threat within Yemen.

The September 17 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a, which left more than a dozen people dead, illustrates this threat. The attack, while shocking, was not necessarily unexpected. Days after al-Q`uyati's death, the Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen posted a statement threatening retaliatory attacks.⁶ The proof, the statement said in a common Islamist phrase, "will be in what you see and not what you hear."⁷ Then, on September 9, a teaser was posted to al-Ikhlās⁸ indicating that the fifth issue of al-Qa`ida's *Sada al-Malahim* journal was due to be released in the coming days.⁹ The combination of these two indicators should have triggered warnings in Yemen, as during the past year al-Qa`ida has developed a pattern of linking its attacks to its rhetoric.

Successes Reveal Al-Qa`ida's Composition

The September 2006 attacks were most likely planned and organized by Fawaz al-Rabay'i, who was killed by Yemeni security forces in October 2006. Al-Q`uyati, on the other hand, first reappeared publicly this summer in a July 23 videotape released by the "al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula: The Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen."¹⁰ Al-Q`uyati's appearance in the video was the first

crack in the facade of anonymity that had surrounded the organization. While he does appear to have been the mastermind of the July 25 suicide attack in Sayyun,¹¹ it is unlikely that he was as prolific as government reports suggest. Furthermore, the local nature of al-Q`uyati's cell—five of the individuals, including al-Q`uyati, were from al-Mukalla, while the other two came from the neighboring towns of Shabwa and al-Qatin¹²—suggests a more limited reach than the government's claim assumes.¹³ Part of this verbal overreach is designed to deflect criticism by Western allies, which have grown increasingly strident in publicly questioning Yemen's commitment to the war on al-Qa`ida.

Yemen has further underscored the rhetorical nature of this claim by the moves it made following the August 11 shootout. Almost immediately, Yemen announced that it had arrested a number of al-Qa`ida supporters, and within a week it claimed to have discovered and dismantled a separate terrorist cell in Hadramawt.¹⁴ Days later, following a visit by Muhammad bin Nayif, Saudi Arabia's assistant minister of the interior for security affairs, Yemen announced that it was extraditing eight Saudi militants back to their country of birth.¹⁵ By the beginning of September, according to most media accounts, Yemen had managed to arrest at least 30 al-Qa`ida suspects since the Tarim raid. On the surface, these appear to be significant victories for Yemen at the expense of al-Qa`ida, but closer examination suggests they are more symbolic than substantive. According to Nasser Arrabyee of *Gulf News*, five of the al-Qa`ida suspects that Yemen

1 This account of the Tarim shootout has been compiled from statements posted on the jihadist web forum al-Ikhlās, in addition to the following article: "Marib Press is Unparalleled in Publishing Details of the Operation in Tarim, Hadramawt" (Arabic), *Marib Press*, August 11, 2008.

2 In addition to al-Q`uyati, the dead included Abdullah Ali Batis, Hasan Bazar'a, Mubarak bin Hawil al-Nahdi, and Mahmud Baramah. The two captured militants were identified as Ali Muhsin Salih al-Akbari and Muhammad Said Ba`awaydhan. The Yemeni military lost three soldiers. For a good overview, see the excellent reporting of Muhammad al-Ahmadi, "Yemen and al-Qaeda" (Arabic), *al-Ghad*, August 18, 2008.

3 Both the United States and the United Kingdom used the success of the raid as a pretext to relax travel restrictions to the country.

4 Ibid.

5 The author dates the "second phase of the war against al-Qaeda in Yemen" to February 2006. For more information, see Gregory D. Johnsen "Securing Yemen's Cooperation in the Second Phase of the War on al-Qa`ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

6 Posted on www.al-ekhlaas.net, August 19, 2008.

7 Ibid.

8 Al-Ikhlās is a prominent jihadist web forum located at www.al-ekhlaas.net.

9 The al-Ikhlās website was taken offline, most likely by hackers, before the fifth issue could be posted. As a result, analysts are unable to determine what al-Qa`ida in Yemen is saying in regard to the attack. This makes predicting and analyzing the group's future activities extremely difficult.

10 This group also goes by the name Jund al-Yaman.

11 For more information on the attack, see "Yemen's Two al-Qaeda's," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 21, 2008.

12 Al-Q`uyati was born in Saudi Arabia, but his family was originally from al-Mukalla and he seems to have made his way back to his ancestral home after escaping from prison in 2006.

13 In addition to the local make-up of al-Q`uyati's cell which has not been stressed enough, one should also note that the local tip that led to the Tarim raid is a positive development that has been under-reported.

14 Husayn al-Jarabani, "Yemen: The Governor of Hadramawt Discovers a New al-Qaeda Cell" (Arabic), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 16, 2008.

15 Faysal Mukrim, "Yemen Delivers to Saudi Eight Suspects in Security Issues" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, August 22, 2008.

arrested in one security sweep “were not hiding, but [rather] they were under lenient house arrest.”¹⁶ Likewise, the eight suspects returned to Saudi Arabia do not appear to have been arrested recently, but rather held until their extradition would guarantee maximum benefit.¹⁷

The narrative of a quick and forceful reaction meets both of Yemen’s goals at once. First, it allows Yemen to appear strong and in control of the security situation to its Western allies and foreign businesses, which have been growing increasingly concerned. Second, it suggests that the two militants who Yemen captured in the Tarim raid—Ali Muhsin Salih al-‘Akbari and Muhammad Said Ba`awaydhan—have “talked”; the appearance of which, Yemen believes, will turn up the pressure on remaining al-Qa`ida cells, helping to flush them out into the open. Despite these choreographed moves, the Tarim raid and the events that preceded it help to explain much about al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Most notably, it sheds light on the relationship between the “al-Qa`ida Organization in the South of the Arabian Peninsula” and the “al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula: The Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen.” These two alternate group identifications had confused many analysts.

Theory of a Split Loses Credence

One theory that has gained strength in recent months is that the two groups had split over tactics.¹⁸ This explanation held that the original group, which calls itself the “al-Qa`ida Organization in the South of the Arabian Peninsula,” favored a “lie low” strategy that involved building up its internal network and recruiting new members, while the splinter group—the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen—was eager to strike immediately. Further strengthening this theory were reports in the Yemeni press of a split between Hamza al-Q`uyati and two of his colleagues, Nasir al-Wahayshi and

Qasim al-Raymi, respectively the *amir* and second-in-command of al-Qa`ida in the South of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet a closer examination of the evidence—statements, videos and attacks—suggests that talk of an acrimonious split within the current generation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen may be premature or misleading. The overlap of rhetoric and individuals is strong enough to indicate that the two groups are more like loose cells of the same organization than separate entities altogether.¹⁹

To fully appreciate this overlap, it is necessary to reexamine the history of al-Qa`ida in Yemen since it was reconstituted following the February 2006 prison break. Of the original 23 escapees, three—Nasir al-Wahayshi, Qasim al-Raymi and Muhammad al-`Umda²⁰—are still at large, according to official government statements. This information, however, is contradicted by a fax sent by Yemen’s Ministry of Interior to real estate agents warning them not to rent to any of the 33 at-large militants listed in the fax. Included in this list are al-Wahayshi, al-Raymi, and al-`Umda as well as Ibrahim al-Huwaydi and Jamal al-Badawi, both of whom Yemen has repeatedly claimed were in jail.²¹

The first attacks attempted by a reconstituted al-Qa`ida in Yemen were the failed September 2006 dual suicide bombings on oil and gas facilities in Marib and Hadramawt. Months later, in March 2007, Ali Mahmud Qasaylah, the chief criminal investigator in Marib, was assassinated. This would later be the first attack for which the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen would take credit in a statement released in February 2008.²² For its part, *Sada al-Malahim*, the

bi-monthly journal edited by al-Qa`ida in the South of the Arabian Peninsula’s al-Wahayshi, would later eulogize one of the attackers, `Abd al-`Aziz Jaradan, in its second issue, following his death in August 2007. The overlap of individual operatives such as this between the supposed two groups is some of the strongest evidence that the split, if it exists as such, is more a tactical ploy than a divisive rupture within the organization

In late June 2007, Qasim al-Raymi released two statements, one of which was a warning to the government. Within days, these statements were followed by a suicide attack on a convoy of Spanish tourists in Marib on July 2. This attack was also later claimed by the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen. It stated that the attack was in retribution for the deaths of five individuals at the hands of Yemeni security forces²³; one of whom, Yasir al-Hamayqani, was later eulogized in the first issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, which was released in January 2008.

The timing of the attack, following so closely after al-Raymi’s two statements, suggests some level of coordination. Likewise, the identity of the suicide bomber, at least circumstantially, suggests a possible link to al-Raymi. The bomber was identified as Abduh Muhammad Sayyid Ruhayqa, a 21-year-old Yemeni originally from the district of al-Rayma, who was living in the eastern Sana`ani neighborhood of Musayk. Like al-Raymi, whose *kunya* Abu Hurayrah al-Sana`ani reflects his birthplace, Ruhayqa was known by the *kunya* Abu al-Maqqad al-Sana`ani. His last will and testament, which was posted to al-Ikhlās on March 29, 2008, the anniversary of the assassination of Qasaylah, also provides some clues. In the video, Ruhayqa, who is identified only by his *kunya*, states unequivocally that he is carrying out the attack for the Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen. He states that the attack is revenge for the death of Fawaz al-Rabya`i and to “expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula.” As he continues to deliver his will, however, he mentions both the al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad

uted the date of the attack, placing it in April instead of March.

23 Ibid.

16 Nasser Arrabyee, “Five Al Qaida Suspects Detained in Yemen,” *Gulf News*, August 19, 2008.

17 This information was confirmed in personal conversations with Yemeni government officials.

18 This theory has been most forcefully expressed by Nicole Strake of the Gulf Research Centre. See, for example, Nicole Strake, “Al-Qaeda in Yemen Divided, but Dangerous,” *The Peninsula*, June 2008.

19 The author would like to thank Thomas Hegghammer for a series of enlightening conversations, which did much to help clarify thinking on this matter. Of course, any mistakes that remain are solely the author’s responsibility. For more details, see “Yemen’s Two al-Qaeda’s,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 21, 2008.

20 Al-`Umda, who is also known by the *kunya* Abu Ghrayb al-Taizi, appears to be the same individual who writes under that pseudonym for *Sada al-Malahim*.

21 The fax, of which the author obtained a copy, is dated May 25, 2008, and in addition to the five names listed above it also includes al-Wahayshi’s brother, Fahd, Nayif al-Qahtani, seven Egyptians and a Jordanian.

22 Jund al-Iman, “Statement 1,” Soldiers’ Brigades of Yemen, February 24, 2008. The statement misattributed

in the Country of Yemen and the al-Qa`ida Organization in the South of the Arabian Peninsula. He appears to use the names interchangeably, which could mean that they are synonymous for the members of al-Qa`ida in Yemen. The video definitively demonstrates the existence of the Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen as early as late June 2007, well before the group first appeared online in February 2008.

In addition to the rationale of revenge, Ruhayqa's desire to "expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula" is a common theme among both al-Wahayshi's group and the Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen. For the latter, it has appeared at the top of all 13 of the group's statements,

“Yet a closer examination of the evidence suggests that talk of an acrimonious split within the current generation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen may be premature or misleading.”

and has consistently been invoked as a reason for carrying out attacks. It has also appeared often in issues of *Sada al-Malahim*. In the first issue it was quoted by Abu Hammam al-Qahtani, who cited it as the most important reason not to travel to Afghanistan or Iraq to fight but rather to stay in Yemen.²⁴ Abu Hammam is the *kunya* of Nayif Muhammad al-Qahtani, who has been linked by the Yemeni government to the July 2007 suicide attack against tourists in Marib. The hadith commanding Muslims to “expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula” is also cited in the second issue of *Sada al-Malahim* in a statement explaining the group's thinking. The statement, which opens the journal, says that any infidel entering the Arabian Peninsula is fair game to be attacked or killed, regardless of whether they call themselves a tourist, a diplomat or a journalist.²⁵

24 “Interview with One of the Wanted Ones” (Arabic), *Sada al-Malahim*, January-February 2008.

25 “Opening,” *Sada al-Malahim*, March-April 2008.

Al-Qahtani was also linked to al-Q`uyati's Tarim cell through passports and plans, which were discovered in the safe house following the August 11 raid. Subsequent reports in the Saudi media that al-Qahtani had received funding from individuals in Libya and Iran is a likely distortion by overzealous Yemeni officials.²⁶ The preponderance of evidence strongly suggests a level of cooperation and even coordination between what some analysts had pegged as two separate groups.

Al-Qa`ida Remains Viable Threat in Yemen

Although al-Q`uyati's death is a significant blow to al-Qa`ida, it did not defeat or even cripple the organization in Yemen. Indeed, eight days after his death the Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen posted its 13th statement to al-Ikhlās. The statement, which threatened attacks in retribution for his death, was posted by the same user in the same manner as the previous 12 statements. This continuity demonstrates that the group's electronic infrastructure was not destroyed in the Tarim raid. Instead, there are two possible explanations.

In the Soldiers' Brigades of Yemen's 13 statements, it has referenced three separate brigades, crediting each with different attacks. These divisions were originally dismissed by most as jihadist hyperbole designed to give an artificially inflated sense of the group's strength. It is possible, however, that there is some truth in the claims of three different brigades, which would mean that the Tarim raid destroyed one, but left the other two intact. The second likely possibility is that an individual escaped the raid and has continued to post and threaten the government on the internet, while lacking the necessary tools to act. A similar occurrence happened in Saudi Arabia in April 2005 when a “bonus issue” of *Sawt al-Jihad* appeared months after most of the organization had been eliminated.²⁷

The core of al-Qa`ida's leadership in Yemen—al-Wahashyi and al-Raymi—remain at large, as do a number of other

26 Muhammad al-Malfi, “Abu Hammam al-Qahtani Receives Support from Iranians and Libyans and Invites the Terrorists in the Kingdom to his Refuge on the Yemeni Border” (Arabic), *al-Watan*, August 20, 2008.

27 The author is grateful to Thomas Hegghammer for the reference.

known militants. While it is difficult to quantify the remaining strength of al-Qa`ida in Yemen in terms of numbers, it does appear that the organization remains capable of carrying out attacks. By far the most worrying indicator is the localized nature of al-Q`uyati's cell. Of the seven individuals killed or captured in the Tarim raid, only al-Q`uyati was known to security forces. This suggests a diffusion of strength, which should concern Yemen. Already there has been discussion on al-Ikhlās about a new way forward for al-Qa`ida in the aftermath of al-Q`uyati's death. In one widely circulated letter of advice, a user on the site wrote that what was happening in Yemen reminded him of the fall of al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia.²⁸ To avoid a similar fate in Yemen, he suggested the selective targeting of security officials.²⁹ What is clear is that despite al-Q`uyati's death, al-Qa`ida remains a significant security threat in Yemen.

Gregory D. Johnsen has written for a variety of publications, including The American Interest, The Christian Science Monitor and the Boston Globe. Mr. Johnsen has also advised the U.S. and British governments on issues related to Yemen. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University.

28 Posted on www.al-ekhlaas.net, August 19, 2008.

29 The suggestion was widely reported in the Arabic media. See, for instance, Faysal Mukrim “Al-Qaeda in Yemen is Incited to Target Leader in Security and Intelligence” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, August 22, 2008. Strangely, Mukrim refers to the letter as an official al-Qa`ida statement, which it is not. It is not clear whether the suggestion of targeting security officials will be adopted by al-Qa`ida.