

## Al-Qa`ida in Yemen's 2008 Campaign

By Gregory D. Johnsen

FOLLOWING THE DRAMATIC escape of 23 al-Qa`ida suspects from a Political Security prison in Sana`a in early February 2006, there has been a fear that Yemen could once again become an active theater of operations for Islamic militants. That fear has now been realized. During the past few months, al-Qa`ida in Yemen has embarked on an aggressive propaganda campaign that has been accompanied by a series of equally aggressive attacks. Tourist convoys, army checkpoints, oil fields, the U.S. Embassy and most recently a housing compound for foreigners have all been targeted as part of the group's stated goal to "expel the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula."<sup>1</sup>

Given Yemen's reputation for violence and the journalistic clichés that accompany nearly every English report of a country teeming with guns and its importance as Usama bin Ladin's "ancestral homeland," it may seem that this latest series of attacks is merely a continuation of the past. This, however, is not the case. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen took a major step forward in January 2008 with the publication of the first issue of its online journal *Sada al-Malahim* (The Echo of Battles), which articulated in bold, broad strokes the group's new strategy. Instead of the large, one-time attacks favored by the previous generation, this group under the leadership of Nasir al-Wahayshi has initiated a policy of constant offense consisting of small, continual attacks. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen seems to understand that there is no one knockout blow that will force Westerners out of Yemen and bring the government to its knees, but rather that it must maintain a constant barrage of activity.

### The Mistakes

The past four months should not have come as a surprise to close observers of the situation in Yemen, as the group

<sup>1</sup> This phrase has appeared at the top of all four statements released by The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen on February 24, 2008, March 21, 2008, March 30, 2008 and April 7, 2008. All statements were accessed via the al-Ikhlas website.

has grown increasingly bolder and more active since it was reorganized by al-Wahayshi. The latest attacks illustrate the dangers of lapsed vigilance of which both the U.S. and Yemeni governments are guilty. It also demonstrates the fallacy of attempting to isolate counter-terrorism from other U.S. policy objectives; this can be done on a spreadsheet, but not always in the minds of foreign counterparts.

There is also a lesson on the dangers of negligence. Yemen is quickly becoming a failed state. It is running out of oil and recently it has increased production in an attempt to ease budget shortfalls. Yet, it is only borrowing against its future, and even this is not sufficient. Disaffected youth in the south have taken to the streets to protest the lack of jobs and rising prices. Not surprisingly, these protests have turned violent and further exacerbated long-standing tensions between the north and the south. The nearly four-year-old al-Houthi revolt continues to sporadically flare-up despite the numerous cease-fires and half-hearted peace negotiations. As a result, the Yemeni government may now be too concerned with its own survival to give the al-Qa`ida issue the attention it deserves.<sup>2</sup>

The United States has failed to understand the situation in which President `Ali `Abdullah Salih's regime sees itself, and instead of helping to ensure regime stability it has seemed more eager to threaten the country for perceived betrayals such as the Jamal al-Badawi case.<sup>3</sup> Both countries have also failed to understand that Yemen is witnessing something both new and dangerous. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen was defeated by the close cooperation of

<sup>2</sup> For example, in early April when much of the English language reporting on the country was focused on al-Qa`ida attacks against foreigners, the majority of the Arabic reporting on Yemen focused on protests in the south.

<sup>3</sup> The United States withheld aid to Yemen once it became public knowledge that Jamal al-Badawi was free. It is likely that the public nature of U.S. disapproval was a contributing factor to Jabir al-Banna's surprise appearance in court in February 2008. Yemen security reportedly reacted to the public snub by the United States by encouraging al-Banna to appear in public. Despite their past crimes and continued support, neither al-Banna nor al-Badawi are part of the current al-Qa`ida campaign in Yemen.

the United States and Yemen during the first phase of the war (2000-2003), but it learned from the loss. Now, while al-Qa`ida in Yemen has adapted to the changing environment, both the United States and Yemen appear ready to fight what it was instead of what it has become.

### The First and Second Phases

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Yemen, like many countries, was eager to appease the United States. It had unpleasant memories of the last time it thwarted U.S. policy and was eager to avoid repeating the same mistakes.<sup>4</sup> During a November 2001 visit to Washington, President Salih made sure the United States knew what side his country was on. Yemen followed Salih's words with actions, arresting anyone it suspected of harboring sympathy for al-Qa`ida. It also worked hand-in-hand with U.S. intelligence services, coordinating the November 2002 strike on al-Qa`ida's head in Yemen, `Ali Qa'id al-Harithi, which was conducted by an unmanned CIA drone. Yet this represented the zenith of U.S.-Yemeni cooperation, as a Pentagon leak, intended for domestic political consumption, destroyed the cover story on which both countries had agreed. Salih paid a high price domestically for allowing the United States to carry out an attack in Yemen, and it took more than a year for the government to publicly admit that it had authorized Washington to act. The United States was still paying the price for hubris a year later in November 2003, when Yemen captured Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, al-Harithi's replacement, at a wedding in Sana`a. Instead of being granted direct access to the prisoner, U.S. officials were forced to work through intermediaries.

In retrospect, however, al-Ahdal's capture marked the end of the first phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. With most of the suspected militants either in jail or drawn to the

<sup>4</sup> Yemen served on the UN Security Council during the 1990-91 Gulf War, and its continued abstentions on security resolutions threatening Iraq won it the displeasure of the United States, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. All three cut off aid to Yemen, while the latter took the even more damaging step of expelling roughly 750,000 guest workers, which cut off worker remittances and helped destabilize the Yemeni economy.

fighting in Iraq, al-Qa`ida faded into the background alongside a host of other more pressing concerns faced by Yemen. For Yemen, al-Qa`ida and Islamic militancy has always been largely a Western problem that affects the country indirectly, but is nowhere near as pressing as a religious uprising among Zaydis in the north or economic woes that exacerbate tensions between the north and the south. These latter two issues are security challenges that directly threaten the survival of the regime, while al-Qa`ida, at least in Yemen's calculus, does not.

Both Yemen and the United States slowly began to act as if the threat from al-Qa`ida had been neutralized. Yemen became increasingly more occupied with putting down the al-Houthi uprising in the Sa`da governorate and with implementing bitter economic reforms that led to riots and widespread dissatisfaction.<sup>5</sup> On the U.S. side, there were a lack of clear policy goals. During a November 2005 trip to the United States, Salih was told that Yemen was being suspended from a U.S. government program, the Millennium Challenge Account. The suspension shocked Salih, who was under the impression that he was going to be rewarded for Yemen's help in the war against al-Qa`ida. Instead, he was hurt by the loss of \$20 million in aid. The following day, his anger was compounded when the World Bank told him that it was cutting its aid from \$420 million to \$280 million. Both of the cuts were attributed to rampant corruption within the Yemeni government.

American claims of corruption were on the mark. Yemen is plagued by "double-dippers," employees who draw two or more government salaries, as well as by "shadow employees," workers who exist only on paper but still receive paychecks. Nevertheless, it is important for U.S. policymakers to understand that Washington cannot have everything it wants in Yemen. The United States must decide whether it wants a partner in the war against al-Qa`ida, or whether it wants a country that is attempting to meet democratic benchmarks. No matter the goal, the starting point has to be a stable Yemen. Withdrawing aid

5 Gregory D. Johnsen, "Salih's Road to Relection," *Middle East Report Online*, January 13, 2006.

from Yemen, whatever the reason, only makes stabilizing the country that much more difficult. Already the government does not have firm control over the hinterlands, which is why the recent attacks in Mar'ib and Hadramawt are not that surprising. The more worrying trend is the two attacks on the U.S. Embassy and the Haddah housing complex in Sana`a. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen has learned from watching the fighting in Iraq that it can thrive in an unstable and chaotic environment. Yemen's ever increasing slide toward instability only provides al-Qa`ida with more operative freedom.

Mistakes of policy and vigilance could be concealed when al-Qa`ida was largely dormant in the country. That dynamic changed, however, with the February 2006 prison break. Within months, al-Qa`ida was once again a security threat in the country, attempting what would ultimately be failed suicide attacks on oil and gas facilities in Mar'ib and Hadramawt.<sup>6</sup> This early and haphazard attempt was soon eclipsed by a more professional attack in July 2007 when a suicide bomber struck a convoy of Spanish tourists in Mar'ib. This attack followed on the heels of two al-Qa`ida statements, both of which were essentially a call to arms by al-Qa`ida in Yemen's new commander, Nasir al-Wahayshi.<sup>7</sup> He has worked hard to rebuild and reorganize al-Qa`ida in Yemen and has been careful to apply the lessons he learned from

6 For more on the aftermath of this attack, the trial of which is still ongoing, see Robert F. Worth, "Wanted by the F.B.I., but Walking out of a Yemeni Hearing," *New York Times*, March 1, 2008. For more background on the February 2006 escape, see Gregory D. Johnsen, "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadis - Part 1," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:18 (2007) and Gregory D. Johnsen, "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadis - Part 2," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:19 (2007). Also see "Al-Ghad Publishes the Names and Information about the Escapees" (Arabic), *al-Ghad*, June 25, 2007.

7 Al-Wahayshi was introduced as the new head of al-Qa`ida in Yemen by Abu Hurayra al-Sana`ani, the *kunya* of Qasim al-Raymi. Both men were among the 23 escapees. For more on the events of July 2007 and al-Wahayshi's background, see "Al-Wahayshi the Leader of al-Qa`ida in Yemen" (Arabic), *al-Wasat*, June 27, 2007; Gregory D. Johnsen and Brian O'Neill, "Yemen Attack Reveals Struggles Among al-Qaeda's Ranks," *Terrorism Focus* 4:22 (2007); Gregory D. Johnsen, "Al-Qaeda in Yemen Reorganizes under Nasir al-Wahayshi," *Terrorism Focus* 5:11 (2008).

the organization's early failures to his current task.

### The 2008 Campaign

One of al-Wahayshi's major accomplishments was the publication of the online journal *Sada al-Malahim* in January 2008. The first issue features an interview with a Saudi fighter, Abu Hammam al-Qahtani, who explains his rationale for remaining in Arabia instead of traveling to Iraq. "This choice was made for two reasons," he said in the interview. "The first is a legal reason." He then proceeded to quote a Qur'anic verse

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and a hadith that command Muslims to "expel the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula." His second reason is a military one. Remaining in Yemen, he explained, will allow him to strike at oil supplies in Arabia that aid the West in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> The journal was quite clearly an opening salvo in a propaganda war. It was aimed at a broad audience, with small features on some of the classical figures of the jihadist world including Sayyid Qutb, `Umar `Abd al-Rahman, and the Saudi fighter known as Khattab.<sup>9</sup>

Within days of releasing the first issue of *Sada al-Malahim* in January 2008, al-Qa`ida in Yemen attacked a convoy of tourists in Hadramawt on January 18, killing two Belgians and two Yemeni drivers. The attack seemed to fit a pattern that al-Qa`ida had developed in June and July 2007 of conducting an attack on the heels of a public statement.<sup>10</sup> Little more than a month later, on February 24, a previously unknown group calling itself The Soldier's

8 "An Interview with One of the Wanted Men - Part 1" (Arabic), *Sada al-Malahim* #1, January 2008, p. 8.

9 Khattab was poisoned by Russian forces in Chechnya in 2002. His real name was Samir Salih Abdullah al-Suwaylim.

10 For more, see Gregory D. Johnsen, "Attacks on Oil are a First Priority for al-Qaeda in Yemen," *Terrorism Focus* 5:5 (2008).

Brigade of Yemen released a one-page statement on al-Ikhlās claiming credit for the attack on the Belgian convoy, as well as the March 2007 assassination of Ali Mahmud al-Qasaylah, the July 2007 attack on Spanish tourists in Mar'ib and two attacks on military checkpoints in Hadramawt in November 2007.<sup>11</sup> Initially, there were thoughts among intelligence officers in Yemen that this group was a fiction that existed only on the internet and was trying to steal credit from al-Wahayshi's group. More recent evidence, however, indicates that this is not the case.

On March 29, for example, the same user, Jund al-Iman, posted a 13-minute video on al-Ikhlās that included the last will and testament of a suicide bomber who identified himself as Abu al-Miqdad al-Sana`ani. The footage on the video indicated that al-Sana`ani was the

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bomber who carried out the July 2007 attack on the Spanish tourists in Mar'ib. Al-Sana`ani, whose real name was Abdu Muhammad Said al-Ruhayqah, clearly states on the video that he is carrying out the attack for The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen.<sup>12</sup> There is also the fact that *Sada al-Malahim*, which is being directed by al-Wahayshi, neglected to deny that The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen was speaking for it in its second issue, which was released on March 13. Al-Qa`ida

11 “Statement 1,” The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, February 24, 2008. The full name of the group is: The al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula: The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen. There are a handful of mistakes and typos throughout the four statements that this group has released, all of which have posted on al-Ikhlās by a user identified as Jund al-Iman (Soldier of Faith). For example, in the first statement the group said that al-Qasaylah was assassinated in April 2007, but he was actually killed in March 2007. Other mistakes are mainly limited to typos and misspellings in Arabic. For more on al-Qasaylah, see Gregory D. Johnsen, “Is al-Qa`ida in Yemen Regrouping?” *Terrorism Focus* 4:15 (2007).

12 Al-Ruhayqah was from the Musayk neighborhood of Sana`a, which would fit with his *kunya* of Abu al-Miqdad al-Sana`ani. Furthermore, the age of the man on the video seems to match with al-Ruhayqah, who was 21-years-old.

in Yemen's information officer, Sayf Muhammad, did put out a statement denying that a January interview between the local Yemeni paper *al-Wasat* and an individual claiming to be al-Qa`ida in Yemen's information officer was legitimate.<sup>13</sup> “We say that we are the al-Qa`ida organization of jihad in the South of the Arabian Peninsula and that the callers are ignorant of the situation and have no relationship with the group.”<sup>14</sup> While it is far from clear whether the same people are putting out both *Sada al-Malahim* and the statements of The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, it appears that they are either united under al-Wahayshi's leadership or at least working in concert.

The second issue of *Sada al-Malahim* is both smoother and more authoritative of tone than its earlier version. Just like the first issue of the journal, the second was followed almost immediately by an attention-grabbing attack. On March 18, the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a was the target of three mortars that fell short of the embassy, killing one guard and injuring a number of girls at a neighboring school.<sup>15</sup> Almost immediately, The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen released a statement claiming credit for a March 1 clash with government soldiers in Mukalla and the attack on the U.S. Embassy. The statement expressed regret at the injuries to the schoolgirls and asked God for their quick recovery. It went on to say, however, that “previously we have warned Muslims about not getting too close to government and foreign offices.”<sup>16</sup> A little more than a week later, The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen put out its third statement claiming that it had attacked a French oil pipeline on March 27 and a Chinese oil field on

13 *Al-Wasat* has since lost its license for domestic political reasons that have nothing to do with al-Qa`ida, in another mistaken move by the Yemeni government as it feels threatened.

14 “Statement of Denial” (Arabic), *Sada al-Malahim* #2, March 2008, p. 8. It should also be noted that in the second issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, al-Qa`ida in Yemen changed its name to: “Al-Qa`ida Organization of Jihad in the South of the Arabian Peninsula.” The group is referred to as al-Qa`ida in Yemen throughout this article for the sake of continuity and brevity.

15 “Families and Teachers Concerned Post Attack,” *Yemen Times*, March 19, 2008.

16 “Statement 2,” The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, March 21, 2008.

March 29.<sup>17</sup> The Yemeni government acknowledged that there had been a pipeline explosion, but denied that it was a terrorist attack.<sup>18</sup> Al-Qa`ida in Yemen followed these attacks up with its most recent strikes on two military checkpoints in Hadramawt and a mortar attack on a housing compound for foreigners in the Haddah district of Sana`a. In the statement, the group reiterated its claim that it would not rest until the last unbeliever had been driven from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>19</sup>

### **Securing the Future**

This campaign is likely to get stronger before it gets weaker for two reasons. First, al-Qa`ida in Yemen has effectively exploited U.S. and Yemeni negligence to carefully lay the groundwork for a successful campaign by linking its rhetoric to action. Tied to this is the fact that it has slowly increased the number and focus of its attacks, which appears to have increased recruiting. The more successful and vocal the group is, the more recruits who want to join. Second, al-Qa`ida in Yemen will continue to benefit from the lack of stability in Yemen. Not only is government attention directed elsewhere, but so is the attention of the population at large. This means that while the government is unable to devote its finite resources toward combating al-Qa`ida, there has also not been a visceral public backlash to the deaths of Yemenis during this campaign such as what has helped to derail other campaigns like the one in Saudi Arabia in 2003.

For the United States, the stability of Yemen is the first and most important step in winning the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Unfortunately, this will not be easy to secure. Washington must be realistic about what is and is not possible in Yemen. It must decide on clear, realistic policy goals and accurately articulate these to the Yemeni government. The previous carrot-and-stick approach is not a sustainable policy. Washington will have to put more money, not less, into the country if it wants to prevent

17 “Statement 3,” The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, March 30, 2008.

18 “Yemen Says Pipeline Explosion not Terror,” UPI, April 1, 2008.

19 “Statement 4,” The Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, April 7, 2008.

full collapse. Simply throwing money at the problem and clearly articulating policy goals, however, will not be enough to stabilize Yemen. Washington will also have to work in concert with its allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, which has much more influence in Yemen than does the United States. None of these steps will be easy, but failure to carry out any of them will almost certainly result in the continued instability of the country, which will in turn allow al-Qa`ida in Yemen more strategic freedom.

Al-Qa`ida in Yemen has already shown that it can rise from the ashes of defeat stronger and better organized than it ever was originally. The United States and Yemen have yet to prove that they can adapt as quickly and as ably as al-Qa`ida has done, but both must be flexible if they hope to win the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen and prevent future incarnations.

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