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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Editor's Note: In response to the failed terrorist attack targeting a Northwest Airlines commercial aircraft on December 25, 2009, the Combating Terrorism Center is releasing this special issue of the CTC Sentinel. Early indications suggest that the suspected bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, received explosives training in Yemen, drawing further attention to the role played by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which claimed credit for the operation. To provide context on al-Qa`ida's activities in Yemen, this special issue includes a new article by Yemen expert Gregory D. Johnsen assessing the current threat posed by AQAP. The issue also includes previously published CTC Sentinel articles focusing on al-Qa`ida in Yemen.

AQAP in Yemen and the Christmas Day Terrorist Attack

By Gregory D. Johnsen

The failed attempt by Nigerian bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to destroy a Northwest Airlines commercial aircraft on Christmas Day has re-focused Western attention on al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the potential dangers emanating from Yemen. The importance of this event drove British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to announce shortly after the botched attack that London would host a conference devoted to combating al-Qa`ida in Yemen. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton echoed Brown's concerns days later, calling the situation in Yemen a threat to the entire world. But Yemen's problems are neither new nor unknown.

The Christmas Day attempt was the logical extension of AQAP's ambitions to date, but one that few believed the group was capable of at this time. AQAP and its predecessor, al-Qa`ida in Yemen, have quickly moved through the stages of development in their bid to be capable of such an attack. The attempt also illustrates the extent to which Nasir al-Wahayshi, the current *amir* of AQAP, has modeled not only his own leadership style on that of Usama bin Ladin, but also fashioned his organization's goals on the template constructed by Bin Ladin in Afghanistan.

This article will show why lapsed vigilance allowed al-Qa`ida to regroup in Yemen, explain the significance of the group's merger in January 2009, identify the recent U.S.-Yemeni response, and finally examine AQAP's decision to attack the U.S. homeland.

Lapsed Vigilance and a Resurgent Al-Qa`ida

In recent years, al-Qa`ida has grown increasingly active and ambitious in Yemen. The current version of the organization, AQAP, is the second incarnation of an al-Qa`ida franchise in Yemen. The initial group was a loosely organized collection of individuals that fought a largely reactionary war against the U.S. and Yemeni governments from 2001 to 2003. The roots of al-Qa`ida's involvement in Yemen pre-date the September 11 attacks by nearly a decade, but it was only those attacks and the implicit threat of U.S. retaliation that finally compelled the Yemeni government to take the fight to al-Qa`ida operatives in the country.

During what this author has described as the "first phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen,"¹ the U.S. and Yemeni governments cooperated quite closely, even working together to kill the then head of al-Qa`ida in Yemen, Abu Ali al-

¹ Gregory D. Johnsen, "Securing Yemen's Cooperation in the Second Phase of the War on al-Qa`ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

Harithi, in an unmanned CIA drone strike in November 2002. Yemeni forces arrested his replacement, Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, a year later. The successive losses of two key leaders as well as numerous other arrests effectively crippled the organization in Yemen. Within months, as the threat from al-Qa`ida decreased and finally disappeared, the United States and Yemen believed that they had decisively defeated the organization. Instead of building on their victory, however, both governments turned their attention elsewhere.²

This lapsed vigilance opened up space for al-Qa`ida to regroup and rebuild following a major prison break in Sana`a in February 2006.³ Among the escapees were Nasir al-Wahayshi, a former personal aide to Usama bin Ladin and current commander of AQAP, and Qasim al-Raymi, a military field commander for the organization. Hizam Mujali and Muhammad al-`Umda, who are both still at large, also escaped from the Political Security Organization prison.

The prison break marked the beginning of the second phase of the war against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Since then, al-Qa`ida has passed through three distinct stages of development in Yemen. First, in 2006 and 2007 al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi worked to resurrect the organization up from the ashes, essentially taking a long view of their project in Yemen and laying a durable foundation. In January 2008, the organization launched the first issue of its bi-monthly journal *Sada al-Malahim* (*Echo of Battles*) and followed it almost

immediately with an attack on a convoy of Belgian tourists in Hadramawt. This initiated the 2008 campaign, which culminated in the September 2008 assault on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a. Then, in January 2009, the group announced that the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qa`ida were merging to form a single, unified organization to be known as AQAP. The merger, which effectively transformed al-Qa`ida from a local chapter to a regional franchise, indicated the organization's desire for regional reach and moved it one step closer toward becoming a group capable of global action.

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

The United States only began paying significant attention to the threat posed once again by al-Qa`ida in Yemen in late 2008, and especially after the attack on the U.S. Embassy in September. Following the merger in January 2009, this attention increased but never matched 2001-2002 levels of focused military and security cooperation.

Throughout 2009, AQAP executed a number of attacks that illustrated the group's growing ambition and capabilities. In March, it dispatched a suicide bomber who killed South Korean tourists in Hadramawt. Days later it struck again, attacking a convoy of South Korean officials sent to investigate the attack. Later that summer, in August, the group launched one of its most ingenious attacks, an attempted assassination of Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism chief and deputy minister of the interior, Muhammad bin Nayif. The bomber, Abdullah Asiri, reportedly hid pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) explosives in his rectum as a way to avoid detection. That attack, of course, was eerily echoed by Abdulmutallab's attempt on Christmas Day.

AQAP learned from its initial failure with PETN. Many analysts believe that the reason Asiri's attempt was unsuccessful is because his body absorbed the majority of the blast—evident from the gruesome pictures of the bomb's aftermath—which is possibly why Abdulmutallab hid the explosives in his underwear instead of inside his body.

Saudi Arabia dodged another major strike in October 2009, when a roving police checkpoint stumbled across an al-Qa`ida cell. The three al-Qa`ida members had already made their way across the border into Saudi Arabia from Yemen when their Chevy Suburban was stopped at a checkpoint. One was driving and the other two

“The January 2009 merger, which gave birth to AQAP, was a carefully considered move designed not only to increase the group’s standing internationally, but also to allow it to expand operations outside of Yemen.”

were disguised as women in the back seat. The Saudi police unit had a female officer accompanying them and when she approached the car to inspect the women's identities the two individuals in the backseat—Ra'id al-Harbi and Yusif al-Shihri, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and the brother-in-law of Said al-Shihri, AQAP's deputy commander—opened fire. Both men were killed in the fighting while the driver was arrested and interrogated. His confessions led Saudi authorities to a number of other al-Qa`ida operatives in the country.

The above account appears to be confirmed by the release of al-Harbi's and al-Shihri's wills by AQAP in December 2009. The wills, recorded before the pair traveled to Saudi Arabia, appear to indicate that they were on a suicide mission, the target of which is not known.

The attempt on Muhammad bin Nayif as well as the foiled attempt by al-Shihri and al-Harbi illustrates that the January 2009 merger, which gave birth to AQAP, was a carefully considered move designed not only to increase the group's standing internationally, but also to allow it to expand operations outside of Yemen.

² The United States reduced its interest in the country, as illustrated by aid to Yemen in 2004-2007. What little attention the United States was paying to the country was directed toward initiatives such as anti-corruption reforms and encouraging the country to take steps toward becoming a fully-formed democratic republic. The Yemeni government, on the other hand, became intimately involved in a bloody insurgency in the country's north. The rebellion, which is led by the al-Huthi family, is a complex local conflict with deep roots in Yemeni history and contemporary politics. At its heart, it is an attempt by Zaydi purists in and around Sa`da to avoid what they believe is an attempt at cultural and theological extinction.

³ Gregory D. Johnsen, "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadis - Part 1," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:18 (2007); Gregory D. Johnsen, "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadis - Part 2," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:19 (2007)

The U.S.-Yemeni Response

Shortly after the wills were released online in December 2009, the United States and Yemen coordinated a trio of strikes against al-Qa`ida targets in the country. It is still unclear what role the United States played in the strikes but, according to the *New York Times*, it was intimately involved in the operations.⁴ One target was reportedly an al-Qa`ida training camp

“AQAP has always welcomed attacks on U.S. interests anywhere in the world, but this was the first time the organization attempted to carry out an attack outside of the Arabian Peninsula.”

in the southern governorate of Abyan, although others have disputed that characterization. The raid, which likely involved U.S. firepower, killed a number of individuals, including al-Qa`ida suspects as well as a number of women and children.⁵ The casualty numbers vary widely depending on the source, but Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs Rashid al-Alimi told members of parliament on December 23 that an investigation was being conducted into the deaths of civilians.

Yemeni forces also conducted raids on two other al-Qa`ida hideouts in and around Sana`a on December 17. In Sana`a, they arrested 14 individuals accused of providing material assistance to al-Qa`ida.⁶ Northeast of the capital in the Arhab tribal region, Yemeni counterterrorism forces raided a suspected al-Qa`ida safe house. The raid resulted in the deaths of

4 David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “Threats Led to Embassy Closings in Yemen, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2010.

5 Thom Shanker and Mark Landler, “US Aids Yemeni Raids on Al Qaeda, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2009.

6 “Security Report Discusses the Details of Operations Targeting al-Qaeda” (Arabic), *Marib Press*, December 27, 2009.

three al-Qa`ida suspects, including a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, Hani al-Sha`lan.⁷ Yet the target of the raid, Qasim al-Raymi, escaped the government’s siege along with fellow al-Qa`ida suspect Hizam Mujali. Days later, on December 21, an al-Qa`ida member later identified as Muhammad Salih al-`Awlaqi returned to the scene of the strike in Abyan and gave a short, impromptu speech to a rally protesting the attack that al-Jazira caught on video.

On December 22, fighter planes, apparently acting on U.S. intelligence, tracked al-`Awlaqi back to his tribal region in Shabwa and attacked a position where he was believed to be hiding. The initial bombing raid was unsuccessful, but two days later another strike on the same position succeeded in killing al-`Awlaqi as well as a handful of other al-Qa`ida suspects. Subsequent rumors that the target of the attack was a leadership meeting between Nasir al-Wahayshi, Said Ali al-Shihri and Anwar al-`Awlaqi appear to be unfounded and none of the three are believed to be dead.

The Christmas Day Attempt

The next day Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to destroy a plane over Detroit. The subsequent statement released by AQAP on December 28 said that the attempt was in retaliation for the week of strikes, which it claimed were carried out by the United States with Cruise missiles, but the chronology of Abdulmutallab’s travel make this more propaganda than fact.⁸

There is still much that is not known about Abdulmutallab’s time in Yemen. Not only where he went and with whom he spent his time, but also whether he was a trial balloon for AQAP or just the first of several bombers. For AQAP, this was a relatively low-cost and low-risk operation. It did not send one of its own members, but rather someone who sought the group out and who was, from an organizational perspective, dispensable. One development that

7 Ibid.

8 Abdulmutallab purchased his ticket on December 16. See, for example, “US Officials Investigating How Abdulmutallab Boarded Flight 253 as More Missed Red Flags Surface,” *New York Daily News*, January 3, 2010.

may help shed light on the subject is whether or not Abdulmutallab recorded a will that he left with AQAP leaders in Yemen. Yet even if he did it is doubtful that the organization would release it given his failure.

Much has been made of Abdulmutallab’s possible connections to Anwar al-`Awlaqi, but so far little evidence has emerged to match the speculation. One worry is that by focusing so exclusively on possible ties to Anwar al-`Awlaqi, the United States is overlooking other lesser-known individuals. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the February 2006 prison break, the U.S.

“The concern for many intelligence analysts and security officials is that AQAP’s success in getting one bomber into the United States will breed more success by attracting other individuals who can move easily through Western countries.”

government focused on Jamal al-Badawi and Jabir al-Banna, two individuals it knew well. Yet it was actually two escapees it did not know—Nasir al-Wahayshi and Qasim al-Raymi—who would prove to be the biggest threat to U.S. interests.

AQAP has always welcomed attacks on U.S. interests anywhere in the world, but this was the first time the organization attempted to carry out an attack outside of the Arabian Peninsula. Even in the statement released by AQAP claiming credit for the failed attack it focused on “expelling the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula,” the group’s stated *raison d’être*. It did, however, raise the rhetoric slightly, calling for “total war on all Crusaders in the peninsula.”

It is difficult to know why the group decided to target the United States at this point in time: whether it saw a vehicle of opportunity in Abdulmutallab, who had a U.S. visa, or whether it was part

of a larger strategy. The concern for many intelligence analysts and security officials is that AQAP's success in getting one bomber into the United States will breed more success by attracting other individuals who can move easily through Western countries.

Another worry is that the reaction by the United States to the unsuccessful attack may induce AQAP to devote more time and resources to similar attempts in the future. This, however, is largely dependent on the group's resources. Currently, the group appears to be under little pressure in Yemen and it has a great deal of space to not only plan but also to launch attacks from hideouts in the country. Certainly there are talented and innovative individuals working within the organization in Yemen and these tend to attract motivated students and recruits. The future targets AQAP selects will depend on the individuals it has at its disposal.⁹ This should be a cause for concern.

At this point, however, the only conclusion that can be known with any degree of certainty is that the attempted Christmas Day attack demonstrates that AQAP's imagination matches its ambitions.

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The Expansion Strategy of Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

By Gregory D. Johnsen

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DURING THE PAST YEAR, the United States has grown increasingly concerned about the dangers of instability in Yemen. This fear has translated into a sharp increase in aid to the fragile state. It also helps to explain the slow but steady trickle of official U.S. visitors to the Yemeni capital, Sana`a. General David Petraeus, for example, traveled to Yemen on July 26, 2009, bringing with him both official confirmation of the uptick in aid along with the warning that the United States would expect a significant return on its money.

The extra funding is largely a result of a resurgent al-Qa`ida threat in the country. In less than four years, al-Qa`ida in Yemen has transformed itself from a fractured and fragmented group of individuals into an organization that is intent on launching attacks throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The development of al-Qa`ida into a regional organization, known as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has been quick but methodical as the group has articulated and then attained each goal set for itself. AQAP is increasingly establishing roots in Yemen, allowing it to plan and execute attacks across the region.

Take Two in Marib

A large part of Petraeus' visit was devoted to counterterrorism. During the meeting with President Ali Abdullah Salih, Petraeus pressed him to take the fight to al-Qa`ida. Salih dutifully responded by dispatching his nephew, `Ammar Muhammad, who is the principal deputy with the National Security Bureau, to the eastern governorate of Marib, which has been the center of al-Qa`ida activity in recent years. `Ammar negotiated the terms of the offensive with local shaykhs, but the operation four days later did not go as planned. First, a Yemeni supply truck got lost and was subsequently captured by al-Qa`ida fighters. Second, Yemeni

counterterrorism forces mistakenly shelled a tribal house rather than an al-Qa`ida safe house. Their error sparked a firefight with tribesmen and a handful of al-Qa`ida fighters opposing the military.

The "Battle of Marib," as al-Qa`ida is now calling the incident, illustrates the dangers and pitfalls of attempting to navigate the murky and multifaceted conflict that fighting al-Qa`ida in Yemen has become. Al-Qa`ida's budding alliance with some tribes in the region means that any fight that is designed to be a two-sided affair

"Al-Qa`ida has reached the point where it is no longer satisfied with local activity. It has its sights set on something bigger."

between the government and al-Qa`ida will not remain that way. The logic of these conflicts will evolve in a way that increasingly incorporates more actors, as tribesmen and other fighters are brought into the fight not out of any ideological loyalty to al-Qa`ida, but rather as a way of reacting against government action and aggression.¹

In the end, the Battle of Marib cost the military five tanks, a number of dead and wounded as well as seven soldiers captured, at least according to a statement released by AQAP.² The Yemeni government disputed the statement, but a video about the battle was subsequently released by AQAP, showing the seven captured soldiers and further confirming al-Qa`ida's claims.³ The video also backed away from the claim made in the initial statement that al-Qa`ida had shelled the Republican Palace in Marib while `Ammar Muhammad was in the building. Instead, al-Qa`ida used the

⁹ For example, AQAP will likely use Saudi and Yemeni recruits for operations in the Peninsula. If it is able to recruit individuals who can travel freely in Western countries, then it may designate those recruits for operations in the West.

¹ Tribes in this region of Yemen have often accepted money and assistance from a variety of sources, which they use as leverage against the central government in Sana`a.

² Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement on the Battle of Marib," August 1, 2009.

³ Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Video on the Battle of Marib," September 8, 2009.