

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.

Gregory D. Johnsen, a former Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. He is also the co-author of the Yemen blog, Waq al-Waq.

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

By Gregory D. Johnsen

** This article was originally published in the September 2009 issue of the CTC Sentinel.*

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.

video to modify its earlier statement, saying only that officers were in the palace when it was shelled.

The clarifications and running commentary throughout the video by Qasim al-Raymi,⁴ one of al-Qa`ida's military commanders, is a calculated attempt by the organization to seize the moral high ground in Yemen. In a country where many are often distrustful of government spokesmen and official statements, al-Qa`ida is attempting to show that its statements are grounded in fact. This was most forcefully illustrated in the video by footage of Yemen's minister of information, Hasan al-Lawzi, discussing the government's version of the events in Marib, which was then followed by al-Raymi's suggestion that people are beginning to turn to jihadist web forums for a more accurate accounting of events.

In addition to brand protection, al-Qa`ida also utilized the captured soldiers to its advantage, portraying them as pawns duped into obeying an un-Islamic regime. At the end of the video, al-Qa`ida announced that it would not execute the soldiers, as this was not permitted, but that if the soldiers would not fight with the mujahidin then neither should they fight against them by assisting the "tyrants." The soldiers were eventually released as a result of tribal mediation, which `Ammar was forced to rely on after his unit's embarrassing performance.

In many ways, the Battle of Marib and the events leading up to it were eerily similar to another series of incidents eight years earlier. In that case, President George W. Bush pressured Salih to arrest three al-Qa`ida members during a November 2001 visit to Washington. The ensuing operation in Marib by Yemeni Special Forces was a disaster. The target of the attack, Abu Ali al-Harithi, escaped along with a comrade, while local tribesmen took

4 Qasim al-Raymi graduated from one of Yemen's religious institutes in the late 1990s before traveling to Afghanistan where he met Usama bin Ladin and spent time in an al-Qa`ida training camp. He comes from a family of fighters. One brother, Ali, is currently in Guantanamo Bay and another, Faris, fought in Iraq and Afghanistan before being killed in mysterious circumstances in June 2007. Al-Raymi was one of the 23 men who escaped from a Yemen Political Security prison in February 2006.

several Yemeni soldiers hostage. Tribal mediators later secured the release of the soldiers, but not before the government was warned against a heavy footprint in Marib. Al-Harithi was killed less than a year later by a U.S. unmanned aerial drone.

Yet this is not 2001, and Yemen is less inclined toward seeing U.S. priorities as its own. It has other security problems—a civil war in the north⁵ and calls for secession in the south—that it deems more pressing than the al-Qa`ida threat. Moreover, it has learned that the United States and its allies can be inconsistent when it comes to rewarding risk.

Establishing Roots

Both the statement and the video about the Battle of Marib express some surprise that the Yemeni government would even carry out an attack in the governorate. In the video, al-Raymi explained the military operation by suggesting that Salih is a "slave to Saudi riyals and American dollars." Al-Qa`ida is increasingly viewing Marib and some of the surrounding governorates, most notably al-Jawf and parts of Shabwa, as its own sphere of influence where the government has no role.

With a few exceptions—the two suicide attacks in March 2009⁶ and the Battle of Marib—al-Qa`ida has been largely silent since its attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a on Ramadan 17, 2008.⁷ Yet this silence does not equate to inactivity. Instead, al-Qa`ida has been building a durable foundation for the future. Specifically, it has been actively working to establish links and put down roots

5 The sixth and most violent round of fighting to date between the government and the Huthis began on August 11, 2009. This sporadic conflict has been ongoing since 2004 and continues to be a drain on both the government's political and military capital.

6 A suicide bomber killed four South Korean tourists and their local Yemeni guide on March 15, 2009. On March 18, a convoy of the victims' relatives along with South Korean investigators was targeted in another suicide attack, although only the bomber was killed in the second incident.

7 The date is significant, as was pointed out in a later issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, as the anniversary of the early Islamic Battle of Badr. It corresponds to September 17, 2008. The recent attempted assassination of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayif is the beginning of something new for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

with the tribes in Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwa governorates.⁸ Most notably, it is accomplishing this by attempting to marry into the local tribes. The personal piety of many al-Qa`ida members also resonates strongly with tribesmen as do cell phone videos of the fighting in Iraq. At the moment, al-Qa`ida is in the early stages of a budding alliance with some of the tribes in these governorates.

Despite early concerns immediately after September 11, 2001, al-Qa`ida has not traditionally had a strong alliance with the tribes in Yemen. There have

“Al-Qa`ida first wanted to rebuild in Yemen, and then it aimed to make itself relevant within the country. Now that it has accomplished both goals, it is taking the next step by expanding regionally.”

been cases of al-Qa`ida members being provided refuge by tribes, but often this was an issue of a tribesman who was also a member of al-Qa`ida playing on his tribal identity to receive refuge. What is happening now is entirely different.

Said Ali al-Shihri, the deputy commander of AQAP, recently brought his wife and children to Yemen from Saudi Arabia.⁹ Not only did this put them beyond the reach of the Saudi government so it could not exert the same sort of pressure on him as it did on Muhammad al-`Awfi,¹⁰ but it also indicates al-Shihri's comfort

8 Much of the analysis in this section is based on the author's recent trip to Yemen in July and August 2009. The author is indebted to the help and generosity of many Yemenis who shared their views and thoughts with him.

9 Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement of Congratulations," *Sada al-Malahim*, No. 9, May 2009.

10 Muhammad al-`Awfi, a former Guantanamo detainee, was one of the four individuals featured in the video that announced the merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qa`ida into the unified al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula in January 2009. One month later, al-`Awfi turned himself in to Saudi authorities. It is widely believed that Saudi Arabia used a variety of different tactics—including pressuring the women in his family—to force his surrender.

level in the country. Al-Qa`ida is not on the run in Yemen, but rather is largely free to do what it wants in certain areas. Al-Shihri's move is also indicative of a growing attempt by al-Qa`ida to become part of the local scene by integrating itself into the entire community in a way that a single man is unable to do.

Specific details on individuals marrying into particular tribes is difficult to acquire, but anecdotal evidence received in Yemen combined with some specific cases indicates that it is part of al-Qa`ida's long-term strategy. In the latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim (Echo of Battles)*, for instance, al-Qa`ida congratulated one of its members, Muhammad al-`Umda, on his marriage.¹¹ It is unclear from the statement who al-`Umda married, but the belief in Yemen is that he married into one of the tribes and that his action is being replicated by other fighters from both Saudi Arabia and Yemen. This development is both new and worrying because it has the potential to turn any counterterrorism operation into a much broader war involving Yemen's tribes.

The Perception and The Reality

Another worrying indicator for the future of counterterrorism operations in Yemen is the general apathy toward al-Qa`ida in the country. There is a culture of passivity and victimhood within the government. Nearly every sector of society has bought into this idea, arguing that the al-Qa`ida problem is really a foreign problem, an outgrowth of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹² This is not the case, and by failing to acknowledge the problem Yemen has never adequately addressed it.

There is silence from major clerics who could speak out against attacks from al-Qa`ida. The shaykhs and clerics who do preach against al-Qa`ida do not have the intellectual weight or popular following to counter al-Qa`ida's arguments. This has essentially ceded the field of debate and discussion within Yemen to al-Qa`ida. The United States has been

11 Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, "Statement of Congratulations," *Sada al-Malahim*, No. 10, July 2009. Al-`Umda is one of three escapees from the February 2006 prison break still at large.

12 This conclusion is based on a number of interviews and conversations the author conducted with ministers, parliamentarians, journalists and tribesmen in July and August 2009 in Yemen.

complicit in this failure by neglecting to seize opportunities to counter the organization's propaganda in any meaningful way.

The United States, for example, had a unique opportunity to go on the offensive in August 2009 when it released Muhammad al-Mu`ayyad and his assistant from U.S. custody.¹³ The case has been a contentious domestic issue in Yemen since 2003, with everyone from the president to al-Qa`ida calling for the pair's release. The United States could have easily placed an Arabic op-ed in the official

“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 between the government and al-Qa`ida will not remain that way.”

daily, *al-Thawra*, explaining its rationale for the release.¹⁴ Articulating that like every country the United States makes mistakes but that it also attempts to learn from those mistakes would have went a long way toward repairing the tattered image of the United States in Yemen. Al-Qa`ida has used al-Mu`ayyad's case as a powerful piece of propaganda for years, but when he was finally released the United States was silent and did not benefit. U.S. public diplomacy in Yemen is all defense and no offense.

13 In January 2003, the United States lured al-Mu`ayyad and his assistant to Germany as part of a sting operation in which they were promised money for groups such as Hamas and al-Qa`ida. The men were arrested and extradited to the United States where they were convicted in 2005 of supporting Hamas but cleared of charges related to al-Qa`ida. Al-Mu`ayyad's popularity in Yemen stems not only from his role as a religious figure, but also from his charity work. He is often referred to as the "Father of orphans" in the Arabic press.

14 The author asked a Yemeni official about the difficulty of placing such an op-ed, and he assured that such an op-ed would have no problem getting printed.

Public diplomacy is not the only U.S. problem in Yemen. There is a frightening mix of ignorance and arrogance when it comes to U.S. policy toward Yemen as well as among many of those tasked with implementing this policy. The United States must learn that its insistence on seeing everything through the prism of counterterrorism has helped to induce exactly the type of results it is hoping to avoid. By focusing on al-Qa`ida to the exclusion of nearly every other challenge, and by linking almost all of its aid to this single issue, the United States has ensured that the issue will never be resolved. There is growing fear in Yemen that the country would be forgotten and neglected in the absence of the threat from al-Qa`ida.¹⁵

This short-sighted and narrow focus by the United States has translated over time into a lack of influence within the country. The United States is not the most important player on the domestic Yemeni scene. During the past several years, Washington has not spent nearly enough money in nearly enough different places in Yemen to have its desired diplomatic leverage. U.S. perceptions of its own importance and influence within Yemen are inflated and do not square with reality.

The Recruiting Ground

While the United States and Yemen have both been distracted by other, seemingly more pressing issues in recent years, al-Qa`ida has been working single-mindedly to create a durable infrastructure that can withstand the loss of key leaders and cells. It has done an excellent job of tailoring its narrative for a local audience.¹⁶ With the exception of suicide attacks within Yemen itself, much of the group's message is broadly popular within the country. As one Yemeni said, "I can no longer tell the difference between al-Qa`ida in the caves and al-Qa`ida in the mosques," illustrating just how popular the group's rhetoric is on many issues.¹⁷

15 This is based on the author's interviews and conversations with government officials, as well as his own analysis of the situation in Yemen.

16 This is particularly evident from the group's videos and issues of *Sada al-Malahim*, where al-Qa`ida uses popular grievances to criticize the regime.

17 Personal interview, a Yemeni who requested anonymity, Sana`a, Yemen, August 2009.

The organization is also benefiting from other government mistakes. The overreaction of governments such as Yemen, largely as a result of U.S. pressure, of arresting nearly everyone suspected of harboring sympathy for al-Qa`ida in the aftermath of September 11 and periodically since then is not reducing radicalization; instead, it is having the opposite effect. Young men are leaving Yemen's security prisons more radical than when they were initially incarcerated. The country's revolving door prison policy is compounding the problem as more young men spend significant time in prison. In a sense, many of these young men have been prepared for recruitment by their time in prison. The initial groundwork is being laid not by al-Qa`ida but rather by the government's actions, which makes these men tempting recruitment targets when they are eventually released.

Yemen refuses to allow monitoring of its security prisons, which is a major cause for concern. Many of these men are being housed together, which only facilitates a sort of mutual encouragement and strengthening as more radical members are able to influence younger individuals.¹⁸ The various clerics and religious shaykhs who visit the prisons to preach also appear to be playing a role in the radicalization process.¹⁹ Al-Qa`ida's potential recruiting pool in Yemen is not drying up but is expanding.

AQAP's Growing Ambition

Since its reemergence in Yemen in 2006, al-Qa`ida has shown itself to be an ambitious but tempered organization, methodically taking the steps needed to rebuild and expand. The attempted assassination of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayif is part of the organization's shift in priorities since the January 2009 merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qa`ida into a single regional franchise. The attack was an early attempt by AQAP to match action with rhetoric.

Following the merger, al-Qa`ida has prioritized attacks in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states²⁰ in an attempt to make itself regionally relevant. For al-Qa`ida, this is the logical extension of its development to date in Yemen. Al-Qa`ida first wanted to rebuild in Yemen, and then it aimed to make itself relevant within the country. Now that it has accomplished both goals, it is taking the next step by expanding regionally.

This process has followed a familiar pattern: each new phase of activity begins with al-Qa`ida announcing its rather ambitious goals and then working to meet those goals. The attack on Muhammad bin Nayif was an early attempt to accomplish this, but it is unlikely to be the last. AQAP currently feels little pressure in Yemen. It has both the time and space to plot and launch attacks throughout the region from its base in the country. This is not to say that the organization will no longer carry out attacks in Yemen, but rather that these attacks are no longer its top priority. Al-Qa`ida has reached the point where it is no longer satisfied with local activity. It has its sights set on something bigger.

Gregory D. Johnsen, a former Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. He is also the co-author of the Yemen blog, Waq al-Waq.

AQAP a Rising Threat in Yemen

By Brian O'Neill

** This article was originally published in the April 2009 issue of the CTC Sentinel.*

ON MARCH 15, 2009, a suicide bomber attacked a group of South Korean tourists in Yemen, killing four of them along with their Yemeni guide. Less than a week later on March 18, the South Korean delegation sent to investigate the attack was targeted by another suicide bomber, who detonated his explosives in the middle of their convoy.¹

These two attacks show that a rumored peace treaty between al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni government is false.² More importantly, the terrorist attacks demonstrate that this reconstituted and renamed terrorist group³ is more adaptable, tactically flexible, and strategically nimble than previously believed. Although the attacks lacked the reach of the 2008 mortar assault on the U.S. Embassy, they proved that AQAP remains a threat to both foreign nationals and to the Yemeni government. This article examines the implications of the two attacks, and how AQAP has evolved its propaganda to achieve better resonance with the Yemeni population.

Implications of the Attacks

Taken separately, both of the March 2009 suicide attacks are worrisome. Taken as a set, they reveal an organization that is both gaining strength and demonstrating a willingness to be influenced by the larger jihadist movement. Al-Qa`ida in Yemen had, before the destruction of its initial cadre around 2004,⁴ been largely

¹⁸ Yemen does allow monitoring of its central prisons, but these are different from the country's many security prisons.

¹⁹ Personal interviews, various Yemeni journalists and officials familiar with the security prisons in the country, Sana'a, Yemen, July and August 2009.

²⁰ AQAP has not yet been found responsible for attacks in other Gulf states. Its statements and some circumstantial evidence, however, imply that it is plotting such operations.

¹ There were no casualties, except for the life of the bomber, in the March 18 attack.

² In early March, several newspapers reported that there was a potential peace treaty between the government and AQAP. The terms were rumored to be a one-year cessation of terrorist activity in exchange for the release of prisoners. It was never confirmed and was shown to be clearly false.

³ Al-Qa`ida terrorists in Yemen were formerly known as al-Qa`ida in Yemen. In late January, it announced that it was merging with the al-Qa`ida faction in Saudi Arabia, and that the two groups would now be known under one name, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

⁴ Gregory Johnsen and Brian O'Neill, "Yemen Faces Sec-