

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.<sup>18</sup> The various clerics and religious shaykhs who visit the prisons to preach also appear to be playing a role in the radicalization process.<sup>19</sup> 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.

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

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

Following the merger, al-Qa`ida has prioritized attacks in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states<sup>20</sup> 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.*

<sup>20</sup> 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.

## AQAP a Rising Threat in Yemen

By Brian O'Neill

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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.<sup>1</sup>

These two attacks show that a rumored peace treaty between al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni government is false.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the terrorist attacks demonstrate that this reconstituted and renamed terrorist group<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> been largely

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Johnsen and Brian O'Neill, "Yemen Faces Sec-

as idiosyncratic in tactics and ideas as the country's politics. It was willing to use the time-honored Yemeni culture of negotiation, and abided by what were essentially non-aggression pacts with the government. Under the new leadership of Nasir al-Wahayshi and Qasim al-Raymi, who reorganized the outfit following a 2006 prison escape, it has shown an ability to weave itself into the larger jihadist framework while remaining tied to Yemen's cultural norms. Their leaders have shown respect for and knowledge of Yemen's complex tribal system and are able to use it to their advantage. Their narrative within Yemen, for example, has focused largely on the traditional tribal distrust of the government in Sana'a. While Yemeni nationalism exists, the tribal areas are wary of centralization, and al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi expend great effort to paint themselves as being on the side of the tribesmen against the government. This narrative is a powerful one, and its appeal is rooted in Yemeni tribal culture. In this way, AQAP is different, and in the long-run more dangerous, than al-Qa`ida's troubled franchise in Iraq.

The March 15 bombing near the iconic mudbrick towers of Shibam highlighted several important aspects of the group's strength. The first is that the bomber, identified as Abd al-Rahman Mahdi Ali Qasim al-Ujayri, used his body as the weapon. In the past, al-Qa`ida-affiliated operatives in Yemen used vehicles or boats in their suicide attacks; while effective, these attacks did not allow for as great a flexibility in target selection. This change demonstrates the ability to draw from jihadist tactics used elsewhere, such as in Iraq and Palestine.

The second aspect involves the nature of the bombing itself. AQAP said in a statement that the Koreans were killed partly in revenge for their government's cooperation against Islamic terrorism,<sup>5</sup> as well as "the role of these tourists in corrupting the ideology of Muslims and their morals." It seems more likely that this justification was developed after

the attack. According to witnesses, the bomber, rather than targeting a group to avenge grievances, selected the largest group he could find to maximize the impact; they happened to be Koreans.<sup>6</sup> The fact that al-Ujayri was able to select his target shows an increased level of training and commitment, as

### **"AQAP is at the forefront of the next wave of jihad."**

he presumably did not detonate his explosives prematurely and was able to wait until he found a target that would achieve the most impact.<sup>7</sup> This could plausibly be tied to the training he purportedly received in Somalia.<sup>8</sup>

The second attack, although a failure in terms of body count, was a psychological success that demonstrated AQAP's operational abilities as well as sending a message that even official status does not guarantee protection from its reach. There are two scenarios of how this attack occurred. The first is that the attack had been planned in advance. The second is that the operation was born quickly from a presented opportunity. At this time, not enough reliable information exists to determine which scenario occurred; both, however, are troublesome.

If the attack had been planned in tandem with the first bombing, it reflects that the strategists of AQAP have the foresight to maximize the impact of their assaults. The second scenario, that of a rapidly-seized opportunity, would show that al-Wahayshi, in addition to being able to adapt and rapidly plan an operation, has a pool of recruits who are both ready to deploy at a moments notice and are already trained well enough to successfully conduct an operation (successful in terms of avoiding arrest before the mission is completed).

### **AQAP's Dominance in the "Virtual Space"**

All of these tactical abilities show al-Qa`ida's flexibility to adapt in the physical environment. While impressive, the aftermath of the attacks is where AQAP has demonstrated its real power and danger—its increasing strength in what analyst Andrew Exum describes as their "virtual space."<sup>9</sup> This refers to the world of jihadist forums, statements, and publications. In it, AQAP has developed a remarkable ability to finesse its ideological message to strike resonant chords with disparate audiences. Their flagship publication, *Sada al-Malahim (Echo of Battles)*, is frequently timed for release shortly before or after a new operation, and provides justifications that are both political and theological, and manages to target both what they see as the apostate regime of Ali Abdullah Salih and the far devil of Islam's Western enemies. Al-Wahayshi's propaganda wing is on a steep learning curve since its initial media forays in 2007 and has seemed to increase in sophistication with each message. While its reach may have been enhanced due to the merger with al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia, its reputation for professionalism was developed entirely on the Yemeni side. They gained a reputation for both skilled presentation and rapid response time well before there were even rumors of Saudi influence in al-Qa`ida in Yemen.

In the latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, Nayf Muhammad al-Qahtani, a Saudi citizen and AQAP leader, discussed both the recently published list by Saudi Arabia of their 85 most wanted terrorists and the alleged rape of Muslims by U.S. soldiers in Iraqi prisons.<sup>10</sup> The issue demonstrates al-Qahtani's skill in linking the depredations of the West with the quisling, "heretical" governments of the peninsula. In doing this, he is attempting to tie together several sources of frustration. The near and far enemies are a usual trope in jihadist literature, but the real talent of AQAP is to not lose sight of what makes their home terrain unique.

ond Generation of Islamist Militants," *Terrorism Focus* 4:27 (2007). By 2004, through a combination of arrests, assassinations and negotiations, the al-Qa`ida franchise responsible for the bombing of the USS *Cole* had ceased to be a viable organization.

5 "Al-Qaeda Claims Killing South Korean Tourists in Revenge," *News Yemen*, March 27, 2009.

6 Inal Irsan, "Qaeda Suicide Bomber Behind Yemen Suicide Attack," Reuters, March 17, 2009.

7 Lin Noueihed, "Qaeda Bomber Behind Suicide Attack Trained in Somalia," Reuters, March 17, 2009.

8 Ibid.

9 Andrew Exum, "No Place to Hide," *The New Republic*, March 31, 2009.

10 The latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim* was released on March 21, 2009 and is available on various jihadist web forums. Also see Gregory D. Johnsen, "Al-Qahtani in Sada al-Malahim," *Waq al-Waq*, March 29, 2009.

Indeed, the statement of responsibility for the dual bombings, despite its after-the-fact rationalizations, was itself a minor masterpiece that revealed several dueling but linked strategies for the group. It is easy for an organization with broad ambitions to lose sight of its domestic objectives, just as it is easy for an organization to become overly concerned with settling scores at home and fail to carry out larger missions; the latter of which increase recruitment by enhancing the organization's reputation and maintain positive morale among the more restless foot soldiers. These conflicting objectives can potentially overwhelm even the most fervent. It must be noted that despite its regional ambitions, AQAP shrewdly has not abandoned parochial issues, and in its statement claimed that the bombing was in revenge for the government's August 2008 killing of al-Qa`ida leader Hamza al-Q`uyati.<sup>11</sup> AQAP has a few reasons for making this claim. First, there is truth to the statement. Second, it reflects a broader strategy. AQAP has frequently alleged that its men have been tortured in Yemeni prisons, and this is not a charge that is beyond the pale. By tying in its specific grievances to issues held by the public at large, and specifically by attempting to make claims that will resonate with tribesmen, who are always wary of interference from Sana`a, AQAP is helping themselves establish safe zones outside the government's writ.

This strategy is what makes AQAP a dangerous force. Its predecessors—al-Qa`ida before 2004—were willing to compromise with the government. Under the inflexible leadership of al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi, however, there is no compromise with a “compromised” government. Eschewing negotiations does not mean they are abandoning all Yemeni traditions; they are just exchanging one inconvenient tradition with the more appealing system of revenge. In utilizing a tit-for-tat justification, such as the death of al-Q`uyati, they are tying themselves into the fabric of Yemeni culture, as well as brandishing their anti-government credentials. This is important in tribal areas that have a strong libertarian bent.

<sup>11</sup> “Al-Qaeda Claims Killing South Korean Tourists in Revenge,” *News Yemen*, March 27, 2009. Al-Q`uyati was an al-Qa`ida leader killed in a raid by security forces in Tarim on August 12, 2008.

### Conclusion

It is by accusing the government of torture, addressing what they see as specific government misdeeds, connecting with people on a tribal level and not losing sight of their global struggle that the reconstituted al-Qa`ida has managed to outstrip its predecessors in threat potential. AQAP is at the forefront of the next wave of jihad. The Yemen-dominated merger of the two al-Qa`ida franchises adds Saudi knowledge to an outfit that has grown in strength. It has integrated into the bewildering morass of Yemeni politics, exploiting the institutional weaknesses of the government, and is far-sighted enough to further chip away at its shaky foundation. AQAP's goal is to weaken and bring down the Yemeni government to create a safe haven for their group; their strategy is to attack tourism and the oil industry, the two tottering pillars of a desperate economy.

The suicide attacks demonstrated that AQAP is equally skilled at both operations; their concurrent propaganda outlined the organization's overall strategy. These developments prompt the need for an equally intelligent counterstrategy. The framework of this strategy would have to involve a deeper knowledge of the tribal system in Yemen, and the ability to play competing factions in AQAP against each other to fragment what is now a well-run and stable hierarchy. This would have to work hand-in-hand with strengthening the economic stability of the Yemeni government, while helping it to increase its legitimacy with its disaffected citizenry. Presently, however, the militants are growing in strength while the government is being inversely weakened. If AQAP is successful, it could bring the most important front in the struggle against jihad from the wilds of Afghanistan and Pakistan home to the holy lands.

*Brian O'Neill, an independent political analyst specializing in Yemen, is a former reporter for the Yemen Observer. With Gregory Johnsen, he runs the website [www.islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com](http://www.islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com).*

## Assessing the Strength of Al-Qa`ida in Yemen

By Gregory D. Johnsen

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

The raid was widely seen as a much needed victory for Yemen.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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