

# YEMEN: AL-QAEDA'S NEXT FORTRESS

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For many Americans, the United States' war with Al-Qaeda began on September 11, 2001 and focuses on the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, in the eyes of Al-Qaeda, the war against the U.S. started nine years earlier in Yemen. Al-Qaeda has never lost sight of its strong connection to Yemen and the U.S. has slowly learned a valuable lesson from this: Al-Qaeda in Yemen possesses an equal, if not greater, direct threat to the U.S. and its allies than Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan or Pakistan currently does. This paper examines the rise and evolution of Al-Qaeda in Yemen. Specifically, it investigates the crumbling socio-economic and political conditions in south Yemen that have allowed for Al-Qaeda to flourish there, and presents potential counter-terrorism policies the U.S. can take to undermine the group's ability to function globally or within Yemen itself.

**D**emen (Figure 1) is quickly joining the ranks of Afghanistan and Pakistan and may soon even surpass them as the renowned forefront in the war against Al-Qaeda. For Al-Qaeda, Yemen is both its geo-political and socio-economic strong hold. It is a country riddled with poverty, dominated by tradition, and infused with social clashes, all of which Al-Qaeda continues to take advantage of to advance its agenda in both the nation and regionally. This paper examines the rise and evolution of Al-Qaeda in Yemen. Specifically, it investigates the crumbling socio-economic and political conditions in south Yemen that have allowed for Al-Qaeda to flourish there, and

Pictured: William Hudson Rogers lecturing in 1954

presents potential counter-terrorism policies the U.S. can take to undermine the group's ability to function globally or within Yemen itself.

#### **Al-Qaeda's ties to Yemen**

In order to grasp the deep and layered connection between Al-Qaeda and Yemen, it is necessary to first understand the role Yemen plays to the foundations of Al-Qaeda itself. Despite being born and raised in Saudi Arabia, Osama Bin Laden's father and ancestry is Yemeni, from the Hadramawt province in South Yemen. It is a connection that Bin Laden has never lost. In a 1998 interview with Al-Jazeera, when asked about Al-Qaeda's links to Yemen, Bin Laden replied, "In Yemen, we have strong and old links, by the grace of god Almighty, besides the fact that my roots and my father's roots go back there" (Lawrence 88).

However, Al-Qaeda's ties to

Yemen go beyond Bin Laden's personal sentimental attachment. Yemen also plays an important strategic role for Al-Qaeda. It is estimated that Yemenis make up the third largest contingent of all Al-Qaeda fighters globally (186). Today, 40% of all captured Al-Qaeda operatives who are prisoners in Guantanamo Bay are Yemeni (Boucek). This makes Yemen a natural resource of potential new recruits to join the ranks of Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, this indicates that there is a substantial chunk of Yemeni society that is sympathetic to Al-Qaeda's cause.

For an organization that takes public pride in its victories, Yemen has come to represent for Al-Qaeda the place of some of the group's earliest successes. In 1992, Al-Qaeda detonated a bomb meant to kill U.S. soldiers who had stopped in Aden on their way to Somalia where the U.S.

was leading a multinational U.N. force. While no American soldiers were hurt in the attack, Bin Laden still viewed the attack as a success. His reasoning behind this stems from the U.S. reaction to the attack. Within days of the bombs going off, the U.S. presence in Yemen quickly evaporated. Bin Laden took personal pride in this and explained to the newspaper *The Daily Pakistan* that, “the United States wanted to set up a military base for U.S. soldiers in Yemen so that it could send fresh troops to Somalia...the United States received our warning and gave up the idea of setting up its military bases in Yemen. This was the first Al-Qaeda victory scored against the Crusaders” (Anonymous 135). However, Al-Qaeda did not truly gain the attention of the U.S. until 2000 with its much larger, more sophisticated successful attack on the U.S.S. Cole

(Figure 2), stationed in the Port of Aden, which left 17 sailors dead. This attack marked the first of a three-stage war in Yemen between the U.S. and Al-Qaeda (Gardner).

### **Stage One: A New Friend In Yemen**

This first stage began in October 2000 with the attack on the Cole and continued until 2003. According to Greg Johnson, an expert on Al-Qaeda in Yemen, these early years of the U.S. war on terror are defined by a high cooperation between the U.S. and Yemen. Prior to this 2000 attack, Al-Qaeda in Yemen operated largely unchallenged and was primarily a recruiting center for Al-Qaeda (Boucek). Following the Cole attack, the U.S. began to exert heavy pressure on Yemeni President Saleh (Figure 3) to hunt down the perpetrators of the attack. The Yemeni government arrested five men, including

Abu Jandal. Jandal was an Al-Qaeda lieutenant and personal bodyguard to Bin Laden (Heffelfinger 240). The entire ordeal was a preview of what was to come in the U.S.-Yemeni relations in dealing with Al-Qaeda.

Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Saleh visited Washington, D.C. In a meeting with President George W. Bush, Saleh assured Bush that the U.S. had the full support of Yemen. This was a shift in Saleh's policies that often turned a blind eye to Al-Qaeda. Following the September 11 attacks, however, Saleh decided to not make the same mistake he had in the 1990 Gulf War. During the first Gulf War, Saleh supported Saddam Hussein. This led to the excommunication of Yemeni migrant workers across the Arabian Peninsula, specifically Saudi Arabia. This political miscalculation was a heavy loss for Yemen. Migrant workers had been

a lifeline in the Yemeni economy. It is estimated that Saudi Arabia drove out around 1 million Yemeni workers (Kapiszewski). This situation deprived Yemen of some \$3 billion in foreign exchange. In addition, the Saudis and several Gulf states ended \$2 billion in foreign aid to Yemen for its support of Hussein who posed a real and immediate threat to the sovereignty of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. As a result of these foreign aid cuts unemployment in Yemen reached 30% (Yemen Country).

Following Saleh's Washington, D.C. visit, he began backing his words with actions. He had any and all known Al-Qaeda operatives and affiliates in Yemen arrested. In addition, Saleh worked closely with U.S. intelligence officials by sharing information acquired from captured and interrogated operatives. This U.S.-Yemeni attack on Al-Qaeda

in Yemen pinnacle in 2002 with the assassination of Al-Qaeda's top commander, Abu Ali al-Harithi, via a U.S. drone attack (Boucek). His replacement, Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, was also soon arrested. With the elimination of Al-Qaeda's top two commanders in Yemen, and increased intelligence reports that showed that the majority of jihadist in Yemen were leaving to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq where tangible American targets were located, the U.S. and Yemeni officials came to believe that the war with Al-Qaeda in Yemen was largely over (Boucek).

### **Stage Two: Reversal in Fortunes for Saleh**

The second stage in the war on Al-Qaeda in Yemen began in late 2003 with this view from U.S. government and Sanaa that Al-Qaeda had been soundly defeated and had collapsed under a lack of leadership;

this continued until 2005. During this gap period, Yemen began to reshift its focus and resources from fighting Al-Qaeda to what Saleh deemed the real threats to his government; a Houthi Rebellion in the north (Boucek). (Houthis are a Shi'ite minority found only in Yemen; they are a minority in Yemen and make continuous claims of government oppression). Throughout this gap year of quelling the rebellion, however, Saleh suffered several major setbacks.

In November 2005, Saleh visited Washington, D.C. again. Saleh had been expecting an increase in aid from Bush in light of the successful cooperation between U.S. and Yemen. Instead, during a meeting with Bush, Saleh was informed that Yemen was to be completely removed from the U.S. aid program. In addition, the following day, the World

Bank informed Saleh that it would be cutting his aid by 66%. In two days, Saleh lost \$160 million in aid (Boucek). Both Bush and the World Bank accredited the cuts to rampant corruption in Yemen. Adding to Saleh's problems was a continuing decrease in oil revenue. Oil revenue accounts for 25% of Yemen's total gross domestic product (GDP), approximately 70% of government revenue, and more than 90% of foreign exchange earnings. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration's Country Brief on Yemen, in 2001, oil production peaked at approximately 440,000 bbI/d (barrels per day). According to Yemen's Ministry of Oil and Minerals, oil production in 2009 was projected at 290,000 bbI/d. (Country). This number is expected to continue decreasing every year, and in 2017 oil production in Yemen is expected to be no longer

economically feasible. Only adding to these economic problems, it is expected that Yemen may soon be the first nation in the world to run out of clean drinking water (Boucek).

Saleh responded to this loss of national income by implementing governmental budget cuts. These cuts have and continue to center on the military and, more specifically, South Yemen. The reason for this is largely based on the fact that Saleh himself is from North Yemen. Prior to 1990, the nation of what is today Yemen was two separate nations of North and South Yemen. The decision for the two nations to unite came almost solely from the discovery of oil along the North South Border (Spencer 202-203). Saleh fired many South Yemeni military officers and has cut the pensions of those who remain. Since taking office in 1990, Saleh has diverted the majority

of profits away from the south and towards the capitol in the North. In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, a former colonel in the Yemeni army told the reporter, “Most of what we have is what the British built when they were here. We haven’t gained anything from unification. I would rather have had the British here for 400 years than be ruled by Saleh” (Horton).

### **Stage Three: The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda**

The third stage in the fight with Al-Qaeda in Yemen began in 2006 with the prison break of twenty-three high-ranking Al-Qaeda operatives and continues to the present. Of these original twenty-three, only three remain at large. The rest have either been captured or killed since 2006. Astonishingly, the few commanders that have survived have been extremely successful at

revitalizing Al-Qaeda operations in Yemen (Boucek). Many of the escapees had close ties to Bin Laden himself and were experienced fighters from Afghanistan. More importantly, however, this new group of commanders has brought with it a new ideology, pertaining to how Al-Qaeda should be organized and conduct its operations.

The previous Al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen had been organized in a top-down, corporate-themed hierarchy, similar to what existed in Afghanistan. This new generation of Al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen has learned from past mistakes and reorganized in Yemen. This reorganization focuses on the ability to have increased mobility and flexibility in case of leadership change were an Al-Qaeda commander be killed or captured (Boucek). This restructuring has played a key role in making

Al-Qaeda in Yemen deadlier than ever. It allows the group the unique dual opportunity to plan strategic operations requiring a high level of coordination, or attack while on the run.

In addition to this new leadership structure, the political and economic conditions in Yemen, specifically South Yemen, have changed since 2003 when Al-Qaeda was last organized. Since the early 1990s, South Yemen has been an Al-Qaeda's stronghold. However, recent socio-economic developments in South Yemen have left the south deteriorating. These include as this paper has shown, a continuing lack of infrastructure development in the south, disgruntled military officers, and increased job loss. These factors are culminating in creating an environment (specifically in the Abyan, Lahij provinces and the city

of Aden) that views Al-Qaeda in an ever more favorable light. Yemeni dissatisfaction with the central government has erupted in mass street protest. On January 27, 2011, 10,000 protestors took the streets in Sanaa, Yemen's capitol (Bakri). Saleh's initial reaction to these rallies and calls of secession has been to use government forces and police, firing a mix of tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition into large crowds (Police).

Al-Qaeda has taken full advantage of this chaotic environment in South Yemen. According to Greg Johnson, Al-Qaeda has painted a narrative amongst South Yemenis, in which the corrupt pro-west central government under Saleh and the U.S. cannot and will not cater to the South's needs. Al-Qaeda has and is continuing to make a compelling case where Islamic Law and



Al-Qaeda are the answer to South Yemen's problem (Boucek).

### **Deadlier Than Ever: the New Al-Qaeda Demonstrates Their Ambitions**

With this new ideology, leadership, and fresh recruits, Al-Qaeda in Yemen has once again become a potent force. Since the 2006 prison break, there have been attacks on oil and gas facilities in Yemen. In 2007, the chief criminal investigator in Yemen was assassinated and a suicide bomber killed several Spanish tourists. A year later, Al-Qaeda detonated two car bombs outside of the American Embassy, killing ten people (Knickmeyer).

In January 2009, Al-Qaeda branches in Saudi Arabia and Yemen united to form a regional block known as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Figure 5) (Novak). This region-wide branch had been an Al-Qaeda goal since the

1990s when Bin Laden suggested the creation of a "Gulf Battalion" (Gunaratna 188). Yet this new regional group seems to have minimal influence coming from Bin Laden; rather they are being spearheaded by Sheikh Anwar al Awlaki (Figure 4). Awlaki is an American-born Yemeni who was recruited for Al-Qaeda in the early 1990s. In addition to being the group's spiritual leader, Awlaki has utilized the Internet as a means to take his preachings global. What makes Awlaki stand out from other jihadists who have also tried to use the Internet to spread their ideology is that Awlaki specifically speaks in English. This allows him to reach a wider audience in the United States and England and help foster the growth and development of domestic terrorists. For this, Awlaki has been extremely successful. Awlaki's tapes and recordings were

found to have influenced Al-Qaeda agents involved in the 7/7 London Bombings, Toronto 18, Fort Dix Plot, Virginia Jihad Network, and Fort Hood shooting (Zimmerman). It was AQAP and Awlaki that were responsible for the notorious, failed Christmas Day 2009 attack by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (Figure 6) (Bernstein). AQAP and Awlaki have also been found responsible for the October 2010 placing of bombs aboard cargo planes destined for Chicago (Temple-Raston). This organization has also been exceptionally active in Yemen itself. In the second half of 2010 alone, AQAP took responsibility for 49 attacks against Yemeni security forces and foreign targets (AQAP).

### **The U.S. Response**

The U.S. has not taken these incidents lightly. Recently, the U.S. increased the number of Special

Forces in Yemen to over 200 and has become more aggressive in its use of predator drones (Dreazen). The U.S. has reversed its aid cuts to Yemen, and has recently been giving Yemen \$170 million in military aid and may soon be giving \$250 million (Porges). It is also important to note that President Barack Obama has approved Awlaki's name be put on a CIA hit list (despite his status as an American citizen), by which he is to be targeted by missile attack from a predator drone (Ross). The reason for the specific attention on Awlaki versus other AQAP leaders is because as Attorney General Eric Holder stated in a press conference, "He [Awlaki] would be on the same list with Bin Laden, he's up there. I don't know whether he's one, two, three, four -- I don't know. But he's certainly on the list of the people who worry me the most" (Sheridan).

In response to this new and dominant threat from AQAP, the U.S, Yemeni, and Saudi governments have acted thus far as a unified front. In March 2010, Saudi forces made sweeping arrests across the country, arresting 113 AQAP militants, including two suicide bomb teams. Some of the militants captured had been planning attacks on energy and security facilities within the Kingdom (Healy). The Yemeni government has taken credit for several air raids on AQAP. On March 14, it was reported that a Yemen air raid killed two top Al-Qaeda commanders in South Yemen (Johnston).

Paulo Coelho once wrote, “Everything that happens once can never happen again. But everything that happens twice will surely happen a third time” (184). Al-Qaeda has twice now emerged as a dominant force within Yemen and will

most likely continue to assert itself there. While the U.S. continues to hunt down Al-Qaeda leadership from the air and provide funding and training to Yemen, the question that still looms over American and Yemeni leadership is, will it be enough? There is a real and valid fear that Yemen could become a mix between a failed state like Somalia and an Al-Qaeda-controlled entity like Afghanistan used to be. If Yemen were to fall into a state of chaos, the United States’ ability to intervene or have an influence against Al-Qaeda would be greatly limited. This would represent an immediate threat to the U.S. and many of its allies. According to John Brennan, assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, AQAP, in its present state, already constitutes a “greater threat to Americans than Osama bin Laden’s group based in Pakistan”

(Shaughnessy). It is for this reason that AQAP cannot be allowed the opportunity to exert greater influence and control in Yemen.

If the central Yemeni government under Saleh were to fall, the U.S. could not directly intervene on the ground as it has in the past. Such an action would only unite the country, provide greater strength to the narrative that Al-Qaeda has been painting, and make a combustible situation worse. For example, in January 2010, a World summit composed of 21 nations was held in London to discuss all possibilities in how to handle Al-Qaeda in Yemen (UK). Initially, it was rumored that there were talks about the possibility of sending troops, either multinational or U.N. peacekeeping, into South Yemen. However, days before the conference, 150 of Yemen's most influential clerics held their own summit

and were united in signing a statement that read, "In the event of any foreign party insisting on hostilities against, an assault on, or military or security intervention in Yemen, then Islam requires all its followers to pursue jihad" (Yemen 'must resist foreign forces').

It is for this reason that the U.S. must continue to enhance its efforts of supporting the Central Yemeni government under Saleh, and do everything and anything to prevent Al-Qaeda from flourishing in Yemen. Yet conventional counterterrorism policies may not be enough to stop AQAP. Awlaki and AQAP have been able to succeed in South Yemen up to this point not because they are smarter, better equipped, or more influential than other terrorist organizations or leaders. Rather the foundations of their success lay in their ability to harness the sympathy

and support of the local communities that harbor them. Support for Al-Qaeda in Yemen has always existed and most likely will continue. However, there is a fundamental difference between Yemenites leaving the country to join the ranks of Al-Qaeda, and Al-Qaeda having its headquarters in Yemen.

### **The Future of Yemen**

It is important to note that hope is not totally lost for Yemen. The majority of the protest and anger by South Yemenites against the central government is not because of an alliance to Al-Qaeda, rather it is the opposite. Their support of Al-Qaeda has developed out of frustration with a corrupt, inefficient, and authoritative central government under Saleh that has left those in the south looking for any alternative they can find. Following the Tunisian uprising that led to the toppling of the

government, Yemen, like Egypt and Jordan, has seen massive street protest. While these protests have been calling for Saleh to step down from power, the protest leaders have recently began to take a different approach. The reasoning for this is two-fold. First, Saleh has, as a means of calming the protests, promised to not run again in the next election and to not have his son take power after him. Second, according to protest leaders like Hassan Zaid, who is the general secretary of the Haq opposition political party, there is a real fear that Yemen could fall into a state of turmoil and violence similar to that in the failed state of Somali (Cummins). There is also a deep concern by many opposition leaders like Khaled Alanesi, a high-ranking member of the National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedom, who was one of the organizers

of the protests, that “The opposition is afraid of what would happen if the regime falls. Afraid of the militant groups, Al Qaeda, the tribes and all the arms here” (Bakri). This mentality demonstrates that there is a substantial and important chunk of Yemeni society that, while opposed to the government, is moderate and trying to avoid violence and more importantly a Yemen controlled by Al-Qaeda. These leaders, above all else, are demanding greater equality, redistribution of wealth, and sweeping political and economic reforms. It is for this reason that the current Yemeni central government policies of continued budget cuts and use of force to quell the popular anger are flawed at their core. Rather, this paper is arguing that the U.S., surrounding Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia should utilize the power of the purse to encourage Saleh to institute

economic and political reforms as well as engage with southern leaders by directly bringing them into government. This is a street fight for the hearts and minds of the people of Yemen and it cannot be won by a drone in the sky.

### **Possible U.S. Counter-Terrorism Actions**

For its part, the U.S. must continue to disrupt AQAP operations as much as possible. Yet this cannot be limited in scope to foiling attacks. For as AQAP has shown that even failed attempts, like the Christmas bomb and the Cargo plane bombs, are twisted and marketed as victories from which they expand their support. The U.S. should expand its counter-terrorist operations to fight AQAP and, more specifically, Awlaki via the Web. As this paper has shown, Awlaki has taken full advantage of the Web to influence terrorist

cells globally. The U.S. must not allow Awlaki to continue to utilize the Internet in this fashion. It is the opinion of this paper that, in light of the failure of U.S. and coalition forces to kill Bin Laden, capturing or killing Awlaki will be just as difficult if not harder since the U.S. has very limited forces on the ground in Yemen. It is for this reason that the U.S. should place more emphasis on hindering Awlaki's ability to reach Jihadists around the world via the Web. While the U.S. government has already begun to work with YouTube to have Awlaki's videos removed, the results have been mixed. There is an essential problem with this cyber counter-terrorism approach the U.S. is taking. These videos usually first get online via file sharing sites to Jihadi Web forums; from there, the videos are uploaded to YouTube for wider consumption. What this amounts

to is that even in the event that the videos are removed from YouTube, they can easily be and usually are re-uploaded by a different source back on YouTube (Ungerleider). In addition, the U.S. government's approach in this cyber counter terrorism has had too narrow a focus on YouTube. According to a report from the 304<sup>th</sup> Military intelligence Battalion, Al-Qaeda has also become adept at using social networking sites, such as Twitter, to plan and carry out attacks. According to the report, Twitter is being used by Al-Qaeda in three scenarios. First, one individual or group of terrorists use Twitter to report real-time information to comrades on enemy troops movement, location, and numbers, so an ambush can be rapidly planned and executed. Second, a two-man terrorist team planning an attack with a remotely controlled bomb uses Twitter via a

mobile device to send information to a comrade holding the detonator with real-time information of the perfect time to detonate the bomb for maximum casualties. Third, Al-Qaeda operatives exploit Twitter by following posts from enemy soldiers. This information would eventually be used for hacking, identity theft, and even physical abduction (Penenberg). For this reason, this paper is arguing that more must be done to disrupt and hinder Al-Qaeda via the Web. This should be accomplished via hacking into known Al-Qaeda websites and forums, distorting information presented, adding false information, presenting erratic ideology, and using social networking sites to provide false information on U.S. troop movements and operations. By interfering with this cyber supply line from Awlaki, the U.S. would be disrupting links

to his support groups, and decreasing the appeal of Al-Qaeda to the pool of potential terrorist recruits. In addition, this strategy would help prevent the ever-growing concern of domestic terrorism.

### Conclusion

Al-Qaeda in Yemen is an organization defined by ambition and relentlessness, intelligence and ruthlessness, flexibility, and adaption. Al-Qaeda has already shown it will not abandon its position in Yemen without a fight. It is a fight in which, to this point, it has been exceptionally successful. This is because in the eyes of Al-Qaeda, Yemen, unlike many other places, is a symbolic home. However, despite all its success, Al-Qaeda cannot yet claim victory in Yemen. Nor will it as long as the U.S. has the conviction to be unyielding in its attack on Al-Qaeda. Thus, while Al-Qaeda views Yemen



as their next great fortress, for the U.S., Yemen represents an opportunity to make Yemen Al-Qaeda's final great fortress.

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# APPENDIX



Figure 1. Yemen (CIA World Factbook)



Figure 2. U.S.S. Cole after Attack (Slater)

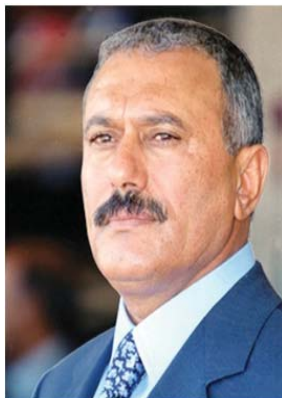


Figure 3. President Saleh of Yemen (Nagpal)

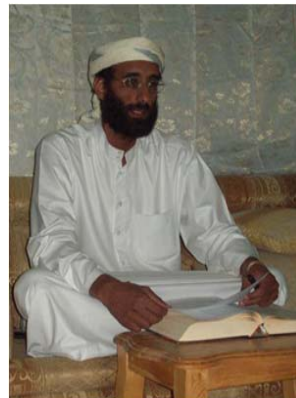


Figure 4. Anwar al-Awlaki (Sacks)



Figure 5. Founders of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Soloman)



Figure 6. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab aka the Christmas Day Bomber (Maquand).