

From Periphery to Core: Foreign Fighters and the Evolution of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

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Abstract: *From the foiled assassination attempt of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Naif, to the attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 253 over Detroit, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has emerged as one of the most provocative regional al Qaeda affiliates. Yet unlike al Qaeda in Iraq, which is comprised mainly of foreign fighters, or al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which claims tenuous links to the syndicate's leadership, this movement exhibits a more nuanced pattern of social integration and operational subordination. By grafting the foreign fighter ethos onto indigenous culture, AQAP has achieved a dynamic equilibrium between the practical realities of local insurgency and the ideological dictates of global jihad.*

On August 27, 2009, Saudi al Qaeda operative Abdullah Hassan al-Asiri detonated a suicide bomb at a Ramadan gathering attended by Deputy Saudi Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Naif. The attack was a tactical failure: Naif escaped with minor injuries.¹ The operation's political implications proved far more consequential, however. Set against the backdrop of an aggressive domestic counterterrorism campaign, al-Asiri's promise to renounce al Qaeda and pledge fealty to the Saudi Royal family raised serious questions about the Kingdom's terrorist re-education and reintegration initiatives. More significantly, it demonstrated that the recent merger between al Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni branches had produced a tenacious, reinvigorated movement committed to fomenting radical change in the heart of the Muslim world.

Formed in January 2009, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula consolidated various militant cells operating in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Many of these militants spent their formative years fighting on the *ummah's* (or community's) cultural and geographic periphery. AQAP's Yemeni *amir*, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, once served as Osama bin Laden's personal secretary in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.² His Saudi predecessors, including Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin and Saleh al-Oufi, fought in theatres as diverse as Algeria, Bosnia, and Chechnya.³ These formative experiences situate AQAP's leadership within the wider foreign fighter phenomenon. Yet unlike their Arab brethren operating in distant, predominantly non-Arab regions, these militants remain grounded in their own indigenous social and political environments.

¹ "Prince Muhammad escapes assassination attempt," *Arab News* (Riyadh), August 28, 2009.

² Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, "Exclusive: A U.S. Intelligence Breakthrough in the Persian Gulf?" *Newsweek*, February 14, 2010.

³ Rob L. Wanger, "Bitter School Dropout Who Became a Flamboyant Killer," *Saudi Gazette* (Riyadh), June 20, 2004.

This distinction is both analytically and strategically significant. As a general rule, al Qaeda colonizes local conflicts by infiltrating indigenous societies and inciting foreign military intervention through terrorist provocations.⁴ The September 11, 2001 attacks were a case in point. According to documents seized from an al Qaeda office in Kabul, the primary purpose of this provocation was to lure the United States into a protracted war with the Taliban and its foreign *jihadi* allies.⁵ By provoking military retaliation, bin Laden hoped to “build universal solidarity among Muslims in reaction to the victimisation and suffering of their Afghan brothers.”⁶

The cycle of provocation and reprisal is a central element in al Qaeda’s social and political mobilization strategy. By exploiting “discontent and alienation across multiple countries,” it seeks to aggregate “the effects of multiple grass-roots actors [...] into a mass movement with global reach.”⁷ Such aggregation is not inevitable, however. Coalition forces in Iraq undermined al Qaeda’s influence by recognizing and exploiting tensions between indigenous insurgents and foreign fighters.⁸ U.S. and Philippine troops quelled the Muslim rebellion in Mindanao by adopting different approaches towards the ethno-nationalist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and *salafi-jihadi* movements like Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).⁹ Finally, NATO officials in Afghanistan have long sought to exploit the “natural tensions” between al Qaeda and the Taliban.¹⁰ In each instance, kinship networks, tribal affiliations, and customary practices can create friction between indigenous insurgents and foreign fighters. Because local militants fight “principally to be left alone,” they may resent—and, thus, ultimately resist—al Qaeda’s attempts to co-opt their struggles and reshape their societies.¹¹

AQAP’s operations in Yemen (and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia) are an important exception to this rule. Tempered by foreign wars, its leaders view their objectives in global, rather than exclusively local or national terms.¹² Driven by *salafi-jihadi* doctrine, they espouse an “exclusive conservatism” that tolerates neither derogation nor dissent.¹³ Grounded in their own society and culture, they navigate complex social and political dynamics with native fluency. In short, AQAP possesses the same attributes and agenda as de-territorialized *jihadi* syndicates without facing the same social and cultural constraints. By grafting the foreign fighter ethos onto indigenous culture, it has achieved a dynamic equilibrium between the practical realities of local insurgency and the doctrinal dictates of global jihad.

⁴ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 35.

⁵ Alan Cullison, “Inside Al-Qaeda’s Hard Drive,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2004, p. 58.

⁶ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, trans. A. Roberts, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 376.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 292.

⁸ David Kilcullen, “Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt,” *Small Wars Journal*, August 29, 2007, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/>.

⁹ David Maxwell, *Commander’s Summary of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines, 2006-2007*, Copy on File with Author.

¹⁰ Anard Gopal, “Bid to split the Taliban, Al-Qaeda,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 16, 2008.

¹¹ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p. xiv.

¹² Nasir al-Bahri, “Al-Qaeda from Within,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), March 20, 2005.

¹³ Kepel, p. 51.

This article examines that equilibrium in three stages. First, it briefly describes AQAP's Yemeni precursors, including their role in the Yemeni Civil War and subsequent rejection of the Yemeni regime. Second, it discusses the low-level insurrection waged by al Qaeda cells and sympathizers in Saudi Arabia over the last decade. Third, it examines AQAP's current campaign against the Saudi and Yemeni regimes, together with the movement's growing emphasis on out-of-area operations. The article concludes by discussing how AQAP exploits Yemen's fragmented society and deteriorating condition in order to promote its local and global objectives.

Yemeni Precursors

Like other contemporary *salafi-jihadi* movements, AQAP's national precursors trace their roots to Soviet-Afghan War. Tempered by the rigors of modern warfare, these so-called "wandering *mujahedeen*" developed experience with guerrilla tactics, modern communications, and logistical planning.¹⁴ Collaboration across national groups also had a transformative effect, with militants coming to view their actions in global, rather than exclusively local or national terms. As Palestinian jurist and *jihadi* propagandist Abdullah Azzam observed, the Afghan crucible "changed the tide of battle, from an Islamic battle of one country, to an Islamic World *Jihad* movement, in which all races participated and all colors, languages, and cultures met."¹⁵

The 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan imbued these militants with profound confidence in their own moral and historical significance. Convinced that "they alone had brought the Soviet empire to its knees, these groups now felt themselves fully capable of bringing down other infidels in power [...]"¹⁶ Their ambitions manifested in dramatically different contexts, however. Some *jihadis* adopted expeditionary agendas, shifting their attention to new fault line conflicts in Tajikistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. Notable among them was Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi-born militant active in the Chechen separatist struggle. Operating independently from the al Qaeda network, al-Khattab funnelled foreign fighters into the North Caucasus with the goal of radicalizing the population and liberating the region.¹⁷

Other Afghan Arabs focused on domestic insurrection. Enraged by the Algerian government's decision to void the parliamentary elections in 1991, organizations like the Armed Islamic Group (*La Groupe Islamique Armé*, or GIA) mounted a vicious insurgency aimed at deposing the secular regime and imposing *shari'ah*, or Islamic law. Populated by radical *Salafis* who equated political pluralism with apostasy, GIA targeted nationalists and moderate Islamists with equal vigour.¹⁸ They also sought financial assistance from like-

¹⁴ Bureau of Intelligence & Research, "The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous," *Weekend Edition* (Washington: U.S. Department of State, Aug. 21-22 1993), p. 1-2.

¹⁵ Abdullah Azzam, *Martyrs: The Building Blocks of Nations*, at http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/azzam_martyrs.htm.

¹⁶ Kepel, *Jihad*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Mustafa Hamid, "The Story of the Afghan Arabs: From the Enter to Afghanistan to the Final Exodus with the Taliban," *Asbarq Al-Ansat* (London), December 9, 2004.

¹⁸ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria," *Rationality and Society* 11, no. 3 (1999), pp. 243-285.

minded militants, accepting \$40,000 in seed money from Osama bin Laden's nascent al Qaeda movement in 1993.¹⁹

These two trends—foreign expedition and domestic insurrection—converged in the 1994 Yemeni Civil War. Viewed symbolically, the clash between the nominally Islamist north and the former Communist south resonated with narratives constructed during the Soviet-Afghan War. Infuriated by Saudi Arabia's support for the Southern Yemeni Socialists led by Haydar Abu Bakr Al-Attas, Osama bin Laden dispatched funds and fighters from his Sudanese training camps to bolster the Northern forces.²⁰ Yemeni Afghan War veterans mobilized on a domestic basis as well, with former mujahedeen commanders like Zayn al-Abadin al-Mihdhar forming private militias to crush the southern secessionists. Leading Islamist clerics like Abd al-Majid al-Zindani also joined the fray, likening the Socialists to the pagan Quraysh tribes that once threatened the Prophet Mohammed in Mecca.²¹

This collaboration proved short-lived. As a pan-Arab nationalist and former ally of Iraq's Ba'athist dictator Saddam Hussein,²² Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh had little passion for the Afghan Arabs' *Salafi* ideology and pan-Islamist impulses. The Afghan Arabs, in turn, grew suspicious of the Zaydi *Shi'a* clique that dominated Yemen's ruling General Congress Party (GPC). In 1996, al-Mihdhar's self-styled Aden-Abyan Islamic Army (AAIA) broke with the government following Saleh's refusal to implement *shari'ah*. Two years later, it released a statement pledging to depose the regime, establish an Islamic state, and purge foreign influences from Yemeni society.²³

Al-Mihdhar's arrest and October 1999 execution did little to curb the burgeoning threat. Within a year, AAIA was implicated in the failed January 2000 attack on the *U.S.S. The Sullivans* and the successful October 2000 bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole*.²⁴ The October 6, 2002 terrorist attack on the French oil tanker *MV Limburg* followed the same operational template, with an explosive-laden dingy killing one sailor and causing extensive economic and environmental damage.²⁵ With Osama bin Laden either praising or claiming these attacks, Western policymakers saw few meaningful distinctions between the indigenous AAIA and its foreign al Qaeda allies. Yemeni officials took a more passive approach, however. Though active in suppressing militants who challenged their own authority, the Political Security Organization (PSO) and other security services seemed unwilling to antagonize Yemen's influential Islamist and *Salafist* communities by aligning itself too closely with Western interests.

September 11, 2001 swiftly altered this equation. In November 2002, a U.S. drone struck senior Yemeni al Qaeda commander Abu Ali al-Harithi and five other suspected

¹⁹ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 217.

²⁰ Michael Scheuer, *Though Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam and the Future of America* (Dulles: Brassey's, 2003), p. 139.

²¹ Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, *The Duty of the Islamic Nation Towards the Battle* (Recording), June 1, 1994.

²² Judith Evans, "Gulf aid may not be enough to bring Yemen back from the brink," *The Times* (London), October 10, 2009.

²³ Jonathan Schanzer, 'Yemen's War on Terror', *Orbis*, 48, no. 3 (Summer 2004), pp. 523-524.

²⁴ Gregory Johnson, "The Resiliency of Yemen's Aden-Abyan Islamic Army," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 14 (July 13, 2006).

²⁵ "Yemen ship attack 'was terrorism,'" *BBC News*, October 13, 2002.

militants travelling in a car south of Sana'a.²⁶ One year later, Yemeni security forces arrested al-Harithi's deputy, Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, convicting him and 13 lower-level operatives on charges stemming from the *Cole* and *Lumburg* bombings. These measures undermined AAIA and other militant cells, disrupting al Qaeda's local networks and degrading its capacity to mount new terrorist strikes. With Yemen's most prominent militants killed, captured, or forced into hiding, Sana'a soon diverted both its attention and forces to suppressing a rebellion led by dissident *Shi'a* cleric Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi in the north. Washington followed suit, focusing less on the foreign fighters sheltering in Yemen and more on the cadres colonizing the burgeoning Iraqi insurgency.²⁷

Saudi Insurgents

Al Qaeda's diminished influence in Yemen coincided with the rise of new cells in neighboring Saudi Arabia. Like their counterparts to the south, these militants originated from informal networks comprised of radical sympathizers. Foremost among them was al Qaeda strategist Yusef al-Ayeri, who viewed the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as an opportunity to mobilize domestic sentiment against the Saudi Royal family. Coordinating with al Qaeda's exiled leadership, al-Ayeri developed and propagated a tactical model for Iraqi insurgents through his website, *al-Nida*.²⁸ He also organized his own forces, creating five covert cells in a bid to purge apostates and infidels from the birthplace of Islam.

The ensuing campaign bore all the hallmarks of a low-level insurrection. On May 12, 2003, militants struck three residential compounds housing Westerners in Riyadh, killing 35 people and wounding 160.²⁹ Al Qaeda's leadership ultimately claimed responsibility for the attacks, releasing the suicide bombers' videotaped wills through its *al-Sahab* media center some six months later.³⁰ On June 14, 2003, militants in the holy city of Mecca opened fire on Saudi police officers after refusing to comply with a routine traffic stop. Culminating with the seizure of a militant safe house and more than 70 improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the skirmish killed five police and two civilians in the middle-class al-Khaldiya neighborhood, located just three miles from the Grand Mosque.³¹

Al-Ayeri's death, in a May 31, 2003 gun battle with Saudi security forces, produced no significant change in either the frequency or intensity of terrorist attacks. On April 21, 2004, for example, militants detonated two car bombs outside the Saudi national police

²⁶ John Esterbrook, "Lakawanna 6 Link to Yemen Killings? Victim of CIA Airstrike Was Tied to Alleged Terror Cell," *CBS News*, November 9, 2002, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/11/04/attack/main527971.shtml>

²⁷ Dan Murphy, "In Iraq, a Clear-Cut bin Laden-Zarqawi Alliance," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 31, 2004.

²⁸ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 235.

²⁹ Turki al-Saheil, "Al-Qaeda Sought to Replicate 9/11 Attack in 2003 Riyadh Bombings," *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), June 21, 2020.

³⁰ Gabriel Weisman, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2006), pp. 45 & 62.

³¹ Essam al-Ghalbi, "Terror Crackdown in Makkah," *Arab News* (Riyadh), June 16, 2003.

headquarters in Riyadh, killing five and injuring 148.³² Two weeks later, militants infiltrated a petrochemical plant in the Red Sea port of Yanbu' al-Bahr and killed seven civilians, including six Western engineers.³³

The violence continued well into the following year. Among the more notable incidents was the May 29, 2004 raid on the Oasis residential compound in the Persian Gulf city of Khobar. Seizing 41 hostages, the perpetrators executed 19 foreigners before Saudi security forces brought the siege to an end.³⁴ Also notable was the June 13, 2004 abduction of Lockheed Martin contractor Paul Johnson, who was beheaded five days later. As in Yemen, these operations tended to emphasize foreign—over indigenous—targets. Beginning with the Yanbu hostage siege and culminating with the storming of the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah some seven months later, Saudi cells targeted eight Western businessmen for assassination. On one level, this emphasis on sensational violence reflected an attempt to offer potential al Qaeda recruits “what they lack[ed]—power over life and death, a mission to rid the world of enemies, and violence as the path to deliverance.”³⁵ In this sense, targeting foreigners reflected a desire to situate their local struggle within the broader universe of al Qaeda's global *jihad*.

Equally important, however, was the Saudi cell's conflation of the near and far enemies. Casting themselves as the guardians of Islam's two holy places, the Saudi cells saw the Prophet's admonition that there be only one faith in Arabia as an immutable and irrevocable commandment. This religious obligation also had a practical dimension, however. Because the Saudi Royal family depended on Western markets, technology, and military assistance to maintain its preeminence, purging foreign infidels was a necessary precondition for toppling the allegedly apostate regime. The resulting emphasis on the so-called “far” enemy closely mirrored al Qaeda's own strategy, which “primarily targets the West and its symbols.”³⁶ By pursuing global targets within their own local theatre, Saudi Arabia's indigenous militants harmonized their global outlook and local objectives with the doctrines espoused by the broader foreign fighter movement.

The insurgency in neighboring Iraq possessed an equally potent influence. Although Saudi Arabia's conservative *Wahhabis* had little affection for Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime, the invasion of a neighboring Muslim country reanimated many of the same anti-imperial narratives that inspired Arab intervention in the Soviet-Afghan War more than two decades earlier. These conditions created a fertile environment for fundraising and recruiting. Inspired by Iraqi efforts to resist Western domination, Saudi Arabia's local al Qaeda analogues came to view the presence of Western defense contractors, oil companies, and mass media on their own soil in substantially similar terms.

³² Press Release, “Saudi Ambassador Responds to Terrorist Act,” (Washington: Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, April 21, 2004).

³³ K.S. Ramkumar, “Memorial Service in Houston for Slain Yambu Engineers,” *Arab News* (Riyadh), May 6, 2004.

³⁴ Abdul Hameed Bakier, “Lessons from al-Qaeda's Attack on the Khobar Compound,” *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 16, (August 11, 2006).

³⁵ Daniel Kimmage, “Al-Qaida's Next Action Hero: An inside account of the Khobar assault,” *Slate.com*, June 16, 2004.

³⁶ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 290.

Despite these outward similarities, this new generation of Saudi *jihadis* differed from their Afghan Arab predecessors in two key respects. First, their ideological and political agenda place them in direct conflict with the Saudi state and clerical hierarchy. Having cast local political and religious authorities as unredeemable apostates, Saudi Arabia's al Qaeda analogues set themselves against the institutional elite on which their more mainstream Afghan Arab predecessors once relied. The second difference lay in their socio-economic background. Where Afghan Arabs like Osama bin Laden had some modicum of religious education, those recruited by Al-Ayari's successors reportedly lacked even a rudimentary understanding of Islamic doctrine.³⁷ They also spent profusely, allegedly diverting funds from a charity for imprisoned Iraqis to underwrite their insurgent activities and lavish personal lifestyles.³⁸

Unlike their Yemeni neighbors, the Saudi Royal Family responded to these al Qaeda cells aggressively and systematically. Beginning in February 2003, Saudi officials indicted 90 individuals for alleged ties to al Qaeda and opened another 250 investigations. Over the ensuing months, Interior Ministry forces began raiding safe houses, seizing weapons caches, and arresting dozens of suspected al Qaeda sympathizers. The regime also strengthened its oversight of the religious establishment, arresting three clerics who had publicly endorsed the May 2003 Riyadh compound bombings and directing religious charities to suspend their foreign operations until new financial oversight mechanisms were instituted.³⁹

Counter-radicalization initiatives complemented this strategy. Cognizant of high unemployment and falling per-capita GDP, the Kingdom implemented a series of educational and employment programs aimed at creating new opportunity structures for Saudi youth. They also developed remedial measures designed to reeducate and rehabilitate convicted militants. Social marginalization was a key element in this strategy. By characterizing al Qaeda's *jihad* as a criminal rather than military enterprise, the regime undermined its romantic appeal while aggressively stigmatizing membership in the movement. Traditional authorities played a central role in this process, with Saudi officials using family and tribal networks to curb terrorist recidivism by making them vicariously liable for the violence perpetrated by their wayward sons and daughters.

None of these measures were sufficient by themselves, to be sure. Yet by late 2005 and early 2006, the combination of an aggressive counterterrorism campaign and comprehensive counter-radicalization programs helped produce a gradual yet tangible diminution in domestic terrorism. Assassinations, arrests, and eroding public support all had an appreciable effect on local al Qaeda cells, driving many militants over the border into neighboring Yemen.

Growing Saudi participation in the Iraqi insurgency may also have been a factor, however. According to one intelligence estimate, Saudis constituted as much as 41 percent of

³⁷ Mahmoud Ahmad, "Al-Qaeda Operatives are an Ignorant Lot, Say Former Members," *Arab News* (Riyadh), October 3, 2004.

³⁸ "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Portray Captured al-Qaeda Militants in a Humiliating Light," *Associated Press*, September 10, 2004.

³⁹ Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, *Saudi Counter Terrorism Efforts: The Changing Paramilitary and Domestic Security Apparatus* (Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2005), p. 12.

the foreign fighters active in Iraq after August 2006.⁴⁰ With government surveillance constraining militant activity at home, aspiring *jihadis* appear to have redirected their efforts towards the more immediate and less stigmatized struggle just over the northern border. The result was an appreciable decline in violence within the Kingdom. By 2008, some analysts described al Qaeda's Saudi cells as a loosely organized and largely ineffectual group of "sympathizers, propagandists, recruiters, and fundraisers focused [primarily] on foreign jihad."⁴¹

It would be a mistake to minimize these activities, however. In March 2010, Saudi officials arrested Hayla al-Qusayir, the 40-year-old widow of slain militant Mohammed Salaiman al-Wakil, for funneling some \$293,000 in charitable donations to al Qaeda operatives in Yemen.⁴² Combined with the assassination attempt on Prince Naif the previous year, these incidents illuminate a small, tenacious network capable of concealing its activities and exploiting the local environment. Nonetheless, the combination of counterterrorism and counter-radicalization had a restraining effect on local al Qaeda sympathizers, isolating them within the Kingdom's more conservative communities and compelling them to conceal their schemes as charitable or religious activities. It also encouraged migration to more permissive operating environments. Constrained by a government crackdown at home and deterred by growing hostility toward foreign fighters in Iraq, prominent Saudi militants sought sanctuary in Yemen, when a newly reconstituted al Qaeda cell welcomed them as allies.

Sanctuary and Solidarity

The new Yemeni cell emerged following the February 2006 escape of 23 suspected al Qaeda operatives from a high-security prison near Sana'a.⁴³ Younger, more professional, and more overtly global in their outlook, this cohort embodied the foreign fighter ethos. The 2009 merger with Saudi militants further strengthened this outlook, with former Guantanamo Bay detainees like Said Ali al-Shihri, Mohamed Atiq Awayd al-Harbi, and Ibrahim Suleiman al-Rubaysh reinforcing the group's place within the constellation of *salafi-jihadi* syndicates. Unlike their predecessors in AAIA, however, this new cadre was younger, more professional, and more overtly global in their outlook.⁴⁴ And unlike al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) it focused on engaging, rather than dominating, indigenous tribal structures. The result was a more subtle, sophisticated strategy—one aimed at securing a viable sanctuary while simultaneously exploiting Yemen's endemic internal divisions.

That strategy involved three key elements. The first was *integration*. Anxious to avoid the social and political marginalization suffered by Saudi al Qaeda cells, AQAP's Yemeni militants actively embraced and exploited their tribal affiliations. Their Saudi counterparts

⁴⁰ Richard A. Oppel, Jr., "Foreign Fighters in Iraq are Tied to Allies of U.S.," *New York Times*, November 22, 2007.

⁴¹ Michal Knights, "The Current State of Al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no 10 (September 2008), p. 7.

⁴² Abdullah al-Oraifij, "Haila al-Quasayyer Funded Al-Qaeda, Recruited Women," *Saudi Gazette* (Riyadh), June 5, 2010.

⁴³ Sudarsan Raghavan, "Al-Qaeda group in Yemen gaining prominence," *Washington Post*, December 28, 2009.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

adopted a similar approach, marrying Yemeni wives in a bid to weave themselves into indigenous social and political structures.⁴⁵ These relationships gave a measure of protection, allowing AQAP to establish safe houses and training facilities in the southern Abyan and Shabwah governorates. It also provided a basis for influencing Yemen's internal political dynamics, albeit indirectly. With the government in Sana'a depending on tribal leaders to extend and enforce its writ, AQAP's gradual infiltration of indigenous tribal structures contributed to the erosion of centralized authority and the creation of ungoverned spaces in which it and its allies could thrive.

The second element was *accommodation*. Rather than engaging directly in Yemen's internal conflicts, as Osama bin Laden had done in the Afghan Civil War, AQAP instead works to amplify, aggregate, and redirect indigenous grievances in a manner that benefits its own near- and long-term objectives. This strategy involves a surprising measure of tolerance for the Yemeni Social Party and its southern secessionist allies. Starting in 2007, this so-called "Southern Movement" organized demonstrations and other forms of civil disobedience to protest Sana'a's policies toward the six provinces that once comprised the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). By 2008, these protests grew increasingly violent; with government security forces killing and wounding scores of protestors. By 2009, armed factions within the Southern Movement were responding in kind, with sporadic gun battles breaking out in cities and towns across the south.

The Southern Movement's low-level insurrection reanimates many narratives and grievances from the 1994 Yemeni Civil War. Unlike the prior conflict, the Saudi government stepped up bilateral cooperation with Ali Abdullah Saleh's beleaguered regime in a bid to forestall Yemen's possible collapse and, by extension, the like flow of Yemeni migrants into Saudi territory. AQAP has also realigned its interests, with al-Wuhayshi calling for the south's secession and the creation of an Islamic state in May 2009.⁴⁶ More significantly, AQAP has minimized al Qaeda's fervent condemnation of Socialism in a bid to persuade the Southern Movement to embrace the *salafi-jibadi* model.⁴⁷ This posture is more opportunistic than substantive, to be sure. Nonetheless, it demonstrates a subtle, nuanced strategy grounded in a rich awareness of Yemen's indigenous dynamics.

AQAP's posture towards Yemen's indigenous *Shi'a* community reflects a similar degree of strategic and rhetorical nuance. Eager to aggregate indigenous opposition to Saleh's regime, it emphasized the historical and political commonalities between Sunni Islam and the Shi'a insurgents driving the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen.⁴⁸ This approach indicates an outright rejection of AQI's strategy, which fomented intra-Muslim sectarian conflict in a bid to destabilize the Iraqi state and create a safe haven for *Sunni* militancy.⁴⁹ This posture is more opportunistic than substantive. Indeed, there is no evidence that AQAP abandoned its radical Salafi particularism in the hope of making common cause with

⁴⁵ "Somalia insurgents threaten to join the new front," *Australian*, January 4, 2010.

⁴⁶ Arafar Madayash and Sawsan Abu-Husain, "Al-Qaeda Call for Islamic State in Southern Yemen," *Asarq al-Awsat* (London), May 14, 2009.

⁴⁷ "The Southern Issue: Secession or Unity. Is there another Option?" *Sada al-Malahim* (Yemen), May 13, 2010.

⁴⁸ Abu'l-Bara'a' al-Sana'i'ani, "The Houtis are Rafidis in the Guise of the Zaydis," *Sada al-Malahim* (Yemen) (February 12, 2010).

⁴⁹ Al-Zarqawi, *Letter to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri*, trans. Coalition Provisional Authority (February 2004), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2004/02/040212-al-zarqawi.htm>.

the Houthis. Instead, its willingness to accommodate numerous sources of indigenous views demonstrates a more subtle strategy—one grounded in an acute awareness of Yemen’s local dynamics and a fresh memory of AQI’s failure in neighboring Iraq. The third element was *provocation*. Beginning in 2007, AQAP staged a series of high-profile attacks on foreign tourists in Yemen. On July 2, 2007, militants detonated a car bomb in Mareb governorate, killing eight Spanish tourists and their Yemeni drivers.⁵⁰ On January 18, 2008, the syndicate ambushed fifteen Belgian tourists travelling in the Hadhramaut, killing two and injuring several others.⁵¹ The following March, a suicide bomber killed four South Korean tourists and injured three more while posing for photographs on a hill overlooking the historic walled city of Shibam.⁵² Suicide bombers struck in Sana’a just days later, targeting a convoy carrying South Korean investigators and the deceased tourists’ families.⁵³

AQAP also launched a campaign against government targets, beginning with a motor barrage on the U.S. Embassy in Sana’a on March 2008, followed by a highly coordinated suicide attack on the Embassy just six months later.⁵⁴ On April 26, 2010, the syndicate struck a convoy carrying British ambassador Tim Torlot, who narrowly survived the assassination attempt.⁵⁵ By June 2010, AQAP cadres were sufficiently strong to attack the PSO headquarters in Aden, killing ten security personnel in a successful operation to free captured comrades.⁵⁶ Two months later, the movement sparked a new wave of violence by issuing a list targeting 54 PSO, Interior Ministry, and Military Intelligence officers in Abyan province for execution.⁵⁷

This transition toward open conflict with the Yemeni government accompanied a deliberate attempt to internationalize AQAP’s operations. This included efforts to recruit Somali militants, who allegedly fought alongside its own cadres during the Yemeni September 2010 offensive against militant strongholds in Shabwah governorate.⁵⁸ With Somalia’s radical al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen movement pledging to support AQAP’s struggle, the prospects for widening instability in the Horn of Africa soon emerged.⁵⁹ Equally significant, however, were AQAP’s efforts to renew direct strikes on the U.S. homeland. Chief among them was the failed bombing of Northwest Flight 253 over Detroit on December 25, 2009. By recruiting and radicalizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian student with no previous record of terrorist activity, AQAP strategists successfully

⁵⁰ “Yemeni Tourist Bombers Killed,” *BBC News*, August 8, 2007.

⁵¹ Baudouin Loos, “Deux Beleges tuées au Yémen,” *Le Soir* (Brussels), January 18, 2008.

⁵² “Tourists dies in Yemen explosion,” *BBC News*, March 15, 2009.

⁵³ “Fresh attack on Koreans in Yemen,” *BBC News*, March 18, 2009.

⁵⁴ Ian Black, “Yemeni police arrest 19 after deadly suicide bomb attack on U.S. Embassy,” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2008.

⁵⁵ “UK Envoy in Yemen Escapes ‘Suicide Bomb,’” *BBC News*, April 26, 2010.

⁵⁶ “Yemen Gunmen in Deadly Raid on Aden Security Services HQ,” *BBC News*, June 19, 2010.

⁵⁷ “Ghamda al-Yusifi, “Report on al-Qaida Threat to Assassinate 54 Yemeni Security Officials,” *Elaph.com* (Dubai), September 20, 2010.

⁵⁸ Nassar Arrabyee, “Four al-Qaeda Fighters Killed As Army Starts All Out Attack in al-Huta,” *Yemen Observer* (Sana’a), September 25, 2010.

⁵⁹ Ibrahim Mohamed, “Al-Shabaab urges Muslims to support Yemeni Qaeda,” *Reuters* (London), January 1, 2010.

circumvented the U.S. airline passenger screening regime.⁶⁰ Less than a year later, the syndicate launched a second attack, shipping package bombs intended to detonate aboard commercial cargo jets flying over the United States.⁶¹

These out-of-area operations had three interrelated objectives. The first was to signal AQAP's growing standing within the global *salafi-jihadi* movement. Combined with an aggressive online propaganda campaign by U.S.-born Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, the attacks cast AQAP as a pre-eminent threat to U.S. national security.⁶² The second was arguably to disrupt airborne commerce and impose higher security costs—a measure consistent with Osama bin Laden's longstanding emphasis on economic attrition.⁶³ Most significant, however, was the goal of provoking foreign military intervention in Yemen. Had Abdulmutallab's mission succeeded, public pressure for military retaliation could have drawn U.S. forces into yet another fractious and failing state. In this sense, AQAP's actions reflect the same basic strategy of provocation, reprisal, and consolidation that animated the September 11th attacks nearly a decade ago.

Crisis and Collapse

To date, Western intervention in Yemen has focused primarily on the provision of foreign aid. Days after the failed attack on Northwest Flight 253, the Obama administration promised to double civilian and military assistance to President Saleh's government.⁶⁴ British Prime Minister Gordon Brown swiftly followed suit, convening a special ministerial meeting on January 28, 2010 to discuss a new multilateral assistance regime. The Yemeni government also seized on the opportunity, requesting some \$44 billion in foreign assistance with the aim of curbing radical Islamic militancy through economic and social development.⁶⁵

This link between economic malaise and Islamic militancy is credible. With per-capita GDP at \$2,500, Yemen remains one of the poorest countries in the Muslim world.⁶⁶ Unemployment stands at thirty-four percent.⁶⁷ Forty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty line.⁶⁸ At least sixty percent is below age twenty-five.⁶⁹ A looming ecological crisis compounds the misery. Despite falling water tables and a rapidly rising population, as much as 60 percent of the country's potable water is currently used to

⁶⁰ Andrew Johnson and Emily Dugan, "Wealthy, quiet, unassuming: the Christmas Day bomb suspect," *Independent* (London), December 27, 2009.

⁶¹ Mark Mazzetti and Robert F. Worth "U.S. Sees Complexity of Bombs as Link to Al-Qaeda," *New York Times*, October 30, 2010.

⁶² Cameron Barr, "Obama's Depiction of al-Qaeda Differs from Aides," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2010.

⁶³ Osama bin Laden, "Full Transcript of Osama bin Laden's Speech," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha) November 1, 2004.

⁶⁴ Anna Fifield and Andrew England, "U.S. Warned over military aid to Yemen," *Financial Times*, January 6, 2010.

⁶⁵ Mahmoud Assamiee, "Yemen asks for USD 44 billion from Friends of Yemen," *Yemen Times* (Sana'a), April 6, 2010.

⁶⁶ "Yemen: Country Profile," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), March 3, 2010, available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/09/200891792235256194.html>

⁶⁷ Assamiee, "Yemen asks for USD 44 billion from Friends of Yemen."

⁶⁸ "Yemen: Country Profile," *Al-Jazeera*.

⁶⁹ "FM meets foreign journalists," *Saba* (Sana'a), April 10, 2010.

cultivate *qat*, a narcotic plant ubiquitous in Yemeni homes and markets.⁷⁰ With national oil revenues falling by 50 percent since 2008,⁷¹ Saleh's government arguably lacks the means to mend Yemen's fraying social fabric, much less maintain the complex patronage networks that sustain his increasingly fragile regime.

Yemen's weakness is not merely a matter of economic development, however. From the Houthi rebellion in the north to the simmering secessionist insurrection in the south, Yemen's internal conflicts have gradually eroded the state's authority, legitimacy and, consequently, its capacity to act. The same is true for recent anti-government protests in Sana'a, Aden, and other cities. Although Yemen's fragmented political opposition has not yet produced the transformative changes witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt, its ability to disrupt and discredit Saleh's regime has reinforced many of the fault lines already evident in Yemeni society. Thus the more Saleh's government contends with internal instability, the less it can address the other sources of domestic disorder. And the longer that disorder persists, the more it empowers AQAP.

These dynamics empower tribal leaders at the expense of the central government. To the extent that national governance becomes intolerable or ineffectual, traditional social and political structures will invariably fill the void. They also create a permissive environment for movements like AQAP. So long as Yemen's internal divisions persist, they preserve the ungoverned space susceptible to colonization by transnational terrorist syndicates and their indigenous allies. Not surprisingly, these conditions have invited popular comparisons with Afghanistan, Somalia, and other failed states. With an estimated 9.9 million small arms circulating within a population of only 23 million, there is no shortage of speculation regarding Yemen's possible collapse.⁷²

This possibility is significant for two reasons. First, the collapse of civil order in Yemen is consistent with al Qaeda's desire for an interior base of operations in the Sunni Arab heartland. Iraq is no longer a viable option, thanks in large measure to AQI's alienation of local Sunni tribes and the subsequent realignment of indigenous insurgents against foreign fighters. Second, Yemen presents few of the barriers that frustrate Arab militants operating on the *ummah's* cultural and geographic periphery. Unlike foreign fighters in Chechnya, Xingjian, or even Afghanistan, AQAP operates in own socio-political terrain.

These conditions have no equivalent in the wider Muslim world. Although indigenous militants in distant theatres may adopt al Qaeda's ideological outlook and operational template, al Qaeda's uprooted nature makes it difficult for foreign fighters "to establish a social and political basis among Muslim populations where they do not benefit from the support [...] of indigenous contractors."⁷³ More significantly, they must tailor their agenda and approach to a cultural environment that is not their own. In this sense, AQAP is uniquely positioned to exploit local conditions in Yemen for regional and perhaps even global ends. By imbuing indigenous networks with the foreign fighter ethos, the syndicate

⁷⁰ Mahmoud Assamiee, "Water crisis threatens Yemen," *Saba* (Sana'a), May 4, 2010.

⁷¹ Ali Saeed, "Yemen introduces 20 investment opportunities in oil and minerals," *Yemen Times* (Sana'a), October 21, 2010.

⁷² "Yemen: Small arms sales heading underground," *IRIN*, February 14, 2010.

⁷³ Roy, pp. 294-295.

could ultimately lay the foundation for an authentic, self-sustaining *salafi-jihadi* campaign at the heart of the Muslim world.