

AN OLD THREAT LEFT IN THE SHADOWS OF ISIS – AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

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Abstract: *Both proud of frightening pasts that have witnessed successful terrorist attacks, al-Qaeda in Yemen and al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia decided in 2009 to join their forces and merge under one name “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” (AQAP) and under one leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi. This step seems to have foreseen the perfect context that was to be created by the Arabic Awakening and by the strong comeback of ISIS. Although its leader, al-Wuhayshi, was killed in 2015, the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remains an important threat to the security of the region although its activity has remained in the shadow of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The bond or rivalry between AQAP and ISIS was observed in the Charlie Hebdo attacks that were claimed by both organizations as two of the perpetrators had been in contact with ISIS and the other one had received training at an AQAP camp. Since then, the two organizations have not claimed any shared attack in the West, but their rivalry might motivate them to support terrorist activity in Europe just to prove their strengths to each other and to the Western powers. The paper addresses a matter relating to terrorism, but it is moving our attention from extremely common elements in the public space like ISIS to less known terrorist organizations, able to generate the future humanitarian crises.*

Keywords: *terrorism; security; threat; al-Qaeda; ISIS*

1. INTRODUCTION

AQAP and ISIS, branches of the same parent organization – al Qaeda, have reinvented themselves in the struggle to survive and conquer the territory and the hearts of the communities in the regions where they operate. Some would use Sageman’s (2016) words and call the two organizations incarnations of a new wave of terrorism: the global neo-jihad. In fact, an analysis of the roots and evolution of the two proves the fact that they have more in common than they agree upon, and they both came up as consequences of Western’s unfortunate decisions regarding the region. This papers aims to address a second face of today’s terrorism and a brother of ISIS that has remained in the shadows of the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate in the past years. AL-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has not been paid as much attention and importance from the media, but it has the power to generate the future humanitarian crisis and to continue a new wave of Jihad started by ISIS.

2. THE ROOTS, FORMATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF AQAP

2.1. Formation and roots. In 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al Qaeda (AQ) decided to

merge in Yemen into one organization called Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This decision came as a consequence of Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism efforts that drove AQ’s Saudi branch across the Yemeni border (Shae’e, 2010). The leadership of this new organization was impersonated by the charismatic figure of the group’s amir - Nasir al-Wuhayshi¹, and by the military commander Qasim al-Raymi. The co-founders are veteran extremist leaders of the parent al-Qaeda.

Although officially formed in 2009, AQAP’s roots reach back to the mujahideen who left Afghanistan and resettled in Yemen back in 1990. One of these mujahideen is Osama bin Laden who was not accepted back by his country and, together with a group of foreign Afghan veterans, resettled in Yemen (Koehler-Derrick, 2011:18-22). Bin Laden began training and financing jihadists in the country in the early 1990s, and formed a militant group called Islamic Jihad in Yemen, which lasted from 1990 until 1994 and was a predecessor to AQAP (CFR Staff, 2011).

The news of a massive jailbreak from a Yemeni prison in early February 2006, that granted

¹ He is now-deceased deputy amir Sa’id al-Shahri.

freedom to 23 Islamic militants (Greg Johnsen, *The Last Refuge*), only later proved to reach the same results as al-Baghdadi's break into several prisons in Iraq had for the formation and evolution of ISIS. The international community didn't pay attention to the threat and left the chance to a new phase with a new group to unfold and unveil as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on the same day with the Obama inauguration in 2009. As O'Neill (2016) underlines, AQAP had shown themselves to be a patient, smart, and to-the-vest group, and that paid off by becoming the dominant al-Qaeda branch in the heartland of Islam.

AQAP announced its formation in a video made by three important leaders of the organization: Wuhayshi, Raymi and Said Ali al-Shihri². Raymi and Shihri pledged allegiance to Wuhayshi, and suggested that AQAP would also include the Yemen Soldiers Brigade, another AQ franchise in Yemen (Burton, 2009). Four days later the group released a 19-minute video titled: "We Start from Here and We Will Meet at al-Aqsa," outlining their goals and ideology: to avenge its enemies "with blood and destruction," in order to establish an Islamic Caliphate and implement Sharia law (US Department of State, 2014). The message of the video resembles the words of the founder of ISIS – al Zarqawi who was heard to say: "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify... until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq." (Dabiq, 2014).

2.2. Ideology and goals. As a descendent of al-Qaeda, AQAP aims to create an Islamic caliphate through the unification of states in the Arabian Peninsula (Shae'e, 2010). Among "the four armies that will march from the periphery of the Muslim world to the heart of Palestine"³, AQAP's main goal is to form the army that will be sent from Yemen (Shae'e, 2010).

Wuhayshi ended his opening speech in 2009 with prayers that express AQAP's goals:

O Allah! Bring conquest over the Holy Mosque and the Haramain [highway from Mecca to Medina] by our hands! O Allah Give us the honor by establishing the Islamic State with our hands! (World Analysis, 2009).

The words of Wuhayshi prove that AQAP shares with ISIS the same ideal of forming an Islamic Caliphate. The difference between them is that ISIS has partly fulfilled this aim by self-claiming a Caliphate and creating a precedent.

² A Saudi national who was released from Guantanamo Bay in November 2007.

³ "one army from Pakistan and Afghanistan, one from Iraq, one from Yemen, and the last from the Levant".

Further goals of AQAP are found in a document released by the organization in 2012: to "[e]xpel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula" and "[e]stablish the Islamic Caliphate and Shari'ah rule which the apostate governments have suspended." (Treadstone 71, 2012). As a formal affiliate of al-Qaeda, AQAP's ideology and practices fall in line with al-Qaeda's broader goals of working towards global Islamist domination. AQAP seeks to execute its Islamist mission through violent jihad, and is believed to be the al-Qaeda affiliate most ideologically similar to al-Qaeda's core (Scott, 2011). Although it is not as atrocious as ISIS regarding this issue, AQAP also works to marginalize Shiites, especially the Houthis in Northern Yemen.

2.3. Organizational structure. In a report dating from 2010, the think-tank called New America Foundation described AQAP as

compartmentalized and hierarchical, with a distinct division of labor. It has a political leader who provides overall direction, a military chief to plan operational details, a propaganda wing that seeks to draw in recruits, and a religious branch that tries to justify attacks from a theological perspective while offering spiritual guidance. (Barfi, 2010).

Within the new wave of Jihadi terrorism, the organizational structure plays a very important role within the strategy of the new terrorists and every detail is taken into consideration in order to give the perception of a state in state. The financial independence and evolution of assets in their basket helped strengthening the organizational structures of these groups and influenced their success.

2.3.1. Political branch. Given the death of the charismatic leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi in 2015, the co-founder of AQAP, Qasim al-Raymi, has filled the leadership position until date. The new leader is considered to have inherited the responsibilities of al-Wuhayshi who was in charge of AQAP's entire program and branches. According to a classified U.S. State Department cable published by WikiLeaks, Wuhayshi's duties specifically included "approving targets, recruiting new members, allocating resources to training and attack planning, and tasking others to carry out attacks."

2.3.2. Military branch. As any other terrorist group of its rank, AQAP undertakes violent attacks, such as bomb and suicide missions, as well as guerilla attacks against the Yemeni government and military together with kidnapping operations and robberies. The crucial figure to AQAP's military branch is its chief bomb maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri. Asiri is considered to be responsible for AQAP's most high-profile bombing attempts,

including the “Christmas Day Bomber” attempt in 2009 and the “Times Square Bomber” attempt in 2010. (Counter Extremism Project Report, 2017)

2.3.3. Propaganda branch. Alike ISIS, AQAP is aware of the key role of a powerful propaganda in order to attract recruits and build its base of support. The propaganda branch is the part of the organization that holds the responsibility to spread the message outside the borders of Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The means of spreading the message and attract support and new recruits vary through a media channel entitled “al-Malahem” – also called AQAP’s “official propaganda arm.”⁴ (Joscelyn, 2014). At the same time, Al-Masra is a digital newsletter that is released several times per month that is also published by AQAP and it includes news updates on the entire al-Qaeda network.

2.3.4. Religious branch. It is important to underline that the religious branch of the organization works hand-in-hand with the propaganda branch. The religious leader of AQAP, in charge with the religious branch of the organization, is Ibrahim al-Rubaish⁵ - former Guantanamo detainee. Al-Rubaish has the authority to issue fatwas and release public statements in accordance with the Islamic Law (Shariah).

2.4. Financing. In terms of financing, for both AQAP and ISIS the various sources of income provided those organizations the independence and strength needed to succeed undertaking their goals. According to the U.S. State Department, AQAP’s funding comes primarily from two sources: “robberies and kidnap for ransom operations.” The information hold by the U.S. State Department is also confirmed by a letter written by al-Wuhayshi to his Algerian allies in 2012, in which he states that “most of the battle costs, if not all, were paid for through the spoils. Almost half the spoils [for a year-long operation in Yemen] came from hostages.”

According to al-Wuhayshi, kidnapping is “an easy spoil, which I may describe as a profitable trade and a precious treasure” (Kalamachi, 2013). Other important sources of income for AQAP are: heists and armed robberies, gun and drug smuggling, opium trafficking, looting, and donations.

At the same time, Yemen’s third-largest port was under AQAP’s control from April 2015 to April 2016, which brought the group millions of dollars during this period.

3. RELATIONSHIP WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR ROLES IN THE EVOLUTION OF AQAP vs. ISIS

The role of the community is double-sided when it comes to terrorist groups, as it can represent an asset or a threat to their sovereignty, at the same time. AQAP has proved that it learned its lesson from the defeat suffered by AQI (the former ISI) back in 2006 when the tribal communities supported the US forces against the terrorist organization. This was not the case for AQAP who, according to some analysts, has depended on a strong relationship with the tribal communities in Yemen for recruitment and protection, since 2006 (Levinson, 2010). Analysts cite high unemployment rates, high rates of poverty, and dwindling supplies of oil and water as reasons why Yemeni local tribes have reportedly provided a safe haven and fertile recruiting grounds to AQAP. (Dorsey, 2010) It is known that the struggles of AQAP to win favor in local communities in order to weave the group into the fabric of Yemeni society included: marrying AQAP members into local tribes and providing social and financial assistance to the country’s areas plagued by abject poverty. AQAP provides services for the community such as digging wells, paying for medical treatments for locals, even paying monthly allowances to poor widows. (Levinson, 2010) In addition, AQAP pays higher than market price for commodities such as goats. (Dorsey, 2010) All these efforts seem to pay off as some local tribesmen have allowed AQAP to recruit their sons and provided shelter for AQAP, blending insurgents into Yemeni local populations.

But not all analysts agree regarding the relationship between AQAP and the communities in Yemen. Some analysts doubt that AQAP is entrenched in the Yemeni society. For instance, the New York Times has argued that the number of tribal leaders that have welcomed AQAP is very low, and asserts that several tribes have banished AQAP members from their areas. (El-Naggar, 2010) At the same time, given the differences between AQAP’s violent ideology and the local culture regarding handling conflicts, the terrorist organization has proved to gain only a small number of recruits from the region. (Harris, 2010)

The exploitation of existing grievances has proved to be a powerful strategy used by AQAP in order to appeal to a broad audience and attract new recruits. As in any other Arab state, local frustrations regarding the government, corruption, unemployment rates, low income, poverty, limited supplies of oil and water have persisted throughout

⁴ Al-Malahem publishes a bi-monthly magazine in Arabic directed at its Yemeni audience, as well as an English-language periodical called Inspire directed at its American audience.

⁵ Claimed dead by AQAP in 2015, but not confirmed by the US forces.

time and represented an asset to be used by the terrorist organization's propaganda. AQAP used the arguments of corruption and the failing Yemeni government more than the rhetoric of global jihad that we have been used to within the recruitment videos and written materials. More recently, AQAP's communications have been focused on unity against "enemies of Islam," such as the U.S., Europe, and Iran, while also issuing messages that support al-Zawahiri. (Hudson, 2015) AQAP has also exploited the relations between communities within the territory by galvanizing Sunni Muslims against the Houthis, who they claim are supported by Iran (Stanford University Report).

In fact, the region witnesses a struggle of two groups fighting each other in order to win the hearts of the population (and the adherent territory) for the purpose of a global jihad. Although, both AQAP and ISIS appeared as branches of the same parent organization and evolved as a result of seizing the opportunity within the chaos and by gaining independence through significant financial gains, a clash between the practice of ideology has gradually unfolded. While AQAP remained "under the skirts" of its parent, ISIS developed its own perspective means and ideals. In this way, the region became a scene for a battle between the old guard, which were revolutionary for their time, and the new guard, who are repeating some of the mistakes of the past, but also stamping their own bloody footprint on the movement. (O'Neill, 2016) Many of the analysts may agree that what we witness is actually a battle between slow, methodical, bridge-building planning, and a rampaging attack whose success depends on constant momentum.

ISIS and AQAP differ especially when it comes to the limit of the means they use in order to achieve their aims. While ISIS has made a reputation out of violence and slaughter, AQAP remains rather tentative: they aren't interested in slaughtering Shi'a or in persecuting Yazidi, they want to defeat the local infidel power more than anything else, and create space and a working army for the next stage of jihad. At the same time, the Islamic State's branch in Yemen, unlike AQAP, consists mainly of non-Yemenis and its members appear to have been with ISIS in Syria and Iraq; they brought to Yemen the same strategy of embedded networks of informants and local propagandists that contributed to the group's successes there (International Crisis Group, Report No. 174/2017). This is one reason that, together with the organization's brutal ways of acting and the autocratic tendencies explain why the Islamic State doesn't gain support in Yemen and it does not fit the local culture of the existing communities.

The relations regarding local communities differ accordingly with the overall behavior of the two terrorist groups. While ISIS slaughters any members of any community that doesn't fit their goals, AQAP tries to gain the local support and transform it into an asset for its aims. Bearing in mind the long fight that both groups have ahead of them, AQAP's strategy is definitely a better one than the unpredictability of ISIS.

4. THE FUTURE OF AQAP

The strategy undertaken by AQAP regarding the local communities proves the fact that the organization is aware that local support is necessary in order to sustain itself and to its expansion in Yemen. Analysts underline that fighting the long war necessitates not only a good strategy, but also patience, time, and a far more nuanced approach to engaging Yemen's tribes and the fragmented forces opposing the Houthis and their allies. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to learn from the mistakes of the past and apply the lessons to the present. The leadership of AQAP has incorporated the lessons learned during its defeats and setbacks in 2012-2014. This is evidenced by AQAP's acceptance—at least for now—of the gradualist approach advocated for by its late leader, al-Wuhayshi, and accepted by, at least to some degree, its current leader, al-Raymi.

AQAP's current strategy is on organizational growth in Yemen and, in case the chaos within the Yemeni borders continues and the international community doesn't interfere, they might achieve their goals. While AQAP's increasing attention to more parochial concerns likely means that it is less concerned with direct attacks against foreign targets, its adoption of what is a far more pragmatic path to growth should be of great concern to the region and the United States. Given AQAP's enmeshment within some anti-Houthi forces and its deepening ties with some tribal communities mean, the organization gradually becomes more resilient and harder to combat. Unlike the Islamic State, AQAP seems to act like a silent but dangerous threat that acts instead of talking and it applies all the lessons learned from its own mistakes and from the past mistakes of other terrorist organizations. These arguments together with the forecast that the civil war in Yemen will likely continue—at least on a low level—for years should draw attention upon the fact that AQAP's future is more secure than ever. After the defeat of ISIS, AQAP may be the reason of the next humanitarian crisis and the never ending war against terrorism created and continuously fueled by the West.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AGAINST THE THREAT REPRESENTED BY AQAP FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Alike the situation in Iraq and Syria for the evolution of ISIS, the chaos created by Yemen's war represented an opportunity for both AQAP and the Yemeni wing of the Islamic State. While the Islamic State didn't fit the local profile and hasn't gained the necessary support, AQAP evolved into a strong threat to the regional and international security, able to provoke the next humanitarian crisis of this century. The success of AQAP so far is attributed to a powerful strategy based on the context of state collapse, sectarianism, shifting opportunistic alliances and a war economy, with fresh recruits and more sources of weapons and income than ever before.

In order for the international community to address the situation and decide upon the right policies to follow, an important step is to know and understand the enemy. AQAP is a relative new terrorist organization in this form and, together with ISIS, represents the "global neojihad" – a new and stronger wave of jihadi terrorism. Although creations of the same parent, AQAP and ISIS differ in many aspects and the international community should be aware of the particularities of the organization that it faces first, then it should think about the necessary policies to defeat it. Therefore, this paper recommends a detailed study of the organizations evolution, strategy, ideology, propaganda and recruitment, modus operandi in order to save as a foundation for future policies against it.

Secondly, the international community should focus on establishing strong partnerships based on confidence and reliability with the local communities in order to decrease the local support for AQAP which is one of its most important advantages in the region.

Thirdly, in order to reverse the AQAP's gains, the international community should work hand in hand with the local community on four pillars: the Yemeni and regional belligerents, the donor governments assisting Yemenis in combating AQAP, the states and groups operating in areas previously under or vulnerable to violent jihadist control, especially, but not limited to, the Hadi government, government-linked militias and the United Arab Emirates, the Huthi/Saleh bloc (International Crisis Group, Report No. 174/2017).

Therefore, the Yemeni and regional belligerents should: end the war by agreeing to a ceasefire followed by negotiations toward a

political settlement⁶ and avoid sectarian language and end media campaigns and mosque sermons that label adversaries in sectarian terms (International Crisis Group, Report No. 174/2017).

The donor governments assisting Yemenis in combatting AQAP should: engage in regular assessments of local and regional partners who may at times tolerate or even encourage AQAP activities for political or economic gain, and press them to change course, threatening to suspend counter-terrorism cooperation if they do not; decouple development from counter-terrorism assistance to reduce the incentives for the (current or future) Yemeni government to benefit financially from AQAP's presence; enhance security measures at ports and border crossings with an increased maritime security focus on AQAP sea supply routes along vulnerable coastlines; encourage and support Track-II and local civil society efforts to heal inter-confessional divides, building on Yemen's history of tolerance; where there are opportunities to open lines of communication with AQAP leaders independent of tribal or political elites, those should be explored and if possible used to help de-escalate violence (International Crisis Group, Report No. 174/2017).

The states and groups operating in areas previously under or vulnerable to violent jihadist control, especially, but not limited to, the Hadi government, government-linked militias and the United Arab Emirates should: prioritize basic security, justice – particularly quick and transparent dispute resolution – and service provision; disaggregate rather than conflate various Sunni Islamist groups⁷; use military and policing tools judiciously and in compliance with local laws and norms by avoiding heavy-handed military campaigns in cities and, when possible, working with local leaders to negotiate violent

⁶ The political settlement should contain: that contains buy-in from a full range of Yemeni stakeholders, including Sunni Islamists (the Islah party and Salafi groups willing to participate in politics) and groups with a regional base, such as Hiraak in the south; recognition of the need for regional autonomy, particularly for the south, and creation of a mechanism to determine the future state structure; and interim security arrangements in various war-torn localities under the state umbrella but with local buy-in.

⁷ by: including Islah in local governance and security initiatives; and communicating and negotiating with supporters of Ansar al-Sharia (AQAP's local insurgency arm), who may not adhere to AQAP's global ideology, and work to separate them from AQAP by addressing their legitimate locally-grounded grievances.

jihadists' exit from urban areas, as happened in Mukalla; and using local forces against AQAP when possible, but without creating legally unaccountable militia structures outside the state's umbrella; bringing local militias, including popular committees, the Security Belt forces and the Elite forces in Hadramout, fully under government authority and under a legal system that ensures transparency and protects human rights (International Crisis Group, Report No. 174/2017).

The Huthi/Saleh bloc should: disaggregate rather than conflate various Sunni Islamist groups, and work with those willing to engage in peace talks and operate within the political process; refrain from military advances into predominately Shafai/Sunni areas that can only further inflame growing sectarian tensions and provide fodder to AQAP/IS propaganda (International Crisis Group, Report No. 174/2017).

6. CONCLUSION

The al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula should never be treated as an easy enemy to the regional and international security. Although not as ferocious and brutal as its brother, the Islamic State, AQAP is still a terrorist organization that has achieved significant gains through seizing the opportunity of the local chaos and gaining financial strengths from various income sources. Mostly important maybe the fact that the strategy of AQAP is based on the lessons learned from past mistakes which make them stronger and well organized. The role of the local communities is also vital when it comes to both the evolution of AQAP and the struggle to defeat the organization. The international community should turn the balance on its side and gain the trust of the local communities who can be strong partners for the strategy to defeat AQAP.

This paper aimed both at raising awareness of the threat that AQAP represents and at providing significant recommendations that should be taken into consideration in order to create a set of international policies for the fight against the organization. If the international community doesn't realize the value of local communities for their struggle, whatever measures are taken against any terrorist organization are just in vain.

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