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BEYOND SYRIA AND IRAQ

EXAMINING ISLAMIC STATE PROVINCES

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Islamic State in Yemen

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PREPARED STATEMENT

THE ISLAMIC STATE is present in Yemen and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. That reality may well lead U.S. policymakers to see Yemen as a front in the counter-Islamic State fight. That would be a mistake. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains the real threat in Yemen, and international counterterrorism efforts ought to focus on that group, despite its skillful efforts to stay below the radar.

The Islamic State needs a footprint in Yemen so that it can claim to be a global Salafi-jihadist movement. The group's assertion that it is the legitimate authority over Muslims requires that it actively develop a presence across the Muslim-majority world. Yemen is critical terrain for the Islamic State because of its position on the Arabian Peninsula—the birthplace of Islam—and the al-Qaeda presence there. While the Islamic State is unlikely to be able to establish a solid base in Yemen, it will retain a meaningful presence there that will support its narrative and compete with al-Qaeda for leadership of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. It will almost certainly lose that competition in the long run, however.

YEMENI BATTLEFIELD

Yemen is a central front for the Salafi-jihadist movement because of its appearance in early Islamic literature and its physical location. One of the hadiths—reports describing the words or actions of the Prophet Muhammed—prophesies that an army of twelve thousand will rise from the Aden-Abyan region in southern Yemen and give victory to the forces of Allah. Transnational Salafi-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, therefore, have sought to set con-

ditions for the rise of this army in Yemen. The country itself sits on a nexus of trade and smuggling routes from the Horn of Africa and through the Gulf of Aden. It also borders Saudi Arabia, which makes it a staging ground for Salafi-jihadist terrorist attacks against the kingdom.

Al-Qaeda has had sanctuary in Yemen for decades. It began supporting Yemeni Islamist groups in the early 1990s, backing mujahedin who returned from Afghanistan in a fight against the socialist South Yemen government. Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders cultivated relationships with leading Salafi-jihadist Yemenis that grew into a base for al-Qaeda, whose operatives used the country as a logistics and planning hub to move between Afghanistan and East Africa. AQAP, the group's Yemen-based affiliate, has established safe havens inside Yemen and is now a leading node within the al-Qaeda network.

The Islamic State core group in Iraq and Syria has identified Yemen as a space for expansion since the declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014. The late IS military commander Omar al-Shishani mentioned Yemen among eight other fields of jihad in the group's celebratory video that month calling for the end of borders that separate Muslims.¹ Yemen was also one of the first Islamic State branches that IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recognized in November 2014.² The announcement that IS was in Yemen seemed premature at the time, though its victories in Iraq and Syria had driven support globally for the group.

RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN YEMEN

The conditions in Yemen grew increasingly favorable for the Islamic State in fall 2014 and spring 2015. The United States, partnered with the Yemeni military, had sustained military pressure on AQAP since 2012. U.S. airstrikes also degraded AQAP's leadership in winter and spring 2015, removing key al-Qaeda voices from the battlefield.

The dynamics of Yemen's civil war have opened the possibility of a sectarian schism of the sort that benefits the Islamic State. A Zaidi Shiite group, the Houthis, seized power in the capital and targeted its political enemies, who were largely Sunni and included prominent Salafi voices. Many Salafi religious leaders fled the country in the wake of this successful uprising, creating a gap in local religious leadership. The Houthis' political ally, Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, is also Zaidi, as is a portion of his support base. The factions opposed to the Houthis are Sunni and are supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The civil war remains based on local power dynamics, but it has opened a possible sectarian fault line that could expand, playing in the Islamic State's favor.

IS leadership in Iraq and Syria directed and supported the effort to expand into Yemen in this period. It commissioned a Saudi Arabian national, Bilal al-Harbi, to gather pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State.³ Harbi was in direct communication with the core leadership by September 2014 and was probably behind the new Yemeni group's decision to pledge allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that month.⁴ He would become the leader of the Yemeni branch. It is quite probable that the core group deployed additional individuals from Iraq and Syria to Yemen, similar to the way in which it built the Libyan branch.

The Islamic State made its initial inroads into Yemen through Salafi-jihadist clerics and defections from AQAP. A prominent AQAP-affiliated cleric, Mamun Hatim, was one such cleric who displayed support for IS.⁵ He probably facilitated an Ibb-based recruiting network for the group, though he remained connected to AQAP as well.⁶ The Islamic State's appeal produced a preliminary surge of support. It offered more money than AQAP, held the narrative of victory based on its success in Iraq, and offered membership in a global community.⁷ The group's call to immediate action differed from AQAP's cautious and tempered approach.⁸ The Islamic State grew primarily where AQAP was recruiting and not attacking, possibly drawing on the frustrations of AQAP supporters who wanted to get in on the action.⁹ Some of its cells (*wilayat*, or provinces) also split from AQAP.¹⁰

The group brought its usual playbook to Yemen: driving sectarian warfare to break the state and mobilize the Sunni behind the Islamic State. Its first major attacks in Yemen struck two "Houthi" mosques in Sana, Yemen's capital,¹¹ its militants attacked Zaydi targets throughout spring and summer 2015. The group shifted its main effort from sectarian attacks to targeting the Saudi-led coalition forces and the Yemeni government and military forces as they began to rebuild the central Yemeni state in south Yemen. It launched four simultaneous suicide car bombs against coalition and government sites in Aden on October 6, 2015.¹²

PROSPECTS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN YEMEN

Despite these initial successes, the Islamic State's strategy is failing. It uses violence at levels outside of Yemeni norms, has a foreign leadership body in Yemen, and refuses to work within local customs. Its targeting of noncombatants, particularly through the mosque bombings, is far outside the acceptable norms in Yemen, generating backlash. AQAP, by contrast, avoids civilian casualties and has issued formal apologies when its attacks, such as a May

2012 suicide bombing at a military cadet parade, have provoked a public outcry. The Islamic State's leadership and leadership style are also alienating to Yemenis. The Islamic State, unlike AQAP, does not have a local Yemeni face. Top leaders are Saudis, who have refused to work through local channels or within tribal customs, creating friction with local leaders.

The group's approach to Yemen has splintered its supporters. In December 2015, Yemeni members issued a public denouncement of the Yemeni leadership in two letters rejecting Bilal al-Harbi and his inner circle.¹³ The 101 Yemeni members, among them senior leaders, reaffirmed their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but cited the leadership's "wrongful" dismissal of Islamic State soldiers, its failure to provide resources for a battle, and its overruling of a sharia decision about a regional commander. The challenge to the command failed, but its impact on IS operations is clear. The Islamic State had eight active cells in Yemen at its peak in 2015. Only two—one in Aden-Abyan and the other in Hadramawt—have claimed attacks in 2016.

The Islamic State will not displace AQAP or gain wide support in Yemen without a fundamental change in its manner of operations or in Yemeni society. Its efforts to drive sectarianism have largely failed, though the rhetoric of Yemeni political and military leaders is increasingly along sectarian lines. Complete government collapse in both Sana and Aden might not be sufficient for IS to gain strength because of the local authorities' resilience. While the defeat of AQAP would drive Salafi-jihadist support to the Islamic State, current counterterrorism operations are unlikely to defeat AQAP.

THE THREAT FROM YEMEN

Yemen is vital—but not to the global fight against the Islamic State. The group will, of course, continue to claim victory and validation, even from retaining its current footprint in Yemen. The Yemeni branch does not, however, provide vital resources or capabilities to the core group, nor is it likely to become a key front even should AQAP be defeated. Removing AQAP from the battlefield will probably require eliminating those conditions in which the Islamic State would flourish in Yemen as well.

The real enemy to the United States in Yemen is AQAP. It operates with sensitivity to the local environment that has enabled it to build a support base. It has the capabilities to conduct mass-casualty attacks, both within Yemen and against the U.S. homeland—the Islamic State's bomb-making cells initially belonged to AQAP. In short, U.S. policymakers must focus on the challenge from AQAP and avoid being drawn into a counter-Islamic State fight in Yemen.

NOTES

1. SITE Intelligence Group, “Islamic State Video Promotes Destruction of Iraq-Syria Border Crossing,” June 29, 2014, available by subscription through www.siteintelgroup.com.
2. The others were the Islamic State in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. SITE Intelligence Group, “IS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Rallies Fighters, Welcomes New Pledges,” November 13, 2014, available by subscription through www.siteintelgroup.com.
3. U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Major Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Leaders, Financial Figures, Facilitators, and Supporters,” press release, September 29, 2015, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0188.aspx>.
4. “Supporters of the Islamic State in Yemen” pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, YouTube video [since removed], posted September 4, 2014.
5. Katherine Zimmerman, “Exploring ISIS in Yemen,” AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, July 24, 2015), slide 5, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/exploring-isis-yemen-zimmerman-july-24-2015>.
6. A U.S. drone strike targeting AQAP killed Sheikh Hatim in al-Mukalla, Hadramawt, on May 11, 2015. AQAP controlled Mukalla at the time, and key leadership figures operated in the vicinity of the Yemeni port city. Sheikh Hatim’s presence in Hadramawt is an indication of a continued relationship with AQAP at the time.
7. Elisabeth Kendall, *Al-Qaida & Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences* (in press as of 2015), available for download at https://www.academia.edu/15757466/Al-Qaida_and_Islamic_State_in_Yemen_A_Battle_for_Local_Audiences.
8. See AQAP spokesman Muhannad Ghallab’s February 28, 2015, statement, “The Followers of ‘The Caliphate’ in Yemen . . . Facts and Questions,” available by request from the author.
9. Katherine Zimmerman, “A New Model for Defeating al Qaeda in Yemen,” AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, September 10, 2015), 27–28, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-new-model-for-defeating-al-qaeda-in-yemen-september-10-2015>.
10. A group defected in Dhamar and Sana in central Yemen in February 2015, for example. SITE Intelligence Group, “Fighters in Yemen Allegedly Break Pledge to Zawahiri, Give Allegiance to Baghdadi,” February 10, 2015, available by subscription through www.siteintelgroup.com.
11. The March 20, 2015, mosque bombings killed more people than any of AQAP’s attacks, previously or even afterward. They prompted an Iranian response—an airlift of the critically injured to Tehran—and a Saudi response, which was to promise to protect Yemen and accuse Iran of sowing sectarianism in the region. The Houthis immediately mobilized Yemeni military forces to confront “terrorism,” and Iran may have moved additional weapons into the country in support of the

- Zaidi Shia movement. Islamic State cells sustained regular small-scale attacks against Houthis during the spring of 2015 and a June 17, 2015, coordinated suicide attack in Sana that the Islamic State claimed struck four Houthi targets in the capital. See the following reports by Alexis Knutsen: "ISIS in Yemen: Fueling the Sectarian Fire," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, March 20, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/knutsen-isis-yemen-fueling-sectarian-fire-march-20-2015>; "2015 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: March 22," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, March 22, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-reports-march-22-2015>; "Ramadan Bombings in Yemen: Part of ISIS's Global Strategy?" AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, June 17, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/knutsen-ramadan-bombings-part-isis-global-strategy-june-17-2015>. See also Joshua Koontz, "Desknote: The Growing Threat of ISIS in Yemen," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, May 6, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/koontz-desknote-growing-threat-isis-in-yemen-may-6-2015>; Tasnim News Agency, "Yemenis Injured in Sana'a Terrorist Attacks Transferred to Iran for Treatment," March 23, 2015, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/english/Home/Single/693138>; and "Saudi Foreign Minister Warns of Saudi Intervention in Yemen if Peaceful Solution Is Not Reached," Almasdar Online, March 23, 2015, <http://almasdaronline.com/article/69894>.
12. Saudi Arabia led an Arab coalition military intervention in Yemen, beginning on March 26, 2015, to reinstate Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi's government as the governing authority there. A July 2015 Emirati-led ground offensive in support of the coalition's objectives seized most of Aden city and began the process of reestablishing the Hadi government in early fall 2015. It expanded this effort to include targets in al-Mukalla after an April 2016 Emirati-led offensive regained control of the southern port city from AQAP. See Joshua Koontz, "2015 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: October 7," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, October 7, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-reports-october-7-2015>, and Jon Diamond and Katherine Zimmerman, "Challenging the Yemeni State: ISIS in Aden and al Mukalla," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, June 9, 2016), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-diamond-challenging-yemeni-state-isis-in-aden-al-mukalla-june-9-2016>.
 13. For analysis of the letters' contents, see Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "Divisions Emerge within the Islamic State's Yemen 'Province,'" *Long War Journal*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/divisions-emerge-within-the-islamic-states-yemen-province.php>.