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Aftermath of suicide attack on Sufi shrine

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TURKISH INTELLIGENCE SAYS AL-QAEDA PLANNED ROCKET ATTACK ON U.S. AIR BASE

Turkish security services claim to have learned of an al-Qaeda plot to use rockets to attack U.S. military aircraft at the Incirlik Air Base in southeastern Turkey. According to intelligence collected by the National Intelligence Organization (Milli Istihbarat Teskilati – MIT) and the General Directorate of Security (Emniyet Genel Mudurlugu), the plot was to be carried out by two Syrian members of al-Qaeda identified as Abu Muhammad al-Kurdi and Salih Battal (*Today's Zaman*, April 6).

The Incirlik Air Base is located just outside the city of Adana and is used jointly by the U.S. Air Force and the Turkish Air Force (Turk Hava Kuwetleri). It is the permanent home of the U.S.A.F.'s 39th Air Base Wing, which acts as the host unit for American air operations using the base. Incirlik has played an important role in U.S. military and intelligence operations from the Cold War through to the war in Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. A U.S. diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks dated June 8, 2006 said that Turkey had allowed Incirlik to be used as a refueling stop for U.S. aircraft involved in the CIA's rendition program (*Guardian*, January 17). Incirlik is also thought to be a forward storage site for U.S. nuclear weapons.

The revelations were followed on April 12 by a series of raids in Istanbul and the eastern province of Van on the homes of suspected members of al-Qaeda and Turkish Hezbollah, a largely Kurdish Islamist militant group involved in the torture and murder of hundreds of members of the Kurdish socialist Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) rebel movement in the 1990s (see *Terrorism Monitor*, January 25, 2008).

Forty-two suspects were detained by police in Istanbul and a further ten in Van. Turkish authorities said that one of the detainees was the alleged head of the Turkish chapter of al-Qaeda, Halis Bayancuk, a graduate of Cairo's al-Azhar University and a former member of Turkish Hezbollah. He was charged with leading a terrorist organization in 2008, but released less than a year later (*Today's Zaman*, April 14; *Turkiye Radyo Televizyon [TRT]*, April 12).

In a recent move that outraged Turkish public opinion, a Turkish court ordered the release in January of at least 25 members of Turkish Hezbollah alleged to have been involved in the brutal murders of PKK members and rival Islamists (see *Terrorism Monitor* Briefs, January 13). The release was ordered under a new law that states detainees cannot remain imprisoned for more than ten years without a trial. The case against the suspects was complicated by numerous allegations that Hezbollah operated as a covert arm of the state's efforts to crush Kurdish separatism and Islamist challenges to the officially secular Turkish state (*Hurriyet*, January 7; *BBC*, January 23, 2000). Turkish authorities did not state whether any of those arrested were involved in the January release (*Reuters*, April 12).

The obvious importance of Incirlik Air Base to the furtherance of U.S. foreign policy interests in the region has inspired a number of Islamist militant cells to plan attacks on U.S. facilities at Incirlik. In 2002 four Arab-Americans were arrested in Detroit on charges of operating a terrorist cell. Sketches of the Incirlik air base were found in their apartment (*Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2002; *Washington Post*, September 15, 2002). There are reports that Osama bin Laden suggested that a Turkish militant cell attack U.S. facilities at Incirlik, but the would-be attackers were dissuaded by the tight security at the base. They then turned their attentions to softer targets, bombing two Istanbul synagogues in November 2003 (*Independent*, December 18, 2003; see also *Terrorism Focus*, December 17, 2007). There were further warnings of an imminent attack by suicide bombers or hijacked planes in February 2006.

SYRIA CLAIMS TO HAVE DISRUPTED TERRORIST GROUP RESPONSIBLE FOR PROTESTS

Syria has implicated a leading Lebanese politician in the creation of a Damascus-based terrorist cell intent on discrediting the Syrian government by killing demonstrators and making it look like the work of the Syrian regime. The allegations were based on the

confessions of three individuals carried on Syrian television. An array of weapons said to have been seized from the alleged terrorists at the time of their April 10 arrest were also displayed.

The leader of the cell, Anas Knaj, a 29-year-old billboard worker, claimed to have recruited two of his friends, Muhammad Badr al-Qalam and Muhammad Ahmad al-Sukhneh, to form a terrorist cell under the name "The Syrian Revolution," which he said aimed to "move the country from a bad situation to a better one" (Syrian Arab News Agency [SANA], April 13; *al-Ba'ath [Damascus]*, April 13).

The formation and arming of the cell was facilitated by a mysterious individual, Ahmad Audeh, who claimed to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Audeh told the men that he was acting on behalf of Lebanese member of parliament Jamal al-Jarrah, a member of Sa'ad al-Hariri's Mustaqbal (Future) movement, part of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition. Audeh suggested that al-Jarrah was part of the Muslim Brotherhood and would provide generous rewards to the members of the cell for their work. In the event of their death, their families would receive large cash payments.

Kanj reported that the cell initially received orders to instigate demonstrations near the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus by recruiting a handful of young people to begin chanting "freedom slogans" near the mosque. As hundreds of other Syrians joined the apparently spontaneous demonstration, the provocateurs slipped away before police arrived.

The Umayyad Mosque has been a focal point for protests in Damascus since the demonstrations began on March 15. The mosque is one of the world's oldest continually used holy places, with the site successively hosting a Bronze Age temple, a Roman Temple of Jupiter, a Byzantine basilica devoted to John the Baptist and the present mosque, founded by an Umayyad caliph in 706.

Though the men had little experience with weapons, Audeh was said to have provided them with sniper rifles and training in their use. Audeh claimed to have used bribery to ship the weapons from Lebanon across the border to Syria and said Kanj's cell was only one of many he had equipped within Syria. According to Kanj, Audeh ordered the cell members to fire on the demonstrators with their sniper rifles. Photos of the carnage were to be taken and posted to the dissident al-Thawra (Revolution) Facebook site "to make the

people believe that the Syrian security members are the ones who were killing the citizens.” Their efforts were regarded as a success within the cell when the al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera news networks reported Syrian security forces were shooting unarmed demonstrators in Damascus.

Just before the men were arrested they claimed to have received orders to attack the poorly-defended Sbeineh police station outside Damascus while disguised as members of the Syrian security forces. One individual was assigned to take photos of the attack and post them to the al-Thawra Facebook site.

The exiled leader of the Syrian chapter of the Muslim Brothers, Muhammad Ri’ad Shaqfa, denied that his movement had any role in promoting unrest in Syria, though it backed demands for greater liberty: “All tyrants play the same game. They accuse their own people of serving an outside conspiracy while using violence and cunning to survive” (Reuters, April 11). The movement was banned in 1963 and membership is punishable by death since 1980.

Iranian sources claim Syria is under attack by an alliance consisting of the pro-Israeli camp in Washington, anti-Iranian elements in Saudi Arabia and the Mustaqbal movement of Sa’ad Hariri in Beirut (Press TV [Tehran], April 15). Supporters of the Syrian regime have pointed to leaked U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks that suggest Sa’ad al-Hariri had proposed replacing Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad with a coalition that would include the Muslim Brotherhood, former Syrian vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam and former Syrian Army chief-of-staff Hekmat al-Shahabi (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], April 16; *Ahram Online*, April 16; *al-Watan* [Damascus], April 18). Khaddam has lived in exile in Paris since 2005 after accusing Assad of directing the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, father of current Mustaqbal leader Sa’ad Hariri. Al-Shehabi resigned after 24 years as Army chief-of-staff in 1998 and moved to California.

While confirming a personal relationship with Abdul Halim Khaddam, Lebanese MP Jamal al-Jarrah has denied any involvement in the alleged terrorist cell: “If [the Syrians] have any evidence, we call on them to present it to the Lebanese judiciary and let it rule” (*iloubnan.info*, April 13; *al-Jadeed TV*, April 13). Al-Jarrah later suggested the mysterious al-Audeh could have been an Israeli agent (*Naharnet*, April 16).

Syrian officials have accused the Muslim Brothers of pursuing a sectarian conflict by attacking Alawites and Christians in Syria. The Brotherhood, however, is apparently keeping a low profile in the unrest, unwilling to give Assad’s regime an excuse for a general massacre of suspected members.

Pakistani Taliban Continue Their Campaign against Sufi Shrines

By Animesh Roul

In troubled Pakistan, sacred spaces such as Sufi shrines have increasingly been the target of bloody attacks by Taliban and al-Qaeda militants. The Taliban-Deobandi school of Islam perceives Sufi practices such as devotional whirling dances, the veneration of Sufi saints and other rituals as being un-Islamic and against the tenets of the religion.

On April 3, a twin suicide attack outside the revered shrine of 13th century Sufi saint Sakhi Sarwar (a.k.a. Ahmed Sultan) in the Dera Ghazi Khan district of Punjab province claimed nearly 50 lives, including women and children. The attacks targeted a crowd gathered outside the shrine for the annual Urs festival and left more than 100 people injured (*Pakistan Observer* [Islamabad], April 3; *Express Tribune* [Karachi], April 4).

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the attack: “Our men carried out these attacks and we will carry out more in retaliation for government operations against our people in the northwest,” Ehsanullah Ehsan, a Taliban spokesman, told the media by telephone (Reuters, April 3; *The Nation* [Lahore], April 4).

A month before the Sakhi Sarwar incident, a similar attack took place at a mosque located in the compound of Akhwand Panju Baba’s shrine in the Nowshera district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (*Daily Times* [Lahore], March 5). The militants struck while a charity meal was being distributed among hundreds of people after the Friday prayers. Nearly ten people were killed and more than 40 sustained injuries.

The Sakhi Sarwar and Akbarpura incidents were the latest in a string of deadly attacks that have targeted some of the most venerated Sufi religious sites in Pakpattan, Lahore, Peshawar, and Karachi. There have been four major attacks on Sufi sacred sites in the last year alone:

- A remote-controlled device was triggered on February 3, while food was being distributed among the devotees outside the Baba Haider Saieen shrine in Lahore, Punjab. At least three people were killed and 27 others injured in the incident.
- The tomb of Baba Fariddudin Ganj Shakkar in Pakpattan was attacked on October 7, 2010. Six people were killed and 15 others injured.
- Taliban militants blew up the Mian Umar Baba shrine in Peshawar on June 22, 2010. No fatalities were reported (*Express Tribune*, June 22, 2010).
- Multiple bomb attacks on July 1, 2010 at the Data Darbar Sufi shrine in Lahore killed 45 people and injured 175. Unusually, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) denied any involvement in this triple suicide bombing. TTP spokesman Azam Tariq said to the media: “We are not responsible for these attacks, this is a conspiracy by foreign secret agencies, you know we do not attack public places. We condemn this brutal act. Our target is very clear and we only attack police, army and other security personnel” (*The Nation*, July 2, 2010).

In Peshawar itself, at least four major Sufi landmarks were targeted between 2007- 2009. These included:

- The shrine of Abdul Shakoor Malang Baba was demolished by explosives on December 18, 2007.
- Lashkar-e-Islam killed ten villagers in a rocket attack on the 400-year-old shrine of Hazrat Abu Saeed Baba on March 3, 2008.
- The shrine of Shaykh Omar Baba was destroyed on May 8, 2009.
- The shrine of the most famous Sufi Pashto language poet, Rahman Baba, was razed to the ground by Taliban militants on March 5, 2009, partly because local women had been visiting the shrine (see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, March 19, 2009).

Besides Sufi places of worship, pro-Taliban Sunni militants often target cultural symbols of the Ahmadiya and Shi’a communities across Pakistan. A late May 2010 attack on the Ahmadiya place of worship in the Model Town and Garhi Shahu areas of Lahore left more than 100 worshippers killed and scores injured. The Punjab chapter of the TTP claimed responsibility for the two attacks (*The News* [Karachi], May 29).

Meanwhile, Behram Khan, the mastermind of the twin suicide attacks at Sakhi Sarwar, was arrested along with five others from the Mamond district of Bajaur tribal agency (*The News*, April 11). His arrest came after the Pakistan agencies extracted information about the Taliban’s future plans from a surviving would-be suicide bomber in the Sakhi Sarwar incident. According to the teenaged suspect, identified as Omar Fidai (a.k.a Fida Hussain), around 300 more boys have been trained for similar suicide attacks across Pakistan and Afghanistan. He claimed to have undergone training in the Mir Ali area of North Waziristan tribal area along with hundreds of juvenile suicide bombers. He is also reported to have revealed that Arabs, Uzbeks and Tajik nationals are amongst the terrorists currently holed up in the area and ready to unleash mayhem in Pakistan (*Dawn* [Karachi], April 8).

Other than the juvenile jihadis brainwashed and indoctrinated to die for Islam through martyrdom, what is also alarming is the graffiti supporting shrine attacks and praising al-Qaeda and the TTP that has surfaced on

the walls of many towns in Dera Ghazi Khan (*Express Tribune*, April 10). These “writing on the wall” campaigns spread chills down the spine of secular locals or those who practice liberal strands of Sufi Islam, as well as the local administration, which is often accused of having a lackadaisical attitude towards the safety and security of minority sects and communities.

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The Internal Crisis of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

By *Hani Nasira*

Since the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution on January 25, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has tried to project an image of unity in its forces, actions and demands. The Brotherhood has been in the forefront of those who insisted on putting the former President Hosni Mubarak and the remnants of his regime on trial. This show of unity was maintained until the April 8 “Friday of Purgation and Trial” and the mock trial of three of Mubarak’s closest political allies held in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. The protest was boycotted by the Salafis and the Islamic Group (Islam Today, April 8).

In spite of this external show of unity within the Muslim Brotherhood since the abdication of President Mubarak and the transfer of power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the internal, operational and theoretical

crises began to invade this show of unity. The image of the Brotherhood has changed from that of the victim to that of a dominant but untrustworthy actor as seen by the youth of the revolution, who worry that the movement might at any moment alienate itself from the Revolution, similar to what happened when the Muslim Brothers and the Salafists allied themselves with the army in seeking a yes vote in the March 19 constitutional reform referendum. The successful yes vote will fast-track parliamentary and presidential elections, a move that will favor the established religious groups like the Brotherhood. There are also concerns in the movement’s youth wing over reports that members of the Muslim Brothers’ 16-man Guidance Council held secret meetings in February with former Vice President Omar Sulayman to negotiate an end to their participation in the revolution in exchange for permission to found their own political party (Muslim Brothers must currently run as independents in elections) (*al-Masry al-Youm*, April 17). Incidents such as these as well as rumors that the movement is conducting secret talks with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces have accelerated the process of alienation from the Revolution and the movement’s youth wing.

On March 31, Haytham Abu Khalil, a former member of the Brotherhood’s Shura (consultative) Council, resigned because of the arbitrary way in which the movement treated him after he was suspended for one month after establishing contacts with the media and his criticism of the leadership. The punishment was later extended to three months and then to a full year. This pushed Abu Khalil to tender his resignation and announce his allegiance to the rival Islamist Nahda (Renaissance) Party (Youm7.com, March 31).

Further losses to the Brotherhood’s leadership occurred on April 2, when Dr. Abdul Moneim Abu al-Futooh, one of the most prominent reformists within the Muslim Brothers, and Dr. Ibrahim al-Zaafarani, a Shura Council member, submitted their resignations. There is speculation they may join Nahda or the Wasat Party, a Muslim Brotherhood breakaway party formed in the mid-1990s. This has all happened after the Brotherhood’s Supreme Guide Muhammad Badie declared members of the groups would not be allowed to join any political party other than the movement’s new Freedom and Justice Party. Al-Zaafarani also noted that the Muslim Brothers’ leadership warned some of its leaders against attending a March 26 conference organized by the movement’s youth faction.

It is also worth noting that a year ago al-Zaafarani had strongly criticized and questioned the legitimacy of the movement's elections and its organizational structure, serious issues that were shoved aside by the new Brotherhood leadership. Al-Zaafarani also stated that the Muslim Brotherhood lacks internal accountability and should realize the approaches used before January 25 are no longer feasible (*al-Akhbar*, March 30; *al-Masry al-Youm*, April 2). These criticisms have left the leadership unmoved; member Jamal Madhi declared on the movement's website that: "The Muslim Brotherhood is like a train that moves in one direction and it will not stop its movement because one of its passengers wants to leave the train" (Ikhwan Online, April 5). In spite of the fact that these resignations took place among the middle ranks of the movement, it is quite obvious by now that the generational conflict runs even deeper than the middle ranks. The Muslim Brotherhood's youth faction has been active since the revolution in examining the movement's leadership and administrative structure, calling for serious reforms of the movement's political perspective and organization. They also demand new ideologies that will lead the movement to more open perspectives and greater harmony with post-Mubarak Egypt.

The youth have called for dissolving the organizational structure of the group and the formation of a transitional administrative council until new and free elections can be held. They have also proposed more open and moderate ideas, saying for example that they did not object electing a Copt as Egypt's president. Such ideas are not shared by other elements of the movement - members of the Brotherhood blocked rail traffic outside the southern city of Qena for two days to protest the appointment of a Coptic governor, General Emad Shehata Michael (Ahram Online, April 16; AP, April 17).

This puts the Muslim Brothers between the rock of the demands of its youth and the hard place of the escalating Salafist challenge. The movement's attempt to contain its youth who participated in the January 25 revolution will be risky as it simultaneously attempts to deal with the challenges posed by the more fundamentalist and extremist ideologies of the Salafists and jihadis.

There are many other problems and challenges that stand in the way of the Muslim Brothers in post-revolutionary Egypt. These challenges take form in the movement's inability to renew its identity by keeping itself captive to the era of its founder, Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949). In addition, there is a negative perception of the movement

by some prominent Islamists and social leaders who believe Egypt's largest Islamic group has deviated from the real teachings of Islam to concentrate its efforts on political pursuits.

The civil movements which were fascinated by the Muslim Brothers' proposal on civil reconciliation after the revolution still have concerns. Their trust in the Brotherhood is far from solid, especially after the battle for constitutional reform on March 19, leading some individuals to talk about a secret deal between the Brothers and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Such a deal has been denied by the latter through statements by its official spokesman.

The question, then, is whether the current crisis within the movement will pave the way for the type of internal dialogue that has been silenced within the corridors of the movement until now. Egypt's new political environment is encouraging competition to the Brotherhood even within the Islamist sphere. Egypt's Islamists will be watching to see whether the movement realizes that its current ideology and strategies no longer enable it to face a host of new challenges and that change has become inevitable.

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Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Challenges and Opportunities in Revolutionary Yemen

By Michael Horton

The wave of revolutionary unrest spreading across the Middle East poses a host of new challenges and possibilities for Salafist inspired militant groups like al-Qaeda. The calls for democracy, fair elections, and transparent governments in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen run contrary to Salafist political ideologies that subscribe to ideas like “one vote, one time” and regard democracy as a form of idolatry. [1] While it could be argued that such anti-democratic ideologies look increasingly irrelevant in the current climate, the instability brought about by rapidly evolving political landscapes could result in increased operational freedom for al-Qaeda and other Salafist militants.

This combination of possibilities and challenges facing al-Qaeda is perhaps most pronounced in Yemen where, after almost three months, anti-government protesters continue to call for the removal of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and for fair elections. However, at the same time, the erosion of the already limited coercive authority of the central government in many parts of Yemen is providing al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other militant Salafist groups with an even more ideal operating environment for training, planning, and launching attacks against domestic and regional targets.

How well AQAP is able to capitalize on this increased operational freedom depends largely on whether or not Yemen transitions to a government that better meets the needs of Yemenis and whether or not AQAP can or will adapt to the changing demands of Yemeni citizens.

Looking For an Audience

It seems that the Islamic world’s various militant Salafist organizations, much like many Western governments, were caught off guard by the rapidity of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Al-Qaeda central was slow to respond to the protests and resulting regime changes in Egypt and Tunisia. Al-Qaeda central’s second in command, Egyptian Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, did

not issue a statement until late February in which he warned Egyptians against adopting a democratic form of government since it “can only be secular.”

In the months since the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, al-Qaeda has attempted to make up for lost ground by issuing a number of statements and audio recordings praising Egyptians, Tunisians, and Libyans for their courage in overthrowing “tyrannical” regimes. Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has appeared in a new video that included statements from American cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi. Both men make laudatory statements about the revolutions but reiterate their calls for the imposition of Shari’a law.

In a recent article entitled “The Tsunami of Change” in AQAP’s English language publication *Inspire*, Anwar al-Awlaqi attempts to make the argument that the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya will ultimately benefit al-Qaeda and the broader Salafist movement: “We do not know yet what the outcome [of the revolutions] would be, and we do not have to. The outcome doesn’t have to be an Islamic government for us to consider what is occurring to be a step in the right direction.” [2] He goes on to argue that, at a minimum, “Our mujahideen brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation.” The idea that militant Salafist groups operating in all three countries, especially Egypt, will have more operational freedom is the one cogent argument Awlaqi makes in the article.

The articles in *Inspire* fail to recognize or engage with what most protesters in Yemen and protestors in Egypt are still demanding — democratic reform. At one point in his article, Awlaqi implies that a Taliban style government is what is desired and expected. This is unlikely to resonate among those supportive of the protesters’ demands for democracy and is even unlikely to resonate in more conservative sectors of Yemen society.

There are a number of reasons why a Taliban-like ideology would be unappealing to Yemenis, most particularly the use of qat. Even in regions like Abyan, Lahej, and Shabwa, where AQAP and Salafis reportedly have more of a following, most of the Yemeni men chew qat (a mild stimulant) on a weekly — if not daily — basis. Salafists believe the use of qat is prohibited by Islamic law and must be punished with the death penalty. Nevertheless, qat farming and consumption are integral parts of Yemeni society and the Yemeni economy. It

is estimated that over 80% of Yemeni men chew qat on at least a weekly basis. While the consumption and production of qat have many negative effects on Yemeni society, qat also has a moderating effect that should not be underestimated.

Abyan: An Islamic Emirate?

In the restive southern governorate of Abyan, various news outlets reported that AQAP had taken over parts of the governorate on March 30 and had declared the governorate or at least the town of Ja'ar an "Islamic emirate" (*al-Bawaba*, March 31; Mareb Press, April 1). Supposed members of AQAP made the announcement from a captured radio station in Ja'ar, the site of an ammunition factory/ depot that was looted and then blown up on March 28, killing 150 people. Government sources initially reported that elements of the dormant group Aden Abyan Islamic Army (AAIA) were responsible for looting the factory which produced reloaded AK-47 rounds and small numbers of reconditioned AK-47 rifles (for the AAIA and al-Qaeda, see *Terrorism Monitor* Briefs, November 11, 2010).

Other reports from residents of Ja'ar indicated that the looting occurred after state security forces withdrew from the town. Residents seized the opportunity to enter the factory and loot the ammunition, brass casings, and gunpowder. In many parts of Yemen, ammunition, especially for the ubiquitous AK-47, acts as a form of currency, and in contrast with the Yemeni riyal, is an appreciating currency with prices for a single round having increased roughly forty percent in the last three months. Reports from the area indicated that women and children were involved in the looting—women and children were certainly among the 150 that were killed when the factory blew up (*al-Jazeera*, March 31). While there were almost certainly Salafist militants and/or AQAP elements involved in the looting—it is unlikely that the attack on the factory and subsequent looting were the sole work of militants.

The declaration of an "Islamic emirate" in the wake of the withdrawal of state security forces from Ja'ar and other parts of Abyan should also be looked at with some suspicion. While AQAP and ideologically allied groups do enjoy support in the area, the idea that AQAP has control of the region or the town and can impose a Taliban style regime on the people of Abyan is highly unlikely. Like much of northern Yemen, the tribes of Abyan are highly independent, and while some will shelter AQAP operatives and join their ranks, they are

unlikely to take orders from the leaders of AQAP. For many tribal groups, AQAP is viewed as a weapon and bargaining tool to be wielded against an unpopular and largely unresponsive government.

AQAP's declaration of an Islamic emirate was followed by an order for women who are unaccompanied by a male guardian to remain in their homes. This will not be economically feasible and it contradicts many of the region's cultural and economic roles for women. Abyan's cultural and economic contexts must also be considered when examining likelihood of AQAP's declaration and implementation of an Islamic emirate. Abyan and the neighboring governorate of Lahej are two of Yemen's most important centers of agricultural production. The Abyan Delta has roughly 40,000 hectares of relatively productive farmland, where much of the work is done by women (*Guardian*, April 10).

A Mutually Beneficial Relationship: AQAP, the Salafists and the Saleh Government

While President Saleh and his government have been publicly described by Western governments, the United States in particular, as key allies and partners in the "war on terror," the reality is that the Saleh government's reliability in combating radical elements in Yemen is decidedly mixed. On March 8, concurrent with a prison riot at Sana'a central jail in which one prisoner was killed and 60 injured, at least 70 militant Salafists, some with connections to AQAP, were released from the Sana'a prison of the Political Security Organization (PSO) (*al-Arabiya*, March 8; *The Australian*, April 5). The order to release the prisoners logically had to have originated from someone with considerable power within the Saleh government. The release and "escape" of known militants and al-Qaeda operatives is not without precedent. In 2006, 23 men tunneled out of PSO prison and into an adjoining mosque (see *Terrorism Focus*, February 7, 2006; July 25, 2006). One of the current leaders of AQAP, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, was among the escapees. In 2007, the Yemeni government released Jamal al-Badawi, who was convicted on charges of helping plan the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole after he promised not to be involved in any further al-Qaeda related activities.

The Saleh government has a long history of making use of radical militants. In its long running covert war against the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), the Saleh government recruited and used so-called "Afghan Arabs" (Yemenis and other Arabs

who had fought against Soviet forces in Afghanistan) to launch operations inside PDRY territory. The Afghan Arabs played a key role in the 1994 civil war in which the south tried to secede from the newly created Republic of Yemen.

Relations between the Saleh government and militant Salafist groups like AQAP are likely more complex than is commonly understood. Both have benefited in different ways from the existence of the other. Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, the former minister for religious endowments who oversaw Yemen's de-radicalization program, has claimed that the Saleh government uses the threat of al-Qaeda to blackmail Arab and foreign countries into giving support. Judge al-Hitar went on to argue that the threat of al-Qaeda is being exaggerated and that the number of al-Qaeda operatives is only ten percent of government estimates (News Yemen, April 8; *The National*, April 9). The idea that the Saleh government has an interest in maintaining some level of "terrorist" threat is one that has been voiced by others, including the influential Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar and should be taken into consideration when vetting Yemeni government assessments of AQAP's strength and reach (*Yemen Times*, March 3). At the same time, AQAP and similar groups have benefited from the Saleh regime's inability to consistently assert state control and its failure to provide even the most basic services in most of Yemen.

Opportunities for Growth

The breakdown of the government's already limited authority in areas like Abyan, Lahej, and Shabwa will undoubtedly — as Awlaqi suggests in his article — provide AQAP and other Salafist militants increased operational freedom and space in which to plan and conduct operations. The rapid deterioration of the weak Yemeni economy will likely provide AQAP with additional recruits and opportunities to insert itself into the margins of Yemeni communities. Unemployment in parts of Yemen exceeds 40%. The impasse between anti-government demonstrators and the Saleh government has further increased unemployment rates across the country due to the cessation of activities like construction and road work. The increased instability has also led to rising food prices, a hard currency shortage, and a devaluing Yemeni Riyal. All of these are adding to the already severe economic pressures being felt by communities throughout Yemen. These economic pressures can and will make members of some communities more susceptible to radical ideologies.

AQAP has never developed the kind of social network that the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt developed. The Muslim Brotherhood in its current configuration is not a militant organization so a direct comparison cannot be made; however, AQAP may well learn from the Brotherhood's success in extending its influence by providing communities with basic welfare services in the absence of an effective and responsive government, especially at a time of increasing economic hardship.

On the regional front, the breakdown of state authority and security will mean that AQAP will have greater opportunities to network with groups like the Shabaab Movement of Somalia. There is already evidence that the two groups have established at least a basic strategic and ideological relationship. Yemen has a long unguarded coastline along both the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea and shares part of the strategic strait and chokepoint, the Bab al-Mandab (see *Terrorism Monitor*, February 19, 2010). Moving men and materiel in and out of the country was possible and relatively easy even before the anti-government protests began. Now, with the withdrawal of many state security forces and army troops, insecurity has further increased. Yemen has long been a regional source of black market weapons — the arms smuggling trade in the Red Sea goes back at least two hundred years. The looting and seizure of a number of government arms depots and the fragmented nature of the Yemeni Army likely mean that AQAP will be well supplied with weapons and materiel — more than enough to emerge as a regional supplier to other Salafist inspired militants.

Conclusion

Militant Salafist organizations like AQAP are doctrinally constrained—they are unable to respond to or engage with protesters' demands for elections and democratic reforms. Yet the unrest generated by the changes present them with a host of new opportunities. In Yemen, AQAP has taken advantage of the breakdown of limited government authority in areas like Abyan and Shabwa. It is likely that AQAP has secured more weapons and is on some level attempting to assert its authority over some communities.

Countering the threat that AQAP represents requires addressing Yemen's core economic and development issues. It is only in this way that AQAP will be denied an operating environment. Furthermore, Yemen must transition to a government that is better able and more willing to address the needs of all of its citizens. The

successful development of real participatory democracies in the Middle East and broader Muslim world is critical to undermining the Salafist ideology and the militant groups that want to impose it on the region.

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Notes:

1. Sayyid Qutb, who provides much of the ideological underpinnings for al-Qaeda, argued that all legislation belongs to God alone and therefore that giving human beings the right to legislate contravened the oneness of God and was *shirk*, which means associating something with God and is considered to be the ultimate sin in Islam.

2. *Inspire*, March 2011 issue.