



# Terrorism Monitor

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## LIBYAN ISLAMIST ABD AL-HAKIM BELHADJ ON BENGHAZI CONSULATE ATTACK

One of the most prominent Islamists to emerge as a political power in Libya's post-Qaddafi era has offered his views on the controversial September 11 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi that left four Americans dead. The remarks, carried in an October 9 interview by pan-Arab daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, were made by Abd al-Hakim Belhadj (a.k.a. Abu Abdullah al-Sadiq), head of the Islamist al-Watan ("Homeland") Party and the former head of the post-revolutionary Tripoli Military Council. Belhadj is also a former *amir* of the al-Qaeda-associated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and is believed to have received close support from Qatar during the revolutionary period (for Belhadj's transition to politics, see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 1).

Belhadj adopted a view similar to the earlier and now generally discounted interpretation that the assault on the Benghazi consulate was a spontaneous demonstration inspired by an anti-Islamic film rather than a planned terrorist strike:

The information we received is that the issue at the beginning was spontaneous. The people gathered in front of the consulate, and then an exchange of fire took place between the two sides - between the consulate's guards and the demonstrators, some of whom were armed. This has later resulted in the regrettable action which claimed the life of the U.S. ambassador. We are waiting for the results of the investigations that will provide us with the firm information represented in the facts that will condemn parties and lead us to know those responsible.

Belhadj's remarks were essentially an extension of the Islamist's earlier characterization of the incident:

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We are fully aware that this despicable hate film, “Innocence of Muslims,” does not reflect the American people’s views, and that the producers of this film are an extremist minority. The unequivocal condemnation of the film by U.S. officials made this quite clear. Indeed, a careful analysis of the situation suggests that there is no conflict between our peoples. Rather, a hate campaign led by a small number of extremist Islamophobes has led to unacceptable counter-reactions by small extremist groups. As in the U.S., these extremists do not reflect mainstream opinion (*Guardian*, September 21).

While Belhadj admits he has “heard of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” he notes that, “personally, I have not noticed the presence of al-Qaeda in Libya during my leadership of the Military Council in Tripoli.” Commenting on reports of people affiliated with al-Qaeda involved in the Benghazi consulate attack, Belhadj claims: “In fact, I do not have information on the presence of this organization in Libya. However, as ideas, perhaps there are similar ideas, and we... will work to prevent Libya from becoming a land for targeting or implementing al-Qaeda’s plans or for its presence.”

Though Belhadj is certain to be better informed on the attack than he seems prepared to reveal, nevertheless the former militia commander appears committed for now to a political approach to determining Libya’s future through his Watan Party and is more closely associated with the consulate’s Libyan February 17 Brigade guards than with the parties most likely associated with the attack. However, Belhadj still has reservations about a general demobilization and disarmament of Libya’s roving militias, suggesting that the government should work out a plan to absorb the ex-revolutionaries “and stop chaos, which the proliferation of these groups and weapons may cause.” Nonetheless, Belhadj calls for the establishment of a capable national security administration before the disarmament process, “because if we start with collecting the weapons before building the establishment, this may have an adverse result and this vacuum may be exploited by those who want to shake security or destabilize the country.” Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the state can establish a functioning security role until the militias turn in their weapons, thus leaving the state permanently vulnerable to bursts of political violence such as the one that claimed the lives of U.S. diplomatic and security personnel in Benghazi.

Belhadj was in Benghazi in April, 2011, where he helped organize a new Islamist militia known as the “February 17 Brigade” (*al-Hayat*, January 2). It was this same militia that was later responsible for providing local security at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.

Included in the security force for the Benghazi consulate proper were four members of the Islamist February 17 Brigade, described by a State Department source as “a friendly militia which has basically been deputized by the Libyan government to serve as our security, our host government security.” A further 16 militia members were part of the quick reaction security team based at the CIA compound described as the consulate’s “annex.” [1] Members of the militia engaged with the consulate’s “Special Protection Unit” complained of a lack of training, inadequate weapons and equipment and a general lack of cooperation from the U.S. embassy that culminated in the unit receiving no response to calls for backup during the assault on the Benghazi consulate (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 7).

Formerly led by Islamist Fawzi Bu Kataf, the February 17 Brigade possesses a quantity of heavy weapons and can field 1500 to 3500 fighters (BBC, September 28). Bu Kataf was replaced by Colonel Amraja’a al-Msheiti as commander on September 24 (AFP, September 24).

The February 17 Brigade is one of the so-called “loyal militias” (at least nominally under the control of the Libyan Defense Ministry) in Benghazi. Others include:

- The Martyr Rafallah Sahati Brigade – Formerly led by Ismail al-Salabi (brother of Libya’s leading Islamist, Ali al-Salabi), the Brigade began as a battalion of the February 17 Brigade before forming an independent command during the anti-Qaddafi revolution. On September 24, the Brigade’s commander, Shaykh Muhammad al-Garabi, was replaced by Colonel Salah al-Din bin Umran (AFP, September 24).
- The Libya Shield Brigade – Led by Islamist Wissam bin Hama’ad, the Libya Shield is the most powerful armed group that can be called on by the new Libyan government and has been sent to remote regions such as Kufra Oasis to quell tribal violence and establish the writ of the government (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, June 15).

Other, non-conforming militias active in Benghazi include:

- The Martyrs of Abu Salim Brigade – Prominent in the revolution, the Islamist group was expelled from four public buildings by demonstrators on September 21 (AFP, September 22).
- Ansar al-Shari’a – The Ansar have engaged in the destruction of Sufi shrines and participated in an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in June but have denied

having any role in the latest consulate attack despite eyewitness accounts placing Ansar al-Shari'a fighters at the scene and movement spokesmen later responding to news of the assault with approval. The movement is a fierce opponent of democratic initiatives in Libya and is believed to have carried out a number of prominent assassinations, including the July 28 murder of General Abd al-Fatah Yunis and two of his aides (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, August 4, 2011). After being driven from their compound and base at Benghazi's al-Jala'a hospital by hundreds of angry demonstrators, Ansar al-Shari'a fighters are reported to have fled Benghazi and Derna for their home turf in the Jabal Akhdar mountains of eastern Libya with some 150 to 200 men and 17 vehicles (*Guardian*, October 9).

Libyan leader Muhammad al-Megaryef has used public anger against the militias (who appear to have been surprised by the degree of resentment expressed by protesters in Benghazi's September 21 anti-militia demonstrations) to try and bring the leadership of the "loyal militias" into line with the nascent Libyan government security forces by assigning Army chief Yusuf al-Mangush to replace their commanders with colonels from the official Libyan military (BBC, September 24).

Despite such efforts, there is a near certainty of a retaliatory drone strike targeting armed militants responsible for the consulate attack before the U.S. presidential election. Numerous drones have been reported by local observers in the night skies over Benghazi, though it is difficult to confirm the accuracy of such reports. Abd al-Hakim Belhadj has publically warned the United States that it would be "unwise" to "send drones into Libyan airspace or [send] naval destroyers to its shores" (*Guardian*, September 21).

Note:

1. State Department Background Briefing on Libya, Washington, D.C., October 9, 2012, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2012/10/state-department-background-briefing-on-libya/>.

## ALGERIAN LEADERS OF AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB REASSERT CONTROL WITH APPOINTMENT OF NEW SAHARAN AMIR

AQIM's Algerian leadership has appointed al-Vourghan Brigade leader Jemal Oukacha (a.k.a. Yahya Abu al-Hammam) as its new Saharan *amir* (Agence Nouakchott

d'Information, October 4). Al-Hammam's appointment was intended to fill a vacancy created when Nabil Makhroufi (a.k.a. Abu al-Kama) was killed a month ago, allegedly in a "car accident" in the desert between Gao and Timbuktu (*Le Temps d'Algerie* [Algiers], October 5).

Al-Hammam is a native of Reghaia, a town in Algiers Province in northern Algeria, and has been involved in the Islamist militancy since 2000, when he finished an 18-month term in prison and joined the Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC), which later became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The young jihadi began to come into prominence through his participation in several raids against Mauritanian and Algerian military posts under Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid. In 2006, al-Hammam was sentenced to death in absentia in Biskra on terrorism-related charges. By 2010 he was heavily involved in the kidnapping of European nationals in the Sahel region with the Vourghan Brigade (*Liberté* [Algiers], October 6).

Al-Hammam is believed to be very close to AQIM leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadad) and his appointment can be seen as an attempt by the Boumerdes-based leadership to reassert their authority in the wild Sahara/Sahel sector, where movement commanders have grown used to a large degree of autonomy in their operations and decision-making.

Al-Hammam's promotion appears to have come at the expense of Mulatham Brigade leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who was reported to have been seriously wounded in a clash with Tuareg rebels earlier this year (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, July 12). If this is the case, the appointment may well create new tensions within the movement, but the decision marks Droukdel's intention to establish firmer control of the movement's southern brigades in anticipation of a major confrontation with ECOWAS, African Union or Western forces in northern Mali in the coming months. News of the appointment was apparently accompanied by orders from the AQIM leadership to Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaid and others to respect the decision (*El-Khabar* [Algiers], October 6). It has been reported that the division of spoils from AQIM's lucrative Saharan kidnapping business has been a recent source of friction between the movement's southern *amirs*.

AQIM's dominance in the Sahara/Sahel region is now being challenged by the rival Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), which is attracting large numbers of sub-Saharan recruits (*Jeune Afrique*, October 14). A spokesman for the Mulatham Brigade denied Algerian reports that Mokhtar Belmokhtar was injured in a clash between the AQIM Brigade and MUJWA fighters on September 27 (*Le*

*Temps d'Algerie*, October 1). Nonetheless, al-Hammam's appointment is in part an effort to reinvigorate AQIM's profile in the region.

With an external military intervention in Mali very unlikely before the end of the year, both AQIM and MUJWA have an opportunity to rally supporters and prepare an armed response. MUJWA leader Omar Ould Hamaha has warned France against adopting an aggressive stance against the Islamists of northern Mali as well as claiming Mauritania's armed forces would be no match for MUJWA fighters, who he says are more experienced and better armed than Mauritanian troops (*al-Akhbar* [Nouakchott], October 6). Algeria appears to be favoring an approach that would simultaneously encourage dialogue with northern Mali's Tuareg rebels (without exclusion) while isolating AQIM and MUJWA from the local community (*Tout sur l'Algerie* [Algiers], October 12).

## Fears of a Militant Resurgence Loom in Kashmir as Territorial Dispute is Revived at UN Forum

Animesh Roul

The security situation in the Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) state of India has reached a new low in the past few months as militant organizations backed by Islamabad have stepped up a campaign of politically-motivated violence by targeting vital infrastructure in the region and attacking civil society members. The region's status remains disputed by Pakistan, which refers to J&K as "Indian-occupied Kashmir." In what seems to be a shift in terrorist tactics, the militants have begun focusing on soft targets such as workers, engineers and village-level political representatives.

On September 23, armed militants in Kashmir's Baramulla District shot and killed local headman Mohammad Shafi Teli, affiliated to the ruling Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC). Earlier in the month, Ghulam Mohammad Yatoo, *sarpanch* (elected village chief) of Raipora village, was killed on September 10. These assassinations, similar to others carried out this year, suggest that the militants have resorted to these tactics to undermine ongoing grassroots democratic efforts in the troubled region.

Cross border violence has remarkably subsided in J&K

over the past few years. The state has witnessed only two major incidents in as many years, including the March 22 car blast in the Bijbehara town of Anantnag district and the January, 2010 Harkat al-Mujahideen attack at the Lal Chowk city square in Srinagar (*Kashmir Times*, March 22; *Daily Excelsior* [Jammu], January 7, 2010).

Astoundingly, successful local civic elections were held in J&K in 2011 after a gap of ten years in the face of militant threats to people taking part in the political process. However, in the wake of renewed threats and targeted killings, hundreds of representatives have resigned, triggering a governance crisis in the state. No militant organizations have claimed responsibility so far for the September incidents. In August, J&K police found handwritten posters from hitherto unknown groups with names like Lashkar-e-al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda Mujahideen demanding village representatives resign in various places in southern Kashmir. These posters also threatened acid attacks on women if they failed to wear the veil in public places (*Indian Express*, August 13). While the veracity of these groups is still shrouded in mystery, the finger of suspicion is firmly on two major Pakistan based terror groups operating in J&K; Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hizbul Mujahideen, both of whom have circulated pamphlets on many prior occasions threatening to target village representatives who have been part of the government since the 2011 elections. Both groups have regularly issued warnings to members of local self-government bodies in Pulwama, Kulgam, Shopian and parts of Baramulla District either to resign or face dire consequences.

The militants have not spared engineers and workers who are engaged in the Wullar barrage construction in north Kashmir's Bandipora district. In late August, militants reportedly carried out an attack destroying property belonging to the Irrigation and Flood Control Department and threatened construction personnel to stop work on the ongoing barrage project (*Greater Kashmir* [Srinagar], October 10). The Wullar Barrage (or Tulbul Project) has been the center of a bilateral dispute since Pakistan demanded a cessation in work in 1987 on the grounds that the project would divert water from the Jhelum River and thus violate the 1960 Indus Water Treaty (IWT). India has recently resumed work on the project despite Pakistan's continued objections.

According to Indian Army chief-of-staff General Bikram Singh, there are nearly 400 terrorists active within J&K state (*Business Standard/PTI*, October 13). Faced with stiff resistance from Indian security forces over the years, stifled Pakistan-based jihadi groups have demanded Pakistan's

active support in carrying out an armed insurgency. Fearing Pakistan's abandonment, jihadi groups led by the Muzafarabad-based United Jihad Council (UJC) have even threatened to take arms against Pakistan. In the words of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen chief and UJC leader Syed Salahuddin: "We are fighting Pakistan's war in Kashmir and if it withdraws its support, the war would be fought inside Pakistan" (*Times of India*, June 8).

Recent overt efforts inside Pakistan to garner support for jihad in Kashmir suggest the campaign is having some effect. Groups like Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Badr Mujahideen, though banned under the laws of the land, have been organizing processions, rallies and conferences to raise funds and scout new talent for jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan. One such incident came to light in July when the above mentioned groups organized a two-day "Shuada [Martyrs] Conference" in the Swan Adda area of Rawalpindi (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], July 9).

Similar efforts are underway in Indian-administered Kashmir as well. Groups like Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Taiba are targeting the teenaged youth of J&K, exploiting tensions created by recent civilian uprisings against police and paramilitary excesses. J&K police sources claimed that Kashmir's youth are increasingly opting for subversive activities in places like Sopore, Pulwama and Tral (*Indian Express* [New Delhi], July 24).

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari's September 25 speech at the 67th session of the UN General Assembly described Kashmir as a symbol of UN failure and has seemingly stirred up the unresolved territorial issue. India promptly described Zardari's reference to Kashmir as unwarranted and reiterated that Jammu and Kashmir State is an integral part of India. The India-Pakistan *bonhomie* that followed various diplomatic efforts to normalize relations between the two nations is once again threatened by the addition of Kashmir to the bilateral agenda.

The rhetoric of the UJC and the newly formed Difah Pakistan Council (DPC - an umbrella group) claims that Pakistan is constitutionally, morally and religiously bound to support mujahideen for the liberation of Kashmir. (*Express Tribune*, February 4, 2011). Zardari himself once said in Muzafarabad that these militant proxies were deliberately "created and nurtured" as a policy to achieve "some short-term tactical objectives" (*Daily Times* (Lahore), January 6, 2010).

Like past governments in Islamabad, the current administration of Asif Zardari banks on the Kashmir issue

for its political survival, ostensibly signaling the militants to continue their armed struggle to keep the Kashmir issue alive. The regular verbal sparring over Kashmir notwithstanding, even a degree of tacit support from Pakistani agencies for a renewed proxy war would soon come to haunt Indian authorities.

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## Can Somalia's al-Shabaab Survive the Loss of Kismayo?

*Muhyadin Ahmed Roble*

The Somali militant group al-Shabaab gave up its stronghold in the southern port town of Kismayo on September 29 following a Kenyan offensive from the land, air and sea (Radio Mogadishu, September 29; Bar-Kulan Radio [Nairobi], September 29). Kismayo, which is about 328 miles (528 km) southwest of Mogadishu, the country's capital, was the main target of Kenya's "Operation Linda Nchi" (Defend the Country), launched a year ago by Kenyan military forces (see *Terrorism Monitor*, October 28, 2011).

The strategic southern port was the last remaining stronghold of the Shabaab militants who have suffered many setbacks since they withdrew from Mogadishu a year ago. Controlled by the militants since 2009, Kismayo was al-Shabaab's greatest revenue source, provided largely through taxation of the port and customs duties. Kismayo and the other Shabaab-held southern seaport of Marka were believed to have generated \$35 to \$50 million annually from taxation. Both ports are now under the control of Somali government forces and troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

The fall of Kismayo is a clear signal of the weakness of the militants but not a sign of total ruin. When the militants withdrew from Mogadishu a year ago government officials hurried to celebrate the end of the militants' presence in the city. What al-Shabaab spokesman Shaykh Ali Mohamud Raage termed the "first phase of the new war" materialized as the militants carried out a series of suicide attacks and assassinations in the heart of Mogadishu (Allpuntland.com, August 6, 2011; Shabelle.net, August 6). It may be that the toughest fight is yet to come for the allied forces in Kismayo.

The militants are now financially and militarily weaker thanks to their internal strife, but the movement can still conduct an effective guerrilla-style war, using tactics that are more amenable to its strengths. Their withdrawal is a strategy by which the movement will benefit from using what it knows best – the type of guerrilla warfare that made the two-year presence of Ethiopian troops in the country a nightmare and left it more unstable than before the Ethiopian intervention.

Al-Shabaab spokesman Shaykh Ali Mohamud Raage described the movement's withdrawal from Kismayo as a "tactical decision" but threatened to continue fighting inside the city (AFP, September 29). The movement's Twitter account announced that Kismayo would be transformed from "a peaceful city governed by Islamic Shari'a into a battle-zone." Three explosions rocked the city on October 2, just a day after the allied Somali and Kenyan forces assumed control. About eight people, including government soldiers, were wounded in the attacks (Bar Kulan Radio, October 2).

Shaykh Abdiaziz Abu Musab, an al-Shabaab spokesman, claimed responsibility for an attack that rocked the district headquarters building housing Somali troops. The government said a grenade was thrown at government vehicles passing in front of the building, but the Shabaab spokesman said the bomb was planted inside the building housing Somali troops, warning: "This is only an introduction to the forthcoming explosions" (Reuters, October 2). Two government soldiers were killed and five others were wounded on October 9 after their vehicle hit a remote controlled land-mine. (Shabelle Radio [Mogadishu], October 9).

Shaykh Ahmed Madobe, the leader of Ras Kamboni militia allied to the Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) reported that al-Shabaab had left an estimated 500 fighters in Kismayo "to cause trouble" (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], September 26). These fighters are secretly hiding in the city to carry out terrorist attacks against the allied forces.

Al-Shabaab assassins have killed about seven people in the city since their withdrawal, including a well-known traditional elder. Some of the victims were targeted on suspicion of having contacts with the Somali government or of showing support for the fall of Kismayo (Raxanreeb Radio, September 29).

In Somalia, the history of the war against al-Shabaab shows that seizing a city does not matter greatly. For al-Shabaab, having a city taken from them without a fight has recently become common, but securing the city from al-Shabaab operatives is another matter. In Mogadishu, the militants are still engaged in assassinations, suicide bombings and ambushing government troops and African Union peacekeepers. On only his third day in office, newly-elected president Hassan Shaykh Mohamud narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by al-Shabaab suicide bombers carried

out at a hotel near the Mogadishu airport where he was meeting with Kenyan delegates.

Though the Kenyan land forces in Somalia are now integrated into AMISOM, they are unlikely to continue moving further into the country with their Somali government and AMISOM partners. Nairobi's main goal in Somalia is to form an autonomous state of "Jubaland" as a buffer zone between Kenya and the rest of the Somali state.

This is where another problem starts. Kismayo, the country's fourth largest city, has been a heartland of the civil war since the government collapsed in 1991. Hostile clans fought for control of the city, a regional economic hub due to the presence of its airport and seaport providing links to the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. The city has changed hands several times between various clans and warlords, presenting a more complex picture than that of Mogadishu.

Nairobi is currently hosting a conference aimed at forming an administration for Kismayo. Some clans in Kismayo have already started complaining of being neglected by the Nairobi conference. The new Somali president has also asked Kenya to stop the conference and let the Somali government form an administration that can bring the hostile clans together (Raxanreeb Radio, September 29).

The Juba region's clans remain divided about forming a new administration for Kismayo. Members of the newly elected Somali parliament, politicians and elders from the Juba region who met in Mogadishu on October 6 demanded that the Somali government be allowed to form an administration for Kismayo. Former deputy prime minister, Abdirahman Haji Aden Ibrahim 'Ibbi' (who was among those politicians in attendance) said that Somalia must have independence in its internal issues (Radio Muqdisho, October 6).

Some clans are suspicious of Kenya's role in establishing the Juba region's administration. Kenya is pushing Shaykh Ahmed Madobe, its ally and the leader of the Ras Kamboni militia, to lead the new Juba region administration. Other clans consider such moves to be part of an attempt to establish the dominance of the Ogaden clan (a sub-clan of the Darod) in the Somali borderlands. The Ogaden clan is found in north-eastern Kenya as well as southern Somalia and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Kenya's defense minister, Muhammad Yusuf Haji, and Farah Maalim, the deputy speaker of Kenya's National Assembly, both Ogaden clan members, are believed to be advocating for the "Ogadenization" of the Juba region, though Shaykh Ahmed Madobe describes such assertions as "propaganda churned out by the Somali rumor-mills and idlers in Nairobi" (*Daily Nation*, September 26).

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## Note

1. Report of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, July 18, 2011, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2011/433](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2011/433).

## Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Sets Assassins Loose in Strategic Shift

*Ludovico Carlino*

The experiment in governance by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the allied Ansar al-Shari'a movement that attempted to establish seven Islamic Emirates in southern Yemen ended in July after less than a year. The end came with a massive June offensive against the main AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a strongholds of Jaar and Zinjibar (Abyan governorate) by the Yemeni army, backed by the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). This offensive paved the way for the government's seizure of Lahj governorate the following month (Yemen Post, July 20). Along with this territorial setback, AQAP suffered other crushing blows as a consequence of U.S. drone strikes and a new momentum in the counterterrorist operations ushered in by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's administration, which has resulted in the killing of several top-level figures and dozens of detentions. Bereft of its operational bases and under increasing pressure from improved Yemeni-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation, AQAP appears to be on the defensive, operating mostly in the shadows. Nevertheless the Islamist group is gradually adapting its strategy and tactics, not merely attacking political, security and military targets through a persistent campaign of low profile operations, but by also bringing its struggle to the capital Sana'a and other new areas of the country.

### AQAP's Assassination Scheme

The new direction of the jihadist campaign in Yemen was first announced in June by the Ansar al-Shari'a's amir, Abu Hamza al-Murqoshi. In an interview, al-Murqoshi openly declared that, if the government "would not stop mounting campaigns in Abyan to annihilate its people, we will certainly transfer the battle to other regions and to the major cities like Sana'a, Aden and others" (Madad News Agency, June 15). Confirmation of al-Murqoshi's warning came just three days later, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in Aden, killing

General Salem Qutn, military commander of the Southern Region of Yemen and one of the highest ranking security officers assassinated in the country so far (*Yemen Times*, June 21). AQAP claimed responsibility for Qutn's killing, clarifying in its communiqué that the general was targeted for his leading role in the military campaign in Abyan and Shabwa governorates. The message also warned of a similar fate for all those involved in the army's offensive. [1] As the army mounted new operations in southern Yemen after Qutn's assassination, AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a effectively shifted from guerrilla warfare to an assassination campaign directed against three main targets - security symbols and officials of the Yemeni Government; members of the security establishment responsible for investigations of AQAP attacks and operations and lastly, elements of the PRC, regional militias made up of local tribes that have sustained the army's offensive against the two Islamist groups (*Al-Tagheer* [Sana'a], August 20).

The efforts of AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a in this new phase of the Islamist insurgency have been both persistent and effective:

- In July, Colonel Mohammed al-Qutami, an officer of Yemen's Political Security Intelligence (PSI), was killed after a bomb planted in his car exploded in al-Sitten neighbourhood in Sana'a (*Al-Akhar* [Beirut], July 4).
- Also in July, AQAP killed the 12-year-old son of Shaykh Majid al-Dhahab, leader of al-Qayfa tribe in al-Bayda governorate. The shaykh's son was killed when handed a package filled with explosives from a man claiming it was a gift for his father, with a message reading, "Those who stand against al-Qaeda will be killed" (Yemen Post, July 28).
- After three prior assassination attempts, Colonel Abdullah al-Maouzaei, a senior police officer responsible for tracking down AQAP militants, was killed a few days later by an IED placed in his car in Aden (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], July 24).
- In early August, AQAP assassins targeted Brigadier General Omar Barashid, killing the dean of the Command and General Staff College and his bodyguard in a roadside bombing in al-Mukalla, Hadramawt governorate (AFP, August 10).
- Colonel Yahya Saleh al-Khadili of the Duleim Air Base headquarters was shot dead outside his home in Sana'a on September (*Saba News*, September 5).

- General Abdullah al-Ashwal, one of the most prominent intelligence officer in Yemen's Political Security Intelligence, was shot dead in central Sana'a by masked men on a motorcycle (Yemen Times, September 27).
- Colonel Ahmed al-Bakarani, a senior intelligence official, was killed at his office in Aden (Yemen Post, September 30).
- Five people were killed (though not the target) in a September 27 bombing in Lawdar intended to kill Muhammad al-Aidorous, head of the Jaar PRC that helped expel al-Qaeda from Zinjibar (*al-Shorfa* [Sana'a], October 5; Yemen Post, September 29).
- Yemen's Defense Minister, Muhammad Nasser Ahmad, has been the target of seven assassination attempts by AQAP since the interim government came into existence last year. The last of these efforts came on September 11 when an explosion outside a Yemeni Cabinet meeting killed 12 people but left the Minister unharmed (Yemen Times, September 11).

Alongside this series of assassinations against personalities of the security establishment, AQAP unleashed a string of revenge attacks at the same time against local tribes blamed for changing sides by fighting alongside the Yemeni Army in its offensive in the south. Tellingly, AQAP militants attempted without success on five occasions to assassinate Abd al-Latif al-Sayyed, leader of the PRC in Jaar and a former AQAP operative who now commands PRC units responsible for fighting Ansar al-Shari'a and AQAP in southern Yemen (*Saba News*, September 22, *Yemen Times*, September 23).

On the one hand, this assassination campaign suggests that AQAP, after its failure in open warfare in southern Yemen and the loss of its strongholds in that region, is resorting to old tactics while trying to retain its relevance by showing an ability to eliminate those who stand against the movement. On the other hand, AQAP still seems to retain the potential to stage major operations and can easily move its operatives throughout other parts of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a, in a clear attempt to counterbalance its debacle in the south.

### Counterterrorist Pressures

While an August 6 suicide bombing that killed 55 people during a tribal gathering outside the home of AQIM-defector and PRC commander Abd al-Latif al-Sayed in Batis (Abyan governorate) marked the bloodiest AQAP attack in the last five months, an attack against a police academy in Sana'a resulting in ten police cadets being killed, highlighted

the ability of the organization to strike the security apparatus at its core and to a certain degree to exploit its weaknesses (Yemen Observer, August 6; Yemen Post, August 4, *al-Shofra*, August 7; *Yemen Times*, July 12). The latter operation appeared to be a preparatory stage for the assault against the intelligence headquarters in Aden, in which a group of militants first detonated a suicide car-bomb and then raided the building with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades, killing 14 members of the security forces (*Saba News*, August 18). It was the third attack of this kind against the same building in the last few years.

While in many respects attacking Yemeni security symbols falls within AQAP's overall strategic priorities, it is also possible to discern a calculated situational response by the movement, which has been crippled by drone raids that have made its sanctuaries increasingly unsafe, and by the sustained counterterrorist efforts implemented by the Yemeni administration. President Hadi has so far been more cooperative with U.S. counterterrorism officials than his predecessor Ali Abdullah Saleh, as seen in the remarks of Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, who said his government had requested that the U.S. uses drones "in some cases" to target al-Qaeda leaders and militants (*al-Arabiya*, June 27). The militants see the UAV raids as lethal weapons and difficult to elude, a view confirmed both by the growing references to drones in AQAP propaganda and by the number of operatives killed in remote strikes. AQAP blame the Hadi administration and the president's security officials for being directly responsible for the increase in U.S. drone operations and for being a party to "Obama's Crusade." [2]

Despite mounting some lethal attacks in recent months, AQAP has undoubtedly suffered serious blows to both its operational capabilities and organizational abilities as a consequence of drone strikes. The group has been forced to look for new areas to set up training camps due to the vulnerability of its previous sanctuaries to air strikes, such as those in the Rada'a district of al-Bayda'a governorate. According to the Yemeni Interior Ministry, AQAP tried to move operatives to Ibb and al-Daleh governorates last July, where the mountainous and rugged topography of the region would offer better protection from drone attacks (*al-Shorfa*, July 16).

In addition, AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a have been noticeably tardy in claiming responsibility for attacks in recent months, and it is safe to assume that their media apparatus has been severely weakened by the combined effort of airstrikes and counterterrorism operations. As media prolificacy has been one of the hallmarks of both groups so far, it is particularly striking that AQAP has not yet issued any statement to



confirm or deny the death of Sa'id al-Shihri, the militant organization's Saudi deputy *amir*. Yemen's Defense Ministry claimed that al-Shihri was killed on September 2 in a military operation in the Wadi al-Ain area of Hadramout along with six other militants, allegedly in a strike carried out by an unmanned U.S. Predator (*Saba News*, September 10). However, the body suspected to be that of al-Shihri was too badly burned to permit normal means of identification. A Yemeni official from the criminal investigation announced that an American team was expected in Yemen to conduct a DNA test on what was believed to be al-Shihri's body (*Asharq al-Awsat*, September 16, *Yemen Observer*, September 20). Should it be confirmed, the death of the AQAP deputy emir would undeniably represent a painful blow to the organization, extending a list of senior members killed by drones in the last months that includes Khalid Batis, involved in the 2002 bombing of the French oil tanker *Limburg*, Kaid al-Dhahab, AQAP's *amir* in Baydah, and Fahd al-Quso, who has been described as AQAP's external operations chief.

## Conclusion

Under the constant pressure of combined U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorist efforts and having failed to hold their southern emirates, AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a are currently on the defensive, operating in the shadows through a sustained assassination campaign against security and governmental figures of the Yemeni establishment. Nevertheless the organizations retain the capability of staging major operations, mainly due to their ability to exploit the weaknesses of the Yemeni security apparatus. It is conceivable that this scheme is partially the result of a strategic adaptation made by the two organizations, which have presented their retreat from the south as "a tactical withdrawal that surprised and shocked everyone while preserving all the forces and ammunitions." [3] While in many respects speaking about a strategic withdrawal is an obvious propaganda effort aimed at disguising their real level of despair, the tactical retreat is not a novelty in the jihadist parlance. The *hijra*, in reference to the journey or migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution, has been a deliberate strategy adopted by a number of jihadist groups and it could now represent an appropriate move for AQAP while it tries to reorganize its ranks and recover its relevance by resorting to low profile attacks.

In their efforts to restore the Islamist militant movement, AQAP still sees possibilities in the on-going political turmoil. The complex Yemeni transition, the difficulties the Hadi administration is facing in reorganizing the security establishment and the lack of government control in large

swathes of Yemeni territory all represent major opportunities for AQAP to expand its fighting capabilities and try to reclaim its lost territory. However, it is also unquestionable that the animosity of large segments of the local tribes, the rise of the Popular Resistance Committees as new popular foes and the pressure brought by increased counterterrorist activities are all elements working against the success of the AQAP strategic shift.

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## Notes

1. AQAP statement no. 54, <https://alfidaa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=34829>
2. Ansar al-Sharia News Report, Issue 19, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=162284>
3. Abu Zubair Adil bin Abdullah al-Adab, "Gains and Benefits of control over parts of Abyan and Shabwah," <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=170781>