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F/A-18 taking off from the USS Carl Vinson for operations in Iraq (Source U.S. Navy)

AIRSTRIKES, GROUND OFFENSIVES PUT ISLAMIC STATE ON THE BACK FOOT

James Brandon

During the last two weeks, a series of mainly military developments have inflicted significant damage on the Islamic State organization, as the power of the extensive international coalition ranged against it begins to take effect.

Military jets and drones operated by the United State and, to a far lesser extent, its coalition partners have continued to strike a number of Islamic State targets in region, with the U.S.'s Western allies focusing on Iraq (where they can claim to be supporting the Iraqi government) and its other, mainly Arab, allies on targets on Syria. The effect of the attacks is disputed. The Australian military, for instance, claimed that one series of airstrikes on "a large, well-established and hidden network of caves and bunkers" near Kirkuk in Iraq had killed as many as 100 Islamic State fighters and that the "advance of ISIL [the Islamic State] across Iraq has slowed" (*Sydney Morning Herald*; ABC (Australia), November 25). The Syrian foreign minister, however, said that the Islamic State organization was "not weaker" due to the airstrikes and repeated his calls for Turkey to be forced to "control its borders" and stop the flow of jihadist fighters into Syria (al-Mayadeen TV, November 28). Iranian Air Force F-4 Phantom jets also carried out airstrikes in areas of Iraq bordering Iran, reportedly with tacit U.S. approval; their exact targets were unclear (*Haaretz*, December 2).

Backed by such airstrikes, and no doubt various foreign special operations forces, Iraqi Kurdish forces claimed in late November to have taken back five villages south of Erbil, in the Gweir and Makhmour areas (al-Jazeera, November 30). The Islamic State's capture of these villages this summer was key in promoting international intervention, amid concern that Iraqi Kurdistan was itself threatened by the organization's advance. Meanwhile, additional Iraqi state-backed Shi'a militia forces arrived in Kirkuk on November 29-30 to further bolster local defences against Islamic State forces; local

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Washington, DC • 20036
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Fax: (202) 483-8337

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media reports described these as being the al-Ahbab and al-Nasr brigades, allegedly operating with the assistance of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and being equipped with heavy artillery and missiles (Rudaw, December 1). The units reportedly dug themselves in on arrival, even digging a trench around their encampment; an unusual step that suggests – by Iraqi standards at least – a higher than usual level of discipline and training, which in turn suggests these units could play an important role in tackling the Islamic State organization in the region.

Meanwhile, in the Syrian Kurdish-majority city of Kobane, the Islamic State organization has been pushed back through a mixture of airstrikes and Kurdish ground troops. In one 24-hour period alone, on November 29, over 50 Islamic State fighters were reportedly killed in the town, its heaviest daily loss there to date (al-Jazeera, November 30). Then on December 2, 150 fresh Iraqi Kurdish troops were rotated into Kobane through Turkey, partly relieving existing Kurdish forces there, a luxury that the hard-pressed Islamic State forces do not enjoy (Rudaw, December 2). Kurdish forces now claim to control the majority of Kobane, although they say that Islamic State forces have heavily mined areas of Kobane still under the militant group's control (al-Arabiya, November 29).

The recent fighting has cost the Islamic State organization some of its highest profile figures. These include Islam Yaken, a wealthy, formerly liberal, Egyptian volunteer who was one of Islamic State's social media stars (al-Arabiya, December 2). In addition, the increased fighting has killed some of the organization's prized Western volunteers. A British citizen of east African origin, Abu Musa al-Sumali, was reportedly killed in fighting near Kirkuk, although his death has not been confirmed by the UK government (*Daily Mail*, December 1). In addition, a British convert of Christian Eritrean origin, known as Abu Abdullah al-Habashi, and another man from London called Abu Dharda were killed in Kobane, either by airstrikes or by Kurdish fighters (BBC, November 22). Claims made by Iraqi state TV that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's leader and self-styled "Caliph," was wounded in an airstrike have not been verified, however, and appear unlikely to be true. Al-Baghdadi suffered a personal setback in late November when one of his wives and his son were reportedly arrested while crossing into northern Lebanon from Syria; his wife remains in detention and is being interrogated (*Daily Star* [Beirut], December 2). Given Hezbollah, Iranian and Western influence over the Lebanese security services, this potentially gives anti-Islamic State forces some personal leverage over al-Baghdadi, as well as putting increased psychological pressure on the militant leader. The Iraqi government, however, has disputed the woman's identity.

BEHEADING OF POLICEMAN IN TUNISIA ILLUSTRATES CONTINUING JIHADIST THREAT

James Brandon

On November 30, armed men stopped a civilian car near the city of El Kef, which is located in northwest Tunisia close to the Algerian border. When they found that one of the two men in the car was an off-duty policeman, they abducted him and drove off in the vehicle. The following day the policeman's body was found near the town of Touiref, seven miles north of El Kef. He had been beheaded (Reuters, December 1). No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, but it was almost certainly carried by one of the country's small jihadist cells that have periodically been active along the Algerian border since Tunisia's 2011 revolution.

In response to the attack, the police union has called for off-duty policemen to be allowed to carry arms, especially in areas affected by terrorism, an indication that the security services feel increasingly targeted by militants (*La Presse* [Tunis], December 2). A previous attack near El Kef earlier in the month had also targeted the security forces when five soldiers were killed when gunmen attacked their bus (Magharebia, November 6). In addition, on December 1, underling the threat from militancy, a mine or improvised explosive device (IED) attack struck an army vehicle in the Kasserine region, also located in northwest Tunisia, killing one soldier and injuring another (*La Presse* [Tunis], December 2). The incident occurred as the army was conducting land and air operations against suspected jihadist hideouts in the Jebel Sammama area.

These attacks underline that small jihadist groups remain active along parts of the border region, where they primarily stage small attacks and ambushes against the security forces. In response, the government is engaged in almost continuous counter-terrorism operations along the Algerian border area. For instance, on December 1, the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior said that five suspected terrorists had been arrested in the Mount Chaambi area of Kasserine province, as part of a fresh government anti-terrorism sweep (Tunis Afrique Presse, December 1). In October, the government said that it had so far arrested 1,500 suspected jihadists during the year to date (al-Arabiya, November 6).

The latest abduction and beheading of the police officer comes as Tunisia is midway through its election process, with the first round of presidential elections having taken place on November 23 and the final round being scheduled for December 28. Although militants have not, so far, targeted the elections – perhaps because they thought this would

excessively alienate the Tunisian populace – the latest attacks nonetheless show that, despite broad support for democracy in Tunisia, jihadists remain active in the country and continue to pose a threat, particularly in rural and outlying areas. This is underlined by the disproportionately large presence of Tunisian jihadists in Syria and Iraq; according to recent research around 5,000 Tunisian fighters have joined that conflict (*al-Hayat*, November 3).

Lashkar-e-Zil: Al-Qaeda’s ‘Shock and Awe’ Force

Farhan Zahid

One effect of the rise of the Islamic State organization is that its rival al-Qaeda has had to try harder to attract global attention, funding, and recruits. The establishment of a new al-Qaeda branch, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, is one major step taken by the group’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to retake the initiative from the Islamic State organization. This is likely to involve reinvigorating al-Qaeda’s operational capabilities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, also with slightly more focus on operations in India. As part of this, al-Qaeda’s elite unit, Lashkar-e-Zil (Shadow Army, LeZ), is likely to play a key role.

Background

Prior to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, al-Qaeda had trained its own version of a special forces unit, known as Brigade-055, at a specialized facility at Rishikor near Kabul. This comprised hard core jihadists from many places around the world, including Chechnya, Uzbekistan, China, Pakistan, Europe, North America and Algeria. After the U.S. invasion and relocating to the relative sanctuary of Pakistan’s tribal areas, a top priority for al-Qaeda was to revive Brigade-055 with fresh blood. Al-Qaeda was at the same time recruiting thousands of Pakistanis from radical Islamist groups based in Pakistan and the hundreds of them immediately moved to the tribal areas. Many of these individuals often already had some fighting experience alongside Kashmiri Islamist organizations and militant sectarian groups based in Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) and Jaysh-e-Muhammad in particular provided new recruits for al-Qaeda. In this promising environment, al-Qaeda leadership’s decided to establish LeZ in 2002 as a mainly-Pakistani “shock and awe” force to replace Brigade 055. [1]

Despite the fact that most of the volunteers hailed from Pakistani Islamist groups, Lashkar-e-Zil was initially led by Khalid Habib, an Egyptian, until his death in 2008 in a CIA drone strike near his base in North Waziristan. Abdullah Saeed al-Libi then assumed charge of the group until his death, once again in a U.S. drone strike, in December 2009. The leadership then went to Ilyas Kashmiri, leader of Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami and its sub-group Brigade 313, both originally active in the Indian Kashmir Islamist insurgency. Kashmiri, who was to prove LeZ’s most active and dynamic commander, died in a U.S. drone strike in June

2011 (*The News* [Islamabad], December 3, 2012). The last known commander of LeZ was Mustafa Abu Yazid who was killed in July in a drone strike in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan (*The News* [Islamabad], July 22). Because of the repeated killings of LeZ commanders by U.S. drone strikes, the identity of new commander has not yet been disclosed by al-Qaeda.

Merger with Brigade 313

One of Kashmiri's key moves as LeZ leader was to merge the group with Brigade 313, a wing of the Islamist Kashmiri militant organization HuJI, which Kashmiri had himself been military commander of. The merger was partly made possible because Kashmiri and HuJI amir Qari Saifullah Akhter were close to the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda during the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan; HuJI recruits had received training at al-Qaeda-run camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. [2] Benefits of the merger between LeZ and Brigade 313 included sharing expertise and training facilities and allowing both greater access to funds provided by al-Qaeda sympathizers in Middle Eastern countries and from Islamist charities based in the Middle East, North America and Western Europe. The merger contributed substantially to the increase in LeZ's operations under Kashmiri.

Operational Capabilities

While remaining part of al-Qaeda, LeZ has acted largely as an auxiliary unit providing support to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and associated extremist groups. After getting readied for action, the LeZ began conducting terrorist attacks against both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border from 2007 onward. In Afghanistan, its operations were largely conducted in collusion with Afghan Taliban forces against U.S. and Afghan security forces. In Pakistan, its primary targets have included military installations, such as air force and naval bases, and it has assassinated Pakistani military officers involved in targeting Taliban and al-Qaeda militants. For instance, Pakistani journalist Amir Mir has claimed that both TTP and al-Qaeda used LeZ forces for several important attacks, including storming a Pakistani military base in Sudhnoti district of Pakistan-administered Kashmir in January 2010, a December 2009 suicide attack at Forward Operating Base Chapman near Khost in Afghanistan and carrying out dozens of guerrilla attacks against ISAF in the Afghan provinces of Ghazni, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Nuristan, Paktika and Wardak. In Pakistan, Mir claimed, the LeZ is active in North and South Waziristan, in the Bajaur, Peshawar, Khyber and Swat districts. He also speculated that LeZ had been involved in the planning and assassination of former two-time Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir

Bhutto, in December 2007 (*The News* [Islamabad], January 11, 2010). Many of the operations in Afghanistan were apparently launched from bases in tribal areas of Pakistan. It is believed that the LeZ directly takes orders from al-Qaeda high command, namely from the group's military shura in consultation with al-Zawahiri.

The LeZ's other major successes included the assassination of Major General Amir Faisal Alvi, the former commander of Special Services Group of the Pakistan Army, in November 2008, in Islamabad. Alvi was shot dead by Major (retired) Haroon Ashiq of Pakistan Army, a committed Islamist, on the directions of Ilyas Kashmir. Haroon's younger brother, Captain Khurram Ashiq, of the Pakistani army, was killed in Helmand, Afghanistan in 2008, while fighting for the Afghan Taliban against the U.S. Army (*The News* [Islamabad], March 22, 2012). LeZ is also said to have been involved in the planning and execution of the 2008 Mumbai attacks; according to slain Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad, the Mumbai attack had the blessings of Ilyas Kashmiri and Major Ashiq. Shahzad speculated that the operation was meant to bring Pakistan and India to the brink of nuclear war in order to divert the direction of Pakistani military operations against al-Qaeda and Taliban in tribal areas of Pakistan. [3]

Conclusion

Since the demise of the LeZ's most ambitious and effective leader, Ilyas Kashmiri, in June 2011, the number of attacks on military bases by LeZ has significantly fallen. The group's capability has also been impacted by military operations launched by Pakistani forces in that country's tribal areas and by operations by Afghanistan's security forces in border districts. Nonetheless, the group remains a force to be reckoned with and likely will remain a significant player among regional militant groups, particularly if al-Qaeda makes good on its stated intentions of increasing its operations in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere in South Asia.

Farhan Zahid writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamist violent non-state actors in Pakistan, militant landscapes in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

Notes

1. "Lashkar-e-Zil," Mapping Militant Organizations, FSI Stanford University, available at: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/425>.
2. Fazal ur Rehman Khalil cofounded HuJI and signed Bin

Laden's 1998 fatwa which declared war against the United States and allies.

3. Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*, Penguin, London, 2011, p. 217.

Islamist Radicalization: A New Challenge for Kenya

Sunguta West

On November 27, the Kenyan government reopened four mosques in Mombasa, which it had shut down the previous week over fears that they were involved in the radicalization and recruitment of local youth for Somalia's Islamist militant group, al-Shabaab. The reopened mosques were handed over to a group of Muslim elders for management, amid the uproar from local politicians and religious leaders that the government was restricting religious freedoms. Further underlining the threat to Kenya from militant Islamism, militants killed 36 non-Muslim quarry workers near Mandera on December 1 (Capital FM, December 2). Previously, on November 22, another massacre of 28 non-Muslim bus passengers had occurred near the town, with al-Shabaab saying it had carried out the killings in retaliation for the mosques' closure (*The Standard* [Nairobi], November 22).

Growing Confrontation

Islamist radicalism is not new to Kenya. A Kenyan citizen was, for instance, involved in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. These coordinated bombings killed about 220 people and were the first suicide bombings by an East Africa al-Qaeda cell. Similarly, in al-Qaeda's 2002 coordinated attacks on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Kikambala and a plane at the Mombasa airport, at least one Kenyan was involved (IRIN, May 6, 2013). More recently, in September 2013, al-Shabaab fighters carried out a deadly attack at the Westgate upscale shopping mall in the Westlands area of Nairobi. The assault, in which automatic weapons and grenades were used, left 67 people dead (BBC, September 21).

Traditionally, Kenyan Muslims, who make up 11 percent of the country's 40 million people and are mainly Sunni, have followed moderate forms of Islam. However, factors such as political marginalization, poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment seem to have accelerated the radicalization of Muslim youth in recent years (IRIN, May 6, 2013). In particular, the Kenyan coastal region and the northern and eastern areas where the majority of Muslims reside have fewer schools, hospitals, and generally, investment in infrastructure is poor or non-existent. Generally, there is also a wide perception that Muslims are underrepresented politically, despite attempts to include them in government (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], June 20). These factors have fueled

resentment and oppositional activities among the Muslim population and pushed youth to join al-Shabaab. Building on these grievances, al-Shabaab has built a cross-border presence and clandestine support network among the Muslim population in northeastern Kenya as well as Nairobi and Mombasa and has been recruiting youth from these regions. Radicalization appeared to have gained additional momentum after Kenya sent troops to fight al-Shabaab in Somalia in October 2011.

In Mombasa itself, tensions have also been heightened by the deaths of leading extremist clerics. One of the most prominent was Shaykh Aboud Rogo Muhammad, who was shot dead in August 2012; he was the fifth local Muslim cleric to die under unclear circumstances. His death triggered violent protests in the coastal city, with two churches being looted. Rogo had been known for preaching radical sermons at the Masjid Musa Mosque (*The Star* [Nairobi], August 28, 2013).

There are also allegations that some Kenyans join al-Shabaab for financial reasons; it has been reported that the group pays recruits up to \$500 a month, when they join training camps in Southern Somalia. This is much higher than entry level pay for a police constable and slightly above Kenya's average salary, meaning such payments may be an important additional motivating factor for disenchanting and unemployed young Muslims (*Business Daily* [Nairobi], October 15; BBC, January 29).

Controversial Mosques

The Kenyan authorities' recent closure of the controversial mosques in Mombasa did not come out of the blue. The scene of previous violent confrontation between police and Muslim youth, the mosques have been on security agencies' radar for some time. Two months ago, the police warned that they would shut down the mosques if their preachers did not stop promoting Islamist ideologies that threatened to radicalize Muslim youths (*The Standard* [Nairobi], September 15). Local Muslim clerics had also warned for some time that the mosques were promoting dangerous ideologies (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], February 9). Allegations included preachers telling the youths that international actions against militant Islamism abroad, for example, in Afghanistan and Iraq, were part of a global campaign against Islam (IRIN, May 6, 2013). Some local youths, allegedly radicalized at the mosques, have also been linked to recent grenade, gun and homemade bomb attacks in the country (*The Star* [Nairobi], September 17).

Government raids on the mosques also seemed to confirm local and official suspicions. On November 19, the security forces raided and closed down the Masjid Musa and Masjid Sakina mosques, which radical youth had violently taken over and renamed as Masjid Shaduda and Masjid Mujahideen respectively. In the operation, the police killed a grenade wielding youth and detained 250 other suspects. The police found weapons, including six grenades, several pistols, ammunitions, gunpowder, knives and machetes along with a flag similar to those often flown by al-Shabaab (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], November 17). Also seized were audio and video recordings of the late Shaykh Aboud Rogo Muhammad, an Islamic extremist accused of arranging funding for al-Shabaab. In addition, in raids on the Swafaa and Minaa Mosques on November 19, the police seized grenades, ammunition and petrol bombs. The operation also netted 110 youth, who were allegedly receiving jihadist instruction inside the mosques (*The Standard* [Nairobi], November 20). Reopening the mosques, government warned that it would not waver in repeating the action if the preachers continued on the same path (*People Daily* [Nairobi], November 28). It is unlikely, however, that this will be the last time that Mombasa mosques are implicated in extremist activities, especially given that many of the local causes of Islamist radicalization are rooted in economic, social and political issues which only a long-term strategy would be able to resolve.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya. He writes about politics, religion, security and environment, among other issues.

From Obscurity to Dominance: The Continuing Rise of Yemen's al-Houthi Movement

James Brandon

During the last three years, the Houthi movement has accomplished a remarkable transformation, evolving from an obscure family-led Zaydi Shi'a guerrilla movement in Sa'ada governorate, one of Yemen's most remote and underdeveloped, to become the country's dominant military and political force. During the last six months in particular, the Houthi movement's military wing, Ansar Allah, has seized control of the capital Sana'a and expanded into most of the country's cultivated, upland region, while foraging even Aden in the south, Mareb in the east and Hodeidah in the west. Meanwhile in Sana'a, the Houthi leadership have displaced the formerly preeminent Sunni al-Ahmar family as country's leading power brokers. Although predicting the future in a country as volatile as Yemen is arguably best left to the country's numerous mystics and fortune tellers, this article will attempt to trace the Houthi movement's remarkable recent trajectory, summarize its recent actions and briefly examine some likely future developments.

Clashes

Although the Houthis' recent expansion throughout much of the Yemeni highlands passed off relatively peacefully, in recent weeks a spate of low-level clashes have illustrated that the Houthis face a number of challenges as they seek to consolidate their territorial and political gains, particularly from elite groups that have been displaced by the movement.

In Sana'a, Houthis have clashed repeatedly with a range of rivals. On November 26, clashes broke out between Houthis and supporters of the al-Ahmar family in the city's Hasaba area, after an al-Ahmar vehicle refused to stop at a Houthi checkpoint and its occupants instead opened fire. The resulting violence, involving the use of heavy machine guns and RPGs, killed five and left the Houthis occupying the house of Sam al-Ahmar, a leading member of the dynasty (*Yemen Times*, November 26). Separate clashes have pitted Houthis against Salafists. On November 5, Houthi militants killed one French-Moroccan Salafist student in Sana'a, in an apparently unprovoked attack, and separately stormed the Sunna mosque, the city's largest Salafist mosque, allegedly looking for weapons (*Yemen Times*, November 6). Many of the mosque's students had reportedly previously studied in madrassas in Dammaj in Sa'ada governorate, the scene of numerous clashes between Houthis and Salafists in the past

(*Yemen Times*, November 6). Further clashes took place in mid-November between the Houthis and security staff at the Sana'a airport when the Houthis attempted to assert control over the facility, including forcing the airport to employ 20 Houthis (al-Arabiya, November 11; *Yemen Times*, November 18).

Similar violence has occurred elsewhere. In Dhamar city, fighters from the local Bayt Hanash tribe attacked the Houthis after the latter ordered local merchants of *qat* (a popular narcotic shrub) to stop paying "taxes" to the tribe (*Yemen Times*, November 25). In Hodeidah meanwhile, on November 10, Houthis reportedly kidnapped Abdulrahman Mokarram, the leader of the Tihami movement, which represents the people of the Tihama coastal plain (al-Jazeera, November 10). This followed protests by Tihama activists against the Houthis, following the latter's capture of the coastal city in October (*Yemen Times*, October 19). As these various incidents indicate, such clashes are typically the result of Houthis using their newfound power to settle old scores, displaced local elites reasserting their influence against the Houthis or else are a result of the group trying to neutralize potential sources of dissent. As such, such incidents are likely to continue both in Sana'a and across the country.

Meanwhile, the Houthis have also been in periodic conflict with fighters from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Some of the most significant recent clashes have taken place in Rada'a, southeast of Dhamar, in a predominantly Sunni and traditionally lawless area on the edge of the desert. Heavy clashes here in early and mid-November killed over 85, in violence involving the use of tanks and artillery (al-Arabiya, November 14). AQAP social media accounts claimed their fighters had helped local tribesmen attack the Houthis; the accusation is credible given the strong Sunni feeling among local tribes and given that AQAP has previously operated in the area (*Yemen Times*, November 24). Previous apparently coordinated attacks between tribes and AQAP have occurred in other strongly-Sunni areas; for instance, in late September, an AQAP suicide bomber attacked Houthi forces in Mareb, killing around 15 Houthis (*Yemen Times*, September 30). AQAP also claimed credit for attacks on the Houthis in Hodeidah in November (al-Masdar, November 2)

From an overall national political perspective, however, the most significant rivalry is arguably between the Houthis and al-Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood's Yemeni branch, which is closely linked with the al-Ahmar family. Houthis and al-Islah activists have clashed repeatedly during the last few years, most recently in Ibb in early November when a leading al-Islah politician was assassinated, and their rivalry is given an added bitterness by al-Islah's former role as a key cheerleader

of the army's assaults on the Houthis' during Ali Abdullah Saleh's presidency (*Yemen Times*, November 4). While it is generally unhelpful to view the Houthi conflict through a "Sunni vs Shi'a" prism, the Houthis' struggles with al-Islah, which contains both broadly non-sectarian traditional tribal figures and hardline Salafist elements, often fits this category. On November 29, however, it was reported that al-Islah and the Houthi group had reached a ceasefire agreement, brokered by Jamal Benomar, the UN Envoy to Yemen and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 29). The agreement, pointedly negotiated on the Houthis' home turf in Sa'ada, reportedly included agreements to end fighting, release prisoners and return seized property and included a commitment to maintain open communications. In practice, however, al-Islah is likely to regard any deal with the Houthis solely as a temporary expediency; al-Islah's tribal figures will ultimately wish to regain their lost political influence and its ideologically-driven Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood elements will continue to resent living under the Houthis' perceived Shi'a rule. [1] Meanwhile, for the Houthis, the ceasefire deal can be seen as a sign that the group is attempting to resolve some past feuds, perhaps driven by a recognition that the group faces numerous challenges and cannot afford an open-ended conflict with al-Islah.

The Houthi Political Agenda

Any attempt to understand the Houthi movement is invariably hampered by the group's chronic inability to consistently or coherently articulate its goals. Beginning as a local Zaydi Shi'a family-based religious revivalist movement focused on protesting against heavy handed Sunni-flavored government intervention in Sa'ada, from the beginning it quixotically adopted "Death to America! Death to Israel!" as its universal slogan, despite this having no connection to its actual grievances or goals. Since capturing Sana'a in September, the movement has tried to present itself to Yemenis as a broad non-sectarian "revolutionary" alternative to the discredited status quo and to the international community as a rational and credible partner. Saleh al-Sammad, a senior Houthi recently appointed as a political advisor to the president, personified these contradictions in a recent interview, describing first a sinister "American project... to occupy Yemen," and then claiming that after the group's capture of Sana'a, "the Ansar Allah displayed the highest degrees of tolerance. They did not attack the institutions of the state that were part of the six wars against the Ansar Allah. Nor did they attack their political adversaries, whether political parties or others" (*al-Ahram*, November 19). The group's other spokesmen, such as Ali Emed of the group's political office, have also repeatedly

said that the group only aspires to create a non-sectarian "democratic civil state that guarantees the rights of everyone and is governed by the law" (Middle East Eye, September 1). The group has also repeatedly publicly renounced any ambitions to recreate the imamate, which the Saleh-era government often accused them of harboring.

Despite undertaking some steps to present itself as a regular, even mainstream, non-sectarian political party, the Houthi movement has nonetheless worked quickly to consolidate its power and embed itself in the country's key institutions. For instance, the Houthis appear to have succeeded in their demand for some of their forces to be merged into the national army. On November 24, Yemen's Defense Minister, Mahmoud al-Subaihi, said that this would be done as laid out in the Peace and National Partnership Agreement signed on September 21 between the Houthis and the government. However, he did not say how many Houthi fighters would be integrated or into which units, and he also stressed that "the military and security institution will remain in charge of all military and security forces" (*Yemen Times*, November 25). The Houthis' likely aim is to consolidate their political influence, prevent the Yemeni Army from being used against the Houthis and ensure that some of the costs of maintaining the Houthi militia is, in the future, met by the state. In addition, the group has inserted its "advisors" into key government departments, with Saleh al-Sammad, for instance, becoming an advisor to the president, presumably with some sort of veto power over government decisions. Although the level of Iranian influence over the Houthi movement remains unclear, this strategy is strongly reminiscent of Hezbollah's "state within a state" strategy in Lebanon and would give the Houthis considerable influence from behind the scenes.

Outlook

Although the Houthi movement has sought to increase its control over the Yemeni government without taking direct responsibility for running the Yemeni state, it is unclear whether it will be able to achieve this balance. Indeed, the Houthis have inherited the same challenges which led Ali Abdullah Saleh to describe governing Yemen as "dancing on the heads of snakes," including a bankrupt and dysfunctional state, a fractious tribal environment, a smoldering al-Qaeda insurgency, an active southern separatist movement and regional powers willing to intervene to promote their own interests. Although the Houthi movement can potentially distance itself from some of the government's failings, it is almost inevitable that any further collapse of law and order, the economy or government services will provoke discontent with the group.

It is also all but inevitable that Sunni forces and traditional tribal leaders, although knocked off-balance by the Houthis' unexpected successes, will gradually reorganize themselves, seek out foreign funding and plan a comeback, regardless of the consequences for the country at large. In particular, al-Islah's leaders are liable to try to seek Wahhabi or Gulf State funding and to meanwhile stoke domestic anti-Shi'a sectarian feeling for their own political gain. For instance, Tawakkol Karman, a leading al-Islah member (and Nobel Peace Prize winner) recently described the Houthis as being "supported financially and militarily by Iran" in order to "undermine the Yemeni republic" as part of "an Iranian project that is targeting the entire region" (Arabi21.com, September 29). Meanwhile, the General People's Congress, the former ruling party, although seemingly operating in conjunction with the Houthis at present, may at some point seek to regain its old monopoly on power. Much also depends on what the Houthis themselves do next. At times, the movement seems content to accept its role as one party of many in the government and to focus on attaining formal federalism for its heartlands in northern Yemen. At other times, however, as demonstrated by its recent attempts to reposition itself as a national "revolutionary" movement, or to integrate its fighters into the army, or by its forays to Hodeidah, Mareb and Aden – all far outside the traditional Zaydi or Houthi heartlands – it seems to have grander aspirations. Regardless, the deeper causes of Yemen's malaise are ultimately economic and given the country's catastrophic financial situation, compounded by falling oil revenues, a growing water shortage and a booming population, the country is bound to remain unstable for many years to come, regardless of the political machinations of the Houthis, al-Islah and other groups.

James Brandon is a political and security risk analyst.

Note

1. See for instance, "Interview: Muhammad Qahtan, senior member of Yemen's al-Islah," *al-Ahram*, November 27, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/116588/World/Region/Interview-Mohammed-Qahtan,-senior-member-of-Yemens.aspx>.