



IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS 1

WESTERN WOMEN WHO JOIN THE ISLAMIC STATE
By Alexandra Bradford 3

FIGHTING TERROR IN TUNISIA: DOMESTIA AND FOREIGN RESPONSE
TO BARDO
By John Thorne 5

AQAP SURGES IN YEMEN AS WAR RAGES
By Brian M. Perkins 8



Fighting in Yemen's Abyan governorate has been going on between forces allied with AQAP and the Houthis.

FRESH SAUDI ARRESTS ILLUSTRATE EVOLVING JIHADIST THREAT

James Brandon

A Saudi interior ministry spokesman said on April 24 that a recently arrested 23-year-old Saudi man, Yazied Muhammad Abdul Rahman Abu Nayan, had confessed to taking part in the killing of two policemen on behalf of the Islamic State (Saudi Press Agency, April 24). The policemen were shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in an eastern part of the capital Riyadh ([al-Jazeera](#), April 24). The government has offered a 1 million riyal (\$267,000) reward for information leading to the arrest of the second suspect, Nawaf bin Sharif Samir al-Enezi, who drove the car. The government said that the suspect was arrested at a farm in Huraimela district, to the north of Riyadh, where three cars were in the process of being converted into car bombs ([al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), April 25). The government said that the police were continuing to search for the rest of the group, and added that the group's key contact with the Islamic State was a man with a Moroccan accent.

A few days later, on April 28, the government announced the recent arrest of a further 93 individuals suspected of terrorist activity. A number of the individuals were said to have formed a group called "Jund Bilad al-Haramain" (Soldiers of the Land of the Two Holy Places— i.e., Saudi Arabia), which they said was connected to the Islamic State ([Saudi Arabian Ministry of Interior](#), April 28). This group, which was previously unknown, is alleged by the government to have organized itself into cells, with roles assigned to individuals or sub-groups tasked with manufacturing explosives, issuing *fatwa*-s and managing the group's finances. Further underlying the rapidly evolving threat, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Interior has also added a number of high-profile Saudi members of the Islamic State and affiliated groups to its most-wanted list. These include Anas bin Ali bin Abdul Aziz al-Nashwan, a hardline Wahhabi theologian, who appeared in a recent video by the Islamic State's Libyan affiliate that showed the execution of 28 Christian Ethiopians. ([Arab News](#), April 27; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April). The ministry has

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Washington, DC • 20036
Tel: (202) 483-8888
Fax: (202) 483-8337

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said that, since 2011, an estimated 2,275 citizens had gone to Syria to join jihadist groups, 500 of whom are believed to have returned so far (*al-Ahram* [Cairo], April 16). Previously in April, the interior ministry had warned of a possible attack on a mall or on oil installations (*Arab News*, April 21).

The latest arrests underline that Saudi Arabia faces significant long-term challenges from those inspired by the Islamic State's ideology and also from individuals directly connected to the group and acting on its orders. Indeed, the police report of car bombs being constructed suggests that Saudi militants, confined in recent years to one-off shootings, may now be seeking to carry out more ambitious attacks. In addition, the apparent emergence of the alleged "Jund Bilad al-Haramain" group suggests surprisingly high levels of organization by Saudi-based militants, which is again suggestive of domestic militants' increasing ambitions. However, while the possibility of further jihadist attacks in the country are very real, the Saudi religious establishment—unlike in the 1990s and early 2000s—remains firmly behind the monarchy, and the domestic security services are far more capable and sophisticated than before. In addition—largely as a result of constant government propaganda through the media and religious institutions—there is a far better understanding in Saudi society of the dangers that unrestrained, non-governmental *takfirism* can pose to the country's stability. At the same time, however, as the latest arrests indicate, both Saudi Arabia itself, and various Western-linked targets within the country, are likely to remain attractive targets for jihadists for the foreseeable future.

AL-QAEDA IN THE ITALIAN PENINSULA: ARRESTS EXPOSE MILITANT LINKS

James Brandon

Italian police on April 24 arrested nine people (eight Pakistanis and one Afghan) on suspicion of involvement in terrorism, and are continuing to search for nine others (*La Repubblica*, April 24). Three of the suspects were arrested in Olbia, on the island of Sardinia, and the others on the Italian mainland. The individuals are accused of having links to Pakistan-based militant groups, including al-Qaeda, and are charged with being part of "an organization dedicated to transnational criminal activity, which was inspired by al-Qaeda and other radical formations," and of planning an "insurgency against the current government in Pakistan" (*La Nuova Sardegna*, April 24). The arrests are a reminder that although no Islamist attacks have taken place in Italy in the

modern era, the country remains a significant base for small Islamist militant groupings, just as it was in the pre-9/11 era when a variety of Islamist militants were based in and around Milan.

According to the police, the detained leader of the network was Hafiz Muhammad Zulkifal, an imam in Zingonia, a deprived urban area in northern Italy (*Corriere Della Sera*, April 26). Zulkifal, who had lived in Italy for eight years, is accused of collecting and sending money to Pakistan Sunni Islamist militant groups, which then used this to fund attacks in Pakistan (*Corriere Della Sera*, April 24). Meanwhile, the apparent leader of the group in Sardinia, where most of the arrests occurred, was Sultan Wali Khan, the imam and figurehead of the Pakistani community in Olbia, who is also a local businessman active in the construction industry (*La Repubblica*, April 24; *L'Union Sarde*, April 25). Compared to other European countries, such as France or the UK, the profile of these radicals is unusual; they are relatively older individuals, who in some cases administer mosques and were outwardly respectable "community leaders," rather than younger radicals operating on the fringes of youth clubs, gyms and community centers who have been at the core of most other jihadist cells in other European countries. The individuals appear to have collected money from local Muslim communities using a front group called "Tabligh Ed-dawa" (Society for the Propagation [of Islam]) (*L'Union Sarde*, April 25).

Money channeled through this network is believed to have funded several prominent attacks in Pakistan, including bombing markets and the police in the city of Quetta in 2011 (*AGI*, April 24). Other attacks reportedly funded through the network include the October 2009 car bomb attack on the Mina Bazaar in Peshawar, which killed 130 people, one of the largest attacks such attacks in Pakistan. The Taliban at the time were widely accused of the attack, although the group—and specifically the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—denied involvement (*The Nation* [Lahore], October 29, 2009). The Italian authorities said the "Tabligh Ed-dawa" group generally transferred money without going through formal banking networks. For instance, one consignment of 55,268 euros (\$60,160) was reportedly transported in cash on a flight to Pakistan by passenger, while other funds being were transferred through the *hawala* informal money transfer system (*The Nation* [Lahore], April 25). The group is also believed to have briefly discussed targeting the Vatican, although information released so far by the police suggests that no concrete plans were made.

The arrests underline that while Italian Muslim communities have proportionately produced a far small number of jihadists

than countries like Belgium, France and the UK, the group does harbor small radical groupings. For instance, around 50 Italian citizens are also reported to have joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (*Corriere Della Sera*, August 25, 2014). The first to die, Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo, a 23-year-old convert to Islam from Genoa, was killed in Syria in 2013 while fighting against the Assad government, although the exact cause of his death has never been established (*Il Giornale*, June 18, 2013). Small numbers of people have also been arrested over suspected links to the Islamic State. For instance, two individuals—a Moroccan and Albanian—were arrested in northern Italy in March on suspicion of recruiting fighters for the Islamic State (*La Stampa*, March 25). Despite such developments, however, periodic threats against the country by Islamist militants are treated with some levity, perhaps because of the lack of attacks in Italy. For instance, after one Islamic State militant warned on Twitter that the group would be “coming to Rome,” Italian Twitter-users used the hashtag #We_Are_Coming_O_Rome to offer shopping tips, restaurant recommendations and to warn that, due to an upcoming transport strike in the Eternal City, he would be unlikely to reach his destination on schedule. [1] Despite such good-humor, however, the reality is that further arrests of Islamist militants, and potentially also attempted attacks, are likely in Italy in the coming months.

Note

1. The tweets using this hashtag can be found at https://twitter.com/hashtag/We_Are_Coming_O_Rome.

Western Women Who Join the Islamic State

Alexandra Bradford

On February 17, three British teenagers left their East London homes and boarded a plane for Turkey. Soon afterwards, they crossed into Syria, where they are believed to have joined the Islamic State militant group (*al-Jazeera*, February 21). This event has put female radicalization in the spotlight. Despite the extensive press coverage, however, the individuals—Shamima Begum, 15, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and Amira Abase, 15—are only the latest women to leave their homes in the West with the intention of joining the Islamic State. Notable others include Zehra Duman (a.k.a. Umm Abdullatif), a 21-year-old Australian of Turkish background, who joined the Islamic State with her husband, and a 33-year-old Dutch-Chechen woman who took her children to Syria to live under the Islamic State last October (*Daily Telegraph* [Australia], April 1; *NOS*, March 16). This article will look at the evolution of such female migration to the Islamic State and explain how and why women are becoming a key strategic asset for the group.

Female Radicalization

Female participation in Islamist terrorist groups is long-established and is not confined to the Islamic State, with women having been previously involved with militant groups in Chechnya, Palestine and elsewhere. However, the way in which women participate in the Islamic State has some new features, including the act of migration to the conflict zone and the scale of recruitment.

One remarkable feature of the women who have joined the Islamic State is the aspect of migration. In the past, female extremists have usually radicalized within their home countries, and have carried out their acts of violence there. For example, Roshanoara Choudhry, a London woman who in 2010 stabbed British MP Stephen Timms, in what she described as retaliation for his support for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, is a prime example of this (*Guardian*, November 3, 2010). She became radicalized by watching online lectures of al-Qaeda supporter Anwar al-Awlaki and then stabbed Timms a few miles from where she lived, while he was meeting with his constituents. By contrast, the new wave of Islamic State female radicals typically leave their home countries and families and then travel across continents to reach Iraq and Syria.

The sheer scale of the Islamic State's recruitment of women is also unusual. For instance, of the 3,000 Westerners who have migrated to areas controlled by the Islamic State, as many as 550 are women, from such regions as Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. [1] The French government alone estimates that 115 French women have joined the group ([Le Parisien](#), April 8). To understand why hundreds of women have flocked to the Islamic State, it is important to look at what motivates them to leave the relative safety and freedom of their Western homes to join one of the most barbaric organizations in recent history.

Motivations

In many aspects, the motives driving female migration to the Islamic State are broadly similar to those driving male migration. Like men, these women are not only migrating voluntarily, but their choice to do so is based on specific "pull factors." While each individual case of radicalization is different, Islamic State members' prolific use of social media offers a unique look into the inner lives and motivations of the group's female members.

The first wave of female Western migration to Syria began as a response to human rights violations that civilians were facing at the hands of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The outrage that Western Muslim migrants felt towards al-Assad was mirrored by these individuals' condemnation of the West for its lack of involvement in the crisis. For instance, the social media accounts of Asqa Mahmood, a female British member of the Islamic State who calls herself Umm Layth, a 20-year-old from Glasgow who is now believed to be in Syria, is an example of this. She began her virtual life on Tumblr and Twitter, where she reposted pictures of war-ravaged women and children from Syria and elsewhere. In addition, however, in an indicator of her radicalization, she increasingly interpreted this violence against Muslims, both within Syria and across the world, as indicating that Muslims are besieged and oppressed by Western nations. For instance, Mahmood stated on Tumblr in September 2014: "This is a war against Islam and it is known that either 'you're with them or with us.' So pick a side" ([Tumblr](#), September 11, 2014). This narrative of the West being at war with Muslims, especially when combined with the narrative by that continuing to live in the West, they are complicit in this perceived war is an important pull factor for Western migrants to the Islamic State.

A further factor driving Western female migration to join the Islamic State is the perception that this can allow migrants to resolve their own internal identity crisis. While to some people, it may seem counterintuitive for female migrants to

give up the freedoms of the West for a life behind a niqab, but for the female migrants, this rejection of the West in fact signals a perceived reclaiming of what they regard as the traditional role of Muslim women, and it accordingly empowers and attracts women who identify with this ideology. For instance, prior to her migration Mahmood posted about her struggles with wearing the niqab:

The more and more I read up on the Islamic veil the more I realize how the niqab is actually *fardh* [obligatory]. *Wallah* [By God], it scares me. May Allaah reward those sisters who abide by the true Islamic attire and give the other sisters—including myself—the strength and *sabr* [patience] to wear it also. Ameen ([Tumblr](#), March 14, 2013).

These postings are important because they indicate her feelings of inner disconnect and reveal her struggle to harmonize who she wishes to be with her actual feelings; hence her need for "strength" and "patience." This, coupled with the disengagement she feels from society, creates an internal maelstrom, which ultimately propelled Mahmood, and other Western migrants like her, to seek out those who they believe will accept them. Traveling to Iraq and Syria is therefore partly a quest for acceptance and to overcome such inner disharmony.

However, while the first Western migrants travelled to Syria in response to the massacre of Syrians by al-Assad and to resolve their own internal contradictions, this has increasingly been replaced by the idea of constructing the caliphate and the belief that it is their religious duty to build this idealized state and to continue to conquer territory. As Mahmood explains in one Tumblr post:

We have conquered these lands once *Beithnillah* [with the permission of God] we will do it again... This Islamic Empire shall be known and feared worldwide, and we will follow none other than the law of the one and the only *ilah* [God]! ([Tumblr](#), September 11, 2014)

The overt brutality that the Islamic State displays, coupled with the misogynistic nature of the militant group, are considered the very definition of barbarism for most people. However, a very small segment of Western Muslim society is inured to this violence, and they see this barbarism as appealing. One female migrant tweeted her request for "more beheadings, please" ([Twitter](#), August 20, 2014). Moreover, they sanctify this violence committed by their own side by their extremist beliefs. As another female migrant tweets "Beheading is halal [permissible under Islamic law]. Go kill yourself if you say its haram. :)" [2] For some, this barbarism

in itself may be attractive.

The Woman's Value to the Islamic State

Umm Layth, the three East London students and the other Western women who recently migrated to the Islamic State, provide high public relations value for the group. These young women, who all came from middle class backgrounds, were well-educated and apparently had bright futures ahead of them, can be seen to have publicly made a choice to leave this behind for life within the militant group. For the Islamic State, this is a powerful endorsement which they can use to attract further recruits. In addition, female recruits are valued for their own qualities, because in the Islamic State's view, while the men are out fighting, these women, are viewed as the founding mothers of their new Utopian society. The women are holding down the home front and building the familial side of the new state by producing the next generation of jihadists who will continue the construction of the group's self-proclaimed "Islamic State." The presence of Western female recruits is therefore an important self-affirmation for the group, and fortifies their belief that they are building a viable, long-term state.

Alexandra Bradford has an MA in Terrorism, Security and Society from Kings College London and studies homegrown Islamist extremism and female radicalization.

Notes

1. "Foreign Fighters in Syria," Soufan Group, June 2014, p. 16. <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.
2. The tweet has subsequently been deleted, but it was published by @MuslimahMujahi1 on August 20, 2014.

Fighting Terror in Tunisia: Domestic and Foreign Response to Bardo

John Thorne

Around midday on March 18, in Tunis, gunmen burst into the grounds of the Bardo Museum as tourists were alighting from buses and opened fire. The tourists fled into the museum and the gunmen followed, taking some of them hostage as security forces converged on the scene. The resulting standoff ended when security forces entered the museum and killed the gunmen (*Webdo* [Tunis], March 26; *al-Jazeera*, March 19). The attackers killed 22 people, wounded dozens more and left Tunisians reeling from the worst terrorist violence in over a decade. Tunisian leaders from across the political spectrum condemned the attack and vowed national solidarity, and thousands of Tunisians turned out for a march against terrorism in Tunis (*Webdo* [Tunis], March 30).

The attack also marked a sharp escalation of the terrorism that has gradually escalated since the revolution in 2011 toppled former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and laid the foundations of the country's emerging democracy. Most attacks since the revolution have targeted security forces in the country's hinterland, although some also targeted liberal and secular public figures (*Terrorism Monitor*, January 23). The Bardo attack, by contrast, struck at mainly foreign civilians in the capital. In response, the security forces quickly hunted down and killed its alleged organizer, Lokman Abu Sakhr (a.k.a. Khaled Chaieb) (*Webdo* [Tunis], March 29). Since the attack, Tunisia's allies have offered greater support that could give Tunisia an edge in the fight against terrorism. In the longer term, however, Tunisia's security will also depend on resolving conflict in neighboring Libya that is making that country a regional terrorist hub.

Evolving Threat

Terrorism in Tunisia appears rooted in the country's deeply conservative Salafist trend, whose religious views appear to provide some of the ideological underpinnings for violent jihad. While most Salafists reject violence, some embrace it as a means to realize their interpretation of a strictly Islamic society and state. The fall of Ben Ali's secularist dictatorship opened space for renewed Salafist activism, which his regime had brutally suppressed. Salafist activists initially made religious demands such as the application of Shari'a and women's right to wear the face-concealing niqab. However, some activists also rioted and vandalized over artwork they

deemed blasphemous ([al-Arabiya](#), June 12, 2014). Violence accelerated in 2012 when a Salafist-led mob ransacked and burned the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia and the nearby American Cooperative School ([Tunisia-live.net](#), September 17, 2012). The following year, in August 2013, the authorities designated Tunisia's leading Salafist group, Ansar al-Shari'a, which is blamed for the U.S. embassy attack, as a terrorist organization, having prohibited its activities since May ([Tunisia-live.net](#), August 23, 2013; [Tunisia-live.net](#), May 21, 2013).

Since then, militants often described by authorities and media as violent extremists have clashed increasingly with Tunisian security forces. Many incidents take place near the Algerian border, where militants are believed to be tax smugglers to fund their operations. Meanwhile, militants in Libya have sent Tunisian would-be jihadists to battlefields in the Middle East, such as Syria and Iraq, and have provided them with weapons and training. While the exact nature and strength of such alliances are hard to gauge, and may shift, a pattern of cooperation among militants across national borders seems to be emerging.

One striking example of such cooperation was a 2013 attack on the In Amenas gas facility in eastern Algeria, carried out by an Algerian-led splinter group from al-Qaeda's North African franchise, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and reportedly involving a mix of fighters that included Tunisians and Egyptians. [1] Similarly, the alleged organizer of the Bardo attack, Sakhr, was reportedly an Algerian who, Tunisian authorities say, led Tunisia's militant Katiba d'Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, based near the Algerian border ([Webdo](#) [Tunis] March 29). Sakhr's career highlights how militant affiliations seem to cut across national boundaries.

In addition, there are indications that the Islamic State group, based in Iraq and Syria, and militants aligned with it, are trying to extend their reach into Tunisia. For instance, the Islamic State swiftly claimed credit for the Bardo attack in statements posted online and via its magazine, *Dabiq* ([Webdo](#) [Tunis], March 19). [2] The same issue of *Dabiq* also featured an interview with a prominent Tunisian Islamic State fighter who threatened Tunisian leaders and called for more Bardo-style attacks. A separate video posted online in April purported to show a Tunisian fighter with an Islamic State-aligned group in Libya threatening Tunisia's government and inviting Tunisians to join him. [3] Such appeals raise fears that the Islamic State considers Tunisia a viable target for sustained violence.

Greater Foreign Support in the Works?

During the last year, Tunisian security forces have increased their counter-terrorism operations, notably around elections last fall. In December, the government also created a new body to analyze intelligence on terrorism from a range of state institutions ([La Presse](#) [Tunis], December 17, 2014). In March, the government submitted a new draft anti-terrorism law to parliament. ([La Presse](#) [Tunis], March 27). Meanwhile, key foreign allies, and particularly France, the United States and the UK, seem increasingly keen to support the country against terrorism.

After the Bardo attack, French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced his country's desire to ramp up security assistance. [4] French proposals include training assault teams, criminal analysts and border security personnel as well as helping build a database for biometric ID cards and passports and training police in crowd control according to international standards to help build trust with citizens, a French diplomat in the country told Jamestown. [5] France's overall aim, said the diplomat, is to transform France's periodic counter-terrorism support into an ongoing structural cooperation.

In April, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States wanted to boost security assistance to Tunisia. [6] In February, the State Department requested \$62.5 million in military financing for Tunisia in fiscal year 2016, more than double the 2015 request. [7] In January, Tunisia also received the second of two C-130J transport aircraft that it had bought from Lockheed Martin, and said it planned to buy eight UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters from Sikorsky, another U.S. firm ([Embassy of the United States Tunisia](#), January 8).

The State Department also wants \$12 million in fiscal year 2016—up from \$7 million the previous year—for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which offers counter-terrorism training, to spend on Tunisia. [8] So far, the INL has trained Tunisian security forces in crowd control and hostage-rescue, and it wants to train them in investigation techniques. [9] A U.S. diplomat in Tunisia told Jamestown that the INL's decision to expand its assistance predates the Bardo attack, and is based on Tunisia's holding of elections and what the United States considers Tunisia's commitment to democratic security sector reform. More broadly, the U.S. diplomat said, the United States is eager to see Tunisia move forward on reforms "entailed in its democratic consolidation." These include economic reforms as well as reforms to security services and the judiciary, the diplomat said. [10]

The UK has also provided counter-terrorism training and equipment, including bomb detection gear, to Tunisia since 2011. Britain may boost this support, a British diplomat in Tunisia told Jamestown. [11] According to a statement after the Bardo attack by UK Foreign Minister Philip Hammond, London's Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command, as well as military counter-terrorism experts, will offer long-term capacity building to the country. [12]

Libyan Dimension

Since the 2011 civil conflict that toppled Mu'ammar Gaddafi, Libyan authorities have struggled to control the country. As a result, Libya is awash with weapons and with armed groups ranging from local militias to international jihadists. In addition, Libyan politics is today polarized between Islamists and non-Islamists, and rival governments sit in Tripoli and in the eastern city of Tobruk. The crisis has dramatically empowered Islamist militants, including groups in Tripoli, Sirte and Derna that have aligned with the Islamic State. This instability also threatens neighboring countries, including Tunisia, as militants exploit the chaos there to expand their operations abroad. The Islamic State itself has encouraging would-be jihadists to relocate to Libya as an alternative to elsewhere in the Middle East. [13]

Outlook

Tunisia is widely acknowledged as the best hope for peace and democracy to have emerged from the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. However, the Bardo attack highlighted both the growing internal and external militant threat to the country. However, while Tunisia's allies seem determined to strengthen their support and cooperation, money will be an important deciding factor, and it remains to be seen how much foreign governments are willing or able to contribute. The French diplomat told Jamestown that some assistance may be multi-lateral, and some funding may come from the United Nations or the European Union. [14] A further persistent challenge will remain Libya, where the lack of political stability makes effective counter-terrorism work almost impossible. The success of UN-led talks aimed at forming a Libyan national unity government is far from certain, while an international peacekeeping force is unpalatable to many Libyans and thus unlikely, a Western diplomat told Jamestown. [15] This underlines that Tunisia, despite its recent achievements, remains for now a fledgling democracy in a rough neighborhood.

John Thorne is a journalist based in Tunis. He has covered North Africa since 2006.

Notes

1. "The In Amenas Attack," *Statoil ASA*, February 2013, p. 39.
2. "Interview with Abu Muqatil," *Dabiq*, Issue 8 (April 2015), p. 62.
3. "Tunisian IS Fighter in Libya in Libya Calls Countrymen to Join Him in Video, Threatens Tunisian Government," SITE Monitoring Group, April 8, 2015.
4. Interview with French diplomat charged with internal security affairs, Tunis, April 22, 2015.
5. Statement to media by Bernard Cazeneuve, French Embassy in Tunis, March 20, 2015.
6. Statement to media by Antony Blinken, U.S. Embassy in Tunis, April 10, 2015.
7. "Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2016," Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, February 2, 2015, p. 181; "Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2015," Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, March 4, 2014, p. 175.
8. "Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2016," Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, February 2, 2015, p. 172; "Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2015," Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, March 4, 2014, p. 107.
9. "Factsheet on Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs programs for Tunisia," U.S. State Department.
10. Interview with U.S. diplomat, Tunis, April 23, 2015; Email from U.S. diplomat in Tunis, April 27, 2015.
11. Interview with British diplomat, Tunis (by telephone), April 21, 2015.
12. Statement by Philip Hammond to the House of Commons, March 20, 2015.
13. "The Libyan Arena," *Dabiq*, Issue 8 (April 2015), p. 26.
14. Interview with French diplomat charged with internal security affairs, Tunis, April 22, 2015.
15. Interview with Western diplomat, Tunis, April 23, 2015.

AQAP Surges in Yemen as War Rages

Brian M. Perkins

The Shi'a Houthi rebels' advance on Yemen's capital Sana'a from late 2014 was a slow burning conflict that led to the resignation of President Abdu Rabbu Mansur Hadi on January 22, which prompted chaos in Sana'a and has since spread to much of the rest of the country (*Yemen Times*, January 22). Meanwhile, a fissure developed within the Yemeni military as former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, backed by key army units, emerged as key Houthi ally, likely to facilitate an intended future power grab by himself, his family and supporters. In response to these developments, on March 25, Saudi Arabia, fearful of an "Iranian-backed" Shi'a regime coming to power, organized a coalition of 10 nations to conduct an air campaign against the Houthis (*al-Jazeera*, March 26). As events in the country increasingly make clear, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been quick to exploit the resulting power vacuum and the ongoing conflict, as it did during and following the Arab Spring uprisings both in Yemen and elsewhere in the region. This article will explore AQAP's recent actions in various locations in Yemen, analyze the group's emerging strategy and suggest how the group is likely to evolve as Yemen's ongoing civil war develops.

Paving the Way

While AQAP is undoubtedly exploiting the fresh tumult in Yemen, it was an elaborate campaign by the group in 2014 that laid the foundation for its current success. In particular, the group during 2014 became more adept at reaching out to local tribes for support, notably through their new *nom de guerre* Ansar al-Shari'a. In addition, the widespread distribution of recent attacks has highlighted that AQAP's potency now extends beyond their former rural bastions in the south and east, striking as far as Sana'a and Hodeidah (*Middle East Eye*, September 29, 2014; *Yemen Observer*, December 21, 2014). The majority of operations in their heartlands during 2014 were against military and government targets, with an emphasis on military bases suspected of cooperating with U.S. drone operations. The outlying attacks meanwhile targeted their Houthi adversaries as well as the national military. In 2013 and 2014, AQAP made its largest gains in Shabwa, Abyan and Hadramawt governorates but tactically retreated from all but the latter during 2014 due to U.S. drone strikes and Yemeni military operations.

Today AQAP is using this same operational model to capitalize on the growing chaos in Yemen. In particular, in recent weeks, AQAP has consolidated their control in parts of Hadramawt and also bolstered their ranks in Marib, Abyan and Shabwa through coopting local tribes and heading off the Houthis before they advance into AQAP strongholds. Notably, the multisided battlespace created by the Houthi advances into Yemen's central highlands and towards Aden provided AQAP the cover needed to conduct one-off assaults on the Houthis in al-Bayda, Lahj, Ibb and Taiz (*al-Mashhad*, April 9; *SITE*, April 19). Although most of these attacks have not led to significant territorial gains, they underline the group's ability to operate with near-impunity through much of the country. However, their maneuverability in these provinces will likely be limited to bombings and assaults using small five to ten man cells as the militias loyal to Hadi and Saudi jets continue to engage Houthi positions.

Amplifying the problems posed by AQAP's resurgence, is that developments come after the United States hastily evacuated all embassy personnel from Sana'a on February 10 in response to the Houthi seizure of the city, following which U.S. special operations forces, including advisors at al-Anad air base near Aden in southern Yemen, were ordered out of the country on March 22 as the Houthis advanced southwards (*Yemen Times*, March 23). The withdrawal of U.S. troops from al-Anad critically diminished the U.S. intelligence footprint within the region at a key moment. Indeed, it is now clear that the disruption of U.S. and Yemeni military operations as a result of the Houthis' advance, coupled with Saudi-led airstrikes, have collectively created a major opportunity for AQAP to broaden and expand its operations.

Marib, Abyan and Shabwa

Fighting between various groups has been steady in the oil-rich province of Marib since the fall of 2014 (*Yemen Times*, November 11, 2014). The Murad, Obaidah and Bani Dabian tribes of Marib mounted a stiff resistance against attempts to advance into the province by both the Houthis and AQAP. However, the tribes have been steadily losing ground to the Houthis, particularly in Sirwah where Houthi fighters have seized the 312th Military Brigade Base (*Yemen Times*, February 2; *Barakish*, April 24). Meanwhile, AQAP fighters, along with members of Islah (Yemen's largest Islamist party, which derives from the Muslim Brotherhood), are reportedly still positioned at the nearby Hailan Mountain and are engaging the Houthis intermittently (*Yemen Observer*, April 18). It is unclear at present if AQAP and Islah are working in unison, or if they merely share a common enemy.

Meanwhile, in Abyan, a traditional stronghold for Sunni extremist groups in southern Yemen, hundreds of AQAP fighters, led by Abyan's field commander Jalal Baleedi, reportedly aligned with the pro-Hadi 111th Infantry Brigade and the local pro-Hadi popular committees to seal off Houthi supply lines from Aden and Shabwa (*Yemen Times*, April 8). Saudi jets have consistently struck Abyan since late March causing casualties on both sides (*Yemen Times*, March 31; *FARS News Agency*, April 19). Continued airstrikes against AQAP may see the group redeploy to the battlefield in Shabwa.

AQAP's recent operations in Shabwa have so far consisted of attacks on embattled military bases as well as bombings and direct fighting, involving heavy artillery, against Houthi forces and militias loyal to Saleh. In one notable attack, AQAP seized control of the pro-Saleh army's 19th Infantry Brigade's base in the Bihan area of Shabwa on February 12 after conducting a several hours-long complex assault with IED's and automatic weapons. Tribal militias, thought to be affiliated with AQAP, also seized the 2nd Infantry Brigade base in Ataq on April 14 (*Yemen Times*, April 14). Five days later, an unconfirmed U.S. drone strike reportedly killed at least three suspected AQAP members in a supply vehicle in Shabwa's Saeed District, suggesting U.S. efforts against the group are ongoing, despite the disruption caused by the evacuation of the embassy and the al-Anad base (*al-Arabiya*, April 20). At this time, however, it is unclear which side maintains the upper hand in Shabwa, but AQAP is seemingly well equipped to continue the fight. In addition, AQAP conducted an offensive in al-Houta in Yemen's southern Lahij governorate in mid-March (*Yemen Times*, March 23).

Hadramawt

AQAP's control over the previously mentioned regions is highly contested. However, the group is operating nearly unopposed in much of Hadramawt, where the Yemeni military has offered little resistance and local tribes seemingly view AQAP's presence as advantageous, even if only temporarily. In their largest attack, AQAP fighters launched a coordinated assault on Hadramawt's capital al-Mukalla on April 2. Dozens of fighters armed with automatic rifles and RPGs freed over 200 inmates from the central prison, including prominent AQAP leader and its former amir of Abyan, Khaled Batarfi. The fighters proceeded to storm the provincial security headquarters, police stations, administrative offices and the central bank, capturing a large cache of weapons and money (*Yemen Times*, April 6). AQAP reportedly signed an agreement with the Council of Sunni Scholars, a tribal alliance comprised of members of the Hadramawt Tribes Confederacy, agreeing to hand over

control of the city to the tribal alliance (*News al-Youm*, April 11). The Council of Sunni Scholars may have conceded to AQAP knowing its tribal fighters were out-gunned and would be unable to repel a Houthi advance in the province. Following the al-Mukalla attack, on April 16, a group of fighters calling themselves the "Sons of Hadramawt," likely members of AQAP, seized al-Shihr oil terminal, al-Rayan Airport and the bases of the 190th Air Defense Brigade head and 27th Mechanized Infantry Brigade (*Middle East Eye*, April 17). In an apparent attempt to subdue local concerns, AQAP organized a large public rally on the beach in al-Mukalla, which was attended by at least several hundred people. During the rally, a spokesperson said the group's seizure of the bank and other state facilities was righteous because it was in the name of jihad against the hostile Houthis (*Hadarem*, April 17). It appears that this helped AQAP to secure the city's support, or at least cooperation or acquiescence; the situation in and around al-Mukalla still appeared calm on April 25 when residents took photos while participating in a community-based cleaning initiative and workers prepared to receive a vital fuel delivery (*Mukalla Star*, April 25).

Tribal Bargaining

Yemen is commonly characterized as a country starkly divided along tribal lines, but allegiances are up for grabs, particularly during uncertain times. Yemen's hyper-local sub-tribes are not as structured, political or self-sufficient as the most powerful families from larger multi-tribe confederations such as the Hashid or Bakil, which are major national power brokers. As such, the sub-tribes are particularly prone to forging opportunistic alliances in an attempt to secure the brightest future for their fellow tribesmen. Tribal allegiances are patronage-based, and with the government no longer capable of providing concessions, the tribes will look to new sources. The Sunni-Shi'a divide in Yemen is not profound enough to elicit universal or sustained Sunni tribal resistance to the Zaydi Shi'a Houthis. Nor is it enough to guarantee Sunni support of AQAP in a battle between the two; tribes will ultimately make decisions based on short-term benefits, and will not hesitate to change positions. For example, the Murad, Obaidah and Jedaan tribes signed a ceasefire agreement with the Houthis on November 24, which ensured the protection of the Marib tribesmen and state facilities. The agreement was nullified five days later when the tribes announced the formation of the "Sons of Marib Alliance" to protect Marib from the Houthis and AQAP (*Yemen Times*, December 2, 2014). As a result of this situation, the Houthis and AQAP will continuously strive to purchase the goodwill of strategically placed tribes to facilitate their broader goals; in particular, each side will play on the current plight of

the region and amplify the threat posed by their rival. For instance, in consequence, AQAP will seek to intensify the sectarian divide to galvanize support against the “rafidah,” an offensive term for Shi’a; meanwhile, tribes aligned with the losing side of a battle may pursue surreptitious ceasefire agreements with their opposition to secure their tribes’ livelihood.

Outlook

AQAP underscored their ambitions in January when the group claimed responsibility for the high-profile attack on the office of Parisian satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (*al-Jazeera*, January 14). Despite this, the exact nature of the relationship between AQAP and the Kouachi brothers, who perpetrated the attack, remains ambiguous. However, in February 2013, *Charlie Hebdo*’s editor was on a hit list published in the tenth issue of AQAP’s slick English language online magazine, *Inspire*. [1] This underlines what differentiates AQAP from their domestic rivals; the desire and capacity to strike Western targets. The war could provide AQAP with the operational mobility necessary to plot further attacks on the West, the U.S.-backed Saudi air campaign—even if directed against the Houthis—may only fuel the desire to strike U.S. interests. Although some analysts might contend that the battlespace is too crowded to plot external operations, the group’s newfound havens in Hadramawt and the uncontested regions of al-Jawf, in the north of Yemen near the Saudi border, could still prove to be adequate staging grounds.

Although many of the strategic alliances galvanized by the civil war will unravel if the conflict subsides, a resolution will not immediately erase the gains they facilitated; the fog of Yemen’s civil war will endure for the near future, regardless of which regime takes power. It is also likely that the duration of the war will ultimately determine the extent of AQAP’s expansion. If AQAP remains a less than primary target for both domestic and foreign actors through a prolonged and rapidly internationalizing conflict, the group will potentially carve out massive swaths of territory. Furthermore, AQAP’s strength will potentially surge if the Saudi-led coalition successfully weakens the Houthis in regions being contested by AQAP. The group’s ongoing seizure of military bases and critical infrastructure will also bolster its operations further by providing it with weapons, vehicles and funding. Strategic and symbolic victories will help foster support from marginalized tribes, particularly across the south and east.

Meanwhile, the rapidly changing operational picture and lack of ground-based intelligence assets will continue to hinder U.S. counter-terrorism operations, particularly as

regional intelligence and naval assets are instead diverted into aiding Saudi efforts or subverting Iranian activities. Sporadic drone strikes will likely continue to undercut AQAP operations, but will likely be ineffectual in preventing its strategic-level growth. The group is meanwhile likely to benefit from increasing hostilities between the Houthis and tribal alliances in areas such as Marib, while the humanitarian impact of the conflict will also allow AQAP to pursue support from marginalized tribes in the war-torn regions. Given that further instability in Yemen is likely and that also such instability will almost certainly further fuel AQAP’s expansion, there appear few scenarios in which AQAP will not emerge as a primary beneficiary of Yemen’s ongoing descent into chaos.

Brian M. Perkins is an International Security Analyst and freelance journalist specializing in terrorism and sectarian violence.

Note

1. *Charlie Hebdo*’s editor Stephane Charbonnier, along with several other European journalists and cartoonists, were featured on a “Wanted Dead or Alive” poster in the tenth issue of *Inspire*, which is published by AQAP’s media wing al-Malahem Media.