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IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS 1

AL-SHABAAB'S Foothold IN KENYA'S NORTHEAST
By Sunguta West 3

THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF PAKISTAN'S OPERATION
ZARB-E-AZB
By Farhan Zahid 5

THE HADRMAWT: AQAP AND THE BATTLE FOR YEMEN'S WEALTHIEST
GOVERNORATE
By Michael Horton 7



Hadramawt Governorate, Yemen's largest and wealthiest, is also where AQAP and the Islamic State are strongest.

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HOUTHİ INCURSIONS, İRANIAN PROPAGANDA TARGET SAUDI ARABIA'S NAJRAN PROVINCE

James Brandon

During the last month, a series of developments in Najran, both a province and its capital city in southwestern Saudi Arabia, close to the Yemeni border, suggest Saudi Arabia's ongoing conflict with Yemen's Zaydi Shi'a Houthi movement may be increasingly spilling into Saudi territory. According to some sources, the conflict may potentially even be fueling local dissatisfaction with Saudi rule. Significantly, Najran has a significant presence of Ismaili Shi'as, who historically formed a majority in the city and surrounding areas, and also a small number of Zaydi Shi'as, hailing from the same sect as Yemen's Houthi movement.

Through the last month, a series of raids and cross-border shelling and rocket fire into Saudi Arabia by the Houthis have been reported. For instance, Yemen's official news agency, currently controlled by the Houthi-aligned government in Yemen's capital Sana'a, reported on July 3, that Houthi fighters and the Yemeni Army had raided a military camp in Saudi Arabia's Jizan province, killing "a number" of Saudi soldiers and destroying armored vehicles, while other reports related cross-border missile attacks (Saba News, July 3; Saba News, June 29). Saudi Arabia has confirmed some such incidents; for instance, the Ministry of Interior said that one Saudi soldier was killed in cross-border shelling on July 27, and on June 30, it reported another soldier's death in unspecified circumstances (SPA, June 28; SPA, June 30). Meanwhile, the Houthis' al-Masirah TV station has posted videos online purporting to show Houthi fighters recently operating inside Saudi Arabia. For instance, one video, posted on July 1, appears to show fighters using a wire-guided missile against two Saudi armored vehicles, destroying at least one, close to the Saudi Arabia-Yemen border (al-Masirah TV, July 1). Another al-Masirah video shows RPG-armed Houthi fighters destroying a Saudi tank, a number of which



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were recently moved to the Yemeni frontier (al-Masirah TV, July 5; IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, May 12). The videos clearly demonstrate—as they are intended to—the Houthis' ability to take the fight to Saudis.

In a distinct but related development, Iranian state media has separately reported on alleged organized domestic opposition to the Saudi government taking shape in Najran. Notably, in mid-June, Iran's state-run news agency reported that a new group called Ahrar al-Najran ("Free Ones of Najran") had been formed in the region (Fars News, June 17). The agency also quoted "Abu Bakr Abi Ahmad al-Salami," a purported leader of the movement, as saying that "all tribes of the region are members of the Ahrar al-Najran Movement," and that they had declared the secession of the region from Saudi Arabia. The Iranian agency separately claimed that the movement had captured a military base, shot down a Saudi helicopter, engaged in numerous clashes with government forces and also set up an organization called "The Youth of Najran" (Fars News, July 2). There is no independent corroboration of any of these events, and it seems most likely that these reports are part of an Iranian psychological operations initiative targeting the Saudi government. The claims are perhaps intended to unnerve the Saudis, to provoke a Saudi overreaction in Najran that then prompts a genuine uprising from locals or else to serve as a warning of Iran's willingness to stir up dissent in Saudi Arabia.

It is also possible that there is a kernel of truth to Iran's claims. During 2000, for instance, there were a series of small-scale violent confrontations in Najran between the security forces and local Ismailis. These related largely to Saudi attempts to repress Ismaili practices in favor of Wahhabism, an import to the region, and also over local socio-economic issues. Although the Saudi government quashed the movement and jailed those involved, none of the local Ismaili grievances have been substantially addressed since then. [1] It is also by no means impossible that members of Najran's local tribes, such as the Benu Yam, which is predominantly Ismaili, sympathize with the Houthis and continue to bear grudges against the Saudi government, particularly in light of Saudi Arabia's ongoing aerial campaign in Yemen which has caused large-scale civilian deaths. It is similarly possible that Iran has sought to reach out to Ismaili individuals and tribal leaders in the Najran region—notwithstanding ethnic and religious differences between the tribes and Iran—just as it has done previously in Lebanon and Iraq, and to lesser extents in Bahrain and Saudi's Shi'a-inhabited Eastern province. Iran has also done this in Yemen itself, where it likely provides a level of military support to the Houthis. While one should be wary of reading too much into Iranian

and Houthi propaganda, the situation in Najran has the clear potential to degenerate further in coming weeks and months, particularly if the Saudi-Houthi conflict continues to drag on inconclusively, or if either side seeks to escalate the conflict in the border region.

Note

1. For more detail, see "The Ismailis of Najran," Human Rights Watch, 2008. <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudiarabia0908web.pdf>.

ISLAMIC STATE REMAINS ROBUST OPPONENT DESPITE RECENT DEFEATS

James Brandon

The Islamic State militant group has continued to fiercely contest ground in Syria during the last fortnight, following the loss of the strategic border town of Tal Abyad to mainly Kurdish forces in mid-June. In particular, fighting between the Islamic State and its opponents in the last week has focused on the town of Ayn Issa. This is located to the south of Tel Abyad, at a key crossroads linking the main east-west highway in northern Syria with a north-south route connecting the Islamic State capital of Raqqa with the Turkish border. Joint Kurdish-Arab forces had first captured Ayn Issa on June 22-24; however, on June 6-7, the Islamic State launched a surprised attack and managed to retake the town and some surrounding areas, according to some sources, as a result of infiltrating the town covertly (ARA News, June 25). By June 8-9, Kurdish forces had managed to recapture the area again (Bas News, July 9; ARA News, July 9).

Similarly, on July 7, Kurdish fighters, in conjunction with the Arab fighters via the Burkan al-Firat ("Euphrates Volcano") joint operations room, reportedly repulsed an Islamic State attack on other areas in northeast Syria (YPG, July 8). Other attacks took place south of Kobane, but were beaten off by Kurdish ground forces, with assistance from U.S. airstrikes (ARA News, July 9) These incidents show that gains by Kurdish and Arab anti-Islamist forces against the Islamic State remain fragile and liable to reverses in many parts of Syria. The incidents also indicate that Islamic State fighters remain aggressive, particularly when seeking to regain control of strategic road junctions, routes providing access to the Turkish border and other key locations.

At the same time, in Iraq, the conflict between the Islamic State and the Iraqi government appears to have entered a quiet period. There have been some recent localized attacks. For instance, the Islamic State launched an unsuccessful attack on Kurdish positions in Tal Afar (located between Mosul and the Syrian border) in late June (Rudaw, June 27). However, in general, neither side is actively seeking to challenge the other's territorial control. This reflects the failure of much-hyped Iraqi government attempts earlier in the year to challenge the Islamic State's control of mainly Sunni areas, and also underlines the reluctance of the Iraqi Kurdish forces to contest Arab-majority areas. Despite this, Iraqi and coalition airstrikes have continued, hitting Islamic State positions near Fallujah and Kirkuk in recent days (Rudaw, July 8). One such attack killed "Mina PKC," an Iranian Kurdish Islamist famous for his skill with a Russian-made PKC machine gun, who had previously fought with jihadist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, underlining the potential of these airstrikes to gradually degrade the Islamic State, ahead of a future government ground offensive (Rudaw, July 19). The slow progress in Iraq, which is partly the result of political and military weakness in the Iraqi government, underlines that removing the Islamic State from the country will be a long process.

Al-Shabaab's Foothold in Kenya's Northeast

Sunguta West

On June 14, the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen militant group (better known as al-Shabaab) launched a major attack on a Kenya Defense Force (KDF) camp in Lamu County. The attack failed badly and exposed the militant group's weak military capabilities. However, it also confirmed the group's growing presence in the East African nation.

The attack began when around 100 al-Shabaab fighters sneaked up to the camp at dawn and then targeted it with machine gun fire, improvised rockets and explosives (Nairobi News, June 25). In the ensuing firefight, the military forcefully repulsed the attack, leaving 11 militants dead, including two senior Kenyan al-Shabaab commanders. A British jihadist, Thomas Evans, a 25-year-old white convert from High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire (a.k.a. Abdul Hakim), also died in the botched attack as well as two Kenyan soldiers (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], June 25).

Al-Shabaab's most significant loss in the attack was Luqman Osman Issa (a.k.a. "Shirwa" or "Deere"), a Kenyan from Mombasa. Osman is believed to have previously sneaked heavily armed militants through the porous Kenya-Somalia border into the Lamu area, where he led a massacre a year ago. Osman was a key al-Shabaab leader and was in charge of the Jeshi la Ayman ("Army of Ayman"), an active al-Shabaab cell in Kenya's coastal region. The cell's fighters are known to hide in Boni, a forest which straddles the border region (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], June 16). Osman's younger brother, Ibrahim Osman Issa was killed in 2001, while fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan, and another sibling co-planned the November 2002 attack on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Kikambala (*The Standard* [Nairobi], June 16). This attack left 13 people dead and 80 injured. The other commander killed in the June 14 attack was Said Abdalla Hemed (a.k.a. Said Hamza).

The attack came after the African Union Mission (AMISOM) troops in southern Somalia have squeezed the group in recent months, forcing it to cede strategic territories. In particular, key cities such as Mogadishu, Barawe and Kismayo have fallen to AMISOM, leaving the group without important sources of revenue to finance its activities (Hiiraan Online, January 6). The militant group has further been weakened by the killing of its key ideological and military leaders and ongoing defections from the group to the Somali Federal Government (SFG) (Horseed Media, March 7).

However, while facing defeat at home, al-Shabaab has successfully exported its jihad to neighboring countries. In Kenya's predominantly Muslim northeast, it has executed numerous attacks over the last year in villages, towns and cities to devastating effect (*The Star* [Nairobi], March 27). The attacks, many of which are relatively low-level, have occurred against frequent warnings by the group that it will continue to escalate such assaults in revenge for Kenya's invasion of Somalia in October 2011. Kenya had launched this action to pursue al-Shabaab, who it accused of killing its nationals and abducting aid workers and foreign tourists.

Since then, an increased number of attacks have been recorded in northeastern Kenyan towns, such as Mandera, as well as in the major cities of Mombasa and Nairobi. The most prominent attack occurred on April 2, when four al-Shabaab militants, armed with AK-47s, stormed Garissa University College in Garissa town. The attack killed 148 people, mainly Christian students, and injured 79 others. This followed the Westgate Shopping Mall attack in September 2013, which killed 67 people and injured another 175 (*The Star* [Nairobi], Friday, April 3). Another significant attack was Osman's attack on the Mpeketoni area in Lamu County, which killed more than 70 people (Etaarifa, June 16). The group's spokesman at the time said the Lamu attacks were a revenge for Kenyan troops' presence in Somalia, the government's oppression of Muslims and particularly their alleged coercion and killing of Muslims scholars.

Before al-Shabaab's latest attempted attack on the military camp, two smaller and separate attacks had occurred in the northeastern region, raising concerns that al-Shabaab seemed to enjoy considerable freedom of movement, both in Garissa in the northeast and Lamu on the coast (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], June 15). In recent months, militants in these areas have apparently adopted a new approach: they storm villages, erect their flags and herd the resident into mosques where they then proceed to lecture them (Standard Digital, May 23; *Daily Nation*, May 28). On three occasions in June and May, they have employed this approach in villages near the Somali border, preaching to the villagers about their mission and warning any would-be "traitors."

For example, on May 21, suspected al-Shabaab militants stormed the village of Yumbis in Fafi County near the Somali border and then herded the residents into a mosque. After lecturing the residents, the militants then retreated back to Somalia. A few days later, on May 26, reports indicated that several police officers had been injured in al-Shabaab attacks in the area (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], May 26). Previously, the militants had similarly stormed the border villages of Kawasalo and Tumtishi (Standard Digital, May 23). In what is

seen as an attempt to win the residents on their side, in many of their lectures of local residents, al-Shabaab reportedly castigated the government, accusing it of harassing Muslims and killing Muslim clerics.

Al-Shabaab's actions in these regions are significant due to a number of factors. These regions are generally underdeveloped, and the Muslim population there often feels neglected and marginalized by the government. There is also chronic youth unemployment, and investment in education is low, meaning that people in the region are unable to compete with other parts of the country for skilled jobs (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], June 2). As a result, young and unemployed persons in the area are likely to become susceptible to radicalization and are more easily lured to join extremist groups, which can offer them a sense of belonging and means of livelihood in the absence of other opportunities (*The Star* [Nairobi], November 29, 2014). Al-Shabaab is reportedly also able to appeal to youths further by giving fighters in its camps a monthly salary of \$500 (*Business Daily* [Nairobi], October 15, 2014).

Conclusion

The consequences of al-Shabaab's expanding foothold in Kenya's northeast, and particularly, its attempts to recruit disillusioned and underemployed young men in economically deprived rural communities in the region, could be grave. The Kenyan government has announced that it will build a wall along the border with Somalia to prevent al-Shabaab incursions. This initiative, and the country's ongoing military intervention in Somalia, may provide some relief. However, these will need to be supported by programs that address both the immediate and deeper needs and concerns of local communities, particularly to address their socio-economic deprivation, in order to be fully effective.

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The Successes and Failures of Pakistan's Operation Zarb-e-Azb

Farhan Zahid

On June 15, the ongoing Pakistan Army operation “Operation Zarb-e-Azb” (Sharp Strike) completed its first year. The military operation is the first of its kind against the Islamist insurgents based in the North Waziristan district of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. However, there have been previous operations elsewhere in FATA since Pakistan's first operation against al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other foreign Islamist militant groups in the area in 2002. The current operation is intended to target al-Qaeda and its associated movements, both foreign and domestic, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Chechen Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and Emirate-e-Kaukav, as well as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other various factions of the TTP. [1]

The semi-autonomous FATA comprises seven districts (a.k.a. agencies), and North Waziristan is known for its rugged and rough terrain and inhospitable environment. Previous major military operations conducted in FATA's six other districts were Operation al-Mizan, Operation Zalzal, Operation Sher Dil, Operation Rah-e-Rast, Operation Rah-e-Haq and Operation Rah-e-Nijat. Despite some achievements, however, most of these operations were not fully successful. For years, consecutive Pakistani governments and military authorities avoided opening a new front against entrenched Islamist militants in North Waziristan, despite coming under intense pressure from the United States and other Western governments as many international terrorist plots had their origins in North Waziristan, particularly in camps associated with al-Qaeda and the TTP.

An example of this reluctance to enter North Waziristan came after Operation Rah-e-Nijat, the last major operation launched by Pakistan Army against the Islamist militants in FATA in 2009. This operation targeted TTP-controlled areas in South Waziristan. In 2011, the then Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, was urged by the international community to also pursue on-the-run Islamist militants seeking refuge in North Waziristan. Lieutenant General Asif Yasin Malik, however, who was supervising operations in the area, told a group of reporters the same year: “We will undertake operations in North Waziristan when we want to... We will undertake such an operation when it is in our national interest militarily” (*Dawn*, June 1, 2011). The army also repeatedly said that it was overstretched and could not maintain its supply lines if it had expanded its military

operation into North Waziristan.

Launching the Operation

The North Waziristan operation, after much ado, was finally launched on June 15, 2014, after it became clear to the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that the peace talks with the TTP were nowhere close to fruition, and that, despite the talks, the TTP had been conducting attacks in Pakistani cities. The Pakistani Army was also getting edgy as more and more military installations had been targeted by the TTP; in one particular strike, Lieutenant General Sanaullah Niazi, a three-star general involved in previous military operations against the TTP, had been assassinated by the group in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province near the Afghan border (*News International*, September 16, 2013). Another key event that triggered the military was the TTP's beheading of 23 captured soldiers from Pakistan's Frontier Corps in February 2014 (*Dawn*, February 18, 2014). The TTP further provoked the military by using Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) members to conduct an attack at the Jinnah International Terminal of Karachi Airport, which resulted in the killing of 28 airport security personnel (*Dawn*, June 9, 2014). Following the government's decision to take the offensive, the military launched airstrikes, and 30,000 troops marched into North Waziristan, where operations have since continued up to the present day.

Evaluating Success

Even after a year, it is difficult to gauge the success of Zarb-e-Azb, largely because figures provided to the public come from only one source, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) of the Pakistani Army. There is no other reliable source of facts, and no independent media organization was allowed to embed with the army units fighting the Islamist militants in North Waziristan during the whole past year (aside from occasional tours organized by ISPR for select groups of journalists to show destroyed militant hideouts and captured weapons). That said, according to the official sources, the operation is a great success. For instance, according to the ISPR statement issued on the operation's first anniversary, the military has destroyed 837 militant hideouts in North Waziristan, recovered and destroyed 253 tons of explosives, captured 18,087 weapons, conducted 9,000 intelligence-based operations and killed 2,763 militants, at the cost of losing 347 officers and soldiers (*Express Tribune*, June 15).

In addition to the official figures, it seems that the operation has brought comparative peace and tranquility to Pakistani cities, which were previously under an intense militant threat, particularly in FATA. For instance, the total number

of fatalities in FATA stood at 2,863 during the year 2014, whereas the fatalities from the first three months of 2015 stood at 411, a pro rata reduction of around a third. [2] As far as the operation's financial costs, Pakistani Minister of Finance Ishaq Dar has said the operation may cost around \$1.3 billion (Geo News, February 19).

One weakness of the operation has been the government's neglect to coordinate it with the government of neighboring Afghanistan. As a result, just as in many previous military operations when Islamist militants escaped by fleeing into North Waziristan district, this time they have sneaked into the relative safety of Afghanistan. For instance, according to one local news report, "at least 400 families affiliated with militant groups—including members of al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—crossed into Afghanistan in December and now live in the homes of locals in lawless parts of the country" (*Express Tribune*, January 30).

Conclusion

Operation Zarb-e-Azb was long overdue, not least because North Waziristan's existence as a safe haven for militants persistently hampered the success of other military operations during 2002-2014. Indeed, militants' ability to rapidly find refuge in North Waziristan to regroup and regain their lost momentum is a major reason that Pakistan's major operations failed to achieve their set targets over the last decade. The present operation has so far managed to bring considerable calm to Pakistani cities, but nonetheless, the TTP and affiliated group are still able to launch major attacks. One large retaliatory suicide bombing was launched at Pakistan-India border crossing near Wagah, Lahore, on November 2, 2014. This attack cost the lives of 55 people and injured 200 others. The attack was claimed by Jamaat ul-Ahrar, one of the Islamist groups that is a part of the TTP cluster. In addition, another TTP faction led by Mullah Fazlullah perpetrated a terrorist attack at the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014. This attack, termed "Pakistan's 9/11," claimed lives of 142 people, 132 of whom were school children. An additional risk arising from Operation Zarb-e-Azb is that adjacent Afghan provinces could now become a "new North Waziristan" as Islamist militants pushed out by Zarb-e-Azb have taken refuge there, underlining the problems caused by Pakistan's failure to get the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani on board before launching the operation. This lack of Afghanistan-Pakistan cooperation, and the resulting militant safe havens into Afghanistan, is likely to be one reason why no major Islamist militant leader, such as Fazlullah, Adnan Rashid, Omar Khalid Khorasani and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, has so far been killed or captured during the operation.

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. Al-Qaeda and the TTP have a network of Islamist militant groups based in mainland Pakistan (four provinces and Islamabad Capital Territory), commonly known as "Punjabi Taliban." These groups are proscribed organizations under Pakistani laws, but still manage to operate under different names. Some of these include Harkat ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI), Harkat ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Jaysh-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).
2. South Asia Terrorism Portal, "FATA Assessment 2015," <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/Waziristan/index.html>.

The Hadramawt: AQAP and the Battle for Yemen's Wealthiest Governorate

Michael Horton

More than three months of intense aerial bombardment by Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners have left much of Yemen in ruins. Few places in the country are not experiencing the effects of the air campaign, civil war and the deprivations caused by the coalition's blockade of Yemen's ports. Yemen's eastern Hadramawt governorate is a notable exception.

Since the beginning of the Saudi-led "Operation Decisive Storm" on March 25, the Hadramawt has remained relatively stable despite the fact that much of the governorate is controlled by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). While AQAP's leadership has been targeted by U.S. drone strikes, the organization has not been targeted by the Saudi-led coalition which has focused its efforts on bombing the Houthis, Yemen's northern-based Zaydi Shi'a rebels, and their allies. The Hadramawt has also remained well provisioned because supplies are still transiting its ports, in particular the port city of Mukalla, which is under the nominal control of AQAP (*Yemen Times*, May 29). The relative stability of the Hadramawt has attracted thousands and quite possibly tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are fleeing the aerial bombardment and civil war that has engulfed most of Yemen.

Set among well-watered canyons, deserts and towering mountains, the Hadramawt is Yemen's largest governorate. It is also its wealthiest in terms of natural resources. Most of Yemen's remaining gas and oil reserves are located here. For instance, a single block, Block 19, located within the Say'un-Masila Basin, accounted for more than 32 percent of Yemen's oil production before most of the country's oil and gas exports went offline following the Saudi-led intervention.

Control of the Hadramawt and its natural resources is critical to any future government of a unified Yemen. The relative stability of the Hadramawt is, however, unlikely to last as AQAP, the Islamic State, Saudi Arabia and forces aligned with the Houthis battle for control of what is one of Yemen's most strategically and economically important governorates.

From AQAP to the 'Sons of the Hadramawt'

Before the start of Saudi-led operations against the Houthis and their allies, AQAP—while still a formidable organization—was on the defensive in much of Yemen. The Houthis, whose membership is predominately Zaydi Shi'a, are the sworn enemies of AQAP. In turn, AQAP and Salafists generally view the Shi'a as heretics. The Houthis and members of various militant Salafist organizations, like AQAP, have additionally been locked in an ongoing war for much of the last decade. With the Houthis' rapid rise to power in 2014 and 2015, the Houthis had pushed AQAP out of key governorates that included al-Jawf, in northern Yemen, and al-Bayda, in central Yemen.

Since the start of the Saudi-led airstrikes on the Houthis and their allies, AQAP is resurgent and now enjoys a degree of operational freedom that it has not had since the 2011-2012 popular uprisings. The Houthis and the forces allied with them, including some of Yemen's Republican Guard, shifted their strategic focus from attacking militant Salafist-aligned forces like AQAP, to securing positions in southern Yemen, namely in Aden. At the same time, the Houthis' and their allies' ability to move men and materiel around the country has been impeded by the Saudi-led airstrikes. As a result, AQAP went on the offensive.

On April 2, AQAP attacked a prison in Mukalla and freed more than 300 prisoners, some of whom were senior AQAP operatives, including Khalid Batarfi who had been a regional commander for AQAP and played a key role in AQAP's 2011-2012 takeover of Abyan (al-Jazeera, April 2). In the days following the April 2 prison break, AQAP rapidly consolidated its hold on Mukalla, Yemen's fifth-largest city and the capital of Hadramawt governorate. The elements of the Yemeni Army that were charged with defending the city either fled from their posts or switched sides. AQAP also looted the Mukalla branch of the Central Bank of Yemen, as well as army warehouses and supply depots (*Yemen Times*, April 6). By April 16, AQAP, with the help of local allies, had seized the nearby Dhaba Oil Terminal at Ash-Shihr and al-Riyan Airport and had routed the Air Defense 190 Brigade and the 27th Mechanized Infantry Brigade (The National, April 18).

Since taking control of Mukalla and the other parts of the Hadramawt that it now controls, AQAP has pursued an accommodative policy. Following their rapid takeover of Mukalla, AQAP's regional leadership, now headed by the recent escapee Batarfi, has worked to build a governing coalition with local authorities and the Hadramawt National Council (HNC). The HNC is an offshoot of Hadrami Tribal

Confederation (HTC), which initially opposed AQAP's takeover of Mukalla. The HNC's core membership is made up of Salafists, many of whom have close ties with Saudi Arabia. The HNC and AQAP are seemingly united by the fact that they view the Houthis as a common enemy. While AQAP and its forces remain in control of security and military operations in Mukalla and other areas in the Hadramawt that they control, day to day governance is being left to local bureaucrats under the supervision of the HNC.

AQAP's shift in strategy in the Hadramawt is also illustrated by the fact that they are now calling themselves "Sons of the Hadramawt." Taking up a new name in order to emphasize a shift in strategy is nothing new for AQAP. By calling themselves by this name, AQAP is indicating that they are deeply embedded in the political, tribal and religious milieus of the Hadramawt. [1] Thus far, AQAP has not moved to impose its version of Shari'a on the inhabitants of those areas that it controls. However, AQAP has instituted an unpopular ban on *qat*, the mild narcotic used by a majority of Yemeni men (al-Bawaba News, May 15).

Despite its ban on *qat*, which is only sporadically enforced, AQAP's accommodative policy in the Hadramawt seems to be bearing fruit for the organization. The Hadramawt, and in particular the city of Mukalla, are relatively stable, and the governorate is attracting thousands of IDPs seeking shelter and aid. In a little more than three months, AQAP has also replenished its funds, gained access to a wide range of medium and heavy weaponry and undoubtedly has access to hundreds, if not thousands, of new recruits in the form of IDPs, many of whom will be attracted by the nominal salaries offered by AQAP. The only current threats to AQAP are the Islamic State and what remains of the Yemeni Armed Forces in the northern reaches of the Hadramawt.

A Delicate Balance

While AQAP operates throughout the Hadramawt, it, however, effectively controls only Mukalla and the southernmost valleys of the governorate. The northern sections of the governorate, including the city of Say'un, are under the nominal control of Major General Abdul Rahman al-Halili, the commander of Yemen's First Military District, the country's largest. [2] Al-Halili commands five brigades. However, it is doubtful that any of the five brigades are at full strength.

In a recent interview, Major General al-Halili claimed that he was a supporter of exiled Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi (Middle East Eye, June 27). However, al-Halili, who was most recently the commander of the 3rd Armored

Brigade, a part of the Republican Guard, is far more likely to be aligned with former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh. While al-Halili was the commander of the 3rd Armored Brigade, he, along with many other commanding officers within the Republican Guard, was reluctant to take orders from President Hadi. Al-Halili was promoted by Hadi and given command of the First Military District as part of a reshuffling and dispersal of field grade and general officers within the Republican Guard (SABA, July 12, 2014). Given his history, it is doubtful that al-Halili is in fact a supporter of Hadi or his exiled government. In late April, a plan to make the city of Say'un, the headquarters of the First Military District, a temporary capital for Hadi and his government was proposed. The proposal went nowhere. Whether this was due to insecurity or a lack of support from al-Halili remains an open question.

Regardless of al-Halili's loyalties, he has thus far kept his forces intact and largely de-politicized. This has allowed him to maintain a delicate balance within the parts of Yemen that he controls. His forces have acted as an effective bulwark against both AQAP and the Islamic State. While al-Halili's forces actively patrol the areas under their control, they do not target AQAP in the areas that the militants control. Al-Halili's strategy is to let AQAP and the Islamic State fight one another while he conserves his resources for whatever might come next.

AQAP also has to contend with the operations of Islamic State in the Hadramawt. While Islamic State operatives have been present in Yemen for close to a year, the group began operations with a suicide attack on two mosques in Sana'a on March 20 (al-Bawaba News, March 20). Since that attack, the Islamic State has carried out additional attacks on mosques in Sana'a and has also targeted Yemeni soldiers. The Islamic State has benefited from a number of defections from AQAP, including Jalal Baleidi, who is now a senior commander within the former group's "Wilayat Hadramawt," or Hadramawt Province. The Islamic State's presence in Yemen remains relatively limited. However, the organization is expanding and is a threat to AQAP's dominance as the premier militant Salafist organization in Yemen. Much of the fighting between AQAP and the Islamic State has taken place within the Hadramawt. Both organizations undoubtedly recognize the strategic and material benefits of controlling parts or all of the governorate. Islamic State operatives maintain a presence in the Wadi al-Hajr, just west of Mukalla. AQAP and allied tribal forces have mounted attacks on Islamic State forces in the area, but have thus far been unable to defeat them. The Islamic State launched its first attack in the Hadramawt on April 30, when it attacked a military checkpoint and a government building in Tarim

in the north of the Hadramawt (al-Arabiya, April 30). The Islamic State beheaded three of the captured soldiers. Since that attack, the Islamic State has focused its efforts on targets associated with the Houthis in Sana'a and on AQAP itself.

A Long Sought Prize

AQAP and the Islamic State are not alone in viewing the Hadramawt as a prize territory. Saudi Arabia has a long and abiding interest in the governorate. Many of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest families, like the Bin Ladens, hail from the Hadramawt. In 1809, followers of the Wahhabi sect, now the state-sanctioned sect of Saudi Arabia, invaded and occupied the Hadramawt. During the occupation, the Wahhabis destroyed Islamic shrines as well as libraries.

While conservative, the Islamic traditions that have predominated in the Hadramawt have generally been moderate and influenced by various Sufi traditions. However, beginning in the early 1980's, Saudi Arabia, much as it did across the Muslim world, began funding a host of Salafist and Wahhabi-inspired imams, mosques and religious centers in the Hadramawt. [3] As a result, over the next three decades, the religious landscape of the Hadramawt changed dramatically as the far more radical Salafist and Wahhabi-influenced interpretations of Islam took hold. This changing religious landscape has reinforced the Hadramawt's links with Saudi Arabia.

However, Saudi Arabia's interest in the Hadramawt extends well beyond religious proselytism and protecting the interests of wealthy families like the Bin Ladens. The Kingdom's primary interest in the governorate is the possible construction of an oil pipeline. Such a pipeline has long been a dream of the government of Saudi Arabia (Wikileaks, June 6, 2008; *Yemen Times*, April 9, 2012). [4] A pipeline through the Hadramawt would give Saudi Arabia and its Gulf State allies direct access to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean; it would allow them to bypass the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint that could be, at least temporarily, blocked by Iran in a future conflict.

The prospect of securing a route for a future pipeline through the Hadramawt likely figures in Saudi Arabia's broader long-term strategy in Yemen. However, in the short-term, Saudi Arabia probably views AQAP's control of the southern Hadramawt as being advantageous to its current war against the Houthis. So far, Saudi Arabia and its allies have not targeted AQAP or the Islamic State in the Hadramawt or elsewhere in Yemen. In the case of the Hadramawt, it is probable that Saudi Arabia sees the new comparatively "moderate" AQAP as a potential ally in its war against the

Houthis and as a check on the Islamic State. This would mirror the situation in Syria where al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has for some time been regarded by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States as a relatively moderate proxy force that serves the dual purpose of fighting the Shi'a-dominated government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and acting as a check on the Islamic State's growing power in the region.

Outlook

All parties involved in the current conflict, including AQAP and the Islamic State, are keenly aware of the strategic and material importance of the Hadramawt. The natural resources in the Hadramawt are critical to the economy of a unified Yemen. Its extensive coastline, its ports and oil handling infrastructure and its border with Saudi Arabia mean that the Hadramawt is a strategic prize for whatever group that can control the governorate—either directly or via a proxy force. While much of the governorate is presently relatively stable when compared with other parts of Yemen, this stability is unlikely to last.

In the short-term, AQAP will remain in control of Mukalla and large parts of southern Hadramawt. AQAP's accommodative policy and its renewed efforts to coopt local tribes and power structures in the Hadramawt will strengthen the organization's hold on the territorial gains that it has made. This, combined with the fact that AQAP's two primary opponents in the region—the Houthis and Saleh-loyalists—have largely been neutralized, will ensure AQAP's continued growth in the Hadramawt and in large swaths of southern Yemen. AQAP may also benefit from the fact that it could well be regarded as a useful proxy by Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthis. Saudi Arabia and its allies are arming a host of disparate militias across southern Yemen. It is almost certain that some, if not much, of the funding and materiel will make its way to AQAP and quite possibly the Islamic State.

While the Islamic State's current focus seems to be on attacking targets associated with the Houthis in Sana'a, given the importance of the Hadramawt, the group will also continue to battle AQAP to maintain its foothold in the region as well. The internecine struggle between AQAP and the Islamic State may spread beyond Wadi al-Hajr to other parts of the Hadramawt. The fight between the two jihadist groups is likely to be the only short-term check on the growth of both organizations, not only in the Hadramawt, but also in Yemen. Apart from Major General al-Halili's forces in northern Hadramawt, most of the Yemeni Army is divided and locked in a battle that pits the Houthis and allied forces against southern separatists and Islah, the Yemeni

branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Halili's forces do not have the capability to go on the offensive against AQAP or the Islamic State without additional aid, which neither the Yemeni government in exile nor Saudi Arabia have provided. Allowing AQAP and the Islamic State to gain and—in the case of AQAP—maintain a presence in the Hadramawt all but ensures the long-term instability of not only the governorate but also of Yemen as a whole. If and when a unity government is formed in Sana'a, it and what remains of the Yemeni Armed Forces, will then face the challenge of not only reconstructing Yemen, but also the Sisyphean task of removing AQAP and the Islamic State from the Hadramawt.

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Notes

1. AQAP is not the first organization to use the name. The original "Sons of the Hadramawt" organization was one whose members supported the secession of the Hadramawt from Yemen. Other members of the organization wanted the Hadramawt to become part of Saudi Arabia.

² The First Military District encompasses much of the Hadramawt and the neighboring governorate of al-Mahra, which borders both Saudi Arabia and Oman.

3. For background see: Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*, Da Capo Press, 2009.

4. See: http://www.gulfinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Threats_to_the_Saudi_Oil_Infrastructure.pdf.