

p.1

BRIEFS

James Brandon

p.3

THE BATTLE FOR THE EU- PHRATES: TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO KURDISH EXPANSION

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

p.6

KASHMIR JIHADISM AND THE THREAT TO INDIA

Animesh Roul

p.8

CAPITALIZING ON CHAOS: AQAP ADVANCES IN YEMEN

Michael Horton

AL-SHABAAB ATTACKS IN SOMALIA SUGGEST NEW HARDLINE STRATEGY

James Brandon

Al-Shabaab, the Somali Islamist militant group, has conducted a range of attacks during the last few weeks, significant both in their scale and their increasingly direct targeting of civilians that suggest the group may be undergoing a strategic shift.

In the first attack, five al-Shabaab militants attacked the popular Lido beach area in Mogadishu with bombs and guns on January 21, killing at least 25 people. The majority of the victims were ordinary Somalis enjoying their day off; the beach area is often visited by local families ([Horseed Media](#), February 13). The attack reportedly prompted a surge in anger towards al-Shabaab and sparked demonstrations against the group ([Horseed Media](#), February 1). Dutch media later reported that the attack had been "masterminded" by Ismail Muse Ahmed Guled, a Netherlands national of Somali origin, who is also believed to have organized other al-Shabaab attacks ([NL Times](#), January 22).

In the second large-scale attack to occur in recent weeks, on February 2, an al-Shabaab militant smuggled a bomb onto a Daallo Airlines passenger jet at Mo-

gadishu's airport. The bomb, hidden in a laptop, exploded shortly after take-off. The blast blew a small hole in the fuselage and killed the attacker, although the plane was able to land safely. After a ten-day delay, al-Shabaab issued a statement claiming credit for the attack, saying that it had been targeting Western intelligence officials and Turkish soldiers who were on the plane and that the bombing was "retribution for the crimes committed by the coalition of Western crusaders and their intelligence agencies against the Muslims of Somalia" ([Horseed Media](#), February 13). However, it later emerged that the attacker had been checked into an earlier Turkish Airlines flight, and when this flight was cancelled, decided to bomb the Somali airliner instead after being offered a seat on the flight ([Al-Jazeera](#), February 7). In a further development, al-Shabaab militants briefly captured the southern port town of Merka on February 5, before being ejected by Somali and African Union forces the following day ([Horseed Media](#), February 6). The attack was an unusual departure from the group's usual hit-and-run guerrilla tactics.

Although al-Shabaab has never shied away from killing civilians, the vast majority of its attacks have targeted the military, government, or perceived 'spies' and 'apostates' rather than ordinary Somali civilians. The latest attacks therefore mark a substantial departure from this trend; al-Shabaab's increased focus on maximizing civil-

ian casualties is likely driven by a range of factors. These include rising competition from the Islamic State's local Somali affiliate, whose growth and increasing prominence has the potential to lead to al-Shabaab factions breaking away, affecting al-Shabaab's supply of recruits and funds. Al-Shabaab remains a loyal affiliate of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State's key jihadist rival. The latest attacks by al-Shabaab may be seen as an attempt to compete with the more extreme Islamic State for radical audiences, even at the expense of more mainstream Somali public opinion.

It is possible that the shift in targeting may indicate increased radicalization within al-Shabaab, perhaps driven by hardliners and more ideological foreign fighters who have less hesitations about attacking Somali civilians. Underlining this potential new trend is that the airline bomb plot originally targeted a Turkish airline; if the attack had succeeded this would have also been perceived as a significant assault by al-Shabaab on Turkish interests. Given Turkey's ambiguous attitude toward other al-Qaeda regional franchises, notably its tolerance of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, such an attack would have doubtlessly prompted Turkey to take action against the group. The original plot, had it been executed successfully, may have even sparked Turkish action against al-Qaeda more widely, and could have exacerbated tensions between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda's leadership, indicating an arguably new trend of recklessness in al-Shabaab's targeting strategy.

AFTER JAKARTA ATTACKS, INDONESIA TAKES ACTION AGAINST MILITANTS

James Brandon

Since the Islamic State-linked attacks in Indonesia's capital of Jakarta on January 14, the most significant jihadist attack in the country in a decade, the government has taken a series of steps against domestic jihadists. In the week following the attack, 18 people were arrested, including both individuals suspected of being linked to those responsible for the attack, as well as those tied to separate groups ([Jakarta Post](#), February 23). Since then, a range of further arrests and raids have been carried out by Indonesia's police and specialist counter-terrorism forces, leading to a total of 33 arrests ([Straits Times](#) [Singapore], February 15). On February 15, the country's counter-terrorism unit, Densus 88, shot and killed one suspected militant from the East Indonesia Mujahidin jihadist group in Bima, in West Nusa Tenggara (in the east of the country) and arrested another ([Jakarta Post](#), February 15). In another raid, on February 3, the authorities arrested another East Indonesia Mujahidin suspect who was believed to have previously attended militant training camps in Poso, Indonesia's Central Sulawesi province ([Jakarta Post](#), February 3). Arrests of suspected Indonesian militants have also taken place abroad; one Indonesian is reported to have been arrested in February in Saudi Arabia as part of a wider crackdown on foreigners believed to be linked to the Islamic State ([Jakarta Post](#), February 1).

In addition to these developments, the authorities also appear to have stepped up investigations into groups active in and around the capital in a bid to prevent any further attacks. For instance, the head of Indonesia's police, Gen. Badrodin Haiti told a government committee that the police had identified three separate terrorist groups active in the Greater Jakarta area ([Tempo](#) [Indonesia], February 15). These groups had been planning to attack a range of targets including the city's main police station, as well as individual police officers out on patrol. General Haiti also claimed that one of these groups was believed to have received 1.6 billion Indonesian Rupiah (\$120,000) from sources in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey, a portion of which had been distributed to jihadist groups in the Philippines. This information highlights the concerning trend of Indonesia's latest generation of jihadists being well-connected to both

militants in the Middle East and to militants elsewhere in the South East Asia region.

In addition to increased police raids on suspected militants, the government has also taken steps to bolster its legal armory. In particular, the government has sought to amend the 2003 terrorism laws that were passed after the Bali bombings, to allow greater action against suspected militants ([Jakarta Post](#), February 16). Measures proposed include expanding the definition of terrorism to allow the authorities to take action at an earlier stage against nascent militant groupings, to allow the police to hold terrorist suspects for a maximum of ten months (an increase from the current six months), and to allow more evidence gathered by the intelligence agencies to be used in court. An additional proposal involves identifying ways to limit and/or criminalize communications between Indonesian radicals with militants based abroad. Although some human rights organizations have criticized the proposals, in practice, the amendments reflect that Indonesia's current laws, which make it very difficult for the government to take any action against militants and extremists who are not actively preparing attacks, are out of sync with international norms and are widely believed to have substantially hampered the country's ability to action against domestic extremists.

The Battle for the Euphrates: Turkey's Response to Kurdish Expansion

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

In an unexpected move on December 26, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), captured the Tishreen Dam close to Manbijin, Syria ([YPGrojava](#), December 30, 2015). This operation, conducted with support of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, crossed a key Turkish "redline." It also opened the way for the YPG to attack Islamic State in Manbij and Jarabulus and to expand Kurdish-controlled territory in the area. Moreover, the YPG took the Menagh Military airbase with Russian air support on February 11 from Turkish-backed rebels in Aleppo's countryside ([Hawar News](#), February 11). This brings the Kurds closer to creating a united Kurdish administration, and will push Turkey to take more measures to prevent the expansion of YPG-held territory into the 60 mile (100km) strip along the Syrian-Turkish border (which is still partially controlled by Islamic State). In addition, on February 13, Turkey started shelling YPG positions close to the Menagh Airport with artillery ([YeniSafak](#), February 13).

Crossing Turkish "Red Lines"

Prior to the SDF's capture of the Tishreen dam, the Turkish National Security Council had made clear that any incursion west of the Euphrates River by Kurdish forces would be a "violation" of a Turkish red line ([TRTworld](#), July 1, 2015). Turkish tanks and artillery have previously fired on YPG and YPG-aligned FSA-rebels trying to cross into Jarabulus on July 27, 2015, in an attempt to enforce this red line ([Now](#), November 29, 2015). In 2015, the YPG claimed the Turkish army had targeted their forces 22 times with heavy weaponry around Tal Abyad and Kobani ([YPGrojava](#), December 31, 2015). In response, the YPG warned Turkey not to violate the Syrian-Turkish border ([Basnews](#), January 31).

Despite the Turkish warnings, the Kurds - with coalition support - proceeded to cross the Euphrates. In Tishreen, located some distance south of the border, they were out of the range of Turkish artillery and tanks. The SDF halted their operations after advancing more than 4

miles (6 km) from the river, most likely on instructions from a U.S.-led coalition that fears provoking a significant Turkish response. As a result, despite previous warnings, the Turkish response has so far been limited; the Turkish PM nonetheless warned that Turkey would not allow any hostile groups to cross the Euphrates ([Daily Sabah](#), December 27, 2015).

For the United States, it is important for the Kurds to take Tishreen Dam in order to isolate Raqqa, Islamic State's self-declared capital, from Islamic State-controlled territories east of the Euphrates. Meanwhile, for the SDF, the move opens the way into the Euphrates Valley and Manbij. Furthermore, the Kurdish advance means that, in the event of an U.S.-coordinated attack by the SDF on Raqqa, it would be more difficult for Islamic State to send fighters from Aleppo to Raqqa to support the group's fighters there. However, it is also clear that the SDF is eager to move towards Manbij in order to later create a contiguous Kurdish-controlled territory along the Syria-Turkish border by taking the remaining Islamic State-held stretch of the border between Azaz and Jarabulus. The U.S., however, will not support them with airstrikes to achieve this aim.

A potential solution for the SDF is to garner Russian support. This year, Assad – backed with Russian support – managed to completely encircle the northern countryside of Aleppo ([Kurdistan24](#), February 5). Consequently, the YPG moved closer to Azaz. Although the SDF will continue to work with the U.S.-led coalition in the countryside of Raqqa and Hasakah, it will also work with Russia in Aleppo's countryside against the Islamic State and Syrian rebels.

Turkey and Turkish Proxy Forces

Turkey seeks to prevent the Kurds from creating a contiguous territory along the Turkish border and halt the union of their three local administrations in Kobani, Efrin, and Cizere; these entities are dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). In a recent meeting with Turkish journalists, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that Turkey would not allow the YPG to expand in this area. "We are only against the PYD establishing a corridor in northern Syria," he asserted ([Daily Sabah](#), February 1).

The Kurdish move across the Euphrates is likely to lead

to increased Turkish support for ethnic Turkmen insurgents from the Free Syrian Army to take Islamic State-dominated villages in Syria ([Daily Sabah](#), January 15). Turkey will also increase support for Arab fighters in Azaz to push back the YPG advances. The Azaz rebels have asked for heavy weapons to fight the YPG ([AA](#), February 12), and Turkey started shelling YPG positions in Aleppo's countryside. In an early indication of these trends, Turkish-backed rebel groups such as the Turkmen Liwa Sultan Murad brigade, the Shamiya Front, and the Sham Legion launched operations on January 9 that seized control of several villages with Turkish artillery support after the SDF crossed the river ([Daily Sabah](#), January 17). Moreover, there were clashes between the Islamic State and the Turkish army, with the Islamic State in particular saying that they had recently fired on Turkish soldiers trying to enter Jarabulus, a border town under their control ([Amaq News Agency](#), February 4). The Turkish army has meanwhile reportedly fired hundreds of artillery shells at Islamic State targets in the region ([Daily Sabah](#), January 15). Turkey is also attempting to clear the border of Islamic State-laid mines ([Now](#), January 19).

It appears the U.S. will support Turkish-backed FSA rebels with airstrikes to help them take control the border crossings of al-Rai and Jarabulus from Islamic State, since this would stop Islamic State access routes from Turkey into Syria. So far, however, the Turkmen rebels have not made major gains, and the Islamic State militants are resisting strongly, indicating the importance of holding the border area for their own ambitions. Meanwhile, Russia is also bombing Turkish-backed rebels opposed to the Russian-backed forces of President Bashar al-Assad. This will make it very difficult for Turkish-backed rebels to resist Islamic State, the YPG, and the Syrian regime simultaneously. Therefore, Turkey will back Syrian militants with artillery against the YPG.

At the same time, Turkey has attempted to decrease Western support for the YPG by emphasizing the links between the YPG and the PKK in meetings with Western officials, attempting to portray the YPG as a terrorist organization ([Daily Sabah](#), January 28). Turkey recently successfully managed to exclude the PYD and YPG from the Geneva peace talks on Syria, although Russia had backed the PYD's inclusion ([Daily Sabah](#), January 29).

U.S. Dependence on the YPG

An additional complication is that the U.S.-led anti-Isl-

Islamic State coalition still needs the SDF to take Raqqa and al-Shaddadi, despite Turkish opposition to the group. As a result, a 13-person delegation led by U.S. Presidential Envoy Brett McGurk visited SDF forces in northern Syria at the end of January, soon after the PYD's exclusion from the Geneva talks, angering Turkey ([Hawar News Agency](#), February 2). The U.S. is using an airstrip in Rmeilan to further materially support SDF forces ([Al Jazeera](#), January 20). One motive for this clear continued support from the U.S. for the PYD is the Obama administration's goal of eliminating Islamic State's hold over Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq before the end of President Obama's second term in January 2017. Therefore, the U.S. needs the Kurds to finish the job.

If the YPG does decide to move towards Manbij and Jarabulus, it is possible that Turkey would attack YPG forces with artillery and tanks. Turkey is already shelling the YPG positions to protect Syrian rebels in Azaz from the YPG and Russia. However, Turkey is not likely to use ground troops, fearing a Russian response after the country shot down a Russian jet in November ([Daily Sabah](#), November 24, 2015). Turkish jets were consequently excluded from Syrian airspace following the shooting down of the jet and the Russian decision to provide air support to Assad in September 2015. Recently, Russia has increased air support even further, leading to the Syrian government and allied Shia militias encircling Aleppo and cutting Turkish supply lines to the city from Azaz ([Al Masdar](#), February 4).

Conclusion

Turkey is not likely to directly intervene with significant military forces in northern Syria to stop YPG advances as a result of Russian threats. However, Ankara will support Turkmen militias against the Islamic State and artillery in order to preempt Kurdish attempts to take control of the border strip. This is leading to increased tensions between Islamic State and Turkey, notably leading to the terrorist group bombing a group of German tourists in central Istanbul on January 12 ([Daily Sabah](#), January 12).

These tensions over the region will lead to clashes between Turkish-backed rebel groups and the YPG for the control of the Euphrates and border area. Furthermore, separate clashes between Assad-backed forces and increasingly hard-pressed Syrian insurgent groups will make it more difficult for anti-Assad rebels to focus on

fighting the Islamic State and the YPG. This makes it possible for the YPG to connect their administrations with either Russian or Western air support. Turkey will moreover increase its anti-YPG propaganda and simultaneous pressure on the West to stop working with the YPG; Turkey will continue to highlight the YPG's links to the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist group by the EU, the U.S., and others. However, Turkey's attempts to delegitimize the YPG will likely have its limits, as the U.S.-led coalition against Islamic State needs the YPG to ultimately liberate Islamic State-held Raqqa and Shaddadi, and it will continue to work with them until its aims are achieved.

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Kashmir Jihadism and the Threat to India

Animesh Roul

It is increasingly evident that each time the relations between India and Pakistan improve, India-focused jihadist groups from across the Pakistani border attempt to disrupt it with attacks in the Indian states of Kashmir, Punjab, and elsewhere. The inevitable aim of these is to upset the possibility of amicable dialogue between these two populous and nuclear-armed nations.

The latest example of this occurred in January when the high-profile Pathankot Air base in the Indian state of Punjab was attacked by militants. The United Jihad council (UJC, also known as Muttahida Jihad Council), based in Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PAK), claimed responsibility for the incident. The attacks and ensuing gun battle at the strategically crucial Indian airbase went on for three days and killed 13 people, including seven Indian security personnel and six militants. UJC Spokesperson Syed Sadaqat Hussain has since threatened similar attacks elsewhere in the country while chiding the Indian establishment for its alleged Pakistan-phobia (*Dawn* [Karachi], January 4). Days later, the chief of UJC, Syed Salahuddin, also supreme leader of Hizbul Mujahideen, criticized the Pakistani government in a similar vein for its alleged stand in support of India, saying that "Pakistan is not just an advocate, but also a party to the longstanding Kashmir conflict" and that it "should play the role of a patron [to groups like UJC] rather than of an adversary" (*Express Tribune*, January 20). Salahudin's comments were issued alongside the Pakistani government's crackdown on the leaders and infrastructures of another constituent of UJC, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), as the group's militants were suspected of being involved in the Pathankot attack.

Rejecting the claim by the UJC as a ploy to divert attention and to confuse their investigation, Indian security agencies investigating the attack have tracked at least four Pakistan-based militant operatives as the prime architects of January's Pathankot attack. All are affiliated with Pakistan-based Jaish-e Muhammed, including its chief, Maulana Masood Azhar, his brother Abdul Rauf Asghar, as well as Ashfaq Ahmed, Haji Abdul Shaqur, and Kashim Jaan. While Azhar allegedly oversaw the operations, his brother Asghar and two others were in

touch with the militants once they made their way inside the airbase. India shared with Pakistan, the telephone numbers and the identity of the suspected Jaish handlers, among other evidence. Initially, the Pakistani government was said to have acted on information provided by Indian agencies by detaining at least 12 JeM operatives for their alleged involvement in the Pathankot terror attack and sealing branch offices of the JeM located in Bahwalnagar, Bahawalpur, Multan, and Muza-fargarh (*Daily Pakistan*, January 13). It also claimed to have taken Masood Azhar into protective custody (*Dawn*, January 15). On the ground, however, JeM leadership denied any such detentions or arrests. Moreover, over a month after the incident, Pakistan's Special Investigation Team (SIT) concluded that there was no substantive evidence to suggest that Masood Azhar or JeM were responsible for the deadly assault (*Express Tribune*, February 8). In order to secure the safe release of JeM's supreme leader Masood Azhar from an Indian prison, his fellow militants had previously orchestrated the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC 814 in late December 1999, the December 2001 Indian parliament attacks, and a number of coordinated attacks in Jammu, Kashmir, and elsewhere in India.

Most UJC militants, who are either camouflaged under new group names or operating under newly-floated hybrid strike units (e.g. as Al-Shuhada Brigade, Shaheed Afzal Guru Squad and Highway Squad), are largely part of the exiting jihadist groups such as Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). These groups often operate collectively. This tactics help anti-India agencies in Pakistan to keep the vexed Kashmir conflict live and relevant, drawing international attention to the contested nature of the territory, and towards the so-called popular insurgency, while also maintaining a level of deniability.

The Pathankot events were not isolated developments as far as Pakistan-based militants are concerned, but were rather a part of a well-orchestrated militant surge. For instance, one report by the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) in April of 2015 warned that six Pakistan based militant groups, including HM, LeT, and JeM, were preparing to launch attacks on security installations in India ([India Today](#), April 1, 2015).

These militant groups have both collectively and independently been attempting to reinvigorate terror infrastructures in Kashmir and beyond, apparently with the

patronage of Pakistan's political, military, and intelligence agencies. There have been many instances of similar violent and well-coordinated strikes in Kashmir and Punjab in the last few years, all emanating from Pakistani soil. Almost after a decade of relative calm in the region, the December 5, 2014 serial attacks in Kashmir and Srinagar killed 21 people, including 11 security personnel and two civilians, in three separate incidents. The fatalities also included eight Pakistani militants who carried out multiple strikes, including an attack at the Indian Army's 31 Field Regiment Ordinance Camp at Mohra, Baramulla district (Reuters, December 2014).

The latest Pathankot events are reminiscent of July 2015's Dinanagar (Punjab) attacks where Pakistani militants launched multiple assaults, including an attack on a police station that killed at least seven, including a senior police official. The militants were equipped with sophisticated arms and ammunitions, including a U.S. Night Vision Device (NVD) and Global Positioning Systems (GPS). The U.S. has confirmed that the NVD used in the attack was in use in Afghanistan in 2010 and was lost during battle (IBN Live, September 16, 2015). Exactly how it reached the militants who were slain in Gurdaspur remains a mystery.

The involvement of Pakistan Army's Border Action Team (BAT) and heavily armed militants in attacks in India has been confirmed on many occasions in the past as a part of a persistent and deliberate attempt by sections of Pakistan's army, intelligence agencies, and alleged non-state actors sponsored by the state to undermine the peaceful atmosphere in neighboring Indian states ([The Economic Times](#), January 20, 2015; [First Post](#), August 18, 2013; [DNA India](#), May 19, 2014). Context for the latest increase in attacks is these groups' desire to revive anti-India militancy in the India's Kashmir region, which has seen a decline in pro-separate militancy in the past few years.

The Pathankot attacks and the resulting clamor in India for immediate action against the perpetrators has brought about a significant development. In Pakistan, for the first time, the National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs issued a four-page policy paper on Kashmir, suggesting that "Pakistan should not encourage calls for active support to armed, banned, militant groups in Kashmir" ([The Express Tribune](#), February 1). At the same time, however, it should be noted that in recent decades, Pakistan's Kashmir policy has

consistently adhered to few time-tested methods, such as pressing for diplomatic dialogue with India while consistently backing India-focused jihadists in the aim of creating the impression of a broad-based and popular insurgency in Kashmir.

The Pathankot attacks occurred just one week after the December 25, 2015 surprise meeting between Indian and Pakistani prime ministers in Lahore. The attacks led to the cancellation of scheduled follow-up talks between respective foreign secretaries and cooled the warming diplomatic relations between the two countries ([The Hindu](#), January 15). The events therefore illustrate both patronage of militant groups by elements of the Pakistani security establishment opposed to improved relations with India, and also underline the resulting resilience of Pakistan's Kashmir-centric jihadi infrastructure, which continues to pose a threat to Indian national security.

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Capitalizing on Chaos: AQAP Advances in Yemen

Michael Horton

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has more men, is better equipped and funded, and holds more territory than at any time in its history. The only point at which the organization has enjoyed comparable strength was in the aftermath of the popular uprising against former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011. However, the conditions that allowed AQAP to seize and hold territory after the 2011 uprising are far more pronounced now than they were then. These include: disarray within the Yemeni Armed Forces, severe and increased poverty, economic turmoil, an absence of governmental authority, and widening sectarian divisions. All of these factors make Yemen — particularly southern and eastern Yemen — fertile ground for the expansion of AQAP.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched “Operation Decisive Storm,” a campaign that ostensibly aimed at restoring the internationally-recognized but exiled government of Yemeni president Abd Raboo Mansur al-Hadi. Hadi and his government had fled the Yemeni port city of Aden for the safety of Saudi Arabia as Yemen’s Houthi rebels advanced. The Houthis — who refer to themselves as Ansar Allah (Supporters of Allah) — are a Zaidi Shi’a movement that has deep roots in northwest Yemen. They are now nominally allied with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and military forces loyal to him, but are believed by Saudi Arabia to be backed by Iran.

The resulting ten month-long naval blockade by Saudi and its allies and their thousands of airstrikes on civilian and military targets across the country have failed to dislodge the Houthis, who remain in control of the capital, Sana’a, and much of northwest Yemen. The airstrikes and the naval blockade have, however, succeeded in ravaging the poorest country in the Middle East. The United Nations estimates that more than eighty percent of Yemen’s population of 26 million are now in need of humanitarian assistance ([UNOCHA](#), January 2016). Yemen’s already limited infrastructure has been decimated and what little central government control there was before the war no longer exists. Perhaps most seriously, the months of war are dismantling the social structures that have long provided Yemen with a measure of

at least localized stability. This multi-front war in Yemen is a gift to groups like AQAP and the Islamic State. Both organizations thrive in areas where poverty and sectarian tensions are pronounced. AQAP, and, to a lesser degree the Islamic State, have consequently lost no time in capitalizing on the chaos in Yemen.

Filling the Void

The Saudi-led coalition succeeded in forcing the Houthis and allied forces to vacate Aden and the parts of southern Yemen that they briefly occupied. However, the coalition, and the exiled Yemeni government that it supports, failed to secure these areas, including the temporary capital of Aden. The Saudi-led campaign relies heavily on airstrikes and thus far has deployed only a limited number of ground troops, many of which are mercenaries ([Middle East Eye](#), December 23, 2015; [al-Bawaba](#), December 14, 2015).

The retreat of the Houthis and military forces allied with them from parts of southern Yemen left a vacuum that AQAP has been quick to fill. Shortly after the initiation of Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, AQAP took over al-Mukalla, Yemen’s fifth largest city and the capital of Hadramawt governorate. AQAP has long maintained a presence in the Hadramawt and in the neighboring governorate of Shabwa. These are both areas where the Houthis have little or no influence. The elements of the Yemeni Armed Forces and security services deployed in Mukalla offered little resistance to the takeover. Following their takeover of Mukalla, AQAP advanced throughout the southern parts of Hadramawt. The only real resistance that AQAP faced was in the northern part of the Hadramawt where forces under the command of Major General Abdul Rahman al-Halili, commander of Yemen’s First Military District, blocked their advance.

While AQAP was halted in its attempts to push into the northern parts of Hadramawt, the organization is expanding across much of southern Yemen. AQAP has infiltrated its operatives into Aden where it enjoys a complex relationship with a matrix of anti-Houthi, separatist, and Salafi militias. During the four-month battle to evict the Houthis and their allies from Aden, which ended in July 2015, AQAP operatives worked closely with many of the militias fighting the Houthis, some of which were backed by the Saudis and the Hadi government. AQAP’s operatives, particularly at more senior levels, were far more experienced fighters than the often raw

recruits that made up the bulk of the militias fighting the Houthis. AQAP has also effectively inserted its operatives into the bitterly contested city of Taiz. Houthi allied forces and a loose alliance of "popular committees," pro-government, and Salafi militias are battling each other for control of the strategically and culturally important city. AQAP's seasoned and increasingly battle-hardened operatives are comparatively well-versed in urban warfare, bomb making, and assassinations. While an overwhelming majority of those fighting against the Houthis and their allies are opposed to AQAP and its ideology, the need for well-trained and relatively disciplined fighters has likely trumped such ideological differences; some of those fighting against the Houthis increasingly view AQAP as a useful source of well-trained, disciplined fighters.

Beyond infiltrating operatives into large urban areas like Aden and Taiz, AQAP is also now holding more territory than it ever has in its history. As mentioned above, AQAP has occupied Mukalla since April 2015 ([Yemen Times](#), April 6, 2015). In early December 2015, AQAP launched an offensive in the governorate of Abyan, located to the west of Hadramawt. AQAP last occupied parts of Abyan in 2011, when it took over the towns of Zinjibar and Ja'ar and declared Abyan to be an "Islamic Emirate." By December 5, 2015, in a repeat of 2011, AQAP had secured the towns of Zinjibar and Ja'ar as well as the surrounding areas. Just as it has in other parts of southern Yemen, AQAP filled the void left by an absence of both government-controlled military forces and those controlled by the nominally pro-Hadi popular committees. In the latter's case, the popular committee forces had successfully pushed Houthi and allied forces out of Abyan but subsequently moved onto the neighboring governorate of Lahej to resist a renewed Houthi offensive, leading to a power vacuum in Abyan.

Just as it has done in Mukalla, AQAP targeted key political figures in Abyan — and particularly those figures that cannot be easily co-opted or bought off. For instance, during its takeover of Zinjibar and Ja'ar, AQAP killed Ali al-Said, a mid-level commander within the Abyan-based popular committee ([The National](#) [UAE], December 3, 2015). The organization also targeted five other key tribal and militia figures. Despite the assassinations, AQAP's commanders have largely implemented the same "light-footprint" strategy in Abyan that they have used in Mukalla ([al-Jazeera](#), September 16, 2015). As will be explained below, this new light footprint

strategy arises from the lessons that AQAP learned in the aftermath of its 2011-12 takeover of parts of Abyan.

Lessons Learned and a New Strategy

In June 2012, a coalition of tribal militias — referred to as popular committees — and units from the Yemeni Army forced AQAP to withdraw from the parts of Abyan that they controlled. The leadership of AQAP had, however, already learned a great deal from the year during which they held and—to some degree governed—territory for the first time. In May and August of 2012, the emir of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, now deceased, wrote two letters to his counterpart in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). [1] Here Wuhayshi sought to impart some of the lessons learned by his own organization in the preceding months.

Foremost among these lessons was the need for al-Qaeda to take a more gradual approach to imposing Sharia law and, in particular, to enforcing severe punishments for relatively minor offences. When AQAP took control of parts of Abyan and the neighboring governorate of Shabwa in 2011, the organization stoked local and specifically tribal anger when it flouted long-established tribal laws and traditions in favor of its own reductionist interpretation of Islamic law. As an example of this, AQAP sought to end the traditional trade in, and consumption of, the mild narcotic qat. Qat is viewed as *halal*, or permitted by many tribal religious authorities in Yemen, and is a core part of the Yemeni economy. AQAP's prohibition therefore struck at both traditional and economic sensitivities.

AQAP's heavy-handed approach to governance in Abyan and Shabwa through the qat ban and other comparable measures cost it critical local support. As a result, while units of the Yemeni Armed Forces played a key role in evicting AQAP from its strongholds in Abyan, it was tribal militias made up of men from the governorate that proved critical to defeating AQAP — at least temporarily.

Wuhayshi and his deputies — including the current AQAP emir, Qasim al-Raymi — used the lessons learned in 2011-12 to redesign their organizational structure and most importantly their approach to governing and holding territory. AQAP's takeover and subsequent management of Mukalla are both clear examples of these changes.

AQAP's takeover of Mukalla in early 2015 was swift and resulted in few casualties and relatively little damage to private property. In the days and weeks following their takeover, AQAP targeted those members of the local government and security apparatus who did not accept their authority. However, after they consolidated their hold on the city, AQAP's leadership left the day-to-day governance of the city to a local council. As part of their effort to indigenize their organization, AQAP began referring to its members who operate in the Hadramawt — Mukalla is the capital of the governorate of the Hadramawt — as the "Sons of Hadramawt" ([al-Jazeera](#), September 16, 2015). In addition, just as Wuhayshi counseled in his letters to the leader of AQIM, AQAP has maintained a relatively low profile in Mukalla. AQAP for instance provides security for the city and has undertaken some "public works" programs like repairing water mains and providing aid in the wake of the November 2015 cyclone. [2]

AQAP's more recent campaign to retake Abyan in December 2015 appears to be of a similar design. Those members of AQAP who are active in Abyan refer to themselves as the "Sons of Abyan" and, apart from targeting a few key figures within the popular committees, the takeover has been relatively bloodless. Much as it has done in Mukalla, it is likely that AQAP will maintain its light footprint strategy and work to re-insert itself into the local governing structures in Abyan.

Out-Maneuvering the Islamic State in Yemen

For all its advantages, AQAP's light footprint strategy is replete with risks to the group. Foremost among these is AQAP's potential to be perceived as lacking radical zeal by more hardline militants. . This perception could intensify what is already a simmering conflict between AQAP and Islamic State. Since the Houthi-led offensive and Saudi Arabia's subsequent commencement of Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, the Islamic State — which had only a limited presence in Yemen — has expanded. In March 2015, the group claimed credit for four suicide attacks on two mosques in Sana'a ([al-Bawaba](#), March 20, 2015). These attacks killed more than 140 people; Islamic State claimed to be targeting what were predominately Zaidi mosques. However, as with the majority of mosques in north Yemen, the two mosques that were targeted were used by both Zaidis and Sunnis. Notably, AQAP condemned the bombing of the mosques ([Middle East Eye](#), March 20, 2015).

Islamic State's attacks in Yemen have largely been directed at targets associated with the Houthis. The militant Salafi ideology that Islamic State and AQAP embrace means that both groups view all Shi'a as heretics. While AQAP is also locked in a battle with the Houthis, its leadership has thus far been careful not to target mosques and other strictly civilian targets. This is not to say that AQAP is not just as brutal and dangerous an organization as Islamic State; however, AQAP takes a pragmatic view and, following its 2011-12 experience, is keenly aware of how important it is to not lose the still limited local support that it enjoys. For instance, local support is critical for maintaining supply chains and evading detection. [3] AQAP is therefore engaged in a delicate balancing act: it must restrain itself and its operatives so as not to alienate and anger local people in the areas that it has nominal control over yet it must also prove that it is as dynamic and "Islamic" as Islamic State.

In addition to the lessons that AQAP learned from its 2011-12 attempt to hold territory, the tactics of Islamic State in Yemen have also forced AQAP to moderate its own tactics. AQAP therefore appears to be pursuing something of a "middle way" in Yemen. Its light footprint strategy allows it to hold territory and enables it to claim that it is making progress toward establishing the caliphate that al-Qaeda (and Islamic State) desires. Yet at the same time, the strategy means that it is able to make the most of its still limited, albeit rapidly increasing, resources. For example, by leaving day-to-day governance to local councils, it is able to effectively co-opt local and regional stakeholders while being able to focus on battling the Houthis and Houthi-allied forces, which remain the primary threat to AQAP.

The Near or Far Enemy?

The debate about whether to pursue the near or far enemy remains contentious within both al-Qaeda central and AQAP. AQAP has a history of pursuing both the near enemy in the Yemeni state and now the Houthis and the far enemy in the West. Since the beginning of the civil war in Yemen, AQAP has focused most of its efforts on attacking the near enemy. The Houthi offensive that saw the Sana'a takeover in September 2014 also put considerable pressure on AQAP. With their allies in the Yemeni Army, the Houthis pushed south into al-Bayda, Abyan, and Shabwa areas where AQAP has long operated and exerted influence. The Houthis and

their allies were initially successful at pushing AQAP out of these areas, to the extent that many of AQAP's operatives fled east to the Hadramawt, where they subsequently regrouped.

The Houthis' push into the south however inflamed what were minimal sectarian divisions and helped — at least to some degree — bolster local support for AQAP and the Salafist militias that fought alongside them. With the entrance of Saudi Arabia and its allies into the war in March 2015, AQAP was therefore able to rapidly regroup and seize large amounts of military hardware and cash from Yemeni Army installations, and banks — in particular, the Yemeni Central Bank branch in Mukalla.

AQAP's counter-offensive against the Houthis and allied forces has been its primary focus in the eleven months since Saudi Arabia entered the war. Only now does AQAP arguably have the operational room and resources to again focus on the far enemy. Most worryingly, AQAP now enjoys more resources and operational freedom than it ever has before. However, with parts of the country, namely Taiz, Lahej, and al-Bayda still being bitterly contested by a host of militias and state-backed forces, AQAP's short-term focus is likely to remain on the near enemy.

In addition to now having considerable resources and operational freedom to carry out attacks on the far enemy, AQAP may also be motivated to at least partially renew its focus on the far enemy by Islamic State. The Islamic State's attacks in Yemen have focused on sectarian and high profile targets, including a deadly attack on the governor of Aden, the temporary headquarters of the Yemeni government in exile, and the presidential palace in Aden ([al-Jazeera](#), December 7, 2015; [al-Arabiya](#), January 30). These attacks are audacious and belie the fact that Islamic State's branch in Yemen is still — relative to AQAP — a small organization. While AQAP has made significant progress in terms of seizing territory and growing its organization, it has generally eschewed high-profile attacks in favor of fighting along more traditional lines. This is a key part of its light footprint strategy but the lack of high profile attacks also leaves it vulnerable to criticism from hardcore members of the jihadist community. An attack on a Western target, whether that be in Yemen or abroad, would demonstrate the fact that AQAP remains a dynamic force that is still committed to and capable of "global

jihad" and thus reassure its hardline supporters who might otherwise be attracted to Islamic State.

Outlook

The ongoing civil war and the destruction wrought by eleven months of aerial bombardment by Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners ensure that Yemen will remain fertile ground for the growth of both AQAP and Islamic State over both the medium and long-term. Terrorist organizations by their very nature are predatory, adaptive, and thrive in power vacuums like the one that exists throughout much of Yemen. AQAP in particular has proven itself to be highly resilient and capable of learning from its mistakes and modifying its organizational structure accordingly.

The ability to learn and evolve has been clearly demonstrated by AQAP over the last two years. Despite drone attacks that have successfully targeted some of its senior leaders, AQAP has retained and improved upon its ability to interface with local stakeholders, plan and participate in relatively complex offensive operations, and perhaps most importantly, it is also learning how to govern through proxies.

Over the medium and even long-term, AQAP's future in Yemen looks secure. While it may be compelled to take a more combative approach to confronting Islamic State, this is unlikely to significantly weaken AQAP. The only real potential threat to AQAP's expansion in Yemen are stability and assertive and efficient governance at the local and federal levels. However, neither stability nor the formation of an effective government appear likely. Even when the war in Yemen does end, AQAP will continue to benefit from the destruction of the country's armed forces, infrastructure, and perhaps most importantly, the intensifying hatred between rival political and religious groups.

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Notes:

[1.] See: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/images/al-qaida-papers-how-to-run-a-state.pdf>

[2] See: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/aqap-video-focuses-on-cyclone-relief-efforts-for-civilians-in-hadramawt.html>

[3] In December 2013, AQAP apologized to the Yemeni people for what its own communique described as a "brutal" attack on the Yemeni Ministry of Defense and the hospital inside the ministry. The attack left 56 dead. AQAP took full responsibility for the attack and promised to pay blood money to the relatives of the dead.