

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## **JORDAN: SATIRIST'S KILLING HIGHLIGHTS RADICALIZATION FEARS**

*Alexander Sehmer*

Protesters in Jordan demanded the resignation of both Prime Minister Hani al-Malki and Interior Minister Salama Hammad in September, following the murder of Nahed Hattar, a satirical writer who was shot dead on the steps of a court building in Amman. Although the government condemned Hattar's killing at the time, the protesters – many of them members of Hattar's tribe – claimed the government had not done enough to protect him. The government quickly imposed a ban on reporting about the killing (Petra, September 26).

Hattar, who was from Jordan's Christian minority (as well as a supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad), had been attending court to face criminal charges over a cartoon he shared on Facebook that was said to be offensive to Muslims. Hattar's suspected killer, a former prayer leader described by the Jordan Times as a known extremist, later gave himself up to the police (Jordan Times, September 25).

Rights groups say Hattar's killing shows Jordan's disregard for free speech and have called for greater protections for the right to freedom of expression (RefWorld,

September 26). Jordan has long been willing, however, to restrict the media in favor of "maintaining stability." More pertinently, the incident highlights concerns over the problem of radicalization in Jordan.

Jordan introduced anti-terror legislation in 2006, following a series of bombings at three hotels across Amman that left more than 60 people dead. It broadened the law in 2014 with the aim of targeting extremists returning home from the conflict in neighboring Syria, but the reforms have also been used to restrict journalists and target members of the opposition with no clear links to terrorism (Memo, August 28, 2015).

The government maintains the changes to the law were necessary, and Jordan certainly faces a threat from returning fighters and a growing wave of radicalization. In findings this year by the UN's gender equality agency, 85 percent of those surveyed for a report on radicalization and women said radicalization was occurring among communities in Jordan (UN Women, March 2016). More than that, 74 percent said it was taking place in universities. The report highlighted the cities of Zarqa, Maan, Salt, Irbid and Rusaifa as areas where radicalization was a particular problem.

When Hattar posted the cartoon that landed him in court, he was subject to a social media backlash. He quickly took it down and apologized. The government

may have hoped that bringing charges against him was a concession of sorts to certain elements within Jordanian society, but it had a very different effect. If Jordan wants to combat radicalization at home, it needs to think carefully about the message its actions on journalists and writers like Hatter send out.

## **KUWAIT: SECURITY RESTRICTIONS AMID IS THREAT**

*Alexander Sehmer*

An Egyptian man crashed a garbage truck into a vehicle carrying five U.S. servicemen in Kuwait on October 6 in an apparent attempted suicide attack. The incident was initially thought to be an accident, with the soldiers, who appear to have been traveling in a civilian vehicle, helping the truck driver who suffered multiple injuries in the collision. But Kuwaiti investigators later reportedly found a suicide belt, an Islamic State (IS) banner and a handwritten note pledging allegiance to IS in the man's vehicle (Kuwait Times, October 7).

The attempted suicide attack, if that is what it was, appears to have been a lone wolf incident. An embassy media statement released in the following days said U.S. authorities were not aware of any credible threats against U.S. citizens in Kuwait (US Embassy, October 9).

IS previously carried out a devastating attack in Kuwait City. In June 2015, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the city's Shia Imam al-Sadiq Mosque, killing 27 people and wounding hundreds more (al-Jazeera, June 27, 2015). Authorities have since mounted a security crackdown. In July, the state news agency announced security forces had thwarted three IS plots, including plans for another mosque bombing during the Eid holiday (KUNA, July 3).

That suggests that while IS may have inspired the apparent failed attack by the Egyptian truck driver, it remains focused on attempts to foment sectarian conflict. Even the reported failed attack came at a time of potentially heightened tensions – ahead of Ashoura, a major Shia festival marking the death in the battle of Karbala of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

Kuwait has historically been relatively free of Sunni-Shia tensions, with Shias – who make up between 15-30 percent of Kuwait's population – living side-by-side with their Sunni counterparts. Nonetheless, Kuwait must safeguard against any stoking of tensions, whether through terrorist attack or on social media, something of which the leadership is well aware (Arab News, June 28). Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah has himself done much to soothe tensions. After the 2015 bombing, he quickly attended the scene at the Imam al-

Sadiq Mosque, against the advice of his security services.

Opportunistic lone wolf attacks, however, are more difficult to defend against. Kuwait faces the same difficulties as its international allies in this regard. As a consequence, Kuwaitis have had to put up with a tightening of security in public places and restrictions on crowds, including a ban this year on open-air Eid prayers (Gulf News, September 19). Such efforts will be familiar to many of the Gulf state's allies, particularly in Europe, where concerns about IS have also led to greater policing of public events.

[For more on the IS threat in the Gulf, see *Terrorism Monitor* July, 22.]

## Our Kind of Warlord: Afghanistan's Deal With Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

*Abubakar Siddique*

Hizb-e Islami Afghanistan (HIA), one of Afghanistan's oldest jihadist factions and largest Islamic parties, concluded a comprehensive peace deal with the Afghan government on September 29. Speaker after speaker in the Afghan capital's grand Arg presidential palace declared the deal "historic," a milestone for restoring peace to Afghanistan after nearly four decades of war (Tolo News, September 29).

The deal is expected to result in the removal of the notorious Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of HIA, who has been a fixture on the Afghan battlefield since the early 1980s, from U.S. and UN terrorist lists.

Kabul hopes it will also serve as a template for concluding a peace agreement with the Taliban, who now account for most anti-government combatants in the country. While they have issued no official reaction, the Taliban have made it quite clear how they feel about Hekmatyar's deal.

### **Amnesty Deal**

The deal pardons Hekmatyar for past crimes and guarantees Kabul will ensure his de-listing from U.S. and UN terror lists, where he has been featured as one of the most prominent Afghans since 2003. The agreement also offers tens of thousands of HIA members government and international aid to facilitate their return to Afghanistan and their eventual reintegration.

In return, HIA has agreed to renounce violence, embrace the Afghan constitution and complete its transition from an armed faction into a mainstream political party. "I pray that our country be independent and sovereign, and our innocent and war-weary nation end the fighting and ongoing insecurity, and that unity prevails," Hekmatyar said, while addressing the signing ceremony through a video link (Taand, September 29).

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said he hoped the deal would prove that power could come through ballots, not bullets. "Our constitution gives the people of Afghanistan the right to gain power through elections," he said adding an appeal for the Taliban to join peace negotiations with the government. "Now is the time for the Taliban to think about whether they want to continue the war or come for peace" (Dawn, September 29).

The deal is expected to complete HIA's transition from a prominent armed faction that has played a central role in the various cycles of war in Afghanistan, into one of the largest Islamist political parties active in the country.

Unlike the Taliban, Hizb-e Islami has been trying to integrate into the new political system since the demise of the Taliban regime in late 2001. In the initial years, some senior HIA members became government advisors, governors and cabinet members. By 2005, some of them registered the movement as a political party distinct from the armed faction led by Hekmatyar. HIA emerged as a leading faction in both parliaments that were formed following elections in 2005 and 2009. Hekmatyar's rehabilitation will complete the return of all HIA cadres and leaders into the government fold, apart from some radical elements who defected to the Taliban in recent years.

### **Limited Battlefield Impact**

Under the deal, HIA will dismantle all its military formations. This may have little impact as Hekmatyar has had only limited involvement in Afghanistan's conflict in recent years and the group hardly has any fighters to demobilize inside Afghanistan.

HIA's presence on the battlefield essentially ended in July with the death of Hekmatyar's longtime jihadist comrade Haji Kashmir Khan, who was considered HIA's last major combat commander. Journalist Rahimullah Yousafzai has described Hekmatyar as playing a "major political role: in the past," but said his role in the current fighting was "next to nothing" (Radio Mashaal, September 29).

As such, HIA's political return is not expected to have a significant impact on the battlefield and will likely do little to downgrade the Taliban military machine. However, the return of a large number of HIA loyalists from

exile in Pakistan could potentially deprive the Taliban of recruits (Dawn, September 17).

Hekmatyar's return is also likely to dent Taliban claims to be fighting to rid Afghanistan of foreign occupiers. In his September 29 speech, Hekmatyar called on the Afghan government to immediately begin peace talks with the Taliban (Tolo News, September 30).

"I ask the president to initiate talks with the Taliban to prove his sincerity and honesty and release their prisoners without any condition [as a goodwill gesture]," Hekmatyar said. "The Taliban, too, should come to the negotiating table and should share their legitimate demands and we will support them."

### **Angry Reaction**

The Taliban, however, appears to be in no mood to listen to Hekmatyar or the government. While the hardline movement has issued no formal reaction to the agreement, it has also made no secret of its views via its own media networks.

An article published on the official Taliban website, Voice of Jihad, implied that Hekmatyar was committing "a major crime" by entering into an agreement with the government. The Pashto-language article did not name Hekmatyar, but references to his peace deal and his overall career were clear (Voice of Jihad, September 26). It also repeated the Taliban position that the current Afghan government is a puppet of Western powers, saying: "[Hekmatyar is] backing this government by concluding a peace agreement with it, Isn't it tantamount to supporting the occupying forces and joining them?"

The Taliban also questioned Hekmatyar's nearly 40-year militant career, which has included his transformation from a student rebel in the 1970s into the leader of the most powerful anti-Soviet guerilla faction of the 1980s. "If making peace with the occupiers was of such importance, then why didn't these peace-loving people make peace with the Russians, who killed two million people and their occupation was followed by a brutal civil war?" the article asked (Gandhara RFE/RL, September 26).

Another article on the pro-Taliban "Nun Asia" website used quotes from Hekmatyar's past pronouncements to question his change of heart. "My advice as a sympathizer to him is that he should give up on this venture.

Many of your comrades and relatives have benefited enormously from the current political system," said an article entitled "An Open Letter to Hekmatyar" (Nun Asia, September 30).

An earlier editorial on the same website offered greater detail on why the Taliban has remained silent about the peace deal (Nun Asia, September 24).

"The Afghan government views the Hekmatyar agreement as a precursor to a [peace] deal with the Taliban," it said. "But the Taliban views a peace agreement within the parameters set by the Afghan government as an instrument of surrender. This is why the Taliban have not paid any attention to this agreement and have instead expressed their reaction by speeding up military operations in [the southern province of] Uruzgan and other regions."

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## The Niger Delta: Will Restarting Amnesty Payments Ease the Conflict?

*Jessica Moody*

The Nigerian government announced in August that it had resumed amnesty payments to former militants in the Niger Delta, many of them members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (Naija Headlines, August 4). It had significantly reduced the amount of money available for such payments in late 2015 and claimed to have suffered a technical hiccup delaying payments in early 2016, resulting in accusations from the militants that Abuja was failing to abide by the arrangements agreed upon in the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) (Information Nigeria, August 2; The Leadership, November 29, 2015; Punch, February 24).

The decision to resume payments to the insurgents was indicative of an increasing desperation on the part of the government to reduce the level of violence in the Niger Delta and enable oil production to return to pre-conflict levels. Violence in the region since the start of 2016 has cut oil production to a near-30-year low, a serious concern for the government, which relies on oil for two-thirds of government revenue and nearly all of its export earnings.

About 30,000 former fighters are now receiving amnesty payments of \$206 per month, on the condition that they end their attacks on pipelines in the Niger Delta (Information Nigeria, August 2). However, it remains uncertain whether this will lead to a genuine decrease in violence in the Niger Delta and unlikely that the reintroduction of amnesty payments will change the dynamics of the conflict in the Delta.

### **Different Groups, Diverse Demands**

The main difficulty with attempts to end conflict in the Delta through the resumption of amnesty payments is that numerous militant factions in the region never received amnesty payments in the first place and were excluded from the PAP. This was one of the main contentions of the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), who distanced themselves from MEND when they first emerged

in early 2016. The NDA claimed that MEND commanders had never cared about the Niger Delta and had grown rich from the amnesty payments without redistributing the money to the foot soldiers of the rebellion (Niger Delta Avengers, May 3). It claimed to be different, although there are several indications that the NDA is composed of many former MEND fighters – not least that NDA attacks escalated significantly after the government halted amnesty payments and began arresting those linked to corruption within the program (The Paradigm, January 16).

Despite this, there remain a number of NDA members and other insurgent groups in the Delta that are outside the PAP, undermining the government's calculation that the militants will reduce attacks as a result of the resumption of payments.

The demands of the Delta insurgents are diverse, ranging from calls for the release of former National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki and pro-Biafran leader Nnamdi Kanu, to more general demands for the redistribution of oil wealth to Delta residents (Vanguard, May 19; see Terrorism Monitor, September 16).

### **Government Dialogue**

Partly as a result of these diverse demands, the government is conducting a dialogue with insurgents and seeking to ensure that a ceasefire the NDA called on 20 August is upheld (Punch, August 21). Pursuing negotiations may be challenging, however, as the militants are often erratic in their approach to talks. For example, in June the government announced it had negotiated a one-month cessation of hostilities with the insurgents, only for the militants to deny this and say they would not countenance further talks without the presence of international mediators (This Day Live, June 21; Vanguard, June 22).

Such moves show just how fragile attempts at engaging militant groups in the Delta can be. [1] Indeed the militants often seem intent on avoiding engaging in a serious dialogue with the government. The NDA has made special requests for negotiators in the conflict, but mostly these demands have been dismissed. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka stated on September 27 that he would not be involved in a mediator role, despite the NDA's requests (Sahara Reporters, September 27).

The government will struggle to negotiate in a more fulfilling manner with the insurgents as long as there continue to be so many different factions of fighters in the Delta. After the NDA emerged in early 2016, a number of other militant groups claiming to fight for similar causes also appeared in the region.

Among those who announced their demands for independence in the Delta and a greater share of oil revenues for residents were the Red Egbesu Water Lions and the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (Vanguard, May 19; This Day Live, June 8). The official demarcation between the groups is unclear, with a large degree of overlap between various forces and some insurgencies seemingly run by the same commanders (Nairaland, May 18; This Day Live, June 2).

The presence of so many different groups "makes it incredibly difficult to track who the government should, or actually will be, dealing with," according to Sola Tayo, Associate Fellow for the Africa Program at Chatham House. [2] Additionally, it means that meeting everyone's demands and negotiating a truce or establishing an all-encompassing dialogue will be challenging.

In the meantime, the government may seek to increase military pressure in the Delta in order to push the NDA into a more self-serving peace agreement (see Terrorism Monitor, September 16). There are plans to increase the number of troops in the Delta to around 10,000 by early 2017, which would put the military at a distinct advantage in the region (Africa Confidential, September 23).

Production is also due to restart at two major oil pipelines, Forcados and Qua Iboe, in the coming weeks, potentially changing the government's interpretation of the economic risk factors involved in prolonging the conflict (Africa Confidential, September 23).

### **An Unlikely Peace**

The overall failure of government efforts to result in genuine peace or an end to pipeline attacks in the Niger Delta is borne out by events in the past couple of weeks in the region. On September 28, local media reported that a group of NDA militants had clashed with security forces in Owerri; while on September 23, the group claimed responsibility for forcing a halt in activities at the Bonny crude oil export line (Vanguard, September 29; Niger Delta Avengers, September 24).

President Muhammadu Buhari announced this month that he was determined to secure peace in the Niger Delta and that he would ensure that this occurred during his presidency (The Nigerian Observer, October 1). He also claimed to have established negotiations with all of the militant groups in the Delta (The Nigerian Observer, October 1).

These claims are a positive sign and suggest the government continues to be eager to reach an agreement with insurgents, though it seems highly unlikely that pipeline bombings and low-level violence in the region will be brought to a halt in the coming months. The sheer number of factions involved, combined with the diverse and complex demands of the groups make this challenge one of the hardest Buhari will face during his time in office.

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## NOTES

[1] Author interview with Sola Tayo, Associate Fellow for the Africa Programme at Chatham House, (October, 3)

[2] Ibid.

# AQAP in Southern Yemen: Learning, Adapting and Growing

*Michael Horton*

During the nearly two years of the Yemeni civil war, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has gone from an organization that was under pressure and struggling financially, to an organization that is larger, more formidable and better armed than it has ever been.

The civil war in Yemen is being fought between the Houthis and their allies – based in northwest Yemen – and a disparate mix of militias that nominally support Yemen's internationally recognized government-in-exile in Saudi Arabia. Nineteen months of unrelenting conflict has reduced most of the country's infrastructure to ruins, devastated an already weak economy and further impoverished the Middle East's poorest nation.

Amid the conflict, AQAP has lost territory, most significantly the Yemeni port city of al-Mukalla, which was retaken by forces backed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on April 24, 2016 (al-Jazeera, April 25). However, this loss of territory has not significantly diminished the group's capabilities. On the contrary, AQAP, which has consistently proven itself to be a highly adaptable and deeply pragmatic organization, has benefited from having a much smaller territorial footprint. AQAP's strategic retreat from al-Mukalla, and other parts of the governorate of Hadramawt, prompted it to once again recalibrate its tactics and organizational structure to take maximum advantage of what is an ideal operational space for a terrorist organization: a politically fragmented and desperately poor country.

## Strategic Retreat

In March 2015, AQAP took over al-Mukalla, Yemen's fifth largest city. This was soon after Saudi Arabia and its partners commenced Operation Decisive Storm. After the takeover of al-Mukalla, AQAP quickly established

itself as a relatively benevolent power in the city and handed over day-to-day governance to a council of elders. During the year that AQAP maintained control of the city, the organization, for the most part, followed a strategy outlined by its now deceased former leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi. [1] The strategy advocated a gradualist approach to governance that adapted itself to the local political and strategic environment. This gradualist strategy was informed by the lessons learned from AQAP's 2011 takeover of parts of the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa. There, it had tried (but failed) to quickly impose its understanding of sharia or Islamic law. The organization lost what local support it had. Its relations with critically important tribal elders frayed to the point where the tribes turned on them and, with the support of parts of the Yemeni Army and with some outside assistance, forced AQAP from its strongholds in Abyan and Shabwa.

AQAP's gradualist strategy served it well during its year-long occupation of al-Mukalla. It built on existing relationships with some members of the Hadrawmi elite and enjoyed limited support from the local populace. In most cases, this support was not for its militant Salafist ideology, but for AQAP's ability to maintain relatively high levels of security and for its attempts to reestablish public services.

Beginning in January 2016, AQAP began moving forces and the heavy equipment that it had captured out of al-Mukalla. The equipment and forces were dispersed and repositioned in AQAP's former strongholds in the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa. In April, forces backed by KSA and UAE reoccupied al-Mukalla in a battle that lasted a day. AQAP's withdrawal from the city was hailed as a crushing defeat by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. KSA and UAE based spokesmen claimed that at least 800 AQAP fighters had been killed (The New Arab, April 25).

The withdrawal, however, was well coordinated and carried out well in advance of the city's reoccupation. AQAP claimed it lost less than 10 fighters and declared that its withdrawal was to save civilian lives (Arab News, April 30). While AQAP typically has little regard for civilian lives, this declaration was likely partially true - size-

able civilian losses would have cost it the support and popularity that it had worked to build over the previous year. Additionally and most importantly, AQAP's leadership saw that holding al-Mukalla in the face of Saudi and Emirati air power was neither tenable nor desirable.

AQAP's leadership has time and again proven that it is able to quickly learn from the mistakes that it makes and from the mistakes that other terrorist organizations, such as Islamic State (IS), make. It is likely that AQAP was already beginning to see that the IS' large territorial footprint and its increasingly conventional forces were becoming a liability. In Iraq and most particularly in Syria – where Russia intervened at the behest of the Syrian government – IS had already suffered considerable losses by January 2016.

While the loss of al-Mukalla was a blow to AQAP's finances (AQAP collected a range of taxes and "tributes" in al-Mukalla, as well as running a lucrative fuel smuggling network), the loss did not diminish AQAP's ability to project power and coordinate offensive actions against its enemies (Reuters, April 8). On the contrary, AQAP's strategic retreat has enhanced its ability to project power and influence.

### **Blurring the Lines**

AQAP's phased withdrawal from al-Mukalla allowed it to leave the city with almost all of the weaponry that it had seized from military installations in and just outside the city. Most importantly, the withdrawal from al-Mukalla allowed AQAP to leave with its ties to many Hadrawmi elites intact.

The group's yearlong occupation of al-Mukalla was something of a master class in governance and community engagement for the organization. The resources seized by AQAP – which included at least \$100 million from the Yemeni Central Bank – allowed it to buy influence within numerous impoverished communities (al-Jazeera, September 16). Some of the money was used to fund aid programs, food distribution, and to pay the salaries of those working directly and indirectly for AQAP. During the year in which AQAP occupied al-Mukalla and much of the southern half of the vast gov-

ernorate of Hadramawt, AQAP worked assiduously at refining its already well-developed community engagement strategy.

The leadership of AQAP has, since at least 2011, recognized the importance of building relationships with local communities. While it has often failed at this due to its heavy-handed tactics, it has incorporated the lessons it has learned in the previous five years. The organization now places an emphasis on “outreach” and engagement. Efforts include the payment of cash indemnities to the families of those killed in drone attacks, public works like the drilling and refurbishment of water wells, and even paying for those who need to travel for medical treatment. [2] AQAP is now effectively leveraging its community ties across south Yemen and its organizational efficiency to make itself a key player in the fight against the Houthis (sworn enemies of AQAP) and loyalists of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, as well as those core parts of the Yemeni Army that remain loyal to Saleh and his sons.

Forces under the command of AQAP and forces allied with it are active on the frontlines in Yemen’s civil war (BBC, February 22). [3] In particular, AQAP is playing a key role in the ongoing battle for the strategic city of Taiz and in the battle for the equally strategic town and governorate of al-Bayda. Both of these areas have long been viewed as chokepoints that, if controlled, facilitate access to northwest highlands and most critically, the capital of Sanaa.

AQAP’s relationship with the groups fighting against the Houthis/Saleh loyalists is complex. [4] It is likely that pro-government-in-exile militias tolerate AQAP because of its superior organizational efficiency and fighting skills. One of the key factors that has impeded the efforts of the pro-government militias is corruption and a lack of efficiency. Many of them are only nominal supporters of the deeply unpopular government in exile. A significant number of the men who have taken up arms have done so simply to earn enough to feed their families. As a result, the inability of their commanders to pay their salaries has caused militia members to look elsewhere for employment.

AQAP is one organization to which some of the men turn. It pays more (as much as \$1,100 a month for senior fighters), it pays on time and its fighters are well supplied with arms and food. This stands in stark contrast with many of the disparate KSA backed pro-government militias and army troops that are poorly paid, if they are paid at all, and who often run short of critical supplies (New York Times, September 12). The lines between pro-government fighters and those fighting alongside AQAP are increasingly blurred. However, this is not to say that anything close to a majority of those fighting with the pro-government militias and reconstituted army units identify with AQAP’s militant Salafist ideology.

Just like many, if not most, of the men who join it, AQAP is an organization driven by pragmatism and a desire to survive. AQAP’s leadership has always been quick to spot opportunities for advancing the interests of the organization and ensuring its long-term survival; and that is the group’s first and foremost concern, trumping ideology.

### **Islamic State: From Enemy to Ally?**

Sixteen months ago, IS posed a significant threat to AQAP. Following in the wake of its territorial gains in Syria and Iraq, IS threatened to metastasize in Yemen just as it has in Libya, the Sinai, Iraq and Syria. Some midlevel members of AQAP’s leadership switched their allegiance to IS, and the two groups fought a number of pitched battles in al-Shabwa and Hadramawt in 2015.

While AQAP, like IS in Syria and Iraq, has lost territory, there is a marked difference between how the two organizations have managed their retreats. As argued above, AQAP’s withdrawal from al-Mukalla was strategic. The withdrawal, just as was envisioned by AQAP’s leadership, added to rather than detracted from the organization’s prestige. In contrast, IS’ hyper-violent approach in the areas where it operates, including Yemen, has cost it much of the support that it briefly enjoyed.

The IS presence in Yemen has always been limited. IS allied operatives in Yemen have focused on small but deadly operations that primarily target government officials, those allied with the Houthis and, to a lesser de-

gree, tribal and pro-government militias. As the power and influence of IS has declined in Syria and Iraq, so too has the influence and reach of IS in Yemen. While IS in Yemen continues to carry out small but deadly attacks, including a September 29 attack on a pro-government colonel in Aden, the organization is likely on the wane due to its tactics and its deteriorating finances (Barakish.net, September 29).

The weakness of IS in Yemen will not have gone unnoticed by the leadership of AQAP. AQAP, in comparison with IS in Yemen, is well funded, well placed and well-armed. It is AQAP that can now set the terms by which the two groups cooperate or quite possibly merge. There is a long history of such mergers in Yemen. AQAP itself is a product of a nearly two-decade long evolution that saw multiple jihadist groups merge and reconfigure themselves into organizations that were almost always more capable than their previous iterations.

While IS' standards for recruits are generally lower than for those of AQAP, IS in Yemen undoubtedly has a number of skilled and committed operatives among its ranks. [5] These men – those who are, ironically, not too radical for AQAP's tastes – could well find a home within the group. While it is too early to write off IS in Yemen as a spent force, at a minimum its weakness and more limited financial resources make it more likely to cooperate with AQAP in areas where their interests overlap (Middle East Monitor, September 9). While there is no hard open source evidence, patterns of activity may indicate such cooperation. The tempo of AQAP's attacks in Aden has declined while attacks by IS are increasingly limited to the area in and around Aden. It is probable that AQAP now views IS as an ally of convenience that, when appropriate, can either be absorbed or eliminated. What is certain is that in addition to being driven by pragmatism, AQAP takes the long view of its war for territory and hearts and minds in Yemen.

### **Patience and Time**

It is unlikely that members of the AQAP leadership read Tolstoy, but they readily incorporate his views on war. In *War and Peace*, the Russian General Kutuzov says of his

troops who are outnumbered by Napoleon's army, "they must understand that we can only lose by taking the offensive. Patience and time are my warriors, my champions." [6] This approach to war is at the heart of AQAP's evolving strategy. The current AQAP leadership, which is clearly more than able to absorb the losses inflicted on it by U.S. drones, is focused on what it sees as a multi-decade war where patience and time will do more than anything else to wear down their enemies.

While AQAP is certainly not opposed to taking and holding territory, it is not afraid to give it up when such a retreat is to its advantage. AQAP took heavy losses in 2013 when it attempted to defend its first self-declared emirate in Abyan. The air strikes, skillfully aided by the United States, and most especially ground forces made up of units from the Yemeni Army and tribal militias who knew the terrain and local actors, devastated AQAP, both its rank and file and its leadership. Just as it has in the past, AQAP learned from this experience and is now "like sand in the desert: always moving with the wind, but always accumulating." [7]

AQAP's proven ability to learn and evolve, combined with what are now ample funds and materiel, mean that it is able to further enmesh itself within communities, militias and urban populations that are subject to rapidly rising levels of poverty and insecurity. As was demonstrated in al-Mukalla, and to a lesser degree in other areas in the south that it continues to control, AQAP is able to set itself up as a viable and in some cases more efficient and effective alternative to the internationally recognized Yemeni government-in-exile. The civil war in Yemen, and the consequent fragmentation of what was already an incredibly complex political terrain, has provided AQAP with an abundance of opportunities to expand its organization and make itself even more resilient.

### **Looking Forward**

Barring some kind of negotiated settlement, the civil war in Yemen is likely to continue, at least at a low intensity, for years. This is welcome news for AQAP. The war has already helped AQAP go from an organization that

was struggling to one that is thriving. The dire humanitarian situation in Yemen – more than 80 percent of Yemenis are in urgent need of aid – will help AQAP fill its ranks with new recruits and allow it to continue to demonstrate its ability to act as a surrogate for the state by providing aid and security (*The Guardian*, March 2016).

Add to this the fact that Yemen, which was already awash in weapons, has seen a dramatic increase in the flow of weapons and materiel, largely from KSA and UAE. It is worth noting that, despite the war, prices for small arms in Yemen have plummeted in the last year. [8] Most significantly, the influx of arms has not been limited to small arms. More advanced weapons such as anti-tank missiles, which can easily be repurposed, have been provided to a range of militias, some of which fight alongside AQAP.

While AQAP is currently devoting most of its energies to fighting what it defines as the “near enemy,” namely the Houthis and their allies, there is little doubt that the organization will once again turn its attention to the “far enemy”, the United States and its allies. When AQAP’s focus returns to the far enemy, it will be better equipped, better funded and most importantly far more resilient.

The war in Yemen and the extraordinary destruction that it has wrought have created ideal conditions for an organization that has proven itself to be highly capable and adaptable. The future for AQAP has rarely looked brighter.

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## NOTES

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

[2] Author interview with Yemen-based government official (September 2016).

[3] See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sP\\_leat-AQDk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sP_leat-AQDk) (Yemen: Under Siege, relevant footage begins at 08.00); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvTiCDp3-zg>; also based on author interviews.

[4] It is notable that Yemeni president in exile Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi appointed Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar as his vice president on April 3, 2016. The general’s ties to militant Salafist groups are well documented (*The Guardian*, March 21, 2011). Before al-Ahmar and former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh turned against one another, General al-Ahmar often acted as Saleh’s liaison to militant Salafist groups who were used as proxy fighters against first southern separatists and then the Houthis.

[5] See: Kilcullen, David, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p.204

[6] Tolstoy, Leo, *War and Peace*, Book 13, Chapter 17

[7] Author interview with Yemen-based analyst (September 2016).

[8] There is now such an abundance of Steyr AUG assault rifles (used by and provided by Saudi Arabia) in Yemen that the price for the rifle is generally under \$50. Yemen’s always well supplied arms markets (the country has long acted as an arms emporium for the region) are now stocked with advanced weaponry like BGM-71 TOW missiles, 9M133 Kornet anti-tank missiles and a dizzying array of night vision equipment.