

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## GERMANY: DO TERRORISTS WANT TO TARGET EUROPE'S NUCLEAR FACILITIES?

*Alexander Sehmer*

Islamic State (IS) has acknowledged a pledge of allegiance from a fledgling group of Islamist fighters in Mali following several recent cross-border attacks by the group, and as IS itself comes under pressure in Iraq and Syria.

On October 30, the IS Amaq news agency broadcast the pledge by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former fighter with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and later with al-Mourabitoun. His so-called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara is behind two recent attacks in Burkina Faso: one in October on a military position near the northern border with Mali that killed five people, and one in September on a customs post in Markoye, which left two people dead (AP, October 12; Jeune Afrique, September 2; L'Info, September 6).

The acceptance of al-Sahrawi is something of a turnaround for IS. Previously, IS ignored a pledge he made in May 2015 as part of al-Mourabitoun (al-Akhbar, May 13, 2015). At the time, IS leadership likely saw little use

for al-Sahrawi, and the al-Mourabitoun leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, disavowed the statement soon afterwards. Possibly, the recent attacks have boosted al-Sahrawi's standing with IS. They earned condemnation – along with other attacks in the region – from the Economic Community of West African States (NTA, October 21). The attacks have also prompted Burkinabe forces with the UN mission in Mali (MINUSIMA) to redeploy closer to their home border (Sidwaya, November 6).

But IS likely has another reason. Its new willingness to welcome al-Sahrawi comes as it watches territory it controls in Iraq and Syria being slowly reclaimed. In his first statement in nearly a year, supposedly made as Iraqi forces press in on Mosul, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi attempted to rally his supporters. However, he also hinted that IS “provinces” elsewhere, which he termed the “pillars of the caliphate,” would have a greater role to play going forward (al-Jazeera, November 3).

As IS looks further afield, Mali in particular – where the government is struggling with Islamist attacks while trying to implement a shaky peace deal with rebel groups – looks promising (Sahel Intelligence, September 8). The Sahel has been largely dominated by al-Qaeda's affiliates, but that could change. Islamic State has already succeeded in coopting a faction of Boko Haram in Nige-

ria, splitting the group (see *Terrorism Monitor*, August 19). IS fighters fleeing the bombardment of Sirte in Libya could choose to move into Mali, and a recent supposed truce there agreed to by al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine could open up space for IS expansion.

As IS faces defeat in Iraq and Syria, its franchises in places like Mali – and elsewhere, such as in Yemen where it has a well-established foothold – will likely receive even greater attention.

## **AFGHANISTAN: 'SECRET' TALKS WITH TALIBAN OFFER LITTLE PROMISE**

*Alexander Sehmer*

Reports the Taliban has held two rounds of “secret” discussions with Afghan government officials have raised hopes that peace talks could be revived, but internal divisions within the group and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan suggest such talks remain only a remote possibility.

The talks were held in September and October in the Taliban’s “political office” in Qatar, which the group has maintained since 2013. While the Taliban has issued no official confirmation on the subject, the Afghan government has since acknowledged they took place (*ToloNews*, November 7).

Present at the discussions were Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund, brother of the late Taliban founder Mullah Omar, and Afghanistan’s spy chief, Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai. The presence of Manan lends the talks some gravitas. He was brought into the Taliban leadership in recent months in a move aimed at healing rifts within the group (*Afghanistan Times*, September 16). A U.S. official was also present at the talks, according to British newspaper *The Guardian*, which first reported the discussions (*The Guardian*, October 18).

Peace talks with the Taliban have been at a standstill since former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed in a U.S. drone strike in May, but the group is unlikely to favor talks now at a time when they are enjoying success on the ground in Afghanistan. In the last month, the group has again made bloody gains in Kunduz. Meanwhile, local politicians in Uruzgan province report that Taliban fighters have besieged scores of Afghan troops for nearly two months (*ToloNews*, November 4; *ToloNews*, November 6).

Indeed, there appears to have been little progress in the Qatar discussions (*Daily Times*, October 19). Following the talks, however, the group dispatched three senior officials – including former Taliban ambassador Maulvi Shahabuddin Dilawar – to Pakistan (*Express Tribune*, October 23). The Taliban have played down that trip as a regular visit, but Pakistan appears not to have had a presence at the Qatar meeting and likely expected to be involved.

In recent months the Pakistani security services have arrested a number of Taliban leaders for reasons that are not wholly clear (Express Tribune, October 12). Some suggest the arrests may be aimed at pushing the Taliban towards peace talks. A less charitable view is that the arrests are a warning to the group from the security services – a reminder to the group’s leadership at a time when some in are calling for the group to break its ties with Pakistan (Khaama, October 22). Either way, with the Taliban’s divisions still not fully healed and the group redoubling its efforts on the ground, the prospect of peace talks remains far off.

## Karachi’s Security Crackdown a Boost for Pakistan’s Islamists

*Farhan Zahid*

Political violence and gang wars in Karachi have remained a critical issue for the Pakistani authorities over the years. The situation even became an agenda item in the country’s National Action Plan on counter-terrorism, an initiative that received unanimous approval in parliament following the 2014 massacre by Taliban militants of 145 school children at an army public school in Peshawar.

Led by the Pakistan Rangers paramilitary force and targeting criminal gangs, terrorist groups and the militant wings of political parties, the Karachi Operation, has been under way since 2014 in an attempt to impose law and order on a part of the country that has become increasingly chaotic.

The main purpose of the crackdown was to target criminals, thousands of whom were associated with the militant wings of political parties (Express Tribune, March 24, 2015). But action on the sprawling network of Islamist terrorist groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Karachi has also been important. Unfortunately, a lopsided focus on the operations of Karachi’s powerful secular parties has opened up a space where Islamists political movements can thrive.

### **Terrorism and Organized Crime**

Karachi, with an estimated population of 20 million people, is the backbone of Pakistan’s struggling economy. All major political parties have a presence there, to a greater or lesser degree, and their alleged militant wings operate seemingly with impunity. The popular Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), a secular party that mainly represents the Urdu-speaking middleclass migrants from India who arrived during partition in 1947, has for years accused its political opponents of acts of violence. And the accusations go both ways. (The News, March 4) Despite the accusations, however, MQM maintains a sizeable following in the city, holding 17 of the 20 National Assembly seats.

In addition to political violence, Karachi has been indirectly affected by Pakistan's military operations against Islamist fighters in other parts of the country. A series of military operations in the tribal areas and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province have displaced hundreds of thousands of people in the tribal areas who have migrated to the cities. According to one senior police officer from Sindh, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, TTP's several factions, the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Baluch Liberation Army and Islamic State all have a presence in Karachi's Pashtun-majority areas as a result. [1]

Attempts to tackle the situation go back to 2011, when the Supreme Court, in a *suo moto* decision, ordered the authorities take action on the deteriorating situation in Karachi (Express Tribune, October 6, 2011). Initially a police-led operation was launched, but it failed to yield the desired results. This prompted the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Shariff to change strategy, giving the lead role to the Rangers in September 2013 (Dawn, September 5, 2013).

Since then, the operation has enjoyed some success and led to a sharp decline in number of terrorist incidents. [2] There remain, however, significant concerns over how the operation has been carried out, and the lenience with which it treats Islamist political groups.

### **Secular Activists Targeted**

Secular political parties say they have been targeted while the authorities have allowed Islamist political parties the freedom to continue their activities. In May, MQM accused the Rangers of the extrajudicial killing of 240 workers and, in a separate incident, the forced disappearance of another 171 (Dunya News, May 12; Dawn, May 3). The ruling party of Sindh province, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), also accused the Rangers of moving beyond their mandate when Rangers personnel arrested PPP stalwart Dr. Asim Hussain on charges of facilitating terrorists in his hospital (ARY News, July 19).

The authorities deny they have been discriminatory, but it is clear that the militant wings of religious parties, as well as proscribed sectarian groups, are still active. Student movements and the charity wings of militant Islamist organizations, as well as those affiliated with Islamist political parties, have been allowed to continue.

In the space opened up by the crackdown on the activist networks of the mainstream political movements, the Islamist parties are set to take advantage. As the U.S.-based author and security expert, Arif Jamal, has noted: "The weakening of the MQM and other political parties is creating a lot of space for jihadist groups in Pakistan ...terrorist organizations like Dawa fundraise millions of dollars on the occasions of Eid-ul-Azha while political parties such as the MQM are not allowed to fundraise for genuine charity reasons. In fact, every year the jihadists fundraise hundreds of thousands of dollars" (DW, August 23).

In an indication of the growth of Islamist-sectarian parties in Karachi, it is notable that during last year's municipal elections the proscribed Islamist terrorist group Sipah-e-Sahaba, the parent organization of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, participated under the name Rah-e-Haq, and succeeded in winning nine seats in Karachi's Pashtun majority areas displaying its growing strength and support base (The News, December 7, 2015).

### **Extending the Crackdown**

Islamist militants, whether operating in Karachi or in other parts of the country, treat Karachi as a safe haven and a source of funding, obtained through extortion, kidnapping and robbery. The spirit of the Karachi crackdown should have to be a non-discriminatory drive for the establishment of law and order. Brushing aside Islamist terrorist groups and militant wings associated with religious parties will solve part of the problem facing Karachi.

Islamist parties and Islamist militant groups have a symbiotic relationship. While they differ in how they intend to achieve their goals, their political views have much in common.

Linking the crackdown on Karachi's criminal elements to the anti-terrorist National Action Plan is a positive measure aimed at broadening the ambit of the operation and curbing Islamist violence. But unless the crackdown is broadened and extended to the activist wings of the Islamist political parties, it will serve only to create a dangerous vacuum that Islamists will seek to fill.

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## NOTES

[1] Author interview with a senior police officer who requested anonymity (October 4).

[2] See Pakistan Security Report (2015) published by Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS).

# Jund al-Aqsa: The Disappearance of a 'Third-Way' Faction in Syria's Conflict

*John Arterbury*

Long-simmering tensions between Jund al-Aqsa, Ahrar al-Sham and several smaller rebel groups erupted into outright fighting across Syria's Hama and Idlib provinces at the beginning of October, culminating in the death of a revered Ahrar al-Sham commander known as al-Dabous. An ensuing truce, mediated by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham with the assistance of Saudi Salafist cleric Abdallah al-Muhaysani, ultimately resulted in Jund al-Aqsa's integration into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

While the move has superficially calmed tensions, the growth of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham through the assimilation of smaller jihadist groups could ultimately bring further instability to northern Syria.

The rise and subsequent assimilation of Jund al-Aqsa illustrates how internal divisions can weaken a small, powerful and nominally independent jihadist group. It also shows how independent jihadist groups like Jund al-Aqsa can undermine rebel cohesion and empower larger radical groups, but more crucially it heralds an important change in the jihadist landscape of northern Syria.

## A 'Third-Way' Jihadist Group

Jund al-Aqsa had been notionally neutral in the Islamic State (IS)/al-Qaeda split, (Aymenn al-Tamimi, October 24, 2015). Many of Jund al-Aqsa's senior leaders had deep ties to al-Qaeda – even acknowledging al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zarqawi's role as leader of global jihad in words that fell just short of pledging their *bayah* (allegiance) – but it was at heart a non-monolithic organization. It could not be classified as an al-Qaeda front, nor as an extension of IS. Instead it was a "third-way" jihadist group, operating within an ambiguous political space (Bellingcat, May 2).

In early October, the group began implementing an austere interpretation of sharia in areas under its control and reasserted its independence by refusing to recognize any agreements between armed parties in the Syri-

an conflict (Al-Quds al-Arabi, October 3). This approach defied al-Qaeda's recent strategy of gradually implementing sharia and prompted veteran jihadist ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi to weigh in, after Jund al-Aqsa's assimilation into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, arguing against practicing such a version of sharia and suggesting that those who tried to emulate Jund al-Aqsa would meet a similar fate (Twitter, October 13).

Jund al-Aqsa's independent position afforded it numerous benefits, including relative operational autonomy and financial backing from individuals in certain Gulf States. Yet undermining its stature in the rebel landscape was the widespread belief that its members harbored secret sympathies for IS, earning it the nickname "Raqq'a's parking garage" among northern Syrians (Arabi21, July 28, 2015). One Syrian activist even disparagingly called it a "politically correct safe haven for Islamic State supporters." [1]

It remains possible that Jund al-Aqsa members may have been involved in external terror plotting. German terror suspect Jaber al-Bakr reportedly traveled to Raqq'a earlier this year on behalf of a small group of IS supporters. He traveled via the rural Idlib town of Saraqib, where, at the time, Jund al-Aqsa had a notable presence, lending credence to the belief that Jund al-Aqsa members maintained links with IS in Raqq'a (Der Spiegel, October 17). Given the reputation among Syrians of Jund al-Aqsa members for keeping contacts in the so-called Caliphate, it is possible these IS supporters and Jund al-Aqsa are one and the same. Indeed, a series of sleeper cell attacks targeting Ahrar al-Sham members in Idlib were widely attributed by other rebels to Jund al-Aqsa members; and at various times Jund al-Aqsa members described themselves as part of a "caliphate," and even employed IS hymns as background music in propaganda videos.

A failed assassination bid on a Jund al-Aqsa commander in Ariha in July – an attempted car bombing in which only the man's children were injured – prompted speculation that Jund al-Aqsa was struggling with internal divisions. [2]

### **Hama Offensive**

The smuggling outpost of Abu Dali and its environs present an interesting case study in how "third-way" jihadists can alter battlefield dynamics. Situated in the

countryside of northern Hama, the town acts as a transit point of smuggled goods between regime-held territory in Hama and rebel-held Idlib, with the pro-regime Sunni clan of Ahmad Darwish overseeing a lucrative black market network.

The intricacies of the northern Hama smuggling network made many rebel groups reluctant to attack, but Jund al-Aqsa, with its hardline (even by Syrian standards) Salafist views and a disproportionate number of foreign fighters, paid little consideration to northern Syria's amorphous conflict economy. During the recent northern Hama offensive, Jund al-Aqsa shock troops blasted through long-static defensive lines manned by Sunni pro-regime forces that opposed the rebels not out of loyalty to President Bashar al-Assad, but as a function of the elaborate nexus between the area's political economy and its security architecture (Arabi21, October 18).

Despite its fighting prowess, however, the wedding of Jund al-Aqsa to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham has caused divisions among supporters of the larger group, particularly among those who view Jund al-Aqsa as sympathetic to IS and wish to move away from the AQ/IS brands. A controversial fatwa against Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation has also fueled divisions among regional Islamic jurists and rebel groups, meaning that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's move came against a backdrop of fierce debate over how hardline Islamists view their role in the struggle against the Syrian regime (Atlantic Council, October 14).

It has also perhaps exacerbated internal rifts in Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which have been ongoing since the group's disengagement from the al-Qaeda network and nominal rebranding in July (see Terrorism Monitor, October 28).

### **Fueling Divisions**

The absorption of Jund al-Aqsa has rapidly become a point of contention among Syrian rebels. This response is similar to how members of another "third-way" jihadist group, Liwa al-Tawba, migrated to Raqq'a and pledged allegiance to IS following a joint attack with IS fighters along the Aleppo-Homs highway near Khanasser in February (Micro Syria, March 7; Al-Quds al-Arabi, February 26).

Eastern Syria activists reported that some Jund al-Aqsa members defected to IS following the absorption into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Twitter, October 12). Notably, some Jund al-Aqsa fighters in Hama initially refused the offer to join Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, reportedly restating their loyalty to Abu Dhar al-Jazrawi (a.k.a. al-Najdi al-Harethi), the group's emir (Twitter, October 9).

That al-Qaeda-leaning al-Muhaysani helped arbitrate an end to the dispute is noteworthy because earlier in the year Jund al-Aqsa had prohibited his visit to territory it held in northern Hama, showing that under pressure the group was willing to engage with him even if some members disapproved of his positions. It was likely al-Muhaysini's leveraging of Abu Anas Saraqib, a hardline senior member of Ahrar al-Sham, that helped to secure the peace deal and eventually win the acquiescence of Abu Yahia al-Hamawi and Ahrar al-Sham more widely (Twitter, October 10).

Al-Muhaysini himself straddles the Syrian rebel divide. Many rebels see him as close to al-Qaeda, but his ability to negotiate between Jund al-Aqsa, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, as well as his oblique endorsement of Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation – which Jabhat Fateh al-Sham publicly condemned – shows him to be a deft political player, despite criticism from some jihadists that he has a self-inflated sense of importance.

Still, the absorption has caused some public consternation among Ahrar al-Sham's members, and a statement by rebel group Suqor al-Sham showed others were also suspicious of the deal (Twitter, October 19). It is likely that mistrust will remain between some Hama and Idlib rebel groups and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham for some time to come.

### **Unknown Variables**

In September 2015, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham snapped up the jihadist coalition of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar and, since taking Jund al-Aqsa into its fold, has also integrated Jama'at al-Mourabiteen, itself a newly minted jihadist group, and the small Idlib-based Jund al-Sharia (Twitter, October 18; Twitter, November 2). This trend demonstrates that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham is eager to consolidate its base by bringing in lesser players, which could have important ramifications for Syrian rebel dynamics if other rebel groups see this behavior as being

too aggressive since the absorbing group is prone to inheriting the lesser group's liabilities.

Consequently, Jund al-Aqsa is a case study for small jihadist groups in the northern Syria theater, demonstrating that survival sometimes means coming under the umbrella of larger players. While Jabhat Fateh al-Sham put a damper on the controversy that Jund al-Aqsa – weakened by internal divisions – was causing, it also illustrates that these more powerful outfits can use groups like Jund al-Aqsa to their advantage, legitimizing themselves through dispute arbitration or boosting their own manpower.

Policy makers should be aware that outlets like Jund al-Aqsa inject an erratic variable into the opposition milieu. They are vulnerable to schisms, in-fighting and absorption on account of their radicalism or internal divides. Larger extremist groups may try to game this to their own advantage. As such, strategic calculations must be made under the assumption that groups like Jund al-Aqsa are key risks to local stability and the viability of legitimate opposition to the Syrian regime.

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### **NOTES**

[1] Author interview with Syrian activist, August 2016

[2] Author interview with Syrian activist, July 2016

# An Unwinnable War: The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the Future of Yemen

Michael Horton

Saudi Arabia and its allies are engaged in an unwinnable war in Yemen. The Saudi-led campaign called “Operation Decisive Storm” began in March 2015 with the aim of forcing Yemen’s Houthi rebels to withdraw from the Yemeni capital of Sanaa and reinstalling Yemen’s internationally recognized government from exile in Saudi Arabia. Despite 20 months of aerial bombardment and an estimated expenditure of \$5 billion by Saudi Arabia alone, the results of the war are anything but decisive (*Independent*, October 23).

The Houthis retain control of northwest Yemen, and their alliance with Yemen’s *ancien régime* led by former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh has deepened. The Houthis enjoy broader support than ever before. The war has helped the Houthis transform themselves from a parochial rebel movement to a national movement that routinely casts itself as a “defender of the nation” in the face of Saudi aggression.

With little or no progress to show for nearly two years of war, Saudi Arabia is employing increasingly brutal tactics. In addition to its continued use of internationally banned cluster munitions, Saudi Arabia’s air force is reported to be targeting Yemen’s farms and its most productive agricultural lands (*Independent*, October 23; *Haaretz*, November 6). [1] If true, this is a modern form of siege warfare. However, rather than starving a single city into submission, an entire country is under siege. The UN warns that Yemen is on the brink of a devastating famine (United Nations Dispatch, October 19). [2]

These tactics are unlikely to break the resolve of the Houthis or their allies. Nor will they have a significant impact on the Houthis’ ability to continue to fight. The Houthi organization is inherently resilient, determined and increasingly able to meld its well-honed guerrilla tactics and forces with conventional ones. What the ongoing war will ensure – and likely already has – is that Yemen will endure a prolonged period of heightened instability that may significantly impact the stability of the region.

## Masters of the Mountains

The Houthis, or Ansar Allah, is an organization forged by years of war in some of the most rugged terrain on the planet. Since their first war with the Yemeni government in 2004, Houthi fighters have proved themselves to be the masters of the mountains and canyons in which they fight. The Houthis’ mastery of irregular warfare enabled them to survive and evolve from a small parochial organization to one that was able to move out of the mountains and seize large parts of Yemen in 2014.

The genesis of the Houthi movement can be traced to a revivalist organization called the “Believing Youth,” formed by members of the eponymous Houthi family. The Houthis are a prominent family of Sayyid (descendants of the Prophet) clerics who started the Believing Youth with the goal of reviving and fostering interest in the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam, which was perceived to be threatened by “foreign” ideologies such as the Salafism exported by Saudi Arabia. [3]

Zaidism is a conservative branch of Shia Islam and is closer doctrinally to Sunni Islam than to the dominant Twelver or Jafari Shia sect. The Believing Youth then evolved into a fully-fledged rebel group known as the Houthi movement. This lengthy metamorphosis was greatly accelerated by the death of Hussein al-Houthi at the hands of government troops in 2004. From 2004 until the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, the Houthis engaged in six protracted wars with the Yemeni government.

It was during these hard-fought wars that the Houthis cohered as an organization and learned how to fight and win against conventional forces, which, until 2011, always outnumbered and outgunned them. In their sixth and final war against the Yemeni government of former president Saleh, the Houthis faced some of the Yemeni Army’s best-trained troops drawn from the Republican Guard and from the American trained and equipped Special Forces and counter-terrorism units. In addition, the Houthis were also targeted by Saudi Arabia’s air force, as well as by limited numbers of Saudi Special Forces who crossed into Yemen. Still, the Houthis prevailed over both the Yemeni and Saudi forces. They captured a number of Saudi Special Forces troops, who they later ransomed, while the Yemeni troops were forced to withdraw to fortified bases, which they aban-

done in the wake of the 2011 uprising against the Saleh government. [4]

There are many reasons for the Houthis' success as an armed rebel movement, but first and foremost is their intimate knowledge of the rugged mountains and canyons in which they fight. The Houthis and the tribesmen who make up the bulk of their loose membership have long understood that Yemen's mountains are a remarkably effective force multiplier. Mountains favor defensive warfare. Those who have invaded Yemen in the past – the Ottoman Turks twice and, later, the Egyptians – quickly discovered that mountainous northwest Yemen, just like Afghanistan, is a graveyard for invaders. [5] Second, the Houthi leadership has worked tirelessly to build personal and organizational relationships with a range of tribes and clans, most of whose members include both Zaidi Shias and Sunnis. Third, the Houthi leadership – most particularly in the early years – rewarded initiative and functioned somewhat along the lines of a meritocracy. Those who led from the front, like some members of the Houthi family, were given more responsibility. [6] This stands in stark contrast to the Yemeni Armed Forces where nepotism and tribal identities largely determine who advances through the ranks.

It was a combination of the Houthis' fighting acumen and the organization's early reputation for being relatively meritocratic and uncorrupt that allowed it to rapidly fill the power vacuum that developed after the 2011 popular uprising against the Saleh government. The Houthis leveraged their early support for the anti-Saleh government protesters to win supporters and to build alliances with key tribal power blocs. In a further demonstration of the Houthis' political pragmatism, in 2014 the leadership formed an alliance with their former adversary, ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh. This relationship, and the fact that Saleh and his sons retained the loyalty of large parts of the Yemeni Army, facilitated the Houthis' rapid and largely bloodless takeover of Sanaa in September 2014 (Middle East Eye, September 2014).

### **Saudi Arabia's Strategy**

As a Zaidi Shia organization, the Houthis' rise to power set off alarm bells in Saudi Arabia, which views them as proxies for Iran. In fact, Iran has little influence over the Houthis, who have repeatedly disregarded Iran's advice, including Iran's warning against seizing the Yemeni capital.

The Houthis' disregard for Yemen's internationally recognized but unpopular government and their push south in 2015 helped trigger the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen (Yemen Times, March 2015). Saudi Arabia's strategy is three pronged: first, it is engaged in what looks to be an increasingly desperate aerial campaign that it claims is targeting military sites; second, it continues to enforce a naval and aerial blockade of northwest Yemen in an attempt to stop supplies from reaching the Houthis; and lastly, Saudi Arabia and its allies are training and arming a mix of militias made up of southern separatists, soldiers loyal to the government, militant Salafists and tribesmen. The groups are being used as proxies in the land war against the Houthis.

While the aerial campaign is low risk – the Houthis and those Yemeni Army units fighting with them no longer have functioning air defense systems – it is also ineffective. The Houthis have a great deal of experience fighting whilst under the threat of aerial bombardment. Consequently, they know how to use Yemen's terrain to hide materiel and how to counter intense aerial surveillance. In many respects, the aerial campaign has benefited the Houthis. The often indiscriminate bombing – a recent example being the October 8 bombing of a funeral in Sanaa, which killed 140 people – has helped bolster support for the Houthis among many Yemenis who had regarded them as usurpers (*Guardian*, October 15). [7]

The sanctions and naval blockade have also proved ineffective at impeding the Houthis access to materiel. The sanctions are having a severe impact, increasing malnutrition and putting further pressure on an already dilapidated healthcare system. Yemen imports 90 percent of its food and is wholly reliant on imports for medical supplies. [8]

In an attempt to increase the efficacy of the campaign against the Houthis, Saudi Arabia and its partners – primarily the UAE – are focusing more attention on using local proxies. However, this is likely to prove as ineffective as the other two parts of their strategy.

### **Fickle Allies**

Yemen's socio-political landscape is much like its terrain: complex, rugged and treacherous, even for those who know how to navigate it. Egypt sent soldiers to what was then North Yemen in 1962 in a bid to back Republican forces against Royalists fighting for Imam al-Badr, the

ruler of North Yemen. The Egyptians eventually deployed more than 50,000 troops to Yemen. These troops enjoyed superior and dedicated air support from the Egyptian Air Force. Yet, a relatively small number of tribesmen, aided by ex-members of the British and French Special Forces, were able to keep thousands of well-armed troops pinned down. [9]

Yemen's mountains played a key role in this. Another factor, however, was that the Egyptians' allies in the war – tribes whose support they thought they had bought – were anything but loyal. The adage often repeated by Egyptian soldiers and Yemenis on both sides was, "a Republican by day and a Royalist by night," a reference to the unreliability of tribesmen whose first loyalty was to their clan and then their tribe. Other loyalties are driven by pure pragmatism – in many cases loyalty was determined by which side paid the most and which had the best rifles to give away.

Systems of loyalty and patronage in Yemen remain byzantine and fundamentally local. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have spent months training and equipping militias to fight on behalf of Yemen's unpopular president-in-exile, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (Emirates News Agency, November 2015). Much of their effort has focused on recruiting tribesmen from the perennially fractious but strategic and resource rich governorate of Marib, located in central Yemen (The National, November 2015). Despite being relatively well armed and well provisioned, these "pro-Hadi" militias have made little or no progress against the Houthis and those tribes allied with them. The front-lines in the war have hardly shifted for the last nine months in spite of repeated claims by Saudi Arabia and the UAE that a major offensive to re-take Sanaa is imminent or even already underway.

The inability of pro-Hadi forces and Saudi-backed militias to launch a sustained ground offensive is no doubt due in part to their unreliability and the mixed motives of some of their leadership. It is far more profitable and reasonable for many of these pro-Hadi militias to maintain a low-level of conflict and continue to extract money and arms from two exceedingly wealthy patrons. The thriving trade in the advanced weaponry provided to and then sold by many of the pro-Hadi militias is evidence of the mixed motives of some of the militia leaders. Just as was the case during its wars against the Yemeni government, the Houthi organization is able to source most of the weapons that it requires internally

(Middle East Eye, April 2015). [10] Anti-tank weapons and advanced anti-tank rifles, as well as hand-launched surveillance drones, are all in high-demand and consequently command high prices. [11] Anti-tank missiles are at the heart of the Houthis' cross-border hit and run attacks on Saudi armor and guard posts in the Saudi province of Najran. [12]

### **AQAP: Feeding the Wolf at the Door**

While the Saudi and UAE backed militias may be making little progress against the Houthis and their allies, this is not the case with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP, which is benefiting from the war in Yemen more than any other organization, is successfully engaging Houthi forces in key Yemeni governorates. AQAP is well organized and determined to secure as much influence in vulnerable parts of Yemen as possible. In what are dangerous parallels with the actions of rebel groups and militant Salafi organizations in Syria, AQAP is actively enmeshing itself with genuine anti-Houthi/pro-government militias. AQAP is able to do this because it is motivated, at least partly, by ideology and, most importantly, because it is a relatively well-run organization with a diffuse but effective chain of command. This contrasts with the informal and fluid leadership of tribal militias and the quickly assembled pro-Hadi forces that are typically more motivated by personal gain than by the prospect of engaging and defeating their enemies.

Before the start of Operation Decisive Storm, AQAP was an organization that was on the ropes financially and strategically. As the sworn enemies of the Houthis and all Shia (deemed to be heretics by Salafists), AQAP was locked in a deadly battle with the Houthis and their allies. It was a battle they were losing. AQAP was being slowly pushed out of key governorates like al-Bayda by tribal militias supported by the Houthis. In many areas, as it has tended to do in the past, AQAP's leadership was too assertive and acted to suppress traditional tribal leadership and customs rather than co-opt them. Thus, they lost the critical support of the communities in which they lived and fought.

This is no longer the case. AQAP's ever-nimble leadership watched and learned from the Houthis who have long relied on engaging and co-opting tribal leaders. Now AQAP, which had to some degree de-emphasized tribal engagement, has put engagement efforts at the

forefront of its offensive strategy in the governorates of al-Bayda, Shabwa, Lahej and Abyan. [13]

AQAP is now a part of what can broadly be called anti-Houthi forces (The New Arab, February 23). How and to what extent it is able to capitalize on its recent gains remains to be seen, but what is certain is that AQAP is now a much stronger organization than it was even six months ago.

As AQAP deepens its involvement in the civil war between those forces allied with the Houthis and those forces that oppose them, it will become increasingly difficult for Saudi Arabia and its allies to ensure that AQAP is not a beneficiary of aid meant for their own anti-Houthi forces. As the war in Yemen continues, AQAP – just as with militant Salafi and al-Qaeda linked groups in Syria fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad – might increasingly be viewed as a useful and effective proxy against the Houthis. Given that AQAP has struck targets in Saudi Arabia in the past, indirectly enabling them is likely to prove dangerous for the House of Saud in the near future.

### **Stalemate**

Saudi Arabia and its partners are engaged in a war that has no clear strategy for achieving its objectives of forcing the Houthis to retreat and reinstalling a pro-Saudi government. Reliance on fickle allies and on dangerous militant Salafi groups to fight the Houthis will not enable Saudi Arabia to achieve its objectives. But despite numerous reports of Saudi troops massing on the Yemeni border, it is highly unlikely that the kingdom will deploy anything but a token number of troops to Yemen. The use of armed proxies will likely be the extent of its involvement on the ground. The reasons for this are complex and have more to do with internal Saudi politics than a sound understanding of what risks these troops would face. [14] However, if Saudi Arabia and its partners were to deploy troops to northwest Yemen, they would face a battlefield scenario similar to what Israel faced when it invaded Lebanon in 2006, but without the benefit of the Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) disciplined and well-trained officers and soldiers.

In 2006, Hezbollah, an organization that has undeniably close ties to Iran, fought the IDF to a standstill by using a deadly mix of conventional and irregular tactics. [15] The Houthis who are now allied with, and to some de-

gree have incorporated, some of the best-trained units from the Yemeni Army, would likely employ a comparable mix of irregular and conventional tactics against an invading force. [16] Furthermore, they would have the benefit of Yemen's rugged terrain. While the frequent claims about Iran supplying the Houthis with weapons are dubious – Yemen, now more than ever, is awash in weapons – it is highly probable that the Houthi leadership has received advice and guidance from Hezbollah and its Iranian advisors.

A ground assault by Saudi Arabia and UAE forces remains highly unlikely and would no doubt prove calamitous for both nations. Thus, Saudi Arabia seems set to continue its costly but futile aerial campaign, while continuing to arm a disparate mix of tribal militias that are incapable and largely unwilling to take on the Houthis and their allies.

### **Looking Back to Look Forward**

Saudi Arabia's three-pronged strategy will not defeat the Houthis and their allies, it will only further impoverish the millions of Yemenis who now have no jobs, no access to health care and who are increasingly food insecure.

The air strikes that have targeted infrastructure, schools, hospitals and homes have bolstered support for the Houthis and allowed them to cast themselves as defenders of a nation under attack by a foreign power. The Saudi-led campaign has also helped create a space in which militant Salafi organizations, in particular AQAP, can operate with a high degree of freedom and have access to evermore desperate recruits.

In order to examine what might stabilize Yemen, it is helpful to look back to the 1962-70 civil war between Royalist and Republican forces in what was then North Yemen. This war was only settled after the foreign powers involved in it – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – withdrew. In that war, Saudi Arabia supported the Royalists, and ironically helped arm and provision the grandfathers of many of the men who now call themselves Houthis.

Neither the Royalists nor the Republicans were able to defeat one another even with, in the case of the Republicans, the help of 50,000 Egyptian troops. The war was finally ended by Yemeni-driven negotiations that allowed both sides in the conflict to save face, reconcile

their grievances and participate in governing what became the Yemen Arab Republic. Admittedly the current conflict in Yemen is more complex as it encompasses both north and south Yemen and all the tensions that accompany a country that was never properly unified.

Despite the north-south tensions, a process similar to the one that settled the 1962-70 civil war was underway before Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in 2015. With the help of then UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, all sides in the current conflict were close to reaching an interim power-sharing agreement. The Houthis had a working relationship with the leadership of many of the southern separatist movements as both groups had been oppressed by the Saleh government. But thanks to the Houthis' push south, their brutal occupation of Aden and abuses by all sides, this relationship has broken down.

Just as in Yemen's last civil war, neither side in the current conflict will be able to defeat the other—even with outside support. The only solution is to restart Yemeni driven negotiations. The alternative is years of low-level conflict that will spread beyond Yemen's borders and negatively impact regional stability and security.

The House of Saud would do well to remember the sage advice of its founder, King Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, who said on his deathbed, "the good or evil for us will come from Yemen." [17] The leadership of Yemen's various rebel groups and its government-in-exile, meanwhile, would benefit from recalling a very Yemeni proverb: "Nothing can break a stone but its sister."

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## NOTES

[1] See Human Rights Watch (August 2015); Human Rights Watch (May 2016); Amnesty International (May 2016)

[2] Yemen Food Security Information System Development Program (October 2016)

[3] The reasons behind the rise of the Houthis are complex and beyond the scope of this article. For requisite background see: Barak Salamoni, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, RAND Corporation, 2010; and for a more nuanced look at the reasons behind the growth of the Houthi Movement, see: Isa Blumi, *Chaos in Yemen: Societal Collapse and the New Authoritarianism*, Routledge, 2010).

[4] Michael Horton, "Borderline Crisis," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, (January, 2010)

[5] See: Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

[6] Leading from the front is something that – at least until 2012 – members of the Houthi leadership practiced. The Houthis' current leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi routinely led men in battles with the Yemeni Army. It is important to note that demonstrating bravery and proving oneself capable and competent are requirements for a leader as stipulated by Zaidi doctrine.

[7] See Human Rights Watch (October 13, 2016); BBC (October 9, 2016)

[8] See 'Yemen's Invisible Food Crisis,' Oxfam (March 2016)

[9] See Duff Hart-Davis. *The War that Never Was: The True Story of the Men Who Fought Britain's Most Secret Battle*, Century, 2011

[10] Following the popular revolt against the Saleh government in 2011, the Houthis seized vast stores of weapons and materiel that were abandoned by Yemeni Army troops that left their bases, particularly in al-Jawf. Since then, many Yemeni Army units have allied themselves with the Houthis and consequently the Houthis have access to a wide range light, medium and heavy weapon systems. However, reports of Iran supplying the Houthis with weapons persist. Most recently, Gulf-based analysts and news sites have claimed that weapons are being smuggled from Iran to Oman and then across the Omani border to Yemen. Aside from the fact that the Houthis do not require additional weapons, this is highly unlikely because the Omani government clearly values and benefits from its neutrality. It would not risk its political position to facilitate arms smuggling. Because Oman's border is secured by well trained and disciplined troops, many of which are drawn from the tribes whose land makes up the border, if weapons were being smuggled, it would not go unnoticed or unchecked.

See this analysis of the varied claims about intercepted weapons shipments from Iran: <https://consortiumnews.com/2016/10/31/justifying-the-saudi-slaughter-in-yemen/>

[11] See Jonathan Spyer, "Changing Battlefields Drive Insurgent Innovation," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2016.

[12] The Houthis have posted hours of footage of their attacks on Saudi forces on Youtube. The centrality of ATGMs to their cross-border raids is evident.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEGjTkZJX20>

[13] For an analysis of why social links and enmeshment in local communities are critical to AQAP see: Fawaz Gerges, *Rise and Fall of al-Qaeda*, Oxford University Press, 2011

[14] Michael Horton, "Saud Control: New Saudi King Goes on the Offensive," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (September 2015)

[15] Williamson Murray (ed.), *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pg. 290

[16] The Houthi leadership, in particular Abdul Malek al-Houthi, is seemingly well versed in literature pertaining to irregular warfare and is particularly interested in how Hezbollah and the Eritreans fused irregular warfare tactics with conventional tactics.

[17] Christopher Van Hollen, "North Yemen: A Dangerous Pentagonal Game," *Washington Quarterly* 5 (3), 1982, p. 137