

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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LIBYA: TACKLING FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE SOUTH

Alexander Sehmer

A new offensive by the Libyan National Army (LNA) is aimed partly at expelling foreign fighters, but the capture of alleged al-Qaeda infiltrators suggests jihadist groups may be looking to ramp up their efforts in Libya.

On March 20, the LNA, under the command of Khalifa Haftar, launched airstrikes in the country's south ([Libya Herald](#), March 20). The bombing is part of what the LNA describes as a law enforcement operation and marks the end of a 10-day grace period that Haftar had offered for foreign fighters to leave the country ([Libya Herald](#), March 15).

As well as attempting to secure the southern town of Kufra and the surrounding area, initial targets have been foreign militant groups—rebels from Chad and Sudan who have joined the fighting in Libya as mercenaries. A United Nations report from June last year noted their presence, including quoting officials from the Sudanese opposition Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) who said they had been approached to fight on behalf of

Islamist militias, as well as to ally with Haftar's own forces ([United Nations](#), June 2017).

The LNA's sweep in the south has also netted a group of 16 supposed al-Qaeda-linked fighters sent from Syria ([Libya Express](#), March 18). The fighters—a photo of them was published on the General Directorate for Counterterrorism's Facebook page—are reportedly members of the Syrian al-Nusra Front, and supposedly traveled to Libya via Turkey and Sudan.

Al-Qaeda's involvement in Libya dates back to the 1990s with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which sought to overthrow the country's then-leader Muammar Gaddafi. But it has suffered setbacks recently, with its affiliate Ansar al-Sharia—which at one point had branches in Derna and Benghazi—dissolved in May 2017 in the face of an onslaught by Haftar's forces ([al-Jazeera](#), May 29, 2017). The capture of the 16 alleged fighters near Kufra could be an indication that the group is now hoping to ramp up its Libya operations.

Meanwhile, Islamic State (IS), which lost its stronghold in Sirte in June 2016, has also been active. After several months of silence, it claimed a suicide attack in February on LNA forces in Jufra, to the southeast of Tripoli, which

left as many as five soldiers dead ([Libya Observer](#), February 21; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 21; [SITE](#), February 22).

Separately this month, the eastern region commander of the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PMF), Muftah Magerief, warned that his forces are on high alert for expected Islamist attacks ([Libya Observer](#), March 7). As Haftar extends his law enforcement operation in the south, it appears that both IS and al-Qaeda may be gearing up for further violence.

COLOMBIA: A POSSIBLE LONE-WOLF PLOT

Alexander Sehmer

Colombian security forces have arrested a Cuban national accused of plotting to blow himself up in the name of Islamic State (IS), raising the question of the extent to which IS has made inroads into a region that is, in reality, unlikely territory for the group.

Raul Gutierrez appeared in court in the Colombian capital of Bogota on March 15. He stands accused of plotting to bomb a café in the city and kill U.S. diplomats on behalf of IS. Prosecutors allege that Gutierrez, who had twice been removed from Colombia, apparently on at least one of those occasions after entering the country illegally, discussed the plan on Telegram ([Confidencial Colombia](#), March 15). He has pleaded not guilty ([Bogota Post](#), March 19).

The case has attracted a fair amount of media attention, not least because of the alleged IS connection in a part of the world that has seen relatively little in the way of Islamist violence. Colombia's decades-long history of terrorist attacks is a result of its conflict with the leftist rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Tackling FARC has given the country years of experience in counter-terrorism, but Latin America's exposure to IS has been limited.

In March 2016, a man who self-identified as an IS supporter stabbed to death a Jewish businessman in the Paraguayan city of Paysandu ([En Perspectiva](#) (Radiomundo), March 10, 2016; [Jerusalem Post](#), March 10, 2016). The same year a group calling itself Ansar al-Khilafah Brazil declared allegiance to IS in online messages ahead of the Olympics, but it in reality had little substance ([SITE](#), July 18). In 2015, a campaigning group claimed IS was working with drugs cartels in Mexico and had established bases close to Ciudad Juárez and the border with the United States, saying that Mexican authorities had recovered prayer rugs and documents in Arabic and Urdu ([Judicial Watch](#), April 14, 2015). The group's claims, attributed to anonymous sources, have since been dismissed.

Instead, where Islamist forces do touch Latin America, it is in the form of relatively well established Iranian networks, with the 1994 attack on a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, carried out by Hezbollah.

Recent arrests indicate that the group has operatives and sympathizers in Panama and further afield ([Panama Today](#), June 8, 2017). Meanwhile, in Colombia, Jewish commentators flagged a bizarrely belligerent—and hastily removed—message on the Palestinian mission’s Twitter account ([Radio Jai](#), October 20, 2017).

To an extent, ingrained Catholic—and more broadly Christian—traditions likely mitigate against the development of Islamist terrorism in South America. Of the thousands of foreign fighters who have joined the ranks of IS, relatively few have come from the region. Nonetheless, the Gutierrez case will be closely monitored for anything it may reveal about the extent of IS penetration in Latin America.

Boko Haram’s Backyard: The Ongoing Battle in Cameroon

Jacob Zenn

The epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency has always been in Nigeria’s northeastern-most Borno State. Since 2013, however, the insurgency has spilled over the border into Cameroon. Boko Haram attacks killed nearly 2,500 Cameroonians between 2014 and 2017, according to Cameroon’s defense ministry ([aa.com.tr](#), October 30, 2017). Most attacks in Cameroon are by the Abubakar Shekau-led faction of Boko Haram, whereas the Abu Musab al-Barnawi-led Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) faction operates closer to the Nigeria-Niger and Nigeria-Chad borders and has even clashed with U.S. forces in Niger’s Diffa region, according to an unclassified U.S. government report ([document-cloud.org](#), December 2017).

In addition, an estimated 26 million people in the Lake Chad region have been “affected” by Boko Haram violence, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while more than 2.6 million have been displaced ([unhcr.org](#), February 24, 2017). This year, in January alone, Cameroon suffered about 30 Boko Haram attacks, with 26 people killed as a result ([Xinhua](#) [Yaounde], February 6).

Although Cameroon has had notable success in tackling Boko Haram in the years since 2013, the group is still able to inflict violence on the country, taking a toll both in human and economic terms. The spillover from fighting in Nigeria and the associated humanitarian concerns will persist in Cameroon, but the country is adopting new counter-insurgency measures in coordination with Nigeria that give some reason for optimism.

Entry Into Cameroon

In 2013, Boko Haram initiated operations in Cameroon in order to establish supply lines, equipping its fighters in Nigeria with arms from Cameroonian towns such as Fotokol, on the border with Nigeria. In some cases, the weapons came from even further afield, in Chad, and passed through Cameroonian towns such as Kousseri. Government officials, including the former mayor of Fotokol, Ramat Moussa, were among those arrested for arms trafficking. The mayor, arrested in September

2014, was found to have an armory under his house. Although he was suspected of supplying Boko Haram, he was acquitted in December 2017 after spending three years in detention (news24.com, December 27, 2017).

Boko Haram also exploited Cameroon as a (relative) safe haven for retreat after a Nigerian state of emergency offensive in 2013 forced the group to abandon urban positions for the mountains and towns along the Cameroonian border. Some of Boko Haram's first battles with Cameroonian forces occurred as the military tried to prevent Boko Haram from crossing the border (AP, January 16, 2014). After one border clash in Banki in January 2014, Boko Haram released fliers in Cameroon in the name of Abubakr Shekau, warning that pro-government vigilantes would "pay dearly for what you do unless you repent" and telling Cameroon that "we have not attacked you, do not attack us" (fr.africatime.com, February 6, 2014).

Starting in February 2013, Boko Haram operations in northern Cameroon extended to kidnapping foreigners. In total, Boko Haram kidnapped 22 foreigners in five operations carried out between 2013 and 2015, as well as abducting a Cameroon traditional leader and some of his family members. Members of the Ansaru faction who reintegrated with Boko Haram assisted in at least the first two kidnapping operations, though it is likely they had a hand in all five (France 24, November 16, 2013).

The abductions were a huge success for Boko Haram, netting the group more than \$10 million. According to one journalist with close ties to Boko Haram's leadership, this was the group's "biggest war chest" (storify.com, November 1, 2014). In addition, the government released many of the Cameroonian Boko Haram members arrested for smuggling arms in exchanges for the foreign hostages.

Current Operations

Boko Haram activity appears to have ramped down considerably in recent years. By 2015, the group's arms smuggling operations in Cameroon had apparently been reduced, likely due to a number of major busts, including the one in Fotokol. In addition, there have been no kidnappings of foreigners in northern Cameroon since 2015, although this could be because for-

eigners now rarely travel there and not necessarily due to improved security.

However, since 2015, Boko Haram has carried out a number of suicide attacks where the perpetrators are women or young girls. Those attacks, as well as being costly in terms of loss of life, have been psychologically painful for communities. On December 31, 2017, one suicide attack at a café in Bia by a girl killed one person and injured 28 others (Vanguard, December 31, 2017). On February 12, Cameroonian forces shot and killed two other female suicide bombers in Kolofata "without waiting for military command." Struck by bullets, the girls' explosives appear to have detonated, and three soldiers were wounded collaterally (Cameroon Concord, February 13). The war has unsurprisingly taken a psychological toll on Cameroonian forces, starkly displayed on February 1 when a soldier shot dead two women and a boy in Mora in what was reported as "an act of madness" (IOL, February 1).

Although there are fewer border raids now than in 2013, they continue and are deadly. On February 6, five men and a pregnant woman were killed and two others were injured when Boko Haram raided the Cameroonian border town of Mayo-Tsanaga. Boko Haram also burned houses and churches during the attack (Xinhua [Yaounde], February 6). Other attacks may not prove to be deadly but are economically costly, such attacks in which Boko Haram steals hundreds of cattle (Reliefweb, December 13, 2017).

Cameroon's Response

Cameroon's response has been multi-faceted and relatively successful. Cameroon has partnered increasingly closely with Nigeria and, since February, its soldiers have been part of Nigeria's "Operation Lafiya Dole," Abuja's counter-insurgency force fighting Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria (Premium Times, February 6). Retired Major General Babagana Mohammed Monguno reaffirmed in February Nigeria's commitment that "no territory of Nigeria would be used as a staging ground to destabilize Cameroon." In one notable success, a joint operation saw Nigerian and Cameroon troops kill 35 Boko Haram fighters (Vanguard, February 28).

In January, the country also began construction of a 10-hectare "rehabilitation center" intended to reintegrate ex-Boko Haram fighters with the support of traditional

leaders. Of the first participants in this program, 186 are currently held in the base of the Multinational Joint Task-force in Mora ([L'Oeil du Sahel](#) [Yaounde], January 17).

Yet another Cameroonian response may have been “deal making” with Boko Haram—the negotiator and mastermind of Boko Haram’s kidnappings of foreign hostages in Cameroon was released from prison in October 2017 under somewhat unclear terms ([Camer.be](#), October 26, 2017). In the short-term, such deal making may keep Boko Haram at bay, but in the longer-term it could become a liability if Cameroon is unable to meet Boko Haram’s demands and the group extracts its revenge.

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Saffron Scare: al-Qaeda’s Propaganda War in India

Animesh Roul

Of late, al-Qaeda's South Asia branch has been proactive and forceful in its campaign against India and its neighbors. A “code of conduct,” released by the group in June 2017, signaled an expanded geographical scope by including Afghanistan and Myanmar into its supposed domain of influence and operation, adding to its core focus on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) has since sought to augment this with a series of videos released at the end of last year that purport to depict anti-Muslim policies and atrocities committed by Hindu right wing groups, as well as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The films all employ the phrase “saffron terror,” an allusion to violent Hindu nationalism.

Propaganda Wave

In the 20 or so pages of its code of conduct, AQIS broadly laid out its future strategy in the region, especially its choice of targets and their priorities. Besides the traditional American and Israeli targets, AQIS singled out India as a priority target. The document claimed that India is promoting and defending secular values in every sphere in the region and specifically mentioned targeting Hindu political and religious leaders who AQIS alleges have been instrumental in anti-Muslim activities in the country and beyond.

Within four months of the document’s release, AQIS reiterated its jihadist campaign against Hindus with its saffron terror videos, in which it gave more specifics on Indian targets ([SITE](#), November 26, 2017). Three videos were released between December 20 and December 29. [1] The group released a further video on December 29 entitled “How Do We Forget,” which focuses on Kashmir. It included footage from Kashmir and of India’s Prime Minister and BJP leader Narendra Modi. [2] On January 7, AQIS released another audio-visual message entitled “The History of Islamic India,” targeting Indian Muslims and depicting the “lost glory” of Islam. [3]

These releases have a direct connection with the so-called code of conduct in as much as AQIS is attempting

to prioritize targets in India. However, unlike the code of conduct, the messages appear random and do not offer detailed guidance on achieving the group's long-term goals either in India or in the South Asian region. Instead, they focus specifically on Indian Muslims and supposed Hindu atrocities against them.

The saffron terror messages have been published in different versions in Urdu, Bengali and English by different media arms of al-Qaeda, such as the hitherto unknown "1857 Media," An-Nasr and the official media arm As-Sahab. They have been distributed through Telegram and other online channels. By publishing and distributing the messages in Urdu and Bengali, AQIS has ostensibly attempted to reach out to Muslims beyond India, in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

'Saffron Terror'

AQIS' adoption of the term "saffron terror" is a nod to Indian media and some political leaders sympathetic to Muslim causes. The color saffron (literally *bhagwa* or *kesaria* in Hindi) is considered to be a divine or godly color in Hinduism and has much religious significance. It is also used by Hindu right-wing political and religious groups, such as the BJP and RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*), and by another Hindu right-wing group, Abhinav Bharat, which has been accused of anti-Muslim violence.

The AQIS video messages are clearly aimed at vitiating the communal atmosphere in India as they contain clips of supposed anti-Muslim violence and purport to show acts of Hindu extremism.

One of the saffron terror videos depicts footage of Muslims forced to praise Hindu gods and denounce Islam. One example given is of an Indian supreme court's ruling against the growing of beards by Muslim soldiers ([The Hindu](#), December 15, 2016). The video is a blatant attempt by AQIS to evoke anger and resentment from Muslims serving in the Indian armed forces.

The last video in the series released on December 29 features mostly hate speeches from leaders of Hindu groups such as RSS and Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The video, just over six minutes long, emphasizes Hindu nationalist fervor and instances of hate speech against Indian Muslims. It opens with Modi's image followed by nationalist leaders who are mostly known for anti-Muslim

hate speech, including Varun Gandhi and Sakhshi Maharaj, both of whom are BJP lawmakers. It also depicts T Raja Singh of Shri Ram Yuva Sena (Telengana), Pravin Togadia of VHP and Rajeshwar Singh, the leader of right-wing Hindu organization Dharam Jagaran Manch.

These groups and others depicted in the film are presently engaged in various pro-Hindu activities such as cow protection, construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and scaremongering within minority communities, including Christians and Muslims. In fact, one of the statements by a Hindu leader featured in the video calls for the complete annihilation of Christianity and Islam in India.

In the second saffron terror video, AQIS used somewhat older footage (from mid-2016) in which self-proclaimed *Gau Rakshaks* (cow protectors) are shown torturing and thrashing a Muslim man in Rajasthan, India. India's majority Hindu community venerates cows as a divine animal. Over the last few years, there has been a noticeable spike in anti-Muslim violence in the name of cow protection, alongside efforts to prevent beef consumption. AQIS and other extremist Islamist groups have attempted to exploit this trend ([The Wire](#), June 28, 2017).

Although the phrase "saffron terror" was coined by the Indian media in the wake of the Gujarat Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002, it became a rallying cry against the BJP and its affiliated groups (popularly known as *Sangh Parivar*) from about 2010. Several legislators from the Congress Party used the phrase to refer to anti-Muslim violence perpetrated by Hindu fringe groups ([The Hindu](#), August 25, 2010; [Hindustan Times](#), January 21, 2013). These groups are thought to be behind a number of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian violent incidents, including the bombings of the Malegaon mosque, the India-Pakistan Samjhouta train and Ajmer's famed Sufi Mosque.

AQIS' focus on Hindu groups is longstanding. In the past, the jihadist group's emir, Asim Umar (a.k.a. Sana ul Haq), who is of Indian origin but based in Pakistan, plotted against Prime Minister Modi and other senior BJP functionaries. The interrogation of the detained AQIS militant Muhammad Asif revealed as much in December 2015 ([Times of India](#), December 17, 2015).

In common with most of the Kashmir-centric Pakistani militant groups (such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and

Lashkar-e-Taiba), AQIS often names Modi as its prime target, citing his Hindu right-wing credentials, as well as the 2002 communal riots, which happened on his watch as Gujarat's chief minister. The pogroms followed an attack on the Sabarmati Express train on February 27, 2002. ([Hindustan Times](#), October 9, 2017). Part of the train was set on fire by a Muslim mob at Godhra station, killing nearly 60 people, most of them Hindu pilgrims.

Islamic militant groups attempt to portray subversive activities against the BJP and other Hindu-centric groups such as the RSS or VHP as retribution for acts against India's Muslim community, including the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 or past violence by Hindu vigilantes.

In May 2015, Umar referenced Modi in a propaganda video entitled "From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down" (released by al-Sabab media) that portrayed the prime minister as an enemy of Islam. Again in July 2016, Umar released a statement that included a reference to a ban on the consumption of beef, and criticized the imposition of nationalistic values and chants such as the *Vande Mataram* (Praise to the Motherland- India) or *Bharat Mata ki Jai* (Glory to Mother India).

This steady release of video propaganda taking aim at India's majority Hindu population is aimed at creating a communal rift and enticing Indian and neighboring Bangladeshi (Bengali-speaking) Muslims to join al-Qaeda's jihad.

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NOTES

[1] "Saffron Terror, Part -3", Jihadology, December 26, 2017, <http://jihadology.net/2017/12/26/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-saffron-terror-part-3/>

[2] Al-Qā'idah in the Indian Subcontinent, "Shaykh Asim Umar: How Do We Forget?", Jihadology, December 29, 2017, <http://jihadology.net/2017/12/29/new-video-mes->

[sage-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinents-shaykh-a%e1%b9%a3im-umar-how-do-we-forget/](http://jihadology.net/2018/01/07/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-history-of-islamic-india/)

[3] Al-Qā'idah in the Indian Subcontinent: "History of Islamic India", Jihadology, January 7, 2018, <http://jihadology.net/2018/01/07/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-history-of-islamic-india/>

Which Way Forward for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?

Michael Horton

Beginning in February, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its proxies launched sequential offensives against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the southern Yemeni governorates of Hadramawt and Shabwah. The latest offensive, Operation Sweeping Torrent, was launched on March 7 with the objective of clearing AQAP from the governorate of Abyan, a longstanding stronghold for the organization ([Middle East Monitor](#), March 8). The UAE and the security forces it backs in Yemen claim to have successfully cleared AQAP from large swaths of all three governorates.

If such claims are even partially true, what does this mean for AQAP and its future operations in Yemen? How will AQAP's leadership and its rank and file respond to the Emirati-backed offensives? Will increased pressure on it by the Emirati-backed militias prompt AQAP to rethink its strategies? Might AQAP be goaded into adopting the largely failed punishment strategy of Islamic State (IS), a maximalist approach that alienated most of those IS wanted to rule and left it overextended and exposed? Or will it continue to model an organization like the Taliban, which, albeit brutal, has successfully woven itself into the very fabric of Afghanistan?

As an organization, AQAP has previously confronted the question of whether it should become more radical and implement a punishment strategy, or whether it should be more measured in its use of violence and adapt itself to the very local and particular socio-cultural environments in which it operates. For the most part, the leadership and its operatives have answered by pursuing a gradualist strategy that has de-prioritized the enforcement of AQAP's radical interpretation of Islamic law in favor of accepting established understandings of tribal and Islamic law. [1] At the same time, AQAP has successfully exploited the many opportunities for inserting its operatives and forces into Yemen's layered and increasingly complex war.

Concurrently, AQAP has also de-prioritized its focus on attacking the "far enemy"—the West—and is concen-

trating on battling its enemies within Yemen. To a considerable degree, the war in Yemen has forced AQAP to become a more indigenous organization that is far more concerned with local and national objectives than with waging trans-national jihad. The war has changed AQAP just as it has altered most other organizations and power structures in Yemen.

AQAP's future in Yemen may well be determined by whether or not its leadership continues to pursue the relatively nuanced and pragmatic strategy that it has largely followed for the last three years, or whether it resorts to the kind of punishment strategy employed by IS. How the leadership and the rank and file respond to the newly launched UAE-backed offensives against them will give some indication of which path AQAP intends to follow.

Relying on Local Militia

In February, the UAE and the security forces that it backs launched Operation Faisal and Operation Decisive Sword ([Gulf Today](#), February 17). These campaigns were followed in March by Operation Sweeping Torrent. The first two focused respectively on clearing AQAP from areas to the west of the port city of al-Mukalla and the southern half of the governorate of Shabwah, while Operation Sweeping Torrent was aimed at clearing AQAP from parts of Abyan ([Emirates News Agency](#), March 7). The three offensives have already concluded. The first two reportedly achieved their objective of clearing AQAP—in the space of days—from the targeted areas ([Gulf Today](#), March 12).

All three offensives were carried out by regional militias created and funded by the UAE. These militias include the Hadrami Elite Forces, Shabawani Elite Forces and the Security Belt Forces, which are also called the al-Hizam Brigades. These regional militias are composed of men drawn almost exclusively from the areas in which the militias operate. In theory, the fact that the men and presumably the commanders are drawn from local communities should mean that these forces possess superior operational intelligence due to their intimate knowledge of the social and physical topography. Using men from the areas where they are deployed may also help ensure a higher level of buy-in by communities. However, these forces operate with no unified chain of command. Even within the individual militias there is often no clear operational hierarchy. [2] The absence of

unified chains of command and the lack of a state authority to oversee them mean that it is unlikely that the militias will be able to make the most of the advantages they possess. While local militias can be highly effective in counter-insurgency operations—this was the case in the 2011-12 campaign against AQAP in Abyan and Shabwa—there is also the risk that they will be far more motivated by local agendas and goals rather than an abiding commitment to combating insurgents, in this case AQAP. These very local agendas and concerns can—and most often do—lead to abuses and the corruption of intelligence.

When the United States began its campaign in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, it allied itself with a number of local militias, warlords and various elites that had been displaced and targeted by the Taliban. After initial successes that forced the leadership of the Taliban to flee, plead for amnesty or turn themselves in, many of these gains were erased within four years by the abuses committed against local populations by warlords, militias and, in some cases, the U.S. forces backing them. While there are numerous reasons for the rebirth of the Taliban, abuses by local and regional militias and warlords were a significant factor. [3] Despite having been near defeat in 2003-4, the Taliban tapped into popular discontent with predatory local forces. While the Taliban are frequently predatory and brutal, in many areas, they were able to offer higher levels of security than local militias and warlords, and their use of violence was often more measured and predictable. [4] With Pakistan as a safe haven, the Taliban were able to revive their alliances and networks of operatives and fighters. Now, 17 years after the United States first launched military operations in Afghanistan, the Taliban are resurgent.

Yemen is very different from Afghanistan. Unlike Afghanistan, there is a strong and ancient Yemeni identity, and the frequent claims in the media of a sectarian divide in Yemen are largely untrue. Yemen—both south and north—also has a history of relatively strong formal and informal governance. However, as a result of three years of war, the divisions within Yemeni society are now far more pronounced. The country has no effective government and its armed forces have either been destroyed or have devolved into local and regional militias that often only answer to their individual commanding officers.

The UAE's policy of equipping and training local and regional militias without a unified chain of command or the restraining authority of an actual government may result in some short-term gains against AQAP. However, the long-term effects of such a policy may further empower AQAP and could lead to an Afghanistan-like outcome for parts of Yemen. The UAE backed security forces all have their own intensely local agendas and aims ([al-Araby](#), March 2). They do not necessarily prioritize the battle against AQAP. Just as with the United States in Afghanistan, the UAE and its partners are reliant on local militias for intelligence. This intelligence is difficult to vet and can be manipulated to paint political and martial rivals as members of AQAP in order to remove them. This corruption and manipulation of intelligence occurred with such frequency in Afghanistan that U.S. authorities often arrested and sometimes killed leaders who were allied with the United States. They simply fell prey to a rival who happened to have the ear of whatever transient set of U.S. authorities was in charge of a particular district at the time. UAE backed forces have already been charged with disappearing Yemenis, running black site prisons, torture, mass arrests and extra-legal detention. [5] These types of abuses will fuel grievances and cycles of revenge that AQAP, just like the Taliban did in Afghanistan, will exploit.

Adopting the 'Taliban Model'?

While the UAE is touting the success of its three offensives against AQAP, it is unlikely that any gains made will be consolidated. The UAE-backed militias do not have the manpower or training to secure what are vast areas, many of which are mountainous and crisscrossed with canyons. This type of terrain makes sustained clearing operations costly and always favors insurgent forces. UAE-backed forces have made some progress in clearing areas to the west of Mukalla, including Wadi Huwayrah and Wadi Hajr.[6] Additionally, the UAE and its forces claim to have cleared a large part of southern Shabwa that abuts the governorate of Hadramawt.

It is difficult to verify the claims, however, given AQAP's history of strategic retreats and its reluctance to engage superior forces, it is likely that AQAP has simply dispersed its fighters to other strongholds. Also, much like the Taliban before they regained significant territory, AQAP encourages its fighters to return to their homes and villages when faced with a potential defeat. AQAP fighters—especially the rank and file—disappear into

the areas from which they came and are sheltered according to tribal custom, which generally protects members regardless of their affiliation with an external group.

AQAP's reluctance to engage superior forces and risk significant losses not only demonstrates the group's understanding of guerrilla warfare, but is also of evidence of its primary objective: to ensure the organization's survival at all costs. Its secondary objective is to continue to lay the foundation for AQAP's long-term growth. This secondary objective is twofold: first, continue to build relationships with a wide range of tribal elites and anti-Houthi militias wherever possible ([Middle East Monitor](#), November 9, 2017). Second, AQAP continues to focus on tapping into licit and illicit trade networks, which allow it to fund its operations. [7]

To achieve these objectives, AQAP has been forced, much like the Taliban, to selectively de-prioritize and modify its interpretation of Islamic law. For AQAP this de-prioritization of its radical Islamist platform has been ongoing—albeit with periodic reversions to its radical roots—for much of the last three years. This is not to say that the leadership—or at least some of it—is not still dedicated to eventually imposing its interpretation of Islamic law across the emirate that it would like to create. However, war, economics and local and national politics impose their own realities which must be grappled with and exploited if an insurgent group is to survive and thrive.

This readiness to adapt to local cultural and political realities has been clearly demonstrated by AQAP in terms of both its willingness to rule through proxies—as it did in Mukalla—and its willingness to ally itself with those who do not share its ideology or long-term objectives ([al-Jazeera](#), September 16, 2015). Much like the Taliban, AQAP is intent on weaving itself into the social fabric of Yemen—at least of southern Yemen. It is doing this by seeding its operatives both overtly and covertly into the growing number of militias that operate across southern Yemen. These militias are often organized along tribal lines and are variously formed for the purpose of fighting the Houthis, inter-tribal feuds and, in a growing number of cases, for fighting rival militias.

Concurrent with inserting its operatives and fighters into numerous militias, AQAP continues to tap into licit and illicit trade networks. AQAP's opportunities for funding itself have diminished since it retreated from Mukalla in

April 2016. Prior to its retreat from the city, AQAP was siphoning off money from illicit sales of crude oil and was successfully taxing imports. It also imposed a tax on the trade in *qat*, a mild narcotic consumed by Yemenis. Much like the Taliban, who do nothing to stop opium production and in fact benefit from it, despite its being forbidden in Islam, AQAP tolerates *qat* usage and to some degree benefits from the trade. [8]

The extreme instability in southern Yemen means that abundant opportunities remain for AQAP to build alliances—even if they are short-lived—and to tap into licit and illicit trade networks. The UAE's policy of funding and backing local militias with no overriding chain of command or state-based oversight will likely provide additional opportunities for AQAP to insert itself into the factional disputes that are sure to result from such a policy. Just as in Afghanistan, where the United States empowered warlords, such a strategy may yield short-term successes but the long-term effects, will foster an ideal operational environment for insurgent organizations, as evidenced in Afghanistan.

Staying the Course

The pragmatic strategy that AQAP has followed for the last three years has allowed it to increase its influence across southern Yemen and to grow the number of rank and file that are at least nominally allied with the group. Despite financial wherewithal, martial strength and a rapid increase in the area it controlled during 2015 and 2016, AQAP's leadership largely resisted overreach. When it controlled Mukalla, it ruled through local proxies and attempted to curry favor with residents through public works projects ([al-Jazeera](#), January 11). AQAP also provided relatively predictable levels of security across much of the area that it controlled. It curtailed banditry on the Mukalla-Aden road and ensured that merchants could once again freely move goods albeit with payments to AQAP. The importance of the provision of predictable levels of security in terms of building goodwill and increasing influence cannot be overemphasized. The Taliban's success in Afghanistan depends on a complex and shifting set of factors, but their ability to provide predictable levels of security—even if their tactics are brutal—remains fundamental to their continued influence.

It is unlikely that having enjoyed the benefits of its more pragmatic strategy, that AQAP will take up the kind of

maximalist strategy employed by IS. The defeat of IS in Iraq and large parts of Syria illustrates the risk of overreach and overexposure. It also clearly shows the danger of openly confronting better-armed enemies. In contrast with IS, the Taliban rarely confront a better armed enemy, they prioritize living to fight another day which in turn dovetails with their focus on winning the long war. Similarly, AQAP is also demonstrating that it is focused on the long war. This focus demands discipline, ideological flexibility, and a willingness to sublimate its own goals in favor of the goals of those militias with which it temporarily allies itself.

AQAP's adoption of a pragmatic strategy and its focus on the long war means that the group's organizational ethos has shifted toward the local and national. While AQAP's leaders continue to call for "lone wolf" attacks on targets in the West, AQAP's operatives and rank and file are focused on combatting internal enemies like the Houthis rather than funding and planning attacks on external targets. [9]

The pressure being put on AQAP by the UAE-backed forces and a stepped-up U.S.-led drone campaign are unlikely to force AQAP to abandon a strategy that has—and is—paying dividends ([al-Jazeera](#), February 5). The leadership of AQAP can easily see that IS's maximalist strategy greatly aided its defeat, or near-defeat, while the Taliban's unceasing focus on the long war combined with the mistakes made by the U.S. and Afghan governments have allowed it to once again become a formidable power in the country ([al-Jazeera](#), March 7).

While AQAP may be suffering some losses due to the various offensives launched by the Emirati-backed forces, it will weather these losses by engaging in strategic retreats and by continuing to enmesh its operatives and fighters within anti-Houthi militias. AQAP's focus on the long war means that it will bide its time until conditions are once again ripe for them to go on the offensive.

Given that southern Yemen has no effective government and that the Emirati-backed militias are riven with factions, AQAP will not have to wait long. Without a functioning government, a national army or clear chains of command, it is likely that the now well-armed local militias backed by the UAE will fail to capitalize on the gains they may have made against AQAP. Instead, many of the militias will pursue their own particular agendas mo-

tivated by securing influence, additional arms and access to the same licit and illicit trade networks as AQAP.

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NOTES

[1] See: Michael Horton, "Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula," [CTC Sentinel](#), January 2017.

[2] Interview with Yemen based analyst, January 2018.

[3] See: Anand Gopal, No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes, Picador, 2014.

[4] See: Steve Coll, Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Penguin, 2018.

[5] See: "Yemen: UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces," [Human Rights Watch](#), June 22, 2017.

[6] Interview with Yemen based Journalist, January 2018.

[7] Interview with Yemen based journalist, February 2018.

[8] This is not to say that qat is comparable to opium or its derivatives. Qat is more akin to strong coffee and its status within Islamic law is far more ambiguous than the use of opium, which is forbidden. However, for Salafi and takfiri groups there is no ambiguity regarding qat: it is forbidden.

[9] See: [SITE](#) May 2017.