

Yemen's War on Terror

by Jonathan Schanzer

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Yemen has emerged of late as one of the more fertile locations for Al Qaeda activity. Al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, the Islamic Army of Aden-Abyan (IAA), has executed a number of spectacular attacks against Western interests in recent years. It was responsible for the 1998 kidnapping of sixteen Western tourists in the southern province of Abyan, the bombing of the USS *Cole* in 2000, and an assault on the French tanker the *Limburg* in 2002, among other attacks. Despite these international strikes, the IAA is the classic Al Qaeda affiliate: a local phenomenon that assists the larger jihadi network in its war against the West.

Historically, Yemen has often been the site of proxy battles among foreign powers, from Pan-Arabists to communists. Not surprisingly, Al Qaeda has also used Yemen as a staging ground. The network has been active in Yemen since its inception: Al Qaeda's first-ever attack took place in Aden in 1992. What started as a loose network of Yemeni Afghans—soldiers who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan and then brought radical Islam back to Yemen when they returned home in the early 1990s—slowly became a node in the Al Qaeda system. More than fourteen years after the end of the Soviet withdrawal in 2003, government officials in Yemen confirmed that several senior Al Qaeda operatives were still at large in Yemen, with dozens of lesser militants roaming the countryside.¹ While Yemen has cooperated with the United States on counterterrorism issues, making significant arrests and thwarting several plots, Al Qaeda is nonetheless likely to maintain deep roots there for years to come.

¹ Interviews with Yemeni officials, June 2003; interview with Walid as-Saqqaf, editor of the *Yemen Times* in Sanaa, June 9, 2003 (“As-Saqqaf Interview”).

Yemeni Lawlessness

Modern Yemen has proven a difficult country to rule. Even the Ottoman Turks and the British, who at different points occupied parts of Yemen, knew enough to leave some of Yemen's more unruly areas alone. In the 1930s, one British observer noted that in just one territory, the Hadramawt, "there were about 2,000 separate 'governments'."² Over the years, Sanaa has slowly expanded its reach. Whereas in the late 1970s it barely controlled the Sanaa-Taiz-Hodeidah triangle, Sanaa's authority is now recognized throughout most of the country. The government operates through a primordial federal system, making the best of the political hand it was dealt when the country was unified in 1990. It projects authority in most of Yemen's towns and cities and provides crucial transportation and oil infrastructure throughout much of the country. Still, Sanaa lacks the resources to effectively control large patches of the countryside.

Yemen is not, however, a country of chaos. Yemeni society has an identifiable rhythm and age-old order, especially in the tribal areas outside city centers. But tribal structures often run parallel to the government. Powerful patriarchs sometimes disregard parameters set by Sanaa, and allegiances to powerful tribal patriarchs will supersede respect for state law. A 2003 International Crisis Group report observes that "parts of the population continue to resist stronger government authority," and the Yemeni government "has yet to exert full control over tribes in remote areas." When tribes are sympathetic to radical elements, "the government finds itself in a deadlock."³

This lack of control, coupled with a lack of resources and Yemen's rugged terrain, can make it difficult to capture, arrest, or interrogate suspects. Yemeni and U.S. authorities agree that the three governorates of primary concern are Marib, Shibwa, and Jawf, which are known for their tribal domination, lawlessness, and harboring of Al Qaeda elements. Marib's oil pipeline was damaged by gunfire and explosives at least eight times in 1998 by local tribes, possibly as a means of undermining the government's authority, but more likely as an effort to extort greater financial benefits from the oil company that owned it. Until recent years, Marib's lawlessness was also reflected in kidnappings. Sirwah, between Sanaa and Marib, is said to be among the worst of Yemen's badlands and is where many of the tribal kidnappings of the 1990s took place.⁴

In northern governorates, clashes between various tribal elements are frequent, aided by Saudi support for some tribes. For decades, the Saudis

²Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 37.

³*Yemen: Coping with Terrorism and Violence in a Fragile State*, International Crisis Group, No. 8, Jan. 8, 2003, p. ii (executive summary); As-Saqqaf Interview.

⁴Interview with a senior U.S. official, Washington, D.C., Jan. 8, 2004; *Yemen: Coping with Terrorism*, pp. 18–19.

paid off local patriarchs and otherwise worked assiduously to keep the Yemeni government off balance. They did this in order to maintain a modicum of power inside Yemen. Sanaa asserts that the kidnappings of the 1990s were likely Saudi-financed, but at least one senior U.S. official believes that Yemeni tribes carried out most of the kidnappings for their own mercantile reasons.⁵ Since the signing of a border agreement between the two countries in 2000, reports of kidnappings have ceased. However, Yemen continues to struggle with porous borders and a weak central government, which Al Qaeda is happy to exploit, as numerous foreigners have before it.

Other Countries' Battles

After centuries of loose Ottoman control, North Yemen established its independence at the end of World War I under the theocratic Imam Yahya. Yahya ruled for two decades, but could not prevent the British (who had been in Yemen since the 1800s) from establishing "spheres of influence" in Aden in the South. After Yahya was killed in a coup attempt in 1948, his son Ahmed ascended to power. Ahmed quickly sought protection from Egypt against British encroachment from the South. When Ahmed died in 1962, his son, Mohammed, ruled for a week, until an army coup ignited an eight-year republican revolution, leading to the creation of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). During this revolutionary phase, Yemen's two competing forces sought sponsorship from the two major regional powers (and ideologies) in the region: Pan-Arabist Egypt under Gamal Abdul Nasser and the royalists of Saudi Arabia. The popular, socialist ideas behind pan-Arabism were commonly seen as the ideology that would rescue the Arab world from its woes and defeat Israel. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other Middle Eastern monarchies, threatened by this challenge to the sovereignty of monarchs, sought to contain pan-Arabism in Yemen. Each power backed a faction in Yemen's war.

This proxy war took its toll on North Yemen. The Saudis and Jordanians backed offensives on northern tribal areas, which prompted Egyptian bombardments of North Yemen and also the Saudi kingdom. By 1965, Egyptian troops in North Yemen numbered about 60,000.⁶ Egypt fought with the Republicans in North Yemen until October 1967, when the Six-Day War with Israel drained its military resources. A defeated Nasser soon withdrew under cover of an Arab summit agreement, while Saudi Arabia nominally agreed to halt support to royalists. When the Egyptians departed North Yemen in December, they barely controlled Sanaa and left a path of destruction, having bombed hostile tribal areas, laid landmines, and even

⁵ Ahmed Noman and Kassim Almadhagi, *Yemen and the United States: A Study of a Small Power and Super-State Relationship, 1962-1994* (NY: I. B. Taurus, 1996), p. 123.

⁶ Mohammed Ahmad Zabarrah, *Yemen: Traditionalism vs. Modernity* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), p. 99.

used chemical weapons.⁷ In 1967, the British also withdrew from Yemen, after suffering a campaign of costly guerrilla attacks in South Yemen. Since 1965, the Libyan-backed Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen and the National Liberation Front had unleashed brutal violence on British forces in the south. In the end, the conflict claimed some 200,000 lives.⁸

By 1972, elements in South Yemen separated that region from the rest of the country and created the first Arab Marxist state, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), a Soviet satellite on the Red Sea. The PDRY received support from communist countries including several Eastern European states, China, and Cuba, as well as from Libya and radical Palestinian groups. The South launched three invasions into the North between 1972 and 1979, the 1979 invasion being the most aggressive. In that Cold War proxy battle, the United States supplied arms to the YAR, and a number of Arab states provided military advisors. U.S. officials were particularly concerned over the presence in PDRY of some "800 to 1,000 Soviet advisers, about half of whom were regular military personnel, between 500 and 700 Cuban advisers, and more than one hundred East Germans, primarily concentrated on internal security intelligence."⁹

In the end, the North was victorious. In the one-month tribal war of 1988, more than 10,000 South Yemenis were killed. The purges and executions from this extended coup stripped the country of nearly all its civil infrastructure. With the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, PDRY lost its patrons and protectors. In May 1990, unification negotiations that had proceeded in fits and starts for nearly fifteen years finally resulted in a unity agreement, shared power arrangements, and a commitment to creating a constitutional polity. However, many dispossessed PDRY leaders resented their loss of power and control in the new Yemen. Their grievances eventually led to the civil war of 1994.

Fighting Others' Wars

Inasmuch as Yemenis historically have looked to outside powers to further their own goals, many Yemenis adopted the cause of the Afghan fighters in Afghanistan's war against the Soviets (1979–89). When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, many Yemenis, prodded by both the Yemeni and U.S.

⁷ Noman and Almadhagi, *Yemen and the United States*, p. 82; Dresch, *History of Modern Yemen*, p. 105.

⁸ "Background Notes: Yemen, October 1996," Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Dept. of State, www.state.gov; Robert D. Kaplan, "A Tale of Two Colonies," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003.

⁹ "Background Notes"; Dresch, *History of Modern Yemen*, pp. 124, 149; and Noman and Almadhagi, *Yemen and the United States*, pp. 106, 109.

governments, left to fight as mujahedin. Southern Yemenis in particular were eager to exact revenge and to take their shots at the power that backed those who had ruled their territory. In Afghanistan, many of these fighters gained battle experience and also were indoctrinated by Al Qaeda's jihadi ideology. When they returned to Yemen in the early 1990s, some began to coalesce into new jihadi groups. A few of these groups were built upon relationships with the core of what would soon become Al Qaeda. The IAA would emerge from that nexus in the late 1990s.

Unification and Weaponization

The Yemeni Afghans returned triumphant after 1989; their jihad indirectly led to the decline of the Soviet empire, the crumbling of the PDRY, and the unification of Yemen in May 1990. But unified Yemen was still unstable. Though the government, based in the North, took steps toward smooth integration, the security apparatus was overwhelmed as the North absorbed a flood of PDRY civil servants. According to former Yemeni prime minister Abdelkareem al-Iryani, southern radicals “exploited the hazy period between November 1993 and July 1994” by building new paramilitary training camps, reactivating existing ones, and preparing themselves for violence against the regime.¹⁰

Hostilities soon resumed between the central government and the southern secessionists, who attempted to undo Yemen's unification. This led to a brutal nine-week civil war in 1994 that took 7,000 lives but ended in a victory for unity. President Ali Abdullah Saleh (still Yemen's president today) gained the upper hand, due in part to his ability to coopt Islamist fighters intent upon defeating the communists.

But the years of fighting had taken their toll. According to Sanaa's current governor, Yemen experienced an unprecedented import of weapons between 1967 and 1994. As a result, there are more than three guns for every citizen. There may even be as many as 80 million firearms in Yemen.¹¹ In the more heavily armed tribal areas, passage is forbidding even for government forces.

In 2003, the government announced a plan to buy back weapons from the tribes. According to estimates from Yemen's interior ministry, the initiative would require billions of Riyals. Sanaa, since the late 1990s, has tried to pass parliamentary legislation prohibiting the carrying of certain firearms within city limits. Such changes may be difficult to implement; Yemen's rugged culture has been armed for centuries. The gun, as well as the *jambiyah* (traditional dagger), is an inextricable part of Yemen's culture.

¹⁰ Interview with advisor to President Saleh, Sanaa, June 10, 2003; interview with Abdel Kareem Al-Irayani, Sanaa, June 14, 2003.

¹¹ Interview with Abdel Wahed al-Bukhaiti, Sanaa, June 9, 2003.

Further, the arms trade is a moneymaker for many Yemenis. The country is seen as a “supermarket” for arms by Somalia and other countries in the region, and the profit margin can be as high as 200 percent. In addition, despite its alleged interest in demilitarization, Sanaa continues to import new weapons from the Czech Republic.

Al Qaeda in Yemen

Yemeni Afghans began setting up training camps in the late 1980s, possibly with the assistance of a tribal patriarch, Tariq al-Fadhi, who helped plan the first Al Qaeda attack in Yemen in 1992. According to one terrorism analyst, bin Laden recognized that Yemen was fertile ground for his network and even considered moving Al Qaeda’s base of operations to Yemen after some 20 Yemeni sheiks met with Al Qaeda operatives in 1997. This base never materialized, but it is still estimated that Yemenis make up the third largest national representation in Al Qaeda, second only to Egyptians and Algerians.¹²

Many journalists point out that bin Laden’s father, Mohammed bin Laden, hailed from a traditional Yemeni village in Hadramawt. But this cannot wholly account for Al Qaeda’s presence in Yemen. A more plausible argument is that Osama bin Laden has been able to maintain a presence there by cultivating ties with several tribes. These contacts, which often amount to financial incentives, have kept tribes on the Al Qaeda bankroll for a decade. Scholar Mark Katz explains that Yemeni tribes have also taken money and assistance from Marxists, Iraqis, and Saudis, among others.¹³ This suggests that the tribes are not necessarily ideologically aligned with bin Laden; they may support him simply because he can bankroll them in ways that Sanaa cannot.

Bin Laden’s message also resonates in Yemen. Bin Laden, according to one CIA analyst, helped found the Islamist-oriented Islah party, provided logistical help to send Yemenis to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, and worked with jihadis to fight the communists of South Yemen. Analysts believe that in the early 1990s an Al Qaeda training camp was built in Mudiyah, a village in Abyan, and that bin Laden sponsored attacks on oil rigs and other strategic assets in Yemen. Of the 1,100 intercepted phone calls made by bin Laden on his satellite phone in the mid-1990s, 221 were made to Yemen. Between 1993 and 1996, bin Laden reportedly shipped loads of

¹²Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2003), p. 129; Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc. Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pp. 175–76; Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 139.

¹³Mark N. Katz, “Breaking the Yemen-Al Qaeda Connection,” *Current History*, Jan. 2003, p. 41.

weapons between Sudan and various tribes in Yemen. Finally, Al Qaeda used Yemen to house some of its business fronts and safe houses, which served as financial, logistical, and passport-forgery centers.¹⁴

By early 1999, bin Laden was reported to have a ceramics manufacturing firm in Yemen. After the 9/11 attacks, three businesses in Yemen's honey industry, including Al-Hamali bakeries and Al-Nur honey, were listed by the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control as fronts to launder terrorist funds.¹⁵ Other fronts undoubtedly remain.

IAA, Local and Global

True to form for an Al Qaeda affiliate, the IAA emerged out of the relatively weak central authority in its host country, beginning with a domestic agenda and only later embracing bin Laden's approach of international terrorism. Over time, the group became increasingly engaged in attacks against foreign targets, but its local attacks never ceased. Thus, the group can still be seen as both provincial and global.

The IAA first started making headlines in 1998, but its antecedents likely date back to 1992. That year, Al Qaeda-affiliated cadres bombed an Aden hotel that was a stopping point for U.S. troops bound for Somalia. The attack was unsuccessful; the U.S. forces had already left the hotel when it took place. Authorities rounded up some twenty jihadis, who claimed to be from the "Osama Group" and the "Islamic Jihad Organization."¹⁶ The IAA did not, however, emerge as a structured Al Qaeda affiliate until the late 1990s. In May–June 1998, the group, led by Zein al-Abidin al-Mihdar (aka Abu al-Hassan), released communiqués criticizing Sanaa's policies and calling for the overthrow of the government. One communiqué threatened that "if the ambassadors of America and Britain do not leave [Yemen], then our time will come soon and the blow will be painful."¹⁷ When the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were attacked in August 1998, the group called the bombers "heroes of the jihad."¹⁸ The group also issued repeated threats

¹⁴ Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002), pp. 112, 126; Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, pp. 12, 139–40.

¹⁵ Simon Reeve, *The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), p. 207.

¹⁶ Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, p. 135. While terror analysts often refer to this as the first-ever Al Qaeda attack, some high-level U.S. officials dispute this. They believe this attack was actually the result of a local land dispute, and completely unrelated to bin Laden's embryonic network. Jan. 8, 2004, U.S. Interview.

¹⁷ "Aden Islamic Army Threatens the American and British Ambassadors if they do not Leave Yemen," Mar. 12, 1999, <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/feat9en.htm>, verified by a senior U.S. official, Washington, D.C., Aug. 13, 2003.

¹⁸ Salim Jiwa, "Terror Targets: A Look at Radical Islamic Groups Targeted by Bush's Order," ABC News Online, Sept. 25, 2001.

against U.S. Ambassador Barbara Bodine via Al Qaeda spokesman Abu Hamza al-Masri (Mustafa Kamel Mustafa) of the Finsbury Park Mosque in London.

During the group's early years, Al-Masri issued most of the IAA's statements, operating under the rather weak terrorism laws of the UK. That country had become an easier operating environment for terrorism in Europe, much the same as Yemen had become in the Middle East. The Finsbury Park Mosque has been host to a number of infamous terrorists, including "shoe bomber" Richard Reid and Zacharias Moussaoui, the "20th hijacker" held in connection with the 9/11 attacks. Al-Masri is now banned from preaching in his mosque and his citizenship has been revoked, but he remains free in London.

Al-Masri's involvement was a harbinger of IAA's growing global ties. The group had been linked to small Al Qaeda training camps and was believed to be providing logistics for Al Qaeda operations, but was soon linked to more high profile incidents.¹⁹ In December 1998, ten suspects possessing large quantities of explosives, in addition to IAA leaflets, wool masks, uniforms, and cosmetics for disguises, were arrested in the Aden and Shibwa governorates.²⁰ According to a senior U.S. official, the plot was organized, funded, and directed by al-Masri, and only a few of the operatives were Yemeni. Authorities were lauded for thwarting these activities, but IAA still managed to pull off a major attack five days later. On December 28, operatives affiliated with al-Masri in London and local IAA cadres kidnapped sixteen Western tourists in the governorate of Abyan. In the subsequent Yemeni rescue mission, four European tourists were killed and one American citizen was wounded. Abu al-Hassan stated that the kidnappings were carried out "for the sake of bin Laden."²¹

At the end of the hostage standoff, Yemeni authorities captured several IAA cadres, including its leader, Abu al-Hassan, who confessed that the group possessed SAM missiles, shells, and anti-tank mines. He admitted that the group was using mobile phones provided by Abu Hamza and that it was planning attacks on Christians during Ramadan and on a hotel in Aden. "Our objective was to hit the Americans."²²

Hassan's group made a plea for their leader's release, then issued a communiqué warning that "if negotiations fail, all foreigners in Yemen from Western ambassadors, experts and doctors to tourists have to leave Yemen. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army will not kidnap them but will kill them." Abu

¹⁹ Interview with senior U.S. official, Washington D.C., Aug. 13, 2003.

²⁰ *Terror in Yemen: Where To?* (Sanaa: 26th September Publications, December 2002), p. 15.

²¹ Jan. 8, 2004, U.S. Interview; B. Raman, "Attack on USS Cole: Background," South Asia Analysis Group, No. 152, Oct. 16, 2000, www.saag.org; Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, p. 200.

²² "Yemen: Report on Confession of Yemeni Kidnapper," *Asb-Sbarq al-Ausat*, Jan. 14, 1999 (FBIS); "Yemen Terrorist Offers Deal to Stop Action," *Asb-Sbarq al-Ausat*, July 27, 1999 (FBIS).

al-Hassan was executed on October 17, 1999; his successor, Hatem bin Fared, was captured. Such successes gave some Sanaa officials an inflated sense of accomplishment and confidence that IAA had been defeated.²³

Although not confident that the IAA had been destroyed, some senior U.S. officials had the sense that it was waning. Specifically, they asserted that the IAA had inflated the number of attacks they took credit for, making it difficult to judge the group's size, capabilities, and scope. For example, it is highly doubtful that IAA caused the downing of a Yemeni military aircraft that killed seventeen officers in August 1999. Still, the IAA was believed to be responsible for bombing a number of local targets, including a church and a hotel. It was thwarted from bombing the U.S. embassy on at least one occasion.²⁴

In January 2000, the IAA adopted a bold new strategy: attacking high-profile U.S. targets. Together with members of the Al Qaeda core, it carried out a failed attempt on the USS *The Sullivans*. Al Qaeda militant Jamal Mohammed al-Badawi and several accomplices loaded a skiff with explosives and aligned the vessel to intersect the destroyer, but then watched the boat sink from shore.²⁵ The CIA, the U.S. embassy, and the Yemeni government were all unaware of this failed plot, which only came to light on October 12, 2000, when IAA and other local Al Qaeda militants used suicide bombers and actually drove a skiff into their target. They attacked the USS *Cole*, an American destroyer, with a powerful boat bomb while the warship refueled in a weakly guarded Aden harbor. The explosion killed seventeen U.S. sailors, injured thirty-nine, and inflicted an estimated \$250 million in damage. Following the attack, Yemeni security arrested six men, all of whom had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets. One of them told officials that he was trained in Al Qaeda's "Jihad Number One" camp in Afghanistan, had fought with Al Qaeda in Bosnia, and was acting on instructions from a high-level Al Qaeda operative named Mohammed Omar al-Harazi.²⁶

The IAA issued a communiqué claiming responsibility for the attack. Two other groups also claimed responsibility (Jaysh Muhammad and the Islamic Deterrence Force), but it was clear that Yemen's Al Qaeda network was to blame.²⁷ Al Qaeda's leadership appeared willing to let IAA take

²³ Raman, "Attack on USS Cole"; "Court Upholds Verdict Against Abu al-Hassan's Successor," *Yemen Times*, Apr. 2–8, 2001; Dhikra Abbas, "Yemeni Aide on Islamic Army, Threats," *al-Majallah*, Nov. 21, 1999 (FBIS).

²⁴ Aug. 13, 2003, U.S. Interview; Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, p. 202; "Islamic Army Suspect Arrested for Aden Blasts: Police," AFP, Jan. 4, 2001.

²⁵ David Stout, "2 Yemeni Fugitives Indicted in Qaeda Attack on U.S.S. Cole," *New York Times*, May 15, 2003.

²⁶ Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.*, p. 168; Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, pp. 192–93.

²⁷ Brian Whitaker, "Yemen Bombers Hit UK Embassy," *Guardian*, Oct. 14, 2000; *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2000*, www.state.gov.

credit for the attack, but evidence suggests that most of the planning, funding, and logistics were not local. Despite indications underscoring Al Qaeda's involvement, Yemeni cooperation in the U.S.-led investigation was slow and begrudging. Some U.S. security officials assert that the Yemeni security apparatus was penetrated by Al Qaeda elements. At the very least, some security men on the Aden harbor may have been forewarned of the attack.²⁸

Tensions between Washington and Sanaa continued through 2000 and 2001. The State Department alleged that Yemen was a safe haven for Al Qaeda affiliated groups, including Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya, and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, as well as core cadres from Al Qaeda itself. The 9/11 attacks also put increased pressure on Yemen, particularly in light of the fact that one of the masterminds was Yemeni national Ramzi Bin al-Shibh. After the 2001 attacks, U.S. officials also established linkages between the twin embassy bombings of 1998 in East Africa, the *Cole* attack, and 9/11. Other leads may have come from the estimated 110 Yemenis imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.²⁹

To make matters worse, Yemen became one of the most active fronts in Al Qaeda's war against the West since 9/11. In April 2002, an explosion rocked the Civil Aviation building in Sanaa. In August 2002, Sanaa authorities discovered large quantities of Semtex explosives hidden among pomegranates.³⁰ It was speculated that the explosives were intended for a foreign target, but the find and subsequent arrests were seen as a domestic event. The most painful blow for Yemen, however, was the October 6, 2002, attack on the *Limburg* in the port of al-Dabbah, which killed one and injured seventeen. Thousands of barrels of oil spilled into Hadramawt's waters. The resulting environmental clean-up operation, tourist cancellations, and drop in port usage crippled the already poverty-stricken country.³¹ The losses prodded Sanaa to engage in increased counterterrorism cooperation with the United States, especially with the CIA and FBI.

Even amid this heightened cooperation, on November 3, 2002, a group of Al Qaeda operatives attempted to shoot down a U.S. oil company helicopter. The group fired two SAM missiles (which missed) and a barrage of automatic gunfire, injuring two people. The next month, a Yemeni militant smuggled a gun into a Baptist-run hospital in the town of Jibla, where he killed three American missionaries and wounded another. In March 2003, on the eve of the U.S. war with Iraq, reports emerged that Islamists in Yemen

²⁸ June 2003 U.S. Interviews.

²⁹ *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2000; Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2001; Terror in Yemen*, p. 63.

³⁰ Susan Schmidt, "Yemen Recovers Huge Cache of Explosives from Blast Site," *Washington Post*, Sept. 11, 2002.

³¹ *Terror in Yemen*, p. 55.

were being actively recruited by Al Qaeda to “conduct suicide attacks and other sabotage against the oil fields outside Iraq.” A few days later, a Yemeni national opened fire on an American, a Canadian, and a Yemeni working on an oil rig east of Sanaa before killing himself.³²

In April, militant Abed Abdul Razak Kamel was arrested on suspicion of being part of an Al Qaeda cell. Days later, a judge was killed in a hand grenade explosion in the Jibla courtroom where Kamel was sentenced to death. In June, Yemeni forces attacked a hideout of the IAA in the mountainous Hattat region where IAA’s first camps were located. During the raid, ten militants were killed and more than 20 arrested. Some twelve more militants were later captured.

With a relatively high number of international attacks to its credit, the once provincial IAA can no longer be seen as a primarily local phenomenon. Rather, this affiliate should be viewed as a loosely constructed Al Qaeda base in Yemen from which large-scale attacks are planned against international and local interests alike.

Counter-Counterterrorism?

After the *Limburg* attack Yemen redoubled its cooperation with British Special Forces, as well as the efforts it had begun in 1996 to deport illegal immigrants and suspected terrorists. Sanaa also expended more resources on programs begun in 2000 to monitor mosques and Islamic organizations, and it launched a public relations campaign that urged clerics to purge extremism and warned the public of terrorism’s cost to the economy. The pinnacle of Yemeni counterterrorism was November 5, 2002, when, based on intelligence from Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, an ensnared mastermind behind the *Cole* attack, the CIA tracked Al Qaeda cadres driving in Marib’s desert region. It launched a hellfire missile on them from a Predator UAV, killing six people, including Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi, a high-level Al Qaeda operative who had taken part in the attack on the *Cole*. Also killed were several IAA cadres and Kamal Derwish, the alleged leader of the “Lackawanna Six,” a Yemeni Al Qaeda cell that was discovered outside of Buffalo, New York in 2002. Still, Sanaa believed that additional high-level Al Qaeda operatives, as well as an estimated 32 IAA militants, remained at large in Yemen. Counterterrorism cooperation therefore continued, yielding a number of arrests, including Fawaz al-Ribeidi and Nasser Megalli, two high-profile Al Qaeda suspects, in April 2003. However, less than a week later, ten *Cole* suspects escaped from jail (one reportedly handed himself over to Yemeni authorities shortly thereafter). Since jailbreaks are almost never reported in the Arab world, the incident raised the question of whether some elements of the security services had allowed it to happen.

³² Ibid., p. 26.

In June, Yemeni forces attacked an IAA hideout in Hattat, with the help of U.S. Special Operations forces, and in September, Sanaa exchanged Bandar bin Abdurrahman al-Gambdi, a top suspect in the May 2003 suicide bombings in Riyadh, for two *Limburg* suspects from Saudi Arabia. Another *Cole* arrest was made in October 2003, and on November 25, 2003, *Cole* perpetrator Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal was apprehended.

That fall Yemen had also made some surprising changes to its counterterrorism policy. In a manner entirely consistent with his style of governance, but contrary to standard counterterrorism practices, President Saleh announced that he would release dozens of militants with links to Al Qaeda as long as they “pledged to respect the rights of non-Muslim foreigners living in Yemen or visiting it.” According to one Yemeni official, the announcement was a means of “feeling out” both the Yemeni public and the United States.³³ By October, Sanaa had moved forward with its plans for amnesty. The prisoners slated for release included a number of Yemenis who were suspected of involvement with Al Qaeda and who had been in jail for up to three years. Others were imprisoned IAA members who had pledged to halt all militant activities. By late November, as many as 146 prisoners suspected of having Al Qaeda links were scheduled to be released.

In public, Yemeni officials insisted that the amnesty would not detract from Yemen’s overall efforts to fight terrorism. In private, some officials explained that the release could be seen within the context of tribal politics; by releasing the “less dangerous” suspects, Sanaa would maintain relations with influential tribes that play a significant role in Yemeni counterterrorism efforts. Officials were also quick to note that the amnesty was the result of increased pressure from nongovernmental organizations accusing Sanaa of human rights violations (many of the suspects had not stood trial).³⁴

According to one Saleh advisor, some twenty prisoners were released by late November. State Department officials believe that none of those granted amnesty had direct links to the *Cole* bombing, the *Limburg* attack, or any other major terrorist operation in Yemen. Rather, they were Islamist sympathizers with only peripheral links to secondary players in Al Qaeda plots. Sanaa also emphasized that the suspects had renounced Islamic violence and even furnished intelligence to Yemeni officials to help thwart terrorist attacks. Officials also noted that the prisoners would not be released entirely on their own recognizance; their families had to sign for them (though Sanaa admitted that it does not have plans—or more likely, the resources—to track their activities).³⁵

In the weeks after Saleh announced the amnesty initiative, more than fifty IAA members from the Hattat region reportedly turned themselves in.

³³ Phone interview with Sanaa official, Nov. 25, 2003. A U.S. State Department spokesman notes that it is unclear whether the U.S. was consulted first; phone interview, Nov. 25, 2003.

³⁴ Phone interview with Saleh advisor, Nov. 25, 2003.

³⁵ Ibid.

Sanaa cited this as an indication that amnesty during times of relative calm is an effective policy, a proposition that can only be proven over time. But the amnesty is a creative attempt to achieve the elusive and delicate balance between human rights and counterterrorism in a region that is too often known for its heavy-handed approach. If Yemen's efforts succeed, other Middle Eastern countries that have detained Al Qaeda suspects should take note—including Egypt, which still holds an estimated 16,000 Islamists in custody, most without due process. Yemen's amnesty is a considerable gamble, however. If the released suspects resort to violence, the initiative will have been at the expense of Yemeni security, which could in turn have an impact on regional and global security.

A Microcosm of Al Qaeda

If Yemen's counterterrorism strategy shifted in fall 2003, so too did Al Qaeda's leadership in Yemen. Yemen appeared to have become a microcosm of Al Qaeda's global presence. Rather than one affiliate, it was reported that several affiliates were working there on behalf of Al Qaeda. Yemeni authorities alerted the United States of a potential new terror threat, imploring U.S. citizens to take exceptional security measures. That warning was followed by a foiled car bomb plot against the British embassy and other Western targets in Sanaa. The plot was attributed to Qaedat al-Jihad, a conglomeration of five international Islamist groups and affiliates of Al Qaeda. One newspaper reported that "the Qaeda of Jihad organization has been strategically restructured, notably with the merging of five groups—Yemeni Jihad, Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, Egyptian Jihad, Organization of Descendants of Companions in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Algerian Al-Dawa Salafi group."³⁶

The coalescence of these affiliates testified to the danger they posed and signaled that new Al Qaeda leaders might be emerging in Yemen. In October 2003, seventeen militants from Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, found with an explosives manual and documents of financial transactions, and jailed. Investigation revealed that they were plotting to attack both embassies and government installations. The group indicated that it was willing to carry out more operations in Yemen and had more than "48 martyrs" at its disposal. The group rejected attempts at mediation.³⁷ The very

³⁶ "U.S. Warns of New Terror Threat in Yemen, Calls for 'Exceptional' Security," AFP, Sept. 29, 2003; "Yemen Foils Attacks on British Embassy," AFP, Dec. 14, 2003; "Militant Groups Merging in Yemen," AFP, Oct. 2, 2003.

³⁷ "World in Brief," *Washington Post*, Oct. 17, 2003; "Yemen Arrests Five Members from Al-Qaeda and Unveils Money Transfers from an Arab African State," *Asb-Sbarq al-Awsat*, Oct. 14, 2003. "Yemen Detains 17 al-Qaida Suspects," UPI, Oct. 16, 2003; "Al-Qaeda Wing Rejects Truce that its Branch Was Offered in Yemen," *al-Hayat*, Oct. 21, 2003.

existence of this new conglomerate of affiliates in Yemen implies that the Yemeni affiliates of Al Qaeda may have metastasized on a local level, just as the larger network does.

Yemen's Challenges in the Future

Yemen's problems with Al Qaeda infiltration will continue unless sensible U.S. policies help push the country in a new direction. Despite significant successes, lawlessness makes counterterrorism operations difficult. Weak central authority is part of the problem, but there are probably other overt reasons for this continued terrorist activity. According to one high-ranking Yemeni official, some 20 percent of the Islah Party has ties with jihadis in other countries, particularly through Sheik Abdulmajeed Az-Zindani, who is known to have connections with Sudan's Hassan at-Turabi and other radicals linked to Al Qaeda. This, of course, is a charge that Islah vehemently denies.³⁸ However, in February 2004, Washington labeled az-Zindani a Specially Designated Terrorist for supporting terrorists and terrorist organizations, adding that he had a "long history of working with bin Laden" as a "spiritual leader," that he helped recruit for Al Qaeda, and that he served as a contact for the Iraqi Ansar al-Islam.³⁹

Islah members have been implicated in other terrorist activities, as well. Sheik Mohammed Ali Hassan Moayad was caught trying to receive funds intended for Al Qaeda during a FBI sting operation in Frankfurt in January 2003. Moayad was tempted to Germany to receive up to \$25 million to finance future Al Qaeda attacks. He allegedly bragged about a prior meeting with bin Laden and promised that any funds he received would go to Al Qaeda.⁴⁰ Since there was no extradition treaty between Germany and Yemen, a German court subsequently handed him to American authorities, who put him on trial in Brooklyn for his activities. Islah holds that Moayad was a pious man who provided alms and food to the poor; Attorney General John Ashcroft calls Moayad's arrest a "severe blow to Al Qaeda."⁴¹

Yemen's tribal culture, the influence of groups like Islah, and the continuing presence of Al Qaeda-affiliated individuals and groups will pose ongoing problems. Because cooperation with the United States is not always supported, Sanaa will likely keep its involvement and its behind-the-scenes

³⁸Interview with Dr. Abdul Hadi al-Hamdani, Sanaa, June 15, 2003; interviews with Mohammed Kahtan, June 10, 2003 and Mohammed al-Yaddoumi, June 15, 2003.

³⁹"United States Designates Bin Laden Loyalist," U.S. Treasury Press Release, Feb. 24, 2004, www.treas.gov.

⁴⁰Peter Finn, "Sting Hints at U.S. Tactics on Terror," *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2003; Dan Eggen, "Cleric Charged with Aiding Al Qaeda; U.S. Says Yemeni Raised More than \$20 Million," *Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 2003.

⁴¹"US Warns German Al Qaeda Extradition May Lead to 'Repercussions' in Yemen," AFP, Nov. 17, 2003; Eggen, "Cleric Charged with Aiding Al Qaeda."

investment in counterterrorism squads quiet. “Remote control” attacks, such as with Predator drones, will likely remain the U.S. strategy of choice. For now, the United States must expand its military cooperation with Yemen to include economic and other assistance while identifying specific counterterrorism measures Sanaa must take. Only closer ties with this complicated country will provide the leverage needed to effect real change.

