

Yemen and the Al Qaeda Pretext: A Closer Look at the War on Terrorism's "New Frontier"

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"Remember, the Al Qaeda that was in a very few countries — and most specifically in Afghanistan in September of 2001 — is now an Al Qaeda that is in about 58, 59 — who knows precisely, but we sort of peg it around 60 countries. It is a global network, which it wasn't." — John F. Kerry, 7 October 2009

If recent experience is anything to go by, the mere mention of any 'Al Qaeda threat' is enough to signal the swift exit of rational thought and/or due regard to definition in Washington. The superior military outfit in history whose sheer might none could aspire to 'equal, let alone surpass', has been madly spooked - as we are led to deduce - by a band of former cave-inhabiting, shoddy-bearded ragtags now transmogrified into a "global network".

The media scene is abuzz once again as spinmeisters tap away in overtime mode to direct world attention to the latest frontier in the so-called Global War on Terrorism: Yemen.



With its fate arguably sealed on Christmas Day following the failed attack by the comically-named “underwear bomber”, the least-developed Gulf state positively checks all the tick-boxes required of a nation for it to qualify for greater US interference – lacking poverty, internally fractured, geopolitically pivotal and fatefully, a nation that can feasibly be associated with a global terror threat. Just weeks earlier, connections to Yemen were apparently uncovered in investigations relating to the Fort Hood shooting.

In between the two incidents, the US military conducted a series of deadly airstrikes having received the go-ahead from Nobel-winner Obama. The target of the attacks (as with the case of routine deadly drone-strikes in north-western Pakistan) was an ethereal Al Qaeda top figure who, unsurprisingly, seems to have escaped unscathed. [1]

Following months of in-house policy talks, top figures in the US administration have added their voices to the mix by underlining the need to confront the threat posed by Al Qaeda in the troubled nation. With the stage seemingly set, and greater US involvement very much in the pipelines, there is a need to plumb through some uncharted territory surrounding the present situation and what it holds for the region as a whole.

Measuring the Al Qaeda Pretext

Obama’s AfPak strategy brought to surface the touchy issue of defining terms previously

assumed to be self-evident such as 'Al Qaeda' and 'Taliban'. Despite Bush-era treatment of these terms as some kind of fixated Platonic archetypes, problems of definition have always been raised by observers and analysts who have cited the misuse of the Al Qaeda pretext in justifying the expanding imperial project, as well as in bolstering instruments of state authority and security in a number of countries. In this regard, the fictitious link tying Iraq to Al Qaeda in the prelude to the war on Iraq represents one of the more obvious examples. Yet, there are a number of other cases in which the same pretext has been falsely employed to serve as a 'welcome!'-sign for direct US involvement.

In his book *'The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa'*, Professor Jeremy Keenan unveiled how the Algerian government theatrically staged operations beginning from 2003 (which it blamed on Al Qaeda), in order to secure US military support. The man running the 'terror show' whose group eventually renamed itself the 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' (AQIM) was in fact an agent of the Algerian secret military intelligence service (DRS); a man operating with the pseudonym, El Para. The Bush administration duly obliged and entered into a marriage of convenience with the Algerian government; a relationship in which both sides, in the words of Professor Keenan, "wanted terrorism in that area".**[2]**

The resource-rich Sahel subsequently became a "swamp of terror" and El Para, whilst still an agent of the DRS, turned into "Bin Laden's right-hand man in the Sahel". Similar blueprints were replicated in nearby Niger and Mali within the context of a wider militarization project in Africa. **[3]** Invented Al Qaeda threats allegedly active in the "swamp of terror" conveniently functioned as "the early seeds" of AFRICOM.

Squarely under the purview of AFRICOM, Yemen seems to be the next country in line; quietly adamant not to lose out on a historic opportunity to shore up its strength and silence all internal dissent by simply throwing up the Al Qaeda card.

Broadening Definitions

In an interview to BBC Arabic, the comments of Yemeni Chief of Staff in the Central Security Forces, Brigadier Yehia Mohammed Abdallah Saleh, were revealing insofar as how he chose to define the nature of the threat: "the problem that Yemen is facing remains with Al Qaeda sympathizers rather than with Al Qaeda itself." He went on to add, "Al Qaeda is trying to weaken Yemen thinking it could operate unchecked if it cooperated with the Houthis to undermine the country". **[4]**

The import of the brigadier's comments is instructive; in addition to being extremely vague, the business of tackling "sympathizers" inherently requires some form of extended commitment. Yet, as the brigadier would no doubt insist, this should be no cause for short-term complacency, for he immediately proceeds to sanctify the ongoing war on Zaydi Houthis by falsely associating it with the wider war on terror - a tactic that is being continually recycled in order to fit newer purposes all around the world.

As one would expect, a brief look at the facts brings forth an entirely different picture. Over the years, the government in Yemen has tried to play it both ways with Al Qaeda. By adopting a strategy of accommodation, and indeed signing a non-aggression pact in 2003, the Yemeni government has in the past solicited the support of Al Qaeda in its fight against the Houthis, as confirmed by counterterrorism expert Michael Scheuer.

In a recent news article that appeared on BBC Arabic, a Houthi official speaking to

correspondent Bob Trevelyan declared that the government's strategy to fight Al Qaeda was bound to fail since it was itself responsible for "sponsor[ing] these movements in the past". [5] Unsurprisingly, such stories or even implicit nuances to that effect are missing altogether in the BBC's English coverage of Yemen - instead, analyses are teeming with talk of a symbiotic relationship between Houthi 'rebels' and Al Qaeda.

For a government that has no qualms with Machiavellian realpolitik and outright deception, one can safely assume that the vocal southern secessionist resurgence will likewise be confronted in the name of counterterrorism. The more pronounced involvement of figures like Tariq Al-Fadhli - a former member of Yemeni president's senior council who also fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan - in the south [6] will turn the "Al Qaeda sympathizers" criterion into quite a useful tool to justify more iron-fist policies towards the region.

At another level, the government's tentative treatment of the Al Qaeda threat is indicative of both the complex social dynamic within the country, as well as the inability of the central government to effectively exert state control. Although a considerable number of Yemenis subscribe to a Wahhabist-Salafist version of Islam, they certainly do not advocate the militaristic outlook that is symptomatic of Al Qaeda.

Growing US involvement or perception of US-client status (as enjoyed by next-door Saudi Arabia) associated with Yemen however, will certainly serve to radicalise great swaths of the Yemeni population, and in turn intensify the nature of the threat from the country. Well aware of this dimension, foreign minister Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi stressed that any direct confrontation with Al Qaeda within Yemen should remain a strictly-Yemeni affair, adding that it is not "in the interests of the United States or western countries to send security forces to Yemen".

The Saudi Connection

It is impossible to speak of an Al Qaeda threat in Yemen without accounting for the role played by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in giving rise to this threat, as well as determining how it is in turn affected by it. In a July testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Brigadier General James Smith - current US ambassador to Saudi Arabia - underlined the need to "bolster Yemen's capacity to defeat violent extremism"; his mention of Yemen, tellingly, came before any mention of Iraq or Syria. [7]

During the 80s and 90s, Saudi Arabia embarked on a project to propagate a strong Wahhabist current in order to establish itself as the paramount power in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Billions upon billions of petrodollars were devoted to this global undertaking in which Yemen, a nation joined to the Saudi kingdom "through historical, ethnic and tribal ties", was certainly not ignored. In Yemen, the kingdom created "a strong Wahhabi current that was politically and ideologically loyal to the ruling al-Saud", as noted by Dr. Mai Yamani, an expert on Saudi Arabia. Earlier in May of last year, Dr. Yamani summarised the present dilemma with the following assessment:

"the two largest countries on the Arabian peninsula - Saudi Arabia, the biggest in terms of landmass and oil wealth, and Yemen in terms of population, are now locked in life-and-death struggles with internal enemies. The paradox is that, though the threat to both countries is the same, each is worsening the outlook for the other by the policies it is pursuing." [8]

As President Ali Abdallah Saleh's control over Yemen falters with popular movements in the

north and south increasingly gaining momentum, the Al-Saud royalty is acutely aware that it would be the first to feel the after-effects of its backfired policy, as it comes under increasing threat from the same quarters it once funded and used to buttress its global standing. The US is likewise very cognisant of this threat, and acknowledges that any destabilization of the kingdom would immediately diminish the empire's regional clout.

In conclusion, the recent focus on Yemen is primarily driven by geostrategic imperatives which revolve around preserving a pro-US configuration of the Middle East. Media hype and sensationalized analysis obscure the underlying dynamics which, in fact implicate the US's closest regional clients most notably, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in engendering the Al Qaeda threat.

Further, the stakes in question for Ali Abdallah Saleh's government are unmistakable: simple old-style survival. With a distinguished heritage in the vocation, the US is thus set to pursue a tradition of bolstering an unpopular, oppressive regime in Yemen. Indeed, Sana'a will be hoping for greater aid and extended commitment from the US (under the cover of the international community), to come out of the London conference called on by British PM Gordon Brown.

As officials from the Yemeni government sing the 'give us more aid, we'll deal with Al Qaeda' tune [9], the message is clear: discreetly strengthen our armed counterterrorism capacity. Not in the least surprising, the head of Commander of Special Operations - the outfit that is responsible for counterterrorism - Ahmed Ali Abdallah Saleh happens to be the son of the Yemeni president. In connection, any international recognition of a vaguely-defined Al Qaeda threat in Yemen will thus provide much needed ammunition to the Yemeni government to silence its internal foes.

For the US, the paramount objective is to secure the surrounding neighbourhood of its prime Gulf client and gradually build a stronger presence in Yemen. The geopolitical prizes on offer are significant: in addition to neighbouring Saudi Arabia, Yemen is the only country from which oil can potentially reach the open seas without passing through either the Strait of Hormuz or the Suez Canal. Should Yemen fall within the orbit of direct US influence, the above factor will ominously reduce the geostrategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz in formulating calculations surrounding any future 'shock and awe'-type strikes on Iran. Further, with a greater presence in Yemen the US will have almost secured the Bab el-Mandeb passage, since Djibouti already hosts a 2,000-man strong AFRICOM base. The only remaining quandary for the US in the war of access to the nerve-centre of global energy supplies will once more leave the Strait of Hormuz and Iran.

In the short-term however, much rests on how the US will act in response to the 'Al Qaeda threat' in Yemen. Indeed, it could be said that Ali Abdallah Saleh's fate is firmly chained to Washington's decisions over the coming months. That perhaps, is in itself revealing as to the present status of regional equations, and how these will in turn pan out.

For individuals and groups concerned with issues of human rights, the most immediate task is to strongly press for a clear, rigid and measurable definition of 'Al Qaeda' and related terms such as 'terrorism' in the upcoming London conference - particularly with relevance to the Yemeni scene - in addition to a clear call for a binding ceasefire to the ongoing war against Yemeni Houthis. Furthermore, any commitment of aid to Yemen (regardless of its nature) must stand up to rigorous standards of transparency; encompassing in this regard, the ability to closely scrutinise how any such aid is (or will be) utilised by the Yemeni

government.

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Notes

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