



Middle East Studies

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Houthi Advances in Yemen Pose Security Dilemma for the U.S.

by Adam C Seitz

In July 2014, the northern Yemeni city of Amran fell to insurgents led by Abdul-Maik al-Houthi. Amran had served as the capital for the elders of the influential Hashid tribal confederation since the 1962 Republican Revolution. Less than two months after the capture of Amran, Houthi militias swept into Sanaa, seizing a number of government buildings and military installations, setting up checkpoints throughout the Yemeni capital, and ultimately forcing the Yemeni government led by President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi to sign the "Peace and Partnership" agreement on September 21, 2014. This in effect created a new political order in Yemen. In the two months following the agreement, the Houthis have captured a number of strategically important cities, including the port city of Hudaydah, and have advanced on a number of others controlled by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its local affiliate Ansar al-Sharia (AAS).

Yemen... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

Why ISIS is More Dangerous than al-Qaeda

by Sebastian Gorka

In the space of just a few months, the jihadi threat group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham)¹ has accomplished more than al-Qaeda did in the thirteen years since the September 11th attacks. It will continue to grow in power and come to pose a direct threat to the United States, unless America guides a regional response and attacks the ideology that drives this jihadist insurgency.

ISIS... (CONTINUED ON PG 3)

MES Notes

Upcoming MES Lecture

On 9 December 2014 Middle East Studies will host Dr. Janet Breslin-Smith to discuss "Perspectives on the ISIL Crisis for Saudi Arabia" as part of the AY14-15 MES Lecture Series "Perspectives on Democracy Promotion and Democratization in the Middle East and North Africa."

Further information about the MES Lecture Series is available at the MES website at <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil> under Affiliate Programs, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu.

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Since 2002, U.S. efforts to disrupt, dismantle and ultimately destroy al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Yemen have relied upon a combination of partnership with the Yemeni military that includes capacity building of Yemeni security forces and U.S. airstrikes. Although the Houthis and the U.S. share a common enemy in AQAP and AAS, this does not equate to a situation in which the enemy of my enemy is my friend. On the contrary, the military and political gains made by the Houthis have created a new set of challenges for counterterrorism efforts in Yemen by the United States and its allies .

As the Houthis continue to advance on areas that are controlled by or are considered safe havens for AQAP, the United States remains actively engaged with AQAP, launching drone strikes and aiding in raids by Yemeni security forces. While drone strikes have been an effective tool in disrupting AQAP's ability to plan and execute attacks against the U.S. and its allies, these same tactics may now inadvertently aid a group that has been quite outspoken in its opposition to U.S. policies in Yemen. "Death to America and Curse to the Jews" is a common chant of Houthi militants and their supporters.

Beyond their anti-American rhetoric, the Houthis recent political and tactical successes are a great cause for concern for the Saudi government. In March 2014, the Saudi government labeled the group a terrorist organization. Many Saudi policymakers view the Houthis as a link in the chain of Iranian encirclement with Iran's reach already firmly established in Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus. Recent statements by some Iranian officials have only increased Saudi concerns of a Houthi-Iran alliance. Following the successes of the Houthis in late September, Ali Reza Zakani, a member of the Iranian Parliament and advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, boasted that "three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian Revolution" with the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, on its way to becoming the fourth.¹ Similarly, Ali Akbar Velayati, former Iranian foreign minister and foreign policy advisor to Khamenei, expressed his hope that "the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group would play the same role in Yemen as Hezbollah does in Lebanon."² Head of the foreign affairs committee on Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, Abdullah Al-Askar, responded to the situation in Yemen, stating that "Sanaa cannot be left in the hands of the Houthis and the Iranians."³

The fall of Amran and Sanaa to the Houthis has dealt a substantial blow to Saudi influence in Yemen, and has left Riyadh in search of new alliances. The Saudi government is looking to rebuild a coalition that can perform the role the Hashids had previously played, which includes countering Houthi advances, and by extension the perceived threat of Iranian encirclement. This may well lead to Saudi policies that include supporting political and tribal elites, military factions, and militias with ties to AAS and/or AQAP. Such a scenario would greatly affect future U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen.

The political and security environment in Yemen is changing rapidly, raising a number of important questions for U.S. policymakers. What effects are Houthi gains having on the threat perceptions and calculations of regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Iran? How are gains by the Houthis impacting the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen? And ultimately, how can the U.S. balance its response to the potential long-term challenges associated with the Houthis ascent with its efforts to simultaneously combat the more immediate threat posed by AQAP? Quite the dilemma.

Yemen Notes:

- ¹ "Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution," *Middle East Monitor*, September 27, 2014.
- ² David Hearst, "Blowback in Yemen: Houthi Advance is a Saudi Nightmare," *Yemen Times*, October 23, 2014.
- ³ Sharif Nashashibi, "Grandstanding over Yemen may backfire on Iran," *The National*, October 28, 2014.

Despite all of the above, the threat posed by al-Qaeda pales in comparison to that posed by its off-shoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, which recently declared the establishment of a new caliphate and has, as a result, changed its name to the Islamic State.

How do I know that ISIS is a greater threat today than al-Qaeda? Here are just four reasons:

1 - ISIS has capabilities that exceed even the wildest dreams of the original founders of al-Qaeda. After capturing the city of Mosul and raiding the local government coffers, it now has over \$400 million at its disposal. According to the official 9/11 Commission, the original 2001 attacks only cost al-Qaeda \$500,000. ISIS has sufficient funds to conduct at least 800 9/11-type attacks. Add to that all the latest U.S. military hardware it has captured and the older Syrian Scud missile it has paraded openly for all the world to see in October, it is clear ISIS and al-Qaeda are in totally different leagues.

2 - Although al-Qaeda was sheltered by the fundamentalist Taliban government in Afghanistan—with Osama bin Laden strategically ensuring that his commander's daughters married into Taliban families—as an organization, al-Qaeda never controlled a whole country. With the Blitzkrieg assault of ISIS fighters capturing city after city in Iraq and then declaring a new caliphate, ISIS is on the cusp of functioning as a de facto country, a Jihadi Nation. Al-Qaeda most often acted like a terrorist group and less often as an insurgency capable of overtaking a whole country. ISIS, however, is a full-fledged insurgency that with its territorial gains is on the brink of functioning as a quasi-state. Already it controls territory equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom.

3 - Al-Qaeda was predominantly successful in bringing Arab Muslims from the Middle East to fight in wars in their own region or in South Asia. Unclassified reports and ISIS's own videos confirm that ISIS is having unprecedented success in attracting Muslim men from the West to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. These young men—

if they survive the current fight—will likely return back home to America, the UK, or elsewhere in the West, as hardened jihadis skilled in infantry tactics and in employing improvised explosive devices.

4 - Bin Laden and the current leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, always understood the importance of propaganda and information warfare, especially after the American jihadi Anwar al-Awlaki took over editorship of *Inspire* magazine. However, they never came close to the sophistication and media savvy of ISIS with its whirlwind establishment of a global social media presence. Not only is ISIS filming and distributing the standard jihadi footage of its vicious attacks and the mass murders of its prisoners, more importantly, it is disseminating more subtle and softer narratives via social media and other channels in ways that al-Qaeda never did.

For all these reasons, and many more, ISIS poses a significantly bigger threat than al-Qaeda ever did and not only to Shia-controlled states like Iraq or Syria. ISIS has made its plan clear. It is reestablishing the theocratic empire of Islam, the caliphate, which was dissolved after WWI in 1924, by the secularizing president of the new Republic of Turkey, Kemal Ataturk. ISIS is driven by an ideology that is absolutist and global.

After taking out the "Near Enemy" in Syria and Iraq, they wish to kill other apostates, others they deem to be false Muslims, be it King Abdullah II of Jordan, or the new president of Egypt, retired General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has vowed to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood, the ideological cousin of ISIS and al-Qaeda. Then they will target the "Far Enemy", the United States and its allies. Theirs is a totalitarian ideology, as universalist and absolute as anything Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin came up with, albeit with holy sanction and a promise of salvation.

MES Notes (cont.)

13 November 2014

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "ISIL: A New Emerging Security Paradigm in the Middle East : What Went Wrong?" to Headquarters Group, I MEF, Camp Pendleton, CA.

13 November 2014

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Understanding Iran's Religion, Culture and Politics" to Headquarters Group, I MEF, Camp Pendleton, CA.

So before victorious American-born jihadis return home to the U.S. to kill infidels here, we need a plan to destroy the caliphate. The response should leverage America's unique position as a leader and the investments we have made over the years in government and military institutions in allied Muslim countries. Since the 1970s, and far more intensively after 9/11, the U.S. has built very strong ties with the militaries of Jordan and Egypt, amongst others. At the same time, there is a force in Iraq already, the Kurdish Peshmurga, which has highly disciplined fighters who hold no affection for the jihadists. Together, these Arab and Muslim forces should be brought together with American guidance to rout the forces of ISIS.

We do not necessarily need another large-scale U.S. deployment of troops. This is not WWII or Korea. This is, in fact, irregular warfare (what the Marine Corps calls "small wars"). These types of messy wars are not won by Americans on the frontlines. What we need to do it to get back to what really works in foreign lands whose governments we wish to assist and who are threatened by an enemy we share. We should not have Americans fight that fight; instead, the local forces should with the assistance and guidance of a small number of soldiers or Marines trained exactly for such missions.

At the same time we must totally reorient America's national security focus. We must stop concentrating on one organization—al-Qaeda. It is not about one group or another. The threat emanates from the ideology of global jihad. Whoever supports or acts upon that ideology is a threat to America and its values, be it ISIS in Iraq or Syria, Hamas in Gaza, or a U.S. Army Major in Fort Hood. Any group whose religious beliefs countermand the Constitution of the United States is an enemy. Period.

The stakes are the highest possible. The conflict is between a world led by religious extremists in which the unbeliever is enslaved or murdered versus a world in which the values of 1776 are protected and can flourish.

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iSIS Notes:

¹ Before Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared the re-establishment of the caliphate and the change of his group's name to simply the Islamic State, the organization called itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS and not ISIL). This name in its original form is significant since Islamic eschatology sees the region of al-Sham as not simply the geographic area of the Levant, but also as the site of the 'Final Jihad' before Judgement Day. This means that those who fight in this 'Holy War' are qualitatively better than all previous jihadists from other theaters such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya. The special status of this conflict zone helps to explain the enormous number of Western fighters recruited by ISIS/IS (15,000-plus according to latest UN figures).

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