



AL-QAEDA FIGHTING THE HOUTHIS IN YEMEN

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ABSTRACT

A new war has started in Yemen after Houthi rebels took control of the capital, Sanaa. Al-Qaeda is leading this new war against the Shia Houthis. The chaos in Yemen is a golden opportunity for AQAP to capture territories and extend its influence in the country, just as ISIS did in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. and its allies in the region have to return stability to Yemen and prevent it from turning into an Iranian proxy or a Sunni Jiahdi – Salafi stronghold (a new Islamic State).

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Al-Qaeda Fighting the Houthis in Yemen

Dr. Shaul Shay

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A new war has started in Yemen after Houthi rebels took control of the capital, Sanaa. Al-Qaeda is leading this new war against the Shia Houthi with support from some of the defeated government forces and Sunni tribes. Al-Qaeda views Shiite Muslims as heretics, like the Houthis. Since July 2014, Al-Qaeda has moved into provinces where they had little presence beforehand, in order to counter Houthi forces spreading across the north. Al-Qaeda and the Houthis have been clashing for the past month in two Northern provinces, Jawf and Amran.

A statement allegedly issued by Al-Qaeda called on Yemen's Sunnis to take up arms against the Shiite Houthi group, which recently wrested control of most state institutions in Sanaa.¹

"Sunnis, take up arms, take the path of struggle and know that your rights are only attained by the gun," Al-Qaeda purportedly said in the statement. According to Al-Qaeda, it has already prepared itself to defend the Sunnis. The group lashed out at the Houthi leadership, accusing it of destroying mosques and burning religious books. It also accused Houthi militants of carrying out a "Persian" plot in Yemen.²

Jalal BelEidi, an Al-Qaeda leader, complained in a video that the government had given Houthis free rein over much of northern Yemen in exchange for their political support at the expense of the country's Sunni Muslim majority.

"Our fighters have entered Sanaa and we are waiting for this battle. Our fight will be against both the Houthis and the government." he said in the video.³

Al-Qaeda seems to be implementing a threat that it issued after Houthis took control of Sanaa, in which it vowed to cut off the heads of Houthis and tear apart their bodies.

¹ Ali Oweida, Qaeda allegedly urges Yemen's Sunnis to fight Houthis, Anadolu Agency, September 24, 2014.

² Ibid.

³ Maria Abi-Habib in Beirut and Hakim Almasmari in San'a, Yemen Al Qaeda Militants Flow Into Yemen's Capital, Yemen Fox, September 15, 2014.

addition, scores of al Qaeda militants have moved into Sanaa in an attempt to exploit the swelling political unrest and to confront the Houthis.

Scores of Houthi militants were killed and injured when an Al-Qaeda suicide bomber targeted a Houthi rally in downtown Sanaa on October 16, 2014. According to the Public Health and Population Ministry, around 47 Houthis were killed and more than 70 others were injured in the suicide bombing near Altahrir Square. The bombing occurred near the Central Bank of Yemen at a time when Houthis were still in control of the capital.⁴

The battle in Al-Baida and Mareb Provinces

Since October 1, 2014, Al-Qaeda killed several hundred Houthis in different attacks. Al-Baida and Mareb Provinces in the east and southeast of the country are where Al-Qaeda is most active, and Al-Qaeda killed about 30 Houthi followers in these two provinces by carrying out suicide bombings, kidnappings and ambushes.⁵

Another Sunni group operating against the Houthis is the Al-Qaeda affiliated Ansar al-Sharia. Ansar al-Sharia has carried out numerous attacks on military and civilian installations of the US-allied Yemeni government. But the group, which adheres to an austere brand of Sunni Islam that views Shi'ites as heretics, has turned its attention to the Houthis who have emerged as a dominant political force since the 2012 uprising that overthrew President Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁶ At least eighteen people were killed and over fifty more were injured in a car bombing near the Al-Jafra Hospital in Mareb. Hours after the bombing, Ansar al-Sharia said in a statement on its Twitter account that it had carried out the attack, which was meant to target the Houthis that had occupied the hospital in Mareb and turned it into a base for its operations. Ansar al-Sharia said that it carried out a similar attack on the Houthis in its northern stronghold of Saada Province, in which dozens of people were killed or wounded.⁷

Fighting between AQAP and Houthis has continued to take place in Rada'a city, Al-Baida Province, since October 15, 2014. The fighting was triggered by the killing of two Houthis and the wounding of a third. One of the victims was Ahmed Idris, a Houthi

⁴ Scores dead after bombings against Houthi militants, soldiers in Yemen, Yemen Post, October 9, 2014.

⁵ Nasser Arrabyee, Yemen's crisis deepens, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue No.1216, 2 October, 2014.

⁶ Sana'a on edge as al-Qaeda attacks Shiite rebel group, Yemen Fox, September 29, 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

leader. In retaliation for these attacks, Houthis bombed the house of Abdulkareem Al-Basiri, a leading AQAP figure in the city. Suspected AQAP supporters then destroyed three houses allegedly belonging to Houthis in Rada'a's city center. At least 12 people have been killed in the fighting between Houthis and AQAP in Radda.⁸

Dhaifalla al-Shami, Head of the Media Department in the Houthis' Political Office, confirmed that fighting took place in Rada'a city and that Houthis were killed. He added that Special Security Forces fought alongside the Houthis.⁹

An AQAP member in Rada'a city said that "Houthis are the ones who escalated the situation by bombing Al-Basiri's house, which made us respond by blowing up three houses and killing six Houthis. We will show no mercy, we will kill them in the streets of Rada'a, we will not give up even if the state fights with them. We control the city and the army is neutral—except for the Special Security Forces who are supporting Houthis," the source said.¹⁰

On October 16, 2014 a convoy of Houthi fighters trying to reach the town of Radda in Al-Baida Province, 130km southeast of Sanaa, was blocked by fighters from Ansar al-Sharia. At least 10 people have been killed in fighting.¹¹

On October 27, 2014 Houthis seized Manaseh and Isbeel after warplanes, including US drones, carried out dozens of airstrikes against AQAP. Two days later AQAP militants, supported by local tribesman, regained parts of the Manaseh area in Yemen's central province of Baida. Scores of Houthis were killed, injured and captured in the AQAP counter attack.¹²

Ibb Province - On October 21, 2014, the Houthis' expansion in Ibb Province was challenged by AQAP, supported by local armed tribesmen who engaged in clashes in different areas of Ibb.¹³

Hodeida Province - The Houthis gained control over Hodeida on October 14, 2014. On November 2, 2014, AQAP seized control of Jabal Ras, a strategically important district in

⁸ Houthi and al-Qaeda fighters clash in Yemen, Al Jazeera, October 17, 2014.

⁹ Ali Ibrahim Al Moshki, Alleged Houthi-AQAP clashes in Al-Baida, Yemen Times, October 16, 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Houthi and Al-Qaeda fighters clash in Yemen, Al Jazeera, October 17, 2014.

¹² Tribes regain parts of Manaseh after battles with Houthi militants, Yemen Post, October 27, 2014.

¹³ AQAP, Houthis clash in Ibb, The Yemen Times, October 21, 2014.

Hodeida Province as it has mountains that overlook several neighboring districts.¹⁴

The political crisis

President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, under pressure from massive pro-Houthi demonstrations in Sanaa, signed a deal with the Houthi leadership aimed at ending the tension in and around the capital.

The deal calls for the formation of a new government, the appointment of a nonpartisan prime minister, and the appointment of a Houthi adviser to the president. However, despite having signed the agreement, Houthi fighters are still in control of Sanaa.

President Hadi nominated Dr. Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak as Prime Minister and ordered him to form a new government but the Houthi militant group and the General People's Congress rejected him on the ground that the new premier was not selected in accordance with consensual standards of Yemeni factions.

In light of this, Dr. Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak resigned and, in his letter to president Hadi, he wrote that he declined to accept the position in order to avoid causing a rift among the Yemeni people.¹⁵

The Houthis are not content to form a new government, as they said at the beginning of their uprising two months ago; they want to establish an Iranian-supported Shia state.

Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates seem to be confused by what is happening in Yemen. They wanted to get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood (the Houthis' main enemy), but they do not want the Houthis to expand their influence.

The defeated military and tribal leaders of Yemen's largest Islamic party, Islah (the Yemen Muslim Brotherhood), have no option now but to use Al-Qaeda to take revenge on the Houthis.

The Houthis accused defeated General Ali Mohsen of turning to Al-Qaeda to fight against them. Although General Mohsen told the media that he is now in Saudi Arabia, the Houthis claim that he is still somewhere in Yemen establishing a branch of the Islamic State group to confront them. Inside Sanaa, Houthi fighters took control over all luxury

¹⁴ [Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki](#), AQAP controls district in Hodeida, The Yemen Times, November 3, 2014.

¹⁵ Newly appointed PM in Yemen asks to be relieved, Yemen Post, October 9, 2014.

homes and business centers owned by fugitive General Mohsen, in addition to his military base, the 1st Armored Division.

The head of the National Security Agency, Ali al-Ahmadi, was one of the main targets of Houthi fighters inside Sanaa. Three men were killed and four others were injured in clashes between al-Ahmadi's guards and Houthi fighters at the gate of al-Ahmadi's home.

The Houthis want their followers and friends released from the state intelligence prison, including Iranian and Lebanese prisoners. Due to this pressure, two Iranians and eight Yemenis were released despite the fact that they were all tried and convicted of spying for Iran. They were arrested last year along with two Iranian ships (the Jihan 1 and Jihan 2), which were laden with smuggled weapons.

On October 31, 2014 a broad gathering called “The Extensive Consultative Meeting of Yemen’s Dignitaries and Seniors” was held in the Sana’a and attended by nearly 3,000 dignitaries from across the country. The meeting set a 10-day deadline for a new technocratic government to be formed, as stipulated in the UN-brokered deal made on September 21.

“President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi has a 10-day chance to form the [new] government, otherwise a call for a national council and for forming a national government with members of Ansarulla [the Houthi group],” said Tribal Sheikh Dhaifullah Rassam, head of the Houthi-linked Tadamon Tribal Council.¹⁶

Yemeni factions finalized the signing of an agreement on November 1, 2014, authorizing transition President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the new Prime Minister, Khalid Bahah, to form a new government of technocrats. The agreement was reached under UN sponsorship.¹⁷

Summary

When the Houthis unexpectedly flooded into Sana’a and took it over in September 2014, the military appeared to have stood down and thrown President Mansour Hadi to them. The Houthis rejected Mansour Hadi’s selection for a new prime minister and

¹⁶ Mohammed Kalfood, President faces a 10 day ultimatum, Yemen Observer, November 1, 2014.

¹⁷ Factions authorize Yemen President, Premier to form government, Yemen Post, November 1, 2014.

seem to be taking over policing in the capital.

The Houthis have taken control of eight Yemeni provinces since they signed a peace and national partnership agreement with other factions. A spokesperson for the group recently said it had seized the cities in coordination with commanders of Yemeni army and security services and foreign embassies. Most of the seizures occurred smoothly without resistance from local residents or action from the army, a matter that makes collusion very possible.¹⁸

A source from the Ministry of Interior said that a decision was made by the Supreme Security Committee to induct 20,000 Houthis into the military. The decision was a response to Abdulmalik al-Houthi's demand to recruit these militias in the military and security apparatus in return for the withdrawal of his forces from Sana'a.¹⁹

It is unlikely that the largely Sunni south will accept a government and military dominated by the Houthis. These developments could cause a Sunni – Shia conflict and another north-south split in Yemen. External forces are already involved in supporting their allies in Yemen- Iran the Houthis and Saudi Arabia the central government and the Sunni parties.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, is considered the terror network's most capable wing in terms of ability to launch local, regional and international attacks.

The chaos in Yemen is a golden opportunity for AQAP to capture territories and extend its influence in the country just as the Islamic State did in Iraq and Syria. In 2011, AQAP captured the city of Zinjibar and it took Yemeni forces, backed by the U.S., more than one month to break its hold.²⁰

The U.S. and its allies in the region have to return stability to Yemen and prevent Yemen from turning into an Iranian proxy or a Sunni Jihadi – Salafi stronghold (a new Islamic State).

¹⁸ Tribes regain parts of Manaseh after battles with Houthi militants, Yemen Post, October 27, 2014.

¹⁹ [Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki](#), AQAP controls district in Hodeida, The Yemen Times, November 3, 2014.

²⁰ Maria Abi-Habib in Beirut and Hakim Almasmari in San'a, Yemen Al Qaeda Militants Flow Into Yemen's Capital, Yemen Fox, September 15, 2014.

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica 2001

