

An Overview of Al-Qaeda in Yemen

This document summarizes a number of articles and new material which appeared in the Arab media at the end of 2011. These articles brought the following points to light:

- ◆ Al-Qaeda's upsurge occurred at the same time as the decline of Yemen's central government, an increase in opposition forces, and increased laxness in general security in Yemen.
- ◆ Ansar al-Shariah, which is tied to Al-Qaeda in Yemen, now controls a number of regions in Southern Yemen: the cities of Azan and Habban in Shabwa Governorate; most of Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan Governorate; and additional areas in Shabwa and Abyan Governorates. These two provinces are the organization's strongholds in Yemen.
- ◆ Al-Qaeda has been fighting protracted battles against the Yemeni army for several months. It has a large number of fighters and is entrenched in city centers. This pattern of behavior differs from Al-Qaeda's image as a small terrorist organization that holes up in mountains and caves to which access is difficult, out of fear of the Yemeni forces. In provinces where the government has strong control, Al-Qaeda intends to continue with its previous practice of using sleeper cells to perpetrate terrorist attacks.
- ◆ In addition to fighting the Yemeni army, Al-Qaeda carries out various activities in place of the government, in those areas which are under its control: protecting the inhabitants' personal security, aiding the needy, maintaining infrastructure, conducting criminal trials (obviously in accordance with Islamic religious law [shari'a]), and establishing a media and propaganda arm.
- ◆ Al-Qaeda obtains boatloads of arms and activists from Somalia, and is recruiting a significant number of activists, for what appears to be expansion of armed conflict with the Yemeni army and security forces.

A UN Observer in Yemen Reports: The Opposition and Al-Qaeda Control about One-third of the Provinces in Yemen

On 23 December 2011, the Saudi Arabian newspaper *Al-Medina* reported that the UN observer in Yemen, Jamal bin Amar, who summarized events in Yemen for the Security Council, stated that six of 18 provinces were now in the hands of the opposition or Al-Qaeda, and that there had been phenomenal development in the organization and its allies. He added that Al-Qaeda was not only calling for jihad, but that it had also "adopted a discourse on the suffering of the people in the south, which is great". He also reported that the battles between Al-Qaeda and the army in Zinjibar, the capital of the Abyan Governorate, were continuing.¹

Al-Wasat: Al-Qaeda Changes Its Modus Operandi: Controlling Large Geographic Areas and Tending to the Needs of Inhabitants, Whilst Continuing to Fight in Abyan and Shabwa Governorates and to Perpetrate Terrorist Attacks in Provinces That Are Under Government Control

On December 21, 2011, the Web site of the Mareb Press quoted an article written by Abd Al-Razzaq Al-Jamal, which was originally published in the Yemeni newspaper *Al-Wasat*. The article described the situation of Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen. According to the article, Ansar al-Shariah had reached the Habban District of Shabwa Governorate, and had been running the daily affairs of the city of Azan in Shabwa Governorate for several months. The article also reported that fighting had again broken out in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan Governorate, after a certain period of calm that began with the Yemeni army's declaration that it had entered the city, and after it had entrenched itself in the eastern part of the city but had failed to progress toward the center of the city to expel Ansar al-Shariah fighters.

According to the article, it would appear that the organization is trying to expand the areas under its control and that more and more activists are joining its ranks. The article also reported that Ansar al-Shariah explained its presence in Habban by saying that it was needed there to protect residents from robbers. In recent weeks,

¹ <http://www.al-madina.com/node/346715> (Arabic).

Ansar al-Shariah had secured the main roads among the Shabwa, Abyan, and Hadhramaut Governorates, due to a significant rise in highway robberies. A number of districts in Shabwa Governorate had asked Ansar al-Shariah to increase its presence, given that it had proven its ability to maintain security in Azan. However, the members of the organization were in no hurry to comply with these requests, fearing a lack of support from the local population.

In Azan, Ansar al-Shariah had begun broadcasting radio programs, including Islamic songs and lectures on Jihad, as well as a news program broadcast every ten days, which reports the organization's activities in Abyan and Shabwa Governorates, as part of its efforts to develop its media and propaganda system.

The article explained that, contrary to the past, Al-Qaeda in Yemen is no longer a group of activists hiding in mountain caves, but rather is now composed of thousands of fighters and da'wa [proselytizing] preachers, who conduct the people's daily affairs just as if the organization were an elected authority. In the writer's opinion, there are not enough caves in Yemen for all of these activists, such that Al-Qaeda could not return to its previous form. It is this that has spawned the idea of seizing additional areas, among which the fighters could move about freely, should they encounter difficulties in one area. The article also envisaged that, when the Yemeni regime falls, Al-Qaeda will have to continuously fight the new regime, whose leaders – who are being pressured by external elements to fight Al-Qaeda – the organization calls "the new collaborators". Since Al-Qaeda is well aware of this eventuality, it is not waiting for the regime to fall, but is acting now to expand its infrastructure and areas of activity. In addition to the areas which Al-Qaeda officially controls (i.e. Abyan and Shabwa Governorates), it also maintains a presence in other areas in the form of "sleeper cells", which could be activated to relieve the pressure that might be brought to bear on the organization (if a new regime were established in Yemen, which would fight the organization even more aggressively). The writer stated that Al-Qaeda had already tried this tactic in the Lahij District and in the city of 'Aden, when the Yemeni army was bombing the organization in Abyan. Underlying this modus operandi is the need to create an equation with the future regime in Yemen, whereby if the Yemeni regime threatens the regions controlled by Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda will attack those areas under the regime's control. The article cited Sana'a and 'Aden as examples of the latter.

The areas under the control of Ansar Al-Shariah are of great importance, because Yemen's oil and gas reserves are situated there and in the surrounding areas. Ansar al-Shariah may use this as a bargaining chip with the future Yemeni government, if the latter tries to change its policies in the regions controlled by the organization. The article also explained that expelling Ansar al-Shariah from these areas would not be an easy task for the government, even if it were to enlist other elements in its campaign against the organization, such as the Muslim Brotherhood youth, who also have a large presence in Shabwa and Abyan. The article further contended that reports of the number of casualties among the ranks of Al-Qaeda from its battles against the Yemeni defense forces were exaggerated and that, given the army's operative capabilities, a campaign to free a governorate from Al-Qaeda could last a number of years.²

Recruiting and Training Activists from Provinces Proximate to the Areas Under Al-Qaeda's Control, and the Arrival of Fighters from Somalia: A Sign of Expansion of the Area of Conflict in the Future

On 29 December 2011, the Web site of the Yemen Press reported that Al-Qaeda was in the process of unprecedented recruitment in Abyan Governorate and was bringing in activists from other regions – Shabwa, Marib, Al-Jawf, Al-Baydha and Hadhramaut – as part of what appears to be preparation for a large-scale attack in the area, and whilst taking advantage of the chaos in Yemen.

According to the report, the organization is recruiting new fighters and is erecting training camps in the Lodar District and on the outskirts of Zinjibar, which is almost completely under its control. More than 1,500 recruits have recently arrived in the area, in addition to weapons, which were unloaded from Somali boats. Somali activists, who were on the boats as well, also infiltrated the province. The report stated that the fighting between the organization and the army could even reach the city of 'Aden.³ This information corroborates previous reports in the Yemeni press

² The original report appeared in the Yemeni newspaper *Al-Wasat*. Taken from the Mareb Press news Web site: http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=38924 (Arabic).

³ <http://yemen-press.com/news5150.html> (Arabic).

regarding the arrival of hundreds of Somali activists to fight alongside Ansar al-Shariah.⁴

In the Areas Under Its Control, Al-Qaeda Serves as the Executive and Judicial Authority

Items available through new media such as YouTube indicate that Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen is carrying out activities other than jihad, such as aiding the needy, repairing generators, and supplying electrical transformers. The logo stamped on these videos shows that they are distributed by the Madad communications agency, which functions under the auspices of Ansar al-Shariah.⁵

On 14 December 2011, *Aden Al-Ghad* reported that Ansar al-Shariah had arrested 15 youths in the city of Jaar in Abyan Governorate for watching pornographic films on their mobile phones. Some of the accused were arrested inside Internet cafes. The local inhabitants are afraid that Ansar al-Shariah will cut off the hands and feet of the accused, as part of its implementation of Islamic religious law [shariah].⁶

Summary

In recent months, there has been a change in the modus operandi of Al-Qaeda in the Yemeni arena. From being a terrorist organization whose activists hide from the authorities in outlying areas, Al-Qaeda in its new form – Ansar al-Shariah – has become a ruling authority in and of itself, which takes on the societal tasks usually executed by the government. At the same time, it continues to fight, face to face, against the Yemeni army and security forces, in battles that deviate from the pinpoint attacks usually associated with the organization.

This change in Al-Qaeda's modus operandi comes at a time of weakening government control over areas in which Al-Qaeda is active, in particular, and over all of Yemen, in general, and proves that Al-Qaeda has adapted to the new political and military reality. Al-Qaeda's flexibility is reflected in its having changed from a terrorist organization that only perpetrates militant attacks, to a hybrid organization

⁴See the Web site Al-Siyasa: <http://www.al-seyassah.com/AtricleView/tabid/59/smld/438/ArticleID/153461/reftab/36/Default.aspx> (Arabic).

⁵<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MsC6pc-9Rg>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElouxPXIIyI&feature=related> (both in Arabic).

⁶ <http://adenalghad.net/news/5844.htm> (Arabic).

that carries out both da'wa [proselytizing] and jihad activities, and that operates within the civilian population to ensure the safety of the areas under its control, and as a means of strengthening support for it and expanding its circle of recruits.