

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

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# Resolving the Conflict in Yemen: **U.S. Interests, Risks, and Policy**

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Senator Corker and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the ongoing war in Yemen. Unfortunately, I do not see a way that this conflict can be resolved any time soon. Yemen is rife with internal divisions, which are exacerbated by the proxy war being waged by several actors. Arab states, Iran, and others see Yemen as a key battleground in their contest for regional power. In addition, al Qaeda has taken advantage of the crisis to pursue its chief objective, which is seizing territory and building an emirate inside the country.

I discuss these various actors in my written testimony below and look forward to answering your questions.

**The Iranian-backed Houthi offensive has significantly undermined U.S. counterterrorism efforts.**

Governance in Yemen has been a longstanding problem. But the Houthi offensive in late 2014 knocked President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi from power at a time when the U.S. was counting on his government to act as a vital counterterrorism partner.

There is a debate over how close the Houthis and Iran really are. Some have argued that the Houthis should not be thought of as an Iranian terror proxy, such as Hezbollah. While this accurate – the Houthis have their own culture and traditions – there is no question that Iran and the Houthis are allies. And it is in Iran’s interest to work with the Houthis against Saudi-backed forces in Yemen, while also encouraging Houthi incursions into the Saudi kingdom.

The U.S. government has long recognized Iran as one of the Houthis’ two key backers. (The other being former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his network, which is discussed below.) In its Country Reports on Terrorism 2012, the State Department noted:<sup>1</sup>

Iran actively supported members of the Houthi tribe in northern Yemen, including activities intended to build military capabilities, which could pose a greater threat to security and stability in Yemen and the surrounding region. In July 2012, the Yemeni Interior Ministry arrested members of an alleged Iranian spy ring, headed by a former member of the IRGC.

That warning proved to be accurate, as the Houthis made significant gains just over two years later. The U.S. and its allies have intercepted multiple Iranian arms shipments reportedly intended for the Houthis.<sup>2</sup> And senior U.S. officials have repeatedly referenced Iran’s ongoing assistance. Late last year, *Reuters* reported that “Iran has stepped up weapons transfers to the Houthis,” including “missiles and small arms.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview,” *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*, May 30, 2013. (<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209985.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> See: “U.S. Navy says it seized weapons from Iran likely bound for Houthis in Yemen,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2016. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-yemen-arms-idUSKCN0X12DB>)

<sup>3</sup> Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons supply to Yemen's Houthis via Oman – officials,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX>)

In September 2015, then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter listed America's "core interests in the region." Among them, according to Carter, was "supporting Saudi Arabia in protecting its territory and people from Houthi attacks, and supporting international efforts to prevent Iranian shipments of lethal equipment from reaching Houthi and Saleh-affiliated forces in Yemen."<sup>4</sup> The Houthis have responded by launching missiles at American ships, as well as ships operated by other countries.

### **Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his supporters have worked to undermine President Hadi's's government.**

Former President Saleh and his son have allied with the Houthis to thwart any chance of having a stable political process inside Yemen. The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Saleh and two Houthi military commanders in 2014, describing them as "political spoilers."<sup>5</sup> Saleh became "one of the primary supporters of violence perpetrated by" the Houthis as of the fall of 2012, and has provided them with "funds and political support."<sup>6</sup> Then, in April 2015, Treasury sanctioned Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Saleh.<sup>7</sup> The junior Saleh was commander of Yemen's Republican Guard, but was removed from that post by Hadi. Still, Ahmed Ali Saleh "retained significant influence within the Yemeni military, even after he was removed from command." And he has "played a key role in facilitating the Houthi military expansion."

### **Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is attempting to build an Islamic state in Yemen.**

Al Qaeda is working to build Islamic emirates in several countries and regions, including Afghanistan, North and West Africa, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. Unlike its rivals in the Islamic State (or ISIS), al Qaeda has adopted a long-term approach for state-building. While AQAP has begun to implement its version of sharia law in Yemen, it has not advertised the most gruesome aspects of its draconian code for fear of alienating the population. Still, AQAP controlled much of southern Yemen from April 2015 to April 2016, including the port city of Mukallah, where it reportedly earned substantial revenues via taxes. AQAP's forces simply melted away when the Arab-led coalition entered Mukallah and other areas. By doing so, AQAP presented itself as a protector of the local population and lived to fight another day. The group is capable of seizing more territory at any time.

### **AQAP isn't just an "affiliate" of al Qaeda; it is al Qaeda.**

In addition to being a regional branch of al Qaeda's international organization, AQAP has housed senior al Qaeda managers who are tasked with responsibilities far outside of Yemen. For example,

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<sup>4</sup> Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, "Statement on U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East before the House Armed Services Committee," *House Armed Services Committee Hearing*, June 17, 2015. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606680>)

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Political Spoilers Threatening the Peace, Security and Stability of Yemen," November 10, 2014. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2693.aspx>)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Instigators of the Violent Takeover of Yemen," April, 14, 2015. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl10021.aspx>)

Nasir al Wuhayshi (who was killed in 2015) served as both AQAP's emir and as al Qaeda's general manager. At the time of his death, Wuhayshi was the deputy emir of al Qaeda's global operations.

Beginning in 2014, the Islamic State (or ISIS), mushroomed in size after declaring the establishment of its so-called caliphate across a large part of Iraq and Syria. Some predicted, erroneously, that AQAP would defect to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's cause in the event that Wuhayshi was killed. That prediction was based on a stunning ignorance of AQAP's organization and implicitly assumed that AQAP's loyalty to al Qaeda was embodied in a single man. Wuhayshi's successor, Qasim al Raymi, quickly reaffirmed his and AQAP's allegiance to Ayman al Zawahiri. Al Qaeda veterans and loyalists from a new generation of jihadists are peppered throughout AQAP's ranks.

**The U.S. has killed a number of top AQAP leaders, but the group has effectively replaced them and likely retains a bench of capable fill-ins.**

Wuhayshi was one of several senior AQAP leaders killed in the drone campaign in 2015. Others have perished since. But AQAP has quickly filled their positions with other al Qaeda veterans, including Raymi, Ibrahim al Qosi (a former Guantanamo detainee), Ibrahim al Banna (discussed below), and others. Most of AQAP's insurgency organization, including its middle management, has not been systematically targeted. Therefore, the organization as a whole has not been systematically degraded. AQAP still threatens the West, but most of its resources are devoted to waging the insurgency and building a state inside Yemen. Recently, the U.S. has stepped up its air campaign, launching 40 or more airstrikes against AQAP this month. Those airstrikes are intended, in part, to weaken AQAP's guerrilla army. But it will require more than bombings to do that. Without an effective government representing most of the Sunni tribes and people, AQAP will continue to position itself as the legitimate ruler in many areas of Yemen.

**Al Qaeda has deep roots inside Yemen.**

Osama bin Laden's and Ayman al Zawahiri's men first began to lay the groundwork for al Qaeda's organization inside Yemen in the early 1990s, if not earlier. Zawahiri himself spent time in Yemen alongside his comrades in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which effectively merged with bin Laden's operation in the 1990s. Zawahiri, his brother, and their fellow EIJ jihadists established a base of operations in Yemen. One of these EIJ veterans, Ibrahim al Banna, was designated as a senior AQAP leader by the U.S. government late last year.<sup>8</sup> In 1992 or 1993, Zawahiri ordered al Banna to oversee "the administration" of al Qaeda's "affairs" in Yemen, "opening public relationships with all the students of knowledge and the notables and the tribal sheikhs."<sup>9</sup> That was more than a quarter of a century ago. Yet al Banna, a co-founder of AQAP, continues to command jihadists inside the country to this day.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "State Department designates founding member of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 6, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/state-department-designates-founding-member-of-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula.php>)

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "An al Qaeda commander comes out from the shadows," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 16, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/an-al-qaeda-commander-comes-out-from-the-shadows.php>)

Al Qaeda has suffered multiple setbacks inside Yemen since al Banna was first dispatched to the country in the early 1990s. But the jihadists' patient approach has clearly borne fruit. An unnamed U.S. military official recently explained that AQAP has "skillfully exploited the disorder in Yemen to build its strength and reinvigorate its membership and training."<sup>10</sup> This same official estimated that AQAP's total group strength is in the "low thousands," but warned that because many of its members are Yemeni "they can blend in with the tribes there."

This assessment of AQAP's overall strength may or may not be accurate with respect to the total number of deployed fighters. But the U.S. has underestimated the size of jihadist organizations in the past, including the Islamic State (ISIS) and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. AQAP maintains a deep support network within Yemeni society that allows it to regenerate its forces and continue waging jihad despite fighting on multiple fronts for many years.

The U.S. Treasury Department has outlined parts of AQAP's fundraising apparatus in a series of terrorist designations.<sup>11</sup> Treasury's work has highlighted the mix of tribal politics, Gulf fundraising, and local banking that has helped fuel AQAP's war in Yemen.

Files recovered in Osama bin Laden's compound reveal that al Qaeda has sought to maintain friendly tribal relations and avoid the mistakes made in Iraq, where the predecessor to the current Islamic State alienated tribal leaders.<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to gauge the extent of ideological support for AQAP's cause within Yemen's tribes, but the jihadists do not need key tribes to be completely committed to their cause. While there have been tensions at times, AQAP benefits from the tribes' frequent unwillingness to back government forces against the jihadists.<sup>13</sup>

Some tribal leaders are closely allied with AQAP, so much so that they have been integrated into the organization's infrastructure. This has led to an awkward situation in which some of AQAP's leaders are also partnered with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Hadi's government in the war against the Houthis. For instance, during a raid against AQAP in January, U.S. forces killed a prominent tribal leader named Sheikh Abdel-Raouf al-Dhahab. The *Associated Press* (AP), citing "military officials, tribal figures and relatives," reported that Dhahab met "with the

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<sup>10</sup> Lisa Ferdinando, "U.S. Conducts Second Day of Strikes Against Terrorists in Yemen," *U.S. Central Command*, March 3, 2017. (<http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1103200/us-conducts-second-day-of-strikes-against-terrorists-in-yemen/>)

<sup>11</sup> See: U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Key Facilitators and Front Company Providing Support to Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula," December 7, 2016. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0673.aspx>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Financial Supporters of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula," November 1, 2016. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0601.aspx>); Thomas Joscelyn, "US Treasury continues to target AQAP's financial network," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 7, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/us-treasury-continues-to-target-aqaps-financial-network.php>)

<sup>12</sup> See Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) summary of a July 18, 2010 letter from Atiyah Abd al Rahman to Nasir al Wuhayshi.

(<https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20dtd%2018%20JUL%202010.pdf>)

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Tribes and AQAP in South Yemen," *Atlantic Council*, June 5, 2014. (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/tribes-and-aqap-in-south-yemen>)

military chief of staff in Hadi's government” shortly “before the raid.”<sup>14</sup> Fahd al-Qasi, Dhahab's “top aide,” accompanied Dhahab to the meeting and subsequently confirmed that it took place. “During five days of talks with the military, al-Dhahab — who commands a force of some 800 tribal fighters — was given around 15 million Yemeni riyals (\$60,000) to pay his men in the fight against the rebels, al-Qasi and the two officials said,” according to the AP. Al-Qasi “distributed the money to the fighters” just hours before the raid.<sup>15</sup>

AQAP has also benefitted from its longstanding relationship with Shaykh Abd-al-Majid al-Zindani and his network. The U.S. Treasury Department first designated Zindani as a terrorist in 2004, describing him as a “loyalist to Usama bin Laden and supporter of al-Qaeda.”<sup>16</sup> In 2013, Treasury said that Zindani was providing “religious guidance” for AQAP's operations.<sup>17</sup> Zindani has been a prominent leader in Islah, which is a Yemeni political party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia and Islah have a lengthy history of relations, which had cooled in the not-so-distant past. However, as a result of the Houthis' successful push across Yemen, Saudi Arabia has embraced Islah once again.<sup>18</sup> Zindani himself has maintained friendly relations with the Saudis.<sup>19</sup>

Zindani is the founder of Al-Iman University, which has served as a jihadist recruiting hub. Some al Qaeda leaders have not always been happy with the elderly ideologue. But one letter recovered in bin Laden's Abbottabad compound demonstrates why al Qaeda would not publicly criticize him. “To be fair, a significant number of al-Mujahidin who reach the jihadi arena here were instructed or prepared by him, especially the new Russian converts to Islam who moved from Russia to Yemen and stayed for a while at al-Iman University and then moved with their families to the field of Jihad,” a senior al Qaeda leader wrote in March 2008.<sup>20</sup> Whatever disagreements al Qaeda may have had with Zindani at times, he and his broad network have provided valuable support for AQAP's operations.

The preceding paragraphs above give a brief overview of AQAP's deep network inside Yemen, demonstrating why it remains a potent force. The Islamic State has also established a much smaller presence inside Yemen. The Islamic State's men are capable of carrying out large attacks,

<sup>14</sup> Maggie Michael and Ahmed al-Haj, “Pro-government tribal leader among dead in US raid in Yemen,” *Associated Press*, February 16, 2017. (<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d927fc2962f44a6d8edf6a790b556bbc/pro-government-tribal-leader-among-dead-us-raid-yemen>)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist,” February 24, 2004. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js1190.aspx>)

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen,” December 18, 2013. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>); Thomas Joscelyn, “Latest Treasury designation targets al Qaeda's fundraising network,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 19, 2013. ([http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/treasury\\_designation.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/treasury_designation.php))

<sup>18</sup> Neil Patrick, “Saudi Arabia's Problematic Allies against the Houthis,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, February 14, 2016. (<https://www.thecaireview.com/tahrir-forum/saudi-arabias-problematic-allies-against-the-houthis/>)

<sup>19</sup> David Andrew Weinberg, “UN official reportedly meets with Iraqi on al Qaeda sanctions list,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, October 30, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/un-official-reportedly-meets-with-iraqi-on-al-qaeda-sanctions-list.php>)

<sup>20</sup> The letter appears to have been prepared by Atiyah Abd al Rahman, but includes excerpts written by multiple al Qaeda leaders, including Abu Yahya al Libi. A translation of the letter can be found at: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20dtd%20March%202008.pdf>

particularly against soft targets such as funerals and markets. AQAP avoids such operations, seeing them as detrimental to its cause, which is based on building more popular support for the jihadist group.