

## Position Paper

# Al-Qaeda in Yemen: A Return to Hit-and-Run Tactics



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After almost a year, the Yemeni army, in collaboration with people's committees, managed to regain control of towns such as Loder, Jaar, Zinjibar and Azzan, which had been previously taken by *Ansar al-Shari'ah* and declared Islamic emirates. *Ansar al-Shari'ah* admitted defeat but said that its exit from these towns was not the end of the battle and that in war one would experience both victories and defeats. Further, it maintained that its withdrawal was necessary in order to avoid civilian casualties and damage to the towns.

The fact, however, was that the group preferred not to get involved in an unequal confrontation that could lead to its destruction, preferring to withdraw and preserve whatever remained of its forces. The group eventually retreated to more secure areas without suffering big losses in lives and materiel. It seems that the retreat was tactical and that the group wanted to reorganise its ranks and resume guerilla warfare and assassinations of senior commanders and officials.

## The Promised Emirate

In a sudden move, al-Qaeda decided in early May 2011 to initiate a major shift in its strategy in Yemen. The group viewed the move as a step forward and decided to leave its hideouts in mountains and remote areas and to infiltrate cities, seize them and attain a long-term goal of establishing some variation of Islamic rule in the territory under its control.

Indeed, al-Qaeda managed, through *Ansar al-Shariah*, to rapidly gain control of towns such as Zinjibar, Jaar, and Loder in Abyan Province, in addition to the town of Azzan in Shabwa Province. These areas were converted into 'Islamic emirates' ruled under Islamic law. *Ansar al-Shari'ah* exploited the political conflict taking place in the country and the divisions within the army. Another factor that encouraged the group to go ahead with its plans was that the anti-terrorism forces that were specially trained for combating al-Qaeda were preoccupied with trying to protect the then-falling Saleh regime in Sana'a.

Some observers, however, contend that members of the former regime used the excuse of 'security challenges' and the imminent threat of al-Qaeda as a cover for brutal acts perpetrated by the government in its attempt to crush the popular uprising and obstruct the process of transferring power.

An examination of *Ansar al-Shari'ah* reveals that the group is composed of a solid nucleus comprising a combination of well-organised al-Qaeda cells in addition to a wider group of enthusiastic youths eager to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed means. A particularly striking feature of the situation is the growing influence of *Ansar al-Shari'ah* in areas where they have exercised control. The feeling that they have become a political authority that is able to control a vast area of land has tempted more youths to join them – both enthusiastic Islamists as well as those who are simply discontent with the status quo and policies of the central government. Moreover, hundreds of members of the Somali Shabab mujahideen group and youths from neighbouring Arab countries and Pakistan, Afghanistan, Chechenya and other countries flooded the region in support of the newly born Islamist scheme.

As a result, fears have grown that Yemen is at risk of becoming a haven for extremist Islamist fighters from all parts of the region, which will lead to the creation of a new point on the southern Arabian Peninsula from which al-Qaeda can launch its attacks after having lost some of its strongholds in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

These developments have been seen as a great threat to the stability of Yemen and came at a time when the country was going through a critical transition. In addition, the security situation in the Gulf countries has been jeopardised by events in Yemen and has threatened Western interests in the region.

Yemeni leadership tried to respond with a swift and direct military confrontation with al-Qaeda in an attempt to regain control of the seized towns before militants could

consolidate their presence. Such a decision, however, was impeded for some time by division within army units. Some viewed the long-term continuation of a guerilla style war between the Yemeni regime's army and Al-Qaeda as being far too deleterious for the army. It was eventually decided that an army of 25,000 soldiers (ten armoured brigades), supported by popular paramilitary units, be sent to combat more than 3,000 *Ansar al-Shari'ah* militants. The outcome of the battle was predictable due to the vast difference in the military capability of the parties. Consequently, *Ansar al-Shari'ah* chose to withdraw in order to preserve the forces it still maintained.

### Partial Victory: Tactical Withdrawal

The importance of the victory of the armed forces and the popular committees' paramilitary units in this round of fighting should not be underestimated. Al-Qaeda has lost significant towns and regions that it had controlled for nearly a year and its scheme to establish political authority on the ground that would form the nucleus of an Islamic regime has been dealt a severe blow. Indeed, al-Qaeda will not be able to repeat what it achieved any time soon since the state has begun to re-consolidate its power, and the new government is more determined in its drive to eliminate al-Qaeda. A crucial element of this new effort is the shaking of the moral basis of the al-Qaeda scheme.

In its drive to gain supporters and mobilise fighters, al-Qaeda has relied on the religious element, basing its discourse on the *hadith* (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad, narrated by Imam Ahmed in his *Musnad*: 'From Aden, 12,000 (fighters) will emerge for the support of Allah and His Messenger and they are the best of all.'

This setback in the al-Qaeda campaign might persuade a portion of *Ansar al-Shari'ah* to reconsider their calculations and the viability of fighting alongside al-Qaeda, particularly with respect to members that are pushed by religious fervour but do not have any real ties to al-Qaeda.

However, the most important factor determining the future of al-Qaeda in the region might be the increasing hatred of local communities towards it. Indeed, during the conflict, al-Qaeda came into direct confrontation with the inhabitants of these areas. Some individuals within peoples' committees and a number of notables who shunned al-Qaeda's acts were even assassinated, which was unprecedented at the time.

Al-Qaeda did not, however, completely lose the battle since, following its withdrawal, it was left with a large part of its forces intact. Al-Qaeda cells have returned to their previous hideouts in the mountains while others rejoined their communities. The organisation is capable – as is apparent from recent operations – of launching painful strikes on the government. The current state of affairs indicates that new rounds of fighting, possibly more violent than before, could erupt.

### Dialogue of Arms

The ongoing political conflict and the fragility of the regime in Yemen have enabled al-Qaeda's expansion in the country. Such a situation has affected the coherence of the country's system of government and its effectiveness in handling the jihadi groups. Consequently, these groups seized the opportunity to increase their influence and expand their power.

On the other hand a new political will is in the making which is determined to employ a different way of dealing with the Jihadi problem and which conflicts with the method adopted by the previous regime. Indeed, the previous regime had sometimes used the Jihadi groups as a means of blackmailing other countries involved in the conflict in order to secure more foreign aid.

Dialogue and negotiations were some of the tools on which the previous regime relied in attempting to contain al-Qaeda. The situation is changing with the advent of a new president who seems to be more serious and more determined to deal with this problem.

Recently, some local parties put forward a proposal for dialogue and negotiation with *Ansar al-Shari'ah* by inviting them to participate in the forthcoming dialogue conference. Similar invitations had been extended to other forces such as the Houthis and the Southern Movement and Mobility Group. Reports suggest that *Ansar al-Shari'ah* has expressed its tentative acceptance of the invitation. However, most of the major forces have excluded such an option as they accuse the group of having been involved in criminal acts that are prosecutable under the law. They contend that the group cannot be compared to other parties invited to the dialogue.

On the other hand, Yemen's external partners in the war against the Jihadi groups refuse to negotiate with such groups in principle – another factor impeding reconciliation.

### **The Future: Intermittent War**

Recent events have uncovered the real weight of al-Qaeda's power in Yemen and have shown its inability to control towns and establish autonomous rule in them in the long run.

Some observers, however, are of the opinion that al-Qaeda has shown administrative and organisational ability that cannot be underestimated and that such ability still exists and can resurface anew, enabling al-Qaeda to strike with greater effect. The fact is that al-Qaeda has suffered a setback but has not lost much of its physical and human resources. In the short-term it is expected that al-Qaeda will revert to greater reliance on its usual tactics, such as suicide bombings.

Further, it is possible that al-Qaeda will shift its operations to other regions in Yemen, with *Ansar al-Shari'ah* threatening to change its tactics to what it calls 'lonely wolf' operations. By this, it means that it will conduct individual vindictive suicidal operations that target senior government officials as a means of reviving its image following its moral defeat.

In the long run, it is expected that al-Qaeda will return to its previous strategy – gradual expansion until an opportunity arises for it to launch an offensive and gain control of territory from where it could build up a political authority.

In addition, al-Qaeda could continue with its old strategy of disrupting regional government control and spreading chaos and instability in locales through hit-and run strikes and suicide operations targeting military units, sites, security officials, and so forth. Al-Qaeda might also encourage secessionist drives in some areas in the south in order to weaken state authority.

Thus, the Yemeni government will likely get involved in a violent and continuous war against al-Qaeda in the near future since there is no common ground for an understanding between the two parties.

Furthermore, the reliance of the Yemeni government on foreign military intervention would give al-Qaeda and its allies the legitimacy needed for it to continue its war. The pretext of waging a Jihad against an external enemy that targets Muslim land is a powerful one.

Nonetheless, reliance on security and military solutions only – despite the importance of both – will not be sufficient to face a problem as complex as that of the Jihadi groups in Yemen. Indeed, material and human resources of these organisations is only one part of the story.

The most important element that can contribute to resisting these organisations would be the creation of a favourable local environment that can enable the monitoring of the growth of these organisations.

The weakness of security service and the absence of the state in many parts of the country, in addition to increasing popular frustration over the performance of official bodies, is definitely a negative element in dealing with these organisations. Moreover, the spread of arms, poverty and unemployment among the youth have helped al-Qaeda in its recruitment drive.

To conclude, the fighting between the Yemeni government and al-Qaeda and its allies will continue, albeit in a sporadic manner. The solution in the long run will depend on the ability of Yemenis to create a democratic state that can convince discontented individuals that they can bring about change without resorting to arms. To this end, the state should disarm all groups that rely on arms to achieve political objectives. It should also open the door wide for those who are hesitant but represent broad sections of society by attracting them to participate politically and compete for power on peaceful terms.

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