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Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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AFGHANISTAN: PEACE TALKS REMAIN A DISTANT PROSPECT

Alexander Sehmer

Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government appear further off than ever after unofficial attempts to restart discussions coincided with an attack on a luxury hotel in Kabul.

Taliban gunmen attacked the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on January 20, killing at least 18 people in a standoff with security forces ([al-Jazeera](#), January 21). The group emphasized it had targeted foreigners—the majority of those killed were foreigners, among them four U.S. citizens—claiming it had planned to carry out the operation a day earlier, but held back because a wedding at the hotel would have meant locals were more likely to be caught up in the violence ([Alemarah](#), January 21; [Gandhara](#), January 24).

The incident came just days after Taliban representatives from the group's political office in Qatar travelled to Islamabad, Pakistan for unofficial discussions aimed at restarting peace negotiations ([Daily Times](#), January 16). That same week, reports emerged about secret talks

held in Turkey involving the Taliban and Afghan government officials, mediated by members of Hezb-i-Islami, the Islamist political organization led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The reports said the talks in Turkey included members of Mohammad Rasool's Taliban faction, as well as a representative named Rahmatullah Wardag who was supposedly an official from the main group ([Ariana News](#), January 14). The Taliban, however, denied it was involved in the talks and disavowed any connection to Wardag ([Alemarah](#), January 16). Elsewhere, their so-called representative was dismissed as a mere "shopkeeper" dressed up as a Taliban member ([Pajhwok](#), January 16). The Afghan government also denied sending anyone to negotiate on its behalf.

The confused picture is representative of the situation in which Afghanistan is mired. Rasool's faction, which splintered from the main Taliban in 2015, appears more amenable to talks with the government and has in the past attended talks in Turkey, mediated by Hekmatyar family members ([Pajhwok](#), October 7, 2017). It is unclear, however, how much of the Taliban membership Rasool, who was arrested in Pakistan in March 2016, actually commands, and the two factions appear unlikely

to reconcile, with their fighters regularly clashing ([Khama](#), July 8, 2017).

Meanwhile, the Kabul attack suggests the Taliban, under Haibatullah Akhundzada, is stepping up its campaign, with its emphasis on targeting foreigners presumably intended to differentiate it from the more indiscriminate activities of Islamic State.

In terms of peace talks, Pakistan remains influential and is keen to maintain its standing in that regard, both for its own reasons and in response to U.S. pressure. But the Kabul attack, occurring within days of the unofficial exploratory meeting in Islamabad, shows such discussions remain at present a distant prospect.

NIGERIA: ETHNIC TENSIONS PLAY INTO MILITANTS' HANDS

Alexander Sehmer

Herdsmen in Nigeria's Benue State killed scores of people in a series of clashes at the beginning of the year ([Vanguard](#), January 2; [Daily Post](#), January 2). Recently reported accusations of Islamic State (IS) involvement are likely overblown, but the situation still presents a significant security threat.

More than 70 people were killed in clashes between farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue State on New Year's Day, but confrontations have continued over the course of the month, driving calls for the government to do more to protect locals ([This Day](#), January 18). The attacks have also provided renewed political impetus to factions within the Middle Belt, an area that sits geographically between Nigeria's Muslim north and Christian south but remains only vaguely defined given the wide range of ethnic groups it encompasses ([Vanguard](#), January 23).

Nigerian intelligence agencies have apparently sought to blame IS West Africa Province (ISWAP) for the killings in Benue. A report submitted to President Muhammadu Buhari supposedly outlines how ISWAP networks have attempted to exacerbate ethnic tensions through the Benue killings ([Daily Trust](#), January 22). It also appears to raise the specter of foreign fighters, claiming a number of supposed attackers arrested in a statewide sweep turned out to be French-speakers.

If such claims are accurate, it suggests ISWAP's network is more extensive than previously thought. In truth, however, clashes between herdsmen and farmers are a long-running concern and do not require prompting from ISWAP. Nevertheless, many in Benue would be pleased to see the Fulani herdsmen designated as terrorists, if only because it might spur a greater government response ([Daily Post](#), January 11).

The problem is not entirely divorced from terrorism. The herdsmen have increasingly moved south in part because of instability and conflict in the north, a result of the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency. However, the desertification of traditional grazing lands and the expansion of agricultural settlements are inevitably the main drivers behind the problem.

Nonetheless, the situation presents a serious threat to security and stability in Nigeria. In Benue, voices from the Middle Belt Forum, one of a number of political groupings that seeks to represent the interests of Middle Belters, have sought to characterize the herdsmen's attacks as an indication of a coming conflict pitting Muslims in the north against Christians in the south ([Daily Post](#), January 5).

While the suggestion, supposedly promoted by Nigeria's intelligence agencies, that ISWAP is guiding these attacks would appear to be fanciful, any confrontation that provokes north-south tensions in Nigeria can only play into the militants' hands.

Islamic State Gains Ground in Afghanistan as Its Caliphate Crumbles Elsewhere

Animesh Roul

Wilayat-e-Khorasan, the Islamic State (IS) affiliate in the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan, is one of the terrorist group's strongest franchises. Bolstered by defections from the Taliban and boosted further in recent months by an influx of foreign fighters fleeing defeat in Iraq and Syria, IS Khorasan Province (ISK-P) is growing in strength and influence.

IS in Afghanistan

ISK-P came into existence in early 2015, and it has since expanded its influence beyond its operational headquarters in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, which borders Pakistan's tribal regions. The group, which is mostly comprised of fighters who defected from the Pakistani Taliban in Orakzai and Mohmand agencies, has perpetrated indiscriminate mass-fatality attacks in cities from Jalalabad and Kabul in Afghanistan, to Quetta and Lahore in Pakistan. Alarming, in September last year, an IS flag bearing the message "The khilafat (caliphate) is coming" was even seen hoisted on a pedestrian bridge near Iqbal town in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital ([Express Tribune](#), September 24, 2017).

ISK-P has extended its influence through alliances with, or simply by co-opting, local militant groups and their leaders. In Pakistan, it has gained the support of sectarian factions such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami, Jundullah and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, the most powerful faction of the Tehrik-e Taliban (TTP) movement. It also has ties to Lashkar-e Islam (LeI), led by Mangal Bagh Afridi, and Lashkar-e-Khorasan.

In July, ISK-P's image was boosted further, at the expense of the Pakistani Taliban, when Haji Daud Mehsud, the former chief of TTP-Karachi, declared allegiance to IS ([The News](#), July 30, 2017).

In Afghanistan, ISK-P's growing influence over the last few years has come from the support of Pakistani militant factions such as LeI and factions of the Afghan Taliban movement, such as the Mullah Rasool group and the

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has sworn allegiance to IS.

Although these alliances remain somewhat imprecise as they cross the Durand Line, the historical but largely imaginary border demarcation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, ISK-P has used the firepower and local networks of these groups in order to carry out its attacks on Christians and Shias, as well as government and military targets.

Sectarian Attacks

The group has claimed responsibility for several sectarian attacks in the region in the last six months or so, with Shia and Sufi places of worship and Christian churches the main targets.

In Pakistan, a deadly sectarian attack on December 17 last year in Balochistan was attributed to ISK-P and allied factions. Two armed militants with suicide vests and assault rifles stormed the Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta, leaving at least nine Christian worshipers dead and more than 50 people seriously wounded ([The Nation](#), December 17, 2017). Although a heightened security presence meant that the death toll was much lower, the attack was reminiscent of ISK-P's March 2016 Lahore park bombing, in which more than 70 people, mostly Christian women and children, were killed. A similar attack was carried out in the Fatehpur area of Jhal Magsi district, Balochistan, on October 5, when an ISK-P suicide bomber targeted the famous Sufi shrine of Pir Rakhyal Shah and killed nearly 20 worshippers ([The Express Tribune](#), October 5, 2017).

ISK-P has carried out similar attacks in Afghanistan, targeting vulnerable minority groups, especially Shia Muslims and their institutions. On December 28, an apparent suicide attack was carried out at the Shia cultural center in Kabul, leaving over 40 people dead and many more injured ([Pajhwok Afghan News](#), December 28, 2017). The IS Amaq news agency, while claiming responsibility for the attack, argued that the facility is a prominent Shia center and was being sponsored by Iranian agencies that used it as a recruitment center for the Fatemiyoun Division, an Afghan Shia militia engaged in the Syrian civil war.

In October last year, ISK-P militants also targeted the Imam Zaman Mosque, a Shia place of worship located in

the western Dashte-e-Barchi neighborhood of Kabul. The suicide attack killed nearly 30 people ([Khaama Press](#), October 20, 2017).

Recruitment Drive

The rise and consolidation of ISK-P in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been aided by intra-Taliban rivalry triggered by the death of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Recruitment has been aided elsewhere by the Deobandi seminaries, which have for decades propagated sectarian ideals in the tribal regions. Further, ISK-P—like its parent organization in Syria and Iraq—has gone beyond these more traditional support structures, using social media to attract more educated and tech-savvy city dwellers. The cases of the medical student Noreen Leghari, and of the student named Muhammad from the elite Aitcheson College in Lahore, bear testimony to ISK-P's appeal among educated youth. Muhammad (media reports give only his first name) had even studied and worked in the United States as an information technology professional.

If Pakistani law enforcement sources are to be believed, in May 2017, security forces in Karachi arrested three students from Lahore's University of Engineering and Technology, along with their teacher for facilitating IS recruitment and activities ([Express Tribune](#), May 22, 2017). Meanwhile, there are nearly a dozen female students from high-profile educational institutions who, like Noreen Leghari, are missing from different areas of Sindh province and are believed to have joined militant groups ([Express Tribune](#), September 14, 2017; [The News](#), March 18, 2017).

In early 2017, Pakistani agencies uncovered IS recruitment networks in Punjab and Lahore. The case of militant recruiter Ghulam Ghous Kumar showed how IS' extremist propaganda enticed Pakistani youth to join the so-called caliphate. Under interrogation, Ghous said he had facilitated at least five recruitment networks using social media, and had managed to recruit more than 130 people for IS. He was in contact with a Syria-based IS commander, Qari Abid, and an Afghanistan-based commander, Nabeel Ahmed (a.k.a. Abu Abdullah) ([The News](#), March 3, 2017).

Similar developments can be seen in Afghanistan, where observers say that ISK-P has a successful ongoing recruitment process through social media and is active in universities, schools and mosques throughout the coun-

try ([Pakistan Today](#), January 8). In March 2017, it was reported ISK-P had distributed leaflets in central Logar province calling on local youth to join the group, resist the Taliban and take control of the province ([Pajhwok](#), March 12, 2017).

In the Darzab district of northwestern Jowzjan province, around 300 young people, most of them under 20, have reportedly been recruited into ISK-P and received training. The group has established training centers in the villages of Moghul and Sar Dara, and there are even reports an ISK-P commander named Umar Mohajir successfully recruited several local Taliban fighters in Jowzjan and Sar-i-Pul provinces ([Pajhwok](#), December 7, 2017; [Pajhwok](#), December 7, 2017).

Foreign Fighters

ISK-P's rank and file has been constantly replenished through volunteers, as well as sympathizers who are lured by its ideals. Separately, a number of foreign fighters, mostly identified as French and Algerians, have recently joined its ranks in northern Afghanistan ([Dawn](#), December 12, 2017). These war returnees, who include female jihadists from the Syria conflict, are establishing new bases in the ISK-P-controlled districts of Darzab and Qosh Tepa in northern Jowzjan province. According to Mohammad Reza Ghafoori, a spokesman for the governor of Jowzjan, there are "more than 40 foreign Islamic State fighters, mostly Uzbeks" who have begun to recruit locals "and train them to become fighters" ([Dawn](#), December 12, 2017). Nearly 200 foreign fighters are camping near Bibi Mariam village in Darzab, according to local media reports ([DID Press Agency](#) [Afghanistan], December 10, 2017).

ISK-P's foreign militant contingent has been targeted for airstrikes. In early January, at least seven foreign fighters—three French and four Uzbek militants—were killed in an airstrike in Alkhani village, in Darzab ([MENAFN - Afghanistan Times](#), January 2).

In September 2017, ISK-P released a video entitled "The Atmosphere of Eid in Khorasan Province," which showed Eid ul-Adha festivities in its territories, underscoring the presence of Indians, Russians and Tajiks among its ranks. In just over six minutes of footage, the group stressed that "all are united one Islam, and our goal is to bring sharia, to bring the laws of Allah, to all the world." [1] Media reports corroborated that Qari

Hekmat, a prominent Taliban leader in Jowzjan, has recently switched allegiance to the IS, raising the ISK-P banner in the province ([AAN](#), November 11, 2017).

Outlook

Since the death of Abdul Haseeb Logari in April 2017, it has been unclear who is in charge of ISK-P—a militant named Abu Sayed possibly briefly succeeded him, but he too was killed in July 2017 ([Daily Times](#), July 16, 2017). It is equally ambiguous if Qari Hekmat, or any senior militant commander, is guiding the foreign fighters who might be preparing for armed operations beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It is, however, certain that a safe haven for ISK-P militants has developed in the tribal lands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The present situation suggests fleeing militants could find a new lease on life and win further sympathizers to the crumbling caliphate, allowing ISK-P to grow in stature in the region.

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NOTES

[1] SITE Intelligence, "The Atmosphere of Eid in Khorasan Province", September 6, 2017, <https://ent.siteintel-group.com/Multimedia/english-speaking-is-fighter-in-khorasan-province-video-notes-presence-of-indians-and-russians-in-its-ranks.html>

Can Airstrikes Alone Tackle Islamic State in Libya?

Allan Pilch and Avery Plaw

In the last four months of 2017, the United States resumed bombing Islamic State (IS) targets in Libya. On September 24, 2017, U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) announced it had conducted airstrikes against an IS training camp on September 22 at 7:06 PM, killing 17 militants and destroying three vehicles ([U.S. African Command](#), September 24, 2017). According to AFRICOM, the training camp, located 150 miles southeast of the city of Sirte, was hit by a half-dozen “precision strikes” launched from B-2 bombers and Reaper Drones. It also claimed that the terrorist group was stockpiling weapons at the camp, hosting foreign fighters and plotting more attacks in Libya and elsewhere.

Another attack followed swiftly. On September 26, AFRICOM reported it had conducted two more precision strikes, 100 miles southeast of the city of Sirte, which killed several more IS militants ([U.S. African Command](#), September 28, 2017).

Most recently, on November 17 and 19, the U.S. military conducted “precision strikes” near the city of Fuqaha, directly south of Sirte ([U.S. African Command](#), November 21, 2017). While AFRICOM did not report any casualties officially, there are reports that the strike killed several fighters ([Libyan Express](#), November 18, 2017).

Before September strikes, the last U.S. airstrike reported in Libya was on January 19, 2017, the last full day that then-President Barack Obama was in office. That strike, employing B-2 bombers, hit an IS training camp south of Sirte, killing roughly 80 fighters. The strikes were reportedly part of an operation to eliminate external plotters, including those plotting attacks in Europe ([North Africa Post](#), September 20). With the latest strikes, the administration of President Donald Trump is following the Obama-era playbook.

Islamic State in Libya

The willingness of the Obama administration to undertake occasional military interventions in Libya, and for the Trump administration to follow that lead, reflects the growing seriousness of the security threat emanating

from the country. With the so-called IS caliphate disappearing in Iraq and Syria, Libya has provided an attractive refuge for fleeing IS jihadists. The extremist network has flourished with their help, organizing increased terrorist attacks at home and abroad while managing a thriving criminal enterprise smuggling people supposedly fleeing Syria into Europe. In a February 2016 report to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called IS in Libya one of the group’s “most developed branches outside of Syria and Iraq.” [1]

Following Clapper’s remarks, the Obama administration took steps to diminish the IS threat emanating from Libya. It carried out Operation Odyssey Lightning from August 1 to December 19, 2016, an air campaign that included 495 precision strikes in support of military forces aligned with Libya’s Government of National Accord (GNA) ([U.S. African Command](#), December 20, 2016). The campaign evicted IS from the city of Sirte, its main base of operations in the country ([al-Monitor](#), December 14, 2016).

Control of Sirte and its surrounding area are of critical strategic significance for the country. The Sirte Basin ranks 13th among the world’s petroleum provinces. It contains 80 percent of the country’s oil reserves and many of its major oil wells. [2] The Basin provides the resources to support most of the military forces fighting in the area.

By depriving IS of Sirte, the Obama administration succeeded in diminishing the group’s capabilities, at least temporarily. However, rather than being scattered or deterred, many IS fighters merely shifted their base of operations to the surrounding countryside and areas to the south ([Middle East Eye](#), August 24, 2017).

In southern and central Libya, neither of the rival national governments—the GNA and the House of Representatives (HoR)—exercises effective authority. Without clear political authority, these regions have become a passageway for smugglers, jihadists and migrants.

Airstrikes Resumed

IS has taken advantage of this power vacuum to reestablish its operational structure and regain much of its organizational capability. In 2017, working from its new bases of operations, IS began a push to recapture Sirte.

It had already established a strong presence in the city of al-Nawfalya, to the east of the city, and, as of December 2017, it controls an area ranging as far south as Waddan in central Libya.

One estimate by Ibrahim Mlitan, a security commander in Sirte, is that IS operates in an area of 40,000 square km surrounding Sirte ([Maghreb Newswire](#), September 15, 2017). Local residents and security forces have reported IS fighters patrolling coastal highways around the city and hunting opponents who aided the GNA in expelling them in 2016 ([Middle East Eye](#), September 5, 2017).

The increasing IS activity, and the growing threat of the group recapturing Sirte, is what prompted the United States to resume precision strikes. Unfortunately, it appears that the latest airstrikes have emboldened IS in Libya. After the first set of U.S. strikes in late September, the group mobilized sleeper cells in towns surrounding Sirte. Then, on October 4, IS gunmen opened fire outside a Libyan courthouse complex in Misrata and eventually detonated suicide vests, killing four people and injuring 41 others ([IOL News](#), October 4, 2017). In December 2017, another IS cell was apprehended by Libyan government forces in Derna after members attempted to assassinate a member of the Derna Shura Council, Moaz Tchani ([Libyan Observer](#), December 11, 2017).

Despite these incidents, there is no indication the United States intends to escalate its involvement in Libya. When asked about U.S. policy toward Libya last April, President Trump stated: "I do not see a role [for the United States] in Libya. I think the United States has right now enough roles ... I do see a role in getting rid of ISIS, we're very effective in that regard ... I see that as a primary role and that's what we're going to do, whether it's in Iraq, or Libya or anywhere else" ([C-SPAN](#), April 20).

'Getting Rid' of IS

It is unclear whether simply continuing to draw from the established playbook of occasional airstrikes, sometimes supported by GNA-affiliated forces on the ground, will achieve the stated policy goal of "getting rid" of IS. After all, the most significant achievement of this approach was forcing IS fighters out of Sirte, and even that is now in danger of unraveling.

In particular, it seems doubtful that IS influence will be broken until a Libyan government can consolidate effective authority in the central and southern regions of the country. As Jalal al-Shweidi, a representative from the Benghazi-based HoR, told one reporter in September: "The defeat of [Islamic State] won't happen without real consensus between politicians, which we are far from achieving" ([World Tribune](#), September 16, 2017).

Unfortunately, Libya's politicians do not appear to be moving toward reconciliation. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), which controls eastern Libya and is aligned with the HoR government based in Tobruk, declared on December 17 that the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), intended to provide the basis for a national political reconciliation, had expired and therefore no longer applied ([Libyan Herald](#), December 17). The following day, the prime minister of Libya's unity government, Fayez al-Sarraj, insisted the agreement "remains in place," despite its mandate elapsing ([Daily Sabah](#), December 19, 2017). His words were echoed by Hashem Bishr, one of the GNA's key military commanders, but only on condition that there be elections in 2018 ([North Africa Post](#), December 18, 2017).

None of this is encouraging for the prospects for peace and reconciliation. The more immediate question, however, is whether the Trump administration can at least replicate the previous administration's limited successes in keeping IS out of Sirte. The longer-term question is whether it can fashion a strategy that promises a more sustainable solution.

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NOTES

[1] Clapper, James R, 'Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community' ([Senate Arms Committee](#), February 9, 2016).

[2] Ahlbrandt, Thomas S, 'The Sirte Basin Province of Libya – Sirte-Zelten Total Petroleum System' ([U.S. Geological Survey](#), 2001).

Guns for Hire: How al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Is Securing Its Future in Yemen

Michael Horton

The outgoing director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Nicholas J. Rasmussen, said in a recent interview that Yemen “continues to be one of the most frustrating theaters in our counterterrorism work right now.” [1] Mr. Rasmussen’s comments reflect the difficulty of conducting counter-terror operations in war-torn Yemen. The conflict is like a *matryoshka*, or Russian nesting doll—there are wars within wars. Complicating the conflict further is the presence of outside actors, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), whose own agendas in Yemen are frequently in opposition to one another.

In such a conflict, drawing clear lines between al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), anti-Houthi militias, tribal fighters and forces backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE is an increasingly difficult task. This ambiguity, the multiplicity of fighting groups, the ever-shifting alliances and the hundreds of millions of dollars of materiel provided to pro-government forces by Saudi Arabia and the UAE have all helped AQAP survive and thrive ([Middle East Eye](#), October 27, 2017). At the same time, the war has forced AQAP to become a very different organization than it was four years ago.

The war has provided AQAP with a host of opportunities to hone and refine its tactics while continuing to grow its organization. Most critically, AQAP has become more pragmatic and continues to de-prioritize ideology—at least in terms of its day-to-day operations—in favor of building alliances, recruiting and training capable fighters and enhancing access to revenue streams. AQAP has learned from its own mistakes and from those of Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq—ideology might win recruits, but it rarely wins wars. Patience, skilled fighters, alliances and access to money and weapons are what wins or, in the case of AQAP, ensures long-term organizational survival.

From Ideologues to Predatory Pragmatists

AQAP's leadership learned a great deal from its first failed attempt to hold and govern territory in 2011-12 ([al-Jazeera](#), May 29, 2011). Its near defeat in the southern governorate of Abyan in 2012 was largely due to the fact that AQAP had alienated the populace it was trying to govern and, most critically, it made enemies of tribal elites rather than making them allies, or at least ensuring that they remained neutral. AQAP's overconfidence, and its unbending application of its own strident interpretation of Islamic law in the areas it seized in 2011, cost it any local support it might have enjoyed.

In April 2015, AQAP took over Yemen's fifth largest city, the port of al-Mukalla ([al-Jazeera](#), September 16, 2015). The takeover was swift and relatively bloodless. The AQAP leadership focused on firming up alliances and agreements with local elites and existing power centers. Rather than overtly asserting its control, it ruled through proxies ([Middle East Eye](#), May 12, 2015). The application of Islamic law was limited—with some exceptions—and generally mirrored what the populace already accepted.

AQAP's real efforts during its yearlong occupation of al-Mukalla were directed toward building alliances with a range of elites from local tribes and business owners to members of the largely defunct Yemeni army. These alliances were built on reciprocity: AQAP provided security, protection and a measure of stability, and, in exchange, various elites agreed not to fight and to share in the spoils of war. [2] During its invasion and occupation of al-Mukalla, AQAP stole an estimated \$100 million from the Yemeni Central Bank branch in the city and from other banks. AQAP also seized millions of dollars' worth of military hardware from army depots and bases. This money and hardware was essential to funding AQAP's ongoing operations and to secure alliances. A percentage of the spoils were undoubtedly shared among those who, at a minimum, chose not to fight AQAP. [3]

While AQAP continued to publish its propaganda—just as it does now—the importance of enforcing Islamic law, of creating a caliphate and of directly attacking targets in the West were de-prioritized in favor of localized objectives. The continuing stream of AQAP tweets, forum postings and publications retains some importance for recruitment and provides material for analysts to parse,

but generally does not reflect the pragmatic and dynamic strategies that AQAP employs.

While AQAP left al-Mukalla in April 2016 rather than fight the Emirati backed forces that took control of the city, its year of governing a sizable city—at least through proxies—provided the leadership with invaluable experience. Some residents of al-Mukalla claim that AQAP did a better job of administering the city than the current Emirati backed government ([al-Jazeera](#), January 11). Most critically for AQAP, its rule over al-Mukalla allowed it to establish its reputation as a reliable and relatively capable force that was willing to work with those elites whose interests overlapped with its own.

Spinning Its Web

AQAP's willingness to sideline its ideologically driven ambitions in favor of attainable objectives like building alliances and securing access to revenue through illicit and licit trade has prompted it to focus on implementing its enmeshment strategy. This involves AQAP inserting its operatives and forces into existing power structures where it can leverage factionalism by offering the services of its often better trained and better motivated fighters. AQAP is implementing a strategy that is not dissimilar to that used by its enemies, the Houthis, who slowly co-opted elites that had been loyal to Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. The buy-in by national and local elites that the Houthis enjoy is on a far larger scale than that enjoyed by AQAP, but, for AQAP, even limited and contingent local support is critical for its long-term survival.

AQAP's operatives and fighters are present on all of the frontlines in Yemen's multi-actor civil war. They are most active in the governorate of al-Bayda and in the battle for the divided city of Taiz. AQAP also remains a potent force in parts of the Hadramawt, where it has launched numerous attacks against the Emirati backed Hadrami Elite Forces ([al-Monitor](#), July 19, 2017). [4] It is in al-Bayda and Taiz, however, that AQAP has repeatedly proven itself to be a dependable ally in the battle against Houthi-allied forces.

Al-Bayda is a strategic fallback position for AQAP. After its near defeat in 2012, senior operatives sought and found refuge in the governorate's rugged terrain. Control of this strategic governorate, which is located near the center of Yemen, where it acts as a kind of keystone

for accessing eight other governorates, is critical to the Houthis and to those forces opposing them.

AQAP's relationship with the tribes that are the dominant power in al-Bayda is complex. Lines between AQAP fighters and operatives and tribal militias as well as coalition backed anti-Houthi forces are rarely demarcated. This lack of clarity is a critical component to AQAP's strategy of enmeshing its operatives with anti-Houthi and tribal fighters. This is not to say that AQAP enjoys a high-degree of support from al-Bayda's tribes. In many cases, the opposite is true. AQAP and some parts of these tribes have fought pitched battles against one another. However, for the moment, AQAP and much of the membership of the various tribes, whose territory encompasses al-Bayda, are focused on defeating a common enemy, the Houthis. [5] For now, this unites them.

In the bitterly contested city of Taiz, which has been under siege by Houthi and formerly Saleh-aligned forces since 2014, AQAP operatives and fighters are overtly and covertly fighting alongside local militias, many of which embrace Salafism. AQAP's fighters are better trained, organized and funded than many of the ad-hoc militias that were formed to fight the Houthis and their allies. This was particularly the case in the first two years of the war in Yemen. Just as AQAP leverages factionalism, it is pragmatic in how it deploys its fighters. In Taiz, in particular, AQAP fighters have often been critical to efforts to stop Houthi-aligned forces from gaining territory.

In the Hadramawt, AQAP faces a different enemy and is employing a different strategy. Here the enemy is not the Houthis and those forces allied with them—at least not overtly—instead it is the UAE-backed and created Hadrami Elite Forces, supposedly allied with Yemen's government in exile. The UAE backed force's popularity among locals—many of whom view the UAE as intent on the colonization of the oil and gas rich parts of Yemen—is limited due to its harsh tactics.

The UAE's attempt to gain a foothold in the area has empowered some Hadrami elites and disempowered others. These disaffected elites, combined with growing popular resentment of the UAE and its allies, have provided AQAP with the opening it needs. As is pointed out in a recent article for al-Jazeera, many residents of al-Mukalla look favorably upon AQAP's light footprint

occupation of the city ([al-Jazeera](#), January 11). They cite the fact that AQAP engaged in more public works and provided better security for residents than the current governing regime.

Just as AQAP has exploited factionalism and leveraged its fighting capabilities in al-Bayda and Taiz, it is doing the same in the Hadramawt, only with a slight twist—it is increasingly acting as a mercenary force.

Guns for Hire

Like many terrorist and militant organizations, AQAP has at times been used by the state that it claims to want to overthrow. For example, parts of the former Saleh regime used al-Qaeda to target rivals and to extract funds from Western donors. AQAP and its precursor organization were thoroughly penetrated by both branches of Yemeni intelligence: the Political Security Bureau (PSB) and the National Security Agency (NSA) ([al-Jazeera](#), June 4, 2015). The murky relationship between the Saleh regime and AQAP mirrors the equally murky and complex set of relationships that now exist between a host of Yemeni elites, coalition-backed forces and AQAP. The group is expert at exploiting the ambiguous and ever-shifting alliances that now exist across war-torn Yemen.

Alliances such as these serve a multiplicity of purposes, but most importantly they allow AQAP to further enmesh its operatives in a variety of martial, social and business networks where they can collect valuable human intelligence (HUMINT). These alliances also serve as important sources of revenue for AQAP, both in terms of hard currency and access to licit and illicit trade networks.

The war in Yemen—or, more accurately, wars—are providing elites across the country with an abundance of opportunities to profit, although these profits pale in comparison with those of the arms manufacturers supplying Saudi Arabia and the UAE. [6] AQAP too is intent on finding new ways to profit and secure its financial future. Just as its ability to deploy motivated, well-trained fighters to the frontlines in places like Taiz and al-Bayda, keep them on post and ensure they are supplied, is recognized and valued by some anti-Houthi forces, the same applies to certain elites in the Hadramawt. While there is no Houthi threat in the Hadramawt, there is much at stake in the resource-rich governorate.

The Hadramawt is home to Yemen's LNG terminal and contains developed oil and gas fields, as well as what could be considerable untapped oil reserves. The Hadramawt also sits atop Yemen's last largely untapped aquifer.

The involvement of Saudi Arabia in Hadrami affairs and of the UAE in particular has angered many residents, elite and non-elite. Many view the UAE and Saudi Arabia as colonizing forces, intent on carving up Yemen and denying it its nationhood. Concurrent with this, UAE-backed forces have been accused of disappearing and torturing Yemenis they suspect of links to AQAP or of backing tribal militias opposed to the Hadrami Elite Forces ([al-Jazeera](#), June 22, 2017). [7]

The combination of abusive tactics, a foreign presence, and the sidelining of many Hadrami elites is providing AQAP with opportunities to maintain and enhance its position in the Hadramawt. In some areas—particularly in the southern reaches of the Hadramawt, where UAE-backed forces are most active—AQAP fighters act as guns for hire for disaffected elites who want to thwart what they see as a takeover by the UAE that could result in their permanent disempowerment. [8] At the same time that there is conflict between Hadrami elites, there is a struggle between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, whose conflicting agendas mean that the forces each backs do not always work together and, at times, even fight one another.

AQAP's leadership understands the financial and political advantages that will likely arise from allowing its fighters to act as mercenaries for select elites. The war in the Hadramawt will enrich AQAP while allowing it to continue to enmesh its operatives in local power structures.

Outlook

The complexity of the war in Yemen, the presence of outside actors with conflicting agendas, and the opportunity to tap into a variety of licit and illicit networks all favor the continued growth and development of AQAP. It has repeatedly demonstrated that it is an organization—or, more accurately, a plurality of organizations—that learns, adapts, evolves and stands ready to seize the advantage where possible. AQAP's ability to adapt to changing political and martial environments by remaining fluid is evidenced by its willingness to de-priori-

tize core aspects of its militant Salafist ideology in favor of more expedient and pragmatic strategies that enable it to build alliances, enmesh its operatives and tap into revenue streams.

The weakening position of Houthi and Houthi-allied forces on some fronts and the, as yet, limited possibility of their retreat from Sanaa will aid AQAP. The inability of coalition-backed forces to secure the areas that they claim to control is made clear by the almost daily attacks and bombings in Aden and across southern Yemen.

If coalition backed forces are able to force the Houthis to retreat, AQAP will move to fill some of the voids left by the Houthis and their allies—at least over the short-term. However, AQAP understands the danger of over-exposure. It will continue to conceal itself within Yemen's *matryoshka*-like war in order to pursue pragmatic strategies that preserve its alliances and access to licit and illicit trade networks. The leadership of AQAP recognizes that the future belongs to organizations that can rapidly adapt to and exploit dynamic environments.

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NOTES

[1] See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-us-terrorism.html>

[2] Author interviews, various Hadramawt-based ex-government officials (October-November 2016).

[3] Author interview with a Yemen-based journalist/analyst (December 2016).

[4] See: SITE Intelligence Group (January 10, 2018).

[5] See: Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 10, 2018.

[6] See: Peter Salisbury, "Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order," Chatham House, December 20, 2017.

[7] See: "Yemen: UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces," Human Rights Watch, June 22, 2017.

[8] Author interview with a Hadramawt-based journalist/analyst (January 2017); author interview with a former member of the Yemeni government (January 2017).