



Commentary

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U.S. efforts to uproot al-Qaeda’s Yemeni franchise often overlooked the country’s mercurial politics. As part of our series [The Legacy of 9/11 and the “War on Terror”](#), Peter Salisbury explains that the sectarianism the group espoused is still rife on all sides of Yemen’s war.

Misunderstanding Yemen

IN EARLY 2014, I found myself in the sparsely furnished front room of a nondescript breeze-block villa in Aden, a city in southern Yemen that was once one of the busiest ports in the world. My host was a man who once fought alongside Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and later helped what would become the local al-Qaeda franchise gain a foothold in Yemen.

He was recounting how, in 1993, a distant relative had arrived at his hideout in the mountains of Abyan, to Aden’s east. The visitor, a senior military official who like my host hailed from Abyan, had come from Sanaa, Yemen’s capital, with a message from President Ali Abdullah Saleh. “He said: ‘If you’re killing communists, that’s OK. But if you’re attacking the Americans, we have a problem’”.

My host’s father, who had died some years before, had been a powerful tribal leader in Abyan. In the 1960s, socialist and Arab nationalist revolutionaries ousted British forces who maintained a protectorate in southern Yemen and established a socialist republic. They tried to suppress southern tribal structures, which they considered backward and a rival power base, and many tribal leaders who had worked with the British fled the country. My host grew

up in exile in Jeddah, on Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea coast, pining for a home he hardly knew. Seeking revenge against the leftist ideologues he felt had robbed him of his birthright, he joined the mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Then, in the run-up to Yemen’s 1993 parliamentary elections, the country’s first since the socialist south had merged with the republican north three years earlier, he returned to his birthplace at the urging of bin Laden and other “Afghan Arabs” – often religiously inspired fighters who flocked to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets – as well as officials in Sanaa. Back in southern Yemen, he participated in an assassination campaign against socialist officials, with the blessing – and, likely, the active support – of Saleh’s northern regime.

Some in his cohort did not draw the line at the socialists. In December 1992, a group my host was affiliated with was accused of bombing two hotels housing U.S. Marines in Aden. The bombings did not kill any Marines but caused a stir in Sanaa, where officials were trying to repair fraught relations with Washington. Of course, my host said with a sly grin, he told



Shiite Huthi rebels man a checkpoint at the southern entrance to the city of Sanaa 15 November 2014.
REUTERS/Mohamed al-Sayaghi

Saleh's envoy that he had not been involved in the hotel bombings.

In their mountain hideout, my host and Saleh's emissary soon moved on to other, more pressing business. A civil war was looming between socialist leaders from the south, who sought to end the unity pact with the north, and Saleh. My host would play an important role in the fighting that broke out in May 1994. Working alongside senior military and intelligence officials in Sanaa, he recruited Afghan Arabs, serving as commander when they helped overrun Aden, and settled the conflict conclusively in the Saleh regime's favour. In return, the regime restored his family's lands in Abyan and handed him a senior role in the security services.

Getting his land and status back was probably my host's real goal all along, at least in the telling of people who had known him and his family for years. But as the hotel attack foreshadowed, many of his comrades in arms had bigger ideological aspirations. My host said he

played no part in the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, a warship that often docked in Aden during breaks from patrolling the Gulf and Arabian Sea as part of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. That attack was executed by members of what was then known as the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army. But he acknowledged that he knew some of those involved.

By the time we met, Yemen was in the midst of yet another upheaval. Saleh had been ousted from the presidency during the 2011 uprising, and Huthi rebels were marching toward Sanaa. My host had joined the southern independence movement that emerged after the 1994 war and gathered momentum in the 2000s, seemingly hedging his bets by forging ties with the secessionists but maintaining relations with Saleh's successor, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, a fellow Abyani whose family once formed part of his father's security detail. High-ranking government officials in Sanaa were paying the rent on his seafront villa, he claimed. Within months of our meeting, during which he extolled the

virtues of Scotch whisky, local media would accuse him of joining the avowedly ascetic Islamic State.

My host's story was colourful but in many ways in keeping with the twists and turns of Yemen's modern history, a series of marriages of convenience that have all too often come to a sudden and sticky end. The last time we spoke was over the phone in 2016. Another civil war, whose political landscape he was struggling to navigate, had broken out a year earlier. Fearing reprisals from his enemies, he had left Aden for Abyan's rugged terrain. The al-Qaeda militants, secessionist fighters and other armed groups who controlled the connecting roads wanted to kill him for his past transgressions, he said, making a meeting with me in Aden impossible.

Misunderstanding Yemen

Over the summer, as the 9/11 anniversary approached and the U.S. withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, I spent some time reading through notes taken during dozens of meetings in Yemen over the past decade. I wondered if I could find signals in the noise, a pattern showing that, in two messy decades of engagement forged by counter-terrorism priorities, the U.S. had ever understood Yemen.

By the time I arrived in Yemen for the first time in 2009, Saleh, who paid a high political and economic price in Washington and the region for supporting Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait (and whose regime was **accused of protecting and even providing employment** to some of the USS Cole bombers), had reinvented himself as a partner in the U.S. "war on terror". The U.S. wanted to decimate the local al-Qaeda franchise, and to prevent state collapse, which they believed would create a safe haven for transnational jihadists. In pursuit of these goals, from the early 2000s onward, Washington worked closely with Saleh, who

was enthusiastic about the endeavour in meetings with U.S. officials.

But instead of eliminating the al-Qaeda franchise, Washington's military-led approach seemed only to give the movement more momentum. By 2010, following a series of failed airliner bombings, U.S. officials warned that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), formed via a merger of the organisation's Saudi Arabian and Yemeni branches a year earlier, had become the **biggest threat to U.S. national security**. They said Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen of Yemeni heritage who had become an AQAP-affiliated cleric, was one of al-Qaeda's most successful figureheads and international recruiters.

Saleh, meanwhile, sought to use his burgeoning relationship with the U.S., the military and financial support that came with counter-terrorism cooperation, and U.S. mistrust of some of his regime's local allies to box them out of conversations with outside powers and consolidate his family's grip on power. Political and economic reforms pushed by Western powers to shore up state stability fell by the wayside. Yemen's elites **began to grumble**, warning of future civil strife. Western officials acknowledged Saleh's failings but were often blunt about why they felt unable to press him on reforms. "Counter-terrorism comes first, second and probably third" on the list of Western priorities, a European official told me in an emblematic remark in 2009.

Counter-terrorism was a lesser priority for ordinary Yemenis, who were far more concerned with the regime's governance failures and corruption as well as the crumbling rule of law. In 2011, popular anger over these problems drove the uprising that split the regime in two. Saleh loyalists attacked the protesters as well as military, tribal and political rivals who had joined them, sparking running street battles

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in Sanaa and other cities. The U.S. and other Western powers froze military support but at first sought to keep Saleh in place. “If Saleh goes”, [a U.S. official told The New Yorker](#) in April 2011, “the two likeliest outcomes are anarchy or a government that is not as friendly [to the U.S.]”. But that approach proved unsustainable. Saleh eventually stepped down under pressure from Gulf Arab states, following which the UN initiated a political transition.

Within three years, the transition had failed. In September 2014, the Huthis, a Zaydi Shiite religious revivalist movement that had evolved into a highly efficient rebel militia during six years of war with the Saleh regime in the 2000s, seized control of Sanaa – with Saleh’s support. Then, in February 2015, President Hadi, the transitional leader who had replaced Saleh in 2012 and was if anything an even more eager partner in the U.S. “war on terror” than Saleh had been, escaped house arrest in Sanaa. The Huthi-Saleh forces pursued Hadi south to Aden. At this point, Saudi Arabia, which saw the Huthis as a proxy for its regional nemesis, Iran, intervened to prevent a complete takeover, launching an intense campaign of aerial bombardment. Pressured by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Washington pledged its support. The deadliest of Yemen’s civil wars began in earnest.

Beards and Ideologues

A main beneficiary of the intensifying fighting was AQAP. Amid the chaos, its fighters and local affiliates [seized Mukalla](#), a port city in south-eastern Yemen, in April 2015. Rumours spread that former regime insiders had facilitated the takeover. [Such speculation was not new.](#) Many Yemenis had scoffed at Saleh’s reinvention of himself as a U.S. counter-terrorism partner, and readily embraced the notion that many AQAP-claimed attacks were really launched by “beards”, ie, [militants acting upon instructions from one regime faction or another.](#) Many thought the regime elements were using the “beards” to rid themselves of rivals while keeping the U.S. engaged in the pursuit of

jihadists. No one has ever produced conclusive proof of such collusion. But the Saleh regime had certainly been happy to use the Afghan Arabs in a similar fashion in the 1990s.

Whatever the case, AQAP was real, and it did have a measure of popular support. Decades of governance failures, corruption scandals and deepening autocracy, along with Saleh and Hadi’s willingness to allow the U.S. to conduct unaccountable remote warfare based on often shaky intelligence, had lent credibility to AQAP’s rhetoric. This rhetoric persisted even after the U.S. killed al-Awlaki, perhaps al-Qaeda’s most capable propagandist, in a drone strike. Similar drone strikes killed large numbers of civilians, including al-Awlaki’s son. They also killed alleged AQAP members [whose families argued they had been robbed of due process](#), sparking anger among ordinary Yemenis who understandably saw the deaths as intolerable violations of formal and customary law. Civil liberties advocates in the U.S., meanwhile, described strikes like the one that killed al-Awlaki as extrajudicial executions.

In early 2016, I interviewed a prominent Aden-based al-Qaeda recruiter and judge in the group’s homegrown justice system. AQAP had reached an apex in Yemen. His explanation of people’s motivations for joining the group were obviously self-serving, a form of propaganda in and of themselves. But he also understood and articulated ordinary Yemenis’ grievances better than most Western officials or counter-terrorism analysts I had met. Governance failures and drone strikes, he said, were excellent recruiting tools, as was the burgeoning civil war with the Huthis, whom he said were an ideal sectarian foil for AQAP. He repeatedly returned to the theme of justice and its absence under the U.S.-backed governments of Yemen’s past. “The American domination of Islamic and Arabic countries made people speak out and ask for justice. Our organisation came to return this nation to the place where it belongs. ... America and the West are still hiring regimes that oppress their own people while [these regimes]

live in riches. ... This is why this organisation will stay and others will appear based on the same ideology”.

The judge was largely uninterested in discussing attacks on the West, in keeping with shifts in al-Qaeda’s evolving global strategy of emphasising local struggles. AQAP’s leader at the time, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, was also al-Qaeda’s global operations chief and understood at the time to be among the movement’s top leaders. **He counselled the movement’s other wings to take a gradual, iterative approach to governing territory under their control**, citing AQAP’s experiences when the group temporarily established an “emirate” in southern Yemen in 2011 and 2012. AQAP pitched itself as a more capable and responsible alternative to the Yemeni government, rooted in Yemeni and Islamic values and culture, rather than the local manifestation of a transnational movement. Al-Qaeda leaders had become hesitant about using the movement’s name locally, and AQAP had experimented with rebranding itself, with its local operational wing given the name Ansar al-Sharia and its rule in Mukalla placed under the auspices of a group called the Sons of Hadramawt. AQAP also promoted itself as the only group truly capable of preventing a Huthi takeover of Sunni lands.

No matter how it branded itself, AQAP’s heyday did not last long. In April 2016, local forces backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pushed the group out of its Mukalla stronghold and uprooted it from many areas of Aden. AQAP subsequently mounted an insurgency across the south that reached its peak in 2017. But a combination of UAE and U.S. special forces attacks and U.S. drone strikes – which killed al-Wuhayshi in 2015 and his successor Qasim al-Raymi in 2020 – along with internal political rifts that may have led some members to turn informant on their colleagues, turned the group into a shadow of its former self. Its leadership and rank and file now appear **mostly concerned with their own survival**. The group’s once prolific media output has slowed to a trickle. Many rank-and-file

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fighters have slipped away to the front to fight the Huthis under the command of military and tribal leaders overseen by the government and the Saudi-led coalition. Others have become guns for hire in the internecine battles that have undermined the cohesion of anti-Huthi forces since the war began.

The anti-AQAP campaign created complications within the Saudi-led coalition battling the Huthis. That effort was built around cooperation with local forces mostly recruited and trained by the UAE, Saudi Arabia’s main coalition partner in the war at the time. U.S. officials admitted that, although their special forces worked alongside the UAE in Yemen, **they were not entirely sure who their Yemeni partners were**. The local forces’ identity soon came into focus. Many of the UAE-backed fighters would go on to form the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a pro-independence group that ousted the Hadi government from Aden after street battles there in August 2019. The STC says it plans on building an independent southern state, and its leadership, taking a leaf from Saleh’s book, is keen to market itself as a highly capable counter-terrorism partner for the U.S.

A Suffusion of Salafis

The UAE also tapped into a network of scholars associated with the Salafi Dar al-Hadith religious school. Many alumni had fought the Huthis during recurrent skirmishes around the group’s main religious institute in the north in the 2000s, before being evacuated as part of a government-negotiated deal in early 2014. UAE military officers found the Salafis to be among the most competent, disciplined and motivated fighters they encountered in Yemen. Salafi commanders subsequently spearheaded campaigns from Saudi Arabian territory into the Huthi heartland in Saada from 2016 onward, as well

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as the 2018 assault on Yemen’s Red Sea coast and incursions into Huthi-controlled territory in al-Bayda governorate on the old north-south border in 2021.

The Dar-al-Hadith network’s evolution since 2015 illustrates the mutations of Yemeni Salafism as a result of the war. The Dar al-Hadith institute’s founder, Muqbil al-Wadeii, was openly sectarian and critical of Western influence, but opposed to al-Qaeda’s violent global campaign. Dar al-Hadith promoted an apolitical “quietist” worldview that included obedience to Muslim leaders in line with the views of the Salafi clergy in Saudi Arabia. But the fighting around the Dar al-Hadith school in Saada that erupted in the 2010s affected its followers’ position on violence. The sectarian teachings of Wadeii, who branded Zaydis as unbelievers and heretics, and accused Zaydi scholars of promoting “reprehensible innovations”, had already been used to excuse the destruction of Zaydi graves and shrines (but not to reject the rule of Saleh, a Zaydi himself). A 2015 ruling by the Dar al-Hadith network’s current leader, Yahya al-Hajouri, gave his followers permission to take up arms as a defensive measure.

The Dar al-Hadith network had **already fragmented by the beginning of the war**. Personal rivalries and doctrinal differences have divided Dar al-Hadith alumni, the same Salafi leader told me, over whether they should take part in offensive operations against the Huthis or limit themselves to self-defence, and over who is Yemen’s rightful ruler. The leaders of Yemen’s now numerous Salafi factions are steeped in the Dar al-Hadith school’s debates; yet, along with military prowess, some have acquired a taste for power that outstrips their commitment to strictly religious causes. Many of the younger fighters under their command have a more rudimentary worldview. Some

profess no interest in Salafi ideology, hoping only to get paid, while others focus mainly on the war’s sectarian dimensions. Although the Salafi fighters I interviewed on the Red Sea coast in 2018 and in Aden in 2019 vehemently denied any ties to AQAP, they described the war as primarily a religious struggle between Sunnis and Shiites.

Stored-Up Trouble

All these developments raise the question of whether continued focus on the hollowed-out AQAP brand and a largely defunct transnational threat is a distraction from a real problem being stored up for Yemen’s future: the tens of thousands of religiously motivated fighters on both sides of the civil war. Like many of their Salafi counterparts, many Huthi-aligned fighters engage in highly sectarian rhetoric and are driven to fight for religious reasons. The Huthis regularly accuse the government and Saudis of working alongside al-Qaeda, branding rival fighters as either mercenaries or terrorists. It is all too easy to imagine that, in a post-war Yemen, any actor discontented with the new order – whether AQAP or some al-Qaeda-like entity, one faction or another of Yemen’s elites, or an outside power with a regional agenda, or all of the above – will be able to tap a rich vein of sectarianism among the ex-fighters and use it for their own ends.

A discussion should start now about how to deal with these fighters, and the social problems they are likely to create once the present war is over (and indeed the problems they are already causing). More “over the horizon” drone strikes or special forces raids designed to deter people from joining AQAP are not the answer, at least not for Yemen. What is needed is a deeper understanding of who is fighting on the ground and more thinking about how to bring them

into a more inclusive and stable society, as challenging as that may sound.

I have repeatedly asked Saudi and Emirati officials what they expect will become of the many fighters they and their Yemeni allies have **recruited directly and indirectly** when the war ends, in particular if it ends with the Huthis in a position of significant power. This problem, a UAE official said, will be the UN's to handle. As for Saudi officials, they say all Yemeni forces will be integrated into the national army, apparently presupposing that Riyadh's Yemeni allies will oversee this force. The UN says it has only the outlines of a demobilisation and reintegration plan for fighters in Yemen, an undertaking that would be massive, costly and contingent on a peace deal that concludes not just the main battle between the Huthis and Hadi forces, but many other violent rivalries across the country. U.S. officials I have spoken to profess "deep concern" but say they have no specific policies in place to deal with post-war reintegration of fighters.

Yemen's Forever Wars

Recent years of Washington's so-called war on terror have produced little in the way of introspection about why counter-terrorism policies stumbled in places like Yemen, where short-term goals obscured proper analysis of what was happening. I find it hard to believe that the U.S. will change its ways and decide that it needs to develop a deeper understanding of Yemen and its people in order to make better policy. The Biden administration says it wants to end the "forever wars" the U.S. embarked upon in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, among other things to focus on domestic threats and great-power competition with China. Stepped-up security and surveillance have made major terrorist attacks inside the U.S. far less likely than they were two decades ago, making places like Yemen less important regardless of the size of their al-Qaeda franchises, which in any case are increasingly focused on local goals.

Powerful voices in Washington policy circles want to see U.S. involvement in the Yemen war ended as quickly as possible. Some in this camp are motivated by humanitarian concerns and a sense that the U.S. is complicit in an enormously destructive war. Others seem more driven by an impatience to extricate the U.S. from an intractable mess in a region that is no longer a priority for strategists who have turned their gaze toward the Pacific.

But in Yemen, the legacy of U.S. influence will be felt for decades, even after U.S. disengagement, as Yemen's own wars refract and repeat. Some Yemenis will argue that there was a plan – a grand conspiracy – behind the U.S. intervention and retreat, designed to sow chaos and keep Yemen weak and malleable, along with the rest of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Others will say, ruefully, that it was simply all a misunderstanding.