

The next base? Concerns about Somalia and Yemen

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As the al-Qaeda organisation in Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to suffer serious setbacks, two important regional affiliates—Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), headquartered in Yemen, and Somalia’s al-Shabaab movement—are growing stronger. Foreign fighters are flocking to these battlegrounds to participate in the global jihad. Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical US born cleric, has been responsible for radicalising a number of prize recruits—non-Arabs with Western passports. AQAP’s been responsible for all of the major terrorist plots against the West in the past two years.

Not only are Somalia and Yemen unstable and attractive to foreign fighters, there’s a growing worry that the two affiliates are beginning to cooperate with each other. And, as Yemen’s and Somalia’s instability grows, their ability to curb the militant groups is waning. It now falls to domestic counter-terrorism efforts to pick up the slack.

Somalia and Yemen: failing states

Somalia’s the very definition of a failed state. It has no functioning government and hasn’t had one since 1992. The end of the Siad Barre regime plunged the country into a civil war that’s still unresolved. Executive power currently rests with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a UN-brokered authority established in 2004, but it effectively controls only a few blocks of the capital, Mogadishu. Because of the decades of fighting and the weakness of the TFG, the Somali Government is unable to provide even the most basic services to its citizens. The Fund for Peace’s Failed State Index has ranked Somalia as the number 1 failed state, three years running.¹

The TFG’s been battling its rival, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), since the mid-1990s and has only recently entered a truce agreement after a US-backed Ethiopian military intervention helped rout the ICU out of Mogadishu in 2006. Despite the truce, the TFG has failed to gain widespread support among Somalis. Conflict continues in central and southern Somalia as the TFG continues to battle al-Shabaab, a youth militia that grew out of the ICU and has ties to al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab controls all of southern Somalia.

In many areas of the country, al-Shabaab is the only organisation that provides education (although only an ‘Islamic’ education, with a limited and fundamentalist curriculum), medical services, food distribution centres and justice, albeit under harsh interpretations of Islamic law. Despite the violence

it brings with it, al-Shabaab is able to win over tribes in its area because it can provide rudimentary services.²

Yemen's another country on the brink. Its country statistics scrape the bottom of the barrel. It's the poorest country in the Arab world, with a GDP per capita of only US\$1230.00. Illiteracy is at 50%. Its already large population is growing at a rate of 3.4% a year. Seventy-five per cent of Yemen's population is under 22, and there's limited access to quality education. Unemployment is the norm.

Yemen is also running out of its two most important resources—water and oil. Sanaa is likely to be the first capital city in the world to run out of water. Resource analysts have estimated that the country's oil supplies, which provide Yemen with 75% of its income, will be depleted by 2017, and the government has no plans in place to transition to a post-oil economy.

Yemen is at war on many fronts—a rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement in the south—and internally Ali Abdel Saleh is an embattled president, struggling to hold on to power in the face of protests demanding his ouster. In contrast to the largely secular protests elsewhere in the region, Abdul Majid al Zindani, a cleric who was once a mentor to Osama bin Laden, has joined the protests and is calling for an Islamic state in Yemen. Inserted into this maelstrom is Yemen's battle with AQAP, which recently relocated its headquarters from Saudi Arabia to Yemen. Already unstable under Saleh, Yemen could descend into chaos if he's deposed.

Al-Qaeda finds a new home

Somalia and Yemen—two of the most unstable countries on the planet—also happen to be extremely close to each other in geography, history and connections between their tribes and people. There's a healthy arms trade and illegal people movements between them. Unfortunately, al-Qaeda's another one of those connections. AQAP in Yemen and al-Shabaab in Somalia are the most active al-Qaeda affiliates. They're resurgent at a time when the al-Qaeda core in Afghanistan and Pakistan has suffered serious setbacks.

Al-Qaeda affiliates in more troublesome regions like Yemen and Somalia are picking up the slack—operationally and ideologically. As al-Qaeda members feel the pinch in Afghanistan and Pakistan, many have moved on to Yemen and Somalia, where there is a more permissive operating environment. According to US law enforcement reports, thirty-four al-Qaeda operatives from other locations, including Pakistan, Iraq and Guantanamo, have relocated to Sanaa.³

AQAP in Yemen and al-Shabaab in Somalia are seeking to transform their narrow national conflicts into part of the global jihad and have welcomed foreign fighters, particularly from the US, Europe and Australia. Counter-terrorism officials have estimated that hundreds, maybe thousands, of insurgents from Iraq and Afghanistan have also relocated to Somalia and Yemen.⁴

For the first time since the inception of the al-Qaeda organisation, intelligence officials have assessed that one of its offshoots is more of a threat than the core organisation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵ They describe AQAP as 'more agile and aggressive' and the more potent threat to Western interests.

Since 2006, AQAP's been the hand behind a number of high-profile plots. In 2008, seven men conducted a well-organised attack on the US Embassy in Sanaa; a number of civilians were killed in the ensuing shoot-out. Then, in 2009, AQAP attempted to assassinate Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of the Interior, Mohammed bin Nayif, the man perhaps most responsible for AQAP's ouster from the kingdom.

This resurgence is all the more disturbing because seven years ago the organisation was on its last legs. US airstrikes had killed its leader,

Abu Ali al-Harithi, and the rest of the organisation spent its time dodging Yemeni and Saudi security services rather than formulating terrorist plots. Now the Yemeni Government is distracted by internal conflicts and faces a governance crisis.⁶

This has given AQAP a second chance to train, organise and plan terrorist operations in Yemen and elsewhere. Its members even feel comfortable enough to appear openly in public, unmasked, in front of international news cameras, as two militants did in December 2009 at an anti-government rally in southern Yemen.⁷

Somalia, too, has longstanding al-Qaeda connections. The terrorists who conducted the 1998 attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2002 attack against a hotel in Kenya used Somalia as an operating base to recruit, train and smuggle weapons.⁸ The rise of al-Shabaab has broadened Somalia's ties: the group formally pledged its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2007.

Al-Shabaab is a large organisation with fractured and competing branches. Not all of its adherents and leaders are connected, operationally or ideologically, with al-Qaeda. However, with the Ethiopian invasion, it gained popular backing as a resistance movement and framed its fight in the narrative of global jihad. Foreign fighters in Somalia jumped on this opportunity to globalise the conflict and started funnelling support.

The number of al-Qaeda linked foreign fighters in Somalia varies widely, anywhere from 20 to 300. But a number of al-Qaeda fighters who trained in Afghanistan are reported to have gone to southern Somalia to train in al-Shabaab camps, and al-Shabaab has provided them with bodyguards and safe haven.⁹ Soon after al-Shabaab declared allegiance to al-Qaeda, it started importing al-Qaeda tactics—suicide bombings, improvised explosive device attacks, remote-controlled detonations and propaganda framed around the global Islamic jihad.¹⁰

The elements of al-Shabaab with the most connection to global jihadists are the mixed clan militias. They have disciplined and indoctrinated fighters, including foreign fighters from the US, Yemen, Australia, Europe and Afghanistan. The militias, sprinkled with foreign fighters, are al-Shabaab's link to al-Qaeda Central. Since 2006, the group has carried out twenty-five suicide attacks inside Somalia, many of them by foreign fighters (one of whom was Shirwa Ahmed, who became the first known American suicide bomber in 2008).

Though al-Shabaab purportedly seeks the creation of an 'Islamic States of Somalia' comprising Somalia, Somaliland, Puntland, north-east Kenya and the Ogaden, it's limited its operations outside Somali territory. Until a couple of years ago, it confined its attacks to Somalia and mostly against African peacekeeping troops, who've worked in concert with the Ethiopian military. Then, on 11 July 2009, al-Shabaab carried out two coordinated attacks in Kampala, Uganda, killing 74 people. That attack represented a marked shift in al-Shabaab tactics. It was the group's first attack outside Somalia. Although the exact motivation for the attack was unclear, it pointed to a greater internationalisation of al-Shabaab's target sets and aims, perhaps due to the influence of foreign fighters.

There's also fear that Somalia's instability could creep into Djibouti. The UNHCR has estimated that there are 10,000 Somali refugees inside Djibouti, and the number's rising every week. There's an open and undefended border between the two countries, and only one official border crossing, in the dusty village of Loyada. Somali refugees make their way through Loyada on their way to Yemen and other Gulf countries. Djibouti immigration officials have already stopped a number of foreign men, including Iraqi nationals and some Somali Americans with US passports.

Cooperating for war

There's growing worry that the two regional affiliates—al-Shabaab and AQAP— are starting to work together, and not just with the al-Qaeda core in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So far, there's only circumstantial evidence of a coordinated campaign between militants in Yemen and Somalia, but according to Ted Dagne of the Congressional Research Service, 'you have elements in both countries with the same jihadist and extremist ideology ... The geographic proximity allows these extremists to sustain themselves and coordinate their efforts.'¹¹

Concern peaked when a senior al-Shabaab leader, Sheikh Mukhtar Robow Abu Mansour, announced that he was prepared to send al-Shabaab fighters to Yemen. 'We tell our Muslim brothers in Yemen that we will cross the water between us and reach your place to assist you fight the enemy of Allah ... I call upon the young men in Arab lands to join the fight there,' he said in an official statement. There's no evidence so far that al-Shabaab fighters have crossed over into Yemen, but there are fears that they could be hidden among the large numbers of Somali refugees in Sanaa.

The Somali Deputy Minister of Defence, Rashad al-Alimi, reported in 2010 that Yemeni militants sent al-Shabaab two boatloads of arms. Somali officials confirmed those claims, stating that twelve al-Qaeda members crossed from Yemen into Somalia, bringing money and fighting expertise to Somali rebels. Treasury Minister Abdirahman Omar Osman told Reuters reporters, 'They were sent off to assess the situation to see if al-Qaeda may move its biggest military bases to southern Somalia since they are facing a lot of pressure in Afghanistan and Iraq ... They brought money to al-Shabaab which had been facing difficulties to recruit more fighters because of cash shortages.' He said that they entered Somalia disguised as foreign aid workers.¹²

According to leading Yemen expert Saeed Obaid, 'Somalia for Yemen is becoming like what Pakistan is for Afghanistan.' Weapons and explosives from Yemen are making their way into Somalia easily and on a regular basis. Those weapons have also been traced to al-Qaeda attacks in Saudi Arabia, such as the assassination attempt on Nayif and the attack on the US Consulate in Jeddah.

Distracted by other conflicts

The jihadist and insurgent connections between Somalia and Yemen are overlain by regional conflicts that constrict even more each country's ability to conduct counter-terrorism operations against al-Shabaab and AQAP.

The Houthi rebellion in Yemen's north has not only further eroded the government's authority, but has threatened to become a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

It has also distracted the Yemeni Government from its fight against al-Qaeda. There are reports that the government has diverted US and British counter-terrorism support and funding, intended for Yemeni operations against AQAP, to use against Houthi rebels.¹³ The Houthis aren't connected to al-Qaeda, despite the Yemeni Government's attempt to lump them together, but they've been critical of the government's role in the global war on terror and its cooperation with the US.¹⁴

To complicate matters more, AQAP recently declared jihad against the Shia Houthis, claiming that their conflict is displacing Wahhabi militants.¹⁵ AQAP's willingness to go after Houthi fighters has given it a temporary pass from the Yemeni security services, who see the attacks as helping their cause against the northern rebel movement. The Salah government has been known to use this tactic before, when Salah aligned with Sunni radicals against southern secessionists in 1994.

Yemen's distracting internal conflicts and Saudi Arabia's growing involvement in combating the Houthi rebellion have also led to fears that an AQAP now based in Yemen could once again be a danger to Saudi Arabia. In March 2010, the Interior Ministry in Saudi Arabia announced the arrest of a two-cell, 113-person network tied to al-Qaeda. The network was made up mostly of Saudis and Yemenis, but also included one Somali, a Bangladeshi and an Eritrean. It was the largest such arrest since AQAP relocated out of the kingdom into Yemen. The network was alleged to have plotted an attack on oil facilities and security installations in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia.

Many of those arrested had entered Saudi Arabia on temporary visas given to Muslims to visit holy sites, or by crossing illegally from Yemen.¹⁶ The age range of those involved, 18 to 25, suggests an emerging generation of *jihadis*. They were all younger than the al-Qaeda members identified by the Saudi Government since 2003. AQAP's also sought to radicalise the Saudi military. Al-Shihri released an audio message in August 2010 titled 'Together to overthrow al-Saud', in which he advised those in the Saudi armed forces to use their positions to wage jihad.¹⁷

AQAP's main target—the West

Although regional instability in Saudi Arabia caused by AQAP elements is worrying, what's most disturbing is AQAP's growing international reach. It was AQAP, a regional affiliate, not al-Qaeda Central, that was responsible for all of the latest high-profile attacks against the West.

There was a failed bombing in 2009, when a young Nigerian man, Umar Farouk Abdul Mutalab, groomed by AQAP, boarded a Northwest Airlines flight on Christmas Day with a bomb in his underwear. It was only the quick thinking of crew and passengers that saved the plane. In 2010, AQAP attempted another innovative attack on cargo planes, sending explosives hidden in printer cartridges via UPS from Yemen to Chicago. The attack was another close call—the bombs were detected only hours before they were timed to detonate.

AQAP's made a concerted effort to recruit Westerners, inside the US and in Yemen and Somalia, to conduct attacks against Western interests. Perhaps the individual most responsible for this is Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born cleric of Yemeni background. Al-Awlaki has become one of al-Qaeda's most able spokesmen and recruiters. So potent is his radicalising power that there's an order out for his assassination.

The string of recent attacks and radicalisation cases loops back to the influence of Awlaki. Major Nidal Hassan, who killed thirteen people at Fort Hood in Texas in 2009, was radicalised and encouraged by Awlaki through email correspondence. Sharif Mobley, a Somali American who was arrested in Yemen, travelled there to seek out Awlaki to become his spiritual mentor. Awlaki's also believed to have provided at least 'spiritual support' to Mutalab, the underwear bomber, whom he first met in 2005 while studying Arabic in Yemen.

Muslim convert Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, who fired upon an Arkansas recruiting station in 2009, had also spent time in Yemen and was radicalised by Awlaki. Before his attack, he'd been detained in Yemen the previous year with a fake Somali passport, explosives manuals and literature by the radical cleric. Even Faisal Shahzad, the failed Times Square bomber, admitted that he was inspired by Awlaki's preachings.

AQAP's targeting of Westerners goes beyond al-Awlaki, however. Al-Qaeda's English-language magazine isn't produced in the UK or Pakistan, but in Yemen. *Inspire* magazine, first published in July 2010 and now on its fourth issue, marks a new level of engagement and radicalisation effort directed towards Western audiences. The magazine's slickly produced and written in perfect English. It's

purportedly produced and edited by Samir Khan, a young American citizen from North Carolina who relocated to Yemen.

Inspire offers theoretical justifications for violence and stealing in the name of jihad, as well as practical advice on conducting operations in the West. It advocates small-scale attacks, like running people over with pickup trucks or shooting up Washington DC restaurants during the lunch rush. Most of all, it emphasises that anyone can participate in jihad in their own country, and doesn't have to travel to join the *mujahidin* in the Middle East or Pakistan.

The latest issue of *Inspire* argues that small-scale attacks are best, inadvertently highlighting al-Qaeda's current inability to carry out more spectacular operations: 'to bring down America we do not need to strike big. The aim is to bleed the enemy to death.' To prove that point, the November issue of *Inspire* was dedicated to covering 'Operation Hemorrhage', the 2010 operation targeting cargo flights, emphasising its low cost and three-month timeline from inception to execution.

Another concern for US counter-terrorism officials is a number of Americans who have converted to Islam and been radicalised in US jails. About three dozen individuals who were recently released from prison travelled to Yemen and are feared to be training with AQAP. There's been no evidence of any plots to date, but they're exactly the kind of individuals that AQAP is seeking to recruit—non-Arabs with US passports.

Australia isn't immune either. A recent *Foreign Correspondent* report revealed that Australians were training alongside other foreigners with AQAP in Yemen. Australians have often travelled to Yemen for religious training, but now there are at least twenty who are classified as 'persons of interest', having first come to Yemen to study and now thought to be linked to extremists in the country. According to *Foreign Correspondent's* source, there were at least two Australians training with AQAP in a camp in Shabwa Province. He also claimed that there were more Australians at another camp in Abyan Province: 'I saw four or five Australians. They were of Indonesian origin but they had Australian passports. One of them went by the name of Abu Nassir. I saw Germans there too and Somalis, Saudis.'¹⁸

Al-Shabaab is also internationalising its struggle. In 2008, al-Shabaab commander Mukhtar Robow told al-Jazeera television that, after defeating foreign influences in Somalia, al-Shabaab would 'continue fighting and secure the freedom of many other places in the world from the colonialists'. Some analysts have suspected that, despite Somalia's reputation as inhospitable to foreigners, al-Shabaab would have an easier time getting international recruits because of its 'cosmopolitan leadership'. Decades of war have scattered Somalia's refugees from South Africa to Minnesota, and the diaspora communities have links back into the fighting in Somalia.

Intelligence sources have claimed that 'The past few years have seen the arrival in Somalia of 200 to 300 young ethnic Somali men from the US, Britain, Canada, Australia, Norway and Sweden, migrants' children returning to their ancestral homeland.' In 2009, several Somali Americans were arrested in Minnesota after returning from training with al-Shabaab in Somalia. There was also the case of about 24 Somali Americans who previously disappeared from St Paul, presumably to also fight alongside al-Shabaab.¹⁹ The *New York Times* released an investigative report detailing how the Minneapolis group used social networking sites to communicate with their friends back in the US, urging them to travel to Somalia and join the jihad.

Interestingly, al-Shabaab's video declaring allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2008 featured Omar Hammami, a Muslim convert and former University of Southern Alabama student who spoke the declaration in English instead of the usual Arabic. The video was much higher quality than previous al-Shabaab videos and was designed to appeal to a foreign audience, with snazzy graphics overlaid with *jihadi* rap music.

Sweden's also seen a rise in young Somalis returning to join al-Shabaab. Sweden accepts about 1000 refugees from Somalia per month, and many have had a difficult time adjusting. Extremist elements have grown in Gothenberg, where many Somalis have settled. Law enforcement officials in Sweden have said that pro-Shabaab refugees have been recruiting among the refugee population, and they estimate that there are about 40 Swedish al-Shabaab currently inside Somalia.

The UK and Canada have also seen their share of Somalis with British passports returning to join al-Shabaab. But, as a recent ASPI policy analysis by Raffaello Pantucci pointed out, the concern in the UK goes beyond Somali immigrants. There are reports that there are a growing number of British Urdu speakers in al-Shabaab's ranks.²⁰

Australia hasn't escaped the radicalisation in Somalia, either. Operation Neath, Australia's largest counter-terrorism operation to date, traced connections back to Somalia. In August 2009, police arrested five men, two of Somali origin, on the grounds that they were plotting to attack the Holsworthy army barracks outside Sydney. The key plotters were taped communicating with individuals in Somalia. They were allegedly seeking to train with al-Shabaab militants, and sought a fatwa condoning the attack. Three out of the five men arrested were found guilty in December, 2010.

Conclusion

As al-Qaeda fades from relevance in the Arab world, especially in the light of democratic movements that have toppled two of the region's dictators and put others on notice, al-Qaeda is likely to redouble its efforts in Yemen and Somalia, two countries where its foothold doesn't appear to be slipping. So far, there are trickles of cooperation between al-Shabaab and AQAP, but growing instability in both countries could allow ties to deepen, bleeding instability to the region in between the Gulf and the Horn of Africa.

One of the most dangerous things they could cooperate on is the training and exchange of foreign fighters, Australians included. Australian passport holders who travel to either one of these destinations for training pose a serious threat to national security interests and domestic safety. Although intelligence cooperation with key allies like the US is important, Australia will also need to adjust its domestic counter-terrorism focus as the al-Qaeda threat migrates from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Yemen and Somalia.

Endnotes

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