A New Model for Defeating al Qaeda in Yemen

Katherine Zimmerman

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KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN

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The terrorist threat from Yemen is growing. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), still likely the most potent al Qaeda terrorist threat to the US homeland, has expanded and strengthened as the Yemeni state has collapsed. AQAP’s success buttresses the global al Qaeda network, which remains cohesive despite the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS).

AQAP’s capabilities to conduct transnational attacks—for example, to design bombs that can travel undetected—remain. The question is when, not if, AQAP will strike next. ISIS also now has a foothold inside Yemen that will only increase under current conditions. ISIS may not be plotting an attack against the West from Yemen, but its expansion into Yemen builds the ISIS narrative and will only serve to strengthen ISIS globally.

The current US approach to Yemen, christened the “Yemen model,” has failed alongside the Yemeni state. America’s counterterrorism partnership ran through the Yemeni government and relied on Yemeni military forces to fight AQAP on the ground. In the wake of the collapse of that partnership, the US is now backing a Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen in hopes of returning that government, or some iteration of it, to power in order to pick up where the partnership left off. But the Yemeni military forces are so degraded today that they will not be able to fight AQAP effectively once the current conflict ends, and this effort to resuscitate the Yemen model does not appreciate that the US approach was not working in the first place.

The American strategy to fight AQAP in Yemen prioritized a military response to AQAP’s threat. American air strikes targeted AQAP leadership, and Yemeni forces disrupted AQAP ground movements. Nonetheless, AQAP reemerged after a major offensive against it in 2012 and again in 2014. Part of its resilience has come from AQAP’s ability to exploit local popular grievances, which the Yemeni government has avoided addressing for decades and which afford the group the operational and territorial latitude so vital to its success.

These local grievances are driving Yemen’s own instability. The fundamental and clear lesson from past experience is that the terrorist threat from Yemen is not susceptible to a kinetic solution. As daunting a task as it is, no strategy against AQAP will be successful if it does not address underlying factors key to AQAP’s continued prosperity.

Complicating matters, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have pulled Yemen into their expanding regional proxy war, a growing challenge for any Yemen strategy. Even more problematic for the United States, both Tehran and Riyadh have picked sides in Yemen’s civil war, and neither is fighting AQAP. Perceptions of the US role from both Riyadh, an important ally in the region, and Tehran, a linchpin of the new Iran deal, mean that most decisions made by Washington will appear to be tipping the regional balance to one or the other player.

The US must identify a way forward and lead a coordinated regional response in Yemen. Specifically, Washington must work with both regional and local partners to defeat AQAP and to negotiate a political solution to the current crisis by

- Engaging in a multitedered effort to negotiate a political settlement among Yemeni stakeholders to end the national-level conflict and signal clearly that the Zaydi Shi’a al Houthi movement must be a part of Yemen’s future;
- Supporting subnational actors to stabilize local dynamics and understand and address underlying grievances;
- Leading a ground offensive against AQAP by coordinating and supporting partnered local forces and conducting direct-action operations to destroy the direct and imminent threat from AQAP; and
- Managing and mitigating a humanitarian crisis by addressing the immediate needs of the population, prioritizing aid delivery to key terrain, and delivering targeted aid through US Agency for International Development channels similar to those run in Iraq or Afghanistan.
These efforts, particularly the ground offensive against AQAP, will generate a reaction. US personnel deployed to Yemen will be in harm’s way, although there are steps to take to minimize that risk. AQAP and ISIS will both probably seize the opportunity to kill Americans, and we must prepare ourselves for casualties. It may be much more appetizing to fight from the sky, but the only way to win will be on the ground.

A win against al Qaeda in Yemen will last only if it is part of a global strategy to operate against al Qaeda, ISIS, and like-minded groups. The proposed approach should not be taken as a model for such a global fight, as experience shows that there is no single answer to this complex problem. Instead, similar concepts must be developed for all the theaters in which al Qaeda and ISIS operate today, which together will comprise a comprehensive strategy to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS.
The United States needs a new strategy in Yemen. Its current approach to combating al Qaeda there has collapsed as the country has slid deeper into civil war. Yet the al Qaeda threat is growing, fed by regional dynamics that are driving radicalism and sectarianism. Yemen has become a third battleground for the Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy war. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) are already dominating forces in Iraq and Syria, and the global jihadist movement, in which the two compete, is on the rise. So also in Yemen both the al Qaeda affiliate, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and an ISIS franchise are growing. US strategy in Yemen must be robust enough to not only defeat both groups, but also de-escalate the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, at least in the Yemen theater.

Current US strategy seeks to defeat the threat to American interests from AQAP through a counterterrorism partnership and drone strikes. Drone strikes alone have never defeated an al Qaeda group. Furthermore, the Yemeni military forces on which US strategy relied to fight al Qaeda on the ground are divided, degraded, and fighting one another. In fact, none of the ground forces in Yemen are fighting al Qaeda. The government that was the US counterterrorism partner fled the country in March 2015. The Yemeni state has fractured, and the US, among other countries, is trying to put it back together to salvage what is left of a counterterrorism strategy.

The prospects are grim. Yemen has been in a slow downward spiral since at least September 2014, and external factors are accelerating its demise. A coup d’état by the Zaydi Shi’a al Houthi movement, openly backed by Iran, ended in January 2015 with the resignation of Yemen’s executive branch. Local militia forces resisted the al Houthis’ expansion from their northern stronghold into central and southern Yemen. A Saudi-led military intervention only recently broke a six-month stalemate but in the process destroyed critical infrastructure, including parts of the Yemeni military. It also exacerbated a growing humanitarian crisis that could become a mass refugee crisis, potentially spreading the al Qaeda contagion throughout the region. Ongoing mediation efforts among key stakeholders show few signs of real progress. A rapid resolution to the conflict in Yemen is improbable.

The Yemeni state no longer exists. The al Houthi movement controls northern Yemen, including the capital, Sana’a, and al Hudaydah, one of three major port cities. The al Houthis are allied with a former nemesis, longtime president and US partner Ali Abdullah Saleh, with whom Saudi Arabia refuses to negotiate. The nominal Yemeni government, led by recent counterterrorism partner Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, has cobbled together a factionalized resistance force to roll back al Houthi gains. That force, which includes Saudi and Emirati components, now controls Yemen’s southern port city of Aden and is pushing northward.

But the supporting factions include southern secessionists, who may see an alliance with Hadi as only temporary. It depends on the quiescence of the southern tribes, among some of which AQAP has embedded itself. And al Qaeda’s Yemeni affiliate controls the third major port city, al Mukalla, in the country’s east where it has expanded its safe haven. Even should the al Houthis, Saleh, and Hadi find a compromise, they are unlikely to focus on AQAP or be able to control its current sanctuaries any time soon.

AQAP has expanded and strengthened without opposition and is growing stronger ties to an insurgency in Yemen. It is adept at exploiting local grievances for its own gains. Similar to al Qaeda’s growth in Syria, AQAP is integrating into local governance structures and, in some places, has gained support as the de facto military power. It will be much more difficult to separate AQAP from the population today than it was in 2012, when AQAP last controlled terrain in Yemen.

This time, there is no Yemeni military to speak of to prosecute a counterinsurgency offensive in Yemen, a key component of the US strategy. AQAP also remains focused on transnational attacks, a capability that shot it to the top of the terrorism threat list. Targeted strikes and intelligence of whatever quality the US maintains in Yemen may be able to disrupt AQAP’s efforts, but
they will not defeat them. There will be another AQAP attack against American interests.

The endurance of AQAP in Yemen is crucial for the global al Qaeda network. AQAP preserves al Qaeda’s Yemen sanctuary, which has supported al Qaeda operations for more than two decades. That sanctuary overlaps with a major smuggling network that runs northward into the heart of the Arabian Peninsula and westward into East Africa. Recently, al Qaeda has run its transnational attacks through AQAP, probably in recognition of AQAP’s attack capabilities but also because of the ability to move through the region. AQAP has supported al Qaeda’s primary fight in Syria, too. Senior members within al Qaeda’s hierarchy have also been leaders within AQAP as the senior al Qaeda leadership has become increasingly decentralized.

A strategy to defeat the AQAP threat will also deal a significant blow to the al Qaeda network if that strategy is nested in a global effort. The past 14 years have proven that the US counterterrorism strategies are not working. A full-scale military invasion risks worsening the problem and generating an insurgency that empowers al Qaeda. Delegating the fight to local proxies, such as the George W. Bush administration did in Somalia in 2006, can have the same effect.

A counterterrorism partnership that runs through the central government, which the Obama administration prefers, has generally been ineffective, as in Yemen, or counterproductive, as in Nigeria, at least until recently. There is no cookie-cutter approach. Instead, there must be a theater-by-theater approach of tailored strategies that work in synergy globally. Until then, the al Qaeda threat will remain.

Developing such a strategy requires understanding the situation in Yemen objectively and in detail. AQAP is growing because of Yemen’s internal political and military crises, which spring from deep-rooted grievances among the population. No meaningful strategy to defeat AQAP can ignore those crises or grievances, however superficially appealing it might be to focus only on killing terrorists.

Therefore, this report starts by considering the current crises in Yemen and the state of play on Yemen’s many battlefields. The situation is fluid and will certainly have changed by the time of publication, but it is not likely to have been fundamentally altered. The effective change in American strategy in Iraq in 2007 resulted from a paradigm shift. The new approach not only focused on providing security to the Iraqi population, but also recognized that the sectarian nature of Iraq’s government and security forces was a central part of the problem creating space for al Qaeda in Iraq to flourish.

A new strategy for Yemen requires a similar, suitably modified paradigm shift that begins by recognizing that the political and military struggle among the al Houthis, Saleh’s forces, the Saudis and their allies, the Iranians, and local Yemeni tribes and groups is central to the challenge of coping with AQAP. This report therefore considers those struggles in considerable detail.

The paper additionally presents a modified implementation of the military decision-making process used by the US armed forces to develop concepts and plans. It evaluates AQAP according to four key characteristics of any armed forces: Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, Critical Vulnerabilities, and Centers of Gravity. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the key tasks and objectives that US and allied forces must achieve to defeat the enemy, preferably in the most efficient manner possible.

The analysis of enemy characteristics then considers five possible courses of action (COAs) the US could adopt, evaluating each based on its strengths and weaknesses. This analysis produces a recommended COA and enables the consideration of the key tasks and some of the military and nonmilitary requirements for accomplishing them. The analysis concludes by considering possible enemy courses of action in response to this strategy and, finally, by identifying key planning assumptions that must remain true for this strategic concept to remain valid.

The result is an initial strategic/operational concept, not a military or political-military campaign plan. Only professional staffs in the US military, intelligence community, and US Department of State can produce meaningful and executable plans that specify exactly how many forces, people, dollars, and other resources will be required to execute them. The aim of this paper is more restricted: simply to describe the problem in a way that facilitates the evolution of a new approach to solving it.
A Broken Model in Yemen

The United States has never fully taken on the challenge that Yemen presents. American strategic interests in Yemen remain limited: prevent al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or any other group from targeting the American homeland, people, and regional infrastructure, and prevent regional instability. These interests have shaped American engagement in Yemen over the past two decades, which has fluctuated largely in correlation with the al Qaeda threat, punctuated by attacks that trace back to the country, such as the October 2000 USS Cole bombing and the December 2009 attempt by the underwear bomber. Yemen’s fractious nature, its government’s restricted capabilities and capacity to operate, and its systemic problems have deterred American involvement beyond what has been deemed necessary to mitigate imminent threats.

The strategy that has emerged from this pattern—the so-called “Yemen model”—is the combination of US direct-action operations, such as drone strikes, and a Yemeni ground effort to combat AQAP. This strategy has relied on the Yemeni government as the US counterterrorism partner. America’s efforts to support security sector reform and training were aimed at helping construct and build the military forces that would deploy against AQAP, without addressing any of the larger problems that have helped create an environment conducive to AQAP’s presence or that have since led to Yemen’s collapse as a state.

Even the limited US goal of sustaining counterterrorism operations with a local partner was failing in the post–Arab Spring environment. The tools of that strategy—the Yemeni military in particular—had been severely degraded over the course of 2011, even while the threat from AQAP grew and changed. AQAP was an insurgent group, not a terrorist cell, by the end of 2011, resilient in the face of leadership attrition and able to field limited irregular military forces.

Yet the US strategy to counter AQAP remained based on counterterrorism tactics: disrupting ongoing plots and operations and degrading the leadership to prevent it from planning attacks on the US. A superficial assessment of the strategy showed it to be working again through 2013. AQAP no longer outright governed or controlled territory, and it did not follow through on an August 2013 threat against US diplomatic posts in the region.

But there were also warnings by the end of 2013 that the strategy could collapse because of growing socio-economic and political problems driving instability and creating conditions conducive to AQAP’s resurgence. These problems convulsed Yemen in 2014, fracturing the state and wrecking the Yemen model, probably for good. The US nevertheless did not respond to the deteriorating situation in any meaningful way, nor did it even, apparently, recognize the end of its strategy. It instead relied on Saudi Arabia to manage the problem as it has so often before.

Saudi Arabia’s historical relationship with Yemen has long served as a crutch for American approaches to this problem. The US has repeatedly outsourced its Yemen policy to Saudi Arabia, rightly, perhaps, recognizing the Saudis’ superior knowledge of their neighbor and greater interest in Yemen’s stability, but also overestimating Saudi abilities to manage a complex problem.

Yemenis, along with the rest of the Arab world, looked to the US for leadership during the 2011 Arab Spring. The US, in turn, looked to Saudi Arabia to stabilize Yemen under its long-time dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh rather than supporting the Yemeni protest movement that ultimately unseated him. The Saudi solution for Yemen was a negotiated transition of power from Saleh to his deputy, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which was encompassed in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative.

The GCC Initiative was a way for the Yemeni elite to mollify the protesters and to rapidly reestablish a facade of stability in Yemen. It provided a framework within which an interim government would oversee Yemen’s transition away from Saleh, but it did not resolve the issues that drove the masses to the streets.

The allure of the GCC Initiative for the US was that it would keep Yemen stable enough to continue pursuing its preferred counterterrorism strategy. It also promised to create the National Dialogue Conference
(NDC), which would address the more fundamental problems that had driven the crisis. But the veneer of the Saudi solution began to fade at the conclusion of the NDC in January 2014, as it became apparent that it would not resolve the most important political disputes.7

The NDC was supposed to be the mechanism through which longstanding grievances between the Yemeni government and opposition groups would be aired and addressed. Opposition groups generally saw Yemen’s federalization and decentralization as the way forward, but the question of how to pursue that approach proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to progress within the NDC.

Hadi pushed a “solution” through in what many perceived to be an elite backroom deal. Some opposition groups, such as the secessionist Southern Movement, signed the final NDC document since it was the only solution presented. Others, such as the al Houthis, deemed the outcome of the NDC illegitimate. The al Houthis opted out of the process, setting in motion the events that led to the current state collapse and foreign-supported civil war in Yemen.

### The Collapse of America’s Counterterrorism Partnership

The success of the NDC and the GCC Initiative depended on the continued cooperation of Yemen’s various opposition groups. The al Houthi decision to withdraw should thus have been a clear sign that the process was breaking down and taking the Yemen model along with it. And the decision was not surprising, considering the history of the al Houthis in Yemen, although neither the US nor the international community seems to have been prepared for it.

**The al Houthi Movement.** The al Houthi movement was founded in 1992 and has since developed into a militarized movement.8 It began as a reaction to socio-political changes in Yemen that challenged traditional Zaydi hierarchies and to growing Wahhabi religious influence in northern Yemen, which threatened the predominant Zaydi Shi’ism. Zaydism orders society by conferring governing legitimacy only on descendants of the Prophet’s family (sayyids), making them a theoretically unchallengeable elite.9

But increased education and mobility came to challenge them, especially when powerful non-sayyid families started converting to Wahhabism as a way around the traditional power structures. The Zaydi revivalist movement, known as the Believing Youth (shabaab al mu’imineen), began as a network to reassert the Zaydi identity and sociopolitical predominance. Among the founders were the sons of prominent Zaydi Badr al Din al Houthi, including Hussein Badr al Din al Houthi.10

Hussein was a parliamentarian who posed a growing threat to Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime. He openly criticized the government from mosques in Sa’ada and, by 2003, had begun questioning Saleh’s legitimacy.
The al Houthi slogan—"Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory for Islam"—spread among Hussein's followers. Moreover, Hussein may have been discouraging his followers from paying taxes to the state, collecting them himself. Saleh sent security forces to arrest Hussein in Sa'ada in June 2004, violating tribal customs. Hussein and his followers fought the security forces, starting the first of the six Sa'ada wars.

The al Houthis became increasingly militant between 2004 and 2010. The Sa'ada wars empowered the military commanders within the movement and marginalized some of the more moderate voices. The Yemeni military's tactics drove popular support for the al Houthis as indiscriminate shelling destroyed homes, and infrastructure remained damaged for years. The al Houthis' demands for reparation and representation in the government did not shift during this time, nor did Saleh offer to meet them.

Saleh's style of rule—building a patronage network around his government—fueled support for the al Houthis among those outside this network. Saleh's government empowered the Hashid tribal confederation, one of Yemen's main tribal confederations, and, especially, his own Sanhan tribe. Marginalized tribes in Sa'ada, such as members of the Bakil tribal confederation, thus sided with the al Houthis in the fight.

Political Dialogue and Return to Force. Al Houthi leadership appears to have made a decision in 2011 to pursue the movement's objectives through political channels rather than military force, although the al Houthis still sought to preserve their military capabilities. The al Houthis founded a new political party, Ansar Allah, which opened offices and grew its membership base beyond the historical al Houthi strongholds, such as in Taiz city. (See figure 1.)

Ansar Allah had fairly strong support even beyond the Zaydi community because it continued to press for real change in Yemen's political system. Ansar Allah members participated in the NDC in 2013 and tended to ally with southerners over shared grievances regarding historical, political, and economic marginalization. Yet there is evidence that the al Houthis were preparing to achieve their objective by force if necessary. A January 2013 interdiction of an Iranian weapons shipment to Yemen, allegedly destined for the al Houthis, carried heavy weapons and explosives, for example.

The September 2014 Coup and Collapse of Hadi's Government. Hadi proposed a six-region federalization plan in the NDC that would have divided al Houthi lands and prevented the al Houthis from creating a semi-autonomous statelet as they desired. The al Houthis thereupon abandoned the political channels that they felt had failed them and turned back to violence. Al Houthi military forces seized control of Amran governorate, just north of the capital, in the beginning of July 2014. They then laid siege to Sana'a, forcing Hadi to capitulate to their demands and sign the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) on September 21, 2014.

The PNPA reallocated decision making in Sana'a from the Hadi government to the al Houthis, depriving the American counterterrorism partner of any real power. But Washington did not adjust its approach: the US-Yemen relationship ostensibly continued unaffected by the change in authority, although the absence of direct communication between US diplomats and al Houthi officials generated distrust. On November 7, 2014, the United Nations (UN) sanctioned two al Houthi leaders and Saleh, who had allied with al Houthis in a bid to return to power, for their role in destabilizing the country.

The al Houthi coup culminated at the end of January 2015 with the resignation and flight of Hadi and most of his government. Hadi had attempted to move forward with a constitution draft codifying the outcomes of the NDC, despite al Houthi military control of the capital, an effort that the al Houthis thwarted. Hadi and the executive branch resigned, leaving the al Houthis largely in control with Saleh's cronies heading the judicial and legislative branches.

The al Houthis, backed by Saleh loyalists, quickly moved to consolidate Yemen's state infrastructure—including Yemen's intelligence and security apparatuses—more firmly under their control and placed the former executive branch under house arrest. (See figure 2.) Local militia forces stood against the al Houthis as they pushed south, preventing their full takeover of
the country. Hadi escaped to Aden city at the end of February 2015 and then fled with other members of his government to Saudi Arabia at the end of March 2015. Saudi Arabia launched an air campaign against the al Houthis in Yemen on March 26 with the aim of restoring Hadi to power.

Saudi Military Intervention. Saudi Arabia’s decision to intervene militarily in Yemen was based primarily on the Saudi perception of the al Houthis as an Iranian proxy force. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are competing for regional hegemony, and Iran’s influence has grown dramatically over the past few years. Some elements of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have deployed to Syria, to support the Bashar al Assad regime against which Saudi-supported opposition forces are fighting, and to Iraq, where Iranian proxy militias are involved in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS).

Saudi Arabia also deployed troops to Bahrain in March 2011 to quell a Shi’a challenge to the ruling Sunni monarchy, which the Saudis and Bahrainis attribute to Iranian sponsorship. Iran’s open support for the al Houthis and their reciprocal support for Iran drove fears of another state bordering Saudi Arabia falling under the Iranian sphere of influence.

Saudi Arabia also saw the beginnings of a Lebanese Hezbollah–like element to the al Houthis, as it observed both the al Houthis quickly becoming a military and governing force within Yemen and their acknowledgment of Iran’s political and rhetorical support. The September 2014 PNPA bore marked similarities to the May 2008 Doha Agreement that gave the Lebanese opposition, dominated by Hezbollah, veto power in...
the Lebanese government. The al Houthis announced the formation of “revolutionary committees” in all of Yemen’s governorates to monitor the performance of state institutions in October 2014.24

Iranian officials’ explicit comparisons of the al Houthis to groups like Hezbollah only confirmed Saudi Arabia’s fears.25 By early March 2015, there were rumors of al Houthi members training under the IRGC in Syria before returning to Yemen.26 Hezbollah directly supports Iranian interests in the region—it deployed thousands of troops to Syria to fight for Assad—and the Saudis feared having a similar Iranian militant proxy group on its borders.

**Muted American Response.** The US stood by its counterterrorism partner in Yemen’s exiled government and its strategy to counter AQAP. In March 2015, US National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Bernadette Meehan explained the US position, saying that a US Joint Planning Cell would coordinate military and intelligence support for the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen and that the US “will continue to take action as necessary to disrupt continuing, imminent threats” to America and its citizens.27 Meehan reiterated this approach at the end of April 2015 but underscored that the US did not believe there was a military solution to Yemen’s conflict.28

Washington did not have much choice regarding whether to support Riyadh in this campaign, to be sure. The US has no relations with the al Houthis, who have steadily adopted strong anti-American rhetoric suitable for potential Iranian partners, and certainly could not have established them quickly enough to side confidently with the al Houthis.

It was immediately clear, moreover, that the al Houthi push beyond their stronghold was generating backlash among tribes and driving support for AQAP. Tensions between the US and the Kingdom because of the Iran nuclear deal negotiations also placed enormous pressure on the White House to demonstrate its support for the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen and that the US “will continue to take action as necessary to disrupt continuing, imminent threats” to America and its citizens.27 Meehan reiterated this approach at the end of April 2015 but underscored that the US did not believe there was a military solution to Yemen’s conflict.28

The US missed an opportunity in Yemen, however. The al Houthis are by no means a direct proxy group of Iran yet, despite some of the clear Iranian influences within the movement. Very likely, there are elements within the al Houthi movement that would readily abandon Iran for US support. The al Houthis fighting for political power, for example, would probably be amenable to a negotiated political settlement that guaranteed their voice in national politics. Washington must be discriminating about how it characterizes the al Houthis and should be open to those willing to engage with the US.

The direct-action part of the American counterterrorism campaign has continued despite the collapse of the Yemeni state. US airstrikes have killed at least four top AQAP leaders in Yemen since the end of March. NSC spokesperson Ned Price confirmed the death of AQAP leader and al Qaeda general manager Nasser al Wahayshi on June 16.30 US airstrikes have also killed Ibrahim al Rubaish, AQAP’s spiritual leader and a former Guantanamo detainee; judge Ma’moun Abdulhamid Hatem; shari’a official Nasser bin Ali al Ansi; and AQAP member Muhannad Ghallab.31

Yet, degrading leadership has never been effective alone at defeating al Qaeda groups and was always only part of the US strategy in Yemen.32 Worse still, the continuation of the Yemen model ignores the dramatic increase in support for AQAP and the emergence of ISIS cells in Yemen resulting from the al Houthi advance and the perception among many Sunni tribes that Iran is backing a quasi–Shi’a sectarian group to establish dominance over them.

The US nevertheless continues to push for a negotiated political solution in Yemen to end the current conflict and restore a government in Sana’a. The return of a Yemeni government would ostensibly permit the US to continue relying on its strategy of partnering with the Yemeni military and security forces to conduct counterterrorism operations.

But a couple of key assumptions undergirding that strategy are no longer valid. The strategy requires, first, that the Yemeni government continue to be a counterterrorism partner and that it be able to prioritize that fight over other demands. Second, it assumes that the Yemeni military and security forces will be successful, or at least not fail, in their efforts. This assumption was problematic even before the recent disorder,
as past examples show that areas cleared by these forces returned to the enemy shortly thereafter. But the al Houthi coup and subsequent civil war have, in fact, destroyed both assumptions. The al Houthis are currently the only thing that might be called a “government” in Yemen, yet they do not control much of the country, are hostile to the US, and inflame support for AQAP and ISIS, Hadi cannot prioritize the fight against AQAP while he is desperately trying to win back Sana’a, particularly since he must depend on the support of southern tribes, some of which support AQAP and some of which seek secession.

Nor is the Yemeni military in any condition to resume a counterinsurgency or even counterterrorism campaign against AQAP and ISIS. The security forces are fractured, badly damaged (in part by the Saudi air campaign), and preoccupied with fighting each other. The entire basis of the US strategy in Yemen hitherto has been utterly destroyed.

The Military Situation in Yemen

Yemen is a failed and fractured state. Hadi’s internationally recognized government controls little territory in Yemen and lacks broad popular support. The Yemeni military is divided and degraded. No one faction is strong enough to take over the country, and few factions have a vision beyond their immediate geographic power base, apart from a vague concept of some decentralized and federalized Yemeni state.

The militias that have re-formed over the past eight months are unlikely to fight outside of their territories for a “Yemeni cause” without significant reassurances of a reward for their efforts. Resolving the national-level conflict will not reunify Yemen, nor will local cease-fires translate to a statewide resolution. This is the environment in which AQAP has once again expanded its operations and in which ISIS has begun to establish a foothold.

The al Houthi movement still controls most of Yemen’s state infrastructure. This control extends to Sana’a, to the various government organs based there, and to a primary seaport, al Hudaydah, and the goods that transit through it. The al Houthis are fighting to maintain these positions with the support of Saleh loyalists. The latter include Yemeni military commanders and security force units in Saleh’s informal patronage network, and local fighters who are members of Saleh’s party, the General People’s Congress (GPC).

The GPC, which Saleh essentially constructed around his patronage network, has enabled the al Houthis to push their own fighting forces farther south without having to control central Yemen directly. The Saudi-led air campaign has disrupted military movements and destroyed key infrastructure, such as the road network, but has only just begun to support local offensives against the al Houthis and their partners.

But the al Houthi–Saleh partnership is also a critical vulnerability for the al Houthis. They rely on Saleh’s forces to sustain their current deployment throughout Yemen, and if Saleh cut a deal with the GCC states for something in exchange for his withdrawal from the fight, the al Houthis would be overextended and unable to maintain their current expansion. A faction of Saleh’s GPC is already peeling away, which is diminishing support for the al Houthis. The al Houthis have exhausted the support they had developed outside of their immediate power base in post-Arab Spring Yemen.

Initially seen as agents to continue Yemen’s revolution and bring about real change for the people, today the al Houthis are a divisive group forcing factions to align with or against them in a struggle for power. They have cracked down on opposition in areas under their control, particularly against members of Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist community, further pushing these and other factions away.

The al Houthis have used their relatively secure stronghold along the Saudi border to attack the Kingdom. Shortly before the start of the Saudi military intervention the al Houthis conducted a military training exercise alongside a regular Yemeni military unit in al Buqa, Sa’ada. They have since conducted minor attacks on Saudi border guard posts and fired rockets at Saudi towns.

The most dramatic attacks were two Scud missile launches aimed at Saudi military targets, one on June 6 and the next on June 30, 2015. The al Houthis appear to be trying to expand the Yemeni civil war into an interstate fight as the Saudis increase their military
commitment inside Yemen. The Saudi leadership seemed to include this possibility in its planning, targeting suspected Scud depots in Sana’a early in the air campaign. But the al Houthis could still open a more active front along the Saudi border should they choose or should Tehran encourage them to do so.

The most heavily contested territory extends south of Sana’a and west to the Red Sea. The al Houthis have used forceful means to control the population where they have been challenged, including arrests and intimidation. The fighting is localized, though, and forces resisting the al Houthis do not have a unified command or means for coordination. They are generally drawn from populations that have mobilized to defend their lands against the perceived al Houthi threat.

There are nevertheless some general systems within the opposition, despite its localized nature. (See figures 3a–g.) These include:

- Sana’a and Dhamar, just to the south;
- Al Hudaydah governorate along the Red Sea coast;
- Mā’rib to the east of Sana’a;
- Ibb, Taiz, and Dhaleh in the central highlands;
- Aden and Lahij in Yemen’s south;
- Al Bayda in south-central Yemen;
- Tribal areas in Abyan and Shabwah in the south; and
- Hadramawt governorate in the east.

The al Houthis faced opposition from popular resistance forces linked to Yemen’s Southern Movement in Aden, Dhaleh, and Lahij, and from AQAP in al Bayda, Abyan, and Shabwah. They have not been able to make headway in remote Hadramawt.

*Sana’a and Dhamar.* The al Houthis remain in control of Sana’a and Dhamar, courtesy of GPC forces and local authorities. There has been little popular resistance to the al Houthis in this area through Summer 2015, but the situation may be changing as the momentum shifts away from the al Houthis: some of the larger tribes in Dhamar took a stance against the al Houthis in early August.\(^{40}\) It is unlikely, however, that the al Houthis will lose control of Sana’a and Dhamar without a hard fight.

**Figure 3a. Sana’a and Dhamar Governorates**

Source: AEI’s Critical Threats Project

**Al Hudaydah.** Al Hudaydah is vital for the al Houthis for two reasons: first, it is the chokepoint for supplies entering northern Yemen, and second, the terminal of Yemen’s main oil export pipeline is in Ras Isa. The Yemeni state—and, now, the al Houthis—depends on the production and export of oil to generate revenues.

**Figure 3b. Al Hudaydah Governorate**

Source: AEI’s Critical Threats Project
although production peaked in 2001, and the declining oil prices will further devastate Yemen’s economy.\textsuperscript{41} The al Houthi Supreme Revolutionary Committee, a body established to oversee the Yemeni government, decided to pursue an oil port in al Hudaydah city’s Salif district in the near future.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Ma’rib.} The presence of Yemen’s main oil field makes Ma’rib governorate important for the al Houthis as well, although they have been far less successful in getting control of it. The tribesmen there, who were a thorn in Saleh’s side during his presidency and continued to pester Hadi, have been able to limit the al Houthis’ gains. They seek to secure the profits from the petroleum resources in Ma’rib and stop them from flowing into the coffers of the Yemeni government and Saleh’s associates.\textsuperscript{43} The oil revenue is a key point of contention between the tribesmen and any form of Yemeni central state, which depends on the oil money to pay part of its budget.

\textbf{Figure 3c. Ma’rib Governorate}

The al Houthis had expanded into Taiz by the end of March 2015, holding Mocha, fighting for control of Taiz city, and holding the main roads through Ibb and Dhaleh.\textsuperscript{44} Saleh’s assistance in Dhaleh helped quash any resistance—the commander of the 33rd Armored Brigade stationed there was the same commander who put down the uprising against Saleh in Taiz in 2011.\textsuperscript{45}

The fighting in Ibb, Dhaleh, and Taiz had stagnated, however, until Saudi and Emirati military support arrived in July 2015. A new Council of Resistance that unifies the popular resistance leadership across the three governorates should unify the anti–al Houthi forces’ command, which will sustain momentum against them, making al Houthi control of this vital area unlikely for the present.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Aden and Lahij.} The next objective after Taiz was control of Aden port city in south Yemen, which would have completed the al Houthis’ control of the major infrastructure in Yemen, except for the oil infrastructure in the remote eastern Hadramawt governorate. The al Houthis amassed troops north of Lahij in late March 2015. The US withdrew its military advisers from al Anad, the military base that served as counterterrorism headquarters for the US, and the al Houthis then pushed south to Aden.\textsuperscript{47}

Al Houthi militants secured the Aden airport and began fighting determined southern resistance forces for
control of the city. This fight bogged down and was stalemated by July, when the Saudis and Emiratis deployed armored vehicles to Aden and retook the city alongside newly trained Yemeni forces. The anti–al Houthi coalition forces pushed north from Aden to liberate Lahij.

The anti–al Houthi coalition forces pushed north from Aden to liberate Lahij. The Saudi plan appears to be to reinstall the Hadi-led government in Aden, but the Adenis, who bore the brunt of the Saudi air campaign that Hadi had supported, may be less enthusiastic about this idea. Aden may be free of al Houthis, but Hadi’s government does not control it. Moreover, it appears that AQAP is moving into towns behind the coalition forces.

**Abyan and Shabwah.** Abyan and Shabwah, two southern governorates with a strong AQAP presence and support for the Southern Movement, remain contested. The al Houthis seized three key cities in Abyan in March: its capital, Zinjibar; Lawder; and Shaqra, which control the main roads that run through the governorate. The al Houthis moved through Abyan into Shabwah, where they pushed back on AQAP’s newly expanded presence.

AQAP had seized the 19th Infantry Brigade base in Bayhan, Shabwah, in mid-February 2015 and looted the base. It held public meetings there until the al Houthis arrived. Then, AQAP backed the local popular resistance forces in combatting the al Houthi presence. The al Houthis also struggled to hold Abyan, however, and could not advance farther than Ataq, the capital of Shabwah.

The change in momentum occasioned by the increased Gulfi military involvement caused the al Houthis to begin to withdraw from Shabwah in July, allowing coalition forces to move through Abyan in early August. AQAP again moved behind the coalition and seized control of Zinjibar, Abyan. AQAP had used Zinjibar as its base when it had controlled Abyan in 2011.

**Al Bayda.** The fight for control or influence over al Bayda governorate has pitted AQAP directly against the al Houthis. The fighting began in Fall 2014, when the al Houthis expanded into al Bayda under the cloak of government forces. Al Houthis militiamen and
Yemeni Strategic Reserve Forces, units formerly from the Republican Guard and probably still loyal to Saleh, took control of Rada’a city in northwestern al Bayda at the end of October.53

Some tribal elements in Rada’a openly support AQAP, however, and the city had been under AQAP control in early 2012.54 Tribal support in al Bayda has shifted over time as tribesmen are killed in the crossfire. Al Bayda tribesmen blame the al Houthis, creating additional support for AQAP.55 Al Bayda governorate remains contested.

The military situation between the al Houthis and local resistance forces supported by the Saudis and their Gulf allies is likely to oscillate between periods of relative mobility and stalemate unless the Gulfis can peel Saleh and his forces away from the al Houthis. Only in the latter case, or with the deployment of a significantly larger ground force to Yemen, can the Gulfis and Hadi hope to retake Sana’a and reestablish Hadi or his successor in Yemen’s historical capital.

The fighting, meanwhile, has largely moved away from the areas with the most significant AQAP presence, apart from al Bayda. (See figure 4.) The al Houthis and Saleh are thus no longer in a position to challenge AQAP, even if that were their priority, which it most assuredly is not.

The strength of the al Houthi and Saleh resistance, on the other hand, makes it most unlikely that Hadi, his southern allies, or the Gulf states will focus on AQAP, especially when doing so risks antagonizing populations that they must keep quiescent to continue pushing their combat forces forward into al Houthi–held territory. None of the organized and relatively centrally directed antagonists now fighting in Yemen,
therefore, have either good reason or the ability to be effective counterterrorism partners for the US. There is little likelihood that this parlous situation will improve any time soon.

**Yemen, Iran, and Regional Dynamics**

Yemen has become embroiled in the Saudi-Iranian competition for power and influence in the Middle East. Yemen was historically a low priority for both sides in that struggle, but today, Iran and Saudi Arabia cast the Yemen conflict, which at its heart is a power contest between various political factions, in terms of their violent regional rivalry.

Yemen is now the third front in that conflict, following Iraq and Syria, however improbable that might seem. Yemen's Zaydi Shi'ism differs significantly from Iran's prevailing Twelver Shi'ism, while Yemen's Sunnis have historically been much more tribal and regional than sectarian in their self-identification. But the Kingdom is trying to ally with Sunni tribes while Tehran insinuates itself among al Houthis. Both countries are primarily concerned with the regional power play in which they are engaged rather than with religious dynamics. The Yemeni conflict is not yet a sectarian war. Rather, it is in part a proxy war between two regional powers that generally align allies along sectarian lines.

The Iranian nuclear negotiations and subsequent agreement have intensified this dynamic. GCC states see the potential for Iran to increase its activities in Yemen with the sanctions relief it will now receive under the terms of the deal. Iran, meanwhile, understood that the American calculus, particularly in Spring 2015, weighted Iran's continued participation in the nuclear talks more heavily than US interests in Yemen and the Gulf of Aden.

Saudi officials have alleged Iranian meddling in Yemen since at least 2009, when Saudis accused Iran of backing the al Houthis in their sixth war against the Yemeni state, as noted previously. Iranian direct support of the al Houthis before the Arab Spring is not well documented, but Iran included the al Houthis in its outreach to Yemenis in 2011 and 2012 and allegedly smuggled small and medium arms to the al Houthis during that time. Today, the al Houthis are within the Iranian sphere of influence and have benefited from Iranian funding, weapons, training, and, probably, advice. But the depth of the ties between Iran and the al Houthis remains unclear, as the alliance certainly benefits both parties pragmatically in the short run.

Saudi Arabia cut off its funding to Yemen in December 2014 when it became obvious that the al Houthis intended to remain in power, because the Saudis saw them as Iranian proxies. The Yemeni government had been wholly reliant on Saudi Arabia's direct budget support to run the country, which included $2 billion in cash in July 2014. The al Houthis were not fazed by the economic pressure and isolation, however.

The al Houthis held meetings on trade and economic agreements with Russia and Iran in December and early January 2015, probably in search of additional funding sources. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states' economic isolation of Yemen may have pushed the al Houthis closer to Iran instead of pressuring them to return power to the Hadi government. It does not yet seem to be seriously imperiling their hold on power.

Iran seized the opportunity to champion the al Houthis’ cause in Yemen from the outset of the current crisis. Iranian officials publicly praised the September 2014 PNPA, which the al Houthis imposed on Hadi by force. The al Houthis were open to Iran's outreach and subsequently released at least three suspected members of the IRGC who had been imprisoned in connection with an Iranian arms shipment to Yemen. Iranian officials continued to increase rhetorical support for the al Houthis and began including Yemen in lists of where the Islamic Revolution—cast as a continuation of the 1979 Iranian Revolution—is ongoing, such as in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and as part of the regional “resistance” that defines Iran's notion of its coalition.

Iran's Mahan Air, sanctioned by the US since 2011 for facilitating IRGC movement (and not on the list of companies to be desanctioned under the nuclear agreement), opened direct flights between Tehran and Sana’a in partnership with Yemenia Airways on February 28,
2015. Its first flight purportedly landed with 12 tons of medical supplies for Yemen. The strengthening bilateral relationship between Iran and Yemen was of increasing concern for Saudi Arabia and was probably a factor in its decision to intervene militarily in Yemen.

Saudi officials announced the start of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen on March 26, 2015, following a request from Hadi for military intervention two days before. All members of the GCC except Oman supported the operation, as did Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and the US. The air campaign initially set the al Houthis back somewhat, but they adapted on the ground and continued their territorial expansion in Yemen until recently, as we have seen.

The air campaign has had various unintended consequences in Yemen, however. It drove local support for the al Houthis against perceived foreign intervention, decreased Yemeni support for Hadi because of his role in calling for the air campaign, and exacerbated a deepening humanitarian crisis. The airstrikes prevented regular shipments of fuel, food, and medical supplies from entering the country, destroyed the bridges and roads needed to deliver the supplies inland, and discouraged commercial truckers from distributing commodities.

The Saudis tried to adjust, announcing the end of Decisive Storm and the start of Operation Restoring Hope in April 2015, which was supposed to include the objectives of protecting civilians, fighting terrorism, and facilitating humanitarian relief efforts. Data from the air campaign shows no significant shift in the frequency or target selection of airstrikes, however. (See figure 5.)
The start of the military intervention in Yemen dramatically shifted the dialogue surrounding the conflict from one about Yemeni stakeholders to one about the Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy war. The air campaign did not change Iranian officials’ stance on support for the al Houthis, but Tehran added a call for a political resolution to the country’s problems to its normal statements.72 An open letter from Mohsen Rezai, head of Iran’s Expediency Council and former commander of the IRGC, praised the al Houthis but also discussed the need to use military power in support of successful diplomacy.73

The IRGC tested US redlines in the Gulf of Aden region by ostentatiously transporting arms by sea to the al Houthis in Yemen.74 Tehran backed down in the face of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet but then pushed to deliver humanitarian assistance to Yemen directly. The UN insisted that the cargo be inspected in Djibouti, and Iran eventually acquiesced in mid-May.75 A July 2015 press conference revealed that Brigadier General Esmail Ahmadi Moghaddam, head of Iran’s Headquarters to Support the Yemeni People, is a former IRGC commander and police chief who is sanctioned by the US for severe human rights violations, including the suppression of the 2009 Iranian protests and helping Assad’s regime in Syria.76 The Saudi-Iranian contest in Yemen appears to be escalating slowly.

The full scope of Iranian motivations in Yemen is too broad for this paper but must factor into considerations. Yemen is not the same as Syria for Iran and probably not a high-stakes issue, which decreases the likelihood that Iran will devote as much energy and resources to Yemen as it has to supporting the Assad regime. It also creates an opportunity to limit the influence of the Saudi-Iranian conflict on Yemen, reducing some of the peripheral challenges to the conflict. The question is whether the Iranians will back down should the cost of involvement in Yemen increase, and subsequently how to effect that change.

**Mediation Attempts.** External actors, including Omani officials and the UN envoy to Yemen, are still attempting to mediate the Yemeni conflict. Under UN Security Council Resolution 2140, the UN Security Council passed a series of resolutions imposing sanctions on Saleh and two al Houthi leaders; under UN Security Council Resolution 2216, it imposed an arms embargo on the al Houthis’ and Saleh’s forces.77 The al Houthis reject the requirements of Resolution 2216, which calls for their complete disarmament, whereas the actors aligned against the al Houthis call for them to abide by those requirements before any talks begin.

The UN negotiation efforts have thus unsurprisingly fallen flat. Former UN envoy to Yemen Jamal Benomar, who shepherded Yemen through its 2011 and 2012 power transition, resigned from his post in April 2015 amid increasing criticism of his inability to resolve the issues at hand. Benomar blamed the Saudi military intervention in Yemen for scuttling a deal in March.78 His successor, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, has not been more effective. A delayed UN-led dialogue in Geneva collapsed without any signs of progress in June 2015.79 Furthermore, a UN-negotiated humanitarian ceasefire broke down hours after it began in July.80 It does not seem likely that a UN-led peace process will resolve the conflict any time soon.

Omani officials’ proximity to both sides of the Yemen conflict may offer a better channel. Oman floated a seven-point plan in April after a series of meetings with interested parties, including Iranian officials.81 An al Houthi delegation met with US officials in Muscat, Oman, at the end of May 2015 to secure the release of American freelance journalist Casey Coombs, whom the al Houthis had arrested on charges of espionage on May 17 in Sana’a.82 The al Houthi delegation, which included spokesman Mohamed Abdul Salam and head of the political council Saleh al Samad, arrived in Oman on May 23.83 Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was in Oman on May 26 to discuss Yemen with Omani counterparts, and it is not a stretch to assume that Zarif also met with the al Houthi delegates.84

Another round of reported negotiations emerged at the end of June, in which al Houthis may have been in discussions with southern Yemeni leaders in Oman to broker a local ceasefire.85 The Omani government has insisted that any negotiations inside of the country are occurring within the UN framework, although that does not seem to always be the case.

Interestingly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began to emerge in July and August as a potential
vector for change. There were rumors in early 2015 that the UAE was negotiating with the Saleh family to drive a wedge between Saleh and the al Houthis, a tactic Saudi Arabia did not pursue because of its intense hatred for Saleh. Saleh’s eldest son, Ahmed Saleh, was then Yemen’s ambassador to the UAE, and the rumor ran that the former Yemeni president would stop supporting the al Houthis in exchange for backing for his son’s bid for the presidency.86

The military intervention in Yemen, which the Emiratis joined, eliminated the possibility of a separate Emirati-negotiated resolution, at least for the time being. The UAE stripped Ahmed Saleh of his diplomatic immunity in early April 2015, and its military played a key support role in the July and August Operation Golden Arrow offensive that secured Aden city and pushed northward into Taiz, Lahij, and Abyan.87 Yemeni government officials, including Vice President Khaled Bahah, shuttled back and forth to Abu Dhabi in early August.88

A new round of talks began in August that may yield results as the tide turns for the al Houthis in Yemen. The UN envoy met with Arab League representatives and then with the al Houthis and Saleh in Muscat on August 8 and 9, respectively.89 The al Houthis may have conceded to abide by the terms in UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which includes the withdrawal from seized cities.90

Iranian Arab and African Affairs Deputy to the Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian announced that GCC representatives will meet with Iranian officials in late September and that Yemen will be on the agenda.91 But there is now a legitimate fear that Saudi Arabia will abandon a negotiated solution for a decisive military victory against the al Houthis. The Saudis have inserted Saudi-trained Yemeni troops into northern Yemen through the Wadia border crossing toward Ma’rib city.92 The position sets coalition forces up to advance on Sana’a from the south and east.

The US has lost legitimacy and credibility by supporting Saudi Arabia’s actions in Yemen, yet Yemenis still turn to the US because of its superpower status. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran is a welcome external influencer, and the UN’s influence is marginal. The US must play a positive role in helping resolve the conflict in Yemen. Even Saleh, a pragmatist who aligned with a group that he had fought for six years, noted that the US has a role to play.93 The US can help shape the outcome of the current crisis in Yemen and facilitate an end to a conflict that is detracting from the key fight for the US—the one against AQAP—but only if it adopts a strategy that makes Yemeni internal stability a priority.

The Expansion of AQAP and the Emergence of ISIS in Yemen

Yemen’s collapse is a direct national security problem for the US because of the presence of AQAP. AQAP is the vanguard for al Qaeda affiliates and a key node within the al Qaeda network. Its leadership plans for both al Qaeda’s global and local objectives. For al Qaeda global, Yemen is not the main effort, which is, rather, winning in Syria. Al Qaeda’s mission in Yemen is to maintain the safe haven there and to support the front in Syria. As part of the al Qaeda network, AQAP coordinates with and supports other al Qaeda nodes, particularly Syria’s extremely dangerous Jabhat al Nusra.94 AQAP also continues to balance the “near war” against the Yemeni and Saudi governments with the “far war” aimed at attacking the US homeland. It has pursued far and near objectives concurrently and will continue to target the US, West, and regional partners. (See table 1.) Thus, AQAP’s decision making must be read in both the al Qaeda global and local Yemeni contexts. So far, it has clearly been achieving its core objective.

The death of AQAP emir Nasser al Wahayshi, who also served as al Qaeda’s general manager, does not appear to have affected the leadership’s decision calculus. Wahayshi’s successor as leader, Qasim al Raymi, had served as the group’s military commander and was part of the core AQAP leadership. Raymi pledged allegiance (bay’a) to al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, reaffirming AQAP’s subscription to al Qaeda’s ideology and strategy (as opposed, for example, to that of ISIS).

The global strategy employs terrorist attacks against the West as a tactic to force the West to retreat from the Muslim-majority world by driving up the cost of the West’s involvement. Locally, the strategy is one of stages that begins with a call (dawr) to al Qaeda’s...
interpretation of Islam and advances toward insurgency within a country. AQAP is actively engaged in an insurgent fight in Yemen and is focused on winning over the population.

**AQAP’s Threat to the US.** AQAP continues to pose a serious threat to the American homeland. AQAP has been the most active and effective al Qaeda node in targeting US interests and will probably continue to be. AQAP has attempted to attack the American homeland at least three times since 2009 and has also targeted US diplomatic posts abroad. The first attack nearly succeeded; AQAP smuggled a bomb concealed in underwear on a plane on Christmas Day 2009. The device itself failed. The second attack was only thwarted by the help of Saudi intelligence, which provided investigators with the package tracking numbers of bombs disguised as printer cartridges shipped to the US in October 2010. The third attack, an improvement on the 2009 underwear bomb, was again thwarted by Saudi intelligence assistance in 2012. Finally, an AQAP threat closed more than 20 diplomatic posts in the Middle East and North Africa region in August 2013.

The group has used the safe haven that it has in Yemen to plan and direct plots targeting American interests within the US and abroad. The case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the underwear bomber, shows how valuable AQAP’s safe haven is: AQAP was able to vet Abdulmutallab through a series of stages before deciding to operationalize him. The imaginative bomb maker, Ibrahim al Asiri, who developed the underwear bomb and printer cartridge, remains at large and has shown the ability to innovate and improve on previous designs. Asiri has also trained others, some of whom have been connected to plots. AQAP’s development of technical expertise has limited the effect that Asiri’s death or capture would have on AQAP’s capabilities.

AQAP’s threat to the US no longer emanates from Yemen alone. AQAP has attempted to coordinate with other groups to conduct attacks. The rising chaos in the Middle East increases opportunities for these groups to maneuver undetected. Al Qaeda’s growth in Syria with Jabhat al Nusra and the volume of foreign fighters within the Syrian civil war provides another channel through which AQAP can operate.
al Nusra has members who hold passports to Western countries.

It is not beyond the pale that at least one of these passport holders could return with a sophisticated explosive device and attempt another mass-casualty attack. A cell of al Qaeda veterans operating alongside Jabhat al Nusra, the so-called Khorasan Group, may serve as an operational link to AQAP to coordinate attacks against the West even as the Khorasan Group provides training and expertise to the Syrian al Qaeda affiliate.

Individuals who trained in AQAP camps also pose a latent threat to the West. The Kouachi brothers’ AQAP-linked Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015 may only be a harbinger of what could come. The attack was efficient and effective, a far cry from a lone-wolf attack. At least one of the Kouachi brothers trained in Yemen (See figure 6.)

AQAP has been training foreign fighters in Yemen for years, and many individuals cycled through there before such travel raised red flags for intelligence officials. Even those known to authorities may be able to operate under the radar as the volume of foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria overwhelms Western intelligence agencies. The threat is that AQAP-trained individuals may return to the West and conduct small-scale attacks.

This risk is increasing as the growing radicalism in
the Middle East inspires individuals to attempt attacks. Thus, AQAP remains a significant threat to the US homeland despite years of the implementation of the Yemen model. AQAP’s expansion and the collapse of the bases of that model are likely to create conditions conducive to a dramatic expansion of that threat.

**An Assessment of AQAP in Yemen.** AQAP has exploited the conditions on the ground to expand and recruit in Yemen. The group still seeks to establish a shari’a-based government there and will attempt to utilize popular discontent with both the al Houthi and Hadi governments to prevent the reestablishment of a strong central Yemeni government. AQAP’s messaging to the Yemeni population is generally a call to arms against both governments, citing the first as run by apostates and the latter as a stooge of the West. The turmoil within Yemen has worked to AQAP’s advantage, creating additional space within which the group can operate.

AQAP’s capabilities do not match those of its counterpart in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, and it does not appear as though it has the capabilities to support a high-tempo campaign of asymmetrical attacks. The group runs a robust counterintelligence network, and the public execution of spies is a key deterrent tactic. Its on-the-ground presence enables it to respond to the local dynamics in its messaging and recruitment.

AQAP is in a better position for success today than it was in 2011 when the Yemeni state collapsed. The ongoing civil war between the al Houthis and the forces aligned against them has already accomplished many of AQAP’s objectives. The Yemeni military, further fractured and weakened, is no longer fighting AQAP. The Yemeni government is fragmented, and the majority of the Yemeni state is outside any sort of government control. And there is an insurgency that has some grounding among Sunni populations that has risen out of the chaos. AQAP may not have brought about these changes, but it certainly benefits from them.

Targeted airstrikes by the US have removed key leaders from the battlefield in 2015, although the group will probably be able to recover from those losses. (See figure 7.) The rapid announcement that Qasim al Raymi would succeed Nasser al Wahayshi indicated that the group was prepared for the loss of its leader, as most al

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**Figure 7. AQAP Leaders Killed in 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>AKA</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HARITH BIN GHAZI AL NADHARI</td>
<td>January 31, 2015</td>
<td>Muhammad al Murshidi</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>AQAP scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBRAHIM AL RUBAISH</td>
<td>April 12, 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>Saudi</td>
<td>AQAP spiritual leader, Former Guantanamo detainee (#192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASSER BIN ALI AL ANSI</td>
<td>April 22, 2015</td>
<td>Abdul Jalil, Abu Ziyad</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>AQAP shari’a official, al Qaeda deputy general manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA’MOUN ABDULHAMID HATEM</td>
<td>May 11, 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>AQAP judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASSER AL WAHAYSHI</td>
<td>June 9, 2015</td>
<td>Abu Basir</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>AQAP emir, al Qaeda general manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AEI’s Critical Threats Project
Qaeda franchises are. AQAP has already shown itself to be resilient when facing the loss of midlevel commanders on the battlefield and continues to develop new leaders. It still has individuals who trained in al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan before 2001 among its ranks. These individuals are part of core al Qaeda—the group of individuals in the immediate vicinity of Osama bin Laden before the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan—and they guide the organization at the strategic level and provide direct connections through relationships built in Afghanistan to al Qaeda core members dispersed globally.

AQAP may suffer more from the loss of its religious leaders, however. Three key individuals— Ibrahim al Rubaish, Nasser bin Ali alansi, and Ma’moun Abdulhamid Hatem—who constituted the core of AQAP’s religious leadership have been killed, and it is not clear who will replace them. Khaled Batarfi, a senior AQAP commander, appears to be taking on a more public role and gave the eulogies for both alansi and Wahayshi.

AQAP adapted nimbly to the changing situation in Yemen. It had been conducting campaigns against the Yemeni military in Aden, Lahij, Abyan, Shabwah, Hadramawt, and Sana’a and against the al Houthis in northern Yemen as of Summer 2014. (See figure 8.)

The campaign against the Yemeni military and security forces had taken on a familiar shape: AQAP used spectacular attacks, such as a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) combined with small-arms fire to target military bases in planned operations, and individual members targeted security and intelligence officials for assassination.“

These military operations closely mirrored what AQAP was doing in Summer 2010 before the Arab
Smaller-scale attacks against Yemeni army checkpoints on key transit routes also occurred. AQAP continued its campaign against the al Houthis, whom it labeled apostates (rafidhah) by Fall 2010, targeting al Houthi leadership and significant events or locations. The campaign against the al Houthis was limited to terrorist attacks and did not involve a ground offensive in this period. Today, AQAP is fighting as part of the ground resistance to the al Houthis. AQAP opened this line of effort in September 2014 after the signing of the PNPA. AQAP began conducting small-scale attacks against al Houthi members in such places as Sana’a and al Bayda. Its operations escalated as the conflict expanded, particularly after the January 2015 resignation of the Yemeni cabinet. The uncertainty in Sana’a created disorder within the Yemeni military: some units recognized the resigned defense minister while others recognized the al Houthis–appointed defense minister.

There was an opportunity here to strike the Yemeni military hard, and AQAP seized upon it. The expansion of AQAP’s operations against the al Houthis did not have a noticeable effect on AQAP’s campaign against the Yemeni military. AQAP attacked Yemeni military bases, and some Yemeni units stood down, which gave AQAP access to the weaponry on the base. Any ground offensive against AQAP ended with the effective dissolution of the Yemeni military into isolated units, and the Saudi-led coalition operations focused on areas where the al Houthis rather than AQAP were present. (See figure 9.) Most active pressure on AQAP was relieved, except for the continuation of a small number of targeted airstrikes by the US.
The frontline of the anti–al Houthi fight has also been an opportunity for AQAP to earn de facto acceptance because of the capabilities it can bring to bear against the al Houthis. AQAP’s insurgent force, operating under the name Ansar al Sharia, conducts asymmetrical attacks against al Houthi positions. It also appears to be more aware of the local tribal dynamics than the al Houthis, who have lost support among some tribes after killing fellow tribesmen.

Al Bayda governorate is the most prominent example of AQAP developing relations among tribal militia forces. The group had a stronghold in Rada’a district under the Dhabab tribe, a component of the Qayfa tribe in al Bayda. It also probably had some level of support with the Hamiqan tribe, of which a prominent Salafist sheikh with ties to AQAP is a member, in al Zahar district in southern al Bayda. (See figure 10.)

AQAP militants now appear to be at least coordinating, if not cooperating, with Yemeni tribal militias in districts surrounding Rada’a in northern al Bayda.
and in districts surrounding al Zahar, particularly Dhi Na‘im, in southern al Bayda. (See figure 11.) The risk is that as the conflict protracts, AQAP will integrate further into the local militias, which will make it increasingly difficult to separate the tribal population from AQAP. This approach is similar to the one Jabhat al Nusra has used to great effect in Syria.

AQAP took a completely different approach in areas away from the anti–al Houthi frontline. The group had been conducting regular attacks, including VBIEDs, against military targets in Hadramawt. These attacks concentrated on al Qatan and Sayun in Wadi Hadramawt, a dry river valley that provides east-west access to Yemen’s Masila block oil infrastructure, and in al Mukalla, a key port city. AQAP may have been seeking to control access to Wadi Hadramawt, which would have better protected an area to the north of Wadi Hadramawt assessed to be an AQAP sanctuary.

The signature of AQAP activity changed dramatically in mid-March 2015, when the conflict with the al Houthis was well underway to the west. AQAP shifted its offensive activity from Wadi Hadramawt and concentrated instead on al Mukalla. The objective appeared to be to govern territory in Hadramawt, starting with al Mukalla city.

AQAP’s Ansar al Sharia militants seized control of al Mukalla city on April 2, 2015. (See figure 12.) The Yemeni military unit based near al Mukalla did not fight AQAP as it moved into the city. A powerful anti-AQAP tribal coalition, the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (helf qaba’il hadramawt), called on tribesmen to resecure al Mukalla from AQAP and deployed fighters to the city, but these forces clashed with a Yemeni army
unit based outside al Mukalla. Ansar al Sharia militants did not immediately institute strict rules to govern the population or even raise the tell-tale al Qaeda black flag with the shahada on it, a change from what Ansar al Sharia had done in 2011.

Instead, it formed a second body, the Sons of Hadramawt, and reached out to local Salafist sheikhs, the Council of Sunni Scholars and al Jama’a in Hadramawt, to negotiate terms for a transition of power. The Sons of Hadramawt turned over governing authorities to the new Hadhrami Domestic Council (al majlis al ahli al hadhrami), established on April 13, 2015. The Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (HTC) subsequently began negotiations with the Hadhrami Domestic Council (HDC), attempting to regain control of the city without violence.

Local tribal leaders populate the AQAP-linked HDC, which oversees governing committees inside al Mukalla. The HDC oversees the payment of government salaries in al Mukalla and provides security. An AQAP commander who was freed from al Mukalla’s prison on April 2, Khaled Batarfi, appeared in public first in the governor’s palace in al Mukalla, a sign of AQAP’s control over the city, and in April discussed what the HDC is doing. AQAP’s presence began to grow in al Mukalla, as the presence of top leaders indicates. The HTC has avoided a direct engagement with AQAP forces in al Mukalla to date and probably seeks military support to enter negotiations with the stronger force.

But AQAP remains in control of al Mukalla through its proxy groups—the Sons of Hadramawt publicly flogged individuals at the end of July—although the HTC has indicated that it might again attempt to secure the city. The HTC has avoided a direct engagement with AQAP forces in al Mukalla to date and probably seeks military support to enter negotiations with the stronger force.

### Figure 12. Hadramawt Nonstate Actors

**Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy**

The Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (HTC) is a military and security alliance established on July 4, 2013, between prominent Hadhrami tribes. It seeks to provide security for the governorate and for the oil infrastructure. It is antigovernment and anti-AQAP and has publicly rejected both the Sons of Hadramawt and the Council of Sunni Scholars and al Jama’a in Hadramawt, which are seen as a threat to the security of Hadramawt governorate.

**Hadhrami Domestic Council**

The Hadhrami Domestic Council is a pro-AQAP group established on April 13, 2015, to govern al Mukalla. It is linked to the Sons of Hadramawt. The council is comprised of various tribal chiefs, theologians, academics, engineers, and other members of civil society within the city. It provides domestic services such as the payment of salaries and the distribution of fuel to its citizens.

**Sons of Hadramawt**

The Sons of Hadramawt is an AQAP-linked group that seized control of al Mukalla, Hadramawt, on April 2, 2015. It maintains control over the city of al Mukalla and runs a religious police unit. It has delegated governance and the provision of civil services to the Hadhrami Domestic Council.

**Council of Sunni Scholars and al Jama’a in Hadramawt**

The Council of Sunni Scholars and al Jama’a in Hadramawt is comprised of Sunni theologians and prominent tribesmen. It seems to be amenable to working with AQAP. The council sought to exercise governance over the entirety of Hadramawt governorate after the withdrawal of Yemeni troops from Hadramawt and after the April 2, 2015, seizure of al Mukalla by the Sons of Hadramawt.
AQAP remains strong in Yemen and is set to expand. There will not be a force capable of defeating AQAP, even should the Yemen civil war end and Hadi’s or an interim government come to power. The anti-Houthi coalition’s offensive through Aden, Lahij, and Abyan has not installed local authorities capable of denying AQAP access to the territory. AQAP also has the opportunity to move in behind the coalition forces and attempt to take control of recently liberated towns throughout south Yemen.

The HTC could secure al Mukalla, or even Hadramawt governorate, without seriously knocking AQAP back. AQAP would just shift positions toward safe havens in Shabwah, regroup, and reset. The recent deaths of AQAP leaders will not permanently reduce the group’s threat, and its threat node remains intact. The question remains not if AQAP will attack the US, but when.

**ISIS’s Challenge to AQAP in Yemen.** ISIS presents a unique challenge to the al Qaeda network and to the US and its allies. For the first time since its inception, al Qaeda is no longer the preeminent group within the global jihadist movement and is in direct competition with ISIS for leadership of the movement.129 ISIS-linked groups first appeared in Yemen in November 2014, although they appeared to be marginalized at that time. AQAP was and remains the dominant jihadist group in Yemen, and AQAP leadership has rejected ISIS’s legitimacy. A prominent AQAP figure outwardly sympathized with ISIS, though, and the late AQAP judge Ma’moun Abdulhamid Hatem probably helped jumpstart ISIS’s presence in Yemen.130 It is also possible that a small ISIS cell from Iraq and Syria entered Yemen to provide guidance and perhaps expertise.

ISIS began to organize into provinces (wilayat) toward the end of February 2015 and had eight active cells in Yemen by the end of July 2015. (See figure 13.) ISIS probably views the potential for a sectarian war as an opportunity for it in Yemen and will pursue a strategy there to inflame sectarian tensions.

ISIS in Yemen is still emerging, and its capabilities remain basic. ISIS’s Wilayat Sana’a claimed credit for the March 20, 2015, deadliest terrorist attack in Yemen: coordinated suicide bombings at mosques in the capital. AQAP has not attacked mosques, and the majority of its spectacular attacks are against hardened targets, such as Yemeni military bases or intelligence headquarters. ISIS suicide attacks are not common, however, and have only occurred in Sana’a and al Bayda, which may be an indicator of the size of ISIS’s recruiting pool or its ability to operate outside of a limited area.
The first ISIS-linked VBIED attacks began on June 17, 2015, the first day of Ramadan, and ISIS has claimed VBIED attacks in Sana’a and Ibb.\textsuperscript{131} Wilayat Sana’a is the most advanced and active ISIS cell in Yemen. It averages just over an attack a week and has only struck targets it identifies as being used by the al Houthis. The first signs of governance activity—a trademark of ISIS in Iraq and Syria—emerged in late July in Aden.\textsuperscript{132}

The growing presence of ISIS in Yemen tests AQAP’s staying power and requires AQAP to continue to demonstrate success. ISIS remains weak in AQAP’s strongholds in east Yemen and strongest where AQAP has historically run recruiting or finance networks. AQAP has opted to work within Yemen’s tribal system and appears to favor the Yemeni tradition of using demonstrations of force to win negotiations for local control rather than to dominate a population by violence, as ISIS has in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS has not yet been successful in changing how Yemenis see the current conflict, which is still based on local power dynamics rather than sectarianism. But the protraction of the conflict will enable ISIS to continue to attempt to influence the shape of the conflict. ISIS will probably be able to expand and at least maintain its current footprint in Yemen as long as the fight against the al Houthis continues. It is far from clear whether ISIS would have been able to gain ground in Yemen without the current conflict, but it will remain there even after the conflict is resolved.
Defeating the Enemy in Yemen

AQAP’s expansion over the past year demonstrates the failure of the American strategy to counter it. This counterterrorism strategy, which relied on degrading leadership and disrupting operations, was based on the assumption that AQAP is fundamentally a terrorist group. It focused on defeating the components supporting AQAP’s external operations cell—the cell plotting imminent attacks against the US, or the AQAP threat node. The objective was to defeat the threat to the US homeland from AQAP, not to defeat the organization itself. This distinction is key because it permitted AQAP to grow as an insurgent organization in Yemen and downplayed the ways in which the AQAP insurgency supports the AQAP threat node.133

ISIS has emerged in Yemen because the proxy war and state collapse have created space for it. The principal ISIS operatives in Yemen were very likely disaffected AQAP members attracted to the new brand and the promise of less-constrained violence. ISIS in Yemen is a group of terrorist cells operating in distinct geographic regions, and there is no strong indication that these cells are coordinating very well. ISIS will most likely continue to attempt to develop its presence in Yemen and will probably continue to grow as long as the current conflict continues.

ISIS cells in Yemen are unlikely to be plotting to attack the US directly any time soon, but that could change if the group is able to significantly expand its areas of control and operations. The continuation of Yemen’s civil war, the further collapse of the Yemeni military, the deepening of the proxy war, and competition between AQAP and ISIS for legitimacy within the global jihadist movement are all factors that could facilitate the continued growth of ISIS.

At this time, however, the threat from ISIS in Yemen remains secondary to the threat from AQAP. It is not necessarily the case that a strategy to defeat AQAP would inevitably defeat ISIS in Yemen, but a sound strategy that addresses the drivers of instability and conflict and the sources of AQAP’s strength is very likely also to address the conditions that allow ISIS to persist as a threat.

Such a strategy must be based on an analysis of the sources of AQAP’s strength, which in turn requires examining AQAP through its strategic role in the global al Qaeda network and through how AQAP is operating on the ground in Yemen. Such an analysis must focus on identifying AQAP’s Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, Critical Vulnerabilities, and Centers of Gravity as the basis for developing an approach to defeating the group in the context of the overall situation in Yemen. (See table 2.)

AQAP’s Critical Capabilities. A Critical Capability enables the group to use its strengths and is required to accomplish its objectives.134 AQAP must maintain its critical capabilities or face defeat. The group derives some of its capabilities from the global al Qaeda network, while others are unique to the Yemen theater. AQAP’s capabilities at the strategic level include its ideology and methodology (minhaj), its role in the al Qaeda network, its threat node, its leadership qualities, and its narrative and media. Its capabilities at the operational level are its operational command functions and its popular support and recruiting capabilities.

Ideology and Methodology. Al Qaeda bases itself on a central idea that it is realizing a divine vision for the ordering of human society through implementing its interpretation of shari’a.135 Al Qaeda’s senior leaders also developed a specific ideology and methodology that has guided the group’s actions. AQAP fully subscribes to both, and its actions on the global and local stage fit within al Qaeda’s framework.

Al Qaeda’s ideology and methodology provide the vision and the roadmap for AQAP, including a means to fundraise and recruit for the cause. ISIS is already attacking that ideology and methodology, and al Qaeda must win the argument that its approach is right. ISIS’s successes on the ground make this more difficult. Denying both groups success will begin to deny them the ability to argue for their ideology and methodology.
Role in al Qaeda Network. AQAP is a force multiplier for the global al Qaeda network and functions as the principal al Qaeda threat to the US homeland and as a core facilitator, which is a Strategic Capability. It shares al Qaeda’s tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), has financed other groups, and has helped coordinate attacks against the West.136 The role AQAP plays improves its reputation within the global jihadist movement.

This role is a key asset for AQAP because of how it positions the group within the al Qaeda network. It magnifies AQAP’s impact and has given it access to additional resources.137 Denying AQAP this capability relegates the group to being a small al Qaeda cell with little clout to threaten the US. AQAP has parlayed its position in the al Qaeda network into something that gives it influence out of proportion to its power.

AQAP Threat Node. AQAP’s external operations cell, its threat node, is highly advanced and is a Strategic Capability that AQAP has developed to conduct mass-casualty spectacular attacks against the US homeland and interests. The cell plans transnational attacks specifically designed to evade the various security protocols the US and other states have put in place to detect explosive devices.

The cell conducts research and development, evidenced by improvements on its explosive devices and experiments with biological weapons.138 It trains operatives on the devices and prepares them for missions. AQAP’s threat node directly contributes to AQAP’s global standing. Without it, AQAP would be just another local militant Islamist group.

Table 2. AQAP’s Elements of Strategic Power

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<th>Definition</th>
<th>AQAP Elements</th>
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| Center of Gravity | The source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act | • Sanctuary in Yemen
• Reputation
• Link between local insurgencies and AQAP threat node |
| Critical Capability | A means that is considered a crucial enabler for a Center of Gravity to function as such and is essential to the accomplishment of the specified or assumed objective(s) | • Ideology and methodology (minhaj)
• Role in al Qaeda network
• AQAP threat node
• Leadership qualities
• Narrative and media
• Popular support and recruitment |
| Critical Requirement | An essential condition, resource, and means for a Critical Capability to be fully operational | • Long-term safe havens
• Ability to develop and execute complex operational and strategic plans
• Funding
• Recruiting and training
• Mobility and communications
• Collaborators and enablers |
| Critical Vulnerability | An aspect of a Critical Requirement that is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects | • Ability to develop and execute complex operational and strategic plans
• Popular support
• Narrative and media |

Leadership Qualities. AQAP’s leadership is experienced and adaptive, a Strategic Capability for AQAP that is essential to its longevity in Yemen. The leaders are part of al Qaeda’s global human network, with relationships that span different al Qaeda groups. Many of AQAP’s senior leaders fought in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or other fronts of jihad or trained at al Qaeda–run camps in Afghanistan. Some of these senior leaders are also members of al Qaeda core, the group of senior al Qaeda leadership that directs the global al Qaeda network.

The late emir Nasser al Wahayshi was Osama bin Laden’s personal aide for four years in Afghanistan before the 2001 US invasion and was appointed al Qaeda’s general manager in 2013, for example. The late shari’a official Nasser bin Ali al Ansi also served as al Qaeda’s deputy general manager since before 2011. AQAP also boasted former Guantanamo detainees among the ranks of its leaders. The late spiritual leader Ibrahim al RuBaish was a former Guantanamo detainee, one of many among AQAP’s senior operatives.

AQAP leadership is also regenerating, and district-level insurgent commanders are moving into higher-level command positions within the organization. The leadership has proven itself to be adaptive. Wahayshi wrote of lessons AQAP learned from its experience in south Yemen in 2011 and 2012, for example. A senior US official also described AQAP in 2011 as the “fastest-learning enemy we have.” The ability to adjust to on-the-ground conditions increases AQAP’s resiliency to change over time. AQAP leadership brings strategic depth and expertise to the al Qaeda group and a certain gravitas that distinguishes it from newer upstart groups, such as the ISIS cells forming in Yemen.

Narrative and Media. Al Qaeda’s narrative rests on the foundation of its ideology and methodology; it is one of growing success over the long term that will be resilient to Western attempts to undermine it. The al Qaeda narrative derives its legitimacy from the idea of a divine mandate. AQAP constructs its narrative to fit within al Qaeda’s ideology but also focuses specifically on developing a narrative for the Yemeni and Saudi people. The local narrative that AQAP produces and disseminates is crucial to AQAP’s ability to fundraise, recruit, and justify its actions.

The narrative in Yemen has shifted over time to match current events. It has attempted to build on local tribal and political concepts—directly addressing southerners, for instance—and painted former Yemeni President Saleh and current President Hadi as American puppets. AQAP’s Yemeni leaders took on the cause of the Yemeni people, highlighting many of the broad-based grievances against the government, and called for a revolution. The group’s Saudi leaders called for the overthrow of the House of Saud, which had deviated from true Islam, according to AQAP. A cause célèbre was the plight of the women imprisoned from Buraidah, Saudi Arabia. AQAP’s media arm, al Malahem Media Foundation, releases branded statements and videos. These include leadership statements, reports on local activities, and serial productions, such as ones focusing on martyrs or lessons on Islam. Al Malahem Media Foundation also produced AQAP’s Arabic-language magazine, Sada al Malahem (Echo of the Epics), and produces AQAP’s English-language magazine, Inspire.

AQAP’s insurgent arm, Ansar al Sharia, established Madad News Agency in 2011, a second media outlet that focused on Ansar al Sharia’s activities, particularly places where it undertook governance. AQAP’s media raises its profile on the global stage and helps attract assets such as foreign fighters. The group must be able to promote its narrative of success to continue attracting new recruits and funding.

Popular Support and Recruitment. AQAP is able to maintain a level of popular support in Yemen generally through a projected understanding of the disaffected populations. It has rarely turned to force or violence to coerce popular support, although the group has used those techniques on occasion. AQAP’s support is largely one of aligned interests rather than one of support for AQAP’s vision for Yemen. Tribesmen and local populations will permit AQAP operatives to transit their land because of a common enemy or lack of incentive to prevent AQAP access. This in turn enables AQAP operatives to enjoy a general freedom of movement in Yemen. AQAP envisions itself as part of a global insurgency against the West, and its ability to mobilize within Yemen’s insurgencies feeds its narrative.
Recruitment is another core operational capability. AQAP recruits Yemeni members through a network of Salafist mosques in which imams effectively pass forward referred recruits. These members fully believe in AQAP’s vision. Other recruits join AQAP or Ansar al Sharia as foot soldiers, motivated for many of the same reasons that AQAP has been able to sustain general popular support. Ansar al Sharia is a fighting force that is combatting a common enemy, either the al Houthis or the government, and is therefore a means to an end. Denying AQAP the ability to recruit and garner popular support defeats its ability to regenerate and disrupts its resiliency.

**AQAP’s Critical Requirements.** A Critical Requirement is an essential condition, resource, and means for a Critical Capability to be fully operational. A strategic requirement for AQAP is that it maintain its long-term safe havens. The operational-level requirements are the continued ability to develop and execute complex plans, funding, recruitment, training, mobility, and communications, and access to collaborators and enablers. Denying AQAP one of these Critical Requirements will disrupt its ability to operate according to its current strategy.

*Long-Term Safe Havens.* AQAP depends on its long-term safe havens to support its operations. The safe havens support key capabilities such as the AQAP threat node, AQAP’s role within the al Qaeda network, and its leadership. The AQAP threat node uses the safe havens for such activities as research and development for IEDs and vetting and training future operatives.145 Such activities require a protected physical space in which they can occur. The safe havens also permit AQAP to communicate with other al Qaeda nodes, enabling it to continue to play a strategic role within the al Qaeda network. Additionally, they host the training camps that have developed operatives and leaders.

Denying AQAP its safe havens would significantly disrupt its ability to plan and prepare transnational attacks. AQAP would not be able to run training camps, which would not only reduce its own domestic capabilities, but would also inhibit a crucial role AQAP has played in sharing its TTPs with other groups.146 AQAP’s leaders would not be able to interact as much with their deputies and with AQAP midlevel command because of concerns for their own safety, creating a leadership deficit.

*Planning and Executing Complex Operational and Strategic Plans.* AQAP relies on its ability to plan at an operational level, known as its military decision-making process (MDMP). AQAP’s ability to plan for, prepare for, and execute operations, both offensive and defensive, has enabled it to endure and expand in Yemen. AQAP has conducted tactical retreats from key terrain in the face of a Yemeni military offensive, for example, avoiding pitched battles that would have resulted in a significant loss of numbers for AQAP.

Successful attacks and operations help support AQAP’s narrative, boost funding, and bolster recruitment efforts. AQAP requires an MDMP capability to operate as an organized, effective insurgent group working toward an objective. Removing this capability reduces AQAP to a disruptive group that might destabilize Yemen but would not have an overall effect on the trajectory of events.

*Funding.* A continued source of funding is another required capability for AQAP to operate. AQAP has long-developed funding streams, although it has had to adapt as Gulf donations shifted to Syria and the kidnapping-for-ransom racket became less profitable as foreigners left Yemen due to the insecurity. Today, AQAP derives some of its funding from foreign donors; local criminal activities, such as robbing bank cash transfers; or from the reserves at the banks in al Mukalla, which is now under AQAP control.

AQAP’s financial demands include funding for basic supplies, weapons, and munitions for fighters; external operations funding; funding for charity work; and payments to the families of killed operatives. AQAP has financed other radical Islamist groups in the past, so there may be some general direction from senior al Qaeda leadership advising the sharing of finances among affiliated groups. Past analysis of al Qaeda group financing shows that this requirement is not a vulnerability for groups on the ground because they are usually able to find new sources for income generation.147
Recruiting and Training. AQAP needs insurgent fighters and foreign operatives. It recruits among locals, nonlocal Sunni Arabs, and radicalized Westerners. These recruits fill AQAP’s ranks, and the radicalized Westerners provide a vector into Europe or the US. AQAP must therefore maintain its recruitment capability in order to continue to regenerate. Foreign operatives are a strategic resource that AQAP deploys in support of its threat node.

New members must go through indoctrination and training, meaning AQAP must maintain training facilities and personnel numbers. The training process, including indoctrination, builds a new generation of hardline al Qaeda members to carry on al Qaeda’s vision and AQAP’s mission in Yemen. Denying AQAP the ability to recruit and train new individuals will disrupt AQAP’s insurgent capabilities—it must have fighters on the ground—and its ability to conduct transnational attacks.

Mobility and Communications. AQAP depends on its freedom of movement and mobility to operate in Yemen: it must be able to deploy forces and operatives to the frontlines of the battlefield, relay commands, and communicate efficiently to distribute resources and information. Yemen’s terrain makes full denial of AQAP’s mobility difficult, since there are many secondary routes off the main roads. The group has rapidly changed its communications tactics to adjust to new conditions. For example, AQAP altered how it reached out to its operatives following the 2013 Edward Snowden leaks.\footnote{148}

Fully denying AQAP’s communications may be difficult, but even disrupting leadership’s ability to pass orders to the frontlines or to contact operatives would begin to break down AQAP’s overall ability to operate. Disrupting AQAP’s ability to move freely through the battlespace would degrade its combat efficiency and its ability to assign and shift resources in response to opportunities and threats.

Collaborators and Enablers. AQAP benefits extensively from and has grown to rely on collaborators and enablers within Yemen. These are individuals who may not fully subscribe to AQAP’s values or vision for the country but derive some immediate benefit from facilitating AQAP activity. They include individuals within government or military positions that provide AQAP with key intelligence, criminal and smuggling networks that move resources, and locals who conduct business transactions with AQAP or support local AQAP operations as a means to an end. AQAP depends on other illicit networks to move personnel and resources. Without these, it would be fairly isolated in Yemen.

AQAP’s Critical Vulnerabilities. A Critical Vulnerability is an aspect of a Critical Requirement that is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects. AQAP must sustain its planning or MDMP capability, it must have popular support, and it must sustain and disseminate its narrative. The weakening or disruption of any of these capabilities will affect AQAP’s ability to operate.

Planning and Executing Complex Operations. AQAP’s planning capabilities, which are adaptive and reactive to the situation at hand, are a considerable asset. As noted previously, AQAP’s planners are adaptive to on-the-ground situations, which increases the likelihood of successful operations. AQAP would be vulnerable should its MDMP capability be disrupted or weakened. AQAP must continue to demonstrate success on the battlefield in order to uphold its own narrative, and planning is an essential component to this success.

Its MDMP is a vulnerability because AQAP will not be able to defend its safe havens or sustain a narrative of success without operational-level planning, which has resounding effects on AQAP’s ability to recruit and fundraise. This capability can be degraded when key nodes of the human network are attacked or safe havens disrupted, forcing the planners to disperse and keep moving. Disrupting AQAP’s mobility and means of communication would also damage this capability, possibly severely.

Popular Support. Part of AQAP’s strength rests on the popular support that it enjoys in Yemen, which means that the group would be particularly vulnerable if this began to erode. The majority of the support is not ideologically based, which reduces the overall effect of efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE).
Instead, support is primarily generated through common cause or through transactional relationships. Common causes currently include preventing al Houthis from controlling or entering tribal territory, harassing or attacking Yemeni government personnel or infrastructure, and ensuring access to basic goods and services. Transactional relationships include those criminal or smuggling networks that help facilitate AQAP operations.

Should the Yemeni government successfully address local grievances, support for AQAP would likely decline. Similarly, should the cost of transacting with AQAP increase, such relationships would likely decrease. A loss of popular support would weaken AQAP, reducing its freedom of movement and access to resources. AQAP has not demonstrated a willingness or ability to maintain itself among hostile populations through terror and force, as al Qaeda in Iraq and its successor, ISIS, have done. It is not clear that AQAP has the ability to maintain itself should current levels of popular support and toleration collapse.

Narrative and Media. The strength of AQAP’s narrative hinges on its ability to deliver continued victories. ISIS’s narrative introduces an alternative that has had demonstrated success in Iraq and Syria and growing success in Libya and the Sinai. AQAP must deliver on the ground in order to back its own narrative and must ensure that its narrative matches reality, at least superficially. It must also be able to distribute reports of its success, promote its leaders’ voices, propagate material on its vision for society, and maintain a presence within the public sphere.

The disruption of AQAP’s media production has had an impact on AQAP’s strength. A separate challenge for AQAP has been the volume and quality of ISIS’s media outputs. AQAP, like the rest of the al Qaeda network, has not yet harnessed the potential behind social media and has suffered in terms of overall stature and recruitment. AQAP and al Qaeda risk being drowned out of the debate by ISIS supporters. This capability can be attacked either directly, by disrupting media centers and other means whereby AQAP communicates, or indirectly, by imposing clear defeats on AQAP, undermining its narrative of success.

AQAP’s Centers of Gravity. A Center of Gravity is a group’s source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act; it is the source of strength. AQAP’s Centers of Gravity are primarily at the strategic level, because of AQAP’s central role to the al Qaeda network. Denying AQAP its Centers of Gravity will have an asymmetric effect on the organization’s strength and will have second-order effects on the global al Qaeda network. (See figure 14.)

As an al Qaeda node, AQAP fulfills many of al Qaeda’s critical requirements, which are not discussed in depth here. Al Qaeda currently relies on the AQAP threat node as part of al Qaeda’s war with the West and uses AQAP’s sanctuary in Yemen as a rear area for the global network. AQAP derives its strength from its sanctuary in Yemen, its reputation and leadership messaging, and the relationship between AQAP and Yemen’s insurgencies.

Sanctuary within Yemen. AQAP has maintained a sanctuary within Yemen since its establishment in January 2009, and its predecessor, al Qaeda in Yemen, had sanctuary there as well. It is a Center of Gravity at both the strategic and operational level because the sanctuary has been a source of strength for the group, enabling AQAP to develop its unique capabilities and to preserve its crucial role within the al Qaeda network.

AQAP’s sanctuary has been a key contributor to its long-term resilience at an operational level. AQAP members are able to retreat into safe havens when pressed militarily by Yemeni security forces, preserving core strength. They also complete paramilitary and military command skill training at the Yemen sanctuary and go through indoctrination courses. AQAP uses its sanctuary to regenerate force. Denying AQAP its sanctuary in Yemen will disrupt its threat node, reduce its role within the al Qaeda network, and deny it a narrative of success, making AQAP a militant group on the run instead of an al Qaeda force multiplier.

Reputation. AQAP’s reputation within the al Qaeda network generates power, particularly at the strategic level. AQAP’s reputation drives its ability to support its narrative, raised it to a leading position among al
Qaeda’s various nodes, and directly contributes to the further development of its threat node.

The group has headed al Qaeda’s efforts to attack the West and remains the al Qaeda network’s greatest direct threat to the US. AQAP’s reputation may begin to fade should the AQAP threat node not continue to pose as great a threat to the US. Another component of AQAP’s reputation is its leadership’s messaging, which occurs on a global platform. Well-respected al Qaeda veterans compose its leadership, although the senior leadership was rapidly degraded in 2015. Current emir Qasim al Raymi was in direct contact with Osama bin Laden and other senior al Qaeda leaders, though, as shown in the few declassified documents from those recovered during the May 2011 Abbottabad raid.

AQAP’s messages are not just to Yemenis or Saudis. Late AQAP spiritual leader Ibrahim al Rubaish, for example, called on all Muslims to fight against the US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria in October 2014. Raymi will probably take on this mantle, but there are already signs that Syria’s leader is taking a greater role in messaging on the global platform.

AQAP’s reputation continues to allow it to operate at a level far beyond that of a group protecting the rear area. Losing this reputation would strip AQAP of its ability to recruit and fundraise, diminish the global resonance of its leadership’s messaging, and demote it within al Qaeda’s network.
Link between Local Insurgencies and the AQAP Threat Node. The relationship between Yemen's local insurgencies and AQAP's threat node enables the threat node to continue to regenerate and to operate away from military pressure. It provides AQAP with a support network, which has strengthened and empowered the group in Yemen. Disaggregating AQAP—particularly the threat node—from local insurgencies would sap AQAP of the momentum behind the insurgencies and the capabilities that they support.

Longstanding antigovernment grievances and, now, a mobilization against the al Houthi movement created conditions on the ground for a broad-based insurgency. That insurgency is not monolithic, but is instead divided into hyperlocal actors and interests. AQAP has been able to navigate the complicated dynamics of the insurgency and leverage it to AQAP’s own advantage, however. The insurgency has permitted AQAP to expand its area of operations and recruit from a wider pool. AQAP is attempting to integrate fully with the insurgency, which would fortify the link between AQAP’s threat node and the insurgency.

Breaking this link would diminish the overall strength of the AQAP threat node and might reduce AQAP to a terrorist cell. AQAP would start to resemble the rag-tag al Qaeda cells in Yemen from the 1990s, although it would preserve its ability to conduct transnational attacks, which is the group’s primary threat to the US.

Developing a New Yemen Model

A new model for defeating AQAP must abandon the reliance on state-based partners, who have repeatedly proved to be unreliable for a variety of reasons, and must prioritize changing the environment that has allowed AQAP to expand despite the military campaign against it. It is time to recognize that the drivers of instability in Yemen are not just Yemeni domestic issues but are also critical opportunities that AQAP and like-minded groups, such as ISIS, exploit.

The US need not rebuild Yemen or address every grievance, but it must recognize how these grievances have abetted AQAP’s growth in the country and have mobilized factions against the Yemeni government. Changing the conditions on the ground will begin to deny AQAP its sanctuary and will start to break the link between AQAP and Yemen’s insurgencies.

A Strategy to Defeat AQAP

The US strategy to defeat AQAP must be a component of a comprehensive strategy to defeat al Qaeda, ISIS, and like-minded groups. Such a US grand strategy will not only need to defeat the current groups that are operative today, but will also need to set the conditions to prevent their return. It will be impossible to defeat these groups’ ideology, but it is conceivable to discredit its leading exponents by defeating them, to deny that ideology space within the public sphere, to re-empower the voices in Islam that represent the majority, and to prevent the spread of sectarianism that polarizes and radicalizes. A strategy to defeat AQAP must work to achieve these broader, grand strategic objectives.

The mission in Yemen is to defeat AQAP while providing security from attacks against the US homeland and advancing US interests in Yemen. These interests include preventing other radical Islamic groups, such as ISIS, from establishing a safe haven; supporting a resolution to the current political crisis that leads to a central government that is perceived to be legitimate, responsive, and capable; and minimizing the risk that the al Houthi movement develops into an Iranian proxy group or a spoiler undermining the future stability of any Yemeni political settlement.

The desired end state is a country in which the threat to American interests is defeated, the Yemeni government is perceived as legitimate and adopts a form of governance that does not generate violence or create conditions conducive to the reestablishment of terrorist safe havens, and the US maintains its ability to work with Yemeni partners. A partitioned Yemen has proven to be inherently unstable, as shown by the de facto partitioning of the Yemeni state today, and therefore it is within US interests to support a unitary, although possibly highly decentralized or federal, Yemeni state.
Strategic Objectives in the Campaign against AQAP.
The US must accomplish four strategic objectives to defeat AQAP:

1. Permanently degrade and disrupt the AQAP organization, leadership, fighting forces, and safe havens in order to destroy the direct threat and to end AQAP’s role as an important al Qaeda network node.

2. Stabilize Yemen as a unified state under a government that is perceived as legitimate.

3. Contain the growing Saudi Arabia–Iran conflict in Yemen that is adding to regional insecurity.

4. Prevent a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, particularly one that generates a significant Yemeni refugee flow from the country.

Strategic Key Tasks in the Campaign against AQAP.
The tasks at hand derive from the key objectives. These translate the objectives into actions that US and partnered forces should undertake and are listed here in order of priority:

1. Destroy the AQAP threat node, which is the external operations cell that plans and directs attacks against the US and the West.

2. Prevent AQAP from co-opting local insurgencies.

3. Identify and address widespread antigovernment grievances that drive insecurity in Yemen.

4. Support a negotiated political settlement that leads to a central government perceived to be legitimate and that does not drive further conflict through its actions.

5. Enable the development of central and local security structures that can accomplish key objectives with ongoing external support and that can sustain operations with these minimum capabilities:
   - Able to conduct counterinsurgency operations without alienating the population;
   - Effective at taking out senior AQAP leadership;
   - Able to prevent the reestablishment of an AQAP safe haven; and
   - Able to protect state infrastructure and secure Yemeni territory.

Potential Courses of Action (COAs). There are multiple potential courses of action that the US could take to pursue its strategic objectives. The US could work unilaterally or through partners. It could rely solely on either military power to defeat the threat from AQAP or diplomatic power to leverage US partners to defeat the threat from AQAP. It could favor a certain side of the political crisis or ignore it altogether. Or it could pursue some combination of the aforementioned actions. These COAs must each be examined independently for their potential advantages and accompanying risks.

COA #1: US Invasion of Yemen. The US could rely on its own military forces and instruments of power to defeat AQAP. The military campaign would be a straightforward counterinsurgency campaign that begins with the insertion of US forces in Aden. The main effort would be the US military securing the major road from Aden to al Mukalla, including the surrounding area, and then the road that runs from Shabwah through Ma‘rib.

US military units would also need to contain AQAP inside of al Bayda, Lahij, Ma‘rib, and al Jawf governorates for a future phase. The first supporting effort would be the provision of logistical, intelligence, training, and weapons to support partnered Yemeni tribal militias; the second would entail the disruption of AQAP terrorist cells.

The US military is experienced at conducting these sorts of operations and would likely be capable of accomplishing the mission. A major force presence on the ground removes a key challenge in Yemen: reliance on partnered forces. This COA imposes a high cost for the US, however, especially in military resources, and poses the significant risk of the US getting bogged down in Yemen. Yemen’s terrain moves from rugged mountains to desert with deep dry river valleys (wadis), difficult for any military force to navigate.
A US invasion of Yemen would also very likely generate hostility toward the US inside the country and would mobilize some powerful tribal forces, such as the Awalek tribe in Shabwah, against the US. This would initially strengthen AQAP and also increases the likelihood of the US fighting an expanded insurgency in Yemen.

**COA #2: US Direct-Action Operations.** The US could pursue an expanded direct-action campaign in Yemen. US special operations force (SOF) units would conduct operations to neutralize the AQAP threat to US interests. A drone strike program would complement the light ground presence. The main effort would be SOF direct-action operations to disrupt AQAP planning operations and degrade the AQAP threat node. The supporting effort would extend direct-action operations against the AQAP support network in Yemen.

The benefit of a US direct-action approach is that it is a light-footprint approach. It also avoids entanglement in local and regional power struggles, since the US investment in Yemen is limited and not likely to empower local groups excessively. The approach is unlikely to defeat AQAP, however, and will probably have the reverse effect of increasing AQAP’s resiliency.

The US drone campaign globally has increased al Qaeda’s resilience to leadership deaths and has also had the interesting effect of strengthening the leadership cadre that remains. Those who remain follow strong operational security procedures and adapt to the US threat. AQAP’s support network and the insurgencies in Yemen that strengthen the group also remain intact. It is likewise unclear that the US could develop actionable intelligence at a high enough rate to support a significantly expanded direct-action effort without putting
additional forces on the ground. This factor is particularly important considering the collapse and reorientation of the partner on which US forces had been relying: the Yemeni military. Finally, the approach leaves the US vulnerable to surprise attacks over the long term.

COA #3: Support the al Houthis. The US could support the al Houthi–led government and partner with it to defeat AQAP. The US military would provide enabling support for al Houthi militia and Yemeni military units to secure Yemen and combat AQAP, working from west to east and north to south. The main effort would be providing logistical, intelligence, trains, and weapons support to the al Houthi–run Yemeni government and military for counterinsurgency operations. The supporting effort would be a direct-action operations campaign to disrupt the direct threat to the US from the AQAP threat node.

The al Houthis control a good percentage of Yemen’s state infrastructure—most importantly, the capital and the ministries and agencies based there. Supporting the al Houthis recognizes the de facto Yemeni state apparatus and works through already-established channels. The US and the al Houthis have a shared interest in combatting AQAP since the group has named both as legitimate targets. Moreover, supporting the al Houthis may serve to discourage them from further aligning themselves with Iran, which reduces the risk that the al Houthis develop along a trend line similar to Lebanese Hezbollah.

Even with US support, however, the al Houthis and Yemeni military would likely remain fixed along a frontline that was the border of former South Yemen. The anti–al Houthi insurgency would probably grow, which would strengthen AQAP on the ground. The presence of Gulf ground forces supporting Hadi against the Houthis risks putting the US in the position of directly supporting operations against Saudi and Emirati troops. Finally, there would be blowback in the region over the perception that the US is again siding with Iran against Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Arab states following the nuclear deal with Iran.

COA #4: Support the Saudi-Led Coalition. The US could instead choose to support fully the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, with the objective of reinstalling the Hadi-led government and resuming counterterrorism operations against AQAP. The US military would provide additional enabling support for Operation Restoring Hope, throwing its weight behind the Arab coalition, to ensure the operation is successful. The main effort would be to provide logistical, intelligence, training, and weapons to both the coalition forces and partnered Yemeni resistance forces and tribal militias. The supporting effort, identical to the previous COA, would be a direct-action operations campaign to disrupt the direct threat to the US.

This COA would lend additional US support to the Sunni Arab coalition efforts that are already underway and backs the internationally recognized government of Yemen. The US would show that it still supports its Sunni Arab partners and could attempt to influence the shape of their operations in Yemen.

The momentum in Yemen has shifted in favor of Operation Restoring Hope, a sign that the al Houthis do not have sufficient popular support to maintain their current force posture. The prospect of returning Yemen to the state where it was before the current crisis is low, however, and even should the coalition succeed, the challenge of defeating AQAP remains. Current coalition actions are indirectly strengthening AQAP, which means that a future AQAP will be harder to defeat. There is also a high risk that Saudi triumphalism would preclude a negotiated settlement with the al Houthis, ensuring continued instability and potentially undermining any temporary settlement of the conflict.

COA #5: Support Local Partners. The US could work with both regional and local partners to defeat AQAP and negotiate a political solution to the current crisis. The US would take on a leadership role in Yemen, and its main effort would be to coordinate and enable the local fight against AQAP, support political negotiations to end the crisis, and work through international channels to address local grievances. The supporting effort would be a direct-action operations campaign to neutralize the AQAP threat.

This COA is a hybrid of other options. It is US-led, which increases the likelihood that US objectives and interests will be met. It is formally neutral on the
Iran–Saudi Arabia question, which may encourage both the Sunni Arab states and Iran to accept a negotiated settlement in Yemen. It also works through many of the local structures in place, which have proven to be robust in Yemen and many times more effective than the central government. The local partnerships would enable the US to identify and begin addressing some of the grievances that drive insecurity in Yemen. US support for these actors also increases US leverage over them, which could facilitate the reunification of Yemen under some form of a central government.

There is an inherent risk of strengthening local actors outside of the state system, however, which must be kept in mind when developing the plan for action. It will also be difficult to persuade the al Houthis and their Iranian backers that the US is not simply helping impose a maximalist Saudi position while simultaneously assuring the Saudis that the US is committed to finding a solution in Yemen that secures Saudi interests.

Recommended COA. The US can neither rely on foreign forces—including Yemeni, Saudi Arabian, or other military units—to fight AQAP effectively, nor can it fight AQAP unilaterally without incurring significant risk of worsening the Yemeni conflict. The current political crisis is a contributing factor to local Yemeni insurgencies, from which AQAP derives strength. Therefore, the US must pursue a COA that simultaneously addresses the political crisis, de-escalates the current military conflict, and contains AQAP with the ultimate objective of isolating it from the population and defeating it. (See table 3.) The recommended COA is, consequently, the fifth COA: to lead multiple lines of effort, working with regional and local partners, to defeat AQAP and negotiate a political solution to the Yemen crisis. (See figure 15.)

Campaign Plan in Yemen: Phase One. The first phase of the campaign can be broken down into four synergistic lines of effort:

- **Political:** Yemeni power politics caused the current conflict, therefore resolving the political crisis and its most important underlying grievances is the key to de-escalating the conflict.

- **Subnational:** The expansion of the al Houthis throughout central Yemen and their offensive into south Yemen mobilized an insurgency. AQAP exploited the opportunity to forge new relationships with Yemeni insurgent forces that would otherwise have been immune to AQAP overtures. These forces need to be identified and supported in their efforts.

- **Counteroffensive:** AQAP will probably remain on the offensive, so there should be a military offensive against AQAP.

- **Humanitarian/stabilization:** The conflict in Yemen has exacerbated poor humanitarian conditions to the point where there is a growing humanitarian crisis, which international aid organizations must begin addressing before it deepens further.

The lines of effort, in order of priority, are:

1. **Negotiate a political solution:** US diplomatic personnel support and pursue multilateral engagement to compel the Sunni Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to accept al Houthi representation within the Yemeni government and to negotiate a political settlement among Yemeni stakeholders in order to end the national-level conflict. The US must signal clearly that it believes that the al Houthis should have a voice in Yemen’s future as long as they are willing to work within the state system and abjure Iranian control. It is far from clear whether Saudi Arabia would currently accept an al Houthi voice in the Yemeni government, and Saudi Arabia is the primary supporter of the Hadi-led government involved in Yemeni peace talks.

   Therefore, the US must ensure that both Yemeni and regional stakeholders accept the future role of the al Houthis in Yemen. Specifically, the US would:
• Apply diplomatic levers to build acceptance for the al Houthi component in the Yemeni government and to increase pressure to remove former Yemeni President Saleh from political power in Yemen. Saleh’s continued role in politics is now detrimental to Yemen’s long-term stability.

• Pressure the Saudi-led coalition to end the general air campaign in Yemen. The air campaign, apart from limited efforts directly in support of Yemeni military forces and Saudi allies, is now doing more damage to popular support for Yemen’s internationally recognized central government than it is to al Houthi capabilities.

• Support and encourage locally negotiated ceasefires. De-escalating the Yemeni conflict on the local level reduces the opportunities for AQAP to embed itself within the local population and may create a more stable situation from which parties can negotiate national terms.

• Engage Yemeni stakeholders in support of UN-led efforts, or those of another country perceived to be neutral, to negotiate a political resolution. There appears to be a level of distrust on the part of some stakeholders such as the al Houthis when entering into negotiations, because they face international sanctions and are opposed by a US-backed Sunni Arab coalition. The US must push for talks in a neutral setting and must show openness to bounded outcomes from the talks.

• Support the renegotiation of terms within the NDC framework agreement in order to produce a legitimate and acceptable path forward for Yemen. The US must publicly recognize that the Hadi government has lost legitimacy and that it is now serving as an interim government. It must therefore reject the Saudi maximalist view of the current conflict. The US must also avoid basing acceptable conditions for an outcome on the observance of the terms of the NDC’s output, because key
players, including the al Houthis and some southern factions, view the NDC as an illegitimate process.

- Empower moderates within the al Houthi movement. A more radical, militant stream appears to be in power within the movement, which is likely perpetuated by the current conflict. There is a faction of the movement that is inherently motivated along political lines, and this is the faction that the US should seek to empower.

2. Support subnational actors: US military or clandestine personnel lead efforts to coordinate support for subnational tribal or governing authorities in order to stabilize local dynamics and prevent and ultimately reverse AQAP or ISIS expansion. AQAP has developed popular support by providing military force to subnational actors, particularly in the current fight against the al Houthis. Preventing these populations from turning to AQAP, or removing their reliance on AQAP, will reduce the group’s operating space.

This effort is defensive in nature and must be coordinated with negotiating an overall solution so that they are mutually supporting. It will probably also require messaging that it is not a fight against the al Houthis, but rather a fight against AQAP’s presence that will also allow the local population to secure themselves against all outsiders. Specifically, the US would:

- Develop and engage local relationships directly or through effective intermediaries in Ma’rib, Shabwah, Hadramawt, al Bayda, and Abyan governorates. Potential intermediaries include tribal or local powerbrokers, or other Arab military or clandestine personnel working on the ground. These relationships should be developed outside of the al Houthi— or Hadi-led government in order to develop strong local relationships and prevent local sentiments toward either government from affecting willingness to engage with the US.

- Identify and address local grievances, including providing military assistance to protect the population from perceived outsiders or occupiers, such as the al Houthis, and humanitarian or development assistance. AQAP has been successful among certain local populations because it is able to identify, understand, and address local grievances. The US and its partners must attempt to do the same when possible.

- Coordinate and direct international—particularly Gulf—assistance to US-identified and US-prioritized projects. The US must work with international donors to ensure that aid is directed to prioritized projects and that it is not delivered at cross-purposes.

- Provide the means by which grievances against the Yemeni central state can be recognized and incorporated into a future reconciliation effort. Not all grievances can or will be addressed through assistance, but the US can help to develop future channels through which these grievances can be voiced and addressed and should provide guarantees to that effect as possible.

3. Lead offensive against AQAP: US military or clandestine personnel lead an effort to coordinate and support a ground offensive against AQAP. This effort is offensive in nature and seeks to defeat AQAP in its safe havens by partnering with local forces. It risks strengthening current forces, such as the al Houthis, and empowering radical forces that are opposed to AQAP. These risks must be mitigated to the greatest possible extent by careful intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and patient and thoughtful planning. The general procedures and timelines of the Village Stabilization Operations (VSO) in Afghanistan are a good model to seek to emulate, suitably modified for Yemen’s different culture.

The final decision to partner with local forces must also take into consideration the current dynamics on the ground and the long-term
objectives of the forces in order to mitigate the risk of strengthening actors outside of the state system. Specifically, the US would:

- Provide intelligence, logistics, weapons, and training support to partnered forces on the ground—particularly in Hadramawt but also in Ma’rib, Shabwah, al Bayda, and Abyan—to secure AQAP safe havens and prevent their reestablishment. Partnered forces could include Yemeni military units and local militia forces that (1) are not subordinated to an actor that seeks to expand power through territorial conquest; (2) subordinate themselves to a US-led command structure, relinquishing some independence of operation; and (3) are not opposed to the idea of a unified Yemeni state under some form of secular central government.

- Conduct direct-action operations to destroy the AQAP threat node. The intent is to isolate the AQAP threat node from its popular support networks so that direct-action operations can destroy the node and prevent its regeneration.

4. Manage and mitigate humanitarian crisis:

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) mobilizes and helps direct the international humanitarian assistance community in order to address the immediate needs of the population and to prevent a full-scale humanitarian crisis. Specifically, USAID would:

- Prioritize assistance to key terrain. Aid will likely be insufficient to address all Yemen’s humanitarian needs and therefore should be scaled to address those that are critical. Its basic components should include fuel, food, water, and medical supplies; development programming is a future task. The assistance must also not appear to marginalize parts of the population, such as those in Sā‘āda where AQAP is inactive, to mitigate the risk of further instability.

- Deliver targeted aid through USAID channels similar to programs run in Afghanistan, such as the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). Deliver general aid, such as food distribution, through UN or international aid agencies.

Projections for Future Phases. The first phase simultaneously addresses both the political crisis that underpins much of the conflict in south-central Yemen and the threat from AQAP in east Yemen. The political solution does not necessarily need to be a permanent one, but must be sufficient to defuse the situation and must be at least an interim agreement that will lead to a lasting power-sharing agreement. It effectively negotiates a détente at the national level and sets conditions for a subnational dialogue and framework.

Any military support given to subnational actors must be conditioned on their acceptance of the ongoing political negotiations. Those who refuse to accept a unitary state or the possibility of groups such as the al Houthis having a voice in the central government must be convinced that this is the best way to have their interests realized and that they cannot be empowered until they do accept the unitary state. Those who seek to expand their influence beyond their historical sphere of influence must also be contained.

The national-level interim government that comes from the first phase of negotiations will probably have little authority at the subnational level and will need to build its legitimacy among those actors who were not involved in the initial discussions. This involves reaching out to local authorities and developing a decentralized framework to incorporate them into a national structure. It also involves the US and others leveraging relationships developed with subnational actors, including conditioning continued support for those actors on their buy-in to a decentralized national framework.

There is also a decision to be made about the future of the forces fighting on the local level. One possibility is to integrate them into a decentralized but nationalized police organization, as has been undertaken to some extent in Iraq and Afghanistan, albeit with mixed results. Such a structure would codify and support preexisting local capabilities. These forces
are already best positioned to identify local threats, such as AQAP operatives, and would then be given the authority to disrupt AQAP activities in their areas of responsibility. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, makes clear that the success of such integration heavily depends on the acceptance by all parties of a political resolution and some agreement about power sharing.

The offensive against AQAP may continue beyond the first phase, as it is far from certain that it will culminate at the same time as the national-level political crisis. Yet, requirements begin to fall into place shortly after a national interim government comes into power. These include reparations to local communities for damage done to infrastructure during the counter-AQAP offensive. A timely response will go a long way in building the local legitimacy of the central government.

The discussion about what to do with the forces that have been fighting AQAP must also begin. Immediate reintegration of Yemeni military units into the Yemeni military will be a challenge because the military itself must go through a rebuilding phase, although eventual reintegration should probably be an objective for these units. The local militias deserve significant attention. Demobilization is a possibility for tribal levies that have historically mobilized and then returned home, but there must be a process to collect medium and heavy weaponry.

Demobilization might also create a security vacuum should there be no alternative security force, and therefore integrating the militias into a national or local structure may be a better option. There is an argument to be made for integrating these militias into the military—they will have been tried and they will have already cooperated with Yemeni military units—but preserving the militias as a unit is likely to cause problems down the line, as it undercuts a core concept of a national military.

Finally, Yemen requires a long-term commitment to development projects once conditions have generally stabilized in the country. A key initiative must be repairing the damage to Yemen’s road networks, especially bombed-out bridges in northern and central Yemen. Other major infrastructure projects, such as those focused on Yemen’s liquefied national gas sector, should be prioritized against immediate needs and future development objectives.

**Key Assumptions.** The campaign plan would be invalidated should any of the key assumptions behind it prove to be false.

**Absence of IRGC Ground Presence in Yemen.** An assumption behind the campaign plan is that there is no IRGC ground presence in Yemen, which would significantly alter Iran’s role in the current conflict and the predicted Sunni Arab response. An IRGC ground presence would also be an indicator that the al Houthis have not preserved their full independence for decision making and are an Iranian proxy group. The plan assumes that the al Houthi movement has been driven toward Iranian support because of previous isolation under the Saleh regime, Iranian outreach, and Saudi Arabian military actions.

**Presence of Willing and Able Local Partners in Yemen.** The campaign plan assumes that the US will be able to identify and work with local partners in Yemen, that the damage to the US reputation in Yemen through support for the coalition air campaign is reparable, and that local partners will cooperate with the right incentives.

**No Basis for a Full-Blown Sectarian Conflict in Yemen.** The analysis of the situation in Yemen views the current conflict as one over the distribution of wealth and power. A key assumption is that only a select few of the more radical actors are motivated along sectarian lines. Indicators that the situation has become a real sectarian conflict include a significant and rapid increase in the targeting of civilians based on faith rather than another identity, incorporation of sectarianism into politics and demands, or the voluntary disaggregation of mixed Zaydi-Shafi’i populations.

**AQAP Subscribes to al Qaeda’s Doctrine.** The campaign plan assumes that AQAP will not pursue a sectarian strategy similar to the one that ISIS pursued in Iraq. AQAP has labeled al Houthis as *rafidhah* and sees Iran as an enemy, but has not included the full Yemeni Zaydi population as a target set.
Saudi Arabia and Its Coalition Partners Do Not Attempt to Seize Northern Yemen. There is an assumption that the Saudi Arabia–led coalition recognizes the high likelihood that an attempt to seize territory in northern Yemen would mobilize a strong resistance force against it and would bog down coalition efforts in Yemen. There are strong anti-Saudi sentiments in northern Yemen, especially in regions victimized by the air campaign, that will generate popular resistance to a Saudi presence. The terrain itself is also difficult, leveling the playing field between the guerilla fighter and equipped soldier. An attempt to seize northern Yemen is also an indicator that Saudi Arabia intends to defeat or destroy the al Houthi movement, which would likely prolong the conflict.

US Forces Required. The US must have operators on the ground for the plan to succeed, as the campaign plan requires US personnel to be operating on the ground outside of the chief of mission authority. The only unilateral actions envisioned for US personnel are direct-action operations against individual AQAP leaders or small groups. Otherwise, US personnel are to serve in advising and enabling functions alongside local forces.

US Special Forces or clandestine services should be able to fulfill this role and maintain a low profile on the ground. The estimated number of personnel depends directly on whether regional partners are able to commit personnel to assist in these roles, but is likely to be in the low thousands.

The US had maintained a presence of about 125 military trainers and advisers in al Anad military base in Lahij governorate until March 2015. These military trainers worked to build Yemeni army unit capacity and to assist in crucial maintenance of Yemen’s Huey-II helicopters. The mission laid out within the campaign plan requires a more significant training presence, likely on site or in proximity to many of the local militia forces that are potential partners. This also requires the US to maintain the capability to rapidly evacuate injured personnel should they come under fire, which calls for either an offshore US presence, say in southern Saudi Arabia, or at a Yemeni military base.

If the US were to establish a military headquarters inside of Yemen in Aden or al Anad, it would risk becoming embroiled in the local fight should the frontline advance south again. Taiz would also need to be secured fully before it became a good option, for the same reasons. Ma’rib, which is centrally located, is another possible location, but this positioning must be negotiated with local tribal powerbrokers, or the local groups might disrupt operations. Decisions about the locations of such facilities will dictate the scale of US forces required in Yemen itself.

This proposed plan aims to keep US forces deployed to Yemen at the lowest possible levels consistent with mission success and their ability to protect themselves. This is a situation that seems very likely to run a serious risk of inflaming the population against a significant American deployment. Direct access from the sea and from Saudi Arabia can mitigate the requirements for a large support presence in Yemen, although only a professional military planning staff can determine precisely to what extent that is true.

Potential Enemy Responses to the First Phase

There is effectively no ground resistance to AQAP and ISIS at the time of writing, and they have been able to seize the various opportunities that the country’s widespread conflict has given them. Putting American personnel on the ground introduces the very present risk that the US will take casualties. Both AQAP and ISIS will likely take advantage of the opportunity to kill or capture and then kill Americans in Yemen. These attacks could be designed to raise the cost of involvement in Yemen for the US or to further embroil the US in Yemen. They could also be designed to create distrust between American personnel and partnered forces, as have the Taliban attacks in Afghanistan.

Potential AQAP Responses. The launch of a counter-offensive against AQAP would significantly change the ground dynamics and would prompt a reaction from AQAP. AQAP might consolidate its resources within its historical safe havens to fight for them, might go on the offensive against groups collaborating with the US, or might revert to focusing on the far war against
the West, which would probably demobilize potential US partners.

**COA #1: Consolidate and Fight.** AQAP could consolidate its resources within historical safe havens and fight for continued control. It would probably need to withdraw from positions in al Bayda, Lahij, and Aden into strongholds in northeast Abyan governorate and Shabwah governorate, where it would probably be able to work with the Awalek tribe. It could withdraw from al Mukalla into remote locations in Hadramawt, to the north of Wadi Hadramawt.

The terrain at these locations is fairly difficult, and the tribesmen in these locations within Abyan and Shabwah governorates would probably be hostile to foreign forces. AQAP could make the fight against it a very costly one, probably with the assessment that the US would not be willing to pay too high a cost for victory.

**COA #2: Campaign against Collaborators.** AQAP could pursue a targeted campaign against individuals or groups who have partnered or collaborated with the US or US partners. The objective of this campaign would be to break down support for the counter-AQAP fight. A successful campaign by AQAP would significantly limit ability to prosecute the campaign plan, which relies heavily on local forces for support. The campaign could also be conducted in tandem with COA #1.

**COA #3: Focus Only on the West.** AQAP could shift to focusing its attacks exclusively on the West, reverting to the group that it was in 2007–08. Such a strategic de-escalation with the Yemeni state and people would significantly increase the cost for the US to mobilize partnered forces against AQAP. It would also, however, divert much of the AQAP-affiliated insurgency away from AQAP, accomplishing one of the main objectives of this strategy. It is unlikely that AQAP will pursue this COA.

**Potential ISIS Responses.** The military aspects of the campaign plan focus on AQAP due to the threat and maturity level of the group with the assumption that ISIS will increasingly become a law enforcement and counterterrorism problem. This presents ISIS with opportunities that it might seize. ISIS could conduct attacks to undermine the political negotiations or target those cooperating with the US, could attempt to spin the narrative to its own advantage, or could go to ground to build strength during the counter-AQAP campaign.

**COA #1: Conduct Strategic Attacks.** ISIS could conduct strategic attacks designed to undermine the political negotiations or to target those cooperating with the US. It will probably continue to pursue its bombing campaign against the al Houthis in Sana’a, but there are opportunities to target political figures on various sides of the negotiations whose removal would be a significant setback—Vice President Khaled Bahah or al Houthi leader Abdul Malik al Houthi, for example—and to stall talks. Like AQAP, ISIS could also opt to target collaborators with the US, although ISIS would probably pursue a campaign of collective punishment against the communities from which collaborators are drawn rather than a targeted assassination campaign.

**COA #2: Build the ISIS Narrative.** ISIS could begin a major media effort to brand its methods and strategy as being on the path to success and to cast AQAP as having failed. This media campaign would nest within the global campaign against al Qaeda that ISIS is currently running, which paints al Qaeda leaders such as Ayman al Zawahiri as having strayed from the true path. ISIS would be able to capitalize on AQAP setbacks to attract recruits and to build its footprint in Yemen.

**COA #3: Go to Ground.** ISIS could also decide to go to ground, a tactic that it has used successfully in Iraq before. This decision would give ISIS time to build its strength and to wait out the US-led military campaign.

**Strategic Mistakes to Avoid**

The US is caught in a trap in Yemen where it prioritizes over all else the military fight against AQAP and is willing to overlook a counterterrorism partner’s shortfalls as long as that partner prosecutes that fight. Former Yemeni President Saleh ignored long-term
structural problems and legitimate popular grievances against him, with backing from the US, because he claimed to provide stability in Yemen. A popular uprising forced him to dedicate limited security resources toward protecting his regime, which allowed AQAP to expand in 2011 and 2012. President Hadi came to power and rolled back AQAP's gains, but was incapable of addressing those same grievances that led to the current crisis today.

The US risks falling into the same trap again. A brokered settlement that resolves the current political crisis but does not include concrete plans to address the underlying structural grievances leaves the US vulnerable to a third collapsed partnership at a time when the threat from both al Qaeda and ISIS is rising. The US must continue to push for structural reform in Yemen in order to begin changing the conditions that allowed AQAP to grow in the first place. Changing the man on top has only traded long-term gains against AQAP for short-term certainty about the existence of a partner on the ground.

Investing in changing the conditions in Yemen will also reduce the risk that ISIS-linked cells develop and increase ISIS's foothold. In addition to creating long-term resiliency against jihadist groups in Yemen, the US should ensure that its focus on the immediate threat from AQAP does not permit ISIS to grow. If left unchecked, ISIS will absorb the remnants of AQAP and could radically change Yemen's trajectory by driving sectarian war. The US must defeat both AQAP and ISIS to achieve success in Yemen.

Working through subnational actors would introduce a line of decision making that affects local dynamics, as the US and regional partners would strengthen forces and must be vigilant against strengthening radical elements. There is a concern in Yemen, however, that some of the subnational actors have been mislabeled. The Yemeni government was sometimes quick to call antigovernment actors AQAP supporters. The US must take care not to conflate antigovernment activity with support for AQAP and must also ensure that its local partners are not radical elements.
There is no easy solution in Yemen. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remains a threat to the US despite the group’s leadership losses. AQAP’s resiliency comes from support networks it has developed within Yemen’s insurgency, and it is not possible to defeat AQAP through attrition. There is no government with which to partner, nor is there an army to fight AQAP on the ground. Longstanding grievances that remained unaddressed were the force that led to Yemen’s collapse and will continue to drive instability. The US must abandon its strategy predicated on a counterterrorism partnership and instead develop one that will address the underlying grievances among the Yemini population.

This report proposes an initial concept of how to pursue US interests in Yemen after the country’s collapse. American strategic interests remain limited: defeat AQAP and create conditions to prevent the rise of like-minded groups, de-escalate the growing Saudi-Iranian conflict in Yemen, and mitigate a humanitarian crisis. The concept recognizes the role that Yemen’s political and military crises play in facilitating AQAP’s growth there and AQAP’s role in the global al Qaeda network. It therefore calls for a fundamental change in the US approach in Yemen—specifically, taking on the governance challenges as a core component to defeating AQAP.

Such a paradigm shift requires changes in overall US policy and leadership decision making. There is general risk aversion in planning that seeks to maximize the security of US government personnel abroad at all costs. These planning restrictions can limit US diplomats’ ability to engage with the Yemeni population and identify causes of grievances. The US should once again engage in expeditionary diplomacy, for which former US ambassadors have voiced their support. US policy decisions have also sacrificed potential medium-to-long-term gains for short-term certainties. The decision to back the GCC Initiative that transitioned Yemen into a post–Arab Spring is one such example. The GCC Initiative secured the immediate stability of the country and the preservation of a US counterterrorism partnership over implementing fundamental changes to address the very grievances that drove protesters to the streets in 2011 and that led to Yemen’s collapse in 2015.

The Yemen strategy and concept of operations described in this report do include the risk of American casualties. The concept calls for Americans to be on the ground in some of the most dangerous parts of Yemen at a time when both AQAP and ISIS are on the rise. But options that preclude American boots on the ground are more likely to fail, and some may be more dangerous for the US in the long term.

The current strategy will not defeat AQAP or ISIS, and the conditions that have allowed both to expand will remain. Full support for the Saudi-led military intervention or switching to support the al Houthis risks strengthening AQAP and plays into tense regional dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The recommendation offered here includes US personnel deployed to Yemen, alongside partner nations, to work directly with the aggrieved populations.

The efforts behind this report cannot duplicate or replace the efforts of the professional staffs needed to produce such strategies. But it is a call to action for the US to devote the resources required to produce a political-military campaign plan in Yemen. The Yemen model is broken. It is time to fix it.
The following is a glossary of select individuals, groups, and concepts mentioned in the report. They are listed in alphabetical order.

**Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi**

He is the internationally recognized president of Yemen. Although a southerner born in Abyan governorate, he was on the losing side of the 1986 civil war in the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and escaped to exile in northern Yemen. Hadi was a military officer fighting against the south during Yemen’s 1994 civil war, after which he became President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s vice president. Hadi came to power in November 2011 under the GCC Initiative and was the sole candidate in a February 2012 presidential election. Yemenis perceive Hadi as someone who has pandered to the West and the GCC above fixing the multitude of social and economic problems in Yemen. Hadi and his government are currently in exile in Riyadh.\(^{158}\)

**Abdul Malik al Houthi**

He is the leader of the al Houthi movement and is currently sanctioned by the US and the UN for engaging in acts that threaten Yemen's stability. Abdul Malik, a Zaydi, assumed leadership of the al Houthi movement after the death of his brother, Hussein, in 2004. He is a Zaydi Shi’a and a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad’s family (sayyid). He was born in the early 1980s and little is known about his personal life.\(^{157}\)

**Ali Abdullah Saleh**

He is the former president of Yemen and is currently sanctioned by the US and the UN for engaging in acts that threaten Yemen’s stability. Saleh, also known by the monikers Affash and Little Saddam, is a Zaydi but not a sayyid. Saleh’s leadership style was one of managing Yemen’s tribal leaders and developing a personal patronage network that ran through the main functions of the state. He was the target of a June 2011 bombing in Sana’a during Yemen’s Arab Spring and went to Saudi Arabia for treatment. Saleh returned to Yemen in September 2011 against Riyadh’s wishes and clung to power. The November 2011 GCC Initiative transitioned power from Saleh to his deputy, Hadi, but Saleh maintained his informal influence and remained the head of the ruling party. Saleh’s partnership with the al Houthis in 2014 and 2015 helped destabilize the country.\(^{158}\)

**Ansar Allah**

See “Al Houthi Movement” entry.

**Ansar al Sharia**

See “Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” entry.

**Council of Sunni Scholars and al Jama’a in Hadramawt**

The council is comprised of Sunni theologians as well as prominent tribesmen. It seems to be amenable to working with AQAP. The council sought to exercise governance over the entirety of Hadramawt governorate after the withdrawal of Yemeni troops from Hadramawt and after the April 2, 2015, seizure of al Mukalla by the Sons of Hadramawt. Sheikh Ahmed bin Hassan bin Sudan al Mu’alim chairs the council.\(^{159}\)

**General People's Congress Party**

The GPC is the largest and most influential political party within Yemeni politics. Ali Abdullah Saleh founded the party in 1982, and it has served as a patronage mechanism for Saleh and a means for politicians to access power and resources. The GPC holds a majority in the Yemeni legislature. Members originally backed Saleh in his support for the al Houthi movement in 2014–15, but a faction is now seeking to negotiate a political settlement with British, American, and Emirati officials to withdraw support from the al Houthis.\(^{160}\)
Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative

The GCC facilitated negotiations between Yemeni stakeholders in 2011 to agree on a transition of power from Saleh to Hadi. Saleh agreed to step down in November 2011, and stakeholders signed a two-year transition plan that called for a national dialogue (the NDC), a referendum on a new constitution, presidential elections, and security sector reforms. Delays plagued the process, and there were concerns among the opposition groups that the deal was fully managed by Yemen’s political elite.161

Hadrami Domestic Council

The group, also known as the Hadramawt National Council and the Hadramawt People’s Council, is a pro-AQAP group established on April 13, 2015, to govern al Mukalla. It is linked to the Sons of Hadramawt. The council is comprised of various tribal chiefs, theologians, academics, engineers, and other members of civil society within the city. It provides domestic services such as the payment of salaries and the distribution of fuel to its citizens.162

Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy

The group, also known as the Hadramawt Tribal Alliance, is a military and security alliance established on July 4, 2013, between prominent Hadhrami tribes. It seeks to provide security for the governorate and for the oil infrastructure. It is antigovernment and anti-AQAP and has publicly rejected both the Sons of Hadramawt and the Council of Sunni Scholars and al Jama’a in Hadramawt, which are seen as a threat to the security of Hadramawt governorate.163

Hashid Tribal Confederation

Yemeni tribal confederations are loose groupings, and member tribal interests supersede those of the confederation. The Hashid tribal confederation is the most powerful of three major tribal confederations in Yemen and its leading members are prominent individuals within Yemen’s business and political elite. Saleh mobilized Hashidi tribes in Sa’ada to fight the al Houthis, who had support among the larger but less powerful Bakil tribal confederation, during the Sa’ada wars. The al Ahmar family leads the Hashids but has been significantly weakened since 2011. The Hashid tribal confederation stands in opposition to the al Houthi movement.164

Al Houthi Movement

The al Houthis are the de facto ruling faction in Yemen’s central government and are now widely perceived as having substantial Iranian backing. The group’s political party, Ansar Allah, was established in the post–Arab Spring environment. The movement traces its roots to a Zaydi revivalist movement in the 1990s. It is led by the al Houthi family, from which the movement’s name came, and militarized increasingly between 2004 and 2010 during the Sa’ada wars. Stated al Houthi objectives include reparations for the damage during the Sa’ada wars, representation within the central government, and guarantees that the group will be protected from future political and economic marginalization. Not all Zaydi Shi’a in Yemen identify with the al Houthi movement.165

Islah Party

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform party, commonly referred to as Islah (Reform), is the second-largest political party in Yemen after the GPC. The late Hashid tribal confederation leader Sheikh Abdulrahman al Husain al Ahmar founded the party in 1990 and chaired it until his death in 2007. The party united Yemen’s Salafists under Sheikh Abdul Majid al Zindani, the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood branch, and the Hashid tribal confederation. Islah was empowered after the 2011 Arab Spring in Yemen but lost influence as the Hashid Tribal Confederation weakened. It originally attempted to appease the al Houthis and now stands in opposition to the group.166
Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham

This group—also known as the Islamic State, ISIS, and Daesh—is the successor organization of al Qaeda in Iraq, an al Qaeda affiliate that pursued a brutal and sectarian strategy during the 2003 Iraq war. ISIS seized control of western Iraq and eastern Syria and proclaimed an Islamic caliphate on June 29, 2014, naming its leader, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, as caliph and “commander of the faithful” (emir al mu'mineen). ISIS pursues a strategy of simultaneous military victory and governance that builds the infrastructure of the state while expanding on the ground. ISIS calls for all Muslims to swear allegiance to the caliph and has been actively expanding throughout Muslim-majority lands.

Nasser al Wahayshi

He is the late emir of AQAP and general manager for al Qaeda global. Wahayshi, also known as Abu Basir Abdul Karim al Wahayshi, served as Osama bin Laden’s personal secretary from 1998 until 2001, when he was arrested in Iran after fleeing Afghanistan. Iran extradited Wahayshi to Yemen in 2003. Wahayshi escaped a Sana’a prison in February 2006 along with 22 other al Qaeda members, including Qasim al Raymi, and was named the head of al Qaeda in Yemen in June 2007. Wahayshi became al Qaeda’s general manager in 2013. He was killed by a US airstrike on June 9, 2015, in al Mukalla.

National Dialogue Conference

The 2011 GCC Initiative mandated that Yemen hold the NDC, which was to be the forum for opposition groups to voice and address their grievances. The 2013 NDC included 565 delegates from across Yemen’s political spectrum, including the al Houthis and the Southern Movement. The hardest issues to resolve—how to decentralize and federalize the state—caused NDC progress to stall. Hadi established special committees, such as the North-South committee (the “8+8”), to hash out an agreement known as the Just Solution. That document did not face full review by the NDC. A second special committee, hand-picked by Hadi, passed a proposal for a federal state with six regions, which was rejected immediately by certain parties.

Operations Decisive Storm, Restoring Hope, and Golden Arrow

Saudi Arabia led a coalition of nine Arab states in a military intervention in Yemen, supported by the US. Operation Decisive Storm began on March 26, 2015, with airstrikes targeting al Houthi positions. The coalition also ran naval patrols to interdict arms shipments to the al Houthis. Operation Restoring Hope was framed in a humanitarian context, although the contours of the military operations changed little. Operation Golden Arrow is a joint Saudi-UAE ground offensive that began in mid-July alongside newly trained Yemeni militia forces. The UAE deployed a brigade to Yemen with a battalion-sized contingent of tanks and armored vehicles alongside Saudi special forces and the Yemeni troops.

Peace and National Partnership Agreement

The Hadi government signed this agreement with the al Houthis and the Southern Movement on September 21, 2014, after the al Houthis besieged Sana’a. The PNPA called for a new caretaker government within a month and obligated the government to expand the Shura Council, the upper body of Parliament, to include additional representatives from opposition parties. The al Houthis refused to sign the annex that called for the normalization of activities in Amran, al Jawf, and Marib governorates. The international community originally backed the PNPA, seeing it as a way forward in Yemen, but is now calling for a return to the GCC Initiative and the NDC outcomes.

Popular Resistance Movement

Local Yemeni populations mobilized against the al Houthi–Saleh alliance in 2015. These forces became known as the popular resistance movement. They do not
operate under a unified command and do not fight for the same objectives. Some simply fight to prevent outsiders from gaining control of their territory. Others seek the reinstatement of Hadi’s government. The Saudi-led coalition is backing the local popular resistance militias.\textsuperscript{172}

\textbf{Al Qaeda Core}

Al Qaeda’s current emir, Ayman al Zawahiri, directly commands al Qaeda core, based in Pakistan, and the al Qaeda senior leaders dispersed throughout the Muslim-majority world that report to Zawahiri or his deputies. The rise of ISIS has challenged al Qaeda globally, and it must now compete for continued relevance within the global jihadist movement.\textsuperscript{173}

\textbf{Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula}

Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen has attempted multiple attacks against American interests. Al Qaeda’s branches in Yemen and Saudi Arabia merged in 2009 to form AQAP, bringing together a deep bench of veteran al Qaeda operatives. In addition to attacks against the US, AQAP targeted Saudi government officials and members of the Yemeni military and government. It fielded an insurgent force, Ansar al Sharia, in 2011, which seized control of parts of south Yemen and is reconstituting control over some of the same territory during the current crisis. AQAP controls territory in Hadramawt and has ties to local groups such as the Sons of Hadramawt.\textsuperscript{174}

\textbf{Qasim al Raymi}

He was appointed AQAP emir on June 16, 2015, and was previously AQAP’s military commander. Raymi, also known as Abu Hurayrah al San`ani and Abu Ammar, trained at the al Qaeda–run al Farouq camp in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and reportedly met bin Laden there. Yemeni security forces arrested him on terrorism charges in 2002. Raymi escaped in February 2006, along with Nasser al Wahayshi and 21 other al Qaeda members. Raymi appeared in AQAP’s founding video in January 2009 alongside Wahayshi. Raymi is known for his ability to recruit new operatives and is a member of AQAP’s senior leadership.\textsuperscript{175}

\textbf{Sons of Hadramawt}

The AQAP-linked group seized control of al Mukalla on April 2, 2015. It maintains control over the city of al Mukalla and runs a religious police unit. It has delegated governance and the provision of civil services to the HDC.\textsuperscript{176}

\textbf{Southern Movement}

This is a movement within the territory of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen that began in 2007. The Southern Movement, also known as al Hirak and al Harakat al Janubiyya, has never been unified and began with demands for reparations following the destruction of southern Yemen during Yemen’s 1994 civil war. The idea of secession from northern Yemen is growing in popularity. Member groups vary in character from political to militant. The movement is currently fighting alongside Saudi-led coalition forces, but may not support the Hadi government over the long term.\textsuperscript{177}

\textbf{UN Resolutions on Yemen}

The UN passed UNSCR 2140 on February 26, 2014, which established a sanctions regime against individuals or entities designated as having engaged in or supported “acts that threaten the peace, security or stability of Yemen.” As of April 14, 2015, five individuals were sanctioned under UNSCR 2140. UNSCR 2216, passed on April 14, 2015, imposed an arms embargo on the designated individuals and entities and called for the al Houthis to withdraw from seized territory, including Yemen’s capital, and disarm.\textsuperscript{178}

\textbf{Zaydi Shi’ism}

About 35 percent of Yemen’s population is Zaydi, concentrated in Yemen’s northwest. Zaydis, also known as Fivers, are among the closest Shi’a to the Sunni sect. They believe that the only legitimate rulers are those who are Sayyids. The last Zaydi imamate was the Mutawakkilite Kingdom in Yemen, which existed between 1918 and 1962 and extended briefly into parts of what is now southwestern Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{179}


11. Ibid.


16. This information derives from conversations between the author and American officials about the US relationship with the al Houthis.


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Threat from Iran,” testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, February 11, 2015, www.aei.org/publication/beyond-nuclear-increasing-threat-iran.


25. On December 8, 2014, IRGC Deputy Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami said of the al Houthis that “The forces of Ansar Allah that have been formed in Yemen . . . shows the potential the Islamic Revolution has to re-take Muslim lands from Western powers.” See “Ansar Allah of Yemen is Similar to the Hezbollah of Lebanon/There Is No Threatening Look toward Iran Even in the Dreams of Military Powers,” Defa Press, December 6, 2014, www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/35605.


34. Saleh’s forces probably facilitated the al Houthi takeover of Sana’a in September 2014, although there was no real fight for control of the city then.


37. Information on al Houthi military activities in Sa’ada and northern Yemen is limited; the area has never had good formal or informal media penetration, and the al Houthis generally control access into their heartland.


forces by that time. See Eric Schmitt, “Out of Yemen, U.S. is
in Yemen because of the fractured nature of the Yemeni armed
Operations Forces advisers were not able to meet their mission
versations with US defense personnel revealed that the Special
which may have been a contributing factor. The author’s con
occurred on the same day as the first ISIS attack in Yemen,
Anad at the time. They were there in a training and advising
47. There were about 125 US military advisers based in al
Anad at the time. They were there in a training and advising
capacity for the Yemeni military forces. The withdrawal
occurred on the same day as the first ISIS attack in Yemen,
which may have been a contributing factor. The author’s con
versations with US defense personnel revealed that the Special
Operations Forces advisers were not able to meet their mission
in Yemen because of the fractured nature of the Yemeni armed
forces by that time. See Eric Schmitt, “Out of Yemen, U.S. is
and “US Evacuates Troops from South Yemen Base: Military
yahoo.com/us-evacuates-troops-south-yemen-military-
source-165916275.html.
49. Joshua Koonz, “Yemen Crisis Situation Report: August
50. Ibid.
criticalthreats.org/gulf-aden-security-review/gulf-aden-
security-review-august-14-2015.
52. Katherine Zimmerman, “Insurgency in Yemen: The
New Challenge to American Counter-Terrorism Strategy,”
criticalthreats.org/yemen/insurgency-yemen-american-counter-
yementimes.com/en/1826/news/4463/Ongoing-Houthi-
54. Sasha Gordon, “Tribal Militias in Yemen: Al Bayda and
Shabwah,” AEI’s Critical Threats Project, February 7, 2013,
www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-report-january-12-2012; and Charles Caris, “Yemen Order of
Battle,” AEI’s Critical Threats Project, February 23, 2015,
www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/caris-yemen-order-
battle-february-23-2015.
55. Information derives from a forthcoming report from
Joshua Koonz of AEI’s Critical Threats Project.
56. Taimur Khan, “Kerry Reassures GCC over Iran Nuclear
Deal,” The National, March 5, 2015, www.thenational.ae/
world/kerry-reassures-gcc-over-iran-nuclear-deal.
57. J. Matthew McInnis, “Iran Tracker Blog: Iran’s Danger-
ai.org/publication/irans-dangerous-calculations-on-the-sea.
Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role,” New York
Times, March 15, 2011; and Andrew Hammond, “South
Yemen Separatists See New Chance After Saleh’s Demise,”
11/us-yemen-south-separatism-idUSBRE89A14M20121011.


65. IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari was discussing the Islamic Revolution at a memorial service for the Iran-Iraq war and said: “If the Islamic Revolution’s thoughts of resistance were not exported to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the destiny of these countries would be unclear. The Yemeni revolution would not have succeeded without this thought.” See “Qassem Soleimani Has Become a Thorn in the Enemy’s Eye and Everyone Acknowledges the Role of this Mujahid in Iraq and Syria,” Tasnim News Agency, November 26, 2014.


69. The initial objective of the air campaign appeared to be to force the al Houthis into a position of weakness to bring
them to the negotiating table. It is not clear whether there was a contingency plan should the primary plan fail to meet this objective.


98. Zimmerman, “Al Qaeda Threat to American Interests.”


101. AQAP’s bomb maker, Ibrahim al Asiri, probably trained Anders Dale, for example. Dale is a Norwegian who trained

102. See Zimmerman, “Testimony: AQAP’s Role in the al Qaeda Network.”

103. Jabhat al Nusra leader Mohammed al Julani recently pledged that his group was not pursuing attacks against the West. The statement was likely a correct reading of the US and European political scene, which characterizes the al Qaeda affiliate as a local Syrian group. A terrorist attack would probably prompt some level of intervention. The swearing off of attacks today does not guarantee that Jabhat al Nusra will not attempt terrorist attacks in the future, however.


106. Compare the Kouachi brothers’ attack on the Charlie Hebdo office building with that of associate Amedy Coulibaly, who killed hostages at a Jewish deli in Paris. The Kouachi brothers intended to survive their attack and were only identified because of an identification card that had fallen out in their getaway car.

107. AQAP executed two alleged spies by gunfire on June 17, 2015, in al Mukalla, Hadramawt. The Saudi men were accused of providing information to the US that led to the targeted airstrike on June 9, 2015, which killed AQAP leader Nasser al Wahayshi. The bodies of the men were then displayed on a bridge with a sign that read, “The House of Saud directs American planes to bomb the holy warriors.” See Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Al Qaeda Kills Two Saudis Accused of Spying for America: Residents,” Reuters, June 17, 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/17/us-yemen-qaeda-idUSKBN0OX11Q20150617.


112. An AQAP member drove a VBIED into an al Houthi checkpoint in al Ghayl in al Jawf governorate on May 23, 2014, which was reportedly not the intended target. Reuters reported that the attacker detonated his device when he was stopped at the checkpoint, but that the intended target was an al Houthi cultural center. See “At Least Three Killed in Suicide Attack on Shi’ites in Yemen,” Reuters, May 25, 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/23/us-yemen-blast-idUSBREA4M0EQ20140523.

113. AQAP seized control of the 19th Infantry Brigade base in Bayhan, Shabwah, in mid-February 2015, as noted earlier. Militants looted the base’s weapons and then held public gatherings in the vicinity of the base until the al Houthi took control of it in late March 2015.

114. Joshua Koontz has forthcoming research with AEI’s Critical Threats Project on AQAP’s relations with the tribes in al Bayda and how they have shifted over the course of the conflict.


116. Sheikh Abdulwahhab Muhammed Abdulrahman al Humayqani is from the Hamiqan tribe. He is sanctioned by


118. I assessed the area as an AQAP sanctuary based on the pattern of activity and requirements for a sanctuary as of November 20, 2014, in a Yemen working group session. There had been evidence of AQAP senior leadership presence in the area, based on a 2012 airstrike targeting the late deputy leader Said al Shihri. Additionally, AQAP attack patterns appeared to be defensive in maintaining freedom of movement in the area, disrupting military convoys and attacking checkpoints, for example. The location was also close enough to infrastructure to maintain basic supplies such as food and water. The November 25, 2014, US SOF raid to recover US hostage Luke Somers from AQAP occurred in Hajar al Sayar, a location just north of Wadi Hadramawt. The presence of hostages is an indicator of a sanctuary, confirming the initial assessment. See “High Security: 6 Yemenis, One Saudi and Ethiopian Freed from Grip of Terrorists in al Sair, Hadramawt,” 26Sep.net, November 25, 2014, www.26sep.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=108727.


123. “Commission Named,” Website of the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy, April 14, 2015, www.alhelf.com/?p=2448. The HDC is also referred to as the Hadramawt People’s Council in media reporting. It is distinct from the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (Hadramawt Tribal Alliance). The HDC runs a website (www.mjlees.net) and a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/HadhramiDomesticCouncil) describing itself and providing news reports on its activities.


126. Top AQAP leaders killed by a US airstrike in the vicinity of al Mukalla include Ibrahim al Rubaish (April 12, 2015), Nasser bin Ali al Ansi (April 22, 2015), Maimoun Abdulhamid al Hatem (May 11, 2015), and Nasser al Wahayshi (June 9, 2015).

127. “Al Qaeda Considering Withdrawal from al Mukalla,” al Arabiy al Jadid, July 18, 2015, www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/7/17/?D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%


131. I assess that ISIS Wilayat Sana’a operates in both Sana’a and Dhamar governorates. Ibb neighbors Dhamar. Therefore, the VBIED capability moved from Wilayat Sana’a to Wilayat Green Brigade (Ibb).

132. A photo set from ISIS Wilayat Aden provides images of the interior of a health care facility with the ISIS flag hung in the background. It was posted on pro-ISIS Twitter accounts and is marked with branding consistent with other ISIS photo sets.


135. This information derives from a forthcoming report by Mary Habeck of AEI on a grand strategy to combat al Qaeda and ISIS.


140. Koontz, “Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Mid-Level Leadership.”


143. Saudi Arabian authorities accuse these women of being financiers, facilitators, and recruiters for al Qaeda.

144. AQAP reportedly executed tribesmen in Ma’rib who had collaborated with the Yemeni military, for example, and left notes on their bodies as warnings to other collaborators. See “Yemeni Qaeda Beheads Three Men for Spying on Operations,” Reuters, October 9, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/09/us-yemen-qaeda-beheading-idUSBRE8980D820121009.


147. US Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen’s remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace explained how ISIS has been able to exploit local populations for finances. AQAP is beginning to show such adaptability in terms of financing, particularly as it came under increasing financial strain as Gulf donors shifted largely to financing Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. See “Attacking ISIL’s Financial Foundation,” October 23, 2014, www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2672.aspx.


150. The threat to the US from ISIS and al Qaeda is fundamentally different. The ISIS threat is its ability to inspire mass-scale, low-level attacks. Al Qaeda has not been able to harness that level of inspiration among would-be Western recruits, although it is trying. Al Qaeda still seeks a high-casualty spectacular attack against American or Western targets.

151. A declassified document recovered during the May 2011 Abbottabad raid mentioned a letter from Qasim al Raymi (Abu Hurayrah al Sana’ani) to Osama bin Laden, which appears to have been a field report from Yemen. See the Combating Terrorism Center’s English-language translation of the letter from Osama bin Laden or Atiyah Abd al Rahman: www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-to-nasir-al-wuhayshi-original-language-2.


154. The US personnel must be operating in Yemen outside of the chief of mission authority and, therefore, the regional security officer restrictions. They must also have a means of self-defense.


The conclusions in this paper were derived from and refined over countless conversations. They would not have been possible without the support of a number of people. Many of the insights came from various working group sessions on Yemen held at AEI over the past year. I am very grateful to those who took the time to participate and for the high level of discussions held.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Zimmerman is a research fellow at AEI and the lead al Qaeda analyst for AEI’s Critical Threats Project. Her work focuses on the al Qaeda network, particularly al Qaeda’s affiliates in the Gulf of Aden region, and other associated groups in western and northern Africa. She specializes in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Yemen-based al Qaeda faction, and in al Shabaab, al Qaeda’s affiliate in Somalia. Zimmerman has testified before Congress on the national security threats emanating from al Qaeda and its network and has briefed members of Congress, their staff, and members of the defense community. She has been published in outlets such as CNN.com, Huffington Post, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post.

ABOUT AEI’S CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT

AEI’s Critical Threats Project equips policymakers, opinion leaders, and the military and intelligence communities with detailed and objective open-source analysis of America’s current and emerging national security challenges. Through daily monitoring, in-depth studies, graphic presentations, private briefings, and public events, the project is a unique resource for those who need to fully understand the nuance and scale of threats to America’s security to effectively develop and execute policy.

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The conclusions and assessments in this report do not reflect the positions of our technology partners.

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