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How US Helps Al Qaeda in Yemen

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Exclusive: The Obama administration, eager to assuage Saudi Arabia’s anger over the Iran nuclear deal and the failure to achieve “regime change” in Syria, has turned a blind eye to Riyadh’s savaging of Yemen, even though that is helping Al Qaeda militants expand their territory, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

For nearly a year, the Obama administration has turned a blind eye to the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen since Saudi Arabia invaded in March 2015 to crush an Iranian-supported insurgency and restore a discredited former president to power. But Washington cannot so easily ignore the rapid resurgence of a dangerous branch of Al Qaeda that is thriving on the chaos to take control of much of southern Yemen.

The war between indigenous Houthi rebels and Saudi-backed supporters of former President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi has cost more than 6,000 lives and caused more than 35,000 casualties.

What a United Nations report called “widespread and systematic” attacks against civilians by Saudi and Gulf emirate pilots, armed with U.S.-made aircraft and cluster bombs that are banned by international treaty, account for the bulk of civilian deaths and for the wholesale destruction of ancient cities and cultural centers.

In addition, a Saudi-imposed blockade on Yemen, supported by Washington, has allowed only a trickle of relief supplies to reach the country, putting millions of people at risk of starvation.

In the midst of this Hobbesian nightmare, militant followers of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants are making a rapid comeback after being crippled in 2012.

Recently seizing numerous towns, including two provincial capitals, AQAP now dominates much of three provinces. And a new report suggests that AQAP insurgents are fighting alongside pro-Saudi forces in a savage battle for control of the large city of Taiz, northwest of the port of Aden.

As *Jane's Intelligence Weekly* reported to its clients recently, "Exploiting a persistent security vacuum and the absence of effective state institutions, AQAP is in the process of asserting itself as the dominant actor across much of southern Yemen. The territory currently controlled by AQAP is larger than the area it held in 2011, when the group's area of control reached its peak" during a popular rising against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

A merger of Al Qaeda groups in Yemen and Saudi Arabia formed AQAP in January 2009. AQAP's predecessors in Yemen had bombed the USS Cole in 2000, killing 17 U.S. seamen. Its Saudi members killed nearly two dozen oil field workers during the infamous Khobar massacre in 2004.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally designated AQAP as a terrorist organization in December 2009 — 11 days before a supporter of the group tried to blow up a U.S. passenger jet headed for Detroit on Christmas Day, with a bomb sewn into his underwear.

The following year, CIA officials concluded that AQAP was the single most urgent threat to U.S. security, surpassing all other Al Qaeda branches, owing to its ongoing determination to hit American targets. The group has vowed to damage the U.S. economy and "bring down America" by mounting small-scale attacks to capitalize on the U.S. "security phobia." It also took credit for the January 2015 terrorist attack on the French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, which killed a dozen people.

Within Yemen, AQAP has also proved formidable. In May 2012, a single suicide bomber killed more than 120 people and wounded 200 during a military parade. A month later, it killed 73 civilians with newly planted land mines. An attack on the country's defense ministry in December 2013 left at least 56 dead.

The movement was severely weakened by a Yemeni government offensive in 2012 and an intense campaign of drone strikes ordered by the White House. Among the controversial targets were several U.S. citizens, including the prominent imam Anwar al-Awlaki, who reportedly inspired not only the Christmas 2009 "underwear bomber" and *Charlie Hebdo* terrorists but the Fort Hood shooter and even the Boston Marathon bombers. (Two weeks later, another strike killed Awlaki's son, also a U.S. citizen, though the U.S. government said he was not the target.) In April 2014, two days of "massive and unprecedented" air strikes in southern Yemen reportedly killed dozens more militants — along with at least several civilians.

But taking advantage of the chaos caused by Saudi Arabia's invasion in March 2015, AQAP mobilized quickly to strike back. That April it conquered the southern port town of Al Mukalla, which allowed jihadists to loot the central bank branch of more than \$120 million, seize an oil terminal and major weapons depot, and free hundreds of inmates from the city's prison. Through clever coalition building, AQAP members allied with local Sunni tribal leaders to provide security and essential services, winning support from residents.

Last December, AQAP seized the capital of Abyan province near the main port city of Aden. Soon its militants staged a blitzkrieg that seized five towns in a mere two weeks. In the process AQAP managed to link up its forces across much of southern Yemen from Lahij near the Red Sea east to Al Mukalla.

Like followers of Islamic State, AQAP jihadists are now pressing their attacks against government forces in Aden, where they recently killed a general who commanded regional operations.

"The group may well be reconstructing the quasi-state it ruled at the height of its power in 2011 and 2012," commented Katherine Zimmerman of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute. "AQAP is becoming an ever-more serious threat to American national security, and no one is doing much about it."

Even allowing for the usual threat inflation from this prominent neoconservative sanctuary, the fact remains that AQAP is successfully exploiting the turmoil of civil war to make significant territorial gains. It has proven adept at governing and is often welcomed by a population that deeply resents the violence brought to Yemen by Houthi insurgents and their Saudi-backed enemies.

Meanwhile, U.S. air strikes against AQAP have accomplished little or nothing. As *The Long War Journal* observed recently, "Although AQAP has lost several key leaders in American drone strikes since early 2015, this has not slowed al Qaeda's guerrilla war. . . . Not only has AQAP continued to gain ground, it also quickly introduced new leaders to serve as public faces for the organization."

Events in Yemen are reaffirming a lesson that should have been learned in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria: Civil wars breed vicious killers who thrive on conflict and jump from battlefield to battlefield with the help of modern technology and zealous supporters. American intervention in those civil wars invariably blows back against us.

By contributing to Yemen's failure as a state, Washington is creating fertile ground for the renewed growth of anti-American terrorism there. The White House may not care much about the overall havoc wreaked by the Yemen war — as evidenced by its extensive support for Saudi Arabia's war crimes — but it should be under no illusion that Fox News and Republican members of Congress will go easy when the next terrorist attack by AQAP kills Americans at home or abroad.