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How US Policy Helps Al Qaeda in Yemen

By Jonathan Marshall

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In a world of bad actors, one of the “baddest” of all is the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which the CIA once branded “the most dangerous regional node in the global jihad.” It masterminded the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000; nearly blew up a U.S. passenger jet flying into Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009; brought down a UPS cargo plane in 2010; and sponsored the 2015 attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris, killing 11 and wounding another 11.

All of which raises an embarrassing question: Why is the United States supporting AQAP’s main ally in Yemen, Saudi Arabia?

The respected news publication *Middle East Eye* reports that Abdulmajid al-Zindani, a Yemeni cleric, “veteran al-Qaeda supporter,” and “former spiritual adviser to Osama bin Laden,” has been operating freely in Saudi Arabia, even posting YouTube videos lauding the Saudi war in his home country.

Apparently no one in Riyadh cares that he’s been on the U.S. Treasury’s Specially Designated Global Terrorist List since 2004, identified as a recruiter for terrorist training camps and a key purchaser of weapons for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. Indeed, Zindani “has been

warmly received by senior clerics and officials,” including one adviser to the Royal Court, according to *Middle East Eye*.

The publication’s sources further allege that “at least five Yemenis designated as terrorists by the U.S. Treasury have advised and coordinated Saudi operations in Yemen with allied forces on the ground.” One senior al-Qaeda supporter in Yemen, Nayif al-Qaysi, has been repeatedly interviewed in Saudi Arabia by fawning television stations. He served as governor of the Yemeni city of Bayda until late July.

Most bizarre of all, one notorious al-Qaeda fundraiser, who has lived in Saudi Arabia for nearly three years, turned up on a list of terrorists whom Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of harboring. Saudi Arabia and four other Arab states broke diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar in early June, in part over allegations that Doha supports extremists.

The Devastation of Yemen

Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other Arab allies have been laying waste to Yemen with logistic support from the United States. They are fighting to wrest control of the country from Houthi militants and their ally, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Riyadh aims to reinstate Saleh’s rival, President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, whose legal mandate ended in January 2015.

Tens of thousands of Yemenis have died from the fighting, historic cities have been pulverized by criminal Saudi bombing raids, and more than 400,000 people have contracted deadly cholera. Almost two million children and millions more adults suffer from malnutrition owing to war-related disruptions of food supplies and a Saudi blockade of Yemen’s ports.

Suffering and chaos provide ideal breeding grounds for AQAP, which took control of a provincial capital and one of Yemen’s largest ports for many months. A special report last year by Reuters concluded that “the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, . . . backed by the United States, has helped Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to become stronger than at any time since it first emerged almost 20 years ago.”

Even the UAE newspaper *The National* conceded last month: “In the absence of a political resolution that addresses local grievances and builds and empowers a central state that can provide jobs and services, Al Qaeda has filled vacuums and its fighters have found a role, while a sectarian narrative that is promoted by the group has increasing traction.”

This matters not only because of AQAP’s potential threat to U.S. security, but because the only possible legal rationale for continued U.S. military involvement in Yemen is the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists, which approves operations *against* al-Qaeda, not in support of its allies. Members of Congress are growing restive about such legal issues as U.S. tax dollars fund the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, with no end in sight.

Getting Stronger

AQAP has gained traction by taking advantage of growing local resentment toward U.S. and UAE counterterrorism operations that result in the murder or torture of suspects.



In a weird twist, typical of the war's endlessly shifting alliances, AQAP has also joined pro-Saudi forces in bloody offensives to retake the southern city of Taiz from Houthi rebels.

"We fight along all Muslims in Yemen, together with different Islamic groups," against the Houthis, said Qasim al-Rimi, the senior military commander of AQAP, this spring.

Although the United States put a \$5 million price on al-Rimi's head, Associated Press reported that his forces "regularly receive funds and weapons from the U.S.-backed Saudi led coalition."

Ironically, just hours before U.S. commandos killed another prominent AQAP-linked tribal leader in late January (along with several children), that leader had arranged for the Saudi-backed coalition of President Hadi to pay his tribal fighters \$60,000 to join in the fight against Houthi rebels.

No wonder the International Crisis Group recently reported that "The Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda is stronger than it has ever been," and that AQAP "is thriving in an environment of state collapse, growing sectarianism, shifting alliances, security vacuums and a burgeoning war economy." AQAP, it added, has "emerged arguably as the biggest winners of the failed political transition and civil war that followed."

Targeting Islamist tribal leaders with more bombs, drones, and military raids — as the Trump administration seems inclined to do — will simply aggravate civilian suffering and strengthen AQAP's political base. There's only one way to dry up its support: the international community must demand a cease-fire, send foreign armies packing, promote a political settlement among all Yemeni stakeholders, and send food and medical aid to alleviate the population's extraordinary suffering.

