Abstract: The emergence of ISIS has represented a significant security risk to U.S. interests and to regional states. In Yemen, the ISIS threat has evolved within the country’s devastating civil war and, while its lethality has declined, this study suggests it remains a factor of concern, and assesses the challenges and options available for the US and for the international community for dealing with this threat.
**ISIS in Yemen: Redoubt or Remnant?**  
*Challenges and Options for Dealing with a Jihadist Threat in a Conflict Environment*

by

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“The fight against terrorism is far from over”
Leon E. Panetta, Former Director CIA, 25 August 2019

**Introduction and Terms of Reference**

Even in its short history, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has posed a significant security challenge both to U.S. interests and to regional states. As the ISIS Caliphate disintegrated recently in its heartland of Iraq and Syria under a succession of blows by its international and local adversaries, the focus of the international community often shifted to ISIS’s outlying branches. However, contrary to early optimism, ISIS has proved a stubborn survivor even in its Iraq-Syria core, while its presence in branches or affiliates in areas such as the Sinai, the Sahara, West Africa, Mozambique, Yemen, and Khurasan (Afghanistan/Pakistan) also continues to be a significant security threat to local and international interests. Moreover, each theater of operations presents a unique set of characteristics, complicating the fight against such local ISIS branches. Yemen, in particular, can be said to represent an enduring ISIS presence, facilitated by that country’s chronic political and security instability, tribal society, and rugged geography, which make eliminating the branch affiliated with ISIS (ISIS/Yemen or ISIS/Y) difficult, either by local or international players.

This study assesses the objectives, capabilities, and prospects of ISIS/Y, seeking to determine whether it is merely a weakened backwater remnant or a menacing redoubt for ISIS, and what the

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options are for local forces, the United States, and the international community for meeting that threat. The thesis of this study is that dealing with ISIS/Y requires a policy based on an understanding of Yemen’s broader security and socio-political system and that the most effective way to deal with ISIS/Y is to promote a comprehensive and durable end to the civil war in that country in order to enable local players themselves to deal with the ISIS/Y problem, with the United States providing support but avoiding a major on-the-ground involvement.

In effect, ISIS/Y can be assessed most accurately in relation to Yemen’s domestic environment, that is the country’s geography and “human terrain” structures and the internal dynamics of how politics, society, and the economy interact in terms of those physical and human givens. In particular, any analysis must account for the effects of the course and aftermath of the civil war that has roiled Yemen since March 2015. This conflict has involved coalitions of shifting players, including the country’s long-time president Ali Abd Allah Salih (until his death in 2017) --who had been toppled in 2011 in a power struggle that coincided with Yemen’s Arab Spring-- and his erstwhile coalition partners the Ansar Allah (often called Houthis by the foreign media after the name of the family that has provided their leaders), confronting Salih’s successor as interim president, Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, and a collection of disparate nominal allies and partners. External actors, of course, also influence the situation either positively or negatively, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular, have been active players in the war, with a focus against the Ansar Allah. Not surprisingly, U.S. military forces have been involved for years in the fight against both AQAP and, later, ISIS/Y, although the U.S. presence on the ground was greatly diminished after the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen in 2015.

Jihadists have long had a presence in Yemen, until recently essentially as Al-Qaida (now formally called Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP). And, over the years, AQAP has posed a threat to significant U.S. interests, including to the security of the U.S. homeland and to U.S. military and civilian facilities and personnel in the region, such as the attack against the USS Cole in Aden harbor (2000), the attack on the American Embassy in Sanaa (2008), the foiled “underwear bombers” on airliners (2009, 2012) and the package bombs shipped by air (2010), as well as the frequent incitement for lone-wolf attacks. In addition, stability on the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula and freedom of navigation through the Bab Al-Mandab and the busy adjacent sea lanes of communication are also interests that potentially are vulnerable to the jihadist threat. The emergence of central ISIS in 2013 and, subsequently, that of ISIS/Y in 2014 after the latter’s break with AQAP has complicated the security situation even further in Yemen.

This study is based on information current as of August 2020. While the situation in Yemen is volatile and one can not predict future events—not least the potential impact of the key variable of a war termination process-- the assessment here is grounded on enduring players, interests, and patterns of conduct intended to establish a reference framework within which current trends and future events and their implications can be evaluated and policies shaped. The data for this study is drawn from open sources, combining information from the western media and think tanks along with that from the local and regional media, which often provides reporting and interpretations not available in sources further afield. The Yemeni media (which nowadays may be produced in Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, Cairo, Beirut, or Doha, as well as in Yemen itself) is, to be sure, highly partisan although, fortunately, the specific loyalties are easy to discern.
The Birth and Growth of ISIS/Y: Shaping the Terms of Reference and the Enduring Legacy

How ISIS/Y emerged has been a key factor in how it has developed subsequently and, in particular, the circumstances of its birth have been a determinant factor in shaping its relationship with the parent ISIS organization, with AQAP, and with local players.

The Models for ISIS Expansion and the Case of Yemen

There were two different models by which ISIS spread to the periphery from its original center in Iraq-Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring: those theaters where there was a pre-existing Al-Qaida or other jihadist group presence (as in Yemen, the Maghreb, Afghanistan, or Chechnya) and areas where there was no previous established rival (as in Tunisia, the Sinai, Libya, or West Africa). Where all jihadist groups were equally newcomers, ISIS-affiliated groups were often able to become the central or dominant jihadist player. Elsewhere, in those areas where jihadist organizations and leaders existed already with a rooted legitimacy, organizational structure, military force, and media network, ISIS had much more limited success. Established local jihadist leaders were likely to view ISIS as an unwelcome competitive interloper, and ISIS’s arrogant approach often simply reinforced such perceptions. All ISIS could do in such situations was to encourage a parallel faction to break away from the existing parent jihadist organization, although it was still often able to thereby develop a credible presence and threat. The emergence of ISIS/Y falls into the second category, as AQAP and its precursors had long played a role in that country’s society and security equation, forcing ISIS to compete with an existing rival and limiting, but not preventing, ISIS’s inroads with the formation of a breakaway splinter group. In that sense, ISIS/Y was the product of the central conflict between ISIS and Al-Qaida.

To be sure, this was a push-pull phenomenon with certain Yemeni jihadist elements seeing the appearance of ISIS as an opportunity to advance their own interests. In effect, the jihadist movement in Yemen already had a long history of fragmentation, with factional and personal divisions continuing in the background even as Al-Qaida Central sought to promote a more cohesive organization in Yemen. Disputes over the years had revolved around such issues as whether or not to have a dialog with the Yemeni government, who the main enemy was, when to set up an Islamic state locally, or simply around competition for the leadership. ³ In that context, what ISIS provided was a source of outside legitimacy and an organizational framework whereby Yemeni dissident jihadists could set up their own group as part of a greater movement, a movement that also seemed to be so successful at the time. In the early days, moreover, as a nascent ISIS/Y competed with AQAP for recruits, it may have hoped for outside funding thanks to ISIS Central’s financial windfall with the latter’s initial control of banks, oil, and communications in the areas it

had seized. In fact, according to claims by an ISIS/Y dissident who later transferred to AQAP, ISIS may have shifted money in the early days to its emerging branch in Yemen and continued to do so at reduced levels in later years.

And, for a group such as ISIS/Y, there was the added benefit of a significant degree of autonomy and freedom of action, with little practical oversight from outside, thanks to the distance and limited communication with the central ISIS leadership, not to speak of the latter’s preoccupation with its own immediate battles. In fact, one might wonder if ISIS Central had been in a position to impose greater control whether the Yemeni branch would have welcomed that, given the Yemenis’ ingrained sense of independence, whatever their political leanings. That is, simply due to circumstances, a provincial organization such as ISIS/Y would have had to be allowed to function based on unity of purpose and a “commander’s intent” from the center, but not have to chafe under direct centralized command and control from afar.

Conflict in the Jihadist Heartland and Its Repercussions in Yemen

Yemenis had contributed a significant contingent to Al-Qaida fighting in Syria and both the AQAP leadership and those Yemeni fighters on the ground in Syria sought to remain neutral as the Al-Qaida/ISIS split developed. Once armed clashes broke out in Syria between what eventually became ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra (supportive of Al-Qaida leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri), AQAP appealed for the fighting to stop, noting that news of the split “saddens us,” and offered to mediate between the two camps. Significantly, some Yemeni fighters returned home from Syria, such as one contingent of 150 fighters in March 2014, specifically citing that they did not want to have to take sides in the ISIS-Jabhat Al-Nusra dispute. ISIS, however, interpreted this attitude on AQAP’s part as a lack of support, and one of its representatives issued an impassioned plea in April 2014 to AQAP leader Nasir Al-Wuhayshi (d. 2015) asking him to side with ISIS and to give the oath of allegiance, bayaa, to the self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. However, the ISIS writer did so in a high-handed and threatening manner, taunting AQAP that it once used to have standing in the jihadist community but that now it was presumably afraid to make decisions on its own, while reminding the recipient of the letter that although ISIS might have made mistakes, so had

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AQAP and that the request for backing came from the “Islamic State,” warning that if AQAP thus did not provide support it would have to answer to God on Judgment Day.8

When AQAP persisted in its refusal to switch its allegiance, ISIS sent another indignant message in July 2014 in the form of a scathing open letter to the leader of AQAP. Although the writer was a not otherwise-identified figure going by the nom de guerre of Gharib Al-Ikhwan, an “adviser in the Minbar Al-Ilami Al-Jihadi” forum --a pro-Al-Baghdadi media outlet-- the prominence the message received on pro-ISIS websites clearly indicated approval by Al-Baghdadi’s inner circle, even if behind a veneer of plausible denial. Treating his audience as subordinates to be limited to a defined area, Gharib Al-Ikhwan’s message to “the leaders of the jihad in Yemen” assured the latter in a patronising manner that “we love the branch commanders, especially the ones in Yemen.”9 But, he reminded the latter that the Sharia – or Islamic law-- demands submission and obedience to the new Caliph at the head of the Islamic State. The message warned that AQAP’s fighters would defect to the Islamic State because they knew better than their leaders and threatened that “you will be the losers if you continue to resist,” noting that the fate of Jabhat Al-Nusra also awaited AQAP in that case.

ISIS/Yemen: A New Jihadist Group Is Born

In November 2014, a new group in Yemen, the “Yemen Mujahidin,” a splinter group representing a disgruntled faction within AQAP, gave the bayaa to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph, in effect initiating the ISIS branch in Yemen.10 Al-Baghdadi himself peremptorily reiterated that same month that the Islamic State would be expanding to new areas, including to Yemen, adding that “we demand that all individuals join the nearest [Islamic State] province (wilaya) and declare obedience to the governor whom we will appoint.”11 Not surprisingly, such demands for subordination by a well-established Al-Qaida organization such as theirs was viewed in Yemen as unacceptable arrogance and as a threat, with AQAP’s legal officer reacting immediately with a communique declaring Al-Baghdadi and his legal team to be “in violation of God’s law” and condemning the proclamation of the Caliphate as invalid in legal terms, while reminding Al-Baghdadi that AQAP already had a binding allegiance to Al-Qaida, and rejecting ISIS’s demand that all jihadist organizations that did not give the bayaa to Al-Baghdadi –such as AQAP– be dissolved.12

AQAP again responded unambiguously at length in a public press conference held by its spokesman, Nasr Al-Anisi (d. 2015), in December 2014.\(^{13}\) In it, Al-Anisi, while supporting the ISIS fight in Iraq/Syria, disagreed with ISIS as to where the focus of effort was to be, with AQAP (and Al-Qaida) seeing the United States as the “head of the snake” and the main enemy, rather than ISIS’s focus on the Shia and “apostate” local regimes. More specifically, Al-Anisi taxed attempts to expand the Caliphate to other countries—such as Yemen—for lacking “a realistic basis” and warned that the only thing that such a policy would accomplish would be to “split the mujahidin’s ranks.”\(^{14}\)

As part of its ensuing campaign of pressure, ISIS accused AQAP of being soft on the Ansar Allah—the local Shia political movement—and on the Shia in general. What position to take on the Shia had been a long-standing bone of contention within the wider jihadist community dating back to the diverging views between Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in Iraq, who had favored a war against the Shia as the priority, as opposed to Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who were more pragmatic and less confrontational on that score, at least for the time-being, as they sought to avoid a distraction from the focus on the United States as the main enemy. In Yemen, too, AQAP’s approach had been—at least in theory—more accommodating, with prominent figures such as Nasr Al-Anisi, for example, wavering on whether all Shia were to be condemned, as he noted that religious opinion on that issue was divided.\(^{15}\)

ISIS’s accusations of being lenient with the Ansar Allah, in particular, seemed to infuriate the AQAP leadership, with Al-Anisi responding in January 2015 that AQAP had a history of fighting against the Ansar Allah—which was true and AQAP had even declared a jihad against the latter in November 2014—and that it was only being held back from doing more by a lack of funds.\(^{16}\) In practical terms, given the balance of forces between the jihadists and the Ansar Allah, it may have been harder for AQAP to do any more than it had been doing in any case, but the issue was a convenient club to use by ISIS against the AQAP leaders and to use to justify having sponsored a breakaway ISIS group. By February 2015, ISIS proclaimed a new “Peninsula Province” (Wilayat Al-Jazira) for Arabia in what it called part of “the Islamic Caliphate’s expansion of the chessboard and of the extension of its rule.”\(^{17}\) ISIS pressure on AQAP to accept a subordinate position continued, now exerted through ISIS’s Yemeni branch, with insistent calls for AQAP to give the bayaa to Al-Baghdadi.\(^{18}\)

**Carving Out a Separate Identity for ISIS/Y**

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Interview with Nasr Al-Anisi, “Al-Liqa’ al-thalith ma al-shaykh Nasr bin Ali Al-Anisi” [The Third Interview with Shaykh Nasr bin Ali Al-Anisi], Mu’assasat Al-Malahim li’l-Intaj Al-Ilami, transcript, January 2015, [https://justpaste.it/jl56](https://justpaste.it/jl56).

\(^{16}\) Ibid.


Unavoidably, ISIS/Y’s subsequent development has to be viewed in relation with AQAP, the parent organization from which it had emerged and which has constituted a continuing competitor for the same pool of jihadist-leaning potential supporters, for leadership of the jihad in the country, and often for control over the same territory and sources of funding.

From the first, ISIS/Y, as the newcomer, sought to differentiate itself in order to convince active and potential jihadists why they should support it and sought to differentiate itself from AQAP as a jihadist player in its own right and to seize control of the brand as the only true representative of the jihad. As part of this competition, AQAP, too, has sought to distinguish itself from ISIS/Y, accusing the latter of being too hasty to declare other Muslims as infidels (takfir) and of seeing themselves as the only true Muslims, as well as of shedding Muslim blood too easily, while AQAP portrayed itself as constructive and not divisive. However, it may be easy to exaggerate a dichotomy of ISIS/Y’s extremism and AQAP’s moderation, as the latter in Yemen has also engaged in its share of egregious actions one sometimes thinks of more in connection with ISIS, whether it be destroying saints’ shrines, executing “sorcerers” (practitioners of folk religion) and adulterers, or enforcing the segregation of the sexes. And, more basically, both have as their declared ultimate strategic objective the formation of an Islamic state in the form of a Caliphate and the implementation of rule according to the Sharia. However, in the subsequent effort to develop a separate identity, ISIS/Y leaders sought to stand out by highlighting and amplifying not only divergences on tactics and strategy but also what at times were artificial differences in ideology and policy.

ISIS/Y and AQAP sometime have also disputed credit for the same operation, which may be complicated by the fact that the ISIS/Y logo and flag are identical to those that AQAP had always used, making visual identification of each group difficult at times. On one occasion, AQAP even initiated a social media campaign and produced a video specifically to counter what it said was “Al-Baghdadi’s group” (ISIS/Y) having taken credit for repulsing an attack by the Ansar Allah while accusing AQAP fighters of running away.

On one plane, the friction has been expressed vocally, with the two groups frequently trading verbal volleys. For example, prominent AQAP figures, such as Khalid BaTarfi, continued to voice their opposition to ISIS/Y and its patron, no doubt to prevent further defections among AQAP members to ISIS/Y. Thus, in October 2015, he reiterated his support for Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri while branding the parent ISIS a “legally invalid Caliphate.” ISIS/Y figures, in fact, complained that AQAP spokesmen were able to “mesmerize their fighters” with words, and therefore warned ISIS/Y fighters to avoid having any dealings with AQAP. At the same time, ISIS/Y accused AQAP of being willing to cooperate with non-jihadist forces and even with the factions allied to the rump Yemeni government supported by Saudi Arabia, and called AQAP’s


21 Khalid BaTarfi, “Bayan bi-sha’n ma warad.”
then-leader, Qasim Al-Raymi (d. 2020), “the leader of the Jews of the jihad.” According to media reports, the Saudis and other intelligence agencies appear to have penetrated AQAP at times, which was confirmed by the fact that AQAP executed even several of its high-ranking members as spies in 2017. Such AQAP security breaches provided ISIS/Y with ammunition to criticize AQAP as inept and compromised.24

Initially, despite the evident reciprocated acrimony, it seemed that both groups were seeking to avoid open hostilities in the field, and AQAP appeared willing to avoid a violent confrontation as long as ISIS/Y efforts were directed against mutual enemies, such as the Ansar Allah, with one AQAP figure concluding in that regard that “we’re not saying that what they [i.e. ISIS/Y] are doing is bad,” when it was a question of also fighting against “the apostate enemies of God.”25 Nevertheless, the mutual dislike was never far from the surface, and could lead to the assassination of prominent figures of the rival group, as when suspected ISIS/Y operatives gunned down an AQAP commander in 2016.26

**ISIS Central’s Relations with Its Yemeni Affiliate: Substance or Symbolism?**

The pivotal role of ISIS Central in the emergence of ISIS/Y notwithstanding, one can characterize the subsequent relationship between ISIS/Y and the central ISIS Caliphate as largely notional rather than functional. That is, simply the reality of the distance between the ISIS heartland and Yemen and the intervening physical obstacles would have made joint operations or coordination very difficult. In effect, in tangible terms, relations between ISIS/Y and ISIS always remained limited, although some Yemenis did go to Syria specifically to fight in ISIS units.27 And, moreover, in light of ISIS’s drastically reduced capabilities, the relationship now carries little practical weight.

What Al-Baghdadi’s Caliphate did provide was a cachet of legitimacy and a validation of promised success. In an attempt to convince other Yemenis that ISIS/Y was part of a winning team and as a morale booster for its own members, ISIS/Y continued to disseminate a portrait of ISIS military and social success --even as ISIS was suffering crushing setbacks in Iraq and Syria-- as in an April 2019 video, which featured scenes of imaginary ISIS military victories, prosperity, security, and

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normality in the putative Caliphate.28 And, in that same video, the Yemeni branch was anxious to show that it too was an integral part of the same global struggle conducted by ISIS Central, including with its incitement of lone-wolf attacks in the West.

For ISIS Central, its Yemen branch remained a sideshow, generating relatively little activity and publicity, and represented a strategic backwater compared not only to the Syria/Iraq heartland but even relative to the Sinai, Afghanistan, or West Africa. Typically, an infographic in *Naba’*, ISIS’s newsmagazine, showed that ISIS/Y had launched only 5 attacks (not further defined) during the just completed month of Ramadan (May-June 2019) compared to 130 in Iraq and 349 ISIS attacks overall.29 Nevertheless, for ISIS, in light of its recent devastating setbacks, any surviving branch still represented a welcome propaganda asset and morale booster.

The subsequent territorial and organizational collapse of the Caliphate and ISIS Central in itself represented a major setback for ISIS/Y despite the fact that the latter’s relationship with ISIS Central was largely a virtual one. Even if the impact of the downfall of the ISIS Caliphate may have been largely psychological, that also has tangible repercussions. Overall, the prestige of belonging to a successful enterprise has been lost, as has the credibility of the legitimacy that a prominent figure such as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi could bestow while he was riding high on a wave of success. Defeat engenders falling morale and disarray in any organization, and ISIS/Y cannot be immune to such developments. More concretely, recruitment efforts to what many may view as a losing cause are also likely to suffer.

**Building an ISIS/Y Presence: The Parameters of Growth**

As one would expect, recruitment was a vital function if ISIS/Y hoped to be successful. Individuals respond for different reasons to such efforts and one cannot reduce motivations to a single one even for those who became ISIS/Y’s foot soldiers. Of course, ISIS/Y relies on playing to the Sunnis’ fear of the Ansar Allah and to broader religious appeals, as well as to pride and a sense of guilt, such as by accusing those who fail to participate in the jihad as ignoring the plight of how the Sharia is ignored, or how Yemenis are humiliated and insulted.30 As one might expect, there are those who are ideologically committed, as was the case with one recruit who had been a common criminal and who had become radicalized while in jail. His commitment extended to his insistence on volunteering for a suicide operation, even forgoing marriage which he felt would divert him from his intent, although he was relegated to menial tasks within the organization.31 However, ISIS/Y’s main target group may have been the poorer social strata, as indicated by the origin of most of ISIS/Y’s rank-and-file recruits in the Taizz area.32 And, ISIS/Y, like AQAP, has

28 ISIS/Y video *Athaqaltum ila al ard* [You Cling Heavily to the Earth], 1 April 2019, Wilayat Al-Bayda’, Shumukh Al-Islam website (ISIS), https://pastethis.to/zEbPfZRHJ. (Hereafter *Athaqaltum ila al-ard*)

29 Table on back cover, *Al-Naba’* (ISIS), no. 186, 5 June 2019.

30 *Sahq al-ida 2* [Crushing the Enemies 2], transcript of video, Shumukh Al-Islam website, September-October 2018, http://pastethis.to/a0vQcqEY. (hereafter *Sahq al-ida 2*)


32 “Tanzhim DAISH yaftah muaskarat tadribiya fi muhafazhatay Shabwa wa’l-Bayda’ wa-yukaththif anshitathual-tanzhimiya fi Taizz” [ISIS Opens Training Camps in the Two Provinces of Shabwa and Al-Bayda’ and Intensifies
geared much of its recruitment effort toward the country’s youth, a sector of the population perennially beset by socio-economic insecurity in the form of the high cost of housing, education, and weddings, and by the absence of jobs and social services. In effect, whenever ISIS/Y has been able to provide money, weapons, and food, such benefits have proved to be potent recruitment inducements.33 Illustrative at the micro level, in one case a young Yemeni suicide bomber, according to his friends, had joined ISIS/Y only after he had despaired of finding work.34

**Competing for Market Share of the Same Audience**

The fact that it had to compete with the long-established AQAP in same recruitment pool hindered ISIS/Y’s efforts. Initially, ISIS/Y’s focus of effort on recruitment was to win over existing personnel in AQAP and most early adherents to ISIS/Y were in that category.35 According to media reporting, many who joined ISIS/Y early appeared to be hard-liners “frustrated with Al Qaeda’s failure to be more aggressive during the current war.”36 However, by and large, ISIS/Y failed to attract recruits from the upper ranks of AQAP. Another early source of potential recruits was the Yemeni contingent fighting abroad, and Saudi reports indicated that Yemeni fighters attached to ISIS Central were continuing to return home through 2015.37 While it is not possible to determine the geographic origin of all ISIS/Y members, they apparently come from both North and South. Membership in Yemen’s jihadist organizations, however, can be fluid, as rank-and-file individuals can and do switch between groups, with individuals shifting allegiances either for ideological, material, or personal motives.38

**The Stigma of Foreign Influence**

Significantly, ISIS/Y has had proportionately more foreigners than AQAP, and ISIS/Y, in fact, often goes out of its way to stress its global jihadist character and international scope by having its

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operatives at times wear black Afghan dress, something that is alien to local usage. Media reports suggest that ISIS/Y has had a difficult time attracting a larger following in Yemen in part due to the fact that many of its top leaders have been Saudis, that is outsiders. Foreigners, in fact, have been prominent, and, for example, the ISIS/Y commander on the Taizz front, prior to his death in November 2018 at the hands of the Ansar Allah, was an Egyptian. This factor also complicated the all-important relations with the tribes, as the Egyptian members on that front ambushed and killed the chief of a tribe linked to the Ansar Allah, as he apparently had been interfering with ISIS/Y recruitment activities. His killing, however, instead of intimidating that tribe, triggered a vigorous response from the Ansar Allah and, in the ensuing fighting, that Egyptian ISIS/Y commander, Abu Abd Allah Al-Masri, among others, was killed.

**The Centrality of Recruitment: Numbers Do Count**

Yemeni sources reported that ISIS/Y began with just 80 men in November 2014, and had built up to 300 by mid-2015, and to 500 by 2017. A Western press report in 2018 put the number in ISIS/Y as “a few hundred members, mostly Al-Qaeda defectors” The United Nations, in 2018, put the number at between 250 and 500. A Yemeni study in 2019, for its part, estimated membership at between 400 and 700. Other local Yemeni sources suggest larger numbers, with one report from 2018 assessing that in one ISIS/Y training camp, that of Al-Ashruh near Taizz, there were 900 personnel, and counted a total of 2150 graduates of seven ISIS/Y training camps around the same

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42 “Al-Yaman: Misri yantami li-DAISH yaqtul shaykh yamani fi Taizz amam atfalih” [Yemen: An Egyptian Belonging to ISIS Kills a Yemeni Shaykh in Front of His Children], Al-Sabah Al-Yemeni, 16 February 2018, [https://www.alsabahalyemeni.net/2018/02](https://www.alsabahalyemeni.net/2018/02); and “Masra qa’id tanzhim DAISH fi Al-Yaman wa-saffah Taizz Abu Abd Allah Al-Masri” [Death of the ISIS in Yemen Leader and Butcher of Taizz Abu Abd Allah Al-Masri] [Death of the ISIS in Yemen Leader and Butcher of Taizz Abu Abd Allah Al-Masri], Yemeni Press, 17 November 2018, [www.yemennypress.net/archives/126308](http://www.yemennypress.net/archives/126308).


Admittedly, determining the numerical strength of ISIS/Y can only be approximate, not only because of its secretive character but also because it is not always clear who one should count. That is, not all those recruited need remain in the organization permanently, but many may simply return home. And, as is true of any insurgent group, a portion of the combatants or actual “trigger-pullers” may be active only part of the time, while some or even a majority of the combat support and combat service support functions (such as logistics, intelligence, finance, personnel) may be embedded permanently in society and their functions carried out by “civilians,” whether on a full-time or part-time basis.

What is key here is that ISIS/Y appears to always have been considerably smaller than AQAP and, in absolute terms, to have remained of limited size, which has had an impact on the scope of ISIS/Y military potential in terms of the types of operations that it could conduct. And, symptomatically, ISIS/Y has never been large enough to produce significant writings, whether on military theory, on politics, or in the legal/religious field. Local sources, such as the pro-Hadi media, have also assessed that ISIS/Y was weaker and less popular than AQAP. The ISIS/Y leadership itself recognized this critical vulnerability, and thought it prudent to allay its members’ concerns, counseling patience and “persistence in righteousness even if few follow it,” reminding members that Muhammad had had only a small number of followers initially.

**ISIS/Y and the Yemeni Operational Environment**

ISIS/Y has had to contend with the same operational environment –both human and physical-- in Yemen as is the case with any other actor, domestic or foreign, which may offer opportunities but which also presents challenges to military and political activity.

**The Physical Terrain-- Equally Demanding for Friend and Foe**

ISIS/Y’s capabilities and limitations must also be viewed against the background of the country’s challenging physical features which have an impact on not only on ISIS/Y but also on how its adversaries can operate. Yemen has an area of 204,000 square miles, making it larger than Iraq but smaller than Afghanistan. Its population of some 26 million --roughly the same as Iraq or Afghanistan-- is distributed in cities and over 38,000, often isolated, villages (roughly the same number as in Afghanistan), complicating control by any government or outside force. This dispersion is aggravated by the country’s harsh terrain, with an average elevation of over 6000 feet for the country overall and a rugged interior with mountain peaks in the 9-12,000 foot range, as well as barren deserts and a coastline that is almost 1400 miles long, all poorly served by a severely underdeveloped transportation infrastructure, further degraded by the destruction caused during

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49 Sahq al-ida 2.
the current civil war. In a sense, of course, such physical terrain is neutral, presenting opportunities and obstacles to all actors, whose strategy and skill can be a determinant in what role that terrain plays.

**The Human Terrain-- Challenges and Opportunities of Yemen’s Complex Society**

It is Yemen’s diverse and factionalized society that provides the arena for the country’s political life, which has always been dynamic, with factions and coalitions constantly combining and recombining in the pursuit of group and personal interests. Yemen’s politics traditionally have been characterized by a pattern of a large number of players in unstable coalitions based on calculations of the balance of power, which can result in pragmatic dealings among those who earlier had been enemies.\(^50\) This flexibility may extend to negotiating and making deals and cooperating even with jihadists, including by regional outside players involved in Yemen.\(^51\)

**The Dominant Tribal Paradigm and Sectarian Variants**

The country’s human terrain is quintessentially tribal, with the heavily-armed tribes exercising a key political, social, and military function and ISIS/Y, as is true of any political player in the country, has had to operate within and adapt to this environment. The tribes, of course, have their own interests and are political players in their own right. If anything, after the collapse of the central state—weak and corrupt at the best of times—as a result of the conflict that erupted in 2014 and that escalated significantly in March 2015 with the surge of the Ansar Allah, the impact of the tribes has only grown. Although the Ansar Allah are Shia, they belong to the Zaydi branch, which in many ways is closer to the country’s Sunnis than it is to the branch of the Shia as practiced in Iran or in the Gulf. However, religious differences in Yemen can be overstated, and one can find tribes, individuals, or factions allied to either warring coalition irrespective of sect, and indeed players can shift sides based on a changing calculus of interests. Salih himself had sought to switch sides in 2017, but had been killed by his erstwhile Ansar Allah allies in the attempt.

Significantly, there is a well-established pattern in Yemen, based on the tradition of tribal loyalty whereby, when times are difficult for their movement, jihadists—whether as cells or individuals—take refuge by returning to their home tribes and reintegrating. Thus, it was not surprising that after AQAP’s defeat in Abyan and Shabwa in 2012 by the government some of its personnel reportedly were able to simply melt back into their own tribes or even to join for protection the very Tribal Committees militias that had been fighting against them.\(^52\) And, likewise, as part of a deal the tribes brokered between the Army and AQAP in one area during another campaign by the

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50 In 2014, for example, the Ansar Allah and the conservative hardline Sunni salafis (Traditionalists) signed an agreement of peaceful coexistence despite earlier conflict, “Wathiqat taayush wa-ikha’” [Document on Coexistence and Brotherhood], 26 June 2016, [https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CCwTS_ZWqAAPM5a.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CCwTS_ZWqAAPM5a.jpg).


government in 2014, local AQAP members were simply allowed to return home. But indications from various provinces suggest that ISIS/Y has not been able to exploit such tribal roots as widely, although the perception that ISIS/Y has no support in the country’s tribal community is also exaggerated. However, in relative terms, AQAP, in great part as a result of its pre-existing tribal networks and longer track record of activity, has always been much better integrated into the tribal society. Even so, some Yemeni sources explain the relative rarity of ISIS/Y attacks in territory under Ansar Allah control (at least after the early days in 2014-15 when the situation on the ground was highly fluid) as the result of pressure by the Ansar Allah on the northern Sunni tribes from which many ISIS/Y members are said to originate in order to induce those tribes to exert their influence on their fellow-tribesmen in ISIS/Y to prevent such attacks. This would confirm the continued depth of tribal loyalties even among ISIS/Y members and the continued relationships, which would make sense in a highly-tribalized society such as that of Yemen. Moreover, ISIS/Y would have found it more difficult to organize and operate in territory populated mainly by Zaydis than to do so in the more benign environment of exclusively Sunni areas.

The Civil War and the Fluidity of Political Dynamics

In assessing ISIS/Y’s role and room for maneuver in the country, it is important to always keep in mind that the traditional Yemeni continuum between open war and lower-intensity conflict does not consist of a simple binary conflict model of static players, but is a fluid situation characterized by overlapping periods of fighting and political dealing among shifting arrays of multiple adversaries, allies, and cobelligerents. Yemen’s fragmented socio-political pattern has become even more evident as a result of the civil war, as the central government crumbled and the ensuing vacuum was filled with an array of warlords and local centers of power, a process fueled by foreign intervention. Had the Arab Coalition not intervened massively with transfers of heavy weaponry and the participation of outside forces, the developing civil conflict probably would have followed the traditional Yemeni model of “managed instability,” with a constantly reconfigured balance-of-power based on armed force, tangible interests, and fluid alliances. No one player would likely have been able to achieve a permanent hegemony, especially as the then-coalition partners of Salih and the Ansar Allah had had a history of fighting six military campaigns against each other and would no doubt have soon fallen out, leading to a new balance, and even a follow-on conflict would have been at a lower level of intensity than has been the case. Instead, the resulting security breakdown and unremitting war made it easier for ISIS/Y to gain a foothold and to operate, not just because the focus of its likely adversaries was diverted but as it enabled ISIS/Y to find a role, however tenuous, in the system as an actor on its own terms.

Navigating Yemen’s Human Terrain-- No Place for Amateurs


54 Cigar, AQAP’s Survival, 9-12, 28-31.

As is true for any actor in the country, if ISIS/Y was to be successful it had to adapt to and insert itself into Yemen’s social and political dynamics. Unlike AQAP, ISIS/Y appeared to prefer siting its camps, at least for its main forces, in more remote areas, reportedly making ISIS/Y more difficult to penetrate than has been the case with AQAP and thus generally less vulnerable to U.S. drone strikes than the latter.\(^56\) In fact, ISIS/Y developed a reputation of establishing its facilities in isolated locations, away from populated areas, which ISIS/Y consciously acknowledged with pride, alleging that tribes would tell AQAP to do likewise, in preference to the latter’s practice of positioning themselves in villages, thereby opening up the inhabitants to U.S. airstrikes.\(^57\) At the front, too, ISIS/Y appeared to prefer to fight separately even against a common adversary rather than integrating and coordinating with non-jihadist elements.\(^58\) Of course, clandestine cells would have to be located among the population in order to be able to carry out operations, whether armed attacks or any of a number of support functions. ISIS/Y, in fact, has been careful with screening would-be members, requiring individuals to have sponsors who could personally vouch for them.\(^59\) In one case, even a volunteer for suicide operations reportedly found it difficult to join ISIS/Y, as he had no one to provide him with a reference.\(^60\) Although perhaps thereby benefiting from greater operational security, the reduced interaction with local society—and in essence with the tribes-- also resulted in a weaker relationship with and support from the latter and limited ISIS/Y’s ability to recruit and expand.

Despite such disadvantages, ISIS/Y sought to win over the population and propagated its ideas from its earliest days, beginning in March 2015, when about 100 masked fighters rode through the provincial capital of Al-Huta, distributing leaflets, unhindered by the local police.\(^61\) However, it was Aden, as the Coalition’s interim capital and the largest city under its control, that soon became the area of ISIS/Y’s greatest early political activity, and ISIS/Y distributed its propaganda there, including through its control of newspaper stands.\(^62\) ISIS/Y has also engaged in other forms of psychological operations and has produced lectures, videos, and religious hymns (anashid) as well as frequent directives intended to shape people’s views and conduct. In Al-Bayda’ province, where until recently ISIS/Y had some degree of freedom of action, there were reports that ISIS/Y distributed copies of the ISIS Central newsmagazine Al-Naba’.\(^63\) And, at the University of Taizz,


\(^{57}\) Abu Al-Yaman Al-Yamani, Bayda’ al-muwahhidin [Al-Bayda’ of the Unitarians], Mu’assasat Al-Azm Al-Illamiya (ISIS/Y), 7 August 2018, 11. (hereafter Al-Yamani, Bayda’ al-muwahhidin)

\(^{58}\) “Al-Shabab sayd thamin li-tanzhimay DAISH wa’l-Qaida fi Taizz” [The Youth Are a Valuable Catch for Both the ISIS and Al-Qaeda Groups], Al-Arabi Al-Jadid (London, Qatar-owned), 4 April 2017, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/Print/9f48bcd0-a029-4e10-b363-6e2bb89f51683/59331ffe-ef03-44db-acc2-3620e7c354f9. (hereafter “Al-Shabab sayd thamin”)


\(^{60}\) “Abu Karam Al-Hadrami,” 9.


\(^{62}\) “DAISH wa’l-Qida’ yatanfasan.”

in 2019, there were reports of pro-ISIS lectures, although the pro-Hadi sources sought to link that to encouragement by the Islah Party (the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brothers) and its supporters in the military.64

However, the results may not always have been proportional to the effort, not least because of competition by a stronger AQAP.65 Arguably, the decision to not control territory, in the sense of permanent administration, undercut ISIS/Y’s ability to implement its ambitious political and social strategy on the ground. And, ISIS/Y’s lack of sufficient military and financial capabilities, have also limited the effectiveness of its political and information efforts, as was the case with its attempt to establish a radio station, but it had to do clandestinely in 2016 in Lahij, a province controlled by Coalition forces, and the UAE-backed Al-Hizam Al-Amni (Security Belt) security forces were able to forestall that by seizing the equipment.66 An attempt to rebuild the ISIS/Y clandestine media center in the same province was again foiled by security forces, this time in 2018.67

More importantly, perhaps, ISIS/Y’s ideology and its mores have at times run counter to local tribal values and interests. In effect, ISIS/Y, predictably, tried to impose its social agenda where it could, such as by closing down Aden University temporarily in 2015 to prevent the mixing of the sexes, or by destroying the children’s rides at a park in Aden, also for the same reason.68 Elsewhere, it threatened schoolgirls with death if they did not wear the type of conservative dress ISIS/Y sees as appropriate.69 And, it sought to create a sense of insecurity within institutions it viewed as secular, such as with its 2018 attack on the guards outside the Aden School of Humanities.70 As a way to establish control in the Taizz area, moreover, ISIS/Y tried to prevent aid personnel from carrying out their work there.71 In more clandestine operations, ISIS/Y has also gone after sufi (spiritual mystic) clerics, whom it regards as deviant rivals for religious legitimacy, including by

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65 “Al-Shabab sayd thamin.”
shooting the prominent preacher Al-Habib Aydarus bin Samit in Hadramawt at his home while he was praying, which many ordinary Muslims would no doubt have seen as scandalous.  

ISIS/Y’s severity appears to have had an alienating effect among some tribesmen, where tribal law has always been more flexible and milder than the version of the Sharia promoted by ISIS/Y, and where religious observances have at times been lax.  

In fact, the Yemeni media assessed that AQAP was more flexible than ISIS/Y in working with the local administration, a definite advantage in dealing with society. Typically, the readiness of ISIS/Y to carry out and publicize gratuitous grisly killings, such as the execution of four youths on their way to join the Army in January 2019, reportedly repelled many ordinary Yemenis. (See FIGURE 1)  

![FIGURE 1: Execution by ISIS/Y in Al-Bayda’, ISIS/Y internet fora, January 2019.](image)

Some sources have reported that ISIS/Y has even been diffident of the population at large in certain provinces, such as Abyan, hurling the term infidels (kuffar) at the latter in general. In fact, the importance of tribal loyalties can also limit ISIS/Y influence or bring it more readily into conflict with broad swathes of society and, not surprisingly, at times ISIS/Y’s social policies have led to confrontations. Despite the absence or weakness of any government authority, there are limits to how much force ISIS/Y can use to impose its will on the local populations, given that, traditionally, the tribes are armed to the teeth, including with heavy weapons, as ISIS/Y found out to its disadvantage when it became involved in clashes in the villages in the Taizz area, although at the same time ISIS/Y was said to be pragmatic enough to negotiate truces to deescalate such confrontations. Likewise, when ISIS/Y attacked the Sulban military base near Aden in December  

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73 Al-Tamimi, “Lack of Tribal, Social Support.”.  
74 “DAISH Al-Yaman: Munafis Al-Qaida.”.  
2016, a number of recruits from a single tribe were killed. In response, that tribe pressured AQAP to take a stand condemning ISIS/Y publicly, which AQAP did in order to placate the powerful BaKazim tribe.78

Nevertheless, ISIS/Y also appeared to have penetrated with at least partial success into local society, as would be indicated by the existence of networks and the support functions required to prepare and mount clandestine operations even in relatively better-policed urban environments. In fact, in Aden, it was reported that ISIS/Y was able to hide weapons in private homes, making it all the more difficult to root it out.79 In that vein, even security success stories can reveal a problem, as was the case with the arrest of an ISIS/Y commander in Aden in March 2018 and, again in April 2018 when the head of the Aden-Abyan section of ISIS/Y was gunned down in a shootout with a large contingent of counterterrorist, security, and police forces that had raided his apartment in Aden, which indicated a continuing ISIS/Y presence in that key city.80

Over time, as its fortunes stalled and waned, ISIS/Y sought to project a softer identity. By 2018, for example, in Al-Bayda’ province, ISIS/Y presented itself as caring for the local population and as willing and able to protect local Sunnis from the Ansar Allah, and to do so more effectively than AQAP.81 The local ISIS/Y commander even insisted that his forces were now refraining from placing IEDs because civilians used the same roads as AQAP, and he was confident that this care to avoid civilian deaths would disprove negative AQAP propaganda.82 In fact, ISIS/Y sought to create the impression that it was now accepting and tolerant of local traditions and society, making it known that it was participating in festivities with the local population in Al-Bayda’ and accepting invitations to banquets, behavior which it claimed disproved accusations that it viewed the tribes as kafir, or unbelievers, or that it viewed everyone who did not give the bayaa to ISIS as a kafir.83 At the same time, ISIS/Y worked to “Yemenize” at least its public image, aware of the negative impression that having visible foreigners creates, as is suggested by the fact that foreign members

78 “Makhawif Al-Qaida min al-qaba’il tadfa al-tanzhim li-muhajamat DAISH” [Al-Qaida’s Fear of the Tribes Prompts It to Attack ISIS], Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, 16 December 2016, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/Print/9f48bcdn-a029-4e10-b363-6e2b89f51683/3ee9fa60-117f-4967-acbc-89dc229e69a1; and “Ansar Al-Sharia fi Al-Yaman yanfi ayy sila lah bi-tajrij muaskar Il’-tajjin wa-yatabbarra’ min afal tanzhim Al-Dawla’” [The Ansar Al-Sharia in Yemen Deny Having Any Link to the Explosion at the Recruiting Base and Distances Itself from the Islamic State’s Actions], Al-Islamiyun website (Jihadist, neutral), 18 December 2016, http://islamion.com/news.


81 Al-Yamani, Bayda’ al-muwahhidin, 9-11, 13.


83 Al-Yamani, Bayda’ al-muwahhidin, 14.
did not appear in its videos, and by the fact that Yemeni rivals highlighted this fact whenever they captured foreigners serving with ISIS/Y.  

What Can ISIS/Y Do? Operational Capabilities and Limitations

ISIS/Y’s impact and potential have to be assessed essentially in relation to the other players in Yemen. The focus for ISIS/Y has been, of necessity, essentially in-country, with no real out-of-area power projection capability, although it has encouraged and has been eager to claim at least inspirational influence for attacks carried out abroad, usually by lone wolf operatives acting on their own. In fact, if would-be jihadists could not make their way to Yemen, ISIS/Y spokesmen advised them that, as an alternative, they could still “take the battle to the infidels” by carrying out attacks in the countries where they lived, “which will drive [the infidels] crazy,” but whether ISIS/Y has had any direct influence from that perspective is highly debatable. Although, as will be seen later, August 2020 was to mark a turning point in ISIS/Y’s strategic situation, studying ISIS/Y’s past operations can still be informative, as this facet is where ISIS/Y’s policies are translated into plans and actions, and one can better appreciate its objectives and capabilities, strengths, and critical vulnerabilities in tangible form.

Leadership, Or a Lack of Leadership, Matters

As is true of any rising transformative movement, such as ISIS/Y portrays itself to be, having one or more capable or charismatic leaders is a critical requirement for success— and in an insurgency in which there is a mismatch in the balance of forces, specifically also one or more leaders with “military genius” may be vital. However, this has been a glaring critical vulnerability for ISIS/Y, as the latter has found no Usama Bin Ladin-type figure, no one giving rousing sermons or producing riveting writings that stir the emotions, or even to pen staid but actionable think-pieces to guide commanders and foot soldiers in the field, as AQAP has done over the years. One has not found leader-types in ISIS/Y propaganda videos who have stood out and individuals who really developed name-recognition. Nor was such a lack of visible leadership compensated by bold, sweeping, victories as Al-Baghdadi was able to deliver at least briefly in his early days that could dazzle supporters or dishearten adversaries. The lack of such a leadership cadre may have had a negative impact on ISIS/Y’s ability to recruit, as well as on morale, organizational cohesion, and the development of policy and on its translation into executable plans.

Fitting into the Spectrum of Conflict—A Guerrilla Movement, and More


85 Athaqaltum ila al-ard.

Initially, ISIS Central may have had unrealistic expectations for ISIS/Y. What appears to have been a source from ISIS Central provided early guidance for ISIS supporters in Yemen, urging them to counter the “great evil” represented by the Ansar Allah by undertaking operations such as seizing airports, arms factories and depots, intelligence centers, radio and TV broadcasting facilities, and recruiting military officers and pilots. However, ISIS/Y clearly then and even later lacked the manpower for such large-scale conventional operations or for sustained fighting on multiple fronts. Its limited capabilities also may have contributed to a conscious decision by ISIS/Y to not try to control terrain in the sense of populated areas. In effect, when possible, ISIS/Y has avoided large-scale operations or holding territory, which could overextend its relatively small force and, making a virtue out of necessity, rather than seeking battle, its preferred key line of operation has been force building, training, and arms acquisition, which Arab Coalition assessments interpreted as waiting for the other combatants in Yemen to exhaust themselves fighting against each other in the civil war. In fact, ISIS/Y put an emphasis on training and established training camps, especially in Hadramawt and Al-Bayda’ provinces, which it believed it could do because the fighting in Yemen overall was not as intense as in Syria and Iraq. (See FIGURES 2 and 3)

FIGURE 2: Unidentified ISIS/Y training camp, Haqq News Agency (ISIS), 24 April 2015.

FIGURE 3: The Raiders’ course at the Shaykh Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani ISIS/Y training camp, Al-Bayda’ province, Haqq News Agency (ISIS), 5 December 2016.

In addition to traditional combat training, ISIS/Y also felt it necessary to provide recruits with religious/legal education, asserting that without such a foundation the fighters would be no better than bandits, adding that this would also contribute to bonding and cohesion.89

ISIS/Y’s Hit Squads and Targeted Killings

In terms of offensive operations, many actions have consisted of attacks by individuals or small units, frequently involving the assassination of prominent political or military figures. ISIS/Y fighters mounted their first operations, in Hadramawt province, in April 2015, with a series of coordinated attacks against pro-Hadi civilian and military assets.90 The following June, it struck again, with a car bomb attack on the convoy carrying the governor of Aden, and succeeded in killing him. Over the following years, ISIS/Y operatives have mounted similar attacks against military or police officers or government officials. Despite many failures, at times characterized by repeated attacks on the same key targets when initial attempts have not succeeded, ISIS/Y has been able to gun down or blow up numerous individuals in pro-Coalition circles, even in broad daylight, with the perpetrators videotaping operations and routinely making good their escape, indicating both a working jihadist support network and gaps in the Coalition’s security apparatus.91

89 “Al-Dawrat al-shariya fi Wilayat Al-Bayda’” [The Legal Courses in Al-Bayda’ Province], Al-Naba’, 20 April, 2017, 14.
While the pace of such attacks may have slackened as ISIS/Y’s force structure was attrited over time and ISIS/Y was forced to shift its focus of effort to conventional operations against multiple adversaries in Al-Bayda’ province, such individual attacks did not disappear, even in the supposedly secure city of Aden, such as the drive-by shooting of a port security guard.92 (See FIGURE 4)

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

FIGURE 4: ISIS/Y video of an ambush of two security personnel by ISIS/Y in Aden, 13 March 2018.

The intent of such personal attacks is not only to eliminate capable adversaries but, as an ISIS/Y spokesman noted, such assassinations and the associated preparatory stalking are intended to unnerve security forces, as indicated by the fact that many police officers reportedly felt safer sleeping at their bases rather than at home, which ISIS/Y interpreted as a psychological measure of success of such attacks.93

**Suicide Operations: The Unpredictability and Terror of Mass Casualties**

93 Sahq al-ida 2.
In a way, however, it was high-visibility suicide attacks, intended to cause mass casualties, that became a particular trademark of ISIS/Y. (See FIGURE 5)

FIGURE 5: ISIS/Y operative being fitted with an explosive vest, file photo, Amaq News Agency (ISIS), 25 March 2019.

Among the first such attacks were the bombings of the Zaydi Shia mosques in Sanaa in 2015, which caused hundreds of dead and wounded.94 Likewise, the two suicide bomber attacks in the port city of Al-Mukalla just three days apart in May 2016 killed or wounded some 150.95 And, in August 2016, an ISIS/Y suicide bomber blew himself up outside Camp Sulban in Aden -- where recruiting was taking place for South Yemeni troops to go help the hard-pressed Saudis defend their own borders from the Ansar Allah -- killing 75 and wounding over 100.96 In 2016, there were also three suicide attacks that targeted security checkpoints, as well as the Coalition’s headquarters in Aden in March 2016 and, in July 2016, another attack against an Army checkpoint in the Aden area.97 Again, on 11 December 2016, a member of ISIS/Y detonated his explosive vest after having infiltrated himself among a large group of military personnel who had gathered to receive their salaries at Camp Sulban, thereby killing 48 personnel and wounding another 31 others.98 Only a week later, another ISIS/Y suicide operative exploded his vest among police personnel gathered for the same purpose in front of the commander’s residence, this time killing more than 50.99 Such

95 “125 qatilan wa-jariban min junud al-taghtut Hadi fi Hadramawt” [125 Dead and Wounded among the Tyrant Hadi’s Troops in Hadramawt], Al-Naba’, 18 May 2016, 3; and “Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya naffadhat amaliat Al-Yaman wa’l-qatla bi’l-mi’at” [The Islamic State Carried Out the Operations in Yemen and There Are Hundreds of Dead], Al-Minbar Al-Ilami Al-Jihadi forum, 21 May 2016, https://www.mnbr.info/vb/showthread.php?t=85440.
attacks continued and, in March 2018, for example, another suicide car bomber struck a mess hall of the Al-Hizam Al-Amni in Aden, killing 3 and wounding 35.\textsuperscript{100} Other suicide attacks by ISIS/Y operatives, such as one who blew himself up with a suicide vest in a shop in Al-Bayda’ province in April 2019, killing 7 civilians, may be difficult to assess, and may also involve private, as well as political, motives, but nevertheless all contribute to a sense of insecurity.\textsuperscript{101} ISIS/Y, not surprisingly given the impact of such operations, has celebrated suicide attackers as heroes. (See FIGURE 6)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{Sahq Al-Ida 2 [Crushing the Enemies 2] video, features those who carried out suicide missions, Wilayat Adan-Abyan Al-Maktab Al-Ilami (ISIS/Y), September-October 2018.}
\end{figure}

Suicide attacks, in effect, which are difficult to prevent, are highly cost-effective in terms of resources expended versus the damage inflicted, and also suggest a significant degree of commitment among at least certain cadres. Even such individual attacks, moreover, are complex operations, requiring planning, reconnaissance, rehearsals, and logistics preparation by a supporting network, suggesting a sophisticated organization. For example, the August 2016 attack at Camp Sulban indicated extensive prior planning and preparation, as it was timed to take advantage of the entry of a vehicle delivering breakfast to the recruits, allowing the suicide car-


\textsuperscript{101} “Al-Bayda’: Istishhad 7 muwatinin fi tafjir intihari bi-mudiriyat Al-Qurayshiya” [The Death of 7 People in a Suicide Blast in Al-Qurayshiya District], Bilqis TV (Yemen), 27 April 2019,\url{https://www.belqees.tv/yemen}. 

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bomber to gain access in trace, with devastating effect. The technical expertise of ISIS/Y in
mounting such attacks should not be underestimated as, for example, they also have used drones
for reconnaissance and damage assessment. (See FIGURE 7)

FIGURE 7: ISIS/Y drone imagery of the result of a suicide attack on a target, Sahq Al-Ida

Of course, suicide attacks also have non-quantifiable repercussions beyond just the material
sphere. For example, the August 2016 attack on Camp Sulban reportedly had a deep psychological
impact on surviving personnel and hurt subsequent government recruitment efforts. In fact,
quite apart from the publicity to be gained, ISIS/Y had specifically also sought to hamper the
recruitment efforts by the Coalition, warning Yemenis earlier that year not to join the Army or
police, and threatening that such personnel would be “a legitimate target,” since they constituted
“enemies of Islam” and protected the “infidel democracy.”

ISIS/Y Raids as Combined Arms Operations

Another aspect of ISIS/Y operations has been that of raids carried out by larger –but still modest-
forces, which have often been effective. Such operations, which themselves often also integrated
a suicide component, in general indicated good intelligence, solid planning, the effective use of
combined arms, and flexibility. Even in its initial attacks, such as three attacks in Aden in October
2015, including one on the headquarters of the interim Coalition-backed Yemeni government, the

102 “Amn Adan wa-kata’ib Al-Mihdar yatawaadani bi’l-tha’r li-dima’ al-shuhada’ wal-jarha” [The Aden Security
and Al-Mihdar’s Brigades Promise Revenge for the Blood of the Dead and Wounded], AkhbarAl-Yawm (Yemen),

103 Mohammed Al Qalisi, “Suicide Bomber Kills More Than 50 Yemen Soldiers Queuing for Salaries,” The National

104 “Tanzhim Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi Al-Yaman yuhdhir min al-iltihaq bi’l-jaysh wa’l-shurta” [The Islamic State in
Yemen Warns against Joining the Army and Police], Aden Today, 13 February 2016, https://www.aden-
today.net/news.
attacks were coordinated and carried out with car bombs in combination with armed fighters, who sought to open the way for follow-on booby-trapped armored vehicles.105

Or, again, in November 5, 2017, ISIS/Y launched a coordinated attack against the UAE-sponsored Criminal Investigations Center in Aden, reportedly as revenge for the earlier arrest and subsequent torture of six of its members, and possibly targeted the overall commander of the city’s security who had been scheduled to make a visit (which in itself may have indicated a success for ISIS/Y intelligence), although in the event snarled road traffic fortuitously was to delay his arrival.106 The attack itself seems to have been well-planned and executed. A powerful car bomb, whose blast was heard all over the city, was detonated at the front gate, opening the way for two more vehicles and motorcycles to follow in trace into the compound, carrying some 20 (some reports say 40, others only 12) fighters wearing military uniforms and armed with RPGs and Light Anti-Tank Weapons.107 In a series of ensuing firefights, the intruders managed to reach the headquarters building, where a second booby-trapped vehicle was then positioned at the entrance to be blown up remotely in order to gain entry.108 The ISIS/Y fighters secured control of the headquarters and surrounding buildings, taking hostages among the police personnel and the prisoners they released. Initial efforts by local security forces to retake the compound failed, and reinforcements had to be called in from other provinces. The ISIS/Y fighters, by using snipers on the rooftops and individuals setting off their explosive vests whenever security forces massed near the entrance to attempt an entry, enabled the remaining seven ISIS/Y fighters to repel attempts by vastly superior forces to retake the compound for 14-24 hours, depending on different sources, before being overwhelmed by sheer numbers, with only one of the original attackers surviving to be captured.109 In the end, 46 security personnel had been killed, and 47 wounded, and ISIS/Y claimed to have

also destroyed 16 vehicles. Not only had ISIS/Y achieved a resounding propaganda success at a moderate cost, but the operation revealed a number of government weaknesses, as the police had apparently neglected earlier intelligence warnings of a potential attack, the response by government forces had been sluggish and uncoordinated, and the expected air support by Coalition forces had failed to materialize in a timely manner.

In a similar attempt, in February 2018, two booby-trapped vehicles struck the gate of the Counterterrorist Forces Headquarters in Aden. Although a reported follow-on attempt by ISIS/Y fighters to penetrate the compound failed, the toll from the bombs was still 14 dead and 40 wounded, many of them passing civilians. The local media interpreted the latter attack as an ISIS/Y bid to win popular support, as people were said to dislike the Counterterrorist Forces, who had developed a reputation of invading and searching homes at night and of engaging in arbitrary arrests and detentions.

ISIS/Y also has mounted similar hit-and-run raids in the provinces, with one of the earliest such attacks a coordinated strike against two security posts in Hadramawt province using suicide car bombs, accompanied by additional gunmen in follow-on firefights, claiming the lives of at least six government troops. Again, in March 2018, ISIS/Y launched a surprise attack on a military outpost in Hadramawt province, when it seized ten recruits from the UAE-supported Nukhba (Special Forces), whom it then summarily executed. Or, again, it mounted another raid on a security checkpoint in January 2019, in Hadramawt province, and combined it with the planting of its flag in the main street in the provincial town of Shibam. In addition, ISIS/Y has also used improvised explosive devices (IEDs), such as the detonation of an IED that struck a Hizam Amni vehicle in Abyan province in January 2019, and another IED that targeted a patrol from the Nukhba in March 2019, or yet another that targeted an Army vehicle in June 2019, killing or wounding

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nine personnel, both of the latter attacks in Hadramawt province. Even Aden was not immune, as in August 2019, a suicide ISIS/Y attacker slammed his booby-trapped motorcycle into a Hizam Amni vehicle, while in December 2019 ISIS/Y operatives assassinated a Hizam Amni commander there. As a Yemeni military source suggested in 2018, there have been many more such small-scale attacks, which apparently often are not reported in the mainstream Yemeni media.

**Persistent Vulnerabilities**

Its tactical skills notwithstanding, internal strife has been a persistent critical vulnerability for ISIS/Y, hampering internal cohesion and diverting attention and resources from a more vigorous military effort. In effect, from its beginnings, as is true with most Yemeni political groups, ISIS/Y seems to have been prone to factionalism, often centered on leadership power struggles. Significantly, after the June 2019 arrest of Abu Usama Al-Muhajir, ISIS/Y’s leader, it took more than four months for a new leader, Qabus Bin Talib, to appear in public, suggesting a contentious process to pick a successor. At times, differences over strategies have accompanied personal rivalries, as in the case of one prominent ISIS/Y commander, Nashwan Al-Adani, who had returned to Yemen in 2016 from Syria/Iraq along with 200 fighters, and who wanted ISIS/Y to seize territory and proclaim an Islamic state in Yemen, which others in ISIS/Y leadership circles thought unwise for the moment. The dissidents appealed to the central ISIS leadership, charging their opponents with corruption, but were rebuffed by Al-Baghdadi. Ultimately, it was AQAP who supported the dissident Al-Adani as he broke with ISIS/Y. Although he was soon gunned down by a probable ISIS/Y operative in March 2017, the disarray likely further hampered ISIS/Y’s ability to engage in larger-scale operations at the time.

Reports surfaced again in 2018 of continuing divisions between those leaders based in Al-Bayda’ and Ma’rib provinces, who pressed for attacks in Aden, and those leaders based in the latter, and directly at risk, who supported a policy of continued building and preparation for fighting at a later time.

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119 “DAISH yuhajim mawaqi al-jaysh.”

120 “Tanzhim Al-Dawla yatrud 7 min qiyadat farihi bi’l-Yaman” [The [Islamic] State Expels 7 Leaders of Its Branch in Yemen], *Al-Shahid Press*, 28 December 2015, [www.alshahidpress.net/arabic/news-7728.htm](http://www.alshahidpress.net/arabic/news-7728.htm); and “ISIS Fails to Gain Much Traction.”


ISIS/Y Versus the World: Who Makes a Difference?

ISIS/Y has had to navigate a difficult path by fighting or negotiating with other local, regional, and international actors, often from a position of military inferiority. Although that situation may present pitfalls for a clumsy and weaker player, Yemen’s unstable and constantly mutating configuration of political balances and alliances in what is an on-going conflict environment may also facilitate the survival of a group such as ISIS/Y by diverting the focus of stronger rivals and adversaries and may even provide opportunities for tacit cooperation. How ISIS/Y manages its relations with other actors has been a key factor in its prospects for survival.

The Arab Coalition and Its Yemeni Clients Versus ISIS/Y: How Effective?

Since 2015, neighboring countries, and principally Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as part of the so-called Arab Coalition, have established a significant role in Yemen. And, often, they have used their claimed effectiveness in countering terrorism as a selling point with the international community to justify their presence in the country, well aware that AQAP and ISIS/Y may be the priority for the international community rather than the Ansar Allah or any Iranian influence. As Prince Khalid bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Minister of Defense, noted in 2019, “Saudi Arabia continues to play a leading role in the international community’s effort to combat terrorism,” and he tied that into his country’s military presence in Yemen, which he depicted as aimed at “the Houthis, Al Qaeda and ISIS.” 124 The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, for his part, portrayed Iran, AQAP, and ISIS/Y as all interconnected, however improbably, perhaps seeing this as an effective mechanism to appeal to all facets of U.S. sensitivities. 125

The UAE, too, has sought to establish a public record for itself of counterterrorist activity against ISIS/Y (and AQAP) as a way to justify to the international community its military presence in Yemen. Spokesmen for its client forces in Yemen and from its allied local politicians claimed—and the UAE media highlighted—that UAE forces were carrying out “spectacular operations” and had delivered “painful blows” to ISIS/Y and AQAP in “a succession of victories” and had played the decisive role in achieving victory over terrorism. 126 Indeed, by 2018, a Yemeni analyst, speaking to the UAE press, claimed that in just two years the UAE had cleared all “terrorist elements of Al-Qaida and ISIS from all territory liberated from the Houthi militias” and “had achieved… what the Yemeni government had not been able to achieve in twenty years in its war against terrorism.” 127

A Realistic Assessment of Coalition Priorities: Reading Between the Lines

127 Ibid.
In practical terms, priorities for the various actors in the Arab Coalition –both regional states and local players-- may vary, and countering ISIS/Y often may not be at the top of the to-do list. For Riyadh, the priority likely has always been its rivalry with Iran and the Ansar Allah, and for the UAE it is the local Islah Party (as Muslim Brothers), who might inspire dissent in the UAE reminiscent of the Arab Spring, as well as the Ansar Allah and Iran. Significantly, early in the Yemeni War, when Muhammad bin Zayd, ruler of Abu Dhabi, highlighted the UAE’s fight against ISIS, it was in the context of the UAE’s participation in the international coalition operating in Iraq and Syria, not in relation to Yemen. Even later, in 2019, the UAE’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs was blunt in stating that “The first priority in brotherly Yemen is that of confronting the Houthis. Without that, Yemen will not be stable and the region’s security will be affected negatively.”

At first, in fact, UAE and Saudi forces appeared to disregard ISIS/Y activity on the ground, as was the case even in Aden, much to the dismay of local residents. Significantly, when asked in April 2015 if the Coalition was pursuing the jihadists, the Saudi spokesman at the time, Brigadier General Ahmad Asiri, taken aback, responded: “The operation was clear from the first. Al-Qaida and ISIS were not specified on the list of objectives for Operation Resolute Storm. Everyone knows that there is an international coalition operating against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, with Saudi Arabia and some other countries participating in that coalition. However, as far as Operation Resolute Storm, I want to reiterate that the specified objectives are clear: support for the legitimate government and President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, and support for efforts to return security and stability in Yemen.” Indicative of Saudi Arabia’s priorities, when the locals asked for help in setting up a counterterrorism unit, the latter demurred, alleging that domestic security was not its concern but, rather, conventional combat, presumably against the Ansar Allah.

Arab Coalition sources, in fact, often downplayed the importance of ISIS/Y or even denied its presence. As a retired Saudi military officer who often represented government views on Yemen noted of ISIS/Y and AQAP in 2015, “These groups do not have much of a presence in Aden ... They do not have a large organization that could threaten the state and its government.”

Tellingly, the Saudi press also featured the spokesman for the Yemeni Army aligned with the Arab Coalition confirming in 2018 that the threat from the Ansar Allah was a more serious one than that

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131 “Asiri: Istihdaf tanzhim Al-Qaida laysat min mahamm asifat al-hazm” [Asiri: Targeting Al-Qaida Is Not One of Resolute Storm’s Missions], YouTube, 16 June 2015, [Link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k_WYNqAHl0).

132 “Al-Shabab sayd thamin.”

from ISIS/Y or AQAP and that the Ansar Allah should therefore also be the international community’s priority. A Saudi military analyst, for his part, recognized that the Gulf states’ priorities in Yemen differed from those of the international community, with ISIS being uppermost for the latter, while for the Gulf authorities it was the Ansar Allah. Over time, Saudi spokesmen became more sensitive to this aspect when addressing foreign audiences and, characteristically, in 2019 the Arab Coalition military spokesman (a Saudi officer) assured reporters that the Coalition did in fact have a commitment to “confront terrorist groups such as ISIS and AQAP” in Yemen.

Likewise, the focus of local actors who are part of the Arab Coalition may also be on confronting their rivals within the Coalition, quite apart from their continuing hostility toward the Ansar Allah. Such internal competition has often turned violent, whether pitting clients of Saudi Arabia and the UAE against each other in the fighting for control of the Aden airport in 2017, in repeated clashes between forces loyal to General Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar or to the Islah Party and those backed by the UAE throughout central and southern Yemen, between southern separatists and unionists, between Tariq Salih (Ali Abd Allah Salih’s nephew and political heir) versus southern interests, among other prominent political leaders or warlords and their militias, or among lesser-known figures at a local level throughout the South. Not surprisingly, forces supported by the Arab Coalition specifically designated for counterterrorist missions often have also been used in such internal power struggles, as was the case in Aden where they were used against the Islah Party.

In fact, counterterrorist forces have even been used for marginal missions, such as ferreting out “sorcerers” (really practitioners of folk religion) and “charlatans,” often simply dissidents.

Symptomatic of the frequent relegation of the fight against ISIS/Y as a residual focus of effort by Coalition actors, the pro-Hadi media, for example, at times denied outright that there was even an ISIS organization in Yemen, claiming that what existed was “just communiques” serving as a front for “North Yemeni … crimes” by General Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar and by the Islah Party—one set of Hadi’s rivals in the Arab Coalition—with support from Israel and Iran. Nevertheless, the same source did acknowledge an ISIS/Y threat in the form of “the spread of heinous extremist thought”


137 See Cigar, AQAP’S Survival, 21, 46, 56.


in mosques, schools, and the media. President Hadi’s Foreign Minister, for his part, in 2016 likewise categorically denied that there was any ISIS/Y presence whatsoever in Yemen and attributed claims to the contrary only to theAnsar Allah-Salih media. Local authorities and their supporters are also prone to blithely deny any ISIS/Y presence in their own area of responsibility, as that might reflect negatively on their governance effectiveness. Typically, despite frequent reports to the contrary, a member of the pro-South independence Southern Transitional Council in Lahij Province, stated emphatically that “There are no members [here] suspected of belonging to that organization [i.e. to ISIS/Y],” even though at the same time the country’s Ministry of the Interior was announcing the arrest of an ISIS/Y cell in that same province. Or, local officials may give optimistic assessments of the progress against jihadist groups, readily repeated by Coalition sources, as was the case with a report that 70% of ISIS/Y and Al-Qaida had been eliminated in Shabwa province already by early 2017.

The Coalition’s Yemeni Forces: A Work in Progress and Blurred Loyalties

Despite the significant Arab Coalition armed presence and investment in Yemen, it is the local armed forces, security, and militias that will inevitably have to take the lead in dealing with ISIS/Y. Not only do local actors have the best knowledge of the human and physical terrain and access to actionable intelligence, but it is they who have the most at stake and who will be there, on the ground, for the long term. ISIS/Y is well aware of this dynamic and, as one of its first initiatives, had issued a communique threatening anyone who joined the Hadi-controlled Army or police, which it claimed protect the apostate rulers and, categorizing such service as “unbelief” (kufr), also warning the population to keep away from the state-sponsored militias.

As the civil war unfolded, in practice there was no genuinely functioning national government or Army in Yemen, and that remains the case to this day. Even in the areas not under Ansar Allah control, there has only been a collection of often-competing political figures and military forces who operate with their foreign patrons’ aid. In effect, the country’s political fragmentation, characterized by tangled alliances and multi-level conflicts, has encouraged the development of warlordism, as party leaders and military and militia commanders carved out personal spheres of control and competed for income sources such as oil and gas facilities, ports and airports, drug markets, and road checkpoints, while the multiplicity of local armed forces undermined unity of

command and cohesion, and prevented the building of an effective national military.\(^\text{145}\) To a great extent, the main Coalition players, that is the UAE and Saudi Arabia, encouraged and enabled this phenomenon—which facilitated their own control and magnified their influence—by recruiting, training, arming, funding, and commanding multiple stand-alone local armed forces.

Despite the considerable outside investments, such Yemeni military and security forces have achieved only limited proficiency. In particular, local forces are hamstrung by factionalism based on loyalties to tribe, region, or party, as well as by widespread corruption affecting pay and logistics, and the “phantom soldier” phenomenon (fictional names on unit rosters as a way to collect additional salaries from Coalition paymasters), or units selling off their weapons. Persistent deficiencies are readily reflected at the tactical level. As a case in point, the commander of an Army brigade in Abyan province worried that his personnel, who had not been receiving pay or support despite government promises, could begin drifting to AQAP or ISIS/Y.\(^\text{146}\) Similarly, the withdrawal of military police in a training camp in Aden to protest a lack of pay enabled ISIS/Y to launch a successful suicide attack on the camp.\(^\text{147}\) Leadership problems are also apparent and, for example, in April 2018, when the redeployment of a 300-man Army unit from Ma’rib province to Al-Bayda’ province led to a clash with ISIS/Y, the Army unit’s commander took flight, leading to the retreat of the Army unit.\(^\text{148}\) Glaring gaps in overall Yemeni security have also persisted, as indicated by the successful attack in December 2018 by unidentified armed elements against police headquarters in the town of Say’un, in Hadramawt province, which resulted in the freeing of those being detained at the site.\(^\text{149}\) Such critical vulnerabilities degrade significantly the combat effectiveness of the forces supported by the Coalition, whether the disparate Army units loyal to the Hadi-led regime or to other commanders, or the various militias established by the UAE, and, on their own, they would probably have a difficult time dealing with ISIS/Y (and AQAP).

What is more, even if to a lesser degree than was the case with AQAP, ISIS/Y became a co-belligerent of sorts of the Coalition in the fight against the Ansar Allah, which was a priority for the Coalition, with jihadist fighters at times actually integrated in the Coalition-sponsored local forces. Some ISIS/Y personnel appear to have been embedded in the locally-raised Coalition forces, always starved for manpower, and especially in those units supported by the UAE that were deployed on the country’s West Coast operating against the Ansar Allah in the Tihama Province.


\(^{147}\) “Al-Tafasil al-kamila li’l-tajir al-intihari bi-muaskar Ra’s Abbas bi’il-Bariqa” [Complete Details on the Suicide Explosion at Ra’s Abbas Camp in Al-Bariqa], *Aden Al-Ghad*, 17 February 2016, http://adenalghad.net.


during the unsuccessful campaign intended to take the port of Al-Hodeidah. UAE compensation was said to have been indirect at times, with alleged money transfers through accommodating tribes. In one instance, when local tribes and police protested ISIS/Y activity in mosques and schools on the Coast, UAE representatives on the ground reportedly dampened the situation, diverting retaliation by locals against ISIS/Y personnel who were then cooperating with UAE-sponsored forces. These same forces, characteristically, took time in 2018 to destroy a famous sufī shrine, the Faza mosque and mausoleum, an indicator of an ISIS/Y presence, as such shrines have always been a target of ISIS/Y, who consider such attacks “a religious duty.” Likewise, personnel in the Coalition forces in Abyan and Hadramawt provinces have also targeted saints’ mausolea, again suggesting an ISIS/Y presence, or at least influence, in those units as well.

The Ansar Allah, for their part, claimed that among those they had killed in combat against the UAE-supported forces during the campaign on the West Coast in 2018 they had found ISIS/Y members, and again in actions against Saudi-supported forces along the northern border in November 2018, or yet again when they ambushed a Coalition Army vehicle in Jawf province in 2019, and often listed by name ISIS/Y members among those who were killed. And, in July 2019, the Ansar Allah claimed that a commander of a Yemeni Border Guards brigade defending the Saudi border who had been killed in combat was at the same time also a prominent ISIS/Y figure. Likewise, in 2019, according to the UAE-controlled media, a prominent individual who had formerly been a fighter with ISIS in Syria and was later part of the pro-Hadi forces in Shabwa Province was killed fighting against the UAE-sponsored Nukhba militia. Individual members

156 “Maqtal al-qiyadi al-daishi Al-Tayyibi wa-adad min al-murtaziqa bi-mihwar Asir” [The ISIS Commander Al-Tayyibi and a Number of Mercenaries Are Killed along the Asir Axis], Yemeni Press, 13 July 2019, https://www.yemenipress.net/archives/153441.
of ISIS/Y are said to also have joined other local militias in the South, such as the Popular Resistance, which may provide a cover and refuge in case of reverses.\footnote{Adham Fahd, “Lahij: Musallahun majhulun yaghtalun qiyadi (sic) bi’l-Muqawama al-Shabiya” [Lahij: Unidentified Gunmen Kill a Commander in the Popular Resistance], \textit{Al-Mawqi Post}, 27 June 2016, \url{https://almawqeapost.net/news/9253}.}

The Coalition, showing pragmatism, has been willing to negotiate with ISIS/Y (as well as with AQAP) in pursuit of its interests, using the tribes as intermediaries, in 2015 seeking, for example, to ease the two jihadist groups out of Aden and from certain other areas by making a deal, although not succeeding in that case.\footnote{“Alan tanzhim DAISH an takhrij arba dufa min al-musallahin fi muaskar Al-Shaykhayn bi-wilayat Adan-Abyan” [ISIS Announces It Has Graduated Four Classes of Fighters from the Al-Shaykhayn Camp in the Aden-Abyan Wilaya], \textit{Al-Fajr Al-Jadid}, 29 November 2015, \url{http://aljeralgaaded.net/news_details.php?sid=10430}.} At a local level, temporary deals could well be made between ISIS/Y and Coalition-supported forces. This complex and loose nature of the security environment and of relationships was made evident when, in 2016, the Yemeni media published images of ISIS/Y personnel training on armored vehicles originating in the UAE that they had somehow obtained from Coalition bases, suggesting at least some sympathizers among local Yemeni military units within the Coalition.\footnote{“Dabbabat wa-mudarraat Al-Imarat taht saytarat DAISH fi Yafa, bi-l-sura” [Tanks and Armored Vehicles Belonging to the UAE under ISIS Control in Yafa, with Pictures], \textit{Al-Wasat}, 9 February 2016, \url{www.alwasatyen.et?ac=38no=46607}.} Likewise, in a striking visual reminder of the fluid mobility and interpenetration of individuals’ roles and loyalties, a photograph from 2019 showed an officer from Yemen’s Ministry of Defense talking to the Minister of Defense while an ISIS/Y decal on the butt of his rifle – a common practice in Yemen on all sides as a way to show where someone’s loyalties lie – was clearly visible.\footnote{The photograph was published widely, including in “Sura fadiha: Wazir al-difa al-shariya yazhar bi-rifqat dubbat min tanzhim DAISH fi wizarat al-difa” [Revealing Photograph: The Minister of Defense in the Legitimate Government Appears in the Ministry of Defense in the Company of Officers from ISIS], \textit{Al-Mashhad Al-Janubi Al-Awwal}, 11 May 2019, \url{www.salmashhad.com/news/43049}.}

\textit{Arab Coalition Operations against ISIS/Y-- How Effective?}

On the ground, such blurred priorities, differing interests, and military inefficiency can translate into missed opportunities and problematic dealings with ISIS/Y for the Coalition. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have always given wide publicity to campaigns they have led and participated in which were said to target ISIS/Y (and AQAP), often with ambitious goals such as one “broad-based campaign” in 2018 intended to “clear” the entire province of Shabwa of the ISIS/Y and AQAP presence.\footnote{Abd Allah Al-Bariqi, “Amaliya li’l-tahaluf wa-quwwat Al-Nukhba didd khalaya DAISH wa’l-Qaida fi Shabwa bi-isnad jawwi fail” [Operation by the Coalition and Nukhba Forces against the ISIS and Al-Qaeda Cells in Shabwa with Effective Air Support], \textit{Sabq} (Riyadh), 23 September 2018, \url{https://sabq.org/WG8wnm}.} Local critics claim that such actions against ISIS/Y led by the Coalition at times are merely a pretext for local Coalition-backed forces to take territory or economic complexes from their rivals within the Coalition.\footnote{Al-Haddad, “Al-Imarat wa-tanzhim Al-Dawla.”} Despite assertions by Hadi or the Arab Coalition, and especially by the UAE, that past campaigns against ISIS/Y have been decisive, these operations habitually have lasted barely a day or two and have been characterized by limited sparring between the Arab Coalition and the Coalition-supported local forces and ISIS/Y rather than constituting any full-scale confrontation, and most often ended in negotiated compromise.
agreements, only to have ISIS/Y reappear there or elsewhere shortly thereafter. Typically, in Taizz, when the Coalition (in the form of a Yemeni Army brigade) decided to exert pressure on ISIS/Y, the latter withdrew from the city in January 2019, after losing only three personnel killed, probably seeking to avoid risking a costly conflict against a more powerful adversary. However, ISIS/Y retained its force structure intact, simply shifting its forces to areas outside the city, apparently as the result of a deal, and reportedly with the logistic, financial, and security assistance of Coalition forces for the redeployment. And, at the same time, ISIS/Y also was said to have left behind sleeper cells in Taizz itself.

There have also been frequent accusations, not easily verifiable, within the Coalition camp that some players in that same Coalition may enable or at least provide non-interference to ISIS/Y assets when they undertake attacks such as assassinations against their Coalition rivals or competitors, allegations that, given the endemic bitter factionalism within the Coalition, are at least plausible. For example, a pro-Qatar Yemeni newspaper accused a UAE-supported local official of facilitating the ISIS/Y attacks that targeted Sufi mystic clerics and other conservative Muslim figures, whom the UAE views as potential ideological threats to its own interests and policies. And, in fact, in July 2019 the public prosecutor in Yemen indicted a senior UAE-backed local official in Aden for allegedly having organized death squads that targeted dozens of clerics in the city. Likewise, tribes in Al-Mahra province accused the Ansar Allah and the Saudi-UAE Coalition of using false flag operations attributed to ISIS/Y as part of their own dirty work, as in the execution of pro-Hadi Army prisoners.

The 2019 Arrest of ISIS/Y’s Leader: A Decisive Decapitation and the End of ISIS/Y?

In late June 2019, the Saudi authorities announced that two weeks earlier they had arrested Abu Usama Al-Muhajir, an individual they identified as the head of ISIS/Y. Ordinarily, such news would indicate a highly effective counterterrorism effort that could, if not destroy, at least cripple an organization like ISIS/Y. In what the Saudi government and media called “a spectacular operation” in the town of Al-Ghayzha, lasting only ten minutes, with no gunfire or casualties, Saudi Special Forces, supported by Yemeni counterparts, were said to have detained Al-Muhajir and a

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166 Ibid.


number of his cohorts.\textsuperscript{170} Other press accounts reported that the United States had supported the operation in unspecified ways with its Special Forces and intelligence.\textsuperscript{171} The Saudi media, understandably, publicized the operation as a great success and provided extensive coverage, with the Saudi Deputy Minister of Defense (and brother of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman), Prince Khalid bin Salman, assessing that the operation was proof of “the great progress and development which the [Saudi] armed forces have witnessed.”\textsuperscript{172} The Saudi ambassador to Yemen even attributed the event directly to the Saudi Crown Prince’s “vision and determination.”\textsuperscript{173}

However, the operation perhaps raised more questions than answers. It was not clear what the reputed leader of ISIS/Y was doing living in Al-Ghayzha, a small town on the coast of Al-Mahra province and the headquarters of the Saudi military presence in the region, some 500 air miles from ISIS/Y bases and the ISIS/Y center in Al-Bayda’ province. Some reports claimed that Al-Muhajir was a Saudi national, as his nom de guerre “The Migrant” suggests.\textsuperscript{174} Had he made a deal with the Saudi government to surrender and return home, and was this a bit of added theater? It could not even be excluded that the latter had been a Saudi agent all along who had succeeded in infiltrating the ISIS/Y structure, as had other Saudi operatives or double agents with AQAP, and was now being repatriated. Tellingly, the faces of Al-Muhajir and those arrested with him were concealed in the accompanying media photographs, which is not the usual Saudi practice which, on the contrary, is to visually publicize those arrested widely in the media in order to prove to the public that someone who was wanted by the law was really in custody. (See FIGURE 10)

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{171} Kareem Fahim and Missy Ryan, “ISIS Figure Reported Captured in Yemen,” \textit{Washington Post}, 26 June 2019, A18.
\textsuperscript{174} “Malumat hasriya an Abu Usama Al-Muhajir alladhi alan al-tahaluf al-qabd alayhi bi-amaliya khassa” [Exclusive Information on Abu Usama Al-Muhajir, Whose Capture the Coalition Announced as Part of an Operation by the Special Forces], \textit{Al-Khabar Al-Yemeni}, 25 June 2019, \url{https://www.alkhabaralyemeni.net/2019/06/25/53691}.
\end{footnotesize}

If he was a Saudi asset, although that would represent an intelligence coup, that could not be acknowledged, as that would implicate the Saudi authorities in some of the criminal acts that Al-Muhajir might have committed or ordered while active within ISIS/Y. The UAE-controlled local media, for its part, claimed that Al-Muhajir, apart from his role in ISIS/Y, was at the same time also serving as an officer in the Yemeni Army subordinate to Hadi. Whether this allegation was true or simply an attempt by the UAE to cast Hadi and his Saudi patrons in a negative light, it would suggest that such a possibility would be seen as at least plausible in the Yemeni context, with the overlapping of loyalties, memberships, and roles.

The timing of the affair, in any event, came at a convenient juncture for Saudi Arabia, which had been under pressure in the U.S. Congress for its human rights dealings and for its policy in Yemen, leading to calls to suspend arms sales to Riyadh. Saudi Arabia could now counter such efforts by showcasing positive results in a sensitive area and Prince Khalid bin Salman, in effect, argued that “The capture of ISIS’ leader in Yemen is just the latest example of our commitment to eradicating the scourge of terrorism. Saudi Arabia continues to play a leading role in the international community’s effort to combat terrorism & counter extremism.” Likewise, the Saudi media claimed that the arrest showed that Riyadh is a leader in international peace and security, and that Saudi Arabia provides protection for the United States and Great Britain. Even if this was a genuine decapitation, the event was unlikely to mean the end of ISIS/Y, which had always been decentralized, if not by intent then as a result of the leadership’s endemic factionalism.

ISIS/Y, AQAP, and the Ansar Allah: Fighting the Unwanted But Unavoidable Battles

ISIS/Y has also had to deal with other local actors who have often proved even more formidable than the Arab Coalition. In particular, ISIS/Y has been forced to engage in conventional combat against both AQAP and the Ansar Allah, especially on the Taizz and Al-Bayda’ fronts, risking the attrition of its small combat force, even when the engagements were of limited size. On such fronts, ISIS/Y yielded the initiative to its adversaries, and it was the latter, rather than ISIS/Y, who could control the operational tempo because of their relatively larger size, and thereby put ISIS/Y at a distinct disadvantage. Even if ISIS/Y might have preferred to pursue a post-war-centered strategy revolving on developing its force structure, training, and weapons acquisition, punctuated by raids and assassinations at times and places of its own choosing, it has been unable to refuse battle when pressed by the local adversaries it has inherited.

ISIS/Y and AQAP: The Jihadist Civil War within a Civil War in Yemen

Not surprisingly, given the bitter antagonism surrounding the birth and subsequent development of ISIS/Y, relations with other jihadist groups, and AQAP in particular, have always been tense. To be sure, ISIS/Y and AQAP reportedly have had at times what the United Nations described as “a mutual non-interference understanding” and sought to contain their rivalry. However, restraint was not always possible and, initially, rivalry between AQAP and ISIS/Y was said to have been particularly fierce in Aden, given the latter’s importance as a political and economic center. Another area that drew ISIS/Y’s attention was Al-Bayda’ province which, according to the local ISIS/Y commander, was attractive because of its rugged terrain and the limited presence of President Hadi’s forces and of AQAP, and the opportunity to fight against the nearby Ansar Allah, as well as its location sitting astride major lines of communication.

By 2018, as ISIS/Y tried to shift its main effort and expand its influence further into Al-Bayda’ province, which AQAP saw as its own stronghold, a direct confrontation with AQAP became increasingly likely as competition began to involve control over concrete prizes such as territory and funding sources, resulting unavoidably in armed clashes. ISIS/Y and AQAP began to set up competing checkpoints on the same roads, both as a way of marking territorial control and as a way to collect money. To some extent, AQAP sought to avoid operations where ISIS/Y was engaged in fighting their mutual enemy, the Ansar Allah. However, ISIS/Y even then portrayed AQAP in Al-Bayda’ as just waiting for a pretext to attack ISIS/Y and claimed that AQAP, the

Army, and most local tribes had conspired to join forces against ISIS/Y. The guidance that ISIS/Y gave to its personnel to simply ignore AQAP checkpoints only increased the likelihood of continuing friction leading to direct confrontations.

Full-scale clashes broke out in that province between the two jihadist groups in July 2018 and would continue in a desultory manner into the Fall of that year. The apparent incident sparking the fighting had been the deployment of an Army brigade loyal to the Hadi regime to Al-Bayda’ and, when the latter had refused an ISIS/Y request to leave, an armed confrontation had ensued, with AQAP reportedly joining in and siding with the pro-Hadi Army unit against ISIS/Y. Losses in these initial clashes between ISIS/Y and AQAP, although modest in terms of pure numbers—with 14 and 22 dead, respectively, for the two—nevertheless indicated a willingness by both groups to commit their limited resources to a showdown in defense of their interests. ISIS/Y accused AQAP of having been the aggressor and, what is more, of having attacked ISIS/Y positions that were directed against the Coalition forces, and claimed in an attempt to save face that it had withdrawn from the field only in order to prevent further bloodshed. A commander from the UAE-sponsored forces led by Tariq, a nephew of the late Yemeni President Ali Abd Allah Salih, reportedly acted as a mediator between ISIS/Y and AQAP to secure the release of the prisoners the latter had taken from ISIS/Y during the fighting, in a deal involving a transfer of money and arms, although ISIS/Y apparently was unhappy with the terms.

In the meantime, ISIS/Y called on its members to converge on Al-Bayda’ from elsewhere in the country in order to enable it to confront AQAP on more equal terms, even if that meant reducing its visibility in Aden and elsewhere. Indicative of its dire need for manpower, ISIS/Y leaders in 2019 even urged foreigners to come and join it in Yemen for the jihad. Thus reinforced with personnel from other provinces, it was ISIS/Y which at times now took the offensive, as in October 2018, when it launched an attack against AQAP positions in Al-Bayda’. Again, in February 2019, ISIS/Y reported it had launched other attacks against AQAP in the same province, although these were very likely only small-scale actions. ISIS/Y also mounted suicide operations as part of its confrontation with AQAP in that province, with an ISIS/Y operative in one case striking an AQAP command post in March 2019 by detonating his explosive vest and killing ten AQAP...

182 Al-Yamani, Bayda’ al-muwahhidin, 5-7.
184 “Muwajahat bayn Al-Qaida wa’l-Dawla.”
185 “Ibid.
186 “Maarik bayn tanzhim Al-Qaida wa’l-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi Wilayat Al-Bayda’” [Battles between Al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Al-Bayda’ Province], Al-Naba’, 14 September 2018, 10.
189 For example, Nasir Al-Saqqaf, in the ISIS/Y video Athaqaltum ila al-ard.
members.\textsuperscript{192} And, AQAP, for its part, counterattacked, initiating a new round of intense armed clashes in March 2019, which resulted in the seizure of ISIS/Y positions, along with weapons and money, and the freeing of Army and AQAP personnel that ISIS/Y had been holding prisoner.\textsuperscript{193}

Fighting between ISIS/Y and AQAP continued in subsequent months in the same theater and, while operations included such classic jihadist guerrilla tactics as assassinations and suicide operations, there was also more conventional combat.\textsuperscript{194} The prominent role played by IEDs for ISIS/Y suggested that the latter’s conventional combat capabilities remained limited and that it wanted to avoid risking major clashes with stronger rivals.\textsuperscript{195} Attacks, such as the one in August 2019 on a major AQAP facility, in which ISIS/Y claimed to have killed 15 AQAP personnel, were the exception.\textsuperscript{196} According to reports, the local tribes routinely sided with AQAP, not least because ISIS/Y had apparently mismanaged its relations with them, with sources citing the foreign element among the ISIS/Y leadership as probably a contributing negative factor complicating dealing with the tribes.\textsuperscript{197} ISIS/Y also accused the pro-Hadi Army units in the area of having sided with AQAP in recent rounds of fighting, although the driving factor here, too, may have been the tribal loyalty of the personnel in those Army units.\textsuperscript{198} As ISIS/Y sources concluded, AQAP seemed intertwined with local society, with villages and tribes, as well as Army personnel, friendly to


\textsuperscript{193} “Maarik anifa wa-istinfar musallah ghayr masbuq bayn DAISH wa’l-Qaida fi Al-Bayda’ wa-tahrir 30 askari” [Intense Clashes and an Unprecedented Mobilization by ISIS and Al-Qaida and the Liberation of 30 Troops], \textit{Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni}, 26 March 2019, \url{https://ww.almashhad-alyemeni.com/129352}.


\textsuperscript{195} “Al-Hutha al-mushrikin yahshudun anasirhum bad al-khasa’ir allatihin bi l-hawun” [The Infidel Houthis Regroup Their Forces after Suffering Significant Casualties], \textit{Al-Naba’}, 19 March 2020 (hereafter “Al-Hutha al-mushrikun”); “Hilak unsurayn min Al-Qaida wa-isabat 3 akharin bi-sawlat tatfir wa-qasf bi’l-hawun li-junud al-khilafa fi Al-Bayda’” [The Death of Two Members of Al-Qaida and the Wounding of 3 Others as a Result of an Explosion and of Shelling from Mortars by Troops of the Caliphate in Al-Bayda’], \textit{Al-Naba’}, 13 December 2019, 8; and “Maqtal wa-isabat 27 min Al-Hutha al-mushrikun wa-8 murtaddin min Al-Qaida fi Qayfa bi’l-Yaman” [27 Infidel Houthis and 8 Apostate Al-Qaida Killed Or Wounded in Qayfa, Yemen], \textit{Al-Naba’}, 8 February 2020, 5.

\textsuperscript{196} “Junud al-khilafa yusaytirun ala mawaqi Al-Qaida fi Al-Humayda” [The Caliphate’s Troops Seize Al-Qaida Positions in Al-Humayda], \textit{Al-Naba’}, 30 August 2019, 4.


\textsuperscript{198} “Junud Al-Khilafa yufajjirun bi’ran mamluka li’l-murtaddin fi Qayfa wa-yuhbitun amalayat tasallul li-anasir Al-Qaida” [The Caliphate’s Fighters Blow Up a Well Owned by the Apostates in Qayfa and Foil the Infiltration Operation by Al-Qaida Members], \textit{Al-Naba’}, 21 March 2019, 6.
AQAP, which ISIS/Y admitted had at times led to the locals cutting off ISIS/Y’s main supply route.199

ISIS/Y and the Ansar Allah: A Sectarian Divide

Yet it is the Ansar Allah, of all political actors in Yemen, who have probably been the most consistent adversaries of ISIS/Y, in part no doubt as they have little choice, given ISIS/Y’s deep innate hostility to anyone who might be Shia, irrespective of political considerations. ISIS/Y considers the Ansar Allah as being mushrikun, that is, of denying the oneness of God and de facto practicing polytheism, a grave offense putting them outside the community of Muslims.200 A key element of ISIS/Y’s strategy has been to fuel sectarianism by generating strife in word and deed (such as by bombing Shia Zaydi mosques and killing Zaydi clerics) in what it portrays as a “battle for survival” and as part of a wider regional anti-Shia struggle.201 ISIS/Y has seen its targeting of the local Zaydi community not only as justified in its own right but also as a way to rally support from the Sunni community by promoting itself as the Sunni community’s defender against the Shia Ansar Allah. In fact, it promised to be more effective in that role than what it called the “political party cowards in hotels,” a clear reference to the Hadi government-in-exile, based in hotels in Riyadh.202 Indeed, ISIS/Y has assured its audience not only that God had guaranteed victory but, in unusually brutal language, also promised that it would take revenge against the Shia and “feed their corpses to the dogs so that … not a dog goes hungry.”203

Conversely, over the years, Ansar Allah forces have arrested ISIS/Y operatives and have impeded ISIS/Y incursions into areas under their control.204 In particular, ISIS/Y and the Ansar Allah sparred in the Taizz and Al-Bayda’ theaters --where ISIS/Y manned stationary observation and fighting positions-- often by engaging in conventional operations, and using conventional fire and maneuver tactics.205 (See FIGURES 8 and 9)

200 For example, as found in Athaqaltum ila al-ard.
202 A copy of the leaflet was published in “Hal DAISH fi Lahij?”
203 Ibid.
FIGURE 8: ISIS/Y personnel lay a heavy mortar against the Ansar Allah, Al-Bayda’ province, Haqq News Agency (ISIS), 10 November 2016.

FIGURE 9: ISIS/Y forces preparing to go into battle against the Ansar Allah in Al-Bayda’ province, Haqq News Agency (ISIS), 25 February 2017.

As the Ansar Allah expanded its presence in parts of Al-Bayda’ province, where ISIS/Y by 2017 was also concentrating after its setbacks around Taizz and where the front was more fluid, the two were bound to clash more frequently, all the more so as this was where ISIS/Y apparently was also
trying to put down roots by establishing a presence in several villages. Most engagements were small, such as one in September 2018, in which four ISIS/Y personnel were killed. Typically, when the Ansar Allah attacked and seized an ISIS/Y base in Al-Bayda’ in November 2018, in the process taking five of the latter’s vehicles, the Ansar Allah media characterized it as a “spectacular operation” despite the modest size of the forces involved and of the results. The tempo of such clashes intensified further in 2019, with increased efforts by the Ansar Allah to clear out ISIS/Y, apparently as part of a planned general advance into the province. Significantly, ISIS/Y had alienated even the Sunni tribes in the area, who then became more willing to cooperate with the Ansar Allah against ISIS/Y, to the latter’s indignation, as it reminded the tribes angrily that they should view ISIS/Y instead as the protector of the Sunnis.

The Ansar Allah’s August 2020 Campaign against ISIS/Y

Eventually, on 13 August 2020, the Ansar Allah launched a major operation against ISIS/Y (and AQAP) in Al-Bayda’ province. The Ansar Allah probably calculated that, since the defending forces in that part of the front were relatively weak, that was where it would be easiest to achieve a breakthrough and establish a land corridor in pursuit of what may have been their main operational objectives: neighboring oil-rich Ma’rib province and expansion into the South. In a series of bitterly-fought engagements during a week-long campaign, the more numerous and better-armed Ansar Allah forces were able to sweep aside the ISIS/Y (and AQAP) fighters and to create a breach in the front which they could then exploit, despite multiple ineffective sorties by Saudi air power intended to stop the Ansar Allah’s progress on the ground. (See FIGURE 10)
FIGURE 10: Map of the strategic corridor in Al-Bayda’ where ISIS/Y (red) and AQAP (black) had been based, Ansar Allah website, 3 September 2020.

At first, ISIS/Y denied any Ansar Allah success and sought to spin the fighting as a defeat for the latter, a propaganda tack that the Arab Coalition also adopted.\textsuperscript{211} The Coalition-controlled local Yemeni media even portrayed ISIS/Y positively as “the resistance” or the “salafi resistance” and spoke optimistically that it was on the offensive against the Ansar Allah and that it had “liberated several positions that had been held by the Houthi militia.”\textsuperscript{212} However, it soon became evident that ISIS/Y had suffered a major setback and had been driven out of the area, as the Ansar Allah were able to produce video evidence of the ISIS/Y positions, workshops, equipment, documents, and prisoners that had been taken, and claimed to have killed the ISIS/Y field commander Abu Al-Walid Al-Adnani and several other senior figures, as well as killing, wounding, or capturing a reported 250 fighters from the two jihadist groups.\textsuperscript{213} Even if the Ansar Allah may have exaggerated its territorial gains and the casualties inflicted, and if some of the six ISIS/Y “camps” the Ansar Allah claimed to have seized may have been little more than outposts, nevertheless the

\textsuperscript{211} “4 qatla min Al-Hutha al-mushrikin wa-istihdafi aliyatayn lahum” [Four of the Infidel Huthis Dead and Two of Their Vehicles Hit], \textit{Al-Naba’}, 13 August 2020, 8.


\textsuperscript{213} “Sana’ tunhi tawajud quwwat al-tahaluf fi ihda jabahat Al-Bayda’” [Sanaa Ends the Presence of the Coalition Forces on One of the Fronts in Al-Bayda’], \textit{Al-Sabah Al-Yemeni}, 18 August 2020, \url{https://alsabahalyemeni.net/2020/08/08/}; and “Hadha ma hadath athna’ maqtal amir DA‘ISH fi Al-Yaman” [This IS What Happened As ISIS/Y’s Commander Was Being Killed], \textit{Mutaba‘at}, 23 August 2020, \url{www.motabaat.com/2020/08/23/}.
operation represented a major defeat for ISIS/Y and meant what appeared to be a major reduction in its presence in Al-Bayda’ province. (See FIGURES 11 and 12)

FIGURE 11: One of the ISIS/Y positions in Al-Bayda’ taken by the Ansar Allah, Al-Khabar (Ansar Allah), 22 August 2020.


In the end, ISIS/Y had to admit its loss of territory, but claimed it had fought “brilliantly” and had resisted to the death, and blamed the Arab Coalition and the local tribes for allegedly leaving gaps
that had enabled the Ansar Allah to penetrate the front and complained bitterly that it had been left to face the Ansar Allah alone, calling that “a betrayal and the stabbing of the mujahidin in the back” and attributed the subsequent defeat only to the fact that ISIS/Y had been outnumbered and outgunned.\(^{214}\) As it was, ISIS/Y’s rigid policy toward the tribes may have played a role in the outcome, as a number of local Sunni tribes rallied to the Ansar Allah, as the governor of the province complained, again confirming the fluidity of pragmatic alliances.\(^{215}\) Eventually, the Coalition, too, acknowledged the changed situation on the ground in favor of the Ansar Allah, but various Coalition factions sought to blame other factions.\(^{216}\)

Engaging in damage control, ISIS/Y argued that, nevertheless, it had survived and that this setback just represented the beginning of a new phase of the jihad using different methods, and that it was preparing to relaunch its effort under the new conditions. In the event, many of the ISIS/Y survivors were able to withdraw unhindered and take refuge in Coalition-controlled territory in Shabwa, Abyan, and Hadramawt provinces, in a way illustrating that any group might be viewed as tomorrow’s ally in the country’s shifting power balances.\(^{217}\) Characteristically, before leaving the Qayfa area in Al-Bayda’ province, those ISIS/Y personnel blew up a local medical facility in Al-Sawmaa, perhaps as revenge for the local tribes’ lack of support.\(^{218}\) Other ISIS/Y elements, however, apparently remained in the Al-Bayda’ area, reportedly bolstered by experienced ISIS commanders coming from Syria, and, along with Yemeni government reinforcements, eventually were able to contain the Ansar Allah advance.\(^{219}\)

**Conclusions, Options, and Implications**

Although one cannot foresee how events in Yemen will unfold, based on the preceding study a number of fundamental dynamics and trends can be identified that can have a bearing on the prospects for ISIS/Y and for options for dealing with the latter.

\(^{214}\) “Junud al-khilafa awqawu nhaw 130 qatilan wa-jarihan” [The Troops of the Caliphate Inflicted about 130 Dead and Wounded], *Al-Naba’,* 20 August 2020, 4; and “La yudirruhum man khadhalahum” [They Will Never Be Harmed by Those Who Forsake Them], *Al-Naba’,* 27 August 2020, 3.


ISIS/Y: A Backwater Remnant or a Survivable Redoubt?

Yemen may well continue to constitute a redoubt for ISIS/Y in the sense that the latter may be able to carve out a sanctuary, however tenuous, for itself so that it may be difficult to eliminate completely, at least in a short time. While ISIS/Y may be a backwater in terms of the international community, for the Yemenis themselves, who are most vulnerable, ISIS/Y remains a genuine threat. Even if not able to overthrow a government, much less seize power, ISIS/Y nevertheless could still cause considerable human and material damage and play a spoiler role to undermine security and stability, even with its diminished capabilities. More so than due to military strength, the survival of such an ISIS/Y redoubt may be attributable to the obstacles that not only isolated parts of Yemen present but, even more so, due to the country’s fragmented political body politic, limited security capabilities, and the diversion of attention to other priorities.

Realistically, as of late-2020, ISIS/Y faced limited prospects, as losses suffered at the hands of more powerful local adversaries took its toll in terms of its numbers and of the areas where it could operate. Attrition suffered from arrests, firefights, and defections came not so much as the result of a pattern of sustained counterterrorist campaigns or operations, but more so by confrontations with its adversaries over competition for resources and influence. Replacing such losses in the short term will be difficult. There may be some Yemeni veterans who may still return from the Syria/Iraq theater, something Ansar Allah sources claimed was occurring during the summer of 2019, but their number would be small. And, it would be unrealistic to bring in significant numbers of foreign ISIS recruits, as blending into a closed tribally-based society like that of Yemen would be difficult. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on ISIS/Y has yet to be determined, as photos of ISIS/Y personnel in 2020 showed no use of personal protective equipment or social distancing in eating, praying, or combat operations.

And yet, although ISIS/Y may have had more limited success than AQAP, thanks in part to the latter’s pre-existing established position in Yemen, one cannot ignore the continuing ISIS/Y threat. There has long been a concern in U.S. government circles that ISIS might establish a permanent base area in Yemen. And, the Saudi ambassador to Yemen warned in 2019 that with the defeat of ISIS in Syria, the latter “might decide to go to Yemen. If we are not ready to fight them in Yemen before they enter we will find ourselves after this war fighting al-Qaeda and Da’esh.” However, this may be primarily an argument meant to justify the Saudi presence in Yemen. And, specifically, the ambassador was also arguing that building up the Saudi presence in Yemen’s Al-Mahra province—a highly unpopular move among the local population—would facilitate the post-war situation against the jihadists or, as he put it, “It’s preemptive … we are trying to prevent

Yemen from falling into the hands of Da’esh or al-Qaeda after this war.” Critics, rather, have argued that the increased Saudi military presence was intended to consolidate Riyadh’s control over Al-Mahra as part of Saudi plans for an oil pipeline to exit on the Yemeni coast in order to bypass the Strait of Hormuz and avoid any disruption to oil exports in any confrontation with Iran.

Could one see ISIS/Y and AQAP reuniting in a common cause? Even if ISIS/Y and AQAP find themselves hard-pressed, it is unlikely that, as organizations, they would reunite, especially as long as current leaders, with their history of intense personal rivalry, remain in place. The appearance of ISIS in Syria/Iraq had presented an opportunity for an alternate organizational framework and source of legitimization for a disgruntled faction within Yemen’s existing AQAP structure. Rather than genuine ideological differences, what appears to have been the catalyst for the original schism was personal rivalry within the AQAP leadership and factional considerations, as well as differences on strategy—all factors which have continued. Instead, ISIS/Y is most likely to remain as a parallel dissident wing of the jihadist movement in Yemen. That does not exclude potential tactical cooperation at lower levels between ISIS/Y and AQAP, where personnel may know each other from years past, and that has indeed occurred on occasion according to reports by Yemeni security, as in attacks against UAE-supported forces in Al-Mukalla in mid-2016 and again during the Ansar Allah offensive in Al-Bayda’ province in August 2020, when ISIS/Y and AQAP reportedly cooperated temporarily. However, over the longer term, even if weakened and with a limited capability, and the collapse of the ISIS Caliphate in the heartland, ISIS/Y leaders might have a difficult time reintegrating into AQAP. Most likely, if ISIS/Y’s fortunes ebb further, its personnel may simply return home and await better times, or some may drift individually to AQAP if the latter’s prospects seem more promising. In fact, by 2018, a United Nations report had found that “low-level ISIL [i.e. ISIS] fighters appear to be defecting to AQAP.”

And yet, despite all the setbacks, ISIS/Y has survived and may continue to pose a security threat. Indeed, a United Nations report from August 2019 seemed to evince surprise at ISIS/Y’s resilience. To be sure, an earlier United Nations report from January 2019 had suggested that ISIS/Y was no longer able to launch major attacks. However, if the comparative criterion to reach that judgment is the number of personnel involved in an attack, that may have been the wrong metric. After all, many of ISIS/Y’s deadliest attacks had been carried out by individual

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223 Ibid.
suicide bombers. ISIS/Y may well have to abandon costly semi-conventional raids, such as the November 2017 attack against the Criminal Investigations Center in Aden, in the near term but it could continue individual suicide attempts. That such operations did not cause major casualties was often due only to the absence of concentrations of human targets at the impact area or simply the element of chance. For example, a would-be suicide bomber’s device exploded prematurely in 2019 while he was driving on one of the rugged roads in Hadramawt, causing none of the intended casualties. What is significant, however, is that ISIS/Y nevertheless will keep trying despite its failures. As a case in point, in August 2019, an ISIS/Y operative driving a car-bomb struck police headquarters in Aden, killing 13 and wounding dozens, including the police chief. ISIS/Y assassinations also have continued, even in Aden itself, with well-planned targeted operations that included filming for propaganda use. The local Yemeni media by early 2020 was reporting an ISIS resurgence in Aden even in terms of organization and propaganda activity, with ISIS hymns (anashid) once again being heard in the city’s streets.

Ultimately, the Yemen War has enabled ISIS/Y to establish at least a foothold in the country. ISIS/Y –albeit less so than AQAP-- has been able to establish some relationships that may endure beyond the end of the civil war, and a 2017 United Nations report assessed that the current ISIS/Y (and AQAP) activity could have a long-term impact, as they were “laying the foundation for terrorist networks that may last for years.” Despite all its own blunders and shortcomings, thanks to Yemen’s internal fragmentation and kaleidoscopic tribal, regional, religious, ideological, and personal loyalties, and at times dysfunctional governance, indications are that ISIS/Y is likely to survive and retain some capability for activity in the future.

Looking Ahead: What Should be the Objective?

Few would disagree that the ultimate objective should be to defeat ISIS/Y and to achieve victory. However, one has to define what “to defeat” and “victory” mean in concrete terms in this situation and what measures of success to use to know when that objective has been reached, something that is not necessarily self-evident. Despite ISIS/Y’s current limited presence, it may not be
possible to eliminate ISIS/Y entirely without major systemic changes in the country’s political, economic, and social environment. It is unlikely that the hardcore nucleus of ISIS/Y can be integrated into the mainstream political system, nor that ISIS/Y can be eradicated using force, which may be hard to apply effectively due to the physical and political obstacles discussed in this study. More to the point, groups such as ISIS/Y and their ideas may be rooted in grievances that may be persistent in the country. Therefore, realistically, “victory” in the near term may entail not so much ISIS/Y’s elimination as its containment and management, to make it less lethal by eroding as much as possible its capabilities and thereby reducing the threat it represents to a level that the international community and local actors may find as an “acceptable” end state, recognizing that, like crime, it may not go away entirely. Determining what that acceptable level is, to a great extent, constitutes a subjective decision by policymakers. As for measures of success that could inform policymakers and military planners of the impact of their strategies, their thrust should be on the effect on ISIS/Y’s capabilities, especially relative to an emerging Yemeni government. Specifically, such measures of success could include the number and lethality of attacks ISIS/Y is able to launch, the absence or expansion of debilitating internal splits within ISIS/Y, evidence of ISIS/Y’s having to rethink its objectives or strategy, negative trends in recruitment and funding, and whether safehavens remain available.

Over the long term, there is no single, simple device or method to deal with the continuing challenge posed by ISIS in Yemen, which in some ways reflects the complexities of Yemen’s problems and requires a combination of approaches and methods in order to achieve progress. In effect, a broad-based strategy marshalling all the elements of power may be needed, with the military element just one component -- albeit a significant one-- of such a strategy during any phase of the continuing civil war or in a post-war situation in Yemen. At a macro level, modifying Yemen’s precarious socio-economic environment which is conducive to the existence of groups like ISIS/Y can have a positive effect in dealing more permanently with the jihadist threat. There is a long-standing consensus among Yemenis across the political spectrum that an improvement in the provision of social services and the reduction of grinding poverty are necessary if the attraction of jihadist movements is to be reversed. While socio-economic concerns may not motivate jihadist leaders, for whom religious-ideological and personal aspirations may be uppermost, such issues may be a key motivation for many of the rank-and-file personnel who follow them and without whose support ideological leaders could not implement policy or have any significant impact. As a South Yemeni political activist noted, “unemployment and deadly free time,” which he saw as the fate of the “overwhelming majority” of youth in Hadramawt province, made individuals “an easy morsel for recruitment” by jihadis. Interim President Hadi had understood as much before coming to power: “If the government fails to tackle the issue of these areas being run by armed Islamists, the latter will continue to expand, as people are actually


satisfied with their rule since they provide services to citizens including fuel and cooking gas and maintain security, and that is what everybody is looking for.”\(^{237}\) Similarly, a past Yemeni Minister of Security concluded that to reduce the appeal of jihadist organizations and to “uproot terrorism,” it was imperative to adopt a comprehensive strategy which, in addition to a military and security approach, would also include a “political, economic, educational, cultural, and media strategy.”\(^{238}\)

To be sure, in the context of the country’s structural economic dysfunctions, and what is likely to continue to be a badly fractured political establishment beset by widespread corruption, such a strategy can be expected to be costly, labor-intensive, time-consuming, and frustrating and, in the end, may be impossible to implement fully. However, taking such an initiative is necessary to make headway toward long-term stability, beginning with a major near-term humanitarian relief effort (benefiting all individuals, not only to those from select political groups or communities) and by a sustained reconstruction program to undo the damage caused by the war to Yemen’s already sub-standard infrastructure, inadequate social services, and fragile economy. Convincing the international community, and especially some of the Gulf states that have been responsible for much of the recent destruction, that a stable and secure Yemen is in their long-term interest and that that requires major funding should be a priority for the international community.

**Options for the United States: Can It Make a Difference against ISIS/Y?**

Whether the United States can make a difference in the effort against ISIS/Y and to what extent it should be involved in Yemen overall has long been a subject of debate in policy and academic circles. Given the limited capabilities and multiple unrelated objectives of the Arab Coalition and its local clients, a U.S. role may be necessary, but should remain restrained. The U.S. can provide military capabilities against ISIS/Y that are not otherwise available, both directly, that is with military operations mounted by U.S. forces, and also indirectly, by supporting regional players -- specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE (as well as some of their local clients).

Although in terms of direct involvement, the U.S. in-country presence diminished greatly after the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen in 2015, U.S. military activity in the country has continued, mostly taking the form of raids and air and naval strikes, and spiked in 2017, but has since receded to below earlier levels.\(^{239}\) Admittedly, by default, ISIS/Y long appeared to be a secondary concern for U.S. policymakers relative to AQAP and, not surprisingly, initially the focus of effort of U.S. operations was directed exclusively against AQAP as the larger and more dangerous jihadi

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grouping. Paradoxically, the initial U.S. drone and fixed-wing air campaign targeting AQAP removed a significant number of the latter’s leadership cadres, with the likely unintended consequence of facilitating ISIS/Y activity at least temporarily vis-à-vis its jihadist rival, which was no doubt diverted by its attendant leadership replacement concerns and in tracking down internal moles who enabled such strikes.

It was only in October 2017 that the first significant U.S. operations were launched against ISIS/Y, with unmanned air strikes that targeted two ISIS/Y training camps in Al-Bayda’ province. The result of the attacks was the reported elimination of some 60 combatants and the intent, according to U.S. Central Command, had been to disrupt training as well as to prevent ISIS/Y from taking advantage and filling any vacuum on the ground created by U.S. attacks against its AQAP rival.240 In fact, this type of strike was equivalent to trapping ISIS/Y into the type of large-scale engagements –in relative terms-- that ISIS/Y could not afford and such that it had always sought to avoid, given its small size. And, although not decisive, this engagement may have represented the single largest defeat up to that time in the latter’s brief history. Since then, it appears from accounts in the media, that it has been AQAP again which has been the main, or the sole, target of U.S. air strikes, with none announced against ISIS/Y.

U.S. strikes can certainly have an impact on ISIS/Y. That is, targeting ISIS/Y’s strategic center of gravity –its leadership who can make decisions and shape strategy-- through decapitation represents a direct approach that can be an effective measure to disrupt, at least temporarily, ISIS/Y’s hierarchy and command and control, and that perhaps can cause doubts and internal dissension before new leaders emerge. Whether successor leaders are more or less capable than the ones eliminated is a variable that usually cannot be controlled. Of course, it may not always be possible to reach such leaders, and a parallel indirect approach may be necessary, that is with a focus on attriting ISIS/Y’s operational center of gravity –its fielded forces and combat support infrastructure-- that enables the leadership to implement plans through such warfighting functions as recruitment, logistics, intelligence, training, and command and control, and the force structure for actual combat operations. This course of action targeting ISIS/Y’s combatants and supporters, whether through direct U.S. operations or by supporting local forces doing so, is likely to be a longer-term, piecemeal, frustrating approach, but at times it may be the most realistic option. In recent years, strike decisions have been delegated to a greater degree to U.S. combat commanders, increasing the latter’s ability to react proactively, but also highlighting their responsibility to understand fully the battle space in all its dimensions.241 That is, U.S. planners must conduct a


thorough analysis of the political, psychological, and humanitarian—as well as the purely military- effects of drone strikes or manned combat raids for each designated target to avoid unintended consequences.

At the same time, the United States should avoid a significant long-term on-the-ground commitment that might risk its being drawn in as a player in the country’s domestic political system by various local actors. U.S. policymakers and military planners at all levels should remember that other players, including regional friends, may not have the same interests, objectives, priorities, or rules of engagement as those of the United States insofar as Yemen and ISIS/Y are concerned. In particular, planners and commanders should exercise caution about determining who is actually a member or supporter of ISIS/Y, as actors in all camps—whether regional states or Yemenis—might misuse the accusation of ISIS/Y as a convenient club against their adversaries. The Hadi faction, for example, has at times claimed that all ISIS/Y are South Yemenis, but that is very likely simply a way of deligitimizing those UAE-supported South Yemenis who call for independence for the South. Yemenis have also complained that the Arab Coalition forces, and the UAE in particular, have used this allegation to intimidate and arrest local critics. The UAE media and the UAE-supported media in Yemen, for their part, have often alleged that ISIS/Y and AQAP cooperate with the Islah Party and Qatar, likely as a way to score political points overseas rather than reflecting the actual situation in all cases. The Ansar Allah, too, for propaganda purposes, can readily label their adversaries as members of ISIS/Y. This tactic of hurling accusations of being linked to ISIS (and AQAP) became especially prominent in 2019 with the onset of the bitter infighting between rivals in South Yemen, backed by their foreign patrons, as was the case of such allegations directed against the Hadi coalition by the Deputy Chief of Dubai’s Police and the Managing Director of Abu Dhabi TV, as well as by the UAE-financed press in Yemen.

**War Termination and Beyond: Ensuring a Positive Outcome in the Fight against ISIS/Y**

The Yemeni civil war has been a significant variable for future developments related to ISIS/Y. All wars, of course, must end, but how and when this war ends can have a major impact on both the present situation in Yemen and on ISIS/Y’s prospects. On the one hand, war termination may entail simply a cessation or a de-escalation of the fighting that has raged since 2015, with essentially the status quo in place. As welcome as that might be in humanitarian terms, it would

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be equivalent to just an operational pause or extended ceasefire, while not addressing the key issues of a new balance of power and the integration of all mainstream players, or a resolution of the thorny North-South issue, or accommodating the ambitions of the numerous warlords who have become key political actors. Outside players may well continue their interference, both with their support of client warlords and with a continued on-the-ground presence, even if at a reduced level. If South Yemen breaks away from the North, whether de jure or just de facto, that development is likely to engender additional instability and prolong a power vacuum, given the mutiplicity of warlords, militias, political groupings, and tribes in the South that can be expected to compete for power in a new emerging situation. In terms of ISIS/Y, such a development might present new opportunities for the latter as other players focus on each other, while the security weight of the North will no longer be directed against ISIS/Y in the South. As it was, the bitter fighting that erupted in the South in 2019 among various factions of the Arab Coalition, backed by either Saudi Arabia or the UAE, and which threatened to escalate into a full-scale civil war within the on-going civil war, already meant a reduced ability to deal with ISIS/Y.

To be sure, even the end of the war may not mean the disappearance of ISIS/Y, which can retain a niche in the country and continue to represent a threat at least at some level, mainly to local players, while it seeks to rebuild, in anticipation of further rounds of fighting. Under such circumstances, those dissatisfied with the war’s outcome or who see their war-generated funding stream ending may drift to ISIS/Y (or AQAP) in protest or out of self-interest, something made more likely by the sharper ideological coloring that has been promoted during this war by outside players such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with their emphasis on sectarianism and political ideology. On the other hand, the initiation of a political process aimed at a genuine resolution could lead to greater stability and increase the ability of a new government (weak as it might be for the foreseeable future) --as well as sub-state actors such as the Ansar Allah or individual tribes-- to refocus their attention against groups such as ISIS/Y since, at the very least, warring parties would no longer direct their energies solely against their counterparts. In addition, tribes and other belligerents will have less need of ISIS/Y as a cobelligerent, however modest that role may be even now, against the Ansar Allah or other adversaries.

In particular, the United States should exert its influence to encourage and support a realistic negotiated settlement that can end the Yemeni civil war and contribute to security and stability. In fact, America has considerable leverage, as without the support of U.S. companies and contractors neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE would be able to conduct sustained military operations in Yemen. Regional states in the Arab Coalition should be advised to refrain from their traditional policy of supporting or encouraging sub-state clients (tribes, political parties, warlords) in Yemen, a practice that has hindered the establishment of national governing institutions.

Whatever form war termination may take, the country’s security environment may continue to be unstable, as Yemen is beset by structural economic dysfunctions --massive unemployment, a “youth bulge,” diminishing water and oil resources, hunger and disease, the destruction of the infrastructure engendered by the war, reduced outlets for its labor abroad, and what is likely to continue to be a badly fractured political establishment.247 For even the possibility of a more

durable peace, the basic interests of all mainstream warring parties must be addressed as part of a political solution, and the government, economic benefits, armed forces, security, and bureaucracy must be integrated and shared in an equitable manner. This means including not only the disparate and often conflicting actors grouped within the Arab Coalition but also the Islah Party and the Ansar Allah, who represent significant parts of the country’s population and who have had legitimate grievances. The Ansar Allah, who are independent-minded and the most consistent adversaries of ISIS/Y, have domestic, rather than regional or global, objectives, and it would be mistaken to see them as just an Iranian surrogate in either ideological or strategic terms, although the war has made them require Tehran’s aid.248 Realistically, any Yemeni government—whatever its ultimate complexion— in a post-war period is likely to remain frail and of limited capability for some time to come, and will need massive immediate and longer-term aid, as well as an outside commitment to organize, equip, finance, and train an adequate security force. Despite all obstacles and potential pitfalls, a peacetime situation would still be an improvement over the wartime situation by potentially reducing the security vacuum that has enabled ISIS/Y’s activity.

**Appendix: The Yemeni Media**

During the Yemeni civil war, the local media became completely polarized, as the major warring parties, warlords, and countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar exerted their influence in their areas of control, while the media controlled by the Ansar Allah retained greater autonomy, albeit within a distinctly partisan framework. To facilitate evaluating sources, this appendix identifies the current affiliation of media outlets, although the degree of control over them may change over time or by issue. Sometimes two media outlets have similar or even exactly the same title and the same physical appearance, dating from the split at the start of the civil war, but the content easily distinguishes where the political loyalty of each lies. When Ali Abd Allah Salih was killed in December 2017, the various outlets of the media loyal to him were either shut down or taken over by the Ansar Allah or the Arab Coalition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Outlet</th>
<th>Political Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26 Sibtimbir: Sibtimbir</td>
<td>Ansar Allah, Army newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Al-Ghad: Aden Al-Ghad</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Free: Aden Free</td>
<td>pro-South independence, defunct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Hurra: Aden Hurra</td>
<td>pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Post: Aden Post</td>
<td>initially pro-UAE, later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pro-Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Time: Aden Time</td>
<td>pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Today: Aden Today</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden Al-Yawm: Aden Al-Yawm</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Arabi: Al-Arabi</td>
<td>pro-Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Ayyam: Al-Ayyam</td>
<td>pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baraqish: Baraqish</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilqis TV: Bilqis TV</td>
<td>Islah Party</td>
</tr>
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<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>pro-South independence, defunct</td>
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<tr>
<td>Huna Aden: Huna Aden</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Janub Al-Yawm: Al-Janub Al-Yawm</td>
<td>pro-Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Khabar Al-Yemen: Al-Khabar Al-Yemen</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Shahid Press: Al-Shahid Press</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khabar News Agency: Khabar News Agency</td>
<td>Salih, then Ansar Allah</td>
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<td>Taizz News: Taizz News</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Yemen: Al-Yemen</td>
<td>Salih, then pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Yemen Al-Said: Al-Yemen Al-Said</td>
<td>Salih, then pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sumud: Al-Sumud</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
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<td>Al-Masirat: Al-Masirat</td>
<td>AQAP, defunct</td>
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<td>Al-Masra: Al-Masra</td>
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<td>Al-Mawqiq Post: Al-Mawqiq Post</td>
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<td>Middle East and North Africa Monitor:</td>
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<td>Al-Mawqiq Post: Al-Mawqiq Post</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Hadi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nashwan News: Nashwan News</td>
<td>pro-Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nas Times: Nas Times</td>
<td>pro-Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Yemen: News Yemen</td>
<td>pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sabah Al-Yemeni: Al-Sabah Al-Yemeni</td>
<td>Salih, then Ansar Allah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Al-Muntasif: Al-Muntasif</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mustaqbal: Al-Mustaqbal</td>
<td>Salih, then Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Muwatin: Al-Muwatin</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nafidhat Al-Yemen: Nafidhat Al-Yemen</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabwa Press: Shabwa Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>Al-Shahid Press: Al-Shahid Press</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Ansar Allah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taizz News: Taizz News</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Al-Umana: Al-Umana</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yamaanat: Yamaanat</td>
<td>Salih, then Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamanat: Yamanat</td>
<td>Salih, then Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamaniyun: Yamaniyun</td>
<td>Salih, then Ansar Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Yawm Al-Thamin: Al-Yawm Al-Thamin</td>
<td>pro-UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen 24: Yemen 24</td>
<td>Hadi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yemeni Press Agency: Yemeni Press Agency</td>
<td>Ansar Allah</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Yemen Press: Hadi
Yemeni Press: Ansar Allah
Yemen Times: pro-Hadi, defunct

About the Author

NORMAN CIGAR retired as Director of Regional Studies and the Minerva Research Chair at the Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA. Previously, he had also taught military theory, strategy and policy, operational case studies, irregular war, and Middle East studies at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College and at the Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting. In an earlier assignment in the Pentagon, he was responsible for the Middle East in the Office of the Army’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, and was manager of the Secretary of the Army’s Intelligence Briefing, as well as supporting the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Army Staff, and Congress with intelligence. He also represented the Army on national-level intelligence issues and requirements in the interagency intelligence community. During the Gulf War, he was the Army’s senior political-military intelligence staff officer on the Desert Shield/Desert Storm Task Force. Before that, he had been in charge of the Army’s Psychological Operations Strategic Studies Detachment for the Middle East and Africa at Fort Bragg, where he supervised a team of civilian academics and military personnel producing in-depth research studies, supporting fielded forces, and interacting with the intelligence and policy communities at the national level.

His current focus is on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and on jihadist movements. He is the author of numerous works on politics and security issues dealing with the Middle East and the Balkans, and has been a consultant at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague. He has also taught at the Defense Intelligence College and was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution, George Mason University. He is the author of The Enemy Is Us: How Allied and U.S. Strategy in Yemen Contributes to AQAP’s Survival; and of Blurring the Line between Countering Terrorism and Countering Dissent: The Case of Saudi Arabia.

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