



# Terrorism Monitor

*In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror*

VOLUME VIII, ISSUE 4 ♦ JANUARY 28, 2010



Yemeni Islamist al-Zindani

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## RECLUSIVE LEADER OF HAQQANI NETWORK SPEAKS TO PRESS AS U.S. URGES HIS ELIMINATION

Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the dangerously effective and independently operated “Haqqani Network” of Taliban insurgents, terrorists and suicide bombers gave a rare interview to al-Jazeera on January 19. Based in the Miran Shah district of North Waziristan, the network’s operations straddle both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 24, 2008). During a January 21-22 visit to Islamabad, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates urged Pakistan’s political and military leadership to expand military operations into North Waziristan, a Haqqani Network stronghold (AFP, January 21).

The secretive Taliban commander revealed little about future activities in the short videotaped interview, but the occasion may have marked a decision to take a more visible role in the conflict. Despite being strongly anti-American, Sirajuddin gave an email and telephone interview to the *Wall Street Journal* last December (*Wall Street Journal*, January 20). With U.S. forces scheduled to begin withdrawal next year, Sirajuddin may be attempting to increase his political profile, though not his visibility – Sirajuddin covered part of his face with a head cloth at all times during the al-Jazeera interview. Nevertheless, at one point Sirajuddin appears to complain that his group is not receiving sufficient media attention. “The world is covering up our operations; they know well who we are. I cannot tell you anything before it happens. God willing, the day will come when they will admit who we are...”

Though there have been questions about Sirajuddin's apparent independence from the core Taliban leadership under Mullah Omar, the Taliban commander insists coordination between the various components of the Taliban is greater than ever:

Thank God, the mujahideen are getting more advanced. The war is now being dictated by them. I can guarantee you that in the future their fighting will be even better. At the beginning of this war the coordination between our fighters was useless, but now there are so many attacks that even we cannot count them ourselves. But it's still not enough. The future will show what I mean.

Perhaps in anticipation of a Pakistani crackdown, Sirajuddin recently downplayed his activities in North Waziristan, emphasizing that he was concentrating on military operations in Afghanistan's Khost and Paktika provinces (*Nawai Afghan Jihad*, November 11, 2009).

Sirajuddin Haqqani is a dominant presence in Afghanistan's Khost province. It is unlikely that the complicated operation that resulted in a Jordanian triple agent blowing up seven CIA agents and a Jordanian intelligence operative in Khost on December 30, 2009 could have been carried out without his cooperation or approval.

#### ARMORED TRAINS RETURN IN RUSSIA'S "WAR AGAINST TERRORISM"

A weapon thought by many to belong to military museums is making a return to active anti-insurgency operations in the North Caucasus: the armored train. First used for such purposes in the American Civil War, armored trains and the tactics associated with their use were most fully developed in the vast expanses of Russia, where they were used in large numbers in World War One, the Red-White Civil War of 1917-22, the Second World War and the Sino-Soviet border conflict of the 1960s. More recently, Russian armored trains were deployed to secure railway lines against Azeri nationalists during the 1990 Soviet military intervention in Baku. Now Russia's Ministry of Defense has announced the return of armored trains for use against Islamist insurgents in the North Caucasus (*Interfax*, January 5; *Russia Today*, January 5).

Building on the 1919 innovation to include a *desantniy ortryad* (raiding team) with every armored train for

offensive and defensive missions, modern armored trains include detachments of armor and infantry that can be quickly offloaded and deployed around the area of the train or sent on reconnaissance missions. This makes it difficult for insurgents to prepare ambushes or destroy sections of track without detection. In the meantime, the armored train can provide mobile artillery fire in support of infantry operations. Anti-aircraft weapons provide a defense against air attack, though this does not figure into anti-insurgency operations such as those in the North Caucasus where control of the skies is held by state forces. Tanks carried on the armored train may also be used in a secondary role as tractors in the removal of derailed railroad cars (as a result of ambush, mines, etc). During the Cold War, Russia deployed 56 RT-23 ICBM missiles (NATO name – SS-24 Scalpel) on military trains used as mobile launch pads. The last of these was decommissioned in 2005.

Russia maintains a unique formation of Railway Troops (*zheleznodorozhniki*), composed of four railway corps, 28 railway brigades and a number of military and research units under the control of the Ministry of Defense since 2004 (*Itar-Tass*, May 2, 1999). The Railway Troops are responsible for securing and rebuilding railroads in support of combat and mobilization efforts, the construction of new railways and the repair or reconstruction of rail systems destroyed by enemy forces or natural calamities. Railway troops were active in these roles in the First Chechen War of 1994-96. Shortly after the Second Chechen War began in 1999 the Railway Troops began operating an armored train to protect commercial cargo and military supply trains (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, June 10, 2008).

In the wake of continuing insurgent attacks on the railroads of the North Caucasus, Russia will return two Stavropol-based armored trains to service in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. The trains, which have been held in reserve for two years, are equipped with "special devices for the removal of landmines and heavy weapons capable of countering an attack by armed militants." Armored trains were heavily used in the North Caucasus region by both Reds and Whites during the Russian Civil War.

Bombings of Russian trains in Dagestan have become a major security problem, with some seven explosions on trains in the last six months of 2009 alone. The attacks appear to be part of a new campaign by North Caucasus Islamist insurgents to strike Russian infrastructure, including railways (see *EDM*, December 10, 2009).

However, it seems unlikely that the deployment of armored trains will be able to prevent the current tactic of placing explosives on the trains rather than mining the track.

## Yemeni Clerics Announce Mandatory Jihad Against Foreign Intervention

By Murad Batal al-Shishani

In his Friday sermon on January 15, the well-known Yemeni Islamist and U.S. designated terrorism supporter Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani called for jihad to defend Yemen in the event of a foreign military intervention. Al-Zindani noted that some American media reports said the “Yemeni regime is about to collapse and U.S. forces and Marines should intervene to protect oil sources in Yemen.” Al-Zindani considered such media reports (which he did not cite specifically) a declaration of war by the United States. Al-Zindani announced, “As soon as the enemy comes down into our land and comes to colonize us, jihad is obligatory according to our religion... This ruling is from Allah; no one can abolish it; neither king, president, commander, scholar, not anyone” (al-Jazeera TV, January 15; Ennahar Online, January 15).

Al-Zindani’s remarks came a day before the shaykh and 149 other Yemeni clerics issued a fatwa in the name of the “Association of Scholars of the Yemen” declaring that jihad is “fard ayn” (a compulsory duty) in the event of military intervention in the country, and thus rejecting any military cooperation with Washington, the use of Yemeni territory for foreign military bases, and Yemen’s commitment to any security or military agreements that are contrary to Islamic Shari’a (Al-Bawaba, January 14; *Asharq al-Awsat*, January 14). In what appears to be a reference to strikes on foreign nationals by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the fatwa also condemns the killing of innocent people, whether Yemenis or foreigners who work or live legally in the country. Furthermore, the fatwa strongly condemns the “bloodshed” in Abyan province, Shabwa province and the city of Arhab (Lahij province). [1] These last three tribal southern areas of Yemen recently witnessed several missile attacks against al-Qaeda members.

Regardless of the probability of a U.S. military invasion of Yemen, the increasing importance of Yemen is obvious from the security perspective of the United States, particularly after the foiled Christmas Day suicide attack on a Detroit-bound passenger plane, which was “prepared” in Yemen. Yemen has also emerged as a safe haven for Salafi-Jihadi militants. The growing importance of Yemen’s national security comes as the U.S. administration of President Barack Obama expresses reluctance to open another front in the “war on terror”, just as the occupation of Iraq is drawing down, and a new focus is being put on military operations in Afghanistan. U.S. president Barack Obama announced through *People Magazine* on January 10 that he had no intention of sending U.S. troops into Yemen.

However, the reaction to the Detroit incident shows that a shift in U.S. policy remains possible; until then, the United States will give a greater role to the U.S. military base in Djibouti in the fight against al-Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia. In November, 2002 the leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen, Sinan Qa’id al-Harhi (a.k.a. Abu Ali al-Harhi) was killed by a U.S. Predator drone launched from Djibouti (*Asharq al-Awsat*, January 19, 2003).

However, such a role might also be in the interest of al-Qaeda and affiliated Salafi-Jihadi groups. In contrast to the U.S. strategic vision, the Salafi-Jihadis and al-Qaeda hope to lure U.S. troops to the region as al-Qaeda’s new strategy is based on the creation of multiple safe havens instead of a single safe haven. The policy is designed to attrite the U.S. on multiple fronts, with Yemen lying in the center of these safe havens (see *Terrorism Monitor*, September 10, 2009).

The entry of the clerics in Yemen to the growing crisis, regardless of whether they are linked to al-Qaeda or not, indicates the development of an environment that is sympathetic to the growing presence of al-Qaeda. Among the factors that helped al-Qaeda to find a foothold in Yemen is their integration with the tribal structure in southern Yemen. A review of the names of those affiliated with al-Qaeda in Yemen show that a respectable number of them are from the southern tribes. The Salafi-Jihadis failed in Iraq and Chechnya, for instance, because they lost the support of their local host communities. According to the Yemeni government, al-Qaeda was in the process of appointing a parallel system of al-Qaeda “provincial governors” (much as the Taliban have done in Afghanistan) before recent air strikes on al-Qaeda leaders disrupted the process (*Asharq al-Awsat*, January 14).

Al-Qaeda's tribal alliances and the ideological convergence with local forces in Yemen are playing to the interests of al-Qaeda. This trend may be reinforced by changing security conditions as well as Yemen's unique political and socio-economic factors. Al-Qaeda considers Yemen important because, among other factors, it can serve as a base to launch attacks on neighboring Gulf States. Across the strategic Bab al-Mandaab strait there is also proximity to other Salafi-Jihadi groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia. All of these factors show that the presence of al-Qaeda in Yemen has regional and international implications and there is every prospect that the conflict between al-Qaeda and the United States will escalate there.

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Notes:

1. See the full Arabic text of the fatwa at <http://sa7t-ye.net/vb/showthread.php?t=15418>

## Saudi Military Operations along the Yemen Border Repel Houthist Incursion

By Andrew McGregor

After a two-month Saudi military offensive along the Saudi Arabia-Yemen border, the Houthist rebels of northern Yemen appear ready to abandon their brief occupation of small areas of Saudi Arabia's Jizan province. In an audiotape message, the leader of Yemen's Zaydi Shiite rebels, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, offered a ceasefire and a withdrawal from Saudi territory. However, al-Houthi warned of consequences if his offer was ignored. "If [Saudi Arabia] insists on continuing its aggression after this initiative, this gives us the legitimacy to open new fronts and to wage an open war" (al-Jazeera, January 25).

Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz rejected the offer, however, suggesting the Houthis could not be trusted. "We must remember

history when it comes to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and his people. They have gone to war with the Yemeni government on five occasions. They have also signed five agreements with the Yemeni Authorities. However, they broke those agreements after a year or two" (BBC, January 27). The Prince rejected the Houthist claim of a complete withdrawal, insisting the rebel fighters had been driven out of their positions by Saudi forces (al-Alam, January 26; BBC, January 27). Earlier this month Prince Khalid turned down a Houthist offer to withdraw on the condition that Saudis stop supporting the Sana'a government, saying, "We should not talk to infiltrators and subversives... Our talks must be with the Yemeni government" (*Yemen Post*, January 13).

Though Sana'a believes Iran is the main supporter of the six-year Houthist rebellion, Riyadh has been reluctant to join the Arab world's general condemnation of Iran as the secret hand behind the Houthist revolt. Though the claim is popular, little has been offered in the way of proof. The Saudis instead make an even more surprising claim: the Houthis are in league with al-Qaeda. According to Prince Khalid, "We have noticed it on the battlefield, but it is proven by various bodies that there are contacts and coordination between them, and that they have a common interest, which is sabotage" (Saudi Press Agency, January 23). Yemen's national security chief Ali Muhammad al-Ansi has similarly claimed the Zaydi Shi'a are working with the virulently anti-Shi'a al-Qaeda organization, while simultaneously claiming the Houthis are supported "financially, politically and through the media" by Iran (*Asharq al-Awsat*, December 13; *Yemen Post*, December 15). Yemen's counterterrorism chief General Yahya Salih has also stated "there is no doubt" Iran is supporting the Houthist rebellion (al-Jazeera, November 16, 2009). Yemen's controversial Islamist leader Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani insists that Iran is trying to "export the Shi'a ideology by force" (al-Jazeera, October 5, 2009).

Houthist rebels crossed the border into southwest Saudi Arabia in November in retaliation for what they claimed was Saudi support of Yemeni military operations against the Houthis. Fighting began after the insurgents killed two Saudi border guards and occupied several villages along the Saudi side of the border. Though Saudi military officials said their orders were not to cross the border with Yemen, the Saudis admitted their intention of establishing a ten kilometer deep buffer zone inside Yemen (Reuters, November 12).



Most of the fighting took place in the mountainous border region of Jizan, Saudi Arabia's smallest province. Fighting was especially heavy around Jabal Dukhan, where the conflict started. Saudi forces battled the army of Yemen's Imam Yahya in the same region in 1934. The terrain is well-designed for defensive warfare and the Saudis made several premature claims of victory before finally clearing the Houthis from their positions. Fighting was bitter, with 133 Saudi soldiers killed according to southern region commander General Ali Zaid al-Khawaji (*al-Riyadh*, January 21). Houthist losses are unknown, but are likely to have been significant in light of the Saudis' superior firepower. According to Prince Khalid, Saudi mountain troops have learned important lessons during the intense fighting (Saudi Press Agency, January 23). The Prince added that the slow pace of the Saudi offensive was deliberate. "Time is with us. There is no need to hurry. We could have controlled all the areas in a month, or two weeks, but we opted not to rush in order to preserve [civilian] souls" (Arab News, January 24).

Soon after hostilities began in November, the Saudi Royal Navy's French-built frigates imposed a blockade of Red Sea ports to prevent supplies from reaching the Houthis. The frigates belong to the Saudi navy's Western Fleet, operating out of Jeddah. Houthist forces made a desperate attempt to seize the Red Sea port of Maydi on Yemen's north coast in November, but were repelled by the Yemeni army (*Asharq al-Awsat*, November 22, 2009). The Saudi frigates fired on two boats they suspected of smuggling arms to the Houthis in December. After a chase with helicopters, the crews of both boats were reported to have been killed in massive explosions caused by the arms and ammunition they were carrying (Arab News, December 10). Shortly before the Houthist incursion into Saudi Arabia, ships of Yemen's navy announced the seizure of an Iranian ship (the *Mahan-1*) carrying anti-tank weapons to a port in northwest Yemen for distribution to Houthist rebels (*al-Arabiya*, October 26). Iran denied any official involvement (Fars News Agency, October 28).

The Houthis' main weapons are small arms and landmines. They have a small number of military vehicles captured from government forces, though many of these appear to have been destroyed in the fighting with the Saudis. When a single Katyusha rocket was fired at a Saudi military base, the movement felt the action worthy of an announcement (*Al-Arabiya*, November 16, 2009). On the other side, Saudi artillery joined ground attack planes of the Royal Saudi Air Force in targeting Houthist

positions and vehicles continuously throughout the conflict. In early December, Saudi frontline forces received new Swiss-built Piranha III wheeled armored vehicles and U.S.-built Bradley infantry fighting vehicles (Arab News, December 10, 2009). Saudi paratroopers have played a leading role in the fighting since it began last November, though they have not participated in any airborne operations (*Saudi Gazette*, January 25, 2010).

The Houthis claimed Saudi warplanes dropped phosphorus bombs in night raids on villages as far as seven kilometers inside the Yemen side of the border, though Saudi authorities claimed what the rebels saw was merely flares (Hamsayeh.net, January 24; AFP, November 9, 2009; BBC, November 5, 2009). The rebels have also accused government forces of using phosphorus shells, though Sana'a says it does not have any such weapons in its arsenal (Gulfnews, November 9, 2009). Earlier this month the Houthis claimed to have shot down a Saudi AH-64 Apache attack helicopter near the Saudi border town of al-Khouba, though this was denied by Saudi authorities (*Yemen Post*, January 16; Press TV [Tehran], January 16).

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently condemned the Saudi role in Yemen, saying, "Saudi Arabia was expected to mediate in Yemen's internal conflict as an older brother and restore peace to the Muslim states, rather than launching military strikes and pounding bombs on Muslim civilians in the north of Yemen" (Press TV [Tehran], January 16). Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal rejected Ahmadinejad's criticism and alleged Iran was responsible for the unrest in Yemen (Sana, January 14).

Though the Houthist rebels displayed tenacity and resilience in resisting over two months of attacks by Saudi Arabia's professional army and air force, the movement is incapable of resisting intensified attacks by Yemeni government forces engaged in "Operation Scorched Earth" while fighting off the Saudis in their rear.

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## AQIM Funds Terrorist Operations with Thriving Sahel-Based Kidnapping Industry

By Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani

Three Spanish aid workers of the Catalan NGO Barcelona Acció Solidària, Albert Vilalta, Alicia Gámez and Roque Pascual, were kidnapped somewhere between Nouadibou and Nouakchott in Mauritania on November 29 (*El País*, November 30, 2009). Four days earlier, a French citizen, Pierre Camatte, was kidnapped in Ménaka, in the eastern part of Mali (*Le Monde*, November 27, 2009). A spokesman for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Saleh Abu Muhammad, claimed responsibility for the kidnappings in an audio message sent to al-Jazeera (*Le Monde*, December 8, 2009). The Spanish government, through the voice of its foreign affairs ministry, Angelo Morantinos, gave credibility to the communiqué (ABC.es [Madrid], December 8, 2009).

French authorities did not release any comment on these kidnappings, stating only, “We are of course in contact with the Spanish authorities... We are fully mobilized... we must exercise a certain level of discretion in order to be effective.” [1] In a message delivered in early January, AQIM threatened to kill the French hostage if France and Mali did not meet the group’s demand for the release of four militants imprisoned by Mali’s authorities. The message included a call to the French public and the Camatte family to pressure French President Nicolas Sarkozy to accept their demands if they wanted the Frenchman to avoid the fate of English hostage Edwin Dyer (Radio France Internationale [RFI], January 11). A tourist kidnapped in January 2009, Dyer was murdered by AQIM in June 2009 after the U.K. government refused to release Abu Qatada, a Jordanian extremist jailed in the U.K. and one of the most prominent figures of global terrorism (*The Telegraph*, June 3, 2009).

A few weeks later, another kidnapping of Western citizens occurred when an Italian couple was kidnapped in southeastern Mauritania. 65-year-old Nicola Sergio Cicala and his wife, 39-year-old Philomen Kabouree (originally from Burkina Faso), were kidnapped on December 18 along the road from Aioun in Mauritania to Kayes in Mali (*Corriere della Sera*, December 19, 2009). AQIM claimed responsibility for this kidnapping in two separate messages. The first message appeared on

al-Arabiya TV, where a picture of the couple was shown with an audio message. The second message was posted on the Internet, where it clearly stated the kidnapping was linked to the role that Italy had in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and because of its support to the “crusade against Islam” (ANSA, December 31, 2009).

### Why is AQIM Targeting Spain, France and Italy?

These three countries are, for different reasons, major targets for terrorist groups. The first reason for the “special” attention paid by AQIM to Spain is historical. In a recent message, the group claimed its aim was to “take back al-Andalus [i.e. those parts of the Iberian peninsula under Muslim rule from the 8th to 15th centuries],” a “lost heaven for Muslims” (Andaluciainfomarción, December 15, 2009). AQIM gave the name al-Andalus to its media branch, responsible for publishing the group’s messages and videos (ABC, November 30, 2009). The myth of “al-Andalus” and the historical and psychological impact of the so-called “Reconquista” is one of the recurrent themes of jihadist rhetoric. Spain is considered to be a major rear-base for the group, as it represents a fundamental center for AQIM recruitment, indoctrination and funding. Moreover, the presence of AQIM activists is widespread in the country. Since 2001, AQIM militants have been arrested and jailed in Madrid, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, Navarra, Aragon and the Spanish-held North African ports of Ceuta and Melilla (*El País*, December 14, 2009). Ceuta and Melilla represent another important issue for AQIM, which considers them to be occupied cities. In 2008, Abdelmalik Droukdel released a message claiming it was unimaginable for a Muslim who loves Islam to talk about the Maghreb without remembering that Ceuta and Melilla are occupied by Spain (*El País*, December 14, 2009).

France is a major target for Islamist groups because of its colonial past and its integration policies, considered anti-Islamic by AQIM. Sarkozy has shown a harsh attitude toward the veil, which he has described as a “symbol of submission” at odds with the secular character of France (AFP, 23 June 2009). AQIM Amir Abu Musab al-Wadoud attacked France for considering a ban on the burka and niqab (veil) in a message delivered on the Islamic forum al-Faloja (June 30, 2009).

The Italian situation is different, but its importance for Islamist groups is increasing. It does not represent a lost territory like Spain and its colonial past did not have the same impact on these territories as that of France. Its

current military presence in Afghanistan and its support of the Anglo-American war in Iraq made Italy an important target for terrorist groups. The threat from terrorist groups to Italy is changing and Italy is now no longer only a logistical platform for organizational and funding activities, but is now a target in itself (see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 20, 2009).

#### AQIM in the Sahel Region: A Network of Terrorists and Criminals

For a long time, AQIM has had a significant presence in the Sahara desert and the semiarid Sahel region that stretches across Mauritania, Mali, Algeria and Niger.

Since the spectacular kidnapping of 32 European tourists in 2003 by AQIM's predecessor, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), rumors related to the spread of Islamist terrorism in this region have abounded. However, AQIM-related activity in countries like Mauritania, Mali and Niger remained subdued until 2008, with a few exceptions, such as the 2005 raid on Lemgheiti barracks in eastern Mauritania. Moreover, rumors concerning the worsening relationship between the head of AQIM's 9th zone of operations (i.e. the Sahara), Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and the AQIM leadership suggested that the group's main focus was on Algeria while the Sahel was regarded merely as a source of income (see *Terrorism Monitor*, May 8, 2009).

Nevertheless, AQIM's activity in this region since 2008 has expanded considerably from what were for years considered its main sources of earnings: cigarette and weapons smuggling, drug trafficking and extortion. [2] Since then AQIM has created a kidnapping industry which funds activities in other areas. The mechanism usually involves local criminal groups kidnapping European tourists (whose governments are more likely to pay ransoms to obtain the release of hostages) and then selling them on to AQIM groups in the Sahel. Part of the paid ransom then goes to the AQIM leadership to finance other operations.

This loose arrangement is carried out by a multiplicity of groups, all linked to AQIM. The most famous of these is the Moulathamoun group, headed by Belmokhtar (*El Watan*, August 1, 2007). Belmokhtar has had several disagreements with AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and acts in a semi-independent fashion. This uneasy collaboration was behind the kidnapping of the three Spanish aid workers who remain in the hands of al-Moulathamoun (AFP, 11 January 2010).

The other main group in the area is the Tareq ibn Ziyad, led by Yahia Abu Amar Abid Hammadou (a.k.a. Abdelhamid Abu Zeid), who created the group in AQIM's 5th zone of operations (northeastern Algeria) in 2003 and subsequently moved to the Sahel area. Abu Zeid, who is allegedly responsible for the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyer, is also the leader of the Talaia al-Salafiya, Nasr Aflou and Muhajiroun groups. [3] The Tareq Ibn Ziyad branch currently holds kidnapped French national Pierre Camatte. In addition, the Italian couple is in the hands of Abu Yaya Amane, a lieutenant of Yahia Abu Amar who is probably trying to exploit this abduction to mark his own territory in the Sahel region and gain operational independence from the other two groups in the area (AFP, January 11).

#### Kidnapping as a Tactic in the Sahel

There are several reasons behind AQIM's increasingly visible presence in the Sahel region and the spread of its thriving kidnapping industry:

- The weakness of Sahelian states and the ineffective control of their territory have played a major role in the development of the current situation. As demonstrated in the various kidnappings, AQIM-related groups have been able to roam across the region while encountering little or no resistance by local armed forces. Kidnappings have taken place in Tunisia, Mali, Niger and Mauritania, usually through local criminal gangs; hostages have then been moved to northern Mali, where a complex political and security scenario pitting local Tuareg tribes against the central government has allowed various terrorist groups to establish their own bases and training grounds (see *Terrorism Monitor*, January 21). In this context, Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure is trying to balance Algerian, French and U.S. pressures to step up the struggle against terrorism with the need to avoid any interference in the delicate peace process with former Tuareg rebels in northern Mali (*Liberté* [Algiers], December 27, 2009). Moreover, doubts have been raised with respect to the attitude of Tuareg tribes towards AQIM, particularly in view of Belmokhtar's close relations with some of them (*Le Jour d'Algerie*, July 21, 2009; see also *Terrorism Monitor*, January 21).

- AQIM's flexible structure in the region has led to a win-win situation where a profitable kidnapping network benefits local criminal groups, local AQIM-affiliated groups and the AQIM leadership. In this context, local criminals carry out the abductions and then sell the hostages to AQIM-affiliated groups for a profit; however, the terrorist groups then earn the highest profit, as they bear the highest risk and can extort a ransom from European governments fearful that the failure of negotiations could lead to the death of hostages, as in the Edwin Dyer case (*Liberation* [Paris], December 9, 2009).

- The AQIM leadership benefits from the visibility of these actions and probably receives part of the profit, thus offering an ideological cover and an al-Qaeda brand to these activities.

### Conclusion

AQIM's growing presence in the Sahel region and the increasing number of abductions of European tourists in Mauritania, Niger, Tunisia and Mali show that a profitable kidnapping industry has led to an increase in terrorism activity in this region. Owing to the weakness of these states and their ineffective control of the area, AQIM militants are free to move across borders and to establish their bases in the region. This situation enables AQIM to combine its ideological goals with a series of tactical advantages; terrorists can target Spain, France and Italy, all the while diversifying and increasing their revenues in order to fund other activities. Moreover, this lucrative business profits local criminal gangs, which have become almost natural allies of AQIM in the region.

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### Notes:

1. Electronic Press Briefing, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 December 2009.
2. Testimony of Dr David Gutelius before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, November 17, 2009.
3. Alain Rodier, "Note to News no. 172 – The Sahel, Playground of al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM),"

Centre Francais de Recherche sur le Renseignement, May 6, 2009, <http://www.cf2r.org/fr/notes-actualite/le-sahel-terrain-de-jeu-al-qaida-au-maghreb-islamique-aqmi.php>.

## Al-Qaeda's Purpose in Yemen Described in Works of Jihad Strategists

*By Michael W.S. Ryan*

It appears that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is currently following a new version of a classic al-Qaeda strategy. Developed by al-Qaeda's strategic thinkers, the strategy behind AQAP's latest operations is to draw American military forces into Yemen. If successful, AQAP would strengthen its position in the near term within the traditional tribal structure and potentially benefit its recruitment efforts and broaden its financial support. Such an outcome would also open another front in a strategic location, even as the United States is planning and executing a drawdown in Iraq. In light of the United States' current refusal to take this bait, we should expect AQAP to attempt further provocative operations aimed at America.

In October 2009, Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki published an article in English on a jihadi website with the title: "Could Yemen be the Next Surprise of the Season?" ([tawhed.ws](http://tawhed.ws), October 20, 2009). Born in the United States, this is the same ideologue who was linked to Major Nidal Hassan, the Fort Hood shooter, and the young Nigerian who attempted to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 en route to Detroit on December 25. Very little notice was taken of this article in the Western press initially, perhaps because Al-Awlaki gave no details and had not yet achieved his current notoriety, but he did make some telling points.

Al-Awlaki, a resident of Yemen, did not call for jihad against Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is both a Zaydi Shi'a and the long-serving secular ruler of the Republic, even though the Shi'a and secular governments are often targets of al-Qaeda. Instead, his



focus was on jihad against America and the Saudi royal family. Yemen has had a mixed relationship with al-Qaeda, ranging from intense security operations aimed at destroying the organization to periods of relative quiescence. Although al-Qaeda in Yemen has attacked government forces, its main focus has been foreign targets. [1] Al-Qaeda members based in Yemen began anti-U.S. operations over ten years ago with the attack on the USS *Cole* on October 12, 2009, in which 17 Americans were killed and 38 wounded. More recently, the group was responsible for the attempted bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on December 25, 2009. [2] The successful attack on the USS *Cole* prompted a determined campaign by the government of Yemen and the United States against al-Qaeda in Yemen, including the killing of local leader Abu Ali al-Harhi by a Predator strike in 2002. It appeared to most observers that by 2004 the government of Yemen, with American help, had rendered al-Qaeda in Yemen relatively powerless. The reemergence of al-Qaeda as the player it is today began in 2006, when 23 jihadists escaped from prison in the Yemen capital of Sana'a. Among the escapees was a former aide to Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, Abu Basir Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was later to become the leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 18, 2008). At least two former inmates of Guantanamo were among the escapees who later became local al-Qaeda leaders (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, Dec. 29, 2009).

### A Base for al-Qaeda?

Yemen presents al-Qaeda with ideal conditions in which to operate. The government is hard pressed on all sides. It is battling an insurgency by the Shi'a minority "Houthi" faction in the north along the border with Saudi Arabia. Houthi incursions into territory claimed by the Kingdom drew a sharp Saudi military response starting in November, 2009, amid near-universal Arab claims that Iran is supporting the rebellion to destabilize the Arabian Peninsula (*Asharq al-Awsat*, December 13, 2009). Unrelated to the Houthi rebellion, a simmering al-Qaeda-endorsed secessionist movement in the south presents another challenge. Yemen's economy appears to be locked in a downward spiral with declining oil reserves and a severe shortage of water. The nation is also facing massive unemployment in the context of a dramatically increasing population.

The January 2009 consolidation of the two branches of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Yemen into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was likely

a practical move, prompted by the increasing success of Saudi security forces inside the Kingdom and by consequence need to take advantage of a safe haven in Yemen (see *Terrorism Monitor*, September 11, 2009). Saudi officials became concerned about the presence of al-Qaeda in Yemen as increasing numbers of Saudi al-Qaeda members began to migrate south. After AQAP was formed, Saudi officials published a list of the 85 most wanted members of al-Qaeda, most if not all of whom were believed to be operating out of the Yemen safe haven. Meanwhile, Saudi forces continued to have success inside the Kingdom, rolling up al-Qaeda cells, arresting individual supporters and uncovering large caches of weapons. But in Yemen, AQAP had breathed new life into jihad. When AQAP leader Abu Basir Nasir al-Wuhayshi (referred to in AQAP publications as Amir Abu Basir) announced the merger, he made it clear that AQAP would target the government of Yemen as well as Saudi Arabia and America. Al-Qaeda no.2 Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri confirmed that al-Qaeda's central organization considers al-Wuhayshi the amir of AQAP and endorsed the merger (*al-Jazeera TV*, December 22, 2009).

Yemen has always been a high priority in al-Qaeda's global strategy. The strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri tried to convince Bin Laden to move al-Qaeda's central organization to Yemen as early as 1989. Although Bin Laden had long-term strategic plans for Yemen, his ancestral homeland, he thought that al-Suri's plan would be too difficult to carry out at that time because it would require the cooperation of a number of diverse Yemeni Islamist groups. [3] Like other jihadis, al-Suri thought that Yemen, because of its conservative tribal social structure, size, mountainous terrain and strategic location, would be an ideal location for jihad (see *Terrorism Focus*, February 7, 2008). Although al-Qaeda's leaders in Yemen have ordered some attacks and condemned the nation's secular government, it is likely that AQAP's intention was to stay below the threshold of activity that would incite the government to renew the kind of attacks that nearly destroyed it previously. Clearly, the Houthi rebellion and the secessionist movement in south Yemen are existential threats in a way that al-Qaeda is not. [4] It was natural for AQAP to assume that the traditionally bad relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia would allow plotting against the Saudis without triggering a strong response from President Saleh. Jihadis in Yemen have traditionally used al-Suri's writings and tapes (sometimes under the alias Khaled Zayn al-Abidin) about the jihad experience in Syria and Afghanistan as training materials and should

be well-schooled in his strategic analysis concerning the use of safe havens and the setting up of resistance fronts.

### Deciphering AQAP's Strategy

With the establishment of AQAP, the tempo of operations has increased and become more dramatic, if not more effective, in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. What is the organization trying to achieve? From al-Awlaki's article and the consistent statements by al-Qaeda over the years, we would have assumed that the ultimate goal of AQAP is the establishment of an Islamic emirate throughout the Arabian Peninsula, beginning with the withdrawal of U.S. forces, followed by the overthrow of the Saudi ruling family. Al-Suri had argued that a hierarchical structure mixing secret operations with overt propaganda operations was the source of the destruction of many jihadist organizations in the modern period. Accordingly, we might have expected the relatively modest AQAP organization to encourage clandestine operations inside Saudi Arabia and restrict its operations in Yemen to a steady stream of polemic and only occasional attacks on Yemeni forces. When AQAP stepped forward to claim the attempted Christmas bombing of Flight 253, al-Wuhayshi was deliberately painting a target on himself and AQAP for the United States. He surely would have expected the government of Yemen to bow to American pressure to take strong measures against AQAP. Yet, al-Wuhayshi changed the game and dramatically increased the risk to himself and his organization. [5]

AQAP's actions only make sense if the group is following the doctrine found in Abu Bakr al-Naji's *Idarat al-Tawahhush* (The Administration of Savagery). [6] In al-Naji's thinking, the Afghan jihad defeated the Soviet Union, not by driving its forces out of Afghanistan, but by drawing them in until they exhausted their ability to fight and the Soviet economy collapsed. Al-Naji's doctrine, drawn from the Afghan experience, is based on a simple formula: enrage the United States so that it oversteps local security forces and engages directly with local jihadis, which in turn incites other Muslims to join the fight against the "occupying" power, thereby increasing al-Qaeda's strength and prestige. The strategy assumes that local Muslims will have much greater staying power than the United States because they can fight so much more cheaply and have a greater tolerance for casualties. Another strategist who became prominent after al-Suri's arrest, Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah, has emphasized the importance of jihadists

working closely with the local Muslim populations in whose sea they must swim and upon whom they depend for recruitment, protection, and financing. [7] Therefore, al-Qaeda operatives should avoid killing Muslim civilians in general attacks against buildings or market places and should also avoid creating scandals by using brutal methods such as videotaped beheadings. Hakaymah, like al-Suri, argues that individual attacks unconnected to a central organization are the best tactic when the jihadist group is not in a position to take on the local government.

If AQAP's intention is to start its attempt to create the Islamic Emirate of the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, the Christmas attack may have been intended to draw U.S. forces into Yemen, as al-Naji's doctrine recommends. When a jihadist organization is facing "occupying forces" the strategy calls for setting up a front in a remote area and fighting the logistically strained Western forces with the full support of the local populace, which is expected to be inflamed by the foreign presence. A statement signed on January 14 by 150 Yemeni clerics that called for jihad if any party invades the country appears to support the notion that AQAP is following al-Naji's prescription and taking advantage of al-Hakaymah's recommendations (al-Bawaba, January 14; *Asharq al-Awsat*, January 14). One cannot help but think that al-Qaeda's leadership would welcome another American entanglement in addition to Iraq and Afghanistan.

### Conclusion

Days prior to the Christmas Day attack, AQAP's leadership stated that they are fighting America, not the Yemeni military (al-Jazeera TV, December 22, 2009). With President Obama having stated that the United States will not send troops to Yemen, it seems that AQAP will be fighting Yemeni security forces exclusively, albeit with American technical help. President Saleh's offer to talk to al-Qaeda "if they lay down their weapons and denounce violence" was basically an offer to talk to AQAP if they stop being al-Qaeda, a statement framed to sound reasonable without in any way constraining Yemen's military forces from attacking AQAP. Unless President Saleh's forces are extraordinarily successful, however, we should expect al-Qaeda to stage more provocative attacks against U.S. citizens and interests outside Yemen, perhaps using American citizens as foot soldiers. Yemen is not the new Afghanistan. Instead, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are all players in the new phase of al-Qaeda's adaptive strategy aimed

at exhausting U.S. patience and resources. At this stage, however, AQAP is still relatively small and vulnerable to local forces.

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#### Notes:

1. In August 2009, AQAP forces attacked Yemeni military forces in Marib. See NEFA Foundation for translation of AQAP communication about this attack. <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/AQIY%20battle%20in%20Mareb.pdf>.

2. In addition to the failed attack on flight 253, Abdullah Hassan Asiri failed to kill Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (August 28, 2009 ); Saudi Arabian forces also announced killing two would-be suicide bombers on the border with Yemen (October 13, 2009). For other highlights of the past decade see: <http://www.aawsat.com//details.asp?section=4&article=553064&issue no=11372>.

3. See Jim Lacey (ed.), *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2008, pp 145-54.

4. In January 2010 the chairman of the board of directors of the Yemen News Agency repeated the accusation that Iran is supporting the Houthis and stated that al-Qaeda cannot pose the same level of threat as the northern rebellion. <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news203619.htm> .

5. An audiotape allegedly recorded by Osama bin Laden appeared to claim responsibility for the attack, though not explicitly. The authenticity of the message has not been confirmed (al-Jazeera, January 25).

6. In January 2010 the chairman of the board of directors of the Yemen News Agency repeated the accusation that Iran is supporting the Houthis and stated that al-Qaeda cannot pose the same level of threat as the northern rebellion. <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news203619.htm> .

7. A translation of this work in full may be found at <http://www.tawhed.net/c.php?i=21> .

8. See Jim Lacey (ed.), *The Canons of Jihad*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2008, pp.147-161.