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Yemen's Civil War Protagonists: A New Leader of Al Qaeda?

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

Synopsis

In Yemen's civil war, the emergence of Qasim al Raymi as the leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been accompanied by its tactical victories in southern Yemen. However the civil war is likely to end with a decisive victory over the Houthis by forces of the current president.

Commentary

YEMEN IS engulfed in a civil war that pits current president Abdul Hadi and his army against former president Abdullah Saleh who is allied with the Houthis, a Shi'ite rebel group. There are also other groups that are jostling for power in the unfolding melee. These include the Hiraq Al Junubee which has been fighting for a separate state in the south of Yemen, and the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia.

AQAP had taken control of the town of Mukalla in the Hadramouth region as soon as the war started in April 2015. This development has turned the AQAP into one of the most successful franchises of AQ in the period after ISIS' declaration of a self-styled Caliphate in June 2014. In response to the loss of control of Mukalla to AQAP the United States has stepped up drone strikes targeting its top members. Recently, in June 2015, it killed Nasser Al Wuhayshi, AQAP's leader and second in command of AQ central, effectively creating a lacuna in the group's leadership. The vacuum has since been filled by Qasim al Raymi.

The new leader

Raymi has been AQAP's military commander since its inception. He was responsible for a suicide bombing in Mareb, Yemen that killed eight Spanish tourists, and the underwear bombing attempt of 2009 by a Nigerian undergraduate of a London university in a plane flying over Detroit, America. This man was also instrumental in smothering semblances of sympathy from within AQAP, of the ISIS and had staved off attempts on the part of AQAP elements from swearing oaths of fealty to it. His insistence that AQAP fighters remain loyal to the AQ despite its waning salience vis-à-vis ISIS is an indication of his influence in the AQ.

Raymi has made clear his intentions by offering his pledge of allegiance to Ayman al Zawahiri and has renewed the group's singular mission to attack US and its interests. Although he has not been

seen to openly fraternise with AQ Central's higher echelons, Raymi has been posited as being the brains of Al Qaeda's operations from that region.

Increasing operations

Two recent developments create an impression of AQAP's increased strength. The first one is AQAP's acquisition of key districts in Aden which is an important area in the southern region due to its location and access by sea. While they have let people walk freely in the city, many residents anticipate that the group is waiting for an opportune moment to take complete control of these areas and implement the Sharia. The group has leveraged on anti-Houthi sentiments to win over Sunni recruits as well as ally itself with the tribes who see the Houthis as enemies.

The second development is the release of the 14th Issue of the Inspire magazine, an AQAP publication. The content of the 88-page magazine includes a call for lone wolf attacks in America, further amplifying Raymi's intentions to focus attacks on America. The group has published the names of some influential businessmen and personalities from the business world that it wants to target, including the likes of Warren Buffet, Michael Bloomberg and Ben Bernanke. It further supplemented this by dispensing tips on how to conduct assassinations.

Circumstantial support

There is reason to believe that it is the disorder arising from the civil war rather than its own strategic prowess that gave the AQ group these breaks. In terms of its regional control of Mukalla and Aden, the war has created an anti-Houthi fervour that has generated sympathisers who have come out in open support for its cause to fight the Houthis. This stands in contrast to peace time reactions to the group as most locals of the southern region – their place of activity -- do not look upon them favourably. If the war ends decisively against the Houthis, then al Qaeda would no longer be able to easily exploit this hostility against the Houthis.

On the second front, the recent publication of the Inspire magazine is actually a commemoration of the 9/11 attacks instead of being in conjunction with Raymi's ascent. Besides, the magazine's influence, like the AQ, is waning. This can be for two reasons. Firstly, the growing popularity of ISIS among the younger generation of jihadists and the ease of access of its magazine Dabiq. And secondly the Inspire magazine is published irregularly and infrequently. On the other hand, Dabiq has published 11 issues in just over a year since 2014.

Clutching at straws?

While there may be reasons to believe that AQAP may have recently become more active, a deeper look at this shows the group's gains are more circumstantial than due to the new leader's strength. In fact, some of the advances they made in terms of gaining territory were achieved well before Raymi came to power.

The fact that he was also serving his predecessor as a planner of missions points to an increased burden on him to deliver on AQAP's strategic goals. Furthermore, if the civil war comes to an end in Abdul Hadi's favour – a likely prospect with his recent conquests of Ma'arib (a Houthi stronghold) – AQAP's outreach efforts will be seriously curtailed. Apart from this, if the prevailing existence of lawlessness can be tackled, the group will be clutching at straws in its fight for territory.

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