

The Failing Islamic State Within The Failed State of Yemen

By Elisabeth Kendall

Abstract

This article explores why Islamic State has failed to gain significant traction in Yemen despite conditions on the ground that appeared, superficially at least, to be conducive to its expansion. Four main reasons are posited: its overt brutality and indiscriminate attacks; its inability to rival al-Qa'ida's deep roots and territorial hold; its failure to find culturally nuanced ways of appealing to locals as well as the difficulties faced by foreign fighters in both reaching and integrating in Yemen; and its arrogant and alienating leadership style. The article next looks at Islamic State's challenges and weaknesses in Yemen by analysing both the revelations of defectors and its own propaganda. Despite some early support from inside Saudi Arabia, Islamic State lacked charismatic leaders who inspired broad loyalty and respect and was well into decline by 2016. Nevertheless, Islamic State media continued to project a magnified image of its presence in Yemen, possibly assisted by several false flagged attacks. Finally the article unravels the conflict that erupted between Islamic State and al-Qa'ida in mid-2018. The evidence suggests that the conflict is linked to local territorial and power rivalries and may have been provoked by external actors intent on sowing rifts inside Yemen's jihad. Looking ahead, Islamic State and al-Qa'ida are unlikely to merge formally, and both groups will weaken in the short-term. Al-Qa'ida retains the upper hand but there are some signs that Islamic State may be trying to develop a more 'authentic' image in Yemen. For jihadist foot soldiers, however, both labels may be becoming less relevant. In the long-term, the prospects for jihad look more promising. Either the current war persists, providing favourable conditions for jihad groups to thrive, or a peace deal is reached, which will inevitably result in disillusioned sectors of the population with whom jihad groups might make common cause.

Keywords: Islamic State in Yemen, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, recruitment, terrorist group rivalries

Introduction

Yemen's rugged topography, rampant corruption[1] and persistent conflicts[2] have long made it an attractive hub for militant jihadists, who have been operating successfully there ever since the 1980s.[3] The Islamic State's attempt to gain ground in Yemen might therefore have been expected to succeed, particularly given the ongoing instability following Yemen's popular uprising in 2011,[4] a National Dialogue which ended in 2014 without solving Yemen's most divisive issues,[5] growing sectarianism generated by the advance of Houthi rebels vocally supported by Shi'ite Iran in 2014, and the chaos of all-out war from 2015. Yet despite early successes in attracting both new recruits and al-Qa'ida defectors, Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) quickly lost momentum, and it never held territory. This article begins by identifying the reasons behind ISY's failure to gain traction. Next it examines ISY's recent challenges and weaknesses, such as defections, the need to retreat, and the increasing irrelevance of the global Islamic State label as the group's character, aims and focus in Yemen become more parochial. It then analyzes the eruption of violent conflict between ISY and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2018 and questions the extent to which this may be harnessed to local rivalries and/or stirred by external actors. Finally, it concludes by looking ahead to how ISY may be evolving and the possible circumstances that may enable it to resurge.

Why Did Islamic State Fail to Take Root in Yemen?

The Islamic State officially announced its expansion into Yemen on 13 November 2014, following Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's acceptance of an oath of allegiance sworn to him by "Yemen's mujahidin" in an audio recording. For a brief period, ISY expanded. Its key youth recruiter and coordinator for Hadramawt, Abu Karam al-Hadrami, opened hostels and managed the accommodation, everyday needs, and movements of new recruits.[6] ISY benefitted from the outbreak of war in Yemen in 2015 as it was able to situate the conflict with the Houthis, who are aligned to a limited extent with Iran, as part of a jihad against Shi'ite "apostates".

In this, ISY was inadvertently helped along by the rampantly sectarian narrative emanating from Gulf states. In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni Arab countries intervened militarily in Yemen to contain the perceived influence of Shi'ite Iran and restore the internationally recognized government toppled by the Houthis, who are largely adherents to the Zaydi branch of Shi'ite Islam. This sectarian framing of Yemen's war fitted perfectly into Islamic State's own highly polarizing narrative of true believers versus deviants, pitting Muslims against Muslims. Given these favorable early signs, why did the Islamic State fail to take root in Yemen?

There are four main reasons why nascent support for ISY ebbed away. First, its overt brutality and indiscriminate attacks alienated Yemenis. One of its earliest operations was a coordinated attack in Sana'a in March 2015 using four suicide bombers. They targeted two public mosques, killing or injuring a total of nearly 500 Yemenis. Although the mosques were tenuously linked to the Houthis, blowing up praying Muslims in public places of worship was too much even for al-Qa'ida. AQAP vehemently denied any link to the attacks and reaffirmed its own policy of avoiding targeting public places where innocent civilians might be harmed.[7]

Second, AQAP had deeper roots than ISY and was able to take quick advantage of the war to exploit the security vacuum left by the absentee government that had fled to Riyadh. As war raged in Yemen's west, AQAP set to work in Yemen's east. It coordinated recruitment stations, playing on southern fears of a northern takeover, staged a jailbreak to release imprisoned mujahidin including Khalid Batarfi, one of its most charismatic ideologues,[8] robbed the central bank and seized state military hardware. Within a month, by April 2015, AQAP was operating its own de facto state out of the eastern coastal capital of Mukalla. For young men seeking higher purpose and keen to help along a nascent caliphate, al-Qa'ida was the obvious choice in Yemen, not Islamic State.

Third, ISY did not integrate well with local communities or tribes. It failed to address local grievances through development programs, something at which AQAP had been adept during 2015 and 2016.[9] Nor did it communicate in locally attuned ways. When this author showed tribesmen in eastern Yemen ISY's first video announcing its arrival in Yemen,[10] the locals looked on bemused, unimpressed by the matching uniforms, coordinated combat moves, odd accents and unwieldy way in which the men had tied their headscarves. Even after ISY retreated to settle in an area of al-Bayda' close to the front lines with the Houthis from around October 2016, it apparently struggled to attract strong support among tribes. Judging by the names of the 49 martyrs announced by ISY for Wilayat al-Bayda' during 2018, no more than a handful were local to al-Bayda'. The greatest single source of martyrs (19%) was Ta'izz, a hotbed of radical Salafi jihadi activity and an active battle front with the Houthis.

ISY's progress in Yemen has also been hampered by the difficulties foreign terrorist fighters faced in trying to reach and integrate in Yemen. Yet its die-hard aspiration to attract foreign fighters for Yemen's jihad was still in evidence in a May 2018 video. This included a call to young men to "come forth to your pinnacle, come forth to your majesty, come forth to what will bring you new life" and cut to footage of UK police manhandling Muslims and of refugees walking along a European motorway.[11] Nevertheless, only two of the 49 ISY martyrs referred to above were from outside the Arabian Peninsula and both of these were from Africa not the west.[12] AQAP's own policy towards foreigners speaks to the challenges of integrating foreigners into Yemen's jihad. It explained that it preferred to exclude foreigners owing to their more extreme outlook and the attention that they draw both domestically and internationally. AQAP claimed in 2017 to have had only five foreigners in its ranks during the entire previous five years.[13]

It is possible that this wariness was informed by experience, for Yemen's jihad had received many foreigners over the years. In the mid-1990s, jihadists from Ayman al-Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad attempted to regroup in Yemen following a harsh crackdown in Egypt. In this, they were tacitly supported by the regime of former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, at least as long as he found them a useful foil in his fight against

southern socialists in Yemen's 1994 civil war.[14] More recently, from the mid-2000s, the arrival in Yemen of American-Yemeni preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi (d. 2011) prompted at least some other western would-be jihadists to follow.[15] Several foreigners who trained with AQAP have become notorious, including the British-educated Nigerian who tried to bring down an airliner over Detroit in 2009, the French brothers of Algerian descent who carried out the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris in 2015 and the Danish radical Morten Storm, who reportedly went on to become an undercover intelligence agent 2006-11.[16] In general, however, Yemen's jihad has been a largely local movement. Although President Hadi in 2014 claimed that 70 per cent of AQAP were foreigners, he may simply have been trying to deflect the blame for Yemen's jihad problem; most of the hundreds killed in a major military crackdown in 2014 were in fact Yemenis.[17]

Fourth, ISY's leadership style was considered arrogant, bossy and disrespectful. By the end of 2015, evidence began to emerge of serious rifts within ISY. A letter purporting to be from 70 ISY members declared their refusal to operate under the command of their appointed leader, owing to his violations of Sharia and oppressive treatment of the rank and file, although they reaffirmed their allegiance to the caliph himself. [18] Their complaints were thrown out by ISIS central office, but two weeks later a further 31 ISY members backed up their denunciation of the ISY leader. It is significant that over 90 per cent of the signatories bear names that clearly identify them as Yemeni.[19] Details of 15 legal cases brought against the ISY leader by its Yemeni rank and file appeared on Telegram channels in July 2016. These specifically named the ISY leader as Abu Bilal al-Harbi, a Saudi national whom they accused of corruption and abuse of power. Al-Harbi must eventually have been killed because laments vowing to avenge his death were circulated by ISIS loyalists in 2017.[20]

ISY's Challenges and Weaknesses

Many of those who initially joined ISY ended up defecting to AQAP as leadership issues persisted. In November 2017, pro-AQAP channels celebrated "breaking news" of "many" ISY fighters defecting to AQAP after suffering mistreatment for having questioned their leaders' irreligious behavior.[21] The fact that US air strikes had obliterated two ISY training camps in al-Bayda' just two weeks earlier,[22] following ill-judged ISY media posts revealing clearly locatable features of the camps,[23] may also have made AQAP look like a more attractive option. More defectors allegedly followed in 2018. Allegations by four ISY defectors published on pro-AQAP channels reveal insights into the continuing challenges faced by ISY in maintaining the loyalty of its fighters. They tell of ISY lock ups in which those who requested to visit family or transfer to other fronts were imprisoned and tortured. This had the effect of horrifying other recruits such that "dozens" were seeking to escape.[24] A further defector criticized ISY leaders for irreligious acts, such as declaring whole local populations apostates, aligning with drug lords in the world of organized crime, and arguing amongst themselves over girls. He also complained of deception, recounting how ISY would film videos in Hadramawt pretending it was Shabwa.[25] Naturally, relying on AQAP sources for such accounts must be treated with caution as they may be selective and exaggerated, but it seems fair to conclude that ISY is making little headway in Yemen.

Several important clues about the operations of and challenges faced by ISY can be derived from the biographical eulogy that ISIS released in May 2018 for Abu Karam al-Hadrami, ISY's key youth recruiter and coordinator.[26] First, ISY was not as well funded as provinces in the ISIS heartlands of Syria and Iraq. Abu Karam had asked to leave Yemen to join ISIS in Syria since this would be more "prosperous" for him. Second, ISY had support from inside Saudi Arabia. Abu Karam was radicalized inside a Saudi prison, then supported financially and guided to Yemen from Saudi. Third, ISY lacks capable and charismatic people. Abu Karam was persuaded to stay in Yemen, and to delay the martyrdom operation he allegedly longed for, owing to an urgent need for men like him. ISIS clearly saw his value, writing "What made Abu Karam distinct was his cheerful face, big heart and fine reputation, together with being blessed by abundant patience. He gained the confidence of everyone who sat with or spent time with him." Fourth, Hadramawt was an early ISY hub since it was receiving recruits in large enough numbers to require Abu Karam to open hostels and manage the

accommodation, everyday needs and movements of ISY fighters before he rose to become responsible for logistics between ISY's provinces. Fifth, after a brief period of expansion, ISY began to decline (probably in 2016). Abu Karam "and his brothers" withdrew to the Qayfa area of al-Bayda'. His role changed from being ISY's cross-Yemen coordinator to serving as a water-carrier for ISY fighters on the al-Bayda' front.

Thus ISY's foothold in Yemen shrank as it all but retreated to a rugged corner of north-west al-Bayda', where it allegedly used intermarriage as an integration strategy.[27] This shift likely began circa October 2016 when ISY's operational claims indicate that it was becoming more active there. The Hadramawt branch of ISY must have decamped to al-Bayda' by Summer 2017 at the latest.[28] ISY tried to consolidate and expand in al-Bayda', setting up two training camps. The first, the Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani camp, was announced in December 2016 and was specifically designed to graduate *inghimasiyyun*, or suicide fighters.[29] This was soon followed by the Abu Muhammad al-Furqan camp, which, as well as training suicide fighters, provided more sophisticated weapons training including for heavy weapons and night operations.[30] Sniper classes also followed, [31] while suicide fighters were indoctrinated during 50-day courses in Sharia law, manners and morals. ISIS central media reported a gushing recruit enthusing that "We find in the courses the meaning of true brotherhood, which represents a living reality and not just passing talk. You find one brother advising his brother, another washing his clothes, the third treating him, the fourth making his bed for him." [32]

ISIS media thus made ISY look like a growing concern in al-Bayda'. AQAP, which was also operating in the Qayfa region, provides an alternative perspective. After ISY released an article crediting its fighters with "repelling the greatest Houthi attack" in the Qayfa region,[33] AQAP formally challenged ISY's claims to be seriously engaged in battling Houthis.[34] A prominent ISY defector also accused ISY of exaggerating its presence and effect and of being more interested in photo shoots than fighting. He criticized ISY for wasting suicide bombers on pointless operations, picking soft targets and perpetrating acts "devoid of religion, morals and benefit".[35] According to his estimate, approximately 120 ISY fighters had congregated in Qayfa, but by April 2017 their number had dwindled to around 70.[36] Successful US air strikes on ISY's two training camps in October 2017 further decimated its ranks.[37]

ISIS media is adept at magnifying its presence and disguising its decline. A fine example is the spin deployed in the martyrology for ISY coordinator, Abu al-Karam, who was killed in April 2018. He had aspired to become a suicide bomber driving an explosives-laden car but was persuaded to defer this ambition. Allah rewarded him with "the best death given to a mujahid: carrying water whilst reciting Allah's book".[38] This placed a heavy spin on the reality, which was dying accidentally after being hit by a Houthi rocket whilst carrying water to the rag-tag remnants of a failing group relegated to a Yemeni backwater and struggling to endure.

To the outside world, Islamic State has often looked stronger than it is in Yemen. Its operations were usually headline-grabbing and its propaganda was slick and professionally produced relative to that of AQAP, especially in its early days. But in reality, AQAP undertook roughly ten times as many operations in Yemen as ISY during 2016 and 2017. ISY may also have been promoted, or at least used as a false flag for disruptive and/or politically motivated attacks, by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. It may not be a coincidence that activities attributed to ISY's Wilayat Aden-Abyan in the southern capital of Aden suffered a noticeable downturn in the period immediately following Saleh's death on 4 December 2017 at the hands of his erstwhile allies, the Houthis. The occasional videos produced in the name of ISY's Wilayat Aden-Abyan differ markedly from those of Wilayat al-Bayda'. They tend to be more professionally produced, display greater military prowess, feature larger scale operations, and naturally focus on targeting southern military and administrative personnel rather than Houthis.[39] Internal ISY communications were also dismissive of activities flagged to ISY in Wilayat Ta'izz. ISY supporters insisted "everyone knows there is no official presence of the Islamic State there . . . just a small band of deviators and rebels." [40]

Internecline Jihadist Conflict: AQAP versus ISY

A bloody conflict erupted between ISY and AQAP in July 2018. The conflict was limited to north-west al-Bayda' and may be linked to local disputes and rivalries, although it is important to understand that alignment with certain individuals or pockets within tribes does not implicate entire tribes.[41] The fighting was sparked by ISY capturing a group of 13 AQAP mujahidin on their way from Yakla to the Houthis battlefront in Upper Qayfa. In a video that ISY released of the captives, only half wore beards, which suggests that they were a mix of AQAP and tribal fighters.[42] AQAP considered this "a declaration of war", the final straw in a long list of ISY provocations. AQAP complained that ISY had pitched camp right behind their own camp, ripped open their tents screaming "takfir", thus declaring them apostates, and prevented them from passing through ISY checkpoints more than one at a time. AQAP vowed that its "mujahidin, together with the proud tribes, will continue to exterminate them" until they start to behave reasonably.[43] The nature of these provocations are more redolent of local territorial and power rivalries within al-Bayda' than of an ideological showdown between two heavyweight jihadist groups battling for supremacy.

This conflict between AQAP and ISY shows no signs of abating. Slanging matches abounded on encrypted social media channels, with slurs such as ISY sentencing a recruit to 80 lashes for gobbling four cans of tuna and threats such as "Don't moor your little [ISY] fishing boat between [AQAP] ships and steamers, O Kharijite!".[44] ISY released a puerile video calling AQAP liars and accusing them of starting the conflict in collaboration with the Yemeni army. The video paraded images of the AQAP captives, insisting they were still alive, then listed 13 of ISY's own fighters whom it claimed AQAP had killed.[45] ISY also released an unconvincing video of an alleged AQAP defector criticizing AQAP for working with the army and for preaching in its mosques that ISY is the real enemy rather than the Houthis.[46] Shortly afterwards, AQAP released a video featuring four ISY recruits whom it had captured. One explains on camera how they had been specifically tasked with oppressing certain tribes in the Qayfa area.[47] More armed clashes have followed. Since ISY consolidated into a single Yemen province in late September 2018 until the end of that year, 69 per cent of ISY's claimed attacks were against AQAP and only 31 per cent against Houthis. Thus ISY's trajectory is now more focused on battling AQAP than targeting Houthis.

AQAP is no longer holding back in its response. It claimed to have killed 12 ISY fighters in a six-hour overnight battle in early November as revenge for ISY launching rocket propelled grenades at a house in Lower Dhi Kalib. A few days later, ISY claimed to have killed 10 AQAP in a 10-hour battle. In a sign that the battle is escalating, pro-AQAP channels responded by circulating a warmongering poem, chanted in a chillingly discordant style, which included vengeful lines such as: "A harsh and painful response is coming / From men of religion and folk who defend / Our swords are drawn, blood for blood".[48] These ongoing clashes, including the targeting of a residential village, at a time when both groups share the pressing overarching mutual jihadist goal of battling Houthi 'infidels' suggests that local rivalries may be attaching themselves to militant jihad (and vice versa).

There is also a possibility that the internecline jihadist fighting has been stirred by *agents provocateurs*. The nature of the irritations listed above and others, such as ISY disrespectfully driving through AQAP checkpoints at high speed or deliberately stirring up problems in AQAP areas,[49] seem designed to provoke conflict at precisely the time when there was a real risk that the two jihad groups might start to blend. Just a month before the conflict erupted, AQAP's Khalid Batarfi revealed that AQAP's relationship with other Islamist groups was at its best yet.[50] This seems credible. After all, by 2017, both ISY and AQAP were under severe pressure from counter-terrorism operations, so could find solidarity in adversity; both were managing to co-exist in the same region of al-Bayda'; both were focused on the same Houthi enemy and ISY had largely ceased perpetrating the kind of headline-grabbing attacks with high civilian death tolls which AQAP hated; many AQAP commanders, some vociferously critical of ISY, had been killed in US drone strikes; and ISY could no longer criticize AQAP's failure to implement Sharia law since AQAP no longer governed territory. It would thus have made good sense for them to combine forces.

There is some evidence that creating rifts inside Yemen's jihad was a conscious aspiration of regional

intelligence agencies. One of the seven major spies outed by AQAP in August 2018 revealed that he had been recruited by Saudi intelligence specifically to start a fake jihad group in Yemen to degrade AQAP. He confessed that he had found this remit too difficult so joined AQAP to disrupt from the inside instead.[51] This at least raises the possibility that there may have been others who succeeded under the guise of ISY. AQAP pointed out in a video that they had been successfully focused on their mission “until the Islamic State organisation appeared and tried to steer [them] off course, behaving in ways that serve enemy interests.” The video featured ISY recruits captured by AQAP explaining how they had been compelled to attend a course that focused specifically on declaring AQAP apostates.[52] A further video in October 2018 featured sobbing operatives confessing that they had been sent to infiltrate AQAP to exploit rifts, stoke conflict, sow suspicion and divert the mujahidin from their mission, and that they were told this was higher priority than merely gathering information for targeted assassinations.[53] Of the eight spy tasks AQAP media identified based on interviews with unmasked spies, the top four all related to stirring discord inside Yemen’s jihad movement.[54]

Naturally, spy confessions must be treated with caution. However, these confessions accord with the reality of AQAP being severely degraded by accurate drone strikes which must have been based on inside information. In some of the early confessions, the spies appear remarkably at ease, wholly unremorseful and even proud of their prowess as they describe specific examples of drone strikes they initiated.[55] This gives the impression that some at least thought they were speaking to a trusted contact, and we do know that AQAP commissioned the documentary style videos, which are considerably better produced than the AQAP norm, from an external professional who was likely unknown to them from within the jihad movement. [56] Other confessions were clearly filmed under duress, with distressed spies demonstrably remorseful for their acts of betrayal and the deaths they had caused.[57] In all cases, the spies provide convincing details of how they were recruited and the methods they used to elicit their jihadist colleagues’ locations, place trackers, photograph targets, record conversations and communicate information at speed to their handlers. On balance therefore, the testimonies may be considered largely credible.

Conclusion: Where Next for ISY?

The uptick in ISY’s martyr claims since March 2018 would indicate that it has managed to replenish its ranks to a limited extent since US air strikes on its training camps in October 2017. Although its main centre of operations in Yemen is now Wilayat al-Bayda’, since September 2018 it has referred to itself under the consolidated name “Wilayat al-Yemen”. This change was designed to fall in line with the name consolidation adopted by ISIS for its other provinces worldwide and does not indicate a broader presence inside Yemen.

AQAP continues to be the strongest jihad group with the deepest roots in Yemen, but it now seems unlikely that ISY will blend into it given the current blood feud between them. There is, however, a certain amount of fluidity between the groups. There are indications that at least some jihadist foot soldiers in Yemen consider the al-Qa’ida and Islamic State labels less relevant, now that neither group governs territory.[58] This is either because they simply aspire to be mujahidin serving God’s higher purpose and will join whichever group reaches out to them, or because their practical interests lie in joining forces with whichever group best serves the needs and ambitions of their community or tribe. In May 2017, Abu Majid al-Khabubi, an al-Qa’ida activist and occasional columnist for its *al-Masra* newspaper, complained that “some people are ready to be a soldier for any Muslim emir” and chastised “those who sympathise with Da’ish and think that differences with them could be resolved if Da’ish changed a little”. He insisted that “this [attitude] fails to recognize the depth of the disagreement with such a group, or more accurately mafia”.[59] His comments were enthusiastically circulated on pro-AQAP wires.

It seems from the two groups’ communications that since late 2015, more foot soldiers have been heading from ISY to AQAP than in the other direction, but there are some signs that ISY may now be trying to develop a more “authentic” image within the Yemeni context. Its standard menu of combat, weaponry and executions

continues. Its latest video (at the time of writing) features a four-man execution squad, a crucifixion and two beheadings as well as a ritual burning of the Yemeni flag against a backdrop of captured coalition vehicles. [60] However, alongside this, it has been making more of an attempt to evoke a sense of belonging, male bonding and shared identity in pursuit of a higher purpose through the dissemination of idealized lifestyle images from the frontlines. This is presumably born of the need to attract new recruits. Since ISY's 'retreat' to al-Bayda', it has issued more photosets and videos of stylized shared moments in frontline jihadi life, such as breaking fast during Ramadan, reciting Qur'an, watching ISIS films and cleaning weapons together. [61] This would attract disillusioned or displaced young men from around war-torn Yemen. Images of food preparation and group meals are particularly dominant in 2018, [62] something which doubtless holds strong appeal in a country where over 20 million people, two thirds of the population, are reported to be severely food insecure. [63] One recent video even included footage of apparent ISY members performing traditional tribal dancing and sung poetry in a style that is normally more reminiscent of AQAP. [64] This supports the notion outlined above that ISY may have succeeded in aligning with some, albeit limited, tribal interests in al-Bayda'.

These findings highlight several important points about the dynamics of jihadi groups that are often overlooked. They are learning organisations that react, morph and interpret their aims according to conditions on the ground, apparently without compromising the supra-historical and non-negotiable nature of their global mission. Hence they latch onto local concerns and make them their own. This results in a constant tug of war between the local and the global. Amongst other factors, the absence of strong, inspirational and effective leadership (whether owing to drone strikes, battlefield deaths, external intervention or the simple impossibility of communicating safely) can mean the local starts to eclipse the global, leading to splintering and fragmentation. Global al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is acutely aware of this and has been at pains in recent addresses to call for brotherly solidarity and to stress that local fighters on myriad battlefronts must view themselves first and foremost as part of a single unifying jihad. [65] In his 9/11 anniversary speech in 2018, Zawahiri even enjoins al-Qa'ida groups not to fight Islamic State, despite the latter declaring them apostates. [66] Nevertheless, in Yemen as elsewhere, [67] ISY and AQAP are becoming increasingly decentralized, both from their respective international cores and as coherent domestic groups.

This does not mean the threat is disappearing. Indeed, the prominent jihadist strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri has long advocated a more decentralized approach. [68] Nor does it mean that the global can't win out again when conditions change. In the short term, internecine fighting inside Yemen's jihad and relentless counter-terrorism operations will likely weaken both groups. In the long-term, however, the prospects for jihad in Yemen look more promising as the civil war drags on and the state continues to unravel. While Yemen has not proven a receptive host to foreign terrorist fighters, as outlined above, all the key ingredients for jihadi militancy to resurge lie inside the Yemeni tinder box itself. These include a fragmenting state, the proliferation of armed militias attached to old north-south fault-lines, external proxies building resentment through human rights violations, an entire generation of dispossessed youth that has known only war for the past four years, over two million children out of school, growing sectarianism, a looming water crisis, millions displaced and millions more on the brink of starvation.

Perversely, it may be that ISY will become more of a risk if and when a peace deal is finally brokered in the Yemen war. This is because any peace deal will inevitably result in disillusioned pockets of the population, especially in the south where historical conflicts, which are unlikely to be addressed in any peace deal, continue to simmer. This presents an opportunity for both ISY and AQAP to co-opt local grievances and re-frame them within their broader narratives of global jihad.

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Notes

- [1] The endemic nature of corruption in Yemen is explained in detail in Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the politics of permanent crisis* (London: Routledge, 2011). See in particular chapter 3, “The informal rules of the game”. See also April Longley-Alley, “The rules of the game: Unpacking patronage politics in Yemen”, *Middle East Journal* 64:3 (2010): 385-409.
- [2] See Isa Blumi, *Chaos in Yemen: Societal collapse and the new authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2010) and Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A troubled national union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- [3] For a brief summary of the roots and evolution of militant jihad in Yemen, see Elisabeth Kendall, “Contemporary jihadi militancy in Yemen: How is the threat evolving?”, Middle East Institute Policy Paper 2018-7 (July 2018), pp. 2-4. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-jihadi-militancy-yemen-evolving>. More in-depth accounts of the history of jihad in Yemen can be found in Gregory Johnsen, *Yemen, the last refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's war in Arabia* (New York: Norton, 2012); Christian Hellmich, *Al-Qaeda: From global network to local franchise* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2011), particularly chapters 5 and 6; Laurent Bonnefoy, “Jihadi violence in Yemen: Dealing with local, regional and international contingencies”, pp. 243-58 in Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Azmi (eds.), *Contextualising jihadi thought* (London: Hurst, 2012). On dangers of oversimplifying the identification of jihadists, the rampant difficulties of quantifying the movement(s), and the tendency to exaggerate the threat, see chapter 3 of Laurent Bonnefoy, *Yemen and the world: Beyond insecurity* (London: Hurst, 2018).
- [4] A plethora of problems continued to face Yemen in the fragile aftermath of its 2011 uprising. Many of these are brought out in Helen Lackner (ed.), *Why Yemen matters: A society in transition* (London: Saqi, 2014). See in particular chapters 1 and 5 by Sheila Carapico and Laurent Bonnefoy respectively.
- [5] The road from Yemen's uprising and transition period to war is explained in chapter one of Helen Lackner, *Yemen in crisis: Autocracy, neo-liberalism and the disintegration of a state* (London: Saqi, 2017). See also Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “The ‘Yemen Model’ as a failure of political imagination”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (2015): 144-7.
- [6] *Al-Naba'* 133 (24 May 2018): 9.
- [7] Note that AQAP has shown no such qualms regarding Houthi civilians. For example, in 2011 it sent three suicide bombers to blow themselves up among crowds of Houthi civilians, including a market place. *Madad* 7 (December 2011): 1.
- [8] Dramatic footage of the Mukalla jailbreak, featuring Batarfi running through the forecourt and Ibrahim al-Abyani sliding down a drainpipe, surfaced in the AQAP video, “Hadm al-Jasusiyya 1”, October 2018.
- [9] See Elisabeth Kendall, “Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A battle for local audiences”, in Simon Staffell and Akil Awan (eds.), *Jihadism transformed* (London: Hurst, 2016), 89-110.
- [10] ISY video, “Junud al-khilafa fi ard al-Yemen”, April 2015.
- [11] ISY video, “al-Khayrat”, May 2018.
- [12] In a list of 13 further martyrs released by ISY on 1 August 2018, one was Omani and one Kuwaiti but there were still no westerners listed.
- [13] Erlend Ofte Arntsen, “Yemen's al-Qaida: Entered agreement with tribal leaders not to attack the west”, *VG*, 16 April 2017.
- [14] Gregory Johnsen, *Yemen, the last refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's war in Arabia* (New York: Norton, 2012), Kindle loc. 840.
- [15] A young Muslim man from San Diego has written about Anwar al-Awlaqi as “a role model for all students of knowledge”. He recounts how, inspired by al-Awlaqi, he too moved from the United States to Yemen in the mid-2000s “to seek knowledge by the will of Allah”, eventually moving on to Somalia to fulfil his dream of jihad. “Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki [sic.] and Me”, *Gaidi Mtaani* 8 (January 2017): 12-18. Awlaqi's online sermons and English language *Inspire* magazine (launched 2010) doubtless raised the profile of Yemen among would-be jihadists in the West.
- [16] Morten Storm, with Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, *Agent Storm: My life inside Al Qaeda* (London: Penguin, 2014). In this autobiography, Storm writes that there were “plenty of foreign students” studying alongside him in the Salafi seminary he attended in Dammaj in the late 1990s on his road to radicalization (p. 43).
- [17] MENAS, “Major offensive against AQAP kills ‘hundreds’ of terrorists”, *Yemen Focus* 5:5 (May 2014): 2.
- [18] Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, “Divisions emerge within the Islamic State's Yemen ‘province’”, *The Long War Journal*, 15 December 2015.
- [19] A comprehensive list of the signatories and an English translation of the letters is provided in Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Dissent in the Islamic State's Yemen affiliates: Documents, translation & analysis”, 29 February 2016. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/02/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-yemen-affiliates>

- [20] Laments appeared, for example, on Uways al-Khilafa and Sabil al-Muwahhidin Telegram channels, 20 October 2017.
- [21] Khunduq al-Haqq Telegram channel, 1 November 2017.
- [22] US Central Command, “US forces conduct strike against ISIS training camps in Yemen”, 16 October 2017. <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1344652/us-forces-conduct-strike-against-isis-training-camps-in-yemen/>
- [23] ISY photoset (distributed as video), “Mu'askar al-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-'Adnani: Takhrij daf'at al-Shaykh Abi Bilal al-Harbi”, 9 October 2017.
- [24] “Inhiyar Jama'at al-Baghdadi, khawarij al-'asr, fi Qayfa”, Min Sama' Shabwa Telegram channel, 7 October 2018.
- [25] Al-Sarim al-Battar, “Shahada li-ahad al-munshaqqin 'an far' Tanzim al-Dawla fi al-Yemen”, al-Badr Media, 24 July 2018.
- [26] *Al-Naba'* 133 (24 May 2018): 9.
- [27] “Khilafat al-awham wa-sirk al-li'am”, Shakhuf Telegram channel, 31 December 2018.
- [28] Abu Karam's eulogy mentions that he participated in a battle in Hammat Liqah. ISY battled in Hamat Liqah several times from February 2017 onwards, but the last battle prior to Abu Karam's death was on 21 August 2017. Additionally, an ISY photoset from Hadramawt “Tanzif al-silah wa-idamatu-hu” dated 25 April 2017 would indicate that ISY had not yet fully decamped from Hadramawt by late April. Therefore the shift of ISY's Hadramawt branch can reasonably be held to have occurred at some point between late April and late August 2018.
- [29] ISY photoset “Mu'askar al-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-'Adnani”, 4 December 2016.
- [30] ISY photoset “Mu'askar al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Firqan”, 30 March 2017; “Mu'askar al-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-Firqan”, *al-Naba'* 76 (13 April 2017): 15.
- [31] ISY photoset “Dawrat al-qannasa li-Junud al-Khilafa fi Qayfa”, 5 June 2017.
- [32] *Al-Naba'* 77 (20 April 2017): 14.
- [33] “Junud al-Khilafa yasudduna akbar hujum li-l-Hutha 'ala mawaqi'i-him fi mintaqat Qayfa”, *al-Naba'* 51 (20 October 2016): 3.
- [34] “Ansar al-Shari'a yafdahun iddi'a' Jama'at al-Baghdadi fi ma'arik Qayfa”, *al-Masra* 28 (2 November 2016): 7.
- [35] Husam al-Umawi Telegram channel, 21 May 2016.
- [36] Husam al-Umawi Telegram channel, 14 April 2017. The main AQAP supporters channel on Telegram similarly estimated that ISY fighters in Qayfa did not exceed 80 by April 2017.
- [37] The US claimed that the strike had “killed dozens of ISIS members . . . , disrupting the organization's attempt to train new fighters”. US Central Command, “US forces conduct strike against ISIS training camps in Yemen”, 16 October 2017. <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1344652/us-forces-conduct-strike-against-isis-training-camps-in-yemen/>
- [38] *Al-Naba'* 133 (24 May 2018): 9.
- [39] A good example is “Haqq al-'ada 2”, 12 September 2018.
- [40] Sabil al-Muwahhadin and Abu al-Yaman al-Yamani Telegram channels, 2 November 2018.
- [41] This complex relationship is explained well by Nadwa al-Dawsari in “Foe not friend: Yemeni tribes and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula”, POMED Paper, 2018. <http://pomed.org/pomed-publications/foe-not-friend-yemens-tribes-and-aqap>. See also Marieke Brandt, “The global and the local: Al-Qaeda and Yemen's tribes”, pp. 105-30 in Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy (eds.), *Tribes and global jihadism* (London: Hurst, 2017).
- [42] ISY video “Anasir min Tanzim “Qa'idat al-Yaman” asara-hum muqatili al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Qayfa shimal gharbi al-Bayda”, 15 July 2018.
- [43] Muslih al-Muhajir, “Haqiqat ma hasala fi ard Qayfa bayna Khawarij al-Baghdadi wa-Ansar al-Shari'a”, al-Badr Media, 27 July 2018.
- [44] Murabit min Hadramawt Telegram channel, 16 July 2018.
- [45] ISY video “Wa-al-badi' azlam”, 1 August 2018.
- [46] ISY video “Unsur min Qa'idat al-Yemen yandammu li-muqatili al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Qayfa shimal gharbi al-Bayda”, 6 August 2018.

- [47] AQAP video, “Shahadat wa-i'tirafat li-asra min Tanzim al-Dawla”, 9 August 2018.
- [48] 'Ashiq al-Rusud Telegram channel appears to have been the original source of distribution, 13 November 2018.
- [49] Al-Sarim al-Battar, “Shahada li-ahad al-munshaqqin 'an far' Tanzim al-Dawla fi al-Yaman”, al-Badr Media, 24 July 2018.
- [50] “Liqa' suhufi ma' al-Shaykh Khalid bin 'Umar Batarfi”, al-Malahim Media, 20 June 2018.
- [51] Testimony of Abu 'Amir al-Makki, AQAP introductory video for series “Hadm al-jasusiyya”, August 2018.
- [52] AQAP video, “Shahadat wa-i'tirafat li-asra min Tanzim al-Dawla”, 9 August 2018.
- [53] AQAP video “Hadm al-jasusiyya 1”, October 2018.
- [54] AQAP infographic “Mahamm al-jawasis wa-anwa'u-hum wa-sifatu-hum wa-amakin tajnidi-him”, al-Badr Media, 7 November 2018.
- [55] AQAP video “Asrar wa-akhtar wa-rahil akhyar”, December 2017 (released 17 January 2018)
- [56] AQAP introductory video for series “Hadm al-jasusiyya”, August 2018. In the final three minutes, the documentary maker explains how he was approached by AQAP. Also of interest is his claim (at 31 minutes into the video) to have had access to some of the spy investigation files as well as the files of former spies within the Saudi intelligence service.
- [57] AQAP video “Hadm al-jasusiyya 1”, October 2018.
- [58] For a discussion of recent fragmentation and decentralization in Yemen's jihad, see Elisabeth Kendall, “Contemporary jihadi militancy in Yemen: How is the threat evolving?”, Middle East Institute Policy Paper 2018-7 (July 2018), pp. 15-18.
- [59] Abu Majid al-Khabubi Telegram channel, 31 May 2017.
- [60] ISY video “Unqudhu anfusa-kum”, 31 December 2018.
- [61] Particularly strong depictions of group belonging can be found in ISY photosets from 11 June 2017, 2 Sept 2017, 1 Oct 2017, 14 May 2018 and ISY video “Id al-Kumah”, 5 Sept 2017.
- [62] For example, photosets from 9 May 2018, 13 June 2018, 20 August 2018 and ISY video “al-Khayrat”, 17 May 2018.
- [63] World Food Programme, Yemen Emergency Dashboard, December 2018. https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/fa4a7ff5c1c64e0ca1b5a2f89dba7de2/download/?_ga=2.226061082.1427846426.1547303472-334034299.1547303472
- [64] ISY video “Ayyam shukr wa-dhikr”, 3 September 2018.
- [65] Zawahiri's strongest exhortation for unity comes in his video address “Umma wahida fi harb wahida 'ala jabahat muta'addida”, 9 June 2017. Other examples can be found in his video addresses “al-Sham lan tarka' illa li-(Al)llah”, 23 April 2017; “Ya akhwanu-na fi al-Sham, aslahu dhat bayna-kum”, 20 February 2018; “Sharq Ifriqiyya Thughar al-Islam al-Janubi”, 18 March 2018; “Tul Abib ayd-an ard al-Muslimin”, 13 May 2018;
- [66] Al-Qa'ida video “Kayfa nuwajih Amrika”, 11 September 2018.
- [67] This splintering has perhaps been most public in Syria. See Charles Lister, “How al-Qa'ida lost control of its Syrian affiliate: The inside story”, *CTC Sentinel* 11: 2 (February 2018).
- [68] See Brynjar Lia, *Architect of global jihad: The life of al-Qa'ida strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (London: Hurst, 2007). Chapter ten provides translated excerpts from al-Suri's *The military theory of the global Islamic resistance call* (December 2004/January 2005).