If the Yemeni terror threat had not already caught the attention of the American public, it did on 29 October 2010. After hours of confused media speculation, US and UK authorities revealed that they had uncovered several bombs which al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) had successfully smuggled on to both cargo and passenger planes. But even before the so-called Halloween Package Incident many in the US government, including the CIA, had characterised AQAP as the world’s most dangerous terror organisation. Today, the Obama Administration regards AQAP as ‘the most operationally active node of the al-Qaeda network,’ surpassing even its AFPAK cousin.

Although the revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring has given hope to reform movements throughout Yemen, it appears to have also strengthened the hand of AQAP. In the words of prominent American-born AQAP leader Anwar al-Awlaki, ‘our mujahidin brothers … will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation.’ Faced with massive demonstrations, President Ali Abdullah Saleh diverted much of his US-trained counterterrorism force away from their battle with AQAP. Correspondingly, the organisation has stepped up its attacks against government forces throughout the south. In Abyan province – a traditional stronghold for AQAP – reports have surfaced that the group has seized control of the city of Jaar as well as a nearby government ammunition depot. According to an article by the Yemen Times, an independent, widely-circulated Yemeni newspaper, AQAP also captured Abyan’s presidential palace and a local radio station, emboldening the organisation to declare Abyan as an Islamic emirate. The group used the radio station to provide a preview of its vision for Yemen, broadcasting statements urging women to ‘stay home and go out only when it is extremely necessary,’ and to only leave their home when accompanied by a male relative. Absent an effective US counterterrorism strategy to address AQAP’s increasing power, their violence could once again reach American or European shores.

The current political turmoil has only accentuated many of the difficulties which have plagued US counterterrorism policy. First, the Yemeni government has not traditionally viewed AQAP as a major threat to its regime. Instead, it has faced major secessionist movements in both the south and north of the country. The central government has channelled most of its resources towards quelling these more widespread...
operate in the shadows, using the presence of foreign troops or overaggressive government forces to inflame public opinion.

members.

to counter illicit drug trafficking, border smuggling, and money laundering. And yet, due to issues of Yemeni sovereignty and potential public backlash, the US has an extremely limited list of potential responses. Therefore, the challenge for the US is to rob AQAP of the first three benefits without running afoul of problems associated with the fourth.

While it may not seem as quick or gratifying as other CT instruments, diplomacy must provide the basis for future US CT policy in Yemen. Diplomacy ‘touches at least as many aspects of counterterrorism as does any other instrument,’ and has been responsible for almost every major international CT success in the past few years. A diplomacy-centric approach offers several benefits. Increased US military presence, whether through airstrikes or troops, could enrage the anti-US population and actually contribute to AQAP’s popularity. Drone and cruise missile attacks in December 2009, which caused several civilian casualties without seriously degrading AQAP’s leadership, have become a widely cited example of the backlash that a military-centric US policy could unleash. Additionally, since AQAP features a heavy Saudi component and often targets the Saudi regime, the group necessitates a regional approach. Saudi Arabia must play a key role, especially with respect to the porous border. Yet to mobilise the Saudis, US diplomats will need to broker deals and assuage any Yemeni concerns about infringements on their sovereignty.

AQAP has exploited all of these benefits. Its territorial control has enabled it to run training camps, stash weapons, and even assemble a formidable propaganda apparatus. Although it has successfully recruited foreigners into the organisation, it remains primarily a Saudi/Yemeni led group which draws most of its foot-soldiers from disaffected tribesman. It then uses these recruits to conduct illicit drug trafficking, border smuggling, and money laundering. And yet, due to issues of Yemeni sovereignty and potential public backlash, the US has an extremely limited list of potential responses. Therefore, the challenge for the US is to rob AQAP of the first three benefits without running afoul of problems associated with the fourth.

Within a diplomatic context, the US should employ three primary techniques aimed at AQAP’s demise: strengthening Yemen’s civil law enforcement capacity, assisting civil development that targets the most afflicted tribal regions, and enhancing intelligence cooperation with local Arab partners. This comprehensive strategy will significantly degrade AQAP’s operational capability by removing the organization’s key safe havens while simultaneously identifying both specific and general threats against US interests. Additionally, diplomatic and intelligence efforts will help the US understand Yemen’s domestic power structure, and thus identify the individuals with which the US should cooperate.

Like most terror organisations, AQAP exists in the hazy netherworld between criminal and conventional threats. It has the ability to mass fires, conduct ambushes, and target major infrastructure, yet it does not operate like a conventional military. Unlike US forces, the group does not utilise massive convoys or supply chains to sustain itself. Instead, it relies on the vast Yemeni black market to funnel illicit weapons, drugs, and money to its various elements. This criminal-logistical nexus means that many of the agencies which can help disrupt AQAP activities come from the law-enforcement community. In fact, organisations like AQAP specifically structure themselves to counter traditional military strengths. While the group boasts an experienced cadre of leaders, it survives as a highly compartmentalised and decentralised organisation. This structure allows it to withstand losses and ensures secrecy if the government captures some of its members. As a result, massive military incursions or occupations would have little effect on AQAP. The group would simply continue to operate in the shadows, using the presence of foreign troops or overaggressive government forces to inflame public opinion.
Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that studies have shown law enforcement – not military force – is the single most potent factor in the demise of terror groups. According to a RAND survey of 648 terror groups between 1968-2006 forty percent of terror groups were ended due to the actions of local law-enforcement agencies, while only seven percent ended due to military action. The difference between the strategies lies in which organisations take the lead against the threat, and, at times, the techniques those agencies use.

“Policing” uses internal security and intelligence organisations to track, penetrate, and then eliminate the group’s members, while military force includes offensive action ranging from commando raids to carpet bombings. Recent experiences support the study’s conclusions.

In Afghanistan, senior US leaders have stated that the country’s future depends more closely on the training of the Afghan police than the Afghan military. The same dynamic exists in Yemen. In an appeal to direct more international funding towards local police units, then-Yemeni Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qirbi said, ‘Police are the front lines of any long-term security strategy. You can’t fight, bring law and order, unless you have a presence in the remote settlements and communities where insurgents are located.’ These units – not elite special operations ‘hunter-killer teams’ – provide the daily barriers to the lawlessness and criminal activity which provides freedom of manoeuvre for AQAP. The shortfalls of military force apply to any government engaged in the fight – even Yemen’s. Prior Yemeni military efforts have only created disillusionment within its population. Even before the rise of the protest movements, Anwar al-Awlaki’s videos cited repressive Yemeni military responses in the southern provinces as part of his recruitment effort. Any strategy shift that heavily relies on a broad military offensive would enhance the resonance of such messages. AQAP does not enjoy widespread popularity in Yemen; US policy should keep it that way. An approach that bolsters the rule of law and secures Yemeni borders would produce markedly better results than wholesale military assistance and aggressive offensive action.

The February 2006 prison escape of several key AQAP leaders highlights the need for a more competent civil security force. After the break-out, AQAP essentially resurrected itself from the ashes after having become almost non-existent. Neither Apache gunships nor Abrams tanks could have prevented the prison break. If the police and prison system had well-trained advisors, a major setback could have been avoided. Instead, years’ worth of work vanished in one day. Partnerships based on the improvement of basic law-enforcement capability will provide the long-term Yemeni capacity needed to thwart AQAP, even though those partnerships will probably not yield the more publicly identifiable “success” that airstrikes would.

To create an effective Yemeni security apparatus, the US must utilise groups which have significant law enforcement experience. Organisations like the FBI, DEA, Coast Guard, Border Patrol, and the State Department’s Office of Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) could lend decades’ worth of insights in support of this effort. In some cases these organisations have already provided assistance. But to manage the increasing aid money flowing into Yemen, law-enforcement agencies operating under the direction of the State Department should receive the primary role for training Yemeni forces, not the military. If DoD, DHS, and State do not coordinate their strategy, the training effort will likely end up wasted. The military, and specifically the US Army Special Forces – which have a history of training foreign militaries in a low-profile capacity – has an important role to play in Yemen. But law-enforcement agencies which truly understand policing operations should take the lead, with military or intelligence experts providing cultural, regional and international expertise.

While operating in Yemen, these groups must retain a low in-country profile to avoid provoking popular backlash. Therefore, Arab partners with professional security establishments, like the Jordanians and Saudis, could provide vital on-ground partnerships. Using Arab partners to train Middle Eastern assets has a historical precedent. The Jordanians have trained Palestinian security forces, and General Abizaid strongly argued for utilising Arab nations to patrol alongside Iraqis during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In Afghanistan, the Jordanians have contributed an entire infantry battalion towards the international effort. By drawing on the two nations’ common Muslim faith, the Jordanians have been able to undertake aid projects and even establish the “Voices of Moderate Islam” program, which provides religious education for tribal leaders. Critical Afghan leadership first receives training in Afghanistan, followed by trips to visit religious scholars and sites in both Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Such a programme would never succeed with a Western face or without serious diplomatic legwork. The State Department would have to facilitate similar arrangements through concerted negotiations with potential partners as well as the Yemeni government. But, if successful, domestic security training could retrograde AQAP’s ability to exploit Yemen’s general lawlessness while also avoiding the creation of unintended flashpoints (like the December bombings) that would only further AQAP’s cause.

For security forces to establish a presence in Yemen’s most AQAP-infected regions, the government must first win the support of local tribal leaders. Fortunately for policy makers, most tribes have supported AQAP for political rather than ideological reasons. While tribes might harbour anti-US sentiment, they primarily seek to use AQAP as political leverage to attain their own tribal interests. In fact, tribes have supported a number of radical groups based on this intent, ranging from atheist Marxists to Iraqi Baathists. Civil projects that help tribal leaders deliver civil services to their constituents could significantly alleviate these political grievances.
Wholesale arming of the Yemeni military would have similarly negative consequences. As mentioned earlier, the Yemeni government has at its disposal extremely specific and perishable brand of intelligence necessary for targeted killings would require a massive presence by US air and ground assets. But policy makers should not let domestic public perceptions blind them from the reality on the ground: aggressive military measures would not only fail to degrade AQAP, they will actually strengthen support for the organisation, and could delegitimise any Yemeni government's tenuous grip on power. An understanding of AQAP's organisational structure and the political sentiment in Yemen precludes in instruments will not only fail to degrade AQAP, they will actually strengthen support for the organisation, and could delegitimise any Yemeni government's tenuous grip on power. An understanding of AQAP's organisational structure and the political sentiment in Yemen precludes an even more integral part of US strategy. Relying solely on the Yemeni government to deliver civil development projects would leave a gaping hole in US strategy. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently noted, ‘development is critical to the success of our defence missions, particularly where poverty and failed governments contribute to instability’. Yet the Yemeni government lacks the ability to fulfil these needs. By providing assistance specifically tailored to US strategic interests, American policy could help turn the tribes against AQAP in a manner similar to the 2006 “Anbar Awakening” during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Rather than offering massive aid projects or building dozens of unwanted schools, US aid should be disbursed at the direction of tribal leaders, contingent on cooperation with Yemeni security forces. Once the tribes’ political interests necessitate alignment with the Yemeni government, the tribes will likely drop their support for AQAP. Only then will America’s aid packages assume the role of a strategic weapon against Yemeni terrorism. While efforts to combat the long-term capability of AQAP must comprise a large part of Yemeni CT strategy, the primary concern for American policy makers will remain protecting the US homeland from terrorist attacks. Accordingly, America must possess the ability to identify and eliminate threats emanating from the organisation. Foreign intelligence cooperation provides this mechanism. Take, for example, the thwarted Halloween Printer Plot. The tip that led to the bombs’ discovery came from a Saudi-run source who had penetrated AQAP and provided specific routing information about the explosive packages. If not for the work by the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate, the bombs would have likely detonated over the US homeland. The package tip underscores the important relationship between the American intelligence community and its foreign counterparts. Local actors have the knowledge, cultural background, and Arab agents that will likely produce vital intelligence about AQAP. Ensuring that these agencies trust the American IC will almost undoubtedly provide the most useful window into AQAP’s operations and ambitions. Preserving that cooperation requires a two-way exchange between the US and its partners. Just as America expects its partners to share important information, its partners expect the same. Yet that dynamic has often been the exception rather than the rule. In November 2009, American officials rejected a Saudi request for satellite imagery to assist aerial targeting during a war with Houthi rebels along the Yemeni border. Instead, the Saudis turned to France, received the imagery, reduced civilian casualties through precisely delivered munitions, and ended the war within a few weeks. Instead of seizing on the request as an opportunity to strengthen ties with the Saudis, US policy makers left the Saudis wondering about America’s commitment to the Saudi regime. If America wants to truly penetrate and dismantle AQAP, it must realise that Yemeni or Saudi intelligence organisations will not simply hand over all their information without reciprocal assistance. The importance of intelligence agencies goes beyond occasionally providing time and place specific information; they should also direct broad US policy within Yemen. Although many policy makers view intelligence as an instrument for ‘terrorist-by-terrorist, cell-by-cell disruption,’’ it more often identifies general trends and power structures. With whom should the US focus its diplomatic efforts? Which tribal leaders can thwart AQAP? What kind of aid would help sway those leaders to the government’s side? What are AQAP’s tactics, techniques, and procedures? While these answers will not manifest themselves as “smoking guns” or “golden nuggets” of intelligence, they hold the key to ultimately disrupting AQAP. Drawing on local assessments of the Yemeni socio-political-economic situation can help sharpen US policy and identify its proper main efforts. Some policy makers will criticise a police-civil aid-intelligence driven strategy and instead favour a more aggressive, kinetic approach that features targeted killings or widespread preemptive military action. American politicians face significant domestic pressure to take action in the face of AQAP terror attempts; cruise missiles and bombed-out “terror camps” provide far better headlines than civil aid or local police patrols. But policy makers should not let domestic public perceptions blind them from the reality on the ground: aggressive military instruments will not only fail to degrade AQAP, they will actually strengthen support for the organisation, and could delegitimise any Yemeni government’s tenuous grip on power. An understanding of AQAP’s organisational structure and the political sentiment in Yemen precludes such overt military measures. Since even the most successful targeted killings have almost always resulted in civilian casualties, a strategy predicated on cruise missiles or even drone strikes would likely alienate the Yemeni population without hampering AQAP ability. Additionally, the extremely specific and perishable brand of intelligence necessary for targeted killings would require a massive presence by US air and ground assets. The US drone campaign along the AFGP border relies on dozens of firebases, a massive troop presence, swarms of CIA personnel, and even cross-border commando raids. For the reasons stated previously, such a presence would prove counterproductive. Wholesale arming of the Yemeni military would have similarly negative consequences. As mentioned earlier, the Yemeni government has at its disposal extremely specific and perishable brand of intelligence necessary for targeted killings; cruise missiles and bombed-out “terror camps” provide far better headlines than civil aid or local police patrols. But policy makers should not let domestic public perceptions blind them from the reality on the ground: aggressive military instruments will not only fail to degrade AQAP, they will actually strengthen support for the organisation, and could delegitimise any Yemeni government’s tenuous grip on power. 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times redirected US military aid towards needs it considers more pressing. In December 2009, President Saleh diverted US-funded armoured vehicles, humvees, and CT troops from their anti-AQAP mission in order to combat Houthi rebels. More recently, Yemeni officials were discovered using their US-trained and provided Coast Guard as for-profit, hired escorts to guard private ships against piracy. And, amidst the chaos of the Arab Spring, snipers and CT troops have become infamous for killing protestors. These cases demonstrate that regardless of the purposes for which the US might provide equipment, the resources will ultimately lie under domestic Yemeni control. Thus the US must limit its aid’s potential for abuse by ensuring its narrow utility, useful only towards the goals on which Yemen and America can mutually agree (specifically the AQAP threat). If America provides Yemen with missile launchers, drone capabilities, or helicopter gunships, these systems will undoubtedly make future appearances when the Yemeni government feels threatened by its domestic foes. The result would almost certainly set back the US campaign against AQAP and strengthen the group’s ties with local insurgencies.

Other critics might take a different tack. Perhaps the US and Yemeni government could simply diffuse the problem by attacking AQAP’s radical Islamist ideology through widespread counter-radicalisation initiatives? While these initiatives should play a role in Yemeni CT efforts, they will not lead to AQAP’s demise. Terror groups utilise “framing processes” which shape perceptions and spur individual participation in the movement. Thus the goal of any counter-radicalization campaign is to thwart the resonance of the terror group’s messages. Yet many Yemeni’s have never even heard of AQAP or believe that the government has simply used it as a cover to quell other domestic opposition forces (which has been true at times). Although the population remains overwhelming hostile towards US interference in their domestic affairs, its opposition towards US policy hardly distinguishes it from the rest of the Middle East. Yet throughout the Arab world, support for al-Qaeda remains low. The vast majority of opposition towards the US does not stem from a “radical Islamist” belief set. The Middle East’s longstanding anti-US outrage lies with a simple clash of political interests. Likewise, the tribes largely harbour AQAP for their own political reasons. So if AQAP’s successes in Yemen have stemmed largely from socio-political reasons, how would a strategy targeting religious ideology dismantle the group? Anti-Americanism will not change unless the US makes sweeping changes in its Middle East policy, which it will not and should not do.

Despite the anti-American sentiment, Yemenis have still failed to gravitate towards AQAP. The group has a small contingent of personnel, indicating that it has yet to metastasise from a largely-criminal terror organisation into a full-blown insurgency. American policy should ensure that the group remains a marginalised operation by avoiding overbearing and unpopular military measures. Likewise, counter-radicalisation might prevent a handful of recruits from joining the ranks, but will not provide the significant strategic benefits of civil law enforcement, targeted development, and intelligence cooperation. By prioritising these efforts, America can ensure the eradication of AQAP while protecting itself against short term threats.

End Notes


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Clashes between government security forces and al Qaeda militants have now killed hundreds in Yemen. Violence has flared around the town of Lawder, which lies along a highway linking al Qaeda strongholds in the Abyan province. Islamists have exploited the political crisis in the country after President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to hand over power to his deputy Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in November 2011. Violence has flared around the town of Lawder, which lies along a highway linking al Qaeda strongholds in the Abyan province. Islamists have exploited the political crisis in the country after President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to hand over power to his deputy Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in November 2011. Yemen, Middle East. How to Reform Israel’s Runaway Supreme Court. Future Ukrainian NATO Membership In Question With Possibility of New President. Al Qaeda Poses New Risk to Saudi Security Amid Yemen Turmoil. Share. Tweet. Email. "The calculation was that as long as this chaos in Yemen continues, al Qaeda will take advantage, which has a huge impact on Saudi security. It's a major reason they acted in Yemen and convinced the United States to join them," said Mustafa Alani, a security analyst with close ties to Riyadh's Interior Ministry. Last week a group of tribes and Sunni clerics, including some who have previously been associated with AQAP, moved to take control of large parts of Hadramawt province, including an airport and oil facility, as government forces left.