

Situation dire as Al Qaeda rises in Yemen

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While the West congratulates itself on two Yemen-related counter-terrorism successes - the alleged foiling of a sophisticated bomb plot against an airliner and the killing by drone strike of Fahd al-Quso, one of the architects of the 2000 USS Cole bombing - the security situation in Yemen itself has become dire.

One of the by-products of the drawn-out demise of president Ali Abdallah Saleh was the splitting of the Yemeni military and the near complete isolation of military units in the vulnerable southern provinces.

This has given the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its affiliates freedom of movement they have never had before. AQAP has for the first time been able to seize and hold ground from the government.

An idea of the strength of AQAP (and the weakness of the Yemeni military) can be gleaned from a selection of recent attacks:

- May 7: Two Yemeni Army positions overrun - 32 dead, 40 wounded, 28 prisoners (in retaliation for drone strike on al-Quso)
- March 4: Yemeni military positions attacked and overrun in Kod – 185 dead, 150 wounded, 73 prisoners (since released)
- February 25: Suicide car bomb kills 26 Yemeni soldiers in al-Mukalla as new Yemeni president takes oath of office in Sana'a

The withdrawal of US military advisers during Saleh's struggle to stay in power hurt the Yemeni counter-terrorism effort, while the internal politicking involved in the purging of Saleh's relatives from key posts in the Yemeni military has meant that it has been virtually impossible to maintain an operational focus on the fight in the south.

The US has adopted a strategy of hitting high-value terrorist targets where intelligence is available, but this has had little, if any, effect on the broader insurgency.

The frequency of US air strikes inside Yemen has increased, but AQAP has been gaining both support and conventional military capability at an alarming rate. At least four major towns in Abyan and Shabwa governorates are in the hands of AQAP affiliates and AQAP's support increases as it defeats government forces.

Some argue that the US air strikes and support for the former regime have been part of the reason for the increased support for AQAP, even though such strikes kill some mid-level AQAP operatives.

But while the prognosis for the country is poor at the moment, AQAP may find it difficult to rule the emirates it is able to establish in Yemen.

This Lowy analysis from two years ago highlighted the potential for AQAP to carve out a semi-governed space in Yemen but also warned of the long-term difficulty of relying on the support of a fractious tribal network for survival.

It would appear that the combination of an extended national power vacuum in Yemen, continued internal competition for power and the loss of focus on the fight against AQAP has allowed a hitherto marginal organisation to gain significantly more power and influence, allowing it to act as the governing authority in parts of a strategically important country.

If anyone ever needed a reminder that relying on technology to fight a war can achieve tactical successes while strategic failure threatens, Yemen has provided such a reminder this week.

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