Yemen Efforts in the Fight Against Terrorism
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Terrorism has no limits and respects no boundaries. It is a phenomenon that plagues the world and needs to be addressed. To succeed in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, any government must adopt and embark on a holistic approach. This, however, cannot be realized without maintaining stability, security and the ability to uphold the rule of law. Many countries facing terrorism take these three basic foundations for granted when designing their strategies to fight this threat.

The Republic of Yemen—before the Youth Revolution of 2011—, to some extent, had all three foundations, yet it failed. This was simply because of the lack of political will back then. After 2012, however, Yemen had the political will and a firm commitment to fight terrorism, but, unfortunately, was faced with many challenges that affected those foundations due to the continuous thwarting of peace following the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative and its implementation mechanism. It is only by restoring the State and ending the coup of September 2014 that any efforts to combat and prevent terrorism and violent extremism in Yemen would ever bear fruit.

Yemen: A Victim of Terrorism

Yemen is at the front lines in the fight against terrorism and has been a victim of this phenomenon for many years. Back in December 1998, a group headed by Abu al-Hassan al-Mehdar, leader of what was called the “Aden-Abyan Islamic Army”, was involved in the killing of four British and Australian tourists in Yemen. Al-Mehdar was supported by Abu Hamza al-Masri who was sentenced, in January 2015, to life in prison after being found guilty to 11 counts of terrorism, including in Yemen, by a federal jury in the United States. This was just the beginning!

In October 2000, al-Qaeda launched a suicide attack on the United States navy destroyer USS Cole at the port of Aden which resulted in the death of 17 US sailors. In the aftermath of the attack, the US and Yemen started to cooperate in security related issues. However, it was not until after September 11, 2001 that the cooperation between the US and Yemen to combat terrorism was reinforced.

Unfortunately, terrorism in Yemen has been on the rise ever since, and Yemenis bore the brunt of its impact. In one of the ugliest terrorist attacks of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, armed terrorists stormed a military hospital in Sanaa in December 2013, and after an initial suicide car bombing, killed 56 people, including patients doctors and nurses, and wounded 215 others. The perpetrators, as was shown in a state-run media report showing the hospital’s video surveillance footage, did not just use machine guns to kill their hopeless victims, they also used hand grenades.

2- Al-Mehdar was executed, along with two of his associates, in 1999 after a trial in which he confessed to leading the so called “Aden-Abyan Islamic Army” which kidnapped 16 foreigner tourists and killed 4 of them as part of what he called “Jihad against the west and all its allies.”
3- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was established in 2009 and subsequently Ansar Al-Sharia, which is a representation of AQAP in Yemen, was established in 2011. This paper will be referring to both as AQAP.
In May 21, 2012, an AQAP suicide bomber attack in Sanaa claimed the lives of over 100 young cadets from the Central Security Forces as they were rehearsing for the Yemen National Day parade. Another attack by AQAP in Sanaa which occurred in January 2015, killed 35 and wounded 68 others as they stood in line in front of the Police Academy to be enlisted.

Additionally, in August 2016, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or “Daesh” affiliate in Yemen claimed the responsibility of a suicide car bombing attack in Aden against an army recruitment center that resulted in over 70 deaths and 80 wounded. And in December 2016, within 8 days only, Daesh perpetrated two separate attacks in and around a military base in Aden that resulted in 88 deaths and 79 injured.

In Aden alone, during 2016, there were also 11 other attacks carried by AQAP and Daesh, killing 98 and wounding 78 civilians. And in the same year, in only Aden and al-Mukalla, AQAP and Daesh killed 337 military and security personnel and new recruits and injured 313 others. AQAP has, for years, targeted not only military and security personnel but also intelligence officers who were effective in tracking and exposing its networks.

These terrorist attacks are just some examples of how brutal and indiscriminate AQAP and Daesh really are in their targeting against Yemeni people.

Government Counterterrorism Efforts

Since the 2000s, the government of Yemen during the reign of former President Saleh took some measures to address this issue; nevertheless, the measures taken were mainly security related, which were intended more for soliciting foreign aid from international partners rather than combating the real cause of terrorism.

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4 - Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or “Daesh” branch in Yemen was formed late 2014; however, it doesn’t have much presence or influence on the group.
Even though Yemen had started one of the first deradicalization programs, and was supported by the international community, especially the United States, in the fight against terrorism from an early stage, the Saleh regime’s unwillingness to address the root causes of terrorism genuinely contributed to its rise.

Yet, between 2012 and 2014, the new Government of President Hadi was successful, against all odds, in designing a new comprehensive counterterrorism approach which can be fully revived as government forces continue to recapture more parts of the country from the Houthi-Saleh militia after the coup of September 2014 with the assistance and support of the Arab Coalition and the international community.

**Early Attempts of Deradicalization**

In 2003, Yemen launched one of the first deradicalization programs in the region. This program was headed by a well-respected Islamic cleric, Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, head of the Yemen Supreme Court and a former Minister of Religious Endowments. Judge al-Hitar was also the head of the dialogue committee, within the program, in charge of initiating a program with an aim of engaging potential terrorists who have been arrested or captured at that time. The first phase of the program was successful, according to al-Hitar, with 364 participants (out of a total of 420) being freed after they renounced their radical ideologies and proved to have no criminal connections.

Nevertheless, this program lasted for only three years starting from early 2003 and ending late 2005. The program started with a motto of “ideology can only be countered with ideology” and stemmed from the belief that “countering radical ideology with force will only increase its intensity.” Al-Hitar argued that only dialogue can yield the desired results in such programs.

The program had two phases: phase one was a direct dialogue and rehabilitation subprogram which was successful and showed positive results, as many participants abandoned their previous radical interpretation of Islam. And, phase two was a reintegration subprogram which proved to be more difficult to accomplish for several reasons. One was the deliberate mishandling of those released after phase one by Saleh’s security apparatus. (After the initial release of those who proved to have changed during the first phase of the program, their contact was limited to certain security and military agents close to the former President Saleh)

Another, and perhaps the most important reason according to al-Hitar, was the unwillingness of the then-government to fund and sponsor the program. This was evident by the lack of state media coverage of the program and by the reluctance to adopt its strategy and vision by Saleh’s regime. There was no inclination by the then-government to create a rehabilitation center formally or to appoint the dialogue committee members officially. This, eventually, led to the termination of the deradicalization program at the end of 2005 despite its promising initial success.

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6- Saleh ruled Yemen from 1978 to 2012
7- Al-Hitar was appointed in 2016 as Head of Yemen Supreme Court; he was the former Head of Sanaa, Damar and al-Jawf District Courts of Appeals, former Religious Endowments Minister, and a human rights activist.
8- Hamoud al-Hitar (Head of Yemen Supreme Court) in discussion with the author, June 2017.
9- Ibid
Beefing up the Security and Counterterrorism Units

Under the regime of former President Saleh, most, if not all, support and assistance provided by the international partners, mainly the United States, was channeled to the creation and reinforcement of certain security apparatuses and counterterrorism units controlled by officials closely related to the former President. Saleh’s son, Ahmed Ali Saleh, was Head of the Republican Guards and oversaw the Special Forces (SF). His nephew, Amar Mohammed Saleh, was the First Deputy of the newly created National Security Bureau (NSB), and was in charge of Al-Qaeda’s file there. His other nephew, Yahya Mohammed Saleh, was Chief of Staff of the Special Security Forces (formerly known as Central Security Forces), and supervised the Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU).

The objective of the old regime was to keep building up the security and military apparatus in the name of counterterrorism operations (with little results to show); while at the same time, undermining other deradicalization programs aimed at hitting the core of the problem.

Saleh was not only reluctant to eradicate al-Qaeda in Yemen, he, in fact, seemed to have used it for his benefit. An investigation by al-Jazeera news in 2015 called “al-Qaeda Informant”, detailing information gathered from interviews with a former al-Qaeda operative, exposed dubious dealings between the old regime security apparatus and al-Qaeda’s network. The informant stated that a senior security official close to Saleh was involved in providing al-Qaeda with explosives only three months prior to the US Embassy attack in Sanaa back in September 2008.

Other Government sources have indicated that even as late as 2015, Saleh still maintains some links with AQAP. The sources believe that Saleh had dealings with AQAP during its one-year occupation of al-Mukalla as part of his campaign to undermine the legitimate Government.

Yemen’s New Approach - 2012 Onward

After the election of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in February 2012, the Government shifted from focusing merely on the military and security options in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in favor of a two-pronged approach. The Government knew that reviving Yemen’s early attempts of deradicalization and reintegration programs was as important—if not more—than the military and security options. This is, however, not to say that the Government has abandoned or in any way reduced its military operations against AQAP. On the contrary, military operations were intensified since 2012 (as will be explained later). It is just to say that the Government was fully committed to eradicating and preventing terrorism and violent extremism, and that it knew only a holistic approach to counter and prevent this phenomenon can succeed.

The Government’s new approach was to develop a comprehensive strategy with cross-cutting executive measures to combat and counter terrorism and violent extremism. These measures needed to be both sustainable and, most importantly, commensurate with available resources.

The comprehensive strategy focused on two main aspects: a military and security aspect and a political economic and social aspect. This approach led to the formation and adoption of Yemen’s new counterterrorism strategy.
A Comprehensive National Counterterrorism Strategy

On August 28, 2012, President Hadi instructed the Government to revise and adopt a Comprehensive National Counterterrorism Strategy (CNCS), originally drafted by the High-Level Security Committee, taking into account all inputs from all ministries including the ministries of Education, Information, and Justice, among others. On September 18, 2012, the Government adopted the new Strategy and created a High-Level Ministerial Committee (HLMC) 10, headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, to supervise its implementation by developing executive measures and budgetary requirements for each ministry to ensure their executions. The HLMC was later mandated to incorporate the National Dialogue Conference’s outcomes (related to counterterrorism) into the CNCS.

During the period from 2012 to 2014 the HLMC created a technical committee with clear terms of reference to develop the executive measures needed for the implementation of the strategy. The technical committee, along with internal teams within each ministry, made major strides in finalizing the executive plans and other administrative and budgetary requirements. By August 2014, the work was done at the technical level; however, by that time the Government was engulfed by the political events leading up to the coup of September 21, 2014. Since then the CNCS, and its executive measures, never saw the light of day.

10- The High-Level Ministerial Committee was headed by the Forging Minister and consisted of the following Ministers as members: Religious Endowments, Interior, Planning and International Cooperation, Justice, Information, Education, Youth and Sports, Legal Affairs, Human Rights.
The Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program

President Hadi issued a Presidential Decree on May 14, 2014, creating a committee to reactivate and further develop Yemen’s rehabilitation and reintegration program. The committee was headed by the National Security Bureau and consists of members from other relevant ministries and authorities including Foreign Affairs, Religious Endowments, Education, Human Rights and Legal Affairs ministries.

The committee focused on creating a rehabilitation and reintegration center with an objective of engaging potential terrorists who have been captured or arrested in relations to terrorism related cases. The goal of this center was not to be a detention facility, but rather a center for deradicalization and future Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs. The committee, with the assistance and support of some of the international partners, including the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Nations, was preparing to launch a pilot project in Sanaa.

Yemen. Drawing from Yemen’s previous efforts and other similar centers’ experiences (including from a visit to Mohammed bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center13), the committee worked hard to develop comprehensive sub-programs for the center – such as ideological counseling programs, physical, mental, and spiritual health assessment programs, educational and vocational training programs, and reintegration, post-release, and family welfare programs.

Later in 2014 and beginning 2015, the committee tried several times to arrange official visits to Sanaa from the United Nations (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute based in Italy) and other international partners to finalize the program assessment and to start the construction of the center. However, the security and political situation in Yemen, after the coup of September 2014, prevented such visits. And Yemen’s deradicalization efforts once again came to a complete halt.

11- The Comprehensive National Counterterrorism Strategy (CNCS) is a 48-page document and its executive measures is a separate 138-page document with a budgetary annex.
12- The committee to reactivate and develop Yemen Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program is headed by the Deputy Head of the National Security Bureau and consists of representatives from the following ministries and authorities: Presidential Office, Foreign Affairs, Religious Endowments, Information, Social Affairs, Legal Affairs, Human Rights, Justice, Education, Vocational Training, Health, and Interior.
The Military Operations Against AQAP 2012-2014

In May 2011, AQAP was able (with just about 200 militants) to capture the city of Zinjibar and other areas in Abyan Governorate. This attack came during the Youth Revolution of 2011 and was widely seen as an attempt by former President Saleh to prove to the world that if he goes so will the stability of Yemen.

In May 2012, just three months in after being elected, President Hadi ordered his first massive military campaign called “Operation Golden Swords” against AQAP. He entrusted Major General Salem Ali Qatan, Commander of the Southern Military Region and Commander of the 31st Armored Brigade, to lead this operation. The operation within just a month managed to free Zinjibar, Jaar and other areas in Abyan, although some AQAP militants remained scattered in the governorate after the campaign. Unfortunately, on June 18, 2012, an AQAP suicide bomber assassinated Major General Salem Qatan in Aden.

Frustratingly, Yemen’s two main counterterrorism forces, which received the bulk of the United States support (namely the SF and CTU as mentioned earlier), did not participate in the campaign at that time and remained in Sanaa mainly because of their commanders’ reluctance and loyalty to Saleh. President Hadi has since, as part of restructuring the armed forces, replaced those command- ers in order to ensure the loyalty of these elite and well-trained counterterrorism forces to the nation as opposed to certain individuals.

In April 2014, the Government launched another massive military campaign against AQAP in Shabwah and Abyan governorates. Those efforts were successful as well; however, they were affected and derailed by the Houthi escalation in Amran governorate leading up to the coup in Sanaa in September 2014.

13- Mohammed bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center is a Saudi deradicalization and reintegration program established in 2007 in Riyadh under Saudi Ministry of Interior.
Liberating al-Mukalla City April 2016

In April 2015, AQAP militants captured the major city al-Mukalla in the Hadhramaut governorate—the largest governorate in Yemen. AQAP was able to maintain its control of al-Mukalla for one year due to the events and instability that followed the Houthis’ coup. During that time, AQAP managed to put its hands on substantial amounts of resources by looting banks and collecting taxes and fees from the city’s port.

In April 2016, the Government supported by the Arab Coalition forces liberated al-Mukalla city and drove AQAP militants out. “The Government and the Arab coalition forces, within a week, were able to recapture Al-Mukalla and defeat what was left of AQAP in the city. From then on, the Government has been sweeping the remaining pockets of Al Qaeda in many governorates (including Aden, Shabwah, and Abyan) and dismantling any other possible safe havens in Yemen.”

AQAP Narratives After the Houthis’ Coup

Although they oppose each other and follow different sects of Islam, both AQAP and the Houthis employ similar schemes. Both regard America as their enemy; the Houthis even call it the “grand devil” and chant for its death. Both use conspiracy theories’ narratives to galvanize their bases and justify their cause. Both benefit from the intensification of sectarian rivalry in Yemen where none existed before. Both preach ideological aspirations that are not compatible with a free civil democratic state. Both stand to lose the most (of what they have gained by force) if a genuine democratic process is to resume in Yemen.

AQAP’s narratives, like that of its mother organization al-Qaeda, are based on the false assertion that it is the “true” follower of Islam. AQAP uses both “takfiri” (accusing others of apostasy) narratives and conspiracy theories against the west to justify the killing of Muslims and non-Muslims respectively. This radical ideology, before the Houthis’ war of 2014, was not a very effective local recruitment tool for AQAP; other financial incentives were more attractive.

Many in the ranks of AQAP, in the past, were foreigners. President Hadi made that clear in a speech in April 2014 in which he stated that 70 percent of AQAP were foreign fighters. In the past as well as today, many of the followers of AQAP in the areas of its influence, were not convinced with al-Qaeda radical ideology. AQAP used to rely more on providing financial compensations, in those areas, to attract followers and sympathizers rather than on preaching radicalization.

After the Houthis embarkation on their illegitimate quest to take control of Yemen (following their September 2014 coup), AQAP introduced a slightly different narrative. As they invaded other governorates, the Houthis carelessly labeled, and still do, all those

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14- Embassy of Yemen Report: “Yemen’s Crisis and Threatened Transition”, p. 4
16- Mohammed Abdusalam (the Houthis’ Spokesperson), Interview, al-Masera TV, April 22, 2017.
17- Qasim al-Raymi (AQAP Leader), Interview, AQAP media outlet, Mar 2017.
who opposed them as either “Dawaesh” (members of ISIL or Daesh), affiliates of al-Qaeda, or simply “takfiris” (those who accuse others of apostasy).\(^\text{18}\) AQAP used this blind accusation as part of its revised propaganda to appeal to Sunni communities whom otherwise were not interested or influenced by al-Qaeda radical ideology. So, instead of solely focusing on labeling its opponents as apostates, and benefiting from the Houthis advances in Sunni dominated communities, AQAP, now, portrays itself as “the defender” of “Sunni” Islam against the “Shiai” Houthis. It did this and, at the same time, still regards the Government and the Arab Coalition forces as its “legitimate targets.”\(^\text{19}\)

As for the Houthis, they too benefited from stirring up sectarianism in Yemen. They used AQAP and Daesh terrorist attacks against civilians in Sanaa as propaganda fuel to recruit followers in what they called “Jihad in the name of Allah.” This was the Houthis justification when they invaded the southern governorates in 2015. Ironically, that is also the same misused Islamic banner al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations use to justify killing others.

**The Way Forward**

There is no military solution to terrorism and violent extremism. The solution must be a comprehensive one. Military operations, nonetheless, are and will still be an integral part of the fight against AQAP and other terrorist organizations in Yemen. However, without incorporating deradicalization and other development programs, a military approach alone will only exacerbate the problem.

The Government, therefore, is determined to revive and implement its CNCS. This will allow it, for instance, to provide more public services, to introduce more development projects, and to foster new relationships of trust and cooperation with its citizens. The Government is now in control of more than 80 percent of Yemen (As shown in the map below).

**The Houthis and Sectarianism in Yemen**

Zaidis and Shafi’is are the two main coexisting sects of Islam practiced in Yemen for a very long time. There was no Sunni-Shiai divide that distinguished the way Yemenis go about their lives. Both Zaidis and Shafi’is have always prayed at the same mosques, intermarried, and coexisted with no sectarian rivalry amongst them. It was not until the Houthis’ war that such rivalry was instigated.

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18- Many prisoners, including children, captured by the Yemeni Armed Forces and the Arab Coalition—after being recruited by the Houthis—attest to this fact.
19- AQAP Leader, Interview.
And, despite facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, it continues to rebuild the liberated areas and to provide basic public services. Furthermore, Yemen will continue to conduct military operations against AQAP’s safe havens, and will continue to cooperate closely with the United States’ administration in all fields, including counterterrorism operations.

The US State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism in 2012 stated that “[t]he Yemeni government, under President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, remained a strong U.S. counterterrorism partner”; and Yemen reaffirms its readiness and willingness to continue to be so. It is imperative, however, to emphasize the need for reinforcing Yemen counterterrorism units and implementing other deradicalization and development programs through the support and assistance of the Arab Coalition countries, the United States, and the international community. And most importantly, it is imperative first to reinstate the State’s institutions and to maintain stability, security and the ability to uphold the rule of law.

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20- Since 2012, there has been no US bilateral assistance towards Yemen counterterrorism efforts (Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and Department of Defense DoD); reinstating this support is vital to the Government efforts in the fight against terrorism.
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Photo cover: Members of a Yemen Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) in a practice drill fighting against al-Qaeda militants, Sanaa, Yemen, Nov. 9, 2010 / Photo: Yin Ke/Xinhua