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The media wing of one of al Qaeda's Yemeni franchises, al Qaeda in Yemen, released a statement on online jihadist forums Jan. 20 from the group's leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, announcing the formation of a single al Qaeda group for the Arabian Peninsula under his command. According to al-Wuhayshi, the new group, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, would consist of his former group (al Qaeda in Yemen) as well as members of the now-defunct Saudi al Qaeda franchise.

The press release noted that the Saudi militants have pledged allegiance to al-Wuhayshi, an indication that the reorganization was not a merger of equals. This is understandable, given that the jihadists in Yemen have been active recently while their

Saudi counterparts have not conducted a meaningful attack in years. The announcement also related that a Saudi national (and former Guantanamo detainee) identified as Abu-Sayyaf al-Shihri has been appointed as al-Wuhayshi's deputy. In some ways, this is similar to the way Ayman al-Zawahiri and his faction of Egyptian Islamic Jihad swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden and were integrated into al Qaeda prime.

While not specifically mentioned, the announcement of a single al Qaeda entity for the entire Arabian Peninsula and the unanimous support by jihadist militants on the Arabian Peninsula for al-Wuhayshi suggests the new organization will incorporate elements of the other al Qaeda franchise in Yemen, the Yemen Soldiers Brigade.

The announcement also provided links to downloadable versions of the latest issue of the group's online magazine, Sada al-Malahim, (Arabic for "The Echo of Battle"). The Web page links provided to download the magazine also featured trailers advertising the pending release of a new video from the group, now referred to by its new name, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The translated name of this new organization sounds very similar to the old Saudi al Qaeda franchise, the al Qaeda Organization in the Arabian Peninsula (in Arabic, "Tandheem al Qaeda fi Jazeerat al-Arabiyyah"). But the new group's new Arabic name, Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-Arab, is slightly different. The addition of "al-Jihad" seems to have been influenced by the Iraqi al Qaeda franchise, Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn. The flag of the Islamic State of Iraq also appears in the Jan. 24 video, further illustrating the deep ties between the newly announced organization and al Qaeda in Iraq. Indeed, a number of Yemeni militants traveled to Iraq to fight, and these returning al Qaeda veterans have played a large part in the increased sophistication of militant attacks in Yemen over the past year.

Four days after the Jan. 20 announcement, links for a 19-minute video from the new group titled "We start from here and we will meet at al-Aqsa" began to appear in jihadist corners of

cyberspace. Al-Aqsa refers to the al-Aqsa Mosque on what Jews know as Temple Mount and Muslims refer to as Al Haram Al Sharif. The video threatens Muslim leaders in the region (whom it refers to as criminal tyrants), including Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Saudi royal family, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. It also threatens so-called "crusader forces" supporting the regional Muslim leaders, and promises to carry the jihad from the Arabian Peninsula to Israel so as to liberate Muslim holy sites and brethren in Gaza.

An interview with al-Wuhayshi aired Jan. 27 on Al Jazeera echoed these sentiments. During the interview, al-Wuhayshi noted that the "crusades" against "Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia" have been launched from bases in the Arabian Peninsula, and that because of this, "all crusader interests" in the peninsula "should be struck."

A different take on events

Most of the analysis in Western media regarding the preceding developments has focused on how two former detainees at the U.S. facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, appear in the Jan. 24 video - one of whom was al-Shihri - and that both were graduates of Saudi Arabia's ideological rehabilitation program, a government deprogramming course for jihadists. In addition to al-Shihri who, according to the video was Guantanamo detainee 372, the video also contains a statement from Abu-al-Harith Muhammad al-Awfi. Al-Awfi, who was identified as a field commander in the video, was allegedly former Guantanamo detainee 333. Prisoner lists from Guantanamo obtained by Stratfor appear to confirm that al-Shihri was in fact Guantanamo detainee No. 372. We did not find al-Awfi's name on the list, however, another name appears as detainee No. 333. Given the proclivity of jihadists to use fraudulent identities, it is entirely possible that al-Awfi is an alias, or that he was held at Guantanamo under an assumed name. At any rate, we doubt al-Awfi would fabricate this claim and then broadcast it in such a public manner.

The media focus on the Guantanamo aspect is understandable in the wake of U.S. President Barack Obama's Jan. 22 executive order to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and all the complexities surrounding that decision. Clearly, some men released from Guantanamo, and even those graduated from the Saudi government's rehabilitation program, can and have returned to the jihadist fold. Ideology is hard to extinguish, especially an ideology that teaches adherents that there is a war against Islam and that the "true believers" will be persecuted for their beliefs. Al Qaeda has even taken this one step further and has worked to prepare its members not only to face death, but also to endure imprisonment and harsh interrogation. A substantial number of al Qaeda cadres, such as al-Zawahiri and Abu Yahya al-Libi, have endured both, and have been instrumental in helping members withstand captivity and interrogation.

This physical and ideological preparation means that efforts to induce captured militants to abandon their ideology can wind up reinforcing that ideology when those efforts appear to prove important tenets of the ideology, such as that adherents will be persecuted and that the Muslim rulers are aligned with the West. It is also important to realize that radical Islamist extremists, ultraconservatives and traditionalists tend to have a far better grasp of Islamic religious texts than their moderate, liberal and modernist counterparts. Hence, they have an edge over them

on the ideological battlefield. Those opposing radicals and extremists have a long way to go before they can produce a coherent legitimate, authoritative and authentic alternative Islamic discourse.

In any event, in practical terms there is no system of "re-education" that is 100 percent effective in eradicating an ideology in humans except execution. There will always be people who will figure out how to game the system and regurgitate whatever is necessary to placate their jailers so as to win release. Because of this, it is not surprising to see people like al-Shihri and al-Awfi released only to re-emerge in their former molds.

Another remarkable feature of the Jan. 27 video is that it showcased four different leaders of the regional group, something rarely seen. In addition to al-Wuhayshi, al-Shihri and al-Awfi, the video also included a statement from Qasim al-Rami, who is suspected of having been involved with the operational planning of the suicide attack on a group of Spanish tourists in Marib, Yemen, in July 2007.

In our estimation, however, perhaps the most remarkable feature about these recent statements from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is not the appearance of these two former Guantanamo detainees in the video, or the appearance of four distinct leaders of the group in a single video, but rather what the statements tell us about the state of the al Qaeda franchises in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Signposts

That the remnants of the Saudi al Qaeda franchise have been forced to flee their country and join up with the Yemeni group demonstrates that the Saudi government's campaign to eradicate the jihadist organization has been very successful. The Saudi franchise was very active in 2003 and 2004, but has not attempted a significant attack since the February 2006 attack against the oil facility in Abqaiq. In spite of the large number of Saudi fighters who have traveled to militant training camps, and to fight in places such as Iraq, the Saudi franchise has had significant problems organizing operational cells inside the kingdom.

Additionally, since the death of Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin, the Saudi franchise has struggled to find a charismatic and savvy leader. (The Saudis have killed several leaders who succeeded al-Muqrin.) In a militant organization conducting an insurgency or terrorist operations, leadership is critical not only to the operational success of the group but also to its ability to recruit new members, raise funding and acquire resources such as weapons.

Like the Saudi node, the fortunes of other al Qaeda regional franchises have risen or fallen based upon ability of the franchise's leadership. For example, in August 2006 al Qaeda announced with great fanfare that the Egyptian militant group Gamaah al-Islamiyah (GAI) had joined forces with al Qaeda. Likewise, in November 2007 al Qaeda announced that the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) had formally joined the al Qaeda network. But neither of these groups really ever got off the ground.

While a large portion of the responsibility for the groups' lack of success may be due to the

oppressive natures of the Egyptian and Libyan governments and the aggressive efforts those governments undertook to control the new al Qaeda franchises, we believe the lack of success also stems from poor leadership. (There are certainly other significant factors contributing to the failure of al Qaeda nodes in various places, such as the alienation of the local population.)

Conversely, we believe that an important reason for the resurgence of the al Qaeda franchise in Yemen has been the leadership of al-Wuhayshi. As we have noted in the past, Yemen is a much easier environment for militants to operate in than either Egypt or Libya. There are many Salafists employed in the Yemeni security and intelligence apparatus who at the very least are sympathetic to the jihadist cause. These men are holdovers from the Yemeni civil war, when Saleh formed an alliance with Salafists and recruited jihadists to fight Marxist forces in South Yemen. This alliance continues today, with Saleh deriving significant political support from radical Islamists.

Many of the state's key institutions (including the military) employ Salafists, making any major crackdown on militant Islamists in the country politically difficult. This sentiment among the security forces also helps explain the many jihadists who have escaped from Yemeni prisons - such as al-Wuhayshi.

Yemen has also long been at the crossroads of a number of jihadist theaters, including Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Levant, Egypt and Somalia. Yemen also is a country with a thriving arms market, a desert warrior tradition and a tribal culture that often bristles against government authority and that makes it difficult for the government to assert control over large swaths of the country. Yemeni tribesmen also tend to be religiously conservative and susceptible to the influence of jihadist theology.

In spite of this favorable environment, the Yemeni al Qaeda franchise has largely floundered since 9/11. Much of this is due to U.S. and Yemeni efforts to decapitate the group, such as the strike by a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle on then-leader of al Qaeda in Yemen, Abu Ali al-Harithi, in late 2002 and the subsequent arrest of his replacement, Mohammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, in late 2003. The combination of these operations in such a short period helped cripple al Qaeda in Yemen's operational capability.

As Stratfor noted in spring 2008, however, al Qaeda militants in Yemen have become more active and more effective under the leadership of al-Wuhayshi, an ethnic Yemeni who spent time in Afghanistan as a lieutenant under bin Laden. After his time with bin Laden, Iranian authorities arrested al-Wuhayshi, later returning him to Yemen in 2003 via an Iranian-Yemeni extradition deal. He subsequently escaped from a high-security prison outside the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in February 2006 along with Jamal al-Badawi (the leader of the cell that carried out the suicide bombing of the USS Cole).

Al-Wuhayshi's established ties with al Qaeda prime and bin Laden in particular not only provide him legitimacy in the eyes of other jihadists, in more practical terms, they may have provided him the opportunity to learn the tradecraft necessary to successfully lead a militant group and conduct operations. His close ties to influential veterans of al Qaeda in Yemen like al-Badawi also may have helped him infuse new energy into the struggle in Yemen in 2008.

While the group had been on a rising trajectory in 2008, things had been eerily quiet in Yemen since the Sept. 17, 2008, attack against the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa and the resulting campaign against the group. The recent flurry of statements has broken the quiet, followed by a Warden Message on Jan. 26 warning of a possible threat against the compound of the U.S. Embassy in Yemen and a firefight at a security checkpoint near the embassy hours later.

At this point, it appears the shooting incident may not be related to the threat warning and may instead have been the result of jumpy nerves. Reports suggest the police may have fired at a speeding car before the occupants, who were armed tribesmen, fired back. Although there have been efforts to crack down on the carrying of weapons in Sanaa, virtually every Yemeni male owns an AK-variant assault rifle of some sort; like the ceremonial jambiya dagger, such a rifle is considered a must-have accessory in most parts of the country. Not surprisingly, incidents involving gunfire are not uncommon in Yemen.

Either way, we will continue to keep a close eye on Yemen and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. As we have seen in the past, press statements are not necessarily indicative of future jihadist performance. It will be important to watch developments in Yemen for signs that will help determine whether this recent merger and announcement is a sign of desperation by a declining group, or whether the addition of fresh blood from Saudi Arabia will help breathe new life into al-Wuhayshi's operations and provide his group the means to make good on its threats.

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