

# Ansar al-Sharia and Governance in Southern Yemen

*By Robin Simcox*

**Y**EMEN IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPOVERISHED NATIONS IN THE MIDDLE East. It has also emerged as the most important front of the U.S.-led war against al-Qaeda (AQ) and its affiliates. Given that the Yemeni state's inability to provide basic provisions and services is a key driver behind AQ's growth, these two issues have become inextricably linked.

A war for territory between the Yemeni government and AQ's Yemeni franchise, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has escalated since the start of the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Throughout the upheaval, the AQAP made significant territorial gains, especially in the Abyan and Shabwa provinces. In March 2011, al-Qaeda's insurgent wing Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) took control of the southern town of Ja'ar in Abyan.<sup>1</sup> While the town's fall to AQAP was significant, it was not a complete surprise. AQAP already had a strong base there; Ja'ar supplied the Afghan mujahideen with fighters in the 1980s, and remnants of the Aden Abyan Islamic Army already lived in the city. Two months later, AQAP took control of Zinjibar, Abyan's capital. Shaqwa, in Shabwa province, was then captured in August 2011. The towns were subsequently declared Islamic "emirates." Meanwhile, AQAP's leadership remained entrenched in the mountainous territory of Azzan in Shabwa.

AAS did not have to win a series of set piece battles with the army to gain control of these towns. As Barbara Bodine, the former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, said: "there was simply "no-one there to stop them."<sup>2</sup> By the time the political crisis developed in Sana'a, state control in southern Yemen had essentially evaporated. Moreover, al-Qaeda's tactics had evolved. It became evident that they were beginning to provide

basic services to the people in the towns they controlled in an effort to harness popular support. Winning this support would, presumably, allow them to recruit in even greater numbers.

The Yemeni military only regained control of these towns in June 2012. After the government expelled AAS, the group stated in June 2012 that under their leadership:

The Sharia was implemented, security prevailed, people were safe on their properties, honors and blood, the virtue was established and the vice was removed, crime disappeared, and blackmail ended, also the aid reached to the villages of the people and the services reached to many villages and taxes were cancelled and even the fees for services like water, electricity, municipality and others were cancelled.<sup>3</sup>

These are significant claims; and, if AAS take these claims seriously, or even if they are trying to give the perception of such achievements, it is important to understand how much is fact and how much is propaganda. The manner in which AAS governed the areas it controlled over the last year provides insight into how AQ could resolve one of its most challenging dilemmas: how to gain local support for its global agenda. In some ways, AAS's Abyan and Shabwa policy provides an outline of how the group may have to operate in the coming years to retain its relevance and potency. It also gives clues about how governments may be forced to respond.

## The AQAP—AAS Nexus

AQAP'S CREATION WAS ANNOUNCED ON JANUARY 20, 2009 FOLLOWING A MERGER OF the Yemeni and Saudi wings of al-Qaeda. Soon thereafter, the group became especially notorious as it proved to be operationally capable of breaching Western security measures. In several instances, it nearly succeeded in carrying out terrorist plots that would have resulted in mass casualties.

On December 25, 2009, AQAP recruit Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted and failed to detonate a bomb concealed in his underwear on a flight headed to Detroit, Michigan. On October 29, 2010, AQAP bombs were discovered in U.S.-bound cargo planes during stopovers in the United Arab Emirates and the UK. In April 2012, the CIA thwarted an AQAP plan to use another underwear bomb on a flight headed to the U.S. after a Saudi agent infiltrated the group. These plots prompted John Brennan, assistant to President Obama on homeland security and counterterrorism, to call AQAP "the most

operationally active node of the al-Qaeda network.”<sup>4</sup> The perception of AQAP in the West as a group that specializes in spectacular, creative terrorist attacks designed to kill on a mass scale has, however, a limited bearing on how the group is regarded in Yemen. Much of this simply comes down to the work that AAS carries out at a local level.

On October 4, 2011, the State Department designated AAS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and as an extension of AQAP. It stated that “AAS is simply AQAP’s effort to rebrand itself, with the aim of manipulating people to join AQAP’s terrorist cause.”<sup>5</sup> Those who have seen the group in action in Yemen have said the same.<sup>6</sup> Both groups are headed by Nasir al-Wahishi, and both share supporters. Senior AQAP cleric Abu Zubayr Adel al-Abab, has said that “the name Ansar al-Shari’a is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work, to tell people about our work and goals.”<sup>7</sup> Mohammed al-Bashar, the Yemeni Embassy’s official spokesman in Washington, D.C., described AAS as “AQAP’s attempt to empower local jihadi-linked actors with ties to AQAP, and rebrand the movement under a global positive banner. After all, who would dare say no to Islamic law?”<sup>8</sup>

Within the organization, however, there are undoubtedly layers of loyalty, support, sympathy and membership. Yemenis concerned with local issues may consider themselves part of AAS but not a global jihadist movement such as al-Qaeda. Ambassador Bodine posits that even if key AQAP leaders were eliminated, AAS would still exist; moreover, even if AAS was eliminated, it may not destroy AQAP. The two groups “feed on each other. They support each other. They certainly are related, but they’re not identical.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the fact that AAS is a vital component of AQAP’s attempt to harness ground support for its agenda, and the fact AAS can and does promote sharia law without having to explicitly associate with al-Qaeda,<sup>10</sup> are in and of themselves signs that the group is increasingly concerned about fighting its propaganda wars in a more effective manner. Therefore, an analysis of AAS’s interest in providing effective governance provides insights regarding AQAP’s priorities and how it may operate in the future.

## A Change in Style

AL-QAEDA’S PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS AT TAKING OVER, CONTROLLING AND THEN GOVERNING significant pieces of territory have all been failures. This was most apparent in Iraq, where AQ found it impossible to maintain any level of support. This was not only because of its inability to govern, but because of inter-tribal fighting and high levels of civilian casualties. The growing disaffection of local Muslim populations culminated in the Anbar Awakening of late 2006. An AAS official interviewed in Azzan this year

said that the group was keen to avoid the same confrontations that they faced in Iraq, and the biggest threat to his organization was not the U.S., but southern Yemen's tribes.<sup>11</sup>

The group's tactics have adapted accordingly. In Yemen, AAS has courted religious and tribal leaders with grievances. Muslim collateral damage has been reduced to focusing on government targets. Jalal Baleedi Al-Murqashi, al-Qaeda's commander of the Abyan governorate, indicated a fundamental shift in political strategy when he stated that "we are doing our best to ensure that the vulnerable people, whom the military and its mercenaries are using as human shields, are not hurt."<sup>12</sup> Safa al-Ahmad, a film director who visited southern Yemen in 2012, said an AAS representative had told her that the group had "learned their lesson from Iraq," and were focused on a "hearts and minds" campaign.<sup>13</sup> To al-Bashar, it was "like they had read a U.S. Army COIN manual."<sup>14</sup>

Abu Zubayr Adel al-Abab promised that AAS would find "solutions" for the biggest problem facing Ja'ar: a "lack of public services such as sewage and water."<sup>15</sup> Taking this seemingly more conciliatory and "political" approach, AAS provided a host of important material services to needy populations that the central government in Sana'a had been incapable of providing for many years. At the same time, AAS began to introduce an alternative legal system, and they attempted to implement their own standards on social and criminal behavior on those who lived in the towns they controlled.

There is a consensus that AAS provided food, gas, and fresh water to the populations under its control.<sup>16</sup> However, the achievement AAS was especially proud of and keen to highlight was its ability to provide electricity. Several sources have corroborated this, including a host of Ja'ar residents interviewed between March and May 2012<sup>17</sup> and a documentary filmmaker who visited the region.<sup>18</sup>

An AAS propaganda video filmed in March 2012 and distributed through their Madad News Agency media wing shows AAS connecting electricity lines in Ja'ar suburbs and images of electric lights and fans operating correctly. The video goes on to ask several different villagers how many houses in their area are being powered by AAS electricity. The answers range from 50 to 300. All interviewed are fulsome in their praise for AAS. One al-Fateh villager is asked how the group treated the suburb: he responds "Oh, sweet. They were great!" A resident of Hajfoor notes "how many times have we asked for it and demanded it, electricity and water, no one gave us our request...God give them goodness, [AAS] didn't fail us." A resident in Seehan speaks about approximately 300 houses that now have electricity, stating "Even the children, look at the children, they are happy! We used to wish for this, our grandfathers used to wish for this." Another interviewed in Saken Waees says that "Ansar Al-Sharia did what the generations before didn't do."<sup>19</sup>

These interviews regularly stress that AAS provided these public services for free and performed them quickly. These achievements are then explicitly contrasted with

the fact that electricity had not been provided in these periods for, in some instances, decades. In the words of one resident of Ja'ar not featured in the propaganda video, "Ansar al-Sharia have solved many problems for us that the government hadn't managed to do for 20 years."<sup>20</sup>

Basic provisions, however, are not the limit of AAS's goals. There is also evidence that they installed sewage pipes,<sup>21</sup> provided teachers, ran the police force,<sup>22</sup> collected trash, and connected phone lines.<sup>23</sup> According to Nadwa al-Dawsari, the director of Partners Yemen, an NGO based in Sana'a, AAS even went so far as to stop the practice of cheating during school exams in Azzan.<sup>24</sup> It is also believed that they hijacked Saudi aid drops containing items intended for Yemeni soldiers and distributed it to residents in towns they controlled.<sup>25</sup> Other Ja'ar sources have said AAS's population outreach efforts even involve providing basic healthcare to some, though not all, residents.<sup>26</sup> Al-Razi hospital in Abyan, for example, was rumored to have only treated sick and injured members of AAS.<sup>27</sup>

Nadwa al-Dawsari believes that AAS in South Yemen were "genuinely trying to provide services in the areas that it controlled as a means of establishing support and legitimacy."<sup>28</sup> Safa al-Ahmad, having personally seen the group's presence in these towns, confirms that "They were really into running [it]."<sup>29</sup> AAS is also an ideological organization, however, and their efforts were not restricted solely to providing material aid and services. While referencing AAS's sharia law courts, al-Dawsari says the group's role was "not just collecting garbage or helping poor families but also providing justice."<sup>30</sup>

An AAS judge interviewed in April 2012 stated the new courts system had resolved 42 cases in two weeks, and claimed that "People come to us from parts we don't control and ask us to solve their problems. The sharia justice system is swift and incorruptible. Most of the cases we solve within the day."<sup>31</sup> Rulings were made almost instantly on backlogged cases left unresolved for over a decade.<sup>32</sup> The courts even dealt with murder cases.<sup>33</sup> According to al-Dawsari, these courts were "treat[ing] people as equal...regardless of their social status or tribal affiliation."<sup>34</sup>

A particular incident in April 2012 supports al-Dawsari's claim. A member of the Alja'adnah tribe in Abyan murdered a fellow tribe member.<sup>35</sup> Tribes have generally tended to prefer their flexible, tribal law over an AAS brand of sharia. Yet as al-Dawsari notes, "such killing incidents risk dragging the whole tribe in revenge killing. The formal justice system is ineffective and the informal system has limitations when it comes to revenge killing issues." Therefore, AAS offered their services to the community, and locals subsequently turned the murderer to AAS. This suggests that on some level, they trusted their justice system.<sup>36</sup>

To an extent, AQAP has been willing to compromise on the harshness of its brand of sharia in order to gain local support. An unemployed laborer in Ja'ar commented

that the group “talked about religion in a friendly way until people felt comfortable with them.” Moreover, the market for *khat*, the local narcotic, was moved to the outskirts of Ja’ar but not banned.<sup>37</sup> An AAS soldier described both cigarettes and *khat* as “sinful” and “bad for society,” but claimed that they tried to “persuade people to give up their sins...[not] force them.”<sup>38</sup>

However, even if AAS made attempts to moderate its agenda and tactics for political gain, there should be no illusions about the harshness of the group’s implementation of sharia law or the totality of its overall agenda.<sup>39</sup> One suspected spy was crucified, while others were publicly executed. In Ja’ar, a local shaykh who objected to AAS targeting Muslims and killing soldiers was imprisoned.<sup>40</sup> AAS also flogged those who drank alcohol,<sup>41</sup> and banned Arabic music. Anti-American sentiment remains virulent: AAS has installed loudspeakers in public places that denounce America and U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia. Many claim that Jews control the U.S.<sup>42</sup>

The group also reportedly assaulted those who did not attend mosque at the required times.<sup>43</sup> This contrasts with AAS claims that their response to those who do not want to pray is to “just take them aside and advise them on the importance of prayer” and, if that does not work, to “lock them somewhere quiet and give them reading material until they realize how wrong they were.”<sup>44</sup>

AAS has also chopped off the hands of those accused of stealing. One of their online video shows members revelling in such incidents.<sup>45</sup> AAS judges continue to say that such incidents are “not to punish the thief, it is to deter the rest of society.”<sup>46</sup> Another member of AAS tried to stress the importance of “context,” saying “If you steal food from the market because you are hungry, we will not cut the hand. But...if you steal during prayer time, or if you steal more than something like \$65, then we cut.”<sup>47</sup> This contrasts with stories which have emerged from others living under AAS rule. For example, when the father of a youth whose hand was amputated asked the group why the punishment had taken place, he was told by an AAS fighter “*mazaj*”—or, “we were in the mood.”<sup>48</sup>

Such actions are likely to have confirmed to most Yemenis the brutality with which AAS intended to govern. However, one Ja’ar resident said that “al-Qaeda members made us feel safe, they cut off the hands of thieves. This is part of sharia: those who steal should have their hands cut off.”<sup>49</sup> Another resident, speaking in September 2012 after the army’s offensive against AAS, claimed that “When al-Qaeda was here, it was good. There were no robberies. People treated each other in a decent way. No one would try to make problems.”<sup>50</sup> It is possible that these interviewees were simply AAS sympathizers. However, it is also possible that the punishments were not universally disapproved of.

If AAS wanted to use these punishments as a deterrent, then it worked. Shops were left open during times of prayer, and no stealing took place.<sup>51</sup> A Ja’ar street vendor said

that “People felt secure and safe (under al-Qaeda)...People would leave their shops open when they went to pray and when we came back our goods were untouched.”<sup>52</sup> This was a respite for tradesmen, who had previously been forced to bribe local criminals in order to allow them to operate their business: a practice which returned as soon as AAS had been forced out of Ja’ar.

AAS eventually gained enough confidence to invite Western journalists to Ja’ar, albeit in a “highly controlled way.”<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, they were willing to allow Western observers to see their running of the town first hand.<sup>54</sup> The material benefits such as greater access to food, electricity and water that AAS brought to parts of Abyan and Shabwa certainly made their policies popular to at least some of the population. However, the key to assessing AAS’s success overall is to study how receptive residents of these towns were to their ideological approach: whether the citizens of Abyan and Shabwa became more sympathetic to AAS while they were in power, and how they reacted to their departure. In this respect, AAS’s experiment in governance was not as successful.

## Hearts and Minds

ON SOME LEVEL, IT WOULD NOT BE SURPRISING IF SOME YEMENIS IN THE SOUTH WERE receptive to the AAS message. The majority of the population there remains destitute and marginalized. Alternative governing models such as socialism and Sultanism have been tried and have largely failed in Yemen. The state has a reputation for illegitimacy and corruption from which it has never really recovered. In oil-rich governorates such as Shabwa and Mareb, there is a perception that wealth generated goes to the regime, while basic services in most areas are non-existent.<sup>55</sup> For these, among other reasons, Jalal Baleedi Al-Murqashi, al-Qaeda’s commander of the Abyan governorate, claimed in May 2012 that:

Several people in Abyan, Shebwa, Baida’a and Hadramout governorates want us to be there, so that we apply the laws of Islamic Sharia and maintain security. People in those areas love us and now we have become a part of them. They realized that we are honest and fair.<sup>56</sup>

AAS certainly won some hearts and minds. After AAS’s rule collapsed, a disappointed Ja’ar resident was quoted as saying that, under AAS, “Everyone was comfortable, the young and old.”<sup>57</sup> And yet, overall, it seems the most common reaction to the group’s departure was happiness and relief. A member of the Zinjibar local council said the

“horrors” of AAS rule were “unthinkable,” and that she was “incredibly happy” at their departure.<sup>58</sup> Another Zinjibar resident stated that it was “great” that AAS had gone.<sup>59</sup> One woman interviewed in Abyan also expressed happiness at AAS leaving, saying “We can’t believe this, it’s a dream today! This dream came true today! We didn’t see something like today. It’s a priceless day...Thank God for this day that we are living in today!”<sup>60</sup> A man from the same region claimed “they are not really Ansar Al-Sharia, they are Ansar of destruction.”<sup>61</sup>

A Ja’ar resident speaking out against the group said “Man, if they wanted to jihad and that crap, send them to Israel, not here. We are Muslims, all of us are Muslims. If there is really jihad, let it go to the people who we are truly against and are enemies of Allah. We are not enemies of Allah.”<sup>62</sup> Even Ja’ar residents thankful for the services AAS was able to provide still stressed the need to expel them. Two such individuals interviewed said that “We have to get rid of al-Qaeda, and yes, we need help from anyone...including America,” and that “[AAS] have brought war. Civilians are dying now because of them.”<sup>63</sup>

The outbreak of war has provided another incentive for Yemenis to reject AAS. There is an awareness that the AAS presence has led and will continue to lead to a greater U.S. drone and Yemeni Air Force presence, more bombing and higher levels of violence. As it becomes increasingly clear that an AAS presence will lead to a forceful Western response, AAS could find it increasingly difficult to muster much support.

Even some of those who initially welcomed AAS’s presence came to change their opinion. One Ja’ar resident said that:

In the beginning when [AAS] came here, they were simple people and weak. We were one of those people who were harmed by the government, because the government stole from us, and we were without work. We aligned with them in the beginning. We found out, thank God, before we did anything with them, we found out that they are liars...they love blood, and they are terrorists.<sup>64</sup>

This type of statement, in which the respondent confirmed his initial involvement with the group was out of anger and frustration with the Sana’a government, helps confirm that while AAS is increasing in numbers, this is not always for ideological reasons. As one former recruit who eventually became disillusioned with the group commented: “I thought Ansar al-Sharia would improve our lives.”<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, it is also known that tribal elders have recruited fighters for AAS in return for wells, irrigation systems and food for their tribes.<sup>66</sup> Some join to fight what they regard as an illegitimate regime.<sup>67</sup> Yet, these localized and short-term gains for the

group do not necessarily translate into support for AQ's global ambitions. Furthermore, it can only ultimately have limited traction in Yemen because, as Ambassador Bodine says, despite its best efforts, "al-Qaeda does not have a constructive program."<sup>68</sup> It has certainly not yet found one that appeals to the majority of Yemenites.

Despite this, it is important to remember the impoverishment of Yemeni society, and the social conditions working in AAS's favor. There are still significant pools of disaffected and politically disenfranchised youths for AAS to recruit. It is estimated that 54 percent of the population lives in chronic poverty; unemployment is as high as 40 percent.<sup>69</sup> The national average age is just 18.1 years old. Furthermore, 16 to 28 year olds make up two thirds of the local population in Abyan and Shabwa.<sup>70</sup> A young, politically disenfranchised, impoverished and unemployed populace will not all gravitate to AAS—yet they are likely to distrust and dislike the government as much as many of their parents. A weak central government unable to command authority or gain popular support is likely to lead to greater opportunity for AAS to pursue its political agenda.

## Aftermath of AAS Rule

IT IS ENCOURAGING THAT MANY YEMENI'S LIVING UNDER IMPOVERISHED CIRCUMSTANCES remain resistant to al-Qaeda's ideology. Yet, despite AAS's departure, there are still grave problems facing the towns that they formerly controlled. These problems are undoubtedly linked to the central government's continued inability to provide basic services and justice.

For example, electricity and water shortages in Abyan are once again commonplace.<sup>71</sup> Not only does this aggravate many Yemenis, but civilians in these areas do remember that AAS managed to provide such services just months ago. In a June 2012 interview, a Ja'ar resident indifferent to the ideology of AAS commented that "We haven't had water or electricity since the day before yesterday. We have never had such disruptions under al Qaeda rule."<sup>72</sup> This remains a problem for the government. Their inability to perform basic services enables al-Qaeda to recruit more effectively than any they could do on their own.

Reconnecting basic services is not going to be easy. Towns that AAS formerly controlled suffered tremendously during the war.<sup>73</sup> There has been more than \$2.5 billion in damage to buildings in Abyan.<sup>74</sup> Hundreds of thousands fled the fighting and many of the displaced remain in refugee camps in Aden. Meanwhile, looters have robbed abandoned houses.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, many residents do not want to return to their hometowns for fear of

left behind AAS landmines and IEDs.<sup>76</sup> Some of those who have returned have been killed or maimed by these weapons, as have the soldiers trying to de-mine the streets.<sup>77</sup> The jubilation of those who have made it back to their hometowns can be short-lived. Al-Bashar described the “destruction” in Zinjibar as “unbelievable... I don’t know how they are going to rebuild the city.”<sup>78</sup> Yemeni television has also showed the destruction of Zinjibar. A resident interviewed said that:

The magnitude of destruction is big. This area is entirely destroyed... They put the bombs in the streets so they can destroy and kill the people. You can’t live here... we asked the government to go ahead and fix the water Al-Qaeda destroyed and polluted. They need to be fast because we are homeless with no water, or food or electricity.<sup>79</sup>

A woman interview in Ja’ar said that:

Look at all the buildings and houses, all of them are destroyed. They say they all have mines. I am one of those people who were told to go back home because our houses are clear, and they are in good condition. But where do I go back to? Which house? Look at the destruction! I can’t settle down in my life in a place like this. Not like before.<sup>80</sup>

An Abyan citizen interviewed spelled out these problems, saying that:

After the army won, Hamdillah, we hoped life would come back, especially the necessary services: electricity, water, schools. If you passed by in Zinjibar, you’d see the reality. There are no services. We hope that the services come back, so people come back.<sup>81</sup>

At present, this remains unlikely. Given the significant degree to which Yemenis distrust their government, anger among the population will likely remain widespread. For example, an Abyan citizen interviewed in the wake of AAS’s expulsion blamed AAS, former President Saleh and the local government for their situation:

They are *Ansar Al-Shar* (evil), not *Ansar Al-Sharia*...The infrastructure now needs rebuilding, needs time, needs cooperation of efforts, and all of this is because Ali Abdullah Saleh...[He] is the reason behind the destruction of Abyan and our homelessness, and the leaders of our area are the people who caused us to be homeless.<sup>82</sup>

The government's agriculture department is now surveying the damage in the affected areas. Some electric generators have arrived in Abyan, some water pumps are working in Zinjibar and new electric generators have been installed in Aden in a bid to resolve water supply issues. Deliveries of water are also beginning to increase. Yet al-Bashar acknowledges that this is now a "key moment." If the government does not rebuild and de-mine affected areas in Abyan and Shabwa, then significant problems lie ahead. He states it plainly himself: "What they are saying in Abyan is (1) landmines are killing me. (2) I need electricity. For (1) you can blame Ansar al-Sharia. For (2), you end up blaming the government."<sup>83</sup>

Sana'a has established a fund to help rebuild Abyan; however, it will be impossible to rebuild the areas destroyed in enough time to prevent further humanitarian disaster. In Ambassador Bodine's view, the entire experience of AAS running southern Yemen towns has just "underscored the need for government services in there," and the need for them to be capable of appealing to and responding to the basic needs of the local population.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

AL-BASHAR SAYS THAT ULTIMATELY AAS'S PROVISION OF BASIC SERVICES AMOUNTED to a "few simple projects." He tends to think that AAS's propaganda was extremely effective, stating they were "really good in promoting the little things they've done."<sup>85</sup> To some extent, it is likely that AAS was overstating what services they were able to provide. There will remain some debate over the effectiveness of their governance.

There is no doubt that AAS was more effective than Sana'a had been in a long time at addressing the lack of basic provisions. AAS understood what services were key and exploited them. They proved capable of organizing themselves into an increasingly formidable opponent militarily, but also, politically. Yemen was AQ's most effective political campaign in the Middle East yet. In exploiting key issues in economically deprived, tribal areas, AAS displayed an ability to govern more effectively than AQ had in the past.

At the same time, AAS had many external factors to thank: a pre-existing distrust of central government, security and humanitarian concerns and widespread corruption. Yet despite these factors, support for the group was not widespread in the areas it controlled. Most citizens remained resistant to AQ ideology.

It is possible that AAS's expulsion from the towns it controlled marks the end of

their political agenda. Such is evident in that their fighters have dispersed and reverted to more traditional, hit and run style attacks against military targets. However, there is no guarantee that this will last. In September 2012, reports began to emerge of AAS offering a “Telephone for Help” service in which Abyan citizens suffering from “looting and robbery” at the hands of government forces who were taking the province back were encouraged to report their problems to AAS.<sup>86</sup>

As Ambassador Bodine says, “if we accept that AAS/AQ has learned the lesson of its own past, and is [giving] the perception of providing service and parallel government... then the Yemeni government needs to respond on that level.”<sup>87</sup> Improvements in security will only be effective if the government’s stewardship of the economy and the justice system improves.

AAS’s strategy in Yemen also illustrates a critical aspect of their method: they only target areas where they already enjoy a certain amount of sympathy and political advantage. Ja’ar was a perfect target. Its historical involvement with the Afghan mujahideen and the Aden Abyan Islamic Army ensured that there were already veteran jihadis living in the area who were familiar with its history, culture, traditions, tribal characteristics and who held influence locally. The fact the population ultimately rejected AAS in these towns shows the limits of al-Qaeda’s ideological appeal. However, AAS is proof that al-Qaeda is attempting to develop and adapt as an organization. With instability in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Sinai Peninsula, Syria, Mali and Nigeria, there are a growing number of opportunities for al-Qaeda to apply and improve its political strategy. As in Yemen, its ability to learn from past failures will help shape the group’s success in the future.<sup>88</sup>

## NOTES

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