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A CASE STUDY OF THE RIVALRY OF TERROR-ORGANIZATIONS: AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA VS. DAESH IN YEMEN¹

ABSTRACT: A sharp rivalry evolved in Yemen when Daesh gained foothold in the Arab country. Namely, Yemen was the stronghold of the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula for a long time and the most effective branch of the international al-Qaeda network got a new dangerous concurrent on its own territory. Daesh proved to be successful and raised its popularity among the local radicals due to its brutal campaign against Shias. However, it seems nowadays that AQAP would be the final winner in this deadly competition due to its strength, influence as well as its more flexible and adaptive strategy.

KEYWORDS: Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Daesh, terrorism

The second civil war, which has been raging across Yemen to this day, gave the followers of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS; ISIL; IS; Daesh) a long-awaited opportunity to gain a foothold in the chaos-stricken country. Although experts believe that the number of extremists could hardly be over a few hundred, attacks against the Zaydi Shia group of Houthis highly increased their influence in the region.

But their popularity and accomplishments threatened not only the integrity of the Arabian Peninsula but put the positions of a different terrorist group, putting al-Qaeda at risk. After separating their ways, the two organizations were forced to wage war against Yemen's regular troops, the Western powers, and now each other. In spite of al-Qaeda's several thousand fighters and significantly superior agency, Daesh's lesser establishment could prevail due to its more spectacular and bloody attacks. This raises the question, how the Islamic State could infiltrate Yemen, while it is still viewed as al-Qaeda's exclusive playground.

THE FOUNDING AND ACTIVITIES OF AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was founded in January 2009 by combining the Yemeni and Saudi wings of the international terrorist organization with the firm intention of stepping out of the region of Saudi Arabia and extend its operational area to the US sphere of influence. Over the years it proved to be one of the most active parts of the al-Qaeda network, and it has been associated with a large number of terror attacks and outrages in the aggregate. The first terror plot linked to al-Qaeda took place on 1 June, 2009 in Little Rock, Arkansas, USA, where Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (changed his name from Carlos Leon Bledsoe

¹ Revised and updated version of the article published originally as "Az al-Kaida és az ISIL rivalizálása Jemenben". *Mediterrán Világ* 33–34. 2015. 143–156.

after he converted to Islam) opened fire at a couple of soldiers waiting in front of a recruiting office.² In that same year, on December 25 Omar Faruk Abdulmutallab attached a bomb to his body and tried to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit mid air.³ The following year they attempted to carry out attacks against Western interests by planting explosives on various cargo planes. On 3 September 2010 a UPS flight crashed, 45 minutes after takeoff from Dubai International Airport. On 29 October two, 300-400-gram bombs were discovered by the security organizations of the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. Both of them were sent from Yemen and addressed to two different synagogues in Chicago.⁴ The next month, AQAP's new strategy, called 'Operation Hemorrhage', was published online. The concept was to abandon attempts on large and spectacular attacks. Instead, the "strategy of a thousand cuts" embraced smaller-scale actions against American interests in order to 'bleed the enemy to death' and keep it under constant pressure. Causing damage was not the main idea. The goal was to create panic in the masses, and to increase the already high security costs at the expense of the US economy even further.⁵

After the Arab Spring, in May 2011, terrorists took advantage of the riots and chaos in Yemen, and managed to occupy several strategically important territories in the Southern governorate of Abyan, and an Islamist Emirate was created in the region. Their spectacular sweep was the consequence of the internal anarchy in Yemen and the terrorists' more pragmatic point of view when they kept respect the local traditions, made allies with Sunni tribes as well as anti-Houthi and anti-Saleh groups. They also infiltrated local militias and embedded themselves in a political economy of smuggling and trade that spanned the various fighting factions. With the help of former commanders of the overthrown Saleh-regime, AQAP could easily gain possession of the capital of the governorate, Zinjibar which was quickly plundered and destroyed. However, successes proved to be temporary. Between May and June 2012, the government forces with the support of the tribal militias launched an offensive against the terrorists, in which they recaptured a few cities that had been heavily undermined before evacuation. Despite these smaller victories and the involvement of the US that was wider than ever the terrorist threat did not reduce. Although suffered many major hits, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was still able not only to make up for the losses, but – according to a message between Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri and Nasir Abdel Karim al-Wuhayshi, intercepted at the end of July 2013 – ambitiously planned to attack 19 US embassies across the Middle East.⁶ Most recently al-Qaeda claimed responsibility

² The assassin who killing a private in the attack and wounding another, later claimed that he was a member of al-Qaeda. Dao, J. "A Muslim Son, a Murder Trial and Many Questions". *The New York Times*, 16 February 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/us/17convert.html?_r=0, Accessed on 8 December 2017.

³ The terrorist organization has claimed responsibility for the failed attack after admitting that the plastic explosive device also came from them. "Detroit terror attack: al-Qaeda regional group claims responsibility". *The Telegraph*, 28 December 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/6901918/Detroit-terror-attack-al-Qaeda-regional-group-claims-responsibility.html>, Accessed on 8 December 2017.

⁴ "Yemen-based al Qaeda group claims responsibility for parcel bomb plot". CNN. 6 November 2010. <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/11/05/yemen.security.concern/>, Accessed on 8 December 2017.

⁵ "Yemen group vows small-scale attacks". CBC News. 21 November 2010. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/yemen-group-vows-small-scale-attacks-1.929698>, Accessed on 8 December 2017.

⁶ Gorman, S. "Al Qaeda Yemen Branch Plan Prompted U.S. Terror Alert". *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 2013. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323838204579001153325427902>, Accessed on 8 December 2017.

for the assault of the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo where two French citizens of Algerian descent killed 12 civilians and wounded another 11.⁷

THE FORMING OF DAESH

The predecessor of the organization was founded by the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999 under the name of Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (meaning: Organization of Monotheism and Jihad) Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Zarqawi's organization rapidly became one of the most active Islamist groups, which gained international fame by fighting against the coalition forces and suicide bombings often demanding local civilian victims. They even attracted the interest of Osama bin Laden, and in spite of many disagreements, Zarqawi swore allegiance to al-Qaeda after an eight-month negotiation in October 2004. After the official accession to the al-Qaeda the group was renamed to Tanzīm Qā'idat al-Jihād fī Bilād ar-Rāfidayn (TQJBR – Organization of Mesopotamian Jihadists), which unofficially was referred to as 'al-Qaeda in Iraq' for many years after that. After some time, because of ideological differences but mainly due to the deepening conflicts around the methods in use, al-Zarqawi tried to gain independence from the international al-Qaeda network and set up a rival organization. As a first step in January 2006, the TQJBR and five other local insurgent groups united and established the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC). However, these efforts could not become a reality, because on 7 June 2006 Al-Zarqawi lost his life in a US air strike. His successor, the Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri, to increase the number of Iraqis within the MSC, to unify the resistance and last but not least to raise awareness in the international Jihadist community, convinced even more rebel groups to join on 12th of October 2006. The next day the creation of Dawlat al-Irāq al-Islāmiyyah (Islamic State of Iraq) was announced and the leadership was given to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Nevertheless, contrary to prior expectations, the new organization did not live up to expectations. By 2010, they virtually lost every connection to the international al-Qaeda network, thousands of their members were imprisoned by the coalition forces, and the rest were hunted by local Sunni mercenaries. In April 2010, al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi were killed during a joint US-Iraqi raid. The new leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had to take over an organization that was undoubtedly on the edge of disintegration.⁸

The withdrawal of coalition forces has put an end to the terrorist organization's decline in December 2011. Through 2012, increasingly lenient security measures and the deepening Sunni-Shia conflict breathed new life into the group that took full advantage of the new situation. After the outbreak of civil war in Syria they extended their area of operation over the neighboring state. Al-Baghdadi created a new organization, the Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front) and quickly united the two groups, despite Ayman al-Zawahiri's aversions. Thus The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-Irāq wa-sh-Shām) was born. Al-Zawahiri refused this decision. He still viewed al-Nusra as the Syrian wing of al-Qaeda, and wanted to limit the Iraqi division agency exclusively to his homeland. Since al-Baghdadi dismissed this notion, and all attempts of reconciliation failed miserably,

⁷ Vick, K. "Al-Qaeda Group Claims Responsibility for Paris Terror Attack". *Time*, 9 January 2015. <http://time.com/3661650/charlie-hebdo-paris-terror-attack-al-qaeda/>, Accessed on 9 December 2017.

⁸ Zelin, A. Y. "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement". *Research Notes – The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 20. 2014. 1–11. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf, Accessed on 15 December 2017.

al-Zawahiri broke off all official relations with Daesh. After the announcement, the terrorist organization retained its name and continued to increase its influence in the two States involved.⁹

But the new name has been subject of controversy ever since, because the term Levant can refer not only to Syria, but in a broader sense to the Eastern Mediterranean regions between Anatolia and Egypt. All those who wanted to resolve this contradiction, use the expressions: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). But the argument was brought up that its abbreviation is a popular woman's name in the West and also the name of the Egyptian goddess of magic and fertility.¹⁰

On 29 June 2014, after occupying massive areas and gaining bigger and bigger influence in both Syria and Iraq, the group took up the more simplified name of "Islamic State" which, they use till today. They proclaimed the foundation of a new caliphate under the leadership of 'Caliph Ibrahim', and called on the Muslims worldwide to vow allegiance to the new state.¹¹

THE EMERGENCE AND ENERGIZATION OF THE 'ISLAMIC STATE' IN YEMEN

In response to the call of al-Baghdadi, many jihadist groups had assured him of their loyalty to the Islamic State worldwide. These terrorists were concentrated in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. They were mainly veterans and volunteers of Daesh returning home in an increasing number from Iraqi and Syrian battlegrounds. Most of them had ties to al-Qaeda, however, with the decline of prestige of the international terrorist network, they turned to Daesh which offered more spectacular successes and achievements.¹²

The areas that had a unified leadership or at least a well functioning organization pledged allegiance to the terrorist network were declared as parts of the Islamic Caliphate. Regardless of geographic distance provinces were created in these regions, reassured of support if the terrorists operating there proposed a governor acceptable to Daesh, set up a Shura Council and an effective strategy to maintain, perhaps expand the area in question, and showed will-

⁹ "The Islamic State". Stanford University: Mapping Militant Organizations Project. 23 January 2015. <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1>, Accessed on 15 December 2017.

¹⁰ Kalmár Z. "Az Iszlám Állam államszervezete". In Ferwagner Á., Garaczi I. and Kalmár Z. (eds), *Mediterrán Perspektívák*. Budapest: Stratégiai Kutatóintézet, 2015. 96.

¹¹ The choice of name and concept of the caliphate caused serious outrage around the world. The name "Islamic State" is consistently refused by the UN, many governments and most of the Muslim community. Instead, Arabic-speaking critics continues to use the acronym Daesh. But this is firmly rejected by the members of the terrorist organization, for a number of reasons. The main issue is that the abbreviation does not contain the term Islam. Plus the word can remind one of the terms 'Dahes' (meaning: someone who sows discord or worrying) and 'Da'es' (meaning: someone who crushes something underfoot or to suppress). Pizzi, M. "In declaring a caliphate, Islamic State draws a line in the sand". *Al-Jazeera America*, 30 June 2014. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/30/islamic-state-caliphate.html>, Accessed on 15 December 2017.; Randall, C. "Why does a simple word like Daesh disturb extremists so much?". *The National*, 18 October 2014. <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/why-does-a-simple-word-like-daesh-disturb-extremists-so-much>, Accessed on 15 December 2017.

¹² These proclamations, however, meant merely verbal commitment, because these groups were only aiming for notoriety and recognizability in the eyes of the wider public. In fact, there was no actual working relationship between them and the Islamic State.

ingness to adapt the Islamic State's interpretation of Sharia law.¹³ In February 2015, Daesh has already brought 24 provinces under its control across Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, Algeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen.¹⁴

The Islamic State started to infiltrate into Yemeni soil to exploit the deepening security void and the favourable sectarian dynamics after the Houthis, Zaydi Shia rebels occupied the capital and subsequently much of the country in 2014. The first jihadists pledged their allegiance to al-Baghdadi in September, which was accepted by the terrorist leader on 13 November.¹⁵ This time the Caliph announced the emergence of Wilayat al-Yemen and – according to reports and rumours – appointed a Saudi citizen, a certain Abu Bilal al-Harbi as its wali.¹⁶ Over the course of just a year Daesh managed to raise the number of its followers from 80 all the way up to nearly 300 who were mostly local volunteers in contrast to the high number of foreign fighters on the Syria–Iraqi front.¹⁷ Their successes in Iraq, Syria and Libya had an indisputable role in this rapid growth, not to mention an intensive recruitment campaign, financed by various, significant resources. According to Yemeni officials, the group was already present in the lowest estimate three provinces of the country's central and southern parts as early as January 2015. Seeing the efforts of Daesh, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula naturally tried to fix a bar against the rival terrorist organization, since it still considered Yemen as its own private turf. The rivalry for financial resources, weaponry, and volunteers, degenerated into armed clashes in December 2014 when the members of the two organizations fought each other in the eastern provinces of the country.¹⁸ However, steps taken to eliminate Daesh proved to be unsuccessful. The decline of al-Qaeda's authority became clear when several members of the Salafist militia, Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law) posted a message on Twitter, announcing their break-off from Ayman al-Zawahiri, and lining up behind the Islamic State.¹⁹ After the accession of his newest followers, al-Baghdadi set a number of goals, accommodated to the specific political and religious situation of Yemen, in addition to the already existing general governing principles. On the one hand, his directives also urged taking serious actions against Houthis who disbanded parliament on 7 February 2015, seized power, and launched a general offensive against the ousted president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and his supporters. Then again, he also declared fight against

¹³ Masi, A. "How The ISIS Allegiance Application Process Works For Groups Joining The 'Caliphate', Like Boko Haram". *International Business Times*, 12 March 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.com/how-isis-allegiance-application-process-works-groups-joining-caliphate-boko-haram-1845560>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

¹⁴ Gambhir, H. "ISIS Global Intelligence Summary, 7 January–8 February 2015". Institute for the Study of War. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/INTSUM_Summary_update.pdf, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

¹⁵ Cruickshank, P. "Al Qaeda in Yemen rebukes ISIS". CNN. 21 November 2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/21/world/meast/al-qaeda-yemen-isis/>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

¹⁶ Johnsen, G. D. "This Man is the Leader in ISIS's Recruiting War against Al-Qaeda in Yemen". BuzzFeed. 6 December 2015. https://www.buzzfeed.com/gregoryjohnsen/this-man-is-the-leader-in-isis-recruiting-war-against-al-qaer?utm_term=.ftGdNGoVP#.xw7mE5PZM, Accessed on 9 January 2018.

¹⁷ Aboudi, S. "In Yemen chaos, Islamic State grows to rival al Qaeda". Reuters. 30 June 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/30/us-yemen-security-islamicstate-insight-idUSKCN0PAIT920150630>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

¹⁸ Todd, B. "ISIS gaining ground in Yemen, competing with al Qaeda". CNN. 22 January 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/21/politics/isis-gaining-ground-in-yemen/>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

¹⁹ Al-Sayagh, M. "Al-Qaeda Supporters in Yemen 'Pledge Allegiance to Islamic State'". *Newsweek*, 11 February 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/al-qaeda-supporters-yemen-pledge-allegiance-islamic-state-306058>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

the central, generally secular regime, regarded as having abandoned and therefore betrayed Islam, and as cooperating with Sadi Arabia and the Western countries.

The first spectacular show of power of Daesh's Yemeni branch occurred on 3 March 2015, when 200 local volunteers of the terror-organization demonstrated on the street of al-Hawtah, capital of Lahij governorate, carrying signs, waving Daesh flags, and calling on residents to swear allegiance to the organization. They also distributed leaflets by the roadside, informing the Sunni inhabitants that they were about to fight the Houthis.²⁰ For proving their determination, four terrorists blew themselves up at two crowded Shi'a mosques in the capital on 20 March 2015. The incident demanded the lives of at least 142 people and wounded about 350.²¹ The buzz around these attacks and the southern offensive launched by the Houthis in late March encouraged more and more groups to continue the fight alongside Daesh, instead of al-Qaeda. In April, the founding of a Governorate between the cities of Taiz and Ibb was unofficially announced by the Daesh-friendly group Green Brigade. According to unconfirmed information, 22 activists of this very same group were responsible for the attack carried out against a Houthi convoy, and the killing of five militiamen near the city of Yarim.²² Two days later the formation of the 'Sana'a province' was officially announced on Twitter through a nine-minute video message, in which two dozen fully armed terrorists can be seen during training, somewhere in the desert close to the capital.²³ Their numbers and influence grew dramatically in a short time. There were at least eight known sub-wilayats active in Yemen as of 2015, and every sub-province was headed by a commander, known as the Emir, who had a deputy. The two headed a hierarchical military chain of command and conducted Daesh's military operations, namely frequently attacking military checkpoints by mortarfire or ambushing Houthi patrols, and customarily carried out abductions of members of the Yemeni army and its security forces, and of Houthi rebels. Some of the abducted soldiers and militants had been executed in a variety of barbaric ways, like beheading, shooting in the head, beating to death, shooting with mortar shells, detonating mortar shells attached to their bodies and having their heads crushed with rocks.²⁴ On 17 June, the beginning of the month of Ramadan, coordinated car-bomb assaults, similar to previous ones were committed against three Shia mosques, and a Houthi political office. Approximately 50 people were killed or wounded during the attacks.²⁵ Three days later, another bomb exploded near a Shia

²⁰ "The ISIS Branch in Yemen and Its Role in the Power Struggles". Meir Amit Intelligence and Information Center. 11 December 2016. http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21106/E_156_16_1336461923.pdf, Accessed on 5 January 2018.

²¹ "Death toll hits 142 from attacks in Yemen mosques". Al-Bawaba News. 20 March 2015. <http://www.albawaba.com/news/two-mosques-yemen-attacked-suicide-bombers-during-friday-prayers-many-injured-671470>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

²² O'Keefe, D. "2015 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: April 23". AEI's Critical Threats. 23 April 2015. <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-reports-april-23-2015>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

²³ "'We've arrived': ISIS wing in Yemen releases first video, threatens Houthis". RT, 25 April 2015. <https://www.rt.com/news/253029-isis-yemen-houthi-sanaa/>, Accessed on 23 December 2017.

²⁴ Koontz, J. "Desknote: The Growing Threat of ISIS in Yemen". AEI's Critical Threats. 6 May 2015. <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/koontz-desknote-growing-threat-isis-in-yemen-may-6-2015>, Accessed on 23 December 2017.

²⁵ Ghobari, M. and Sukhtian, L. "Islamic State car bombs kill or injure 50 in Yemeni capital". Reuters. 18 June 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/18/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN0OX0KQ20150618>, Accessed on 23 December 2017.

place of worship, which claimed two lives and injured 16 others.²⁶ On June 28, two Houthi leaders and their families gathered to grieve one of their relatives, when a bomb went off. The action killed at least 28 people, including eight women.²⁷

The remarkable activity of Daesh motivated even more al-Qaeda-members to leave. Among the prominent sympathizers were senior commander of AQAP Mamoun Abdulhamid Hatem, who was killed in May 2015, and influential AQAP religious scholar Sheikh Abdul Majid bin Mahmoud al-Hitari al-Raymi. Probably the most controversial of all was the conversion of Jalal Baleedi al-Marqishi, who was killed in an American drone strike in Abyan Province, on 6 February 2016. One of the most prominent leaders within the circles of Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen, Baleidi gained his reputation by the capturing and slaughtering of several soldiers on leave in 2014. According to leaked tribal and military intelligence, he and many of his men joined al-Baghdadi due to the split in the ranks of Ansar al-Sharia at the end of June 2015, and quickly formed a training camp – the Sheikh Anas al-Nashwan camp – in the abandoned province of Hadhramaut, near the Saudi border.²⁸

THE ISLAMIC STATE’S SECRET OF SUCCESS IN YEMEN

The rapid forging ahead of Daesh was the consequence of multiple complex reasons and unfavorable circumstances. Perhaps the most important ones are the ruthless executions of imprisoned Yemeni soldiers and the increasingly frequent attacks on the Zaydi Shia Houthis. The al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was unable to organize and execute similar scaled actions during this period. This was because al-Qaeda placed emphasis on fighting against governmental forces and other armed groups all along trying to minimize civilian casualties. On the other hand, for the Yemeni branch of Islamic State it was considered not only natural, but also an upright requirement to polarize religious diversification, namely attacking and killing all of the Shias who were considered apostate citizens by the extremists. These methods were criticized by al-Qaeda on several occasions.²⁹ Despite the extreme brutality, in its propaganda Daesh could effectively exploit the results of unnecessary bloodshed, or the absence of it in the case of al-Qaeda, which aroused the interest of those susceptible to extremes and representing themselves as closer to the ideology of Salafi jihadist Islam by acting against the Houthi threat and “correcting” the measures taken by al-Qaeda. Accordingly, the above-mentioned aims portrayed AQAP as an organization which had strayed from the right path. It was accused of collaborating with the Hadi government and with foreign

²⁶ “ISIS Claims Deadly Car Bomb in Yemen’s Capital Targeting Houthi Rebels”. *The Huffington Post*, 20 June 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/20/isis-car-bomb-yemen_n_7627370.html, Accessed on 23 December 2017.

²⁷ “Islamic State bomb attack on Houthi rebel leaders in Yemen leaves 28 dead”. *The Guardian*, 30 June 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/30/islamic-state-bomb-attack-on-huthi-rebel-leaders-in-yemen-leaves-28-dead>, Accessed on 23 December 2017.

²⁸ Baleedi’s desertion was questioned in an interview with him, published in mid-August by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The terrorist leader discussed events of the past months and called on Sunni Muslims of Yemen to fight against the Houthis, which lies parallel to al-Qaeda’s position. The ‘Islamic State’, however, was not mentioned in the conversation. Al-Muslimi, F. “Extremism Grows in Yemen’s Civil War”. *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, 7 September 2015. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=61210>, Accessed on 22 December 2017.

²⁹ Mora, E. “Report: ISIS in Yemen Trying to Steal Al-Qaeda’s Thunder”. *Breitbart*, 1 December 2015. <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/07/01/report-isis-in-yemen-trying-to-steal-al-qaedas-thunder/>, Accessed on 28 December 2017.

intelligence organizations, and of complacency and inaction, causing damage to the Sunni Muslims in Yemen and enabling the achievements of the Houthi rebels.

It was also worrying at the same time, that the recognition of the terrorist organization was becoming increasingly common not only among extremists, but among the more moderate too. In the Sunni-majority southern regions, many people rather accepted the authority of Daesh that was considered the lesser of two evils, than to live under the control of Shia Houthis. The strategy of deepening the religious feud between the Shia and the Sunni people have been successfully applied in Yemen, and just like in Iraq and Syria it proved to be particularly productive. In a country that was already very divided religiously and culturally, and had to face the consequences of the political vacuum left behind by the former leadership, more and more southerners, soldiers, or government officials who fled from the North would have preferred the protection of Daesh – that had proven itself multiple times – over al-Qaeda in the beginning, which continued to be more focused on winning the hearts and minds.³⁰

Another important component of Daesh's activities is the drone war carried out against al-Qaeda. The West in cooperation with the Yemeni cabinet has been waging war of unmanned aircraft on the identified terrorists for many years now, with more or less success. However, in the last few months, a decision made by the terrorists – a decision later proved to be a most unfortunate one – provided an especially important breakthrough in this field. As we previously mentioned several times, al-Qaeda wanted to bring down the Houthis, not by attacking the Shias in densely populated areas, but rather by the support of the fight against the Zaydi militia. For this reason, many activists have joined the warriors of the Sunni tribes, which in turn allowed the Saudi intelligence to collect up-to-date information about the group and the exact whereabouts of prominent terrorist leaders. Between January and April 2015, many of them were eliminated, including senior Shariah official Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari, ideologist and spokesman Ibrahim al-Rubaish, resident judge Mamoun Abdulhamid Hatem, and Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi who appeared in many of AQAP's propaganda videos and claimed responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris. In early June, even Naser al-Wuhayshi the supreme leader of the organization also fell victim to coalition attacks.³¹ This, of course, led to the weakening of al-Qaeda. The disasters AQAP suffered and the collapse of the command structure left even the most dedicated believers unsure. After all that, many more went over to Daesh, unsurprisingly.

Finally, we should mention the contradictory attitude of foreign countries towards the current conflict in Yemen. This is perhaps most clearly reflected by Washington's foreign policy, which provided support for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen. High-ranking military superiors and politicians, however, questioned the success and point of the operations against the Houthis from the beginning. In their arguments, they referred to the fact that, in terms of results, Houthis have been much more effective against terrorists, than the hundreds of drone strikes carried out in recent years, or the involvement of a significant number of military consultants in Yemen.³² Thus, Washington continues

³⁰ Salisbury, P. and Mohsen, A. "The Rise of the Islamic State in Yemen". *Vice News*, 20 December 2015. <https://news.vice.com/article/the-rise-of-the-islamic-state-in-yemen>, Accessed on 28 December 2017.

³¹ "Yemen al-Qaeda chief al-Wuhayshi killed in US strike". *BBC News*. 16 June 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33143259>, Accessed on 29 December 2017.

³² Perry, M. "US generals: Saudi intervention in Yemen 'a bad idea'". *Al-Jazeera America*, 17 April 2015. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/17/us-generals-think-saudi-strikes-in-yemen-a-bad-idea.html>, Accessed on 29 December 2017.

to carry out airstrikes on al-Qaeda members, while making drastic diplomatic attempts to persuade Saudi Arabia and its allies of ending military operations.³³ Nevertheless, the latter currently seems to be unacceptable to Riyadh, for the withdrawal of the Arab coalition forces from the second civil war in Yemen would very likely lead to the defeat of the forces loyal to President Hadi and the victory of Shia Houthis. This would mean the further strengthening of Iran in the region, which is something both Riyadh and the partnering Arab states would like to avoid. This serious conflict of interest after all threatens to lengthen the fighting, and the current situation would only benefit for the terrorists, Daesh and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula alike.

It should be also noted, that the Yemeni wings of Daesh, despite all of the aforementioned advantages and achievements, has very serious incompletenesses too. For example: the geographical distance and the fighting on the Iraqi–Syrian fronts significantly derogated the importance of the Daesh’s Yemeni branch. It followed that Daesh’s Yemeni militants received less attention and supplies. The latter could have been essential for effective sedentation in the country where the tribes were divided and the terrorists’ well-equipped enemies deployed modern weapons against them. Moreover, it seemed that the terrorist group did not have a fully developed strategy and, more importantly, lacked local allies. While al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was prepared to compromise with the willing tribes and communities in the fight against the common enemy, Daesh considered everyone who did not join, as enemy. This was shown most clearly in the phases of the terror-organization’s Aden-campaign.

Namely, while the terrorists’ targets were mainly Shia mosques and Houthi militants until the beginning of August 2015, the Yemeni operatives changed their strategy after the re-occupation of most of Aden. The latter was symbolized by the demolition of many Christian sacred places and the execution of an apostate agent. The third phase started in the end of September when the Yemeni government’s re-organisation began. The terrorists reacted to the changed circumstances by assuming the name of Wilayat Aden-Abyan for emphasizing the importance of their presence, determination and plans.³⁴ Maybe this was demonstrated the most conspicuously on 6 October 2015 in two seemingly separate incidences. While the attack carried out against a Shia mosque in Sana’a, claiming at least seven lives, stands in line with previously observed practices, the explosions that occurred on the same day in Aden were a new phenomenon in itself. In the latter case, the targets were the joint headquarters of Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well the residence of the president and members of the Yemeni Cabinet the al-Qasr Hotel. This meant that the attack, killing 18 people, was targeting those who were considered the main opponents of the Shia Houthis.³⁵ This was followed by the assassination of Jaafar Mohammed Saad, Governor of Aden, on 8 December 2015 whose successor also became the terrorists’ target at least three times, in

³³ “United States Policy & Yemen’s Armed Conflict”. The Yemen Peace Project. 2015. <http://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/US-Policy-and-Yemens-Armed-Conflict.pdf>, Accessed on 29 December 2017.

³⁴ Zimmermann, K. and Diamon, J. “Challenging the Yemeni State: ISIS in Aden and al Mukalla”. The Critical Threats. 9 June 2016. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/challenging-the-yemeni-state-isis-in-aden-and-al-mukalla>, Accessed on 30 December 2017.

³⁵ Al-Batati, S. and Fahim, K. “ISIS Takes Responsibility for Bombings in Yemen”. *The New York Times*, 6 October 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/07/world/middleeast/yemen-aden-hotel-explosion.html>, Accessed on 30 December 2017.

a short period.³⁶ However, the terror group considerably lost face according to signs when it attacked the contending parties without differentiation at the same time. Its expansion balked and Daesh's Yemeni branch did not manage to control effectively only a single region nor to introduce their specific governmental institution and extreme Sharia interpretation, in contrast with Syria, Iraq or Libya.

Its attractivity also was diminished due to the fact that the salary of Daesh's volunteers, which had been several times higher than AQAP fighters' payment in the beginning, declined in the course of time. Moreover, tensions evolved between the local Yemeni militants and their Saudi originated leaders, and the local Daesh commanders rivaled with each other. Thanks to all of these factors, internal discontentment ruled over the organization just one year after the establishment of Daesh's Yemeni wing and some members who were disappointed in the policy of leadership left the terror-organization in the end of 2015.³⁷ However, it is important to emphasize that the reason of the latter mentioned events was not the decline of Daesh's prestige. Namely, most of the secessors questioned only the competency of local commanders and denied submission to their orders, but they remained faithful to their oath to al-Baghdadi at the same time.³⁸

Despite the crisis, Daesh's Yemeni wing remained active and regularly carried out bloody attacks in certain districts. For example, On 15 May 2016, Daesh militants committed a suicide attack that killed at least 31 police recruits in the port of Mukalla, which was under AQAP control until April 2016, when the Saudi-led coalition forced the terror-organization to give up the city.³⁹ More than a week later, on May 23 2016, more than 45 persons lost their lives in two similar attacks when one of the assassins rammed into a recruitment center with his car which was fully packed with explosives. At the same time, another suicide bomber got among the recruits who gathered in front of an army commander's house and blew himself up.⁴⁰ A similar attack was carried out against another military recruitment center of the port

³⁶ The terrorists also carried out many unsuccessful assassination attempt against Aden's Police Chief beside the new Governor. Al-Haj, A. "Suicide bombers targets police chief in Yemen's Aden, kills 7". *Daily Mail*, 17 January 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3403584/2-senior-security-officials-assassinated-Yemen.html>, Accessed on 30 December 2017.

³⁷ In the middle of December 2015, 101 local members of the terrororganization publicly called upon the relay of the inadequate governor in two letters before the secession from ISIL. About 30 men of them had defected to AQAP in early 2016, unhappy with the group's tactics and targeting of mosques and Muslim civilians. "ISIS Fails to Gain Much Traction in Yemen". *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-fails-to-gain-much-traction-in-yemen-1459203675>, Accessed on 5 January 2018.; Zimmermann and Diamon. "Challenging the Yemeni State..."

³⁸ However, the protest against Abu Bilal al-Harbi's rule finally resulted the removal of the self-proclaimed emir. Abu Sulayman al-Adani became his successor who served previously as military commander for the group until March 2017. In October 2017, the US government managed to identify other key members of the terror-group like Nashwan al-Wali al-Yafi'i as the group's top financial official, or Khalid al-Marfadi, Radwan Muhammad Husayn Ali Qanan and Khalid Sa'id Ghabish al-Ubaydi as key military leaders. Roggio, B. "US military hits Islamic State in Yemen". *FDD's Long War Journal*, 27 October 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/10/us-military-hits-islamic-state-in-yemen.php>, Accessed on 29 December 2017.

³⁹ "Yemen conflict: IS suicide attack kills 31 police recruits". BBC News. 15 May 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36295616>, Accessed on 29 December 2017.

⁴⁰ Al-Haj, A. "Yemen Suicide Attacks Kill at least 45 Army Recruits". Associated Press. 23 May 2016. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/cfc2c17587f742ea955ab9f36ca836f3/yemen-suicide-attacks-kill-least-45-army-recruits>, Accessed on 23 December 2017.; "ISIS Claims Deadly Attacks on Yemeni Recruits in Aden". Al Arabiya. 23 May 2016. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/05/23/Deadly-car-bomb-attack-hits-Yemen-s-Aden.html>, Accessed on 5 January 2018.

on 29 August 2016 killing more than 70.⁴¹ Moreover, the terrorists also carried out attacks against fortified military facilities next to so-called soft targets at the same time. For example, Wilayat al-Bayda carried out a suicide attack in Rada'a city with an explosive-packed vehicle. In the same month, it also launched a drone for documenting its fighting against Houthi and Saleh-party forces in the middle part of the country.⁴² In the following month, the fighters of Wilayat Aden-Abyan carried out a combined attack against a significant coalition military base in al-Burayaqah, timing it to the anniversary of the beginning of coalition's airstrikes. That time the terrorists used suicide attackers as well as small arms at the same time. On the basis of the above-mentioned events, we can conclude that we can not talk about the full roll-back of Daesh in Yemen despite the evolved ambivalent situation. Its local cells continually try for renewing their methods and the used equipment to sabotage the stabilization efforts of coalition forces'.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the events of recent months we can say that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remains a major source of danger for the western interests in Yemen, despite the losses it suffered. In our opinion there are basically two options for al-Qaeda to regain its lost prestige and restore its swayed positions: increase the support for militias fighting Shia Houthis, and execute more intense and frequent attacks against western interests. Learning from the mistakes of the past years al-Qaeda has begun developing a more flexible and more recipient strategy. For example, after the rapid fall of the short-lived Abyan Emirate, the terrorist organization formed a considerably more tolerant policy towards locals, and refrains from introducing strict interpretations of Islamic law in areas under its control, for this would risk the further loss of potential supporters. Besides, the group was able to successfully fill up the political and security vacuum in some local communities, and even gained many allies among Sunni tribal militias in its war against Houthis due to the ongoing civil war, the humanitarian disaster as well as the collapse of the central government and the retreat of Yemeni armed forces. Therefore, while Daesh's proponents continued their fight in smaller, individual cells, the local branch of al-Qaeda was able to acquire significantly large regions, military bases, airports, and ports with a substantial arsenal of weaponry in the eastern Hadhramaut and al-Bayda provinces.

However, generally we can conclude that the major defeats of Daesh in Iraq and Syria do not mean the final victory over the terror-organization. It is still active and has not given up its efforts to realize its fundamental aims by brutal methods and tools. This statement is especially relevant when we examine the current Yemeni situation. Daesh's Yemeni wing intensified its activity in the autumn due to the separatist Southern Movement's growing popularity and claimed responsibility for the deadly VBIED attack against the Finance Ministry in Aden in November 2017. In the same month, they carried out several suicide blasts against the UAE-financed and -managed Security Belt Forces that mainly operate in Aden, as well as assassinated policemen and Yemeni Salafi imams who preached a more moderate form of

⁴¹ "Yemen: Death toll in ISIL's Aden bombing rises to 70". *Al-Jazeera*, 30 August 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/yemen-death-toll-isil-aden-bombing-rises-70-160830040441997.html>, Accessed on 5 January 2018.

⁴² Farrukh, M. "Yemen Situation Report". *The Critical Threats*. 3 Marc 2017. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/yemen-situation-report/2017-yemen-crisis-situation-report-march-3>, Accessed on 5 January 2018.

Islam. However, the current anarchic situation, which became more chaotic after the killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh on 04 December 2017, assumes that al-Qaeda can further increase its influence in the country while Islamic State may disappear from Yemen, because the latter could not put together a proper strategy suitable for the conditions in the Arabic country. We have to remark also that the latter will occur when the rout of Daesh became reality. We also have to emphasize that it means just the final defeat of a terror-organization and we can only guess about the further future of its members. The most probable option is that most of the former Daesh activists will return to AQAP's lines to continue their fundamental struggle against Shia and governmental forces. However, until that moment we cannot exclude the possibility that those Jihadist warriors who are fleeing Iraq and Syria now, will join their comrades in Yemen, which nowadays has become a safe haven for radical Sunni militants due to the current circumstances.

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