

Viewpoints
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Saudi Arabia's "Terrorist" Allies in Yemen

David B. Ottaway
Middle East Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center

Saudi Arabia has found itself some strange bedfellows in its all-out pursuit to crush the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, turning to al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood for help even though it has condemned both groups as terrorists inside the kingdom.

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The Yemeni civil war is making for strange bedfellows. Who would have predicted that Saudi Arabia and al-Qaeda might become allies despite the terrorist group's near success in assassinating the current Saudi crown prince six years ago? Who would have thought the Kingdom would turn to the Muslim Brotherhood for help even though the Saudis have condemned it as a terrorist group at home? But this is what is happening in Yemen as the struggle between factions, seen by rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran as proxies of each other, relentlessly grinds on with no end in sight.

These Saudi alliances may be mainly tactical and of short duration, but they are straining Saudi relations with the United States, which regards al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as the most dangerous terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland. They are also angering Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who looks upon the Brotherhood as an existential threat and the main source of the escalating terrorist insurgency he faces.

More and more evidence of this strange alignment of forces has come to light as the Saudis and their Yemeni allies begin turning the tide against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in and around Aden, the war-ravaged nation's second largest city and once the capital of an independent South Yemen. The Wall Street Journal reported on July 17, 2015 that al-Qaeda militants, long ensconced in the South, had participated in the liberation of the port city, fighting alongside Saudi-backed tribal militia and even some special forces sent by the United Arab Emirates.

The government-in-exile of Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, based in the Saudi capital of Riyadh since February, rushed several ministers to Aden on July 16 to re-establish its presence on Yemeni soil. But the Houthis, aided by army units loyal to the former Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, still control all the country's other major cities including the capital, Sana'a.

The Saudi royal family has been a prime target of al-Qaeda for years, although both are Sunni fundamentalists sharing a zealous religious prejudice against the Houthis, who belong to a Shi'ite offshoot known as Zaydism. The Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, historically has received a lot of support from Saudi religious and political establishments.

The first sign of an al-Qaeda connection to the Saudi-backed Hadi government surfaced during unsuccessful UN-sponsored peace talks with the Houthis held in Geneva in mid-June. Included in the Hadi delegation was Abdel-Wahab Humayqani, whom the U.S. Treasury Department branded a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2013 because of his role as an AQAP recruiter and financier. The State Department noted and objected to his presence but did not press the issue as it had been a prime promoter of the talks, which quickly collapsed.

While the Obama administration has been helping the Saudi-led air campaign with logistical and intelligence support, it has also made clear that it strongly disagrees with the Saudi reliance on military might to deal with the Houthis. It has pushed hard for peace talks, called for a “humanitarian pause” in the fighting and admonished the Saudis that “there is no military solution to the conflict in Yemen.”

Meanwhile, AQAP has taken advantage of the chaotic civil war to seize control of the port city Al Mukalla, capital of oil-rich Hadhramaut Province in southeast Yemen that extends north to the Saudi border. The Saudi-led coalition of air forces from nine Arab nations has yet to attack the AQAP stronghold in Hadhramaut, although it has been bombing Houthi targets all over the country on a daily basis since March 26.

By contrast, U.S. drones have attacked and killed 41 AQAP militants since March 26 including its Yemeni leader, Nasir Wuhayshi, according to the analysis of the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank. Seven of ten strikes were in and around AQAP-occupied Al Mukalla.

Prior to the onset of the Yemeni civil war a year ago, the Saudis had viewed AQAP as the main threat to their security, following multiple terrorist attacks from its militants. In August 2009, an AQAP suicide bomber coming from Yemen nearly succeeded in assassinating Saudi Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, now the kingdom’s crown prince. The last AQAP attack against Saudi Arabia targeted a remote Saudi border post in April 2015, killing two Saudi officers. Increasingly, however, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has replaced al-Qaeda as the center of Saudi security concerns, particularly after several deadly attacks on Shi’ite mosques and the arrest of over 400 suspected ISIS militants earlier this month.

An integral part of the Saudi-devised strategy to roll back the Houthis has been to work with whatever Yemeni tribes or organizations are opposed to the Houthi takeover of the country. Both al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood fit that bill right now.

The al-Islah Party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, has its stronghold in Marib Province, the country’s other oil center east of Sana’a. The Saudi strategy to defeat the Houthis in the north depends on winning the support of the Marib tribes. The key to its success is General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, former commander of the First Armored Division, co-founder of al-Islah in 1990 and a leader of Yemen’s powerful Hashid tribal confederation. Al-Islah and Mohsen have long had close ties to the Saudis, and the general is presently living in exile in the kingdom.

Al-Ahmar has long been a sworn enemy of former President Saleh, who has been siding with the Houthis after being ousted in 2012 as a result of an uprising. A key factor in Saleh’s downfall was the protection Mohsen offered to the demonstrators in Sana’a calling for his removal.

Saudi Arabia's reliance on the Muslim Brotherhood has put it in direct conflict with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who in July 2013 overthrew President Mohamed Morsi, the first elected Muslim Brotherhood leader in the Arab world. Initially, Saudi Arabia strongly backed Sisi and together with its Gulf Arab allies provided him with at least \$20 billion to bolster his rule. The Saudis even backed Sisi's brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood inside Egypt, including it in a list of organizations they branded in 2014 as "terrorist."

Despite this Saudi largesse, Sisi has not been a strong supporter of the Saudi war in Yemen, although Egypt remains formally part of the Arab coalition. So far, the Egyptian president has not publicly criticized the Saudis for working with the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated al-Islah Party. However, the authoritative Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly* reported in early June that this was one of the "bones of contention" between Cairo and Riyadh that also included Egypt's opposition to a ground offensive. Sisi himself has made clear indirectly his preference for a political solution. He infuriated the Saudis at an Arab League summit held in March in Sharm el-Sheikh by reading a letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin calling for a peaceful resolution of the Yemeni conflict "without any external interference."

So long as the Yemeni civil war drags on, the Saudis' dependence on the Muslim Brotherhood to improve their fortunes on the battlefield, and eventually at the negotiating table, seems likely to endure. On the other hand, the durability of their alliance with al-Qaeda seems questionable.

Right now, both Saudi Arabia and AQAP have a common enemy in the Houthis and a common rival in ISIS. But whether al-Qaeda has abandoned its long-held goal of toppling the Saudi royal family remains to be seen. In the meantime, the Saudis are certain to regard AQAP's control of the Hadhramaut on the kingdom's southern border as a major threat to the kingdom.



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