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STRATEGIC TRENDS

April 2016

GULF

AQAP: facing the Gulf monarchies' offensive

Since March 2016, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been carrying out a military offensive without precedent against jihadi militias in southern coastal Yemen, where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its affiliate Ansar Al-Sharia established their fiefdoms.

For the first time since March 2015, when the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes against Yemeni Shia militias (the Huthis of the Ansarullah northern movement, plus former president Saleh's loyalists) began, the coalition has decided to target AQAP too, indicating how much the threat perception connected to jihadi activities in the Peninsula became more acute.

Due to the Yemeni civil war, AQAP was able to exploit both the institutional and military power vacuum and the tribal resentment against central, northern-dominated élites. AQAP has also rapidly rallied consensus in the south, among predominantly Sunni tribes, in the aftermath of Ansarullah's militias territorial penetration: it fuelled anti-Shia rhetoric and pictured itself as the first champion against northern land-grabbing. Ansar Al-Sharia, the local driving belt between AQAP and tribal grassroots, has demonstrated to be an effective welfare-provider in disenfranchised areas, thus boosting recruitment.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have started anti-AQAP airstrikes especially in Mukalla (Hadhramaut), the Abyan region and Aden, targeting training camps, arms and logistic facilities. Since mid-April, the Yemeni army (also deploying units trained by the UAE), with the support of tribal popular committees, has been engaged in a ground offensive in Zinjibar's outskirts and in Mukalla. Before, US officials revealed that the UAE had asked for Washington's military support to fight AQAP.

AQAP has rapidly withdrawn from Mukalla after a Yemeni-Emirati ground offensive: the city was co-managed by AQAP and local tribal councils since mid-2015, where the jihadi group rebranded itself as "Sons of Hadhramaut", attempting to win local approval through the evocation of the traditional discourse for regional autonomy. However, AQAP's forces have already been redeploying between the Shabwa and the Al-Bayda governorates. On the Abyan coast, AQAP has reconstituted seven proto-emirates between Jaar and Zinjibar, already established in 2011 and then dissolved during the Yemeni-US military operations in 2012. Jihadi militias (some of them belonging to the Yemeni cell of the so-called Islamic State) control now some Aden districts, organizing suicide attacks against institutional and military headquarters.

Beyond Hadhramaut, AQAP has been enhancing recruitment efforts vis-à-vis the bordering Al-Mahra region: even though Mahri tribes have engaged in anti-jihadi patrolling to protect their villages from possible infiltrations, some localized tribal support, in particular among youth, cannot be excluded. Before the war, the federal draft reform approved by transitional institutions designed a macro-region including Shabwa, Hadhramaut and Al-Mahra: an hypothesis rejected by all governorates, which don't want to share power. The implementation of this project could feed new violence, turning some clans towards AQAP. Oman has just built barriers to isolate its Western border from insurgency and smuggling.

Only a viable political agreement between the Yemeni government and Shia militias can effectively sustain multilateral counterterrorism efforts. Weakening AQAP's operational strength is a matter of national interest even for the United States, since the Yemeni branch of Al-Qaeda has always been able to hit American targets in the Gulf and to inspire attacks in the United States too.

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