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Framing AQAP's intra-jihadi hegemony in Yemen: shifting patterns of governance and the importance of being local

ELEONORA ARDEMAGNI

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of jihadism in Yemen, framing jihadi networks' territorial penetration whether in the context of the ongoing Yemeni multilayered conflict, as in the chronic failure of Yemen's state-building from the unification so far. Due to a gradual convergence in operational areas and targets, the research article contends the occurrence of a rising intra-jihadi rivalry on Yemen's soil between al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has deep tribal ties with some Yemeni tribes, and emerging cells of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). Three factors that disempower IS's mobilization capabilities are identified here, building the evidence of AQAP's intra-jihadi hegemony in Yemen. Firstly, AQAP was able to establish proto-emirates in the Abyan region (Jaar and Zinjibar provinces) in 2011, before the experience of the "Caliphate" between Syria and Iraq: that was a vanguard experiment in terms of identity, territoriality and language. Secondly, AQAP and its affiliates, as Ansar al-Shari'a, rely on a tribal wire of linkages and informal economy ties with local population, flourished in remote provinces out of state control. Thirdly, AQAP has elaborated jihadist narratives able to interact effectively with the Yemeni context, so rallying consensus (direct or tacit) among indigenous southern populations, where the *shaykh* plays a more prominent role if compared with the *imam*. To highlight similarities and differences within the jihadi galaxy, the article offers a comparison, in the first section, between AQAP and IS in Yemen, according to genealogy, structure of the organizations, targets and geography, narratives. In the second section, the article introduces a focus on AQAP's shifting pattern of governance in the south of Yemen, where it has established fiefdoms and attracts recruits leveraging on tribal/regional discontent *vis-à-vis* the Sana'a-based system of power. As a matter of fact, the Abyan proto-emirates (2011-12) embodied a *shar'ia*-oriented approach: the implementation of Islamic law was prioritized in the relationship with local communities, since the aim was to win popular support through top-down measures predominantly based on coercion. On the contrary, the Mukalla's mini-state in Hadhramaut (2015-16), founded on fuel smuggling, showed the adaptable, community-first face of jihadism: such a scheme is more difficult to counter for central authorities than the former because able to win local communities' consensus through the interaction with local leaders, organized welfare and locally-tailored propaganda. It is not by chance that AQAP decided to rebrand itself in Mukalla as "Sons of Hadhramaut". AQAP's shifting pattern of governance is going to enhance the resilience of jihadism in many Yemeni areas out of state's control, especially in coastal southern regions. Moreover, as the last section of the essay analyzes, the widespread discontent of southern tribes about interim president Hadi's federal reform (which was designed and approved by an appointed and not elected committee in 2014, but not implemented yet), could furtherly empower jihadists, given the historical mistrust and rivalries among populations that will be called to share resources and authority if the draft will

enter into force (for instance, Abyan and Lahj, Hadhramaut and al-Mahra). Notwithstanding a Yemeni-focused lens of investigation, this article takes into account the current Middle Eastern scenario and its domestic implications (i.e. the geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran), as the necessity to include Yemen's instability into the broader Gulf of Aden's regional security complex, in order to analyze dynamics and sources of insecurity.

Key-words

Yemen; al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; jihadism; security; tribes; Mukalla

In Yemen, the intra-jihadi rivalry between al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and local cells of the so-called Islamic State has been gaining momentum, exacerbated by the ongoing multilayered conflict in the country. Since the beginning of the crisis, jihadi networks were able to capitalize on security vacuum, local resentment against central institutions and the sectarian narrative promoted by Saudi Arabia and Iran as a power politics tool. Notwithstanding escalating "spectacular" attacks against Shia civilians and security/governmental forces, IS didn't manage to challenge AQAP's supremacy within the Yemeni jihadi camp so far. Nevertheless, the intra-jihadi rivalry is now on the rise, due to a gradual convergence in operational areas and targets between AQAP and IS. There are at least three factors that disempower IS's mobilization capabilities in Yemen, underlying AQAP's intra-jihadi hegemony. Firstly, AQAP was able to establish proto-emirates in the Abyan region (Jaar and Zinjibar provinces) in 2011, before the self-proclamation of so-called Caliphate between Syria and Iraq: that was a vanguard experiment in terms of identity, territoriality and language. Secondly, AQAP and its affiliates, as Ansar al-Shari'a, rely on a tribal wire of linkages and informal economy ties with local population, flourished in remote provinces out of state control. Thirdly, AQAP has elaborated jihadist narratives able to interact effectively with the Yemeni context, so rallying consensus (direct or tacit) among indigenous southern populations, where the *shaykh* plays a more prominent role if compared with the *imam* (Kendall, 2016a). For instance, AQAP's English-language publications, as the magazine Inspire, are primarily devoted to foreign audiences: taking into account the high illiteracy rate, the internal *dawa* is carried out through the ideological use of oral culture and traditional customs, as poetry and songs. These devices find place even in AQAP's Arabic publications and videos for locals¹. Adding new complexity to this scenario, AQAP has recently introduced a flexible pattern of governance in southern controlled-cities, as was Mukalla (April 2015-April 2016), searching to merge

¹ As the new newspaper Al-Masra and the media outlet Wikalat al-Athir, focused on welfare.

with the existing social tissue. This community-oriented pattern prioritizes welfare provision and administrative involvement of local population with respect to direct military control and strict *shari'a*-implementation, which however remain significant tools of coercion. A compared analysis between AQAP and IS in Yemen contributes to furtherly shed light on the topic.

1. Genealogies

The bulk of al-Qa'ida in Yemen (renamed AQAP in 2009, when the Saudi and the Yemeni cells merged) was constituted by *mujahidin* returning from Afghanistan, as in the case of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army (Johnsen, 2006)². In the Eighties, at least 30.000 Yemeni volunteers left the country to support the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan: most of them returned to the homeland, so becoming the vanguard of jihadi proliferation in Yemen. Shaykh Abdel Majid al-Zindani, one of the Islah party's leading figure³, played a key-role, since he cultivated close contacts with the first Osama bin Laden during the Nineties. In 1998, several Yemeni citizens were involved in the al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks against two U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (Shay, 2007). Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's president until 2011, was a champion of ambiguity towards local jihadism. At the beginning, he rallied the support of jihadi fighters to combat southerners during the civil war in 1994 (Bonney, 2009a) and then, after 9/11, he signed a security alliance with the United States in the name of the *war on terror*, choosing to arbitrarily implement securitization policies (Mermier, 2010). Instead, the Yemeni branch of the so-called Islamic State appeared for the first time in the media in November 2014: Ansarullah (the Huthis' movement) had just seized the capital Sana'a, paving the way for the *coup d'état* in January 2015. IS in Yemen is predominantly constituted by AQAP's defectors; beyond Yemenis, Saudi citizens represent the backbone of both jihadi organizations. Yemeni Salafi movement developed in the Eighties around the figure of Muqbil al-Wadi', a

² The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army was organized in the 1990's by Abu Hasan Zayn al-Abadin al-Mihdhar, a Yemeni commander from Shabwa. The militia supported Saleh-led government against socialists in the south. (Johnsen, 2006).

³ The Islah party (the Reform Party, in the sense of the Salafi return to pious ancestors, the *al-salaf al-salih*, also known as Yemeni Congregation for Reform, *al-Tajammu al-Yamani li-l-Islah*), was founded in 1990. Widely considered a moderate party which accepted the Saleh-led system of power, Islah is a complex movement which rallies whether the Yemeni Muslim Brothers as the Salafis, together with tribal *shuyyukh* (*shaykh* Abdullah al-Ahmar, the paramount leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, was the founder of Islah), businessmen, reformist intellectuals and the conservative *milieu*. Al-Zindani still represents the most radical wing of the party and appears on the United States' list of global terrorists.

tribesman from Saada's highlands educated in Saudi Arabia. Founder of the Dar al-Hadith *madrassa*, al-Wadi's opted for a loyal approach *vis-à-vis* the Yemeni regime. After his death in 2001, Yemeni Salafis have followed divergent paths: some adopted the traditional quietist posture, while others embraced the Sahwa movement or the same Muslim Brotherhood. In any case, Yemeni Salafis majority remained tacit allies of the regime. (Bonney 2009b). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has massively contributed to the spread of the Salafi-Wahhabi doctrine in Yemen (Sunnis use to follow here the Shafi *madhab*)⁴, through kinship ties and transnational patronage. This has occurred especially in Hadhramaut, where Sufi Islam is instead an ancient legacy and experienced a revitalization in the Nineties, as the Dar al-Mustafa institute in Tarim testifies.

2. Structure of the organizations

Islamic State in Yemen is organized in small, regionally-based networks, which claim direct responsibility for the attacks in the country. These *wilayat* are several: Sana'a, Aden-Abyan, Shabwa (the most active and recognizable cells), Ibb-Taiz, Lahij, al-Bayda, Hadhramaut. The majority of IS's top-ranking commanders in Yemen are Saudis: their prominent role would be generating confrontation within the organization. In two letters dated 15 and 17 December 2015, more than 100 IS's members asked to al-Baghdadi for the removal of the current *wali*, denouncing an excessive interpretation of *shari'a* (Estelle, 2015). AQAP shows a more hierarchical structure with respect to the Yemeni cells which pronounced the oath of allegiance to the caliphate. Nasser al-Wuhayshi, killed during a U.S. drone attack in June 2015, was substituted by his deputy Qassim al-Raimi, who soon pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to Ayman al-Zawahiri. During the Obama administration, Washington's counterterrorism strategy has registered an impressive increase of drone strikes, but this tactic did not produce positive outcomes: AQAP remains the most dangerous al-Qa'ida's node for U.S. homeland and abroad interests. Although many top-AQAP commanders were killed (and then rapidly replaced), the impact of the drone warfare campaign on recruitment was even counterproductive, since recurrent civilian casualties fueled jihadi enrollment among southern, disenfranchised youth. This is especially true for the affiliate Ansar al-Sharia, the 'chain of transmission' between the terrorist organization and local tribes. The competition between AQAP and IS regards grassroots recruitment and

⁴ Shafeism is a synthesis between two schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madahib*): malikism, based on conservative tradition, and hanafism, which emphasizes the role of reason in religious understanding.

didn't involve apical commanders so far: IS-*wilayat* were mostly created by AQAP's defectors attracted by higher salaries (Zimmerman and Diamond, 2016) and a more aggressive attitude with respect to al-Qaeda. In some cases, grey zones between AQAP and IS still persist, as in the case of "Wilaya Hadhramaut", which could not be necessarily linked to IS. In August 2012, after the temporary emirates' dismantlement in Abyan, AQAP's local cell moved to east (Mahfad in Eastern Abyan and Azzan in Shabwa, Michaels and Ayyash, 2013) and may have rebranded itself as Wilaya Hadhramaut. In fact, before the appearance of IS, AQAP used to name its territories with the term *wilaya* (province), in order to distinguish them from the *muhafaza* (governorate) belonging to civil states. For instance, in 2011-12, Abyan's proto-emirates were called *wilayat* by AQAP, rather than *'imara* (emirate), (Kendall, 2016a).

3. Targets and Geography

AQAP prioritizes hard targets, as security forces, and Yemeni government officials, while IS mainly attacks the Huthis and Yemen's Shia community, without distinctions between hard and soft targets. In May 2012, during the national military parade celebrating the reunified republic, AQAP claimed responsibility for the suicide attack that killed more than 90 soldiers in Sana'a (Al-Arabiya, 2012). In March 2015, IS claimed credit for the suicide operations against two Sana'a mosques, Badr and Hashoush, which killed more than 130 believers, (BBC News, 2015). Yemeni Sunni and Shia communities use to pray in the same mosques, but in March the capital was already under Ansarul-lah's control. However, this targets categorization becomes day by day more nuanced, even though it remains a salient criterion of analysis. AQAP and IS's attacks have been following a convergent trend, enhanced by overlapped geographical areas of confrontation (as Aden and recently Mukalla) since the start of the Saudi-led military intervention against Shia militias (the Huthis and former president Saleh's loyalists, in March 2015) and then of Saudi-Emiratis' airstrikes against swathes of territory held by jihadists (March 2016). From late 2015 on, IS uses to target government officials and coalition bases, as frequently occurred in Aden, or young police/military recruits in the south. IS began to carry out attacks in Aden when the city was "reconquered" from Shia rebels by the Yemeni army and Sunni militias. In Mukalla, IS (maybe based in in the northern Wadi Hadhramaut sanctuary, not along southern coasts so far) has begun to carry out attacks since AQAP withdraw from the city in April 2016. IS has also criticized AQAP's decision to avoid armed confrontation in Mukalla with the Yemeni army, Sunni militias and Emirati Presidential Guard's units.

Aden and Mukalla are now key-cities in Yemen's battlefield, contested among government and coalition's forces, pro-independence militias (al-Hiraak in Aden), local tribes and AQAP (supported by some Hadhrami clans in Mukalla). Both cities register growing numbers of Islamic State's infiltrates. AQAP operates mainly in central and southern Yemen (as Taiz, al-Bayda, Hadhramaut). In al-Bayda, AQAP has entrenched strong alliances with some tribal clans, as the Dhahab tribe (Qayfa confederation) in Rada'a district: the governor Nayif Saleh Salim al-Qaysi is an AQAP member under U.S. sanctions (Zimmerman, 2015; Palmer, 2016). After AQAP's withdrawal from Mukalla, the jihadist presence in al-Mahra, the Yemeni most Eastern region, would be rising.

4. Narratives

AQAP's discourse has traditionally combined polemics against the "far enemy" (the United States and the West, Israel and the Jews) with invectives against the "near enemy" (the Yemeni government and the security forces, the Saudi monarchy). In this framework, AQAP has managed to partially exploit southern popular anger towards northern-driven élites, picturing Sana'a's institutions as shared enemies in order to forge tribal alliances on the ground. In Hadhramaut, AQAP has skillfully played the card of the Hadhrami emancipation from a corrupted and unequal central state, dominated by Saleh's northern oligarchy and his political heirs. As a matter of fact, AQAP has capitalized on the 2011 Yemeni uprising and the 2013 Hadhrami anti-government protests (Bafana, 2014) to prepare Mukalla's governance experiment. On the other hand, Islamic State in Yemen has bet since the beginning all its ideological resources on sectarian, anti-Shia rhetoric. The Huthis (a minority part of the Zaydi Shia branch, rooted in Saada's northern fiefdom⁵) have been labeled by IS as the primary enemy – with an eye to expand its leverage in the south – so emphasizing the sectarian narrative already fueled, for power politics purposes, by Saudi Arabia and Iran (Colgan, 2015). The unsolved Yemen's multilayered conflict risks to empower not only the role of jihadi net-

⁵ Zaydism is a Shia branch predominantly rooted in Yemen. Its believers recognize five imam, differently from Jaafarism (the Twelver Shia, most of them located in Iran). Zaydi's religious élite claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad (the *sayyids*, or *sāda*): the Huthis are a Hashemite family. In Yemen, the Zaydi Imamate (897-1962) was founded in Saada, where Huthis still have their political fiefdom. A document signed by prominent Zaydi clerics in 1990 declares the abandon of the imamate project, even though ambiguities on this topic remain. Not all Yemeni Zaydis are Huthis. Ansarullah, the Zaydi revivalist movement, is the Huthis' political umbrella, founded at the beginning of the Nineties with the name of *al-Shabab al-Mu'min*, the Believing Youth (Dorlian, 2013, International Crisis Group, 2014). The Huthis' militia encompasses at least 20.000 fighters (al-Dhahab, 2016).

works, but also the strength of the sectarian message proposed by IS. AQAP could be tempted to escalate the sectarian tone of its propaganda, in order to compete with IS in recruitment and media, as some statements and small-scale attacks against the Huthis have stressed since 2015.

5. AQAP's shifting patterns of governance

AQAP has been repositioning its governance model from a *shari'a-first* approach to a *community-first* posture oriented to power-sharing with local actors. The first type of governance was applied in 2011-12 in some coastal Abyan's cities (Jaar, Zinjibar). Despite some alliances with indigenous tribes opposed to Sana'a, AQAP (under the banner of the affiliate Ansar al-Shari'a) self-proclaimed the emirates due to the military vacuum and a spread indifferent mood among locals. AQAP and its network implemented strict *shari'a* codes, banned Arab music and the *qat* (a narcotic leaf which is, at the same time, a local custom and a source of economic survival for many clans), provided basic services to the population, as electricity and water, organizing garbage collection and phone lines connection (Sincox, 2013). In Abyan, AQAP emphasized ideology on pragmatism, rejecting and trying to replace traditional customs, as *qat*, in the name of the "Islamic purity": the aim was to win popular support through the use of coercion rather than consensus. In this framework, the military campaign headed by the Yemeni army, with the ground support of popular committees and U.S. airstrikes, managed to temporarily dismantle the emirates, since locals didn't oppose government forces. In 2012, Nasser al-Wuhayshi wrote two letters to AQIM's leader, advising him to gradually implement *shari'a* and redesign models of governance not to alienate local population's sympathy (Horton, 2016): few years later, Abyan has become a lesson learned for the Yemeni al-Qaeda's node. The affiliated Ansar al-Shari'a seized Mukalla in April 2015: when jihadists took the control of the city, the local army's unit didn't intervene to prevent it. As usual, AQAP robbed bank deposits, released prisoners from the jail, abolished taxes. In Mukalla, the capital of the richest Yemeni governorate (oil and gas reserves), AQAP designed a well-functioning "militant economy", imposing fees on ship traffic and organizing fuel smuggling (Bayoumi et al., 2016). *Qat* was banned, but *shari'a* was only intermittently implemented: this time, AQAP demonstrated to be an adaptable, pragmatic organization, deciding (maybe due to some initial protests in the town) to involve locals in administrative tasks. Therefore, AQAP has assured the military control of Mukalla, delegating civil government and its duties to local, tribal bodies: it is not by chance that AQAP rebranded here "Sons of Hadhramaut", echoing the historical Hadhrami quest for autonomy in order to rally consensus among

inhabitants. The pro-AQAP Hadhrami Domestic Council (HDC), established in April 2015, was tasked to provide basic services and pay salaries: it encompasses some tribal *shuyyukh*, academics and theologians. Differently from what occurred in Abyan in 2011, AQAP didn't raise the al-Qa'ida black flag in Mukalla. Prioritizing governance on ideology, AQAP has attempted to solve water problems, land disputes between southerners and northerners, reconstructing damaged infrastructures and improving healthcare provisions. The Hadhramaut Tribal Confederacy (HTC), a military and security alliance established by prominent tribes on 2013 to rule the city, has always rejected AQAP and its brand-new banners; however, it has avoided direct confrontation with jihadists so far (Zimmerman, 2015). In April 2016, at the dawn of the ground offensive to regain Mukalla (organized by the Yemeni army, plus Sunni militias, Emirati Presidential Guard's units and some U.S. militaries), AQAP decided a strategic withdrawal from the city, following local intermediation. Similarly, a recent AQAP's statement in Abyan (now rebranded "Sons of Abyan") warned women and children that the organization would attack military commanders' homes. In 2016, AQAP and its affiliates have withdrawn from Jaar and Zinjibar (Abyan) and from the city of Azzan (Shabwa): in both cases, jihadists have left their strongholds after Saudi-led airstrikes and mediation with local *shuyyukh*. In the long-term, this community-oriented approach risks to be even more menacing for central authorities than the first, *shari'a*-driven one, especially in areas when central institutions were absent and unwelcomed since decades.

6. The federal reform and the intra-southern rivalry: the next window of opportunity for jihadists?

The future implementation of the federal reform project, contested by many southern regional actors, could furtherly turn local tribes towards AQAP. The draft, elaborated in the framework of the National Dialogue Conference, but designed by a 22-members Committee of Regions appointed and headed by interim president Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, reorganizes Yemen's administrative map in six macro-regions (Thiel, 2015). With regard to the southern regions, they would be clustered in the brand new Aden (current Aden, Abyan, Lahj and Dhala'e governorates) and Hadhramaut (Shabwa, Hadhramaut, al-Mahra and Socotra) regions: AQAP and IS have their fiefdoms just in these areas, where they strive for the hegemony within the jihadi galaxy. Rooted rivalries and mistrust persist among southern tribes: many of them will be unwilling to share power and resources, probably looking for jihadi's support against tribal competitors. For instance, the southern civil war in 1986 have left deep enmities between Dhala'e, Lahj fighters (the so-called Tuqma) and those proceeding from Abyan and

Shabwa (the Zumra), since the Tuqma defeated the Zumra during a battle that caused about 10.000 victims in ten days⁶ (International Crisis Group, 2016: International Crisis Group 2013). Furthermore, president Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi's systematic promotion of army officers and bureaucratic officials proceeding from Abyan, his native region, with the purpose to enhance his weak leadership vis-à-vis the *ancien régime*, has furtherly exacerbated tensions between southern tribes and transitional institutions. Hadhramis and Mahris are also dissatisfied with the suggested federal reform. Hadhramaut is the richest Yemeni region in natural resources (oil, gas, unexploited gold deposits, water and land): 80% of producing oil fields are located within its administrative boundaries. On the contrary, al-Mahra has few natural resources and 80% of its inhabitants don't have direct access to water and electricity. As a matter of fact, such a new macro-region would be a fusion between 'have' and 'have-not' governorates, with all its political implications. Hadhramaut has always looked for autonomy from the Yemeni state, with the support of the Hadhrami diaspora, powerful and deeply tied with the homeland. According to a 2013 survey (Kendall, 2014), 99% of 34.000 respondents in al-Mahra rejected the proposal to merge with Hadhramaut too and 86% asked to be ruled by a cross-tribal council, opposing all federal solutions. Not to forget that socialist forces entered in al-Mahra from Hadhramaut in 1968, when the Mahra Sultanate of Qishn and Socotra was abrogated and then integrated into the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. With regard to the archipelago of Socotra, it was recognized as governorate only in 2014, while it previously belonged to Aden and then to Hadhramaut. (Ardemagni, 2016b).

7. Conclusions and Perspectives

The ideological and territorial space for AQAP and IS is going to expand without a viable, comprehensive political agreement between the Yemeni government and Shia rebels. Direct, informal talks between the Saudis and Ansarullah (the Huthis' political movement) have relatively settled violence along the Saudi border in the first half of 2016, but can't secure the south from jihadists' penetration. In this framework, intra-jihadi rivalry between AQAP and IS is likely to increase, because of a gradual convergence trend in operational areas and targets. Notwithstanding this phenomenon, AQAP maintains an hegemonic position within the Yemeni jihadi field with respect to IS. The concept

⁶ "Zumra" and "Tuqma" terms, lifted from the Iraqi and the Syrian Ba'ath Party respectively to describe competing groups, indicate the split occurred within Yemeni southern socialists during the 1986 intra-south civil war. At least 30000 partisans of president Ali Nasser Mohammed (Zumra), defeated by Tuqma, left native Abyan and Shabwa regions to reach the north, where they rallied under Ali Abdullah Saleh's neo-patrimonial network.

of hegemony, traditionally applied to state actors, is referred here to a non-state actor (AQAP) which acts as a state actor in areas under its control: in these territories, AQAP shows, if compared to IS, superiority in military capabilities and financial resources, plus a certain degree of recognition by local populations.⁷ At a micro-level, AQAP's hegemony is corroborated by three factors: the 'emirates vanguard project' appeared in 2011, deep tribal linkages and local knowledge, a jihadist narrative able to mix ideological goals with indigenous customs and grievances, so creating an effective story-telling. Open IS-AQAP competition is going to influence AQAP's language and tactics, fueling sectarian rhetoric and polarizing mixed societies (as in the central Dhamar region). However, AQAP's new, community-oriented pattern of governance showed in Mukalla has been drawing a line between AQAP and IS directions in Yemen. Such a kind of governance can become even more resilient and difficult to eradicate with respect to the *shari'a*-driven model, since it directly bets on Sana'a's chronological political failures, seeking for local support. For instance, AQAP was able to build an effective «narrative of injustice» (Phillips, 2016) with regard to the land issue, since many southerners traditionally complain about systematic land appropriation and redistribution operated by the Sana'a-based central power, in favor of tribal allies and cronies. Focusing local propaganda on the land problem, AQAP has skillfully succeeded to emphasize the chronic mismanagements of the Yemeni system of power, which transcends and persists the resignations of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Denouncing a deep politicized issue as the land one is – rather than poverty – AQAP nurtures in the long-term the vicious cycle of mistrust between Yemenis and the United States, since Washington is the first Yemeni governments' sponsor, so rhetorically carving out new niches for further jihadi penetration. From a regional perspective, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) started only in March 2016 to conduct airstrikes against jihadi safe havens in Yemen. Gulf monarchies have changed attitude *vis-à-vis* AQAP threat in Yemen, as emphasized by Saudi Foreign Minister's recent interview on *Le Figaro*, when he pictured jihadists, not Huthis, as the first military coalition's targets from that moment on (Malbrunot, 2016). Beyond past ambiguities, Saudis and Emiratis decided to target AQAP and IS cells when they began to heavily threaten the stability of areas reconquered by the recognized government, as Aden. On the contrary, jihadi militias formerly participated in many battles

⁷ According to Charles Kindleberger, who developed the theory of hegemonic stability to explain the international system, the fundamental resources of hegemony are military and financial supremacy, plus recognition by the others; in other words, the "hard power" and the "soft" one. Hegemony is always temporary, since costs grow faster than the resources for its maintenance (Parsi, 2007).

where anti-Huthi forces were engaged.⁸ This occurred in central regions as Taiz, al-Bayda, Mareb and in the southern Abyan. Yemen is a “milieu of networks” (Medici, 2012), open not only towards the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, but on the road to the Horn of Africa too: for this reason, Aden’s security remains critical (al-Dawsari, 2015; Ardemagni, 2016b) not only for Yemen, but for the stability of the whole neighborhood. As a matter of fact, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan represent a real regional (in)security complex, sharing some features of interdependent instability. For instance, they host epicenters of Islamic radicalism and swathes of jihadism, experienced foreign colonial rule (with regard to Yemen, the British in the South) and civil wars. Direct or indirect “state legitimization of terror activity” is also recurrent here (ties and links between members of authoritarian regimes and criminal-terroristic organizations), as well as government lack of steps to counter violent extremism (Shay, 2007). Aden, and to a lesser extent Mukalla, is a *choke-point* for trade and energy: their instability could also provoke a resurgence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, a fundamental waterway that has to be addressed as the same region of insecurity, taking into account the tribal/clanic social structures and their transnational dynamics (Lewis, 2014). Surely, Yemen’s security vacuum represents more and more a congenial environment for jihadism.

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