

# Exploiting Grievances: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

## Executive Summary

### THE PAPER IN A NUTSHELL

- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been remarkably adept at exploiting the grievances of ordinary Yemenis. The group's rhetoric, however, only goes so far and has not yet translated into a widespread base of support. In order to prevent AQAP from becoming more deeply entrenched, the Yemeni government must move swiftly to increase governmental visibility and improve the delivery of services at the local level. Failure to do so risks a growing al-Qaeda presence on the Arabian Peninsula with grave consequences for regional and international security.

### VITAL STATISTICS

- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is the product of a merger between al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni branches.
- Estimates of the size of AQAP in Yemen vary from 300 to several thousand. The lower figure likely represents the number of active militants within the organization, while the larger figure includes supporters not actively involved in the group's day-to-day operations.
- AQAP employs targeted messaging that is consistent with the core tenets of al-Qaeda's ideology but infused with themes that resonate locally within Yemen.
- According to AQAP, Muslims are suffering at the hands of foreign powers that prop up illegitimate and corrupt local regimes that have failed to provide for their citizens.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

- **Closely study AQAP's message:** The United States should continue to partner with Yemeni authorities to monitor and carefully analyze AQAP's public statements. Such efforts are vital to helping the Yemeni government better understand how the organization communicates and why local populations are drawn to its message.
- **Use caution when exercising force:** Care must be taken to avoid antagonizing ordinary Yemenis and driving them into the arms of AQAP. Counterterrorism operations in Yemen should therefore be proportionate, Yemeni-led, and minimize the risk of civilian casualties.
- **Recognize the limits of hard power:** Following last year's failed Christmas Day attack, the United States quickly announced plans to double security aid to Yemen. While military and law enforcement responses clearly have a role to play, they are not by themselves sufficient. In order to decisively overcome AQAP, the United States and Yemen must treat military force as only one element of a broader, more comprehensive strategy.
- **Emphasize economic development:** The United States should actively encourage Yemen to improve governmental visibility and service delivery at the local level. Such initiatives would go a long way toward improving the quality of life in Yemen and addressing the underlying grievances that helped give rise to AQAP in the first place.

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