

## WHAT COMES NEXT IN YEMEN? AL-QAEDA, THE TRIBES, AND STATE-BUILDING

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### THE PAPER IN A NUTSHELL

- Could al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) bring about the collapse of the fragile Yemeni government and usher in a Taliban-style regime? At the moment, that scenario appears unlikely. While al-Qaeda operatives have indeed found safe haven in some of Yemen's tribal regions, a host of factors—including AQAP's outsider status, its expansive political agenda, and its propensity toward extreme violence—suggest that the hospitality of Yemen's tribes is likely to have its limits. Over the long term, however, Yemen must undergo a fundamental restructuring of its political system to become much more inclusive if it is ever to achieve a lasting degree of stability.

#### VITAL STATISTICS

- Al-Qaeda's gains in Yemen are rooted in mistakes by the security apparatus and policies that alienate the bulk of the population by rewarding the elites. The establishment of good governance in Yemen is critical to blunting the appeal of al-Qaeda.
- Yemenis are religiously conservative, but they are not inherently radicalized. AQAP is providing a narrative of injustice for a population that is suffering, but the jihadis are not (yet) the voice of the people or a surrogate government.
- Where AQAP and Yemen's tribes are likely to come into tension is over the fact that al-Qaeda is an external actor with a clear political agenda—namely, the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Its presence threatens to undermine local autonomy and disrupt long-standing local mechanisms for maintaining order.
- AQAP has relatively little to offer the tribes beyond destructive muscle. The organization's propensity for extreme violence against civilians further restricts its ability to gain broad support within Yemen.
- Despite the many handicaps it faces, AQAP's chances of becoming perceived as a legitimate political actor in Yemen increase the longer it functions in the background without overtly challenging the tribes for power.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

- **Avoid a visible U.S. military footprint in Yemen:** AQAP is working aggressively to brand the Yemeni government as "America's lackey." The United States should therefore continue to extend military support to Yemen to counter the threat posed by al-Qaeda, but it must be careful to do so quietly, avoiding an overt U.S. military presence.
- **Support good governance projects in Yemen:** More than military intervention or even development aid, Yemen needs better governance. At the end of the day, the growth of militant jihadism in Yemen stems from the malignancy of the country's political system. With support from the United States, the system must become far more inclusive, which means removing considerable power from the incumbent elite, if Yemen is ever to achieve a lasting measure of stability.

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