REVIEW OF RESEARCH

RISE AND RE-EMERGENCE OF THE AL-QAEDA IN ARABIAN PENINSULA

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ABSTRACT:

The Jihadi terrorist threat to the world has never been as critical as it is today. Though the US-led NATO forces have fought a decade long war against al-Qaeda central, the threat perception from the group has not changed. However, the group has changed the structure and pattern to confront the world. It has become exceptionally flexible outfit enough capable of modifying itself. The rapid spread of its ideological virus after the September 11 attacks has challenged the peace and stability of the international order (Bergen, 2008, p.15). It manoeuvres as a collective network of Islamist radicals and Salafi Jihadist. Therefore the European Union, the United Nation Security Council, Russia, the US, India and many other countries[1]. The US-led global war on terrorism has brought some success in the form of destruction of al-Qaeda hideouts in Afghanistan and eliminations of its top leadership- but the informed security experts believe that al-Qaeda's network would not be eliminated soon. Even in some manners, it has proved itself in the more frightening adversary, decentralized, self-sustaining, and frequently using new tactics to bring its enemies on the knees (Dickens, 2006). In spite of extreme actions, it has been successful to launch devastating strikes, such as attack on USS Cole in October 2000, September 11 attack on World Trade Centre, 2004 Railway station bombing in Madrid and the London bombings of July 2005. For this reason, countering al-Qaeda is central to the national security calculations of the western countries.

KEYWORDS: *terrorist threat , Afghanistan and eliminations.*

INTRODUCTION:

The origins of Al-Qaeda's jihadist terrorist aspirations can be traced from the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan (1979-1989). As, an organization it had emerged from Maktab al-Khidamat (Afghan Services Bureau), which was established in 1984 by Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Rollins, 2010). This organization proved to be immensely competent in raising money and Mujahedeen for the Afghan Jihad.

Maktab al-Khidamat befitted the antecedent to al-Qaeda and its fundraising and recruitment network proved extremely helpful for al-Qaeda during the 1990s (Shahzad 2011). The purpose of this organization was to bring all those people together who had accumulated rich professional experience of Guerrilla warfare during the war in Afghanistan. After the assassination of Azzam, the organization was succeeded by bin Laden, one of his leading disciples. Osama bin Laden transformed the organization into Al-Qaeda in 1988 (Schweitzer and Ferber, 2005, p.1).

Once MAK's was disposed of, its resources were diverted by Al-Q

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[1]Australia, India, Brazil Canada, EU, France Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, NATO, Netherlands, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK , UNSC, and US designate al-Qaeda as a terror outfit.

aeda away from Afghanistan into regional conflicts where Islamist guerrillas were involved, principally in Kashmir and Chechnya, but also in Mindanao, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Somalia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Yemen, Algeria and Egypt. In most of these countries the governing regimes were openly hostile to Islamist movements, often repressing them ferociously (Gunaratna, 2002.p. 5).

Al-Qaeda established ideological, political, financial and military control over several Islamist terrorist groups, to get involved in regional violent conflicts successfully where Muslims were affected. Though "Afghanistan was Al-Qaeda's principal military training base, it also trained recruits in Sudan, Yemen, Chechnya, Tajikistan, Somalia, and the Philippines. For instance, when the group's trainees had difficulties entering landlocked Afghanistan through Pakistan after the East Africa embassy bombings in August 1998, Osama phoned Hashim Salamat, the leader of the MILF, in mid- February 1999, asking him to set up new training camps in the Philippines" (Ibid.).

To function at a global level, Al-Qaeda created a worldwide strategic framework of Islamist military and political organisations. From the early 1990s onwards, Osama invited representatives of Islamist terrorist groups and Islamic political movements to join its *shura majlis,* or consultative council (Jalata, 2016). Al-Qaeda also established relationships with thirty Islamist terrorist groups, inspiring and assisting them, both directly and indirectly, to attack targets at home and abroad.

According to Syad Saleem Shahzad (2011) "al-Qaeda would not have had the same impact if it had not been preceded by al-Zawahiri and the Egyptian camp's ideology and pattern of struggle. In fact, al-Zawahiri was the one who actually made Al-Qaeda into the organization the world knows today" (Shahzad, 2011). The principal objectives of Al-Qaeda were to the establishment of governing regimes throughout the world that functions according to Sharia law, initially, in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia then in the other parts of the world (Ibid.).

To prepare the powerful Islamist forefront, Al-Qaeda stresses the physical as well as psychological aspects of warfare training. Regarding the training, the average Al-Qaeda fighters are well trained and "better prepared for his mission than any other Islamist guerrilla or terrorist" (Gunaratna, 2002, p.5). For example, of the twenty 9/11 hijackers it is remarkable that not one of them flinched, no one had second thoughts; all went willingly to their deaths, even the very young.

Since 9/11, Al-Qaeda (AQ) has changed itself from its previous outlook which was more centralized and limited to the one organization, al-Qaeda central. Its leadership was also composed of the cadre of Mujahideen of the Afghan war against USSR and largely dominated the Egyptian origin Jihadist. In the post 9/11 world, all these things changed and it transformed itself as a global network and a philosophical movement. It became a terror organization decentralized among its affiliates. The core leadership was operating from the areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, wherein trained its operatives. On the other hands, its affiliates were functional in the areas of Yemen and Somalia played an important role as a critical power centre for the larger movement (Rollins, 2011, p. 1).

According to John Rollins (2011), currently, al-Qaeda network encompasses "semi-autonomous or self-radicalized actors", this actor sometimes have direct ties with the al-Qaeda central or its affiliates another part of the world. According to Senior officials of US security forces, it is "less centralized command and control, (with) no clear centre of gravity, and likely rising and falling centres of gravity, depending on where the U.S. and the international focus is for that period" (Quoted in Rollins, 2011, p. 1). Its cells are situated and functional in the more than 70 countries.

Yemen's Historical Ties with al-Qaeda

Yemen has been a safe haven for Jihadist since the 1980s. With the end of the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, Yemen became the most favourite country for Mujahideen. It was followed by the President of North Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, who welcomed these Mujahedeens to Yemen in the 1980s. Most of these Mujahideen were particularly Yemeni but also had a considerable number of others. Furthermore, Osama bin Laden provided $20 million for the settlement of these Mujahideen (Burns, 2000).

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Saleh allegedly engaged these mujahedeen to deal with his opponent, "from secessionists in the south to Marxists" (Stanford University, 2018). The end of the war in Afghanistan, extreme level of radicalization and changed domestic situations made difficult resettle in their own countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq. These Mujahideen included Osama Bin Laden as well. He then left for Sudan and later on settled in Yemen. In this condition, Yemen emerged as a country where these Mujahedeens could take refuse. In Yemen, Laden urged his fellow Mujahideen to come ahead to "wage a global jihad against western imperialism" (Rollins, 2010). The powerful tribal system, a fragile economy, chaotic political environment, and difficult mountainous train provided a safe haven to these Jihadists.

The chaotic political order and unique geographical location of Yemen convinced Osama Bin Laden to situate its headquarters in Yemen. He used Yemen as a training ground for Mujahedeens and led the cornerstone of the first Jihadist outfit known as Islamic Jihad in Yemen (IJY). However, it was short lived and ended in 2004 but it played an important role in the establishment of AQAP and was a forebear, followed by other groups as well, such as Army of Aden Abyan (1994), and finally al-Qaeda in Yamen (AQY) in 2003.

The collective unity of these jihadist shaped al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) in 1998 and led chain of attacks on the US installations in the peninsula. In 2000, AQY carried out its first major strike against the US on 12 October 2000 by targeting the US navy's missile destroyer USS Cole. Simultaneously, during this time Osama Bin Laden in his personal supervision trained Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Said Al-shirt, Qasim al-Raymi, and Mohamed al-Wafi, who eventually created AQAP in 2009. The deadliest attack on World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 (also known as 9/11 attacks) brought AQY at international fame. Responding to the attacks, US administration declared a 'global war on terrorism' and started a military operation against al-Qaeda Central and its affiliates.

In November 2001, President of Yemen Saleh visited the US to met President George W. "Bush, Secretary of State, Colin Powell and CIA Director George Tenet to discuss $400 million aid package to Yemen" (CNN, 2017). During the visit, Saleh expressed Yemen's support to the US plan of Action (Chakravortty, 2017). In 2002, his government along with the US Special Forces initiated fierce onslaught against AQY operatives in Yemen. In November 2002, a US drone strike killed AQY's leader Salim Sinan al-Harethi along with several other operatives. The collective Yemeni and the US operation pushed most of AQY members to leave Yemen and join al-Qaeda in different parts of the world such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

During 2002-2003, both the countries worked together to fight al-Qaeda in Yemen. This close cooperation between Yemen and the US led a major on al-Qaeda, in 2004 collaborative operations with Saudi Arabia eliminated, Khaled Ali Hajj, a senior operative of AQY. However, the group very soon recovered from the setback and launched a chain of attacks under the leadership of Abdul Aziz al Muqarin, who was also killed in June 2004.

The joint operations of the US and Yemen largely destroyed AQY network in Yemen. By the end of 2003, al-Qaeda was significantly damaged therefore both the countries shifted its focus on the political chaos in Yemen, which provided a most needed opportunity to Jihadist to again strengthen their footholds (BBC, 2015). On 3 February 2006, a massive prison break in Yemen fuelled the rebirth of AQY.

In prison break, around 23 militants escaped this included "convicted Al-Qaeda terrorists, some of whom were involved in attacks on US and French ships in 2000 and 2002" (CNN, 2006). The escape was notable because the escapees included, Jamal Ahmed Badawi-alleged architect of the USS Cole attack on 12 October 2000- Abdullah Al-Raymi- current emir of AQAP- and Nasir al-Wuhayshi who became the first leader of the group. The escape of key operatives of al-Qaeda created a base for the formation of AQAP (BBC, 2015). In March 2007, al-Qaeda officially affirmed its return, declaring al-Wuhayshi its commander. With this declaration, it also started a chain of suicide attacks on Saudi Arabia and Yemen. This chain of suicide attacks ended in September 2008 when the US embassy in Riyadh was targeted by the al-Qaeda, killing 18 people. After the attack, the US severely pressurized Saudi Arabia to fight against al-Qaeda. The Saudi crackdown pushed al-Qaeda operatives to leave the area and again take refuge in southern Yemen. This arrival of al-Qaeda members provided the entire

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necessary ingredient for the formation of AQAP. In January 2009, al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Yemen merged with each other and formed Al- Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Re-emergence of al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula

In 2011, the whole West Asian region registered a chain of protest and it impacted Yemen as well. During the 2011 protests in the region, al-Qaeda presented itself as a supporter of the local movements. It asked its global network to coordinate and invest resources into local conflicts. Al-Qaeda central nicely positioned its Yemeni franchise AQAP to exploit the available vacuum in Yemen during the 2011 uprising (Zimmerman, 2018). Due to the protest in Yemen, President Saleh stepped down and resulted in the Yemeni Civil War. The unstable political situation provided a space to AQAP to expand its hands in Yemen.

Prior to 2011 uprising, AQAP was under least pressure and responded quickly to replace the remnants of the Yemeni government the moment it collapsed. According to many experts, Laden forecasted the political vacuum much before the protest in Yemen and discussed it with Wahayshi. Laden's major concern was to be sure about Wahayshi, whether he had enough support to establish a Sharia law based society (Zimmerman, 2018). It was broadly captured in the documents recovered from Abbottabad raid in May 2011, which eliminated Laden in Pakistan; in the letters, he was keen to know Wahayshi's ties with the tribal leadership[2]. The letters highlighted that "If the mujahidin improve their dealings with the tribes, most likely the tribes will lean toward them; the blood's effect on the tribal societies is great" (cited in Zimmerman, 2018). The key focus of Laden in Yemen was the success that why he was more concerned about the necessary material, specifically its popular support among the tribal population and ability to deal with the military advancement if needed. The military strength was the second in the priority list (Ibid.).

The reports, those were made public by the Central Investigation Agency (CIA) and seems to be written a daughter of Laden underlined that al-Qaeda saw 2011 Arab uprising as an opportunity to expand its networks around the globe and mainly in the Arabian Peninsula (Batrawy and Michael et. al, 2017). In 2011, the first time it captured the territories of Yemen and started ruling the area on the bases of "strict interpretation of Sharia and declaring an emirate" (Fanusie and Entz, 2017). With the shocks waves of the Arab Spring in 2011, it firstly captured Azzan town of Yemen. Azzan is at the crossroad between Aden and natural resources rich Hadramawt province, of which Mukalla is the capital. However, in 2012 collective the US-led Yemeni forces thrown it out from the land it was controlling but it remained a critical threat to western countries even after that. The magnitude of AQAP's dominance in Azzan could be understood by President Hadi's statement in which he hailed "the big victory over al-Qaeda elements of evil and terrorism" , he also asked the Yemeni people "to join ranks in the face of terrorism and its elements and to confront their criminal plots" (*al-arabiya news,* 2012).

In 2011, another affiliate group of al- Qaeda, Ansar al-Sharia, came into existence. This group was closely working with al-Qaeda but it dropped the name of Al-Qaeda's. It is interesting to understand that most of AQAP leaders were actually Ansar al-Sharia operatives, but "not all members of Ansar al-Sharia were members of Al-Qaeda" (Zimmerman, 2018). The establishment of Ansar al-Sharia was a strategy of al-Qaeda to expand its popular base in Yemen without compromising with al-Qaeda's position. It governed the areas of South Yemen for a year with the support of the local tribal leaders. During that time it publicized its good works, such as charitable activities. It also started to implement Sharia law in the areas, it was ruling and imposed *had* punishments[3] by the end of 2011 it started losing the territories and finally a collective Yemani and the US-backed tribal insurgent offensive swept AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia from south Yemen by mid- 2012 (Ibid.).

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[2]During the Abottabad raid a series of letters were recovered between Nasser al Wahayshi (Abu Basir) and Osama bin Laden (Zamarai) and Mahmud al Hassan (Attiya) and broadly highlighted the decision-making process in al-Qaeda.
[3]Hadd is a set of punishment mandated by Allah in the Qaran.

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Though the group was weakened by the collective military offensive launched by the Yemeni army, impact on the terror operations of AQAP was minimal. The military operations were eliminating the senior leadership of al-Qaeda in Yemen, but AQAP was still functional. On 21 May 2012, AQAP's suicide bomber attacked the rehearsal of unity day military at Sanaa and killed more than 120 people. In December 2013, it raided a hospital situated in defence ministry compound a killed 56 people. In January 2015, it claimed the responsibility of lethal strike on the office "Charlie Hebdo, which had published caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad" (BBC, 2015). On 2 April 2015, AQAP launched a major offensive on the coastal city of Mukalla and after successfully capturing the city it handed over the control to a civilian council. According to the Central Bank of Yemen, it looted around the $120 million from the central bank of Yemen. To provide local services in the city, AQAP also allocated a budget of more than $4 million (International Crisis Group, 2017). On 2 December 2015, Zinjibar and areas of Jaʿār were seized by AQAP operatives. Similar to Mukala, in both the places AQAP handed over the control to a civilian council (Horton, 2017).

Saudi led intervention in 2015 and al-Qaeda

The unfolding development in Yemen was vital for the security of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia considers Yemen as an important playground to contest the Iranian regional dominance. In Yemen, Iran's covert but active involvement in arming Houthis rebels was a security challenge for Saudi Arabia. Therefore, in March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Strom. The key objective of the operation was to take control of the Yemeni capital and finish the war as soon as possible. During the operation, Saudi Arabia supplied more than 150 fighter planes and deployed 1, 50, 000 troops. Despite constant air strikes, Saudi led troops were unable to capture Sana'a (Waters, 2016, p. 3). Even after the back to back military operation, the Houthis continued to dominate the northern western and the capital of Yemen (Zimmerman, 2016; Waters, 2016,p. 3). Furthermore, they have been successfully attacking deep inside Saudi Arabia as well, the recent unsuccessful ballistic missile attack by Houthi rebels aimed at the Saudi king's official residence in Riyadh.

The complete state collapse and constant military operations resulted in the form of catastrophe for Yemen. It created an acute humanitarian crisis and displaced over 3.1 million people since 2015. AQAP has exploited the conflict between Houthis and the Saudi coalition. Since 2015, it has dramatically expanded its footholds in South Yemen. The military withdrawal from the bases in the south generated an ideal prospect for AQAP "capture large quantities of sophisticated and advanced weapons, including shoulder-fired missiles, C4 explosives, and armoured vehicles" (Waters, 2016, p. 3).

Saudi led militaries involvement in the north against Houthis allowed AQAP operatives to seize the control of many cities situated areas around the costal corridor between Aden and al-Mukalla (Zimmerman, 2016). The main reason for this critical situation was troops movement from South Yemen to North. It left the city of Mukalla unguarded that allowed AQAP operatives to easily capture the land. On 2 April 2015, AQAP Jihadist launched the coastal city of Mukalla and captured it. The seizure of Mukalla was strategically vital for AQAP as it provided with sea trade route and strong geographical defence. On 2 December 2015, Abyan Governorate, Zinjibar, and Jaʿār came under the control of AQAP. In all of these areas, AQAP forces soon handed over the controls of the city to the civilian council, which highlighted its actual intentions, to establish a proper functioned state. While AQAP lost control of Mukalla in April 2016, but by then they managed to gain enormous wealth from Mukalla.

In Mukalla, it also successfully ransacked 13 billion Rials and looted another "$1.5 million from the Central bank and 20 million Rials from an agricultural bank" (UNSC, 2016). During its long control over the financially important city of Yemen, Mukalla, it earned an estimated $2 million per day (UNSC, 2014). The money from taxation on shipments and traders was a key source of this income. This money was also generated from kidnapping, external donations, and ransom. According to Yemeni officials, an estimated $10 million per year is sufficient for AQAP to remain functional in the region (Bayoumy and Browning et.al, 2016). The revenue which is gathered during the capture of Mukalla highlights that the group retains substantial cash reserves. In 2016, a sharp decrease had been registered in AQAP's revenue, but it remains well funded. This was an outcome of losing control over the city of Mukalla.

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In the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda also confronted the dominance of Islamic State. It refused to associate with IS. The reason behind it was to project that its understanding of Islamic caliphate is different than IS (Chakrobarty 2017:125). It has also presented itself as a more moderate organization than IS. It did not target civilians but soldiers, foreigners and government installations. On the other hand, IS not only killed civilian but also made civilians life miserable in the areas where they were in power. However, both the groups share their long term objective which is the establishment of Sharia-based Islamic state (Kamali, 2017).

According to many security experts, the collapsed of IS had definitely strengthened AQAP in the peninsula. It was also reflected in the tactical assessment of the US administration under President Donald Trump, thus, it launched a wide range of air strikes against it soon after coming into power. On 29 January 2017, it started an air offensive against AQAP and killed 41 suspected operatives and 16 civilians. In March 2017, the US military launched 70 airstrikes on AQAP dominated areas, it was two times more in comparison to 2016 (Buncombe, 2017). While talking about the strikes, spokesman of Pentagon, Capt Jeff Davis noted that "we continue to target Al-Qaeda in Yemen, and this is done in the interest of disrupting this terror organisation that presents a very significant threat to the United States," (Quoted in Buncombe, 2017).

The seize Mukalla underlined a fascinating fact as well; in Mukalla, many people joined the AQAP. Even, most of the people of the coastal corridor felt safe in the authoritarian rule of AQAP. According to local AQAP rule was far better than ever-changing Hauthi or Hadi control. According to a Mukalla resident (47), "I prefer that al-Qaeda stay here, not for Al Mukalla to be liberated…The situation is stable, more than any 'free' part of Yemen. The alternative to Al-Qaeda is much worse" (Quoted in Water, 2016). The main reason for these civilians attitude was AQAP's social work in the dominated areas and less cruelty in comparison to IS (Joscelyn, 2016). It made roads in the dominated areas and provided food to the local.

All these initiatives allowed al-Qaeda to thrive, particularly in south Yemen. In 2017, it launched many suicide attacks and vehicle-borne improvised explosive attacks on government institutions. However, Arial attacks by the US forces have targeted its leadership and issued a 5 million dollar reward to capture its current leader, Qasim al-Raimi, AQAP is thriving and successfully uses its strategies to engage locals population. The dirty game of proxy war warfare in Yemen supported by Iran and Saudi Arabia's conquest of dominance in Yemen created a room for AQAP to rebuild itself (Kamali, 2017).

AQAP's presence in the Arabian Peninsula is the biggest barrier for peace in the region. It knows very well how to exploit the situation and support of the local people. It can be understood by Al-Raimi statement in May 2017, in which he said that they are fighting beside all the Muslims in Yemen, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Sunni tribes (Ibid.). It was a successful attempt of AQAP to bring the sectarian angle to its strategy, which works nicely in the recruitment process of the Jihadist. The victory Shia origin Houthis in the north has created a perfect ground for AQAP to play this card. It has also provided the group with some reputation and prosperity in Yemen. This pragmatic approach has also permitted it to work with other moderate Sunni groups in the tribal areas of Yemen (Ibid.).

It was also evident from the available inputs that AQAP has influential connections within the power circle in Sanna, which provides significant strength to the group (Brannen, 2017). It's important to adopt a nuanced approach to break this connection if collective Yemeni forces really want to deal with AQAP. In the absence of major offensive against al-Qaeda in Yemen, it's very difficult to bring peace and stability in the country.

CONCLUSION

There is a consensus among the security experts that AQAP, the most dangerous franchise of al-Qaeda, is the biggest obstacle in the peacebuilding in Yemen. It was also proved by its successful and failed terrorist operations inside and outside the Arabian Peninsula. Unfortunately, the group is not the major concerns of the international community in Yemen but it is the civil war between pro-government and Houthi forces and the reduction of the influence of Iran in Yemen.

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This situation provides AQAP an opportunity to restore itself. Though the limited military operations in Yemen have weakened the group but it's not wiped out yet. It may have lost its territory, but its ideology and operatives are still alive. The group is financially stable and well funded. Limited surgical strikes and Drone attacks against the group will merely help in the complete eradication of al-Qaeda in Yemen.

As earlier mentioned, AQAP has influential connections within the power circle in Sanna, which provides significant strength to the group. Alongside the military operation, these connections also need to be broken, if collective Yemeni forces really want to deal with AQAP. In the absence of major offensive against al-Qaeda in Yemen, it's very difficult to bring peace and stability in the country. It's important to understand that the group is not just an al-Qaeda affiliate but also a school for ideological teaching and circulating propaganda, furthermore, it's swiftly turning into a model for other Jihadist groups. The absence of strong military action against the group in Yemen will create a possibility of the emergence of other terror groups like AQAP.

As soon as the war in Syria against coming to an end, al-Qaeda and its affiliate possibly going to be more powerful. These trends are visible in Syria where destruction of IS has strengthened al-Qaeda. The current strategy which is largely focused on the drone and airstrikes with a limited foot on the ground is visibly failed in Yemen.

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