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## AL-QAEDA ORGANIZATION IN YEMEN

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The attempted terror attack on board a Northwest Airlines plane flying from Amsterdam to Detroit on December 25, 2009 was a wake up call for the international community. By claiming responsibility for the attack, al-Qaeda in Yemen clearly demonstrated that it would no longer limit its actions to the national “theater of operations” and that targets in the international arena were now within its reach.

During the last few years, al-Qaeda in Yemen has proven its intention and capability to operate beyond the Yemeni borders; the al-Qaeda branch made its presence felt on the regional level through a number of operations targeting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; then it moved to the international level with the failed operation against the Detroit airliner. This sort of widening activity does not come out of a vacuum; it has its roots in the nature of al-Qaeda in Yemen as well as in the specific nature of Yemeni state and society. This paper will try to highlight the trajectory of al-Qaeda in Yemen and point out some of the factors that have contributed to the escalation of their activities.

### THE ROOTS OF AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN

The origins of al-Qaeda in Yemen can be traced to the war in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. During the mid 1980s, many Yemenis went to Afghanistan to take part in the fight against the Soviet Army. After the war ended in 1989, the Mujahideen returned to their hometowns in north Yemen. The impact of the war on the “Afghan returnees” was evident: they were radicalized in their thinking, well trained as fighters, and had extensive knowledge about arms and explosives. They were professional Mujahideen but had no

other expertise. In the immediate aftermath of their return to Yemen, the Afghan returnees enjoyed the respect of their societies as they had achieved the desirable objective of defeating 'the big power' and liberating an occupied Muslim country. However, it soon became clear that the Mujahideen's battle skills were not required in Yemen and they could not easily reintegrate in society or in the labor market. Finding it difficult to reintegrate in society, the Mujahideen maintained their radical attitudes as well as their willingness to apply the idea of Jihad to force change in their home country.

**From 1967-1990, the South Yemen Republic, the original home of Osama bin Laden's family, was ruled by a Marxist regime.**

### **OSAMA BIN LADEN AND YEMEN**

The Mujahideen's victory over the Soviet military and their success in defeating communism in Afghanistan encouraged them to oppose the communist (socialist) regimes closer to home. From 1967-1990, the South Yemen Republic, the original home of Osama bin Laden's family, was ruled by a Marxist regime. Soon after the end of the Afghan war, bin Laden and his group of Saudi and Yemeni Mujahideen considered the idea of starting 'Jihad' in South Yemen to bring down the 'un-Islamic regime' and establish an Islamic state. The plan of the new 'Jihad' in the Arabian Peninsula did not reach fruition because the South Yemen regime virtually collapsed in 1990, and North and South Yemen reached an agreement to reunify as the "Republic of Yemen." The unification, seen as a take-over by the North, satisfied the aspirations of the Islamic radicals in Yemen. When during the last stage of the unification process in 1994 some leaders of the former South Yemen attempted to revolt against the unity agreement and sparked a civil war, the Mujahideen fighters played a significant role in supporting the Sana'a government to maintain the unity of the state. The three-month long civil war ended with a clear victory for the Northern forces.

In late 1992, the first attack on Yemen territory against a foreign target was recorded. A group of Mujahideen conducted an attack against U.S. forces who, while on transit to Somalia, stopped in Aden, in South Yemen. Six Yemeni Mujahideen and one Libyan were involved in the attacks on December 29, 1992 at two locations frequented

by U.S. forces, the Gold Mohur and Aden Hotel.<sup>1</sup> The attacks were not successful and the security forces were able to arrest the cell members who admitted their link to Osama bin Laden.

The attacks targeting the U.S. forces in Aden came just 20 months after the end of the U.S.-led Operation Desert Storm against Iraq and for the liberation of Kuwait. By that time Islamic radicals, including Osama bin Laden and his Mujahideen group, had already declared their open opposition to the involvement of non-Muslim troops in the war. The Mujahideen in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were supported by a new generation of Islamic radicals who staged a major revolt against the Saudi government, protesting against the decision to call for U.S. help and the deployment of U.S. forces on Islam's 'holiest land.' The radicals' protests were also directed against the official religious institutions which tried to legitimize the ruling elites' decision to call for U.S. military assistance. It was reported that bin Laden had initially offered to send "his"

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Mujahideen Army to protect Saudi Arabia against the alleged Iraqi threat, but the Saudi government had declined. From this point on, the relationship between bin Laden and the Saudi government continuously deteriorated and the former increasingly criticized the government and demanded an end to the "occupation of Saudi Arabia." To show his strong disapproval of the Saudi leadership's decision to call for U.S. military help in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in 1992 bin Laden established a Saudi Islamic opposition movement under the name "The Forum for Advice and Reform."

On June 7, 1994, 'The Forum for Advice and Reform'<sup>2</sup> issued its first statement related to developments in internal Yemen politics. The statement signed by bin Laden came at the peak of the Yemen civil war and accused the Saudi leadership of providing support to the 'communist'

1 | For more information see: Mohammed Saif Haider, "From Osama to Wuhayshi: The Rise of al Qaeda Organization in Yemen", in: *Madarat Magazine*, Issue 2, January/February 2010, Sheba Center for Strategic Studies, Yemen (in Arabic).

2 | "What Does it Say: The Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights in Saudi Arabia," London, UK, p. 217, September 1994 (in Arabic).

government of South Yemen. The statement sharply criticized the Saudi leadership for its alleged investment of considerable funds with the aim of preventing the reunification of Yemen. Later that year, bin Laden issued a second statement, celebrating the defeat of communism in the Arabian Peninsula, calling it "a good lesson for anyone working against unity of Yemen."<sup>3</sup> From the Islamic radicals' point of view, the defeat of the Yemeni Socialist Party, considered as being non-Muslim, supposedly fulfilled the call made by Prophet Mohammed to "free" the Arabian Peninsula from all non-Muslims.<sup>4</sup> In August of the same year, as a reaction to bin Laden's mounting public criticism and sharp condemnation of the Saudi leadership, the Saudi government decided to revoke his citizenship. On August 23, 1996, bin Laden openly declared war against the American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia calling for an end to the alleged U.S. "occupation" of Islam's holy land, and vowed to work for fulfilling the objective of the "expulsion of all infidels from the Arabian Peninsula" which included Yemen. In February 1998, from their new refuge in Afghanistan, bin Laden and his radical colleagues moved a step further toward declaring a universal war against "the enemy of Islam" when they announced the formation of a new alliance under the name "The World Front for Fighting the Jews and the Crusaders."<sup>5</sup> The call received approval and support from the radical Islamic Ulema in the Arab World, Pakistan and Afghanistan who adopted the concept of 'universal Jihad' and underlined the importance of liberating Saudi Arabia as a holy place of Islam. This declaration marked the official birth of al-Qaeda as a global organization.

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### AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN

The December 1992 attacks on the U.S. forces in Aden were carried out by the Yemeni Mujahideen with the blessing, and possibly approval, of bin Laden. Until that time, there was no evidence to prove that al-Qaeda had established a branch on Yemeni territory nor was there any statement referring to the existence of the organization's local branch. It is plausible that considering the mounting

3 | Ibid. p. 221 et seq.

4 | Ibid.

5 | *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 23, 1998.

hostility between bin Laden and the Saudi government, the leader of al-Qaeda tried not to embarrass the Yemeni government by announcing the establishment of the organization's branch in Yemen. However, this did not mean that the al-Qaeda organization was not active in Yemen.

The first Mujahideen group that officially emerged in Yemen was 'The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army' which issued its first statement on May 29, 1998.<sup>6</sup> Although this group belonged to the radical Jihadi school and praised al-Qaeda attacks against the U.S. embassies in East Africa in August 1998, there was no evidence to link it to al-Qaeda or to Osama bin Laden. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army was responsible for the kidnapping of 16 foreign tourists in Yemen in December 1998; four of the British hostages lost their lives in an exchange of fire between the militant group and security forces. The leader of the group, Zayn al-Abidin Abu Bakr al-Mihdar, was captured by the Yemeni security forces, sentenced to death by the court, and executed in mid-2000.

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The attack was a well-planned operation against what was considered a 'hard target' and was carried out by an explosives-laden boat which targeted the Navy destroyer while it was refueling in Yemen's territorial waters, in the port of Aden. Abu Ali al-Harithi, a Yemeni citizen and former Afghan Mujahid, was held responsible for masterminding the attack which was seen as the first evidence that al-Qaeda was operating in Yemen. In October 2002, the organization carried out another major attack in Yemen's territorial waters, this time against the French oil tanker Limburg in the Gulf of Aden killing one crew member and injuring 12 others. In November 2002, an unmanned U.S. drone attacked a convoy of cars near the Yemeni-Saudi border. The target was Abu Ali al-Harithi who was killed along with five of his colleagues. He was later identified by U.S. intelligence as the "leader of al-Qaeda organization in Yemen."

6 | [www.aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net), October 3, 2004.

## **AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN: AN EVOLVING AND ADAPTABLE ORGANIZATION**

The suicide attack against the USS Cole was the first major attack carried out by al-Qaeda inside Yemen. Since then, the organization has shown its capacity to adapt to a changing environment and has undergone significant changes.

- In terms of strategy, the Yemeni organization has moved from its policy in the early days of avoiding direct confrontation with the Yemeni authorities to a policy which targets the government as a major enemy. The organization's local leadership, as well as the al-Qaeda top leadership, has engaged in a propaganda war branding Yemen's government as un-Islamic and illegitimate and as an "agent of the U.S.". In July 2006, in a public statement, bin Laden described the Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh as "a Zionist agent."<sup>7</sup> Similar accusations against the Yemeni leadership were also leveled by Nasser al-Wuhaishi, the local leader of the organization. On their part, President Saleh and his ministers branded al-Qaeda as a terrorist group threatening Yemen as well as regional stability and vowed to eradicate the group from Yemen. At the same time, the Yemeni government could no longer conceal or deny its close cooperation with U.S. and Saudi Arabia in the field of counter-terrorism. Indeed, the conflict between the Yemeni authorities and al-Qaeda escalated further when in February 2006, in a spectacular operation, 23 prisoners escaped from a high security prison belonging to the Political Security Organization in Sana'a. Among the escapees were Nasser al-Wuhayshi and Qasim al-Raymi who were part of the generation of fighters trained in Afghanistan and are the key members of al-Qaeda in Yemen today. Subsequently, the escapees were able to restructure the organization and reactivate their cells which then carried out a number of attacks in a short period. However, the government reacted swiftly and, so far, has recaptured and killed 20 out of the 23 escapees.

- In terms of identity, the organization has witnessed some shifts with the name of the organization being changed a number of times. In the first publication issued by the group in Yemen in January 2008 – a semi-regular magazine under the name “Sada al-Malahim” (the Echo of Battlefields) – the organization called itself “Al-Qaeda Organization for Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula – The Land of Yemen.” However, the name of the organization was amended in subsequent publications. In March 2008, the name of the organization changed to “Al-Qaeda Organization in the Southern Arabian Peninsula.” The name was amended again in January 2009 when the branches in Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced their merger and the formation of a new regional organization under the name “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.” Theoretically, the new unified organization is now responsible for activities and operations in seven states which constitute the Arabian Peninsula (the six GCC states and Yemen).

**The seriousness of the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Yemen to the neighboring states was underlined by the assassination attempt targeting Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad bin Nayef.**

- In terms of targeting policy, the Yemeni organization has moved from attacking mainly hard targets to attacking soft and hard targets alike, including government and non-government targets. The group employs assassination tactics and has killed a number of security officers. It uses suicide bombings as a tactic aimed at soft as well as hard targets such as the attack on the Spanish tourists in Marib in July 2007 and on the South Koreans in Hadramaut in March 2009 as well as the attacks against oil infrastructure targets in September 2006 and the U.S. embassy in March 2008.
- In terms of ‘geographical’ influence and the extent of the ‘theater of operations’, the organization has moved fast from being a ‘national organization,’ which mainly carried out operations within the Yemen border, to become a ‘regional organization’ through its attacks in Saudi Arabia, and then an ‘international organization’ as manifest in the attempted attack on the U.S. airliner in December 2009.
- In terms of quality of the attacks and the rate of success in achieving the objective (the level of actual physical

damage inflicted on the targets), the organization has suffered reverses. While attacks on soft targets resulted mostly in the death of the targeted victims, attacks on hard targets such as oil installations, the attack on the U.S. embassy or the assassination attempt on the British Ambassador in April 2010 had only a limited impact. Only in some cases was the al Qaeda branch able to penetrate security perimeters and reach the actual target. The lack of success could be attributed not only to the increasing physical security measures taken by the government which made it more difficult to reach the targets but also to the quality of the new recruits joining the organization who are mostly young and inexperienced. However, such a judgment may not be accurate in all cases. In particular, in recent operations, the organization has achieved some spectacular successes, though without achieving the ultimate result. Indeed, judging by the two recent attempted attacks – the assassination attempt on Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and the attack on the Northwestern Airlines plane – it seems obvious that the new merged organization (the Yemen-Saudi branches) has demonstrated a remarkable ability to generate creative ideas to bypass security systems; the group also seems to have considerable intelligence knowledge and planning ability.

**Had the suicide operation against him been successful, it would have constituted a serious blow to the Saudi regime. Prince Mohammad is not only a key figure in the country's counter-terrorism efforts but also the son of the Interior Minister and Second Deputy Prime Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.**

### **ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON PRINCE MOHAMMAD BIN NAYEF**

The seriousness of the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Yemen to the neighboring states was underlined by the assassination attempt targeting Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad bin Nayef.

On August 27, 2009, a suicide bomber triggered an explosive device inside the ministerial compound in Jeddah. Prince Mohammad was chosen as a target for both symbolic and practical reasons.<sup>8</sup> As Deputy Interior Minister, Prince Mohammad is in charge of the Saudi government's counter-terrorism strategy and thereby of

8 | Why Mohammad bin Nayef? – "لماذا محمد بن نايف"، see in: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (accessed May 1, 2010).



the fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. He is also responsible for the Saudi rehabilitation program for militant Islamists (al-Munasaha wa al-Islah).<sup>9</sup> Al-Qaeda in Yemen stated that its operation was aimed at taking revenge for the killings of Shaikh Yusuf al-Uyairi (killed by the Saudi authorities in 2003) and Abu-Hajar (Abd-al-Aziz al-Muqrin), a leader of the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula killed in 2004, as well as for the imprisonment of the wife of Saeed al-Shihri.<sup>10</sup>

Had the suicide operation against him been successful, it would have constituted a serious blow to the Saudi regime. Prince Mohammad is not only a key figure in the country's counter-terrorism efforts but also the son of the Interior Minister and Second Deputy Prime Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud and grandson of King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The attack on Prince Mohammad bin Nayef was significant for a number of reasons:

- It proved that Yemen was being used by al-Qaeda in Yemen as a backyard to recruit, train and plan operations to be carried out in Saudi Arabia.
- It is the first direct assassination attempt by al-Qaeda in Yemen targeting a senior member of the Saudi ruling family. The attack not only exposed the insufficient security measures taken to protect the prince from physical harm, it also shook the image of senior Saudi royals as being untouchable figures. The group was indeed hoping that the success of this operation would encourage new recruitment to al-Qaeda in Yemen, in particular from among young Saudi militants.
- It demonstrated al-Qaeda's ability to convince Prince Mohammad bin Nayef to facilitate the meeting with the suicide bomber; the fact that al-Qaeda succeeded in determining the timing and the place of the encounter (immediate and in private context) was unprecedented

9 | For more information see: Nicole Stracke, Arab Prison: A Place for Dialogue and Reform, in: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume I, Issue 4.

10 | *Sada al-Malahim* (Year of the Assassination), no. 11 and <http://www.sada-najdhejaz.info>, May 31, 2009 (in Arabic).

and reflects both the cold calculations of the group as well as its ability to predict the behavior of Saudi government officials.<sup>11</sup>

The Saudi government and the Kingdom's security forces had clearly underestimated the capacity of al-Qaeda in Yemen and were forced to rework the security framework in the aftermath of the attack. As a result, access to Saudi VIPs has become more difficult and is subject to elaborate security measures. Ultimately, the attack also affected the official attitude towards the Kingdom's rehabilitation program in which numerous Saudi members of al-Qaeda in Yemen are currently participating. Officials have muted their remarks in praise of the success of the program that is now being subject to further reform.

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#### **ATTACK ON THE NORTHWESTERN AIRLINES PLANE**

The attempted terror attack aboard a Northwestern Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on December 25, 2009 is another example of a significant operation by al-Qaeda in Yemen. The attack demonstrated the Yemeni al-Qaeda organization's intention to operate on the international level and its capacity and capability to plan an operation beyond national and regional borders. Al-Qaeda in Yemen thereby established itself as the leading branch within the worldwide al-Qaeda network.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen celebrated the operation as a success and has warned of further international attacks.<sup>12</sup> In fact, all steps of the operation had been 'successful,' from the identification (recruitment) of the bomber and his training, to the identification of the target and reaching it without difficulty.

- Neither the regional nor international security services were able to discover and prevent the planned operation.

11 | Conversation between the attacker and Prince Mohammad – "تسجيل مكالمة الأمير محمد بن نايف مع الانتحاري", see in: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (accessed April 29, 2010).

12 | *Sada al-Malahim* (The Battle of Omar Farouk – Details and Results), no. 12 (in Arabic).

- Al-Qaeda in Yemen was successful in identifying a suitable person to carry out the operation; being of Nigerian origin, with a long record of traveling without problems, and without any previous criminal or terrorist record, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was less likely to attract any attention from security services.
- The operation was able to introduce a new technique of bomb construction using a chemical formula which was undetectable by the bomb/explosives detectors in international airports. The fact that the organization took advantage of the existing technical limitations indicated that they were fully aware of the gaps in the security system in international airports and were able to exploit it.
- The timing of the operation was carefully chosen to coincide with Christmas Eve in order to have the maximum psychological impact. Moreover, Al-Qaeda in Yemen instructed Abdulmutallab to ignite the explosive device in U.S. airspace while flying over a major city to inflict maximum damage.<sup>13</sup>
- While the bomber reached his destination without any obstacles and was able to ignite the bomb, the operation failed because the bomb mechanism functioned only partially.

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The two attacks described above reveal al-Qaeda's creative and remarkable technical ability in bomb-making and the use of explosives. Besides, the attack on the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammad bin Nayef proved the group's ability to penetrate one of the most effective security systems in the region and the attempted attack aboard a U.S. airliner confirmed its ability to plan operations that can successfully evade the strict security measures adopted in Western airports since 2001.

## CONCLUSION

It seems that from al-Qaeda's early days as an organization, its top leadership has recognized the long-term value of Yemen for the organization's ambitious aims and accordingly has adopted a cautious policy toward Yemen. This policy was based on avoiding any direct confrontation with the government. The leadership was aware of the cordial relations that existed between the government and the Mujahideen during the Yemen re-unification process. It also values Yemen as a vital backyard for supporting its activities in Saudi Arabia to which it gives the highest priority.

Indeed, most of the pre-2000 (pre-USS Cole) Mujahideen operations in Yemen were individual efforts or acts carried out by local radical groups which had no operational or organizational links with al-Qaeda. When the first major attack was carried out by al-Qaeda in East Africa against U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salam (Kenya and Tanzania) in August 1998, the organization had no 'official' al-Qaeda branch in Yemen. However, considering the geographical proximity of Yemen to the al-Qaeda 'theater of operations' in East Africa, and the strong links between the people of Yemen and the communities in the two African states it does not come as a surprise that U.S. investigations into the 1998 attacks proved that Yemen had been used to provide vital logistical support for al-Qaeda's activities in Africa.<sup>14</sup>

**Al-Qaeda attacks on USS Cole and the French oil tanker Limburg, and then the killing of Abu Ali al-Harithi by the U.S. opened the door wide for a confrontation between the Yemeni government and al-Qaeda organization.**

14 | It was reported that Mohamed Rashed Daoud Al-Owhali, a Saudi citizen, carried out the attack against the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi on August 7, 1998 having obtained a forged Yemeni passport in the name of Khalid Salim Saleh bin Rashid. He used the Yemeni passport to travel to Nairobi five days before the operation. Al-Owhali also provided the investigators a telephone number that he had called before and after the bombing, which was a Yemeni phone number and proved that Yemen was used as key communications hub by al-Qaeda attackers. See: *Al Sharq al Awsat*, January 31, 2008 and Summary of Evidence for Combatant Status Review Tribunal – al Nashiri, Abd al Rahim Hussein Mohammed, Department of Defense, February 8, 2007, see: [www.defense.gov/news](http://www.defense.gov/news).

The major shift in the al-Qaeda-Yemen government relations occurred in the aftermath of the attack on the USS Cole. The Yemeni government was concerned about the impact of the attack on its relations with the U.S. and worried that Yemen would be seen as a terrorist safe haven. The government moved against al-Qaeda and was successful in arresting and prosecuting many members of the organization who were involved in the attack against USS Cole and in other operations. Al-Qaeda attacks on

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USS Cole and the French oil tanker Limburg, and then the killing of Abu Ali al-Harithi by the U.S. opened the door wide for a confrontation between the Yemeni government and al-Qaeda organization. It was reported that al-Qaeda's top leadership, specifically Osama bin Laden, was initially keen to avoid such conflict and tried to prevent al-Qaeda in Yemen from provoking or embarrassing the Yemeni government. According to a number of sources, bin Laden instructed the local leadership not to attack Yemeni targets, and even the attack on USS Cole was originally planned to be carried out outside the Yemeni territorial waters.<sup>15</sup> Either Bin Laden changed his mind after the government executed the leader of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army in the summer of 2000, or for technical reasons, the attack on the U.S. destroyer was carried out inside Yemeni waters. No doubt the government in Yemen then decided that the al-Qaeda activities in the country constituted a serious threat to the state and the regime. At the same time, the government came under huge pressure at the regional and international levels to deal with the al-Qaeda branch inside Yemen. The U.S. and most European countries adopted a 'carrot and stick' policy in pressurizing the Yemeni leadership on the issue of counter-terrorism. Economic and financial assistance to Yemen became conditional and explicitly linked to the government's performance in the task of counter-terrorism. Help from the Arab, mainly Gulf, states was similarly associated to the state's efforts in fighting al-Qaeda.

No doubt, for the foreseeable future, the al-Qaeda organization in Yemen will remain a major player on the security landscape in Yemen as well as on a regional and possibly

15 | *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 27, 2007.

international level. Having survived the past two decades, al-Qaeda in Yemen continues to adapt and remain a threat notwithstanding the recent counter-terrorism operations launched by the government. The overall political, security, and economic environment in Yemen constitutes a major hindrance to counter-terrorism efforts. The task of fighting the threat of al-Qaeda in Yemen is a highly complex one and beyond the Yemeni government's capacity. Therefore, regional and international sustainable assistance would be a crucial factor in determining the final outcome of this battle.