

IN FOCUS

**MADE IN MARIB:
A LOCAL RESPONSE TO
INSTABILITY AND VIOLENCE**



Made in Marib: A Local Response to Instability and Violence

The international community's go-to response to instability, conflict and violent extremism in fragile states is almost exclusively hard power, military approaches.¹ Often, these responses are undertaken without taking into account local drivers of conflict and violence.² In parallel, there are always efforts by local communities that attempt to address factors that lead people to violence, built on deep set knowledge of local conditions.³ Unfortunately, these efforts are almost always undercut, bypassed or contradicted by international efforts "which often end up undermining peace and security".⁴ Instead of mounting military responses independently from local efforts, the international community would benefit from addressing local drivers of violence⁵ by supporting, building onto and learning from community responses.⁶ Only then will it be able to effectively stop existing (and prevent future) violence,⁷ which provides an avenue to building sustainable stability and security.

Changing the international community's response to conflict is particularly important, because it fails to be successful even according to its own objectives of combating armed groups. According to a bipartisan task force of eminent former US policymakers, "Worldwide, annual terrorist attacks have increased fivefold since 2001. The number of self-professed Salafi-jihadist fighters has more than tripled" and spread to new geographies.⁸ This development underscores the immediate need to rethink security policy and reach outside of the hard power toolbox to address underlying factors.⁹ Yemen, a country home to the most dangerous branch of Al-Qaeda which has been subject to both international and domestic security approaches, serves as a compelling case study of this.

This briefing will discuss how community leaders in Marib have addressed local drivers of instability and violence with significant success. First, it will give a brief introduction

into Al-Qaeda's evolution in Yemen, followed by a swift analysis of the effects of the international security approach on the community. Thereafter, drawing on comprehensive field research, it will examine how Maribi leaders, aided by widespread community support, developed a local security response that not only improved the province's security, but also drove economic growth.

The briefing is based on research conducted during a field trip to Marib, Yemen, in July 2018, and draws on interviews with five dozen people. In order to capture the experiences of a cross-section of society, interviewees included local government and security officials, Yemeni and Saudi military officials, civil servants (including women at Marib's Department for Women's Affairs), journalists, shopkeepers, aid workers and civil society members. During the trip I met dozens of people who had lost loved ones in drone strikes or had themselves survived strikes. Many regularly experienced drones flying above their homes. I also visited a family that had been the target of a US and Emirati special forces raid. They explained that drones fly overhead daily. The day of my visit was no exception.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen

Since at least the late 1980s, al-Qaeda affiliated operatives have been active in Yemen.¹⁰ The operatives had free reign until 2002, when the US temporarily shut down the group's activities. These resurged in 2006 and in 2009 al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was founded.¹¹ Both in 2011 and in 2014, AQAP took advantage of the deteriorating security situation and ensuing power vacuum, the marginalisation of "local populations' and their resentment toward the central government"¹² to spread to new geographies and take over cities. In 2011,

AQAP's spread followed political breakdown and peaceful political protests in Yemen's Arab Spring.¹³ Three years later, the group's growth was driven by a collapse in the political transition and outbreak of the civil war.¹⁴

In 2011, AQAP briefly had some success at governing through the front group Ansar al-Sharia, not primarily through ideological conviction, but by providing essential services the government had failed to supply, including "security, electricity, irrigation systems, food, gas and fresh water" to long neglected populations.¹⁵ However, its repressive reign saw the group lose popularity.¹⁶ The second time around, in 2014, AQAP tried to present itself as less brutal, with more success.¹⁷ In recent years, the group has "made important financial gains" and "become more adept at integrating itself into Yemen's regional political struggles, thereby helping to ensure its relevance."¹⁸ As several AQAP leaders have been killed, Nadwa Dawsari's comprehensive fieldwork across Yemen has found that local figures have stepped into leadership roles in the organisation, making the group more decentralised and shifting its focus away from a global jihadist struggle. New leaders see "themselves more as Yemenis concerned about issues that matter to their communities, such as defending their region from Houthi incursion or improving and delivering more just governance (at least as al-Qaeda defines it)."

The effects of the traditional, international military response to insecurity and violent extremism

For more than 15 years, Yemen has been a central battlefield in the U.S.-led war on terror.¹⁹ The U.S. strategy appears to have been broadly the same there as in Pakistan and Somalia, namely to take out terrorist leaders (but also lower level members) through remote methods of war, primarily via drone strikes, but also through Special Forces raids.²⁰ Whereas some drone strikes have done just that, others have targeted AQAP foot soldiers and even people who have only been alleged of being foot soldiers. Strikes have resulted in

the killing of many civilians, disruption and destruction of property, essential infrastructure and livestock.²¹ The strategy has also subjected local populations to widespread and constant fear of being targeted.²² In Marib, one mother told me that every time the village children hear a drone, they run home from school, with her child yelling "the Americans are coming to kill us!" Then, the village's 1900 inhabitants will get in their cars and evacuate into the desert.²³ In tribal areas, the killing of civilians has caused "deep anger...towards the Yemeni and United States governments" which, in turn, is exploited by AQAP.²⁴

Over the years, the U.S.' intelligence and targeting process has been widely criticised, with civil society investigations revealing its underreporting of civilian casualties.²⁵ In Marib, the US counterterrorism strategy has been denounced and its success questioned, with the strategy failing to reduce the number of local terrorist attacks.²⁶ This points to the inability of the U.S. response alone to end violent extremism and instability in Marib. As argued by Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "the excessively militarised U.S. counterterrorism approach has worsened some of the conditions on the ground that fuelled al-Qaeda in Yemen in the first place,"²⁷ whilst failing to address the social, political and economic conditions that have given rise to the group. This includes poverty, isolation, unemployment, insecurity, lack of governance and essential services.²⁸

AQAP's ability to take advantage of local grievances is not unique. Rather, it is an approach that has been used by groups across the Middle East, north Africa and the Sahel. Conflict, instability and violent extremism do not develop in a vacuum.²⁹ In fact, understanding the local context in which they emerge is essential. The Brookings Institute's Middle East analyst, Kenneth M. Pollack, has written that "overemphasis(ing) counterterrorism as a goal of foreign policy" whilst not "addressing the underlying problems that gave rise to them are bound to prove fruitless... [and] simply leads to the emergence of new (often worse) terrorist groups."³⁰ From Syria and Iraq to the Sahel,

analysts and non-governmental organisations working on the ground have warned against oversimplifying and generalising the motivations that drive people to join, or support, extremist groups across different communities.³¹ Without understanding and addressing these local drivers – many of which are non-ideological – and without seeking community buy-in, an international response will never successfully build sustainable stability and security.³²

The ‘Marib Model’

Over the years, Marib’s local government has developed its own strategy to counter AQAP and provide security and stability for the province’s population. I call the region’s approach to security, stability and economic growth the ‘Marib Model.’ This strategy is a) driven by well-respected and capable leaders, b) empowered by national decentralisation, providing Marib with an unprecedented level of provincial autonomy and financial independence, and has c) enabled the development of an effective and accountable security force; cross-community trust-building and consensus-driven decision-making (which in turn has built community support) and financial investment in the local economy.

Contrary to the U.S. response, the aim and focus of local efforts extended beyond AQAP and addressed the root causes of the province’s insecurity and the drivers of extremist recruiting. This stretched from addressing the governance and security vacuum that in the past left Marib’s population vulnerable to AQAP attacks. Moreover, without access to state protection or justice, socio-economic grievances – including those based on poverty, isolation and unemployment – are often taken advantage of and used as recruitment tools by AQAP. The Marib Model has had far-reaching knock-on effects, driving economic growth and development, and creating employment and educational opportunities.

Whereas the first steps toward developing a coherent and effective strategy started in

2002, when Marib’s tribal and political leaders came together and publicly and unequivocally stated their opposition to AQAP,³³ it was not until 2015 that the local strategy would get teeth. In 2012, Sheik Sultan al-Aradah was appointed Governor of Marib by Yemen’s transitional President, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Al-Aradah’s grounding within Marib’s tribal system, experience resolving tribal disputes, deep knowledge of, and commitment to, the province and military skills – seen in his role in the liberation of Marib from the Houthis in 2015 – gave him local legitimacy.³⁴

The local community’s trust in its leadership has been the “backbone” of Marib’s successful development.³⁵ Contrary to other leaders in Yemen, al-Aradah lives in the community he serves and is invested in Marib’s long-term development. As part of al-Aradah’s commitment to trust-building, “local officials in Marib regularly meet with representatives of political parties and tribal factions to try to reach consensus in decision-making, something that officials and activists in the province alike cast as a key factors in its current stability.”³⁶ Maribi officials have been able to engage effectively and build trust with a diverse group of local stakeholders, by taking advantage of the “pre-existing tribal system”, rather than attempting to create a new political ecosystem.³⁷ By focusing on good governance, upholding local law and supporting an effective judiciary, and promoting transparency and accountability, the community’s trust in security forces and provincial leaders has increased.³⁸ According to local officials, the crime rate has dropped by 70 percent.³⁹

Taking advantage of the national decentralised system developed by Yemen’s National Transitional Council, al-Aradah in 2015 used Marib’s new autonomy to retain 20 percent of the province’s oil and gas revenues.⁴⁰ This secured a sustainable provincial income and enabled Marib to expand government services, pay all its employees monthly salaries, and employ some of Yemen’s most capable security officials to develop, train and run local

security forces.⁴¹ Marib's ability to pay its employees was no small feat. From 2016 to 2018, receiving monthly wages was almost unheard of in Yemen, with the vast majority of public employees going up to two years without pay.⁴² In 2020, the national Government is still struggling to pay public-sector salaries.⁴³

The new-won provincial income allowed Marib to address other local grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, weak essential infrastructure and lack of public services. By increasing the size and number of public provincial departments and initiating essential (and less essential) infrastructure projects – including building a hospital, a FIFA grade football ground and a university with a 5000-student capacity – Marib created a sustainable employment model. It also created educational opportunities across social sectors, including those for women.⁴⁴ This, in turn, helped address several local socio-economic grievances.

During my research trip, interviews with local citizens showed a clear trend that people felt safe inside Marib's city walls.⁴⁵ Its population surged from 40,000 a few years earlier, to as many as 2 million, the Governor's Chief of Staff told me. Internally displaced peoples (IDPs) from across Yemen have sought refuge in Marib, not from AQAP, but from the civil war. With them, the new arrivals brought resources, culture and skills, setting up businesses along the city's fast expanding network of streets.⁴⁶ This, in combination with considerable Saudi and Emirati aid and investment in big infrastructure projects, has added to the number of local jobs and supercharged the economy.⁴⁷ The influx of Yemenis from more liberal parts of the country, such as Aden and Sana'a, has also had a significant impact on gender norms: this was repeated by women of all ages, from groups of teenage girls socialising in the park, to grandmothers.⁴⁸ For the first time, women, including native Maribis, were working en masse outside the home and pursuing higher education in the province.⁴⁹

One problem, two responses

There are clear differences between the U.S. counterterrorism strategy and Marib's local security and development efforts. Marib's strategy seeks to address the underlying drivers of instability and violent extremism, such as the lack of good governance, security, essential services and employment opportunities, as a way of improving the conditions and security of the local population. This has been led by local leaders, informed by local expertise, and focused on collaborating with the population. The U.S. strategy is not designed for Marib's particular conditions but is based on a one-size-fits-all counterterrorism model. By only focusing on killing suspected or confirmed terrorists, it fails to address the specific conditions which allowed AQAP to grow in numbers and strength, as well as existing local efforts to counter the group.⁵⁰

Keenly aware that Marib's own efforts could be undermined by hard power solutions from the international community, officials from Marib tried to put an end to U.S. drone strikes in the province. In 2018, Marib's governor spoke with U.S. and UK officials about replacing drone strikes with local counterterrorism efforts where suspects would be arrested, prosecuted and tried in accordance with Yemeni law. The proposal was rejected, despite evidence pointing to a correlation between local efforts and a downturn in attacks. "If you look at the statistics" one expert told me, "you can see that the number of local AQAP attacks only decreased" once Marib's new security platform and forces were up and running.⁵¹ A transition from an international to a local only response may reduce the number of local attacks: an analysis pairing the Global Terrorism Database from the University of Maryland⁵² and civil war and insurgency data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program⁵³ found that "Western intervention in conflict zones may be linked to higher number of terrorist incidents in those areas."⁵⁴ As a part of Marib's push towards countering terrorism within the restraints of Yemen's conventional

law enforcement framework, al-Aradah has also asked for European support to improve Marib's judiciary, ideally by sending Marib's judges to be trained in Europe. The lack of communication, contacts and coordination, as well as international focus on Yemen, and competing priorities in Marib, appear to have prevented this proposal from becoming reality.

Conclusion

The primary grievances felt by Marib's population at the turn of the century concerned the lack of governance, stability, security and financial opportunities.⁵⁵ Good leadership, cross-community support and trust, consensus-seeking policymaking, and a sustainable provincial income model enabled the development of a locally minded strategy. This has turned Marib around. Whilst the U.S. counterterrorism policy predating the Marib Model failed to reduce the number of local terrorist attacks, these decreased following the launch of the local response. Furthermore, the Model has created an environment conducive to economic growth, providing a safe haven for millions of IDPs and job opportunities for young people. Whilst the international approach has killed some AQAP leaders, my research has clearly shown that U.S. drone strikes remain a source of fear and, in the eyes of some rural populations, are an arbitrary and unjustified exercise of deadly force. Notwithstanding Marib's success, the US continues to conduct drone strikes and special forces raids in the province.

Whereas the 'Marib Model' is not a one-size-fits-all intervention strategy, it highlights the value of utilising local expertise and strategies when building resilient and safe(er) communities. In fact, upon learning of Marib's success, other towns in Yemen have attempted to adopt a similar model. During my visit in 2018, local activists saw the creation of a network of safe haven cities as a way to provide security for people facing violence across the war-ridden country. Such a model would only be possible with international support.⁵⁶

Sadly, despite the progress made in Marib, the international community has failed to draw on the lessons it presents. Notwithstanding continued rhetorical reference to the importance of local buy-in and expertise, international interventions are continually designed and executed without taking into account existing local initiatives or consulting local communities. Yet, almost without failure, local communities have devised their own responses, drawing on local expertise, and often designed with a longevity and sustainability rarely seen in international responses.

By drawing on local expertise, and investing in, building on, and working with, local communities, a dynamic international response could look to address the multitude of underlying factors that drive violence and extremism by supporting good governance, providing sustainable employment, assisting in the creation of stable avenues of funding, investing in infrastructure and promoting accountability. By addressing underlying factors, the international community could help build community resilience, mitigate factors that may drive people to support violent extremism and contribute towards greater peace.

Author Bio

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Larry Attree, Celia McKeon and Konstantin Bärwaldt write: “In the name of peace and stability, the U.N. and its member states provide intelligence, logistics, and financial support to the armies of Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad for counter-terror operations that consistently involve serious human rights violations that feed into further conflict. Despite its significant U.N. and EU backing, the African Union Mission in Somalia remains similarly heavy-handed.” Larry Attree, Celia McKeon and Konstantin Bärwaldt, The International Security Echo-Chamber: Getting Civil Society Into the Room, *Just Security*, 11 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ELVKTI>; Nadwa Al-Dawsari, Foe not Friend: Yemeni Tribes and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, *Project on Middle East Democracy*, 2018

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⁴ Larry Attree, Celia McKeon and Konstantin Bärwaldt write: “In sum, security interventions are consistently failing at great cost. Yet governments tend to respond not by changing course and refocusing on addressing root causes, but with further investments in walls, border guards, special forces, train-and-equip programs, and remote warfare that all serve to perpetuate the cycle of violence.”

⁴ Larry Attree, Celia McKeon and Konstantin Bärwaldt, The International Security Echo-Chamber: Getting Civil Society Into the Room, *Just Security*, 11 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ELVKTI>

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