Yemen, afflicted by internal crisis, is slipping towards the precipice of state failure. Over the last year, there have been widespread protests against the regime, a bloody crackdown, the promise of political transition, and fighting between rival factions of the military.

Pessimists fear that Al-Qa’ida will flourish in another lawless haven for terrorism. Of particular concern for Western security has been the terrorist group, Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, which has developed a sophisticated media strategy for mobilising and radicalising recruits not just in the Middle East, but also in the West – as highlighted by the online English-language jihadist magazine, Inspire.

This Whitehall Report analyses how Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula has built and uses this communications apparatus. It argues that while this shows the terrorist group to indeed be a real threat to the West, it is nevertheless important not to overstate its capabilities. Though Yemen teeters on the brink of political upheaval, the UK and partner states can pursue a selection of policies, from strategic communications to counter-terrorism, to mitigate the Al-Qa’ida threat and defeat its narrative.
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The Language of Jihad
Narratives and Strategies of Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula and UK Responses

Benedict Wilkinson and Jack Barclay
The views expressed in this paper are the authors’ own, and do not necessarily reflect those of RUSI or any other institutions with which the authors are associated.

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to the series editor:
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Foreword

Tobias Feakin

The twenty-first century security landscape has been dominated by terrorism, as much as the Cold War dominated it in the 1980s. But unlike then, the security environment today has been both instigated and shaped by one non-state actor: Al-Qa’ida. A group which was originally a highly hierarchical organisation, comprising Osama bin Laden and his close group of associates drawn from the ranks of the mujahedeen who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, has now largely morphed and reshaped itself to pose a very different threat to the one it presented in 2001. There now exist disparate clusters of regional terrorist groups, small cells and individuals who look to Al-Qa’ida for both inspiration and, at times, leadership.

However, 2011, ten years on from the attacks in the US, was significant for the fight against Al-Qa’ida due to three pivotal events.

First was that one of the core objectives of the invasion of Afghanistan was achieved on 2 May when Bin Laden was killed by US special forces. This was followed by a series of targeted killings: a month later there were reports of his senior commander, Ilyas Kashmiri, being killed by a drone attack; on 22 August Atiyah Abd Al-Rahman (who led the external operations wing and was reported to be the new Deputy leader of Al-Qa’ida’s central leadership) was killed in the Waziristan border region; on 5 September, Younis Al-Mauritani – a senior figure in the network’s external operations wing and focused on hitting economically important targets in America, Europe and Australia – was seized in Quetta along with two other operatives. There is no doubt that the double-barrelled effort of drone attacks and high-tempo special forces operations have ‘Al-Qa’ida Core’ – the term ascribed to Al-Qai’da’s central leadership – on the ropes. Yet we are still trying to understand how this will impact the focus and shape of Al-Qa’ida in the months and years to come.

Second, the Arab Spring has taken Al-Qa’ida by surprise and bypassed its ideology as much as it did most governments around the world: we are all still assessing the impact that this will have upon the terrorist landscape.

Third, and very pertinent to this Whitehall Report, was the news that Anwar Al-Awlaki (widely perceived as the new leading light of Al-Qa’ida) and Samir Khan (an American citizen, and editor of the online terrorist magazine, *Inspire*) had been killed on 30 September by a US unmanned drone attack in Yemen which added further strength to the sense that Al-Qa’ida as an organisation is in decline, having suffered hammer blows to its strategic leadership through the course of 2011. Despite the damage to the Al-Qa’ida hierarchy, it would be a brave individual who predicts this as the ultimate
demise of the organisation – especially as there are still many influential Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) figureheads still at large in Yemen, who provide it with backbone and capability.

As the report outlines, amongst these highly influential individuals are those such as Ibrahim Al-Asiri, a known master bomb-maker who it is claimed was responsible for the device that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate on a plane over Detroit in 2009, and the bombs that AQAP tried to ship to the US in 2010 in printer cartridges. In addition, still at large are Qasim Al-Raymi, believed to be the military commander for AQAP, and Nasir Abdul Karim Al-Wuhayshi, a former personal assistant to Bin Laden and who oversaw the merging of Saudi Arabian and Yemeni splinters of Al-Qa’ida to form AQAP. So whilst diminished, the organisation still exists operationally. A defining feature of its history has been the organisation’s ability to disseminate highly sophisticated ideological narratives and strategic communication to support their attacks and aid recruitment, which requires further analysis and understanding as it is now largely shaping the recruitment of new volunteers into Al-Qa’ida. This report is vital reading for those wishing to understand these narratives and methods, and how they shape the present and future radicalisation of vulnerable individuals.

Many experts, including Wilkinson and Barclay within this report, look to understand the situation in Yemen and the possibilities for AQAP gaining further traction in the region, through garnering a greater understanding of the underlying issues that allow such groups to operate. Yemen is the Arab world’s most impoverished country: according to Oxfam, some 40 per cent of a rapidly growing population live on less than £1.25 per day, approximately 7.5 million Yemenis are going hungry and have serious problems in gaining access to fresh water. Despite relatively large oil reserves, crude is sold to pay for food imports, and illicit economies are the norm. In addition, there is a longstanding conflict in the north of the country which continues to create serious social disparities and frictions, thus providing non-state actors with a fertile ground in which to operate.

The Yemeni population has also been inspired by the Arab Spring movements across the region, and since the early part of 2011 there have been continual protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime which have led to mass protests and the death of many hundreds of Yemenis. 2012 will be a pivotal year in Yemen’s future: firstly, as February is the time that President Saleh must relinquish full control of the country according to the Gulf Cooperation Council agreement he signed in November 2011, and it is uncertain as to how smoothly this transition will proceed. Secondly, Western powers have put a lot of diplomatic effort and funding into supporting Saleh’s regime in the battle against terrorism, so to lose this key ally presents them with multiple, difficult choices, all of which will have direct implications for both the Yemeni
population and AQAP. What is certain is that AQAP will be watching closely to capitalise on any mistakes that are made and will bide their time ready to fill any vacuum that appears.

Dr Tobias Feakin
Senior Research Fellow/Director, National Security and Resilience
December 2011

Notes and References

Introduction

Yemen, hemmed in by a whole host of political and security crises, is slipping towards the precipice of state failure. 2011 has witnessed vast protests against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, fighting between rival factions of the military and political apparatus and the deaths of countless citizens. Yemen’s most recent political history – one of protests, violence and ever-deepening instability – is intricate and requires a full treatment outside the scope of this report.1

However, this bloody crisis has taken centre stage against a well-established backdrop of concern both for Yemen’s internal stability and the threat that organisations operating from Yemeni territory pose to the West. Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), now increasingly perceived to be the greatest threat to Western security, has made a number of attempts to attack Western targets. On 24 December 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a twenty-three-year old Nigerian man, attempted to ignite explosives sewn into his underwear whilst on board a flight to Detroit. Similarly, in April 2010, a suicide bomber attacked the British Ambassador’s convoy in Sana’a, injuring three bystanders. On 29 October 2010, two devices were found on cargo planes destined for the US. AQAP has also made gains at home: the organisation has a significant presence in the southern Governorates of Abyan and Shabwa and, during the summer of 2011, was reputed to have taken almost complete control of the town of Ja’ar and the port of Zinjibar.2

In June 2011, sixty-two prisoners with links to AQAP escaped from a prison in Al-Mukalla – another significant coup for the organisation.3

By and large, analysts have linked the threat of AQAP with the internal politics of an increasingly fragile state.4 The Yemeni government has to contend with an insurgency in the north and a secessionist movement rapidly gathering momentum in the south.5 These security challenges have simultaneously stretched already limited resources and provided AQAP with the territorial space required for training. Recent months have seen militants affiliated with AQAP take advantage of lax security in southern Yemen to seize several towns and in some cases establish parallel governance there. Moreover, widespread corruption, poor governance, lack of infrastructure and employment, water and food scarcity and the impending exhaustion of its oil reserves have acted as propaganda tools helping AQAP to recruit and further consolidate its influence in the region.6

To compound matters further, it is precisely Yemen’s fragility which has led to the exaggeration of the threat of AQAP; indeed, some analysts argue that the threat has become part of a political narrative advanced by the Yemeni regime to secure foreign aid, to stabilise a worsening economy and to strengthen the position of the president against his rivals.7 This view
continues to gain credibility: after weeks of protests and calls to stand down, Saleh’s repeated reaction was to refer to the need for a strong leadership capable of defeating the organisation in partnership with the West. Without him, the implication was, AQAP would capitalise on state weakness, gain further traction and expand upon their already dangerous presence. In short, Saleh portrayed himself as the only person capable of defeating AQAP and other violent militants in Yemen.

The key question at the heart of UK policy towards Yemen is whether AQAP does indeed pose a threat to regional and Western security and, if so, how great that threat is. Without a firm and analytically rigorous assessment, the UK’s foreign policy position – and that of other Western states – is likely to focus on the counter-terrorism imperative and remain blind to alternatives. With that in mind, this report attempts to take the longest possible view of AQAP and to provide a history of the organisation from its Saudi and Yemeni origins up to the formal establishment of AQAP in its contemporary form. A key feature of this history has been the organisation’s ability to disseminate highly sophisticated ideological narratives and strategic communication to support their attacks and aid recruitment, and this forms a major thematic thread throughout the report.

Broadly speaking, this report argues that analysis of AQAP’s publications demonstrate that the organisation does indeed present a security threat to the region and the West, but we should not over-state this threat. The organisation’s most dangerous characteristic is its ability to plan and execute large-scale international terrorist plots. That said, the attempts to inspire sympathisers remotely to carry out their own operations add an additional layer to the threat picture and, crucially, one which is intrinsically hard to address. In the authors’ view, the emergence of this two-tiered strategy for achieving political ends marks out a shift in the strategic blueprint of AQAP – one which will require a corresponding shift in the way that the West, in conjunction with Yemen, seeks to counter the organisation.

In light of this analysis, and, in particular, given the attempts by AQAP to use strategic messaging to mobilise Western sympathisers remotely, a two-pronged solution is needed which emphasises the need to both undermine and counter AQAP’s narratives and communication. The former depends upon exploiting the weaknesses inherent to the organisation’s message; the latter relies on the creation of an effective counter-narrative. In this sense, the report identifies the field of strategic communication as a key battleground in the fight against groups such as AQAP, and offers concrete, practicable solutions.

The report is structured around three questions. First, what is the history of the organisation, how did it start and how did it develop into its current
form? Second, how have its intentions, both regionally and towards the West, developed? Finally, how, based on this analysis, can the UK and the West, more generally, act in tandem with the Yemeni government to counter this organisation?

The first chapter briefly lays out the theoretical background to the report and examines the centrality of communication to terrorist organisations. Each subsequent chapter deals with one of these questions above. Thus, the second chapter focuses on the history of AQAP: from the establishment of the first networks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1998, to the organisation’s relocation from Saudi Arabia to Yemen after the campaigns of violence in 2005. In the second part of this chapter, the focus moves to the Yemeni strand of Al-Qa’ida, which operated from 2006 until the point of the formal union in 2009, concentrating on developing a sophisticated and effective communications arm. The third chapter explores the period following the 2009 merger of the Saudi and Yemeni Al-Qa’ida franchises and, in particular, on the content and breadth of the group’s written publications and audio-visual material in order to gain access to recurring ideological and strategic themes. Finally, the report offers conclusions on the threat which AQAP poses to the West, based on analysis of their published material.

Notes and References


2. Details of AQAP presence in these towns remain unclear; some militants claimed to be affiliated to an organisation called Ansar Al-Sharia, which almost certainly has substantial links to AQAP. See Michael Horton, ‘Tribes, Salafists and Separatists: Yemen’s Changing Political Landscape’, Jamestown Terrorism Monitor (Vol. 25, No. 9, June 2011).


5. For in-depth studies on the Houthi insurgency and the southern secessionist movement, see variously: Barak A Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon (Santa Monica, CA, Arlington, VA,


I. Terrorism, Communication and Strategy

Violence speaks volumes. For the strategists in terrorist organisations, violence has long been viewed as a form of language. The Russian Anarchists of the nineteenth century, for example, were acutely aware that terrorism provided compelling propaganda. Bakunin, a leading strategist for the movement, saw terrorist violence as a strategy for spreading ‘principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda’. Similarly, Khaled Mesha‘al, now the leader of Hamas’s Political Bureau, proclaimed in the aftermath of 9/11 that ‘the Zionist enemy ... only understands the language of jihad, resistance and martyrdom; that was the language that led to its blatant defeat in South Lebanon and it will be the language that will defeat it on the land of Palestine’. Al-Qa’ida and its affiliates are equally aware of the communicative power of terrorism. Al-Zawahiri, for example, was absolutely explicit that terrorism should send a message which could not be ignored; he once told his followers to ‘be sure to inflict maximum casualties on the enemy, kill the greatest number of people, for this is the language understood by the West’. For terrorists, then, the logic of terrorist violence is straightforward enough: it is a method of communication, conveying an organisation’s potential to damage its target politically, economically or territorially unless certain demands are met.

Violence is one language in which terrorists communicate both with their opposition and with their real and potential supporters. But for violence to bring about desired political goals, however, terrorist organisations cannot rely on acts of violence alone. For terrorism to be ‘the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda’, it must be supported by a range of justifying narratives which describe the organisation’s ‘worldview’: its ideology, list of grievances, demands for change and so on. Without a supporting narrative, terrorist activity is nothing more than a meaningless act of random violence. Or to put it another way, in order for terrorist violence to advertise the cause, it must have a cause to advertise. Indeed, it is as a consequence of the marketing imperative that terrorist organisations have had to become savvy media operators, producing magazines and providing interviews, justifying their actions and seeking to garner support.

If terrorist violence is the organisation’s coercive language and if narratives provide the justification for that language of violence, then strategic communications are designed to maximise the group’s resources into creating the highest ‘value’ message possible. Strategic communications legitimise various actions (for example, suicide bombings, assassinations, grassroots initiatives) and proscribe others (for example, avoid the deaths of Muslims, do not join the jihad in Yemen but fight at home, do not focus on the domestic enemy but the ‘far’ enemy). They are designed to unify the actions
of the organisation and ensure that all of the group’s efforts are in alignment. It is, in short, a way of making sure that everyone is ‘facing the same way’. But this is far from straightforward: discussions about maximising resources produce debates and disagreements between terrorist strategists about how best to achieve their political goals. Indeed, it is often these disagreements which create factions within terrorist organisations; rival strategists and leaders have to work through their differences, as in any organisation or relationship, or risk long-term separation. Conversely, those organisations with a unified strategic view, clearly disseminated and enforced throughout the membership, are able to act in harmony and increase their chances of strategic success.

To recap, then, terrorist organisations communicate in three ‘languages’. The most visible of these is the act of violence which communicates the organisation’s commitment to their cause, the changes they desire and, simultaneously, an ‘advertisement of the cause’. The second form of communication is the narrative which supplies the justification for an attack, the group’s grievances and their desired aims; it also presents ideological propaganda for current and aspiring supporters. The third form consists of those messages which describe the way in which the organisation intends to achieve its goals, simultaneously a threat to its target and a way of unifying the efforts of the organisation to maximise their effect.

It is no coincidence that all three forms of communications – or ‘languages’ as this paper calls them – impact on two audiences at the same time. Violence both advertises to current and potential supporters as well as issuing an ultimatum to the target. For strategic communications, the primary audience is clearly the organisation itself, which is being told how to go about achieving desired political aims. But even strategic communications convey a threat to the enemy – they are a secondary coercive layer, designed to reinforce the language of violence.

But for all this talk of languages and audiences, how is terrorism supposed to achieve political change? Under the strategic view, which this report adopts throughout, the logic of terrorism is relatively uncomplicated: one academic puts it neatly, arguing that terrorism is a coercive strategy which aims to generate ‘a psychological effect – terror – with a view to creating a political effect that will be manifest in changes in the target’s strategy’. A population sufficiently frightened by the language of terrorist violence, so the argument runs, will prevent further bloodshed and panic by putting pressure on their governments to adjust their policy or strategy according to the demands of the terrorist organisation.

Bearing in mind the centrality of these communications to the success of terrorist organisations, it is unsurprising that they spend a great deal of time
producing written and audio-visual material for the benefit of their supporters and targets. Critically, however, this material also provides Western analysts with an opportunity. As one academic has argued, ‘this written body of work remains the most tangible element in the identity of such a phenomenon ... to elucidate this ideology, without simply calling it terrorism, is to enable ourselves to understand its modus operandi and define it by comprehension rather than by extension’.\textsuperscript{9} In other words, because terrorists are aware that these narratives are central to the success of their strategy, they provide a fascinating and under-valued evidential base for analysing a terrorist organisation’s future ambitions, its \textit{modus operandi} and, consequently, the threat it poses to various states and regions.

AQAP has become one of the most vocally and textually productive organisations in the history of terrorism. Clearly, the group has conducted (or attempted) a range of high-profile attacks in recent years and these have brought widespread attention to their cause. Similarly, a substantial proportion of their traditional publications in both Arabic and English have been devoted both to presenting a unified strategic doctrine and to providing the underlying, supportive narratives which describe the cause which their attacks advertise. In comparison to other terrorist organisations, however, AQAP in its current guise in Yemen has avoided the debates and falling outs so often associated with the production of strategic communications. That the organisation has managed to maintain control over its supporters is a testament not only to the quantity of its strategic communication but also to the quality of those communications.

This is not to say, of course, that AQAP’s strategy has not mutated as the organisation has developed and expanded. On the contrary, AQAP has undergone a marked strategic change since the beginning of 2009. Rather than focusing solely on regional aspirations in the Arabian Peninsula, it has rather turned its back on regional politics and attempted to incite terrorist activity abroad, largely, though not completely, against Western targets. This report assesses the validity of the claim that AQAP has developed strategically and become a genuine threat to Western security; it also identifies the rationale provided for this strategic shift, and provides a range of methods for countering the threat. Rather than focusing on one language (for example, the litany of attacks and attempted attacks) or on secondary reports of the organisation’s structure, membership and capabilities, this report focuses instead on the strategic communications produced by the organisation.

\textbf{Notes and References}

1. Mikhail Bakunin, \textit{Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis} (September 1870). See also Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jaz Azari, ‘Propaganda of the Deed: Understanding the
Phenomenon’, *RUSI Whitehall Report* (No. 3-08, 2008).


II. The History of AQAP

Al-Qa’ida in Saudi Arabia

From the organisation’s foundation, the desire to attack and ultimately remove the Saudi regime has been an oft-repeated political aim.¹ But, despite agreement on this aim throughout AQAP and the wider Al-Qa’ida movement, there was broad disagreement about how to achieve political aims: some Al-Qa’ida strategists argued that their ambitions could only be realised by opening jihadist fronts and waging war against military personnel, where others argued for decentralised operations against Western civilian and military targets. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those Saudis who were attracted to the cause found greater kudos in the former route – many of them departed for other jihadist fronts – and the Saudi franchise was left with a depleted pool of recruits.²

The Al-Uyayri and Al-Nashiri Networks

Indeed, it was not until June 1998, when Yusuf Al-Uyayri was released from prison and took on the leadership of the group, that the efforts to establish Al-Qa’ida in Saudi Arabia began to gather pace. The organisation was reinforced in 2002 when a large proportion of the Saudi mujahedeen returned from Afghanistan – amongst them Abd Al-Rahman Al-Nashiri.³ Al-Nashiri and Al-Uyayri neatly represent both sides of the strategic schism within the organisation. Al-Nashiri wanted an immediate initiation of hostilities against government targets across the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Uyayri, by contrast, insisted on the slow approach by establishing a resilient network of five independent cells, each with its own independent support networks, which were capable of carrying out spectacular attacks against Western targets in the Kingdom. In the event, Al-Nashiri’s doctrine seems to have had greater appeal to ‘Al-Qa’ida Core’ (AQC) operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan and, over a ten month period in 2002, he ran a series of operations across the peninsula. But it was precisely this impetuosity which quickly brought him to the attention of Saudi and US intelligence officials: in November 2002, he was captured and the remainder of his operation faltered.⁴

It is important to note the widespread lack of coherence and cohesion in strategy, not only amongst the diverse membership of Al-Qa’ida, but also between AQC and the two Saudi networks. As this report argues, terrorism requires strategic communications to unify the actions of its membership. In the case of the Al-Uyayri and Al-Nashiri networks, the absence of a harmonised strategy for operations on the Arabian Peninsula not only led to factionalism between Bin Laden and Al-Uyayri, but, as we shall see, also led to weaknesses in the jihadist effort in Saudi Arabia for years to come.

A few months after the capture of Al-Nashiri in early 2003, Al-Uyayri had completed his recruitment drive in preparation for establishing five distinct
cells in the Kingdom; but his plans were never fully realised. Once again, Al-Uayyri came to blows with AQC. He remained adamant in his conviction that success would be brought about by a resilient, organised network capable of launching a momentous attack on Saudi soil while avoiding detection by Saudi intelligence. For AQC, attacks on US targets were much more sufficient strategically: they would force the US to leave the Kingdom and, bereft of US support, the Saudi regime would falter and fall.

Despite his misgivings, Al-Uayyri, under pressure from AQC, went ahead with the campaign. But the network was under-prepared and the decision to escalate premature. Indeed, it is an indication of the network’s lack of cohesion that the group still had not coalesced under a unified name and that most of the attacks during this, the most violent period of terrorist activity in Saudi Arabian history, were unsuccessful. On 12 May 2003, several car bombs were detonated outside housing compounds in east Riyadh; 34 were killed and more than 200 wounded. The attack cajoled the Saudi government into a full-blown crackdown and by November, at least a hundred members of Al-Uayyri’s network had been arrested and twenty-six had died, including the leader himself.

Whilst the loss of recruits was a major setback for the organisation, the situation was not without its silver lining. In the following months, the organisation had time to regroup and restructure. As a consequence of its restricted operational capacity, it focused on producing a formidable media presence, chiefly in the publication of Sawt Al-Jihad. It was a brilliant strategic move: the depth and sophistication of the media campaign camouflaged the group’s lack of operational capability. Slowly, the group began to reorganise around the publication campaign. Interestingly, it was at this time in November 2003 that the organisation formally took the name of ‘Al-Qa’ida on the Arabian Peninsula’. Like the media campaign, the adoption of a formal title provided a discrete entity around which a membership could coalesce. More importantly, perhaps, the name not only carried the legitimising power of Al-Qa’ida branding, but also provided the group with the authority to disseminate a strategic vision tailored to the specific requirements of the environment in which it operated.

As a consequence of their rebranding and targeted marketing campaign, AQAP consolidated its position enough to begin another round of attacks in December 2003. Hand-in-hand with the rebrand went a change in targets: the group increasingly turned its attention away from Westerners and towards Saudi security targets. Strategically, the rationale was that the government’s retaliation had all but disabled the group previously and that attacking security targets would provide the organisation with the room to manoeuvre. But the strategy was inconsistent with a key element of its supporting narrative – that they acted in the best interests of Muslims. It was
for precisely this reason that AQAP did not take responsibility for attacks on the Saudi security infrastructure at the time; rather, the attacks were claimed by an organisation calling itself the Haramain Brigades. It is now widely recognised that this was a calculated strategic decision by senior operatives, designed to avoid tarnishing the name of the organisation by attacking fellow countrymen. As Hegghammer puts it: ‘The name AQAP had to be reserved for the declared “Westerners first” strategy’.

But by 2004, AQAP was rapidly becoming dysfunctional: the organisation seemed incapable of maintaining a steady leadership, adopting a single strategy for achieving its aims, choosing a set of targets appropriate to these aims or mobilising substantial support among the Saudi population. Despite attempts under the new leader, Aziz Al-Muqrin, to revitalise the campaign in April, when a car bomb was detonated outside Police Headquarters in central Riyadh, once again the casualties were Muslim and the attack was widely seen to be counter-productive for AQAP. As in the previous December, AQAP distanced itself from the casualties and the attack was claimed by the Haramain Brigades. The security response was precise and uncompromising. Indeed, so complete was the action against the organisation that, in the eyes of the Saudi intelligence officials, it had run out of steam. By September 2004, AQAP had ceased to release its major publications; as the organisation had announced its resurgence by creating Sawt Al-Jihad, so the group’s demise was marked by its absence.

Whilst AQAP continued its struggling existence over the next years, attacks became infrequent and poorly executed. The organisation had, in effect, been decapitated by Saudi counter-terrorism efforts and without a reliable platform of experienced jihadi operatives, AQAP struggled to make further impact in Saudi Arabia. The police routinely arrested several hundred individuals with links to the organisation and AQAP’s recruitment stream dried up. It was the impossibility of conducting successful attacks in Saudi which would be a critical factor in encouraging the merger with the Yemeni branch in 2009.

Al-Qa’ida in Yemen
Yemen has long had an Al-Qa’ida presence, both as a ground for recruitment and a location for attacks. A sizeable proportion of those mujahdeen who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s were of Yemeni origin and the first attacks for which Al-Qa’ida officially claimed responsibility took place in Yemen: two hotels in Aden, the Gold Mohur and the Mövenpick, were bombed in 1992. In January 2000, an attack on the USS The Sullivans in Aden failed, but a second attack later in 2000 against the USS Cole killed seventeen members of the crew. In the aftermath of this attack, Yemen worked in partnership with the US to dismantle many of Al-Qa’ida’s networks and affiliates and when Sinan Al-Harithi, a leading Yemeni Al-Qa’ida (AQIY)
operative, was killed in a Predator drone strike in 2002, the group began to flounder.\textsuperscript{15}

Many analysts locate the roots of AQIY’s current success in the jailbreak of February 2006. The jailbreak saw the release of by twenty-three jihadi prisoners – many of whom soon became major figures in today’s organisation: Nasir Al-Wuhayshi, Qasim Al-Raymi and Fawaz Al-Rabay’i’.\textsuperscript{16}

For others, the key moment in the re-emergence of contemporary AQAP was the official declaration of the merger of the Saudi and Yemeni branches in 2009. However, these are moments which articulate the rising fortunes and growing momentum of the group, rather than that which brought about its resurgence. Indeed, the roots of the group’s re-emergence can be traced back further to the complacency which followed US-Yemeni success against AQIY networks in the southern Arabian Peninsula, reflected particularly in the decision of November 2005 to refuse Yemen $20 million from the Millennium Challenge Account and to reduce World Bank aid from $420 million to $280 million. This complacency represented an opportunity for AQIY not only to begin to reform, but to learn from previous, largely strategic, mistakes.

Between early 2006 and early 2008, AQIY made a number of defiant, if clumsy, attempts to threaten the regime, which it began by targeting oil facilities in Marib and the Hadramaut. Whether the group decided that there was little traction – in terms of both recruitment and coercion in these operations – or whether it decided to avoid attacks which impacted negatively on the lives of those to whom it wanted to appeal – is unclear. Either way, it seems that AQIY underwent a period of strategic development. Unlike its Saudi counterpart, which focused on local security and political targets at one time and symbols of Western influence and presence at another, AQIY progressed to a two-tier system. It simultaneously carried out a string of insurgent-style attacks on Yemeni security force targets in the country’s central and southern tribal regions whilst undertaking more high-profile operations, ranging from suicide bombings at tourist sites to attacks on diplomatic premises and personnel in Sana’a, against Western nationals.\textsuperscript{17}

It was during this period that AQIY began to issue statements which mirrored its two-tier tactical and strategic choices. In addition to calling on the regime to release jihadi prisoners, it issued threats towards the Yemeni government which it branded ‘apostate’ on the grounds that it was perceived to have had a central role in implementing US foreign policy in the region. The group was equally explicit about its staunch opposition to US presence in Yemen and involvement in local politics, demanding that Saleh sever his ties with the US and allow for the introduction of shariah as the system of governance in the country. By early 2008, such statements had developed into a full-blown media and communications branch, through which it disseminated its outlook and strategic intentions, in particular through its new magazine:
Sada Al-Malahim. The publication bore similarity in layout, content and purpose to its Saudi forerunners Sawt Al-Jihad and Muaskar Al-Battar.

It is, perhaps, tempting to see the similarity in publications as evidence for connection between ‘old’ AQAP and AQIY. Certainly, there were links between the organisations: Al-Nashiri is reported to have organised the attacks on the USS The Sullivans and the USS Cole. But despite this, the organisations were tactically and strategically different: old ‘AQAP’ switched its targets on a regular basis, where AQIY opted for a two-tier system. AQAP was largely traditional in its tactics, using car bombs and assassinations, where as AQIY demonstrated a certain flexibility in terms of both targeting and its modus operandi.

‘New’ AQAP Announced
Despite these differences, it is worth mentioning one similarity before analysing the group’s publications. The decision to call the newly merged organisation AQAP – to keep the name of its Saudi predecessor – remains something of a mystery. To date, the group has shown little interest in the wider Arabian Peninsula; even less a desire to conduct lengthy campaigns against the Saudi regime in the mould of its namesake. Nevertheless, by early 2009, AQIY and the various other jihadi networks active in the country coalesced into what purported to be a single organisation appropriating the name of its Saudi forebear: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. AQAP officially announced its formation in a video released in January 2009 by Al-Malahim Media. The video, entitled From Here We Start And In al-Aqsa We Meet, featured senior members of the organisation’s new Shura council, including the group’s emir, Nasir Al-Wuhayshi. The video marked the start of the rapid development of a sophisticated strategic communication capability to rival that of Al-Sahab Media, the media production arm most closely affiliated with the Al-Qaeda senior leadership.

The first occasion on which Shura council members of the new organisation had delivered an address to video, From Here We Start, formally announced a merger between Al-Qaeda’s Saudi and Yemeni networks. It also offered valuable insight into the group’s outlook, grievances and agenda. The video focused on prepared statements delivered to camera by four members of the AQAP Shura: Al-Wuhayshi; ‘Military Emir’ Qasim Al-Raymi; Deputy Emir Sayyid Ali Al-Shihri, a Saudi national and a so-called ‘field commander’ of AQAP; and Sheikh Abul-Harith Muhammad Al-Awfi, also a Saudi. From the outset, ‘new’ AQAP strategic communication has reflected the group’s local and regional agenda in much the same manner as the communications of its Saudi predecessor. It is worth noting that AQAP rhetoric in this video framed the US and its allies as bearing ultimate responsibility for the calamities affecting the Middle East and the wider Muslim world.
In the video, AQAP’s leadership declared their allegiance to Al-Qa’ida and its then emir, Osama bin Laden. This is noteworthy as it demonstrates a commitment to supporting Al-Qa’ida’s grand strategy, which would de facto include a commitment to targeting directly the ‘far enemy’ — namely the US and its allies — on its home soil, something that ‘old AQAP’ is not publicly known to have attempted. The video’s narrator states: ‘We would also like to reiterate to our leaders and elders, Sheikh Osama bin Laden and Sheikh Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri – may Allah protect them – that we are still fulfilling our promise and Jihad’.

This process of pledging unity to Al-Qa’ida leadership and official adoption of the brand is a means by which the leadership attains strategic unity across disparate conflict zones. Indications of a shared strategic outlook between the ‘new’ AQAP and Al-Qa’ida senior leadership permeate the AQAP strategic communications. The most obvious example of this can be seen in the repeated allusions to the ‘single narrative’ most frequently recurrent in video productions by Al-Sahab Media. This narrative describes a global military and ideological attack on Islam and Muslims by a ‘Zionist-Crusader alliance’ seeking to occupy Muslim lands, plunder their resources, subjugate their people and ensure that Islam is kept divided and weak. The narrative reminds the audience that the oppressive ‘apostate’ regimes in the Middle East region — including Yemen — are merely the local agents of a bigger oppressor: the United States. This identification, characterisation and demonisation of the perceived ‘main enemy’ (the US), and the incorporation of that enemy into a conspiracy theory framework that identifies it as the ultimate source of oppression in the region, is a critical preparatory step in convincing an audience that violence against this enemy is legitimate.

Interestingly, a number of commentators have perceived a genealogical thread running between ‘old’ AQAP and ‘new’ AQAP, often citing continuity in personnel and strategy. By contrast, research for this report suggests that there is a surprising dearth of evidence for such a link. The groups seem to bear little continuity in personnel: those individuals of Saudi Arabian origin in ‘new’ AQAP had no link to the ‘old’ organisation, residing, as they were, in Guantánamo; while those with a central role in ‘old’ AQAP were subject to an extremely effective Saudi counter-terrorism campaign and were, for the most part, captured or killed. In terms of strategy, as will be discussed in the following chapter, the emergence of ‘new’ AQAP represented a marked departure for Al-Qa’ida, strategically and operationally, in the Arabian Peninsula.

Similarly, the decision to retain the AQAP branding, despite fundamental differences that permeated the two organisations, was entirely strategic. In so doing, the group was able to benefit from a number of opportunities: in the first place, the group could simultaneously claim allegiance to the AQC
operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to take advantage of their allure to ‘new’ recruits, of their finance and support networks and, most importantly, of their oft-repeated political aims – in particular, their contempt for the Saudi regime. Secondly, the leaders could claim a kind of invincibility for their organisation: despite the tenacity of Saudi counter-terrorism initiatives, the organisation lived on. In terms of marketing, they could portray themselves as flexible and invulnerable and in so doing acquire a level of kudos and status in the eyes of existing and potential mujahedeen the world over. This was further strengthened by the group’s self-assumed responsibility to execute all Al-Qa’ida operations across the Arabian Peninsula, including in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps most importantly, however, the decision to continue with the name allowed them to hit the ground running: little time was required in the laborious work of securing funds and attracting recruits. Instead, the leaders could concentrate on establishing a resilient, strategically harmonious organisation – and in order to achieve that, they spent a great deal of effort communicating with their supporters through written and audio-visual material.

Notes and References


3. Ibid., p. 165. Hegghammer estimates that between three hundred and a thousand mujahedeen returned to Saudi Arabia from Afghanistan.

4. Ibid., p. 167–70.


8. Thomas Hegghammer, op. cit., p. 41.
9. A useful contemporary example is found in recent reports of Bin Laden’s desire to change the name of Al-Qa’ida, which he felt had become too associated with the deaths of Muslims. Jason Burke, ‘Bin Laden Wanted to Change Al-Qaida’s Bloodied Name’, *Guardian*, 24 June 2011.


11. AQAP, however, had a sting in its tail: two operations in December, the first on the US Consulate in Jidda and the second on the Ministry of the Interior and National Guard Training Centre in Riyadh, left several dead and wounded. They were impressive operations in their planning and preparation, but failures in their execution.

12. Two further issues were released in April 2005 and January 2007, however these were the work of individuals, both of whom were promptly arrested.


15. Before the merger, Al-Qa’ida networks in Yemen were rather loosely arranged. Officially, they referred to themselves as the Al-Qa’ida Organisation for Jihad in the South Arabian Peninsula; however, Al-Qa’ida in Yemen (AQIY) was also used. Later, they provided names for particular cells – notably the Yemen Soldiers Brigade. The authors have opted for the acronym AQIY to refer to the networks operating in Yemen until the merger. See Tony Karon, ‘Yemen Strike Opens New Chapter In War On Terror’, *Time*, 5 November 2002, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,387571,00.html>, accessed 14 December 2011.


18. As nearly every commentary points out, the title means: ‘The Echo Of Epic Battles’.
Interestingly, comparison between attack and messaging timelines for Al-Qa’ida in Yemen against its media releases suggests an attempt by the group to synchronise its media activities with high-profile operations; when each edition of *Sada Al-Malahim* was released, an attack would often follow very shortly afterward, though this was not always a consistent pattern.

19. Al-Malahim Media, *From Here We Begin And In Al-Aqsa We Meet*, January 2009. A version featuring English subtitles prepared by the Global Islamic Media Front, an online jihadi media production organisation, can be found in multiple parts at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vf7hcME0RI>, accessed 14 December 2011.


22. In particular, as noted above, the now senior figures of Sayyid Ali Al-Shihri and Abul-Harith Muhammad Al-Awfi who had little part to play during the operational hey-day of AQAP.
III. The Language of Jihad

Since 2009, the ‘new’ AQAP has demonstrated a strong commitment, through its rhetoric and its actions, to a sustained international terrorist agenda. While this agenda was in evidence in AQAP’s early stages with attacks on Westerners inside Yemen (and in accompanying rhetoric offering a justification for such attacks), it has since expanded to the direct targeting of objectives in Western territory. This represents a strategic shift for AQAP when compared to the strategy of the group’s Saudi predecessor, which targeted Western nationals and their interests in the Kingdom on numerous occasions but which did not, as far as is publicly known, attempt to strike the US, UK or its Western allies at home. The threat is now multi-dimensional, involving direct attacks on the West via centrally-directed terrorist conspiracies, supported by attempts to use strategic communication to remotely mobilise AQAP sympathisers in the UK, US and elsewhere.

This chapter will detail how the breadth of AQAP strategic communication has grown in order to support this strategy. The sophistication of AQAP media has risen sharply since 2009, in particular of its Arabic language producer Al-Malahim Media, which, it can be assumed, speaks primarily to a regional audience in the Middle East. More recently, attempts to stimulate grassroots jihadist activity on US and Western soil have been supported by a new, English language media arm spearheaded by Inspire magazine, in which the US-Yemeni cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki has featured prominently.

So far, rhetoric from ‘new’ AQAP has been largely coherent concerning the importance of such attacks to its overall strategy. The US and its Western partners (including the UK) have been attacked repeatedly and threatened in AQAP rhetoric consistently since the 2009 merger. The US and its NATO allies have frequently found themselves at the centre of AQAP narratives. These characterise them as forces oppressing Islam and Muslims via their support for ‘apostate’ puppet regimes in the Middle East. AQAP has since gone further in seeking to convince its audience both inside and outside the Gulf States region that its US and NATO adversaries are now de facto invading Yemen through UAV strikes and naval deployments in the Gulf of Aden.

This consistency in messaging, not to mention repeated targeting, suggests unity of both outlook and strategy among AQAP’s leadership concerning the adoption of international terrorism against the West. This contrasts with the shifting strategy and divided opinions that were discernible at various junctures in the ultimately doomed campaign of its Saudi predecessor. This suggests that ‘new’ AQAP’s international terrorist agenda is likely to be a fundamental aspect of the group’s strategy for the foreseeable future.
AQAP’s Arabic Publications

Consistent Messaging: The West as a Target
Since first issuing this direct threat against the West’s interests, AQAP has repeatedly sought to legitimise its targeting of the West and propagate the message that this is necessary and permissible. In several statements, AQAP leaders, ideologues and spokesmen have been specific in describing that threat as encompassing attacks both in Yemen and on Western soil. In From Here We Begin, after setting out AQAP’s worldview and grievances, Al-Wuhayshi threatened the US and its allies directly and suggested that the commitment to attacking Western interests was a crucial aspect of AQAP strategy:

We must cut the supply routes of the Zionist-Christian Crusaders, and we must kill every Crusader we find in our lands. We must strike at all Western interests until Europe and America cease their support of the Jews and stop their massacre there, and they order their agents from the traitorous rulers to open the border crossings into Gaza and the rest of Palestine. The masses must continue to put pressure until all of Palestine is recovered.

Similarly, in a November 2009 statement released by Al-Malahim Media, Muhammad ibn Abdur-Rahman Al-Rashid, an AQAP commander, sought to leverage the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as justification for such attacks:

Your first enemy is the crusaders of America and NATO [author’s emphasis]. If not, then who else other than America and its aides was it who attacked the Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq, helped the Jews to occupy Palestine, and killed Muslims – making their children orphans and their women and elderly homeless – and usurped the resources of the Muslims?’

The Fort Hood shootings the same month, and the attempted airline bombing over Detroit in December of that year, were followed by further specific threats in the twelfth issue of Sada Al-Malahim, which was released in February 2010. The magazine contained an article by an AQAP leader known as Abu Hureira Al-Sana’ai in which he referred to air strikes on suspected AQAP operatives in Yemen and which he claimed were carried out by the US. Al-Sana’ai warned that any further air strikes would provoke an AQAP retaliation. He wrote:

Today, you have attacked us in the midst of our household, so wait for what will attack you in the midst of yours. We shall come to you between your own hands and from behind you and against your beliefs and against your merits. We will blow up the earth below your feet.
Three months later, in the Al-Malahim Media video *America and the Final Trap*, Fahd Al-Quso, an AQAP military commander and a suspect in the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, argued that fighting the Americans both in Yemen and abroad was necessary:

> We will take the battle to the heart of their homes and pre-empt their attacks with ours and kill their soldiers in their secure bases the same way the mujahid hero Umar al-Farouk did .... Our women and children will not be killed while yours remain safe and sound. The equation is clear and understandable: ‘You will be killed just as you kill, and you will be fired upon just as you fire upon us.’ The bill is very long and the reward shall be of the same nature as the deed.

This warning was reinforced in an Arabic language interview given to Al-Malahim Media by Anwar Al-Awlaki the same month, who said:

> The bill between us and America, as far as it concerns women and children only, has reached over a million [people]. Those who could have been killed in that plane [the airline targeted in December 2009] are a drop in the sea and we should treat them the same way they treat us and attack them the very same way they attack us.

This consistent messaging characterising the US and its European allies as the main enemy of Islam, and repeatedly threatening to attack both, suggests that AQAP targeting of objectives in the West to date has been much more than opportunistic. Rather, it suggests that such targeting is now a fundamental plank of AQAP strategy.

**Operation Hemorrhage**

In November 2010, AQAP’s new international terrorist strategy was the subject of specific attention in issue three of the group’s English language magazine, *Inspire*. The magazine underscored AQAP’s apparent commitment to a sustained campaign of terrorist attacks against the West and, in what was described as a special, ‘commemorative edition’ of the magazine to mark the group’s attempted bombing of two cargo airliners the previous month, it provided technical details of the plot as well as the rationale behind it. ‘Operation Hemorrhage’, as AQAP referred to it, was described as being part of a lengthy strategy of multiple small attacks against the United States. The aim, according to the magazine’s editors, was to bring the country closer to bankruptcy by forcing a gross overspend on security measures and a similarly costly over-extension of its foreign policy commitments. The magazine’s editorial stated: ‘This strategy of attacking the enemy with smaller, but more frequent operations is what some may refer to as the strategy of a thousand cuts. The aim is to bleed the enemy to death’.
The strategy of tying down the US and its allies in multiple, simultaneous military expeditions in the Muslim world was articulated several times by Osama bin Laden, and is further evidence of a shared strategic outlook between Al-Qa’ida’s leadership and the leaders of AQAP. It could be argued, however, that there is some divergence between the two groups with regard to means. Bin Laden is known to have favoured large, strategic strikes on the US, whereas AQAP’s approach appears to involve a combination of multiple, smaller operations by grassroots attackers as well as co-ordinated ‘spectaculars’, for example, those involving civil aviation.

Framing Messages for a Middle East Audience
As has been explained in the first chapter, effective terrorist strategic communication is bidirectional, aimed to attract existing and potential supporters whilst simultaneously communicating an ultimatum to the enemy. Many of AQAP’s video releases have followed this formula, containing multiple messages aimed at both constituencies. However, in some cases AQAP has also used simple processes of audience segmentation to craft more focused messages intended to appeal directly to audiences in specific regions or countries.

Much of ‘new’ AQAP’s strategic messaging is designed to appeal for support among a broad audience in the Middle East region, for example by framing the problems of Yemen within the situation faced by regional states. For instance, messages by AQAP leaders and ideologues have aligned the Yemeni regime alongside others in the region that the group also considers US agents, among them the Saudi government and monarchy, along with the governments of Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. They thus attempt to connect the oppression of Yemenis by the Saleh regime with similar treatment being meted out to co-religionists elsewhere – all allegedly at the behest of these regimes’ supporter, the US.

On numerous occasions, AQAP has sought to leverage a particularly emotive issue for Muslims everywhere – that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, AQAP has sought to frame its struggle in Yemen as a necessary first step – to remove an ‘apostate’ regime in Yemen standing in the way of an onward march toward the liberation of the Al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem. It has subsequently called on Muslims across the Gulf States to join a jihad against the Zionist-Crusader alliance and its apostate regimes. According to Nasir Al-Wuhayshi in *From Here We Begin:*

Allah has willed this night and for this oppression to come to an end, and thus efforts began to join and the banners of jihad set out for its meeting ground, the backbone, the land where our beloved [the Prophet Mohammed] … ascended to heaven, and the land of the great battles, to purify the Arabian Peninsula from the filth of the spiteful occupiers
and their traitorous agents, and march on to our brothers in Gaza and Palestine.

**The Fight in Saudi Continues**
While some messages are intended to have regional appeal, others appear to be aimed much more tightly at specific constituencies, for example, Saudi Arabia. In *From Here We Begin*, AQAP attempted to frame its struggle to some degree as a continuation of that which had begun in the Kingdom in 2003. Saudi members of the AQAP Shura eulogised Saudi *mujahideen* killed between 2003 and 2005 and promised that their sacrifice in the struggle with the Saudi government and monarchy would not be in vain. Al-Shihri, one of the two Saudis featured in the video, said:10

> We say to our brothers in the Land of the Haramain [Saudi Arabia] that the ripened fruit which was produced by the souls of our brothers ... who were killed for coming to the aid of their religion and their imprisoned brothers everywhere; we swear by Allah besides whom no deity is to be worshipped, that only we will pick the fruits which grew from the trees watered from the blood of our brothers.

**Leveraging Yemeni Developments**
Another noteworthy AQAP messaging tactic has been to leverage internal Yemeni social and political developments to strengthen the narrative that the current Yemeni government is a corrupt and illegitimate tool of the US and other Western powers. This approach has been used to reinforce a range of messages delivered to both regional and international audiences. For example, in his May 2009 statement *To Our Family In The South*, Nasir Al-Wuhayshi sought to declare solidarity with Yemen’s Southern Mobility Movement, claiming:11

> And today he [Saleh] uses all the tyranny ... under the pretext of the preservation of unity and under this pretext exercises injustice and steals the safety from the people and assassinates their dignity and muzzles their mouths.

> You the free men ... the justice you seek is our demand and you will find it only in the arbitration of Sharia. You have tried all of the systems but they did not connect you to the freedom and the justice that you would receive under Islam; no justice and no freedom is guaranteed except in its shadow.

Being a Yemen-based organisation, AQAP has a deep appreciation of Yemeni tribal custom and norms and is able to manoeuvre effectively within these informal power structures more effectively than perceived ‘outside elements’ such as the Saleh regime.12 In some cases, AQAP has sought to leverage this
in its strategic messaging, playing on domestic suspicions over US foreign policy in the region to portray Yemeni government security crackdowns as part of a US-backed plan to weaken and divide the tribes and appropriate their land and resources. In a 2009 statement entitled *They Plot But Allah Too Plots*, Nasir Al-Wuhayshi addressed Yemeni tribes directly, saying:

This military campaign concentrated in Marib, Jawf, Shabwa, Abyan, Sana’a, and Hadramaut that they have concealed from the media, what is it other than a step to strike the tribes and their sons [based upon] frail and erroneous pretexts? Its true aim is to break the tribes’ prestige, strip them of their weapons, control their land, and kill their sons to make it easy for the vile agents, and with them the Crusader campaign, to humiliate you. Be warned.

AQAP has also attempted to deploy the narrative that an increased US and NATO naval presence in the Gulf of Aden is a sign of a forthcoming invasion, and not a counter-piracy initiative. This narrative has the potential to resonate with both local and regional audiences, as it plays upon the conspiracy theories in wide circulation in the region that the US might attack Yemen in the same way that it attacked and occupied Iraq. According to the narrator in *From Here We Begin*:

This Crusade, which has come and filled the Arabian Sea, the Arabian Gulf, and the Red Sea with its battleships and aircraft carriers to take control over the Muslim world, its seas to its lands, to support the Jews, the thieves who have occupied the Noble Aqsa Mosque, and to encircle our brothers in Somalia.

**AQAP’s Annual Strategic Appraisal**

In January 2010, AQAP issued a statement marking the first anniversary of its official inauguration in Yemen. The statement offered useful additional insight into AQAP’s three-pronged strategy – local, regional and international – and its intentions behind the targeting of Western interests.

On the local front, the statement explained how AQAP operations in Yemen were aimed at stoking domestic rebellion by forcing the Yemeni people to increasingly see the Saleh regime as an agent of US interests. AQAP suggested this strategy had served their interests by provoking a response from the Yemeni military which showed the government’s ‘disregard for the blood and honour of Muslims, their complicity in the crimes of the Zionist-Crusaders, and therefore the obligation of fighting them’.

The statement also reviewed the group’s regional strategy, including the targeting of the Saudi regime. It lauded the September 2009 AQAP suicide bomb attack against one of the ‘heads of disbelief’, the Saudi Deputy Interior
Minister Mohammed bin Nayef. ‘Every one of the Idol Kings of the Arabs will now sleep less soundly knowing that the Lions of Tawhid are coming for them soon!’, the statement claimed.  

Against this local and regional context was set the group’s international terrorist agenda. The statement applauded the attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to destroy an airliner over Detroit in 2009 with a concealed explosive device. By carrying out such operations against the US homeland, AQAP claimed to be pursuing a strategy of inflicting crippling economic damage on the United States. This aforementioned ‘bleed to bankruptcy’ policy, frequently articulated by Al-Qa’ida leaders and strategists, involves the use of terrorist attacks on US soil to prompt, first, overspend by the US government on homeland security and, second, a foreign policy overreaction that results in the US being drawn further into expensive meddling in the Middle East region. In its statement, AQAP claimed Abdulmutallab’s attack alone had ‘sent the Western world into a spin, forcing the infidels to spend many billions of dollars upgrading their airport security’. With their economy eventually crippled, Al-Qa’ida strategists maintain, the US will no longer be able to prop up its regional allies, thereby making those regimes vulnerable to overthrow.

Analysis of ‘new’ AQAP’s strategic communication in Arabic, suggests that the organisation, like the Al-Qa’ida leadership, already appears to have developed a track record of telling its audiences in broad terms what it plans to do before actually trying to do it. It is clear from analysis of AQAP targeting and associated rhetoric that attacks against Western interests is a key plank of the group’s strategy and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. As part of what it views as a ‘bleed to bankruptcy’ campaign designed to push the economies of the US and its allies to the point of collapse, AQAP will attempt further attacks on US and European soil.

**AQAP’s English Publications**

Such attacks form only one half of a twin-track strategy, however. To appreciate the second half, one must examine AQAP’s burgeoning English language strategic communication capability, which sets out an approach to stimulating independent acts of terrorism by jihadist supporters based in the West.

**Inspire and Grassroots Jihad**

In May 2010, Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula’s media organisation, Al-Malahim Media, released the first issue of *Inspire*, an English language jihadist magazine. This attractively designed, full-colour, sixty-seven-page publication was claimed by Al-Malahim to be the first magazine produced by Al-Qa’ida in English. Its mix of theological and strategic discourse, statements from AQAP and various jihadi leaders, practical instruction in
terrorist tradecraft, and current affairs commentary was designed primarily to engage an audience of English-speaking Muslims. At time of writing, Al-Malahim has produced seven editions of *Inspire*.

*Inspire*’s direct exhortation to its readership to carry out terrorist attacks on home soil generated considerable Western mass media attention, as did guest contributions from Anwar Al-Awlaki, whose alleged association with several terrorist conspiracies against the US had already made him the target of a man hunt in Yemen’s tribal areas. Nevertheless, some observers initially dismissed *Inspire* as a gimmick, considering it a ‘style over substance’ publication that for all its slick production quality was essentially just another mouthpiece for Al-Qa’ida propaganda, containing pro-jihadi rhetoric and recycled tips on terrorist tradecraft. Others noted that jihadi supporters in the West had been producing English language content for years and that *Inspire* did not appear to offer any significant development in this field.

Other analysts cautioned that *Inspire* magazine should be viewed in the context of the wider development of AQAP strategic communication. They noted that for all the mass media coverage given to *Inspire*, it represented a tiny fraction of AQAP’s messaging overall, and that the sophistication of its Arabic language content should be the focus of at least as much attention.

This report makes the case that *Inspire* is a genuinely significant development in AQAP strategic messaging, and indeed more generally in terms of Al-Qa’ida’s strategic communication. In the first place, *Inspire* underscores the growing importance to AQAP of its international terrorist agenda, and highlights the group’s twin-track approach of promoting ‘independent jihad’ in the West while simultaneously developing transnational terrorist plots emanating from Yemen and targeting US and UK home soil. Secondly, and more broadly, it is the authors’ contention that the magazine is a more innovative piece of jihadist strategic communication than many have assumed. Its content is designed not just to radicalise its readership. Rather, it represents a potential formula for grassroots jihadi mobilisation, being focused on helping readers overcome the various psychological barriers that might otherwise prevent them from carrying out individual acts of domestic terrorism. Although the magazine’s impact may be difficult to judge at this stage, it need not mobilise the masses to be judged by AQAP as effective. If even a handful of readers can be persuaded to act on its contents, the group will have made a significant return on a very modest investment.

However, *Inspire* appears, at times, to struggle to communicate coherently its primary message of grassroots incitement. As explained in Chapter I, a coherent and cohesive narrative is critical to the justification of terrorist violence. To some of its readers, *Inspire* actually risks sounding incoherent; on one hand it legitimises and glorifies the jihad in Yemen, while on the
other it tries to persuade the reader to remain at home to wage domestic jihad in the West. This contradiction in the messages promulgated by Inspire should not be taken as an indicator of any sort of organisational strategic schism concerning the group’s international terrorist agenda. It does, however, demonstrate that promoting the two forms of jihad together in one package may obfuscate the core narrative of Inspire – that for a Muslim in the West, fighting the enemy within closest reach is both an obligation and a praiseworthy endeavour of greater importance to the jihadist movement than fighting on open battlefronts abroad. This may ultimately hinder, rather than help, mobilisation.

In the meantime, whether or not Inspire is ultimately successful in stimulating multiple acts of domestic terrorism, it still represents a useful, additional source of insight into AQAP’s outlook and strategy vis-à-vis its international terrorism agenda in the West.

Inspire Magazine: From Radicalisation to Mobilisation

Inspire represents a new development in AQAP messaging: the production of original English language content directed primarily at a Western audience. It is designed to support what appears to be a growing emphasis by ‘new’ AQAP on targeting the West in its own territory. The emergence of this magazine suggests that promoting grassroots jihad by supporters in the West is one facet of this international agenda.

Furthermore, it is Inspire’s focus not just on radicalisation but mobilisation that distinguishes it from other recent AQAP media products. It is also a development that marks out current AQAP media from that produced by ‘old’ AQAP in Saudi Arabia, whose strategic communication was aimed overwhelmingly at radicalising an audience in the Arabic-speaking world, and in the Gulf States region in particular.

The attention clearly paid to the design and production of the first issue of Inspire garnered significant mass media attention. This focus on the aesthetic should be seen as more than mere window dressing, however. Rather, it may mark an attempt by the magazine’s editors to garner source credibility by emulating the style of credible, mass-market, news-analysis magazines such as Time or Newsweek. For instance, a ‘sound-bites’-style section features comments from journalists, politicians, government spokesmen and jihadi leaders on the issues of the day, while a ‘newsflash’ page presents highlights of jihadist activity worldwide. A ‘letter from the editor’ explains the particular theme of each issue. Features are interspersed with full-page ‘advertisements’ for recent jihadist media productions. As with other similarly high-gloss jihadist magazines in Arabic, the aim here is to draw reader attention away from contrary news reports in Western media, and toward a more pro-jihad version of events.
It is noteworthy that some of the advertisements appear calculated to give the publication a broader ‘counter-culture’ feel. Many do not relate specifically to violent jihad. For instance, an advert in Issue 1 called for readers to give their money to charity instead of spending their earnings on material possessions, while another advert in Issue 2 appealed to readers to abandon Western materialism and devote their energy to seeking help through ‘patience and prayer’.

While the promotion of a popular jihadist uprising has been a core aim of Al-Qa’ida since its inception, even the movement’s leadership group does not currently produce an equivalent publication to *Inspire* that is aimed squarely at mobilising the movement’s Western support base.

**Challenging Barriers to Domestic Mobilisation**

Somewhat understandably, mass media coverage of the first issue of *Inspire* also focused on its tradecraft-related features such as ‘How To Make A Bomb In The Kitchen Of Your Mom’, and editorials by Anwar Al-Awlaki threatening terrorist attacks against the United States. A less obvious, though arguably more significant, aspect of the magazine in strategic communication terms is the sophistication with which *Inspire* seeks to address systematically the key psychological barriers to effective individual participation in domestic jihadist violence in the West. These include concerns over:

- A lack of technical skill, tradecraft and resources to mount a successful attack
- The restrictive security environment in the West, limiting the chances of operational success
- The potential lack of strategic impact and recognition resulting from an attack of only limited scale
- The disapproval of friends and family
- The questionable theological permissibility of waging violent jihad on home soil.

*Inspire* has thus attempted to tackle these barriers comprehensively through interviews, essays, theological tracts and even poetry, as well as practical operational guidance. The motivational power of *Inspire* is a result of the skilful combination of this broad range of content; together they form a potent cocktail of incitement to violence greater than the sum of their parts. While the themes and some of the messages addressed in *Inspire* may not be original in themselves, what makes the magazine innovative is the way it has combined these themes to speak specifically to a Western readership and seeks to directly motivate individuals and groups unconnected to operational terrorist networks.
‘Don’t Worry – it’s Praiseworthy’

Analysis of the content of Inspire, Issue 1 offers an example of the above approach. Prominence was given in the magazine to an interview with AQAP Emir Nasir Al-Wuhayshi, who specifically encouraged Muslims in the West to carry out attacks on home soil. In remarks calculated to convince readers of both the imperative for and strategic value of such attacks, Al-Wuhayshi said: ‘My advice to my Muslim brothers in the West is to acquire weapons and to learn methods of war. They are living in a place where they can cause great harm to the enemy’.

In an apparent reference to the publication of cartoons in European newspapers depicting the Prophet Mohammed, Al-Wuhayshi stated:

There is no meaning in life if the Messenger of Allah (swt) is cursed while they listen to and see such crimes being committed in front of their eyes.

It is not enough … to participate in demonstrations and protests, because these methods would not stop the West which is already used to them. The successful means are through explosive devices and sacrificing souls.

In this context, Al-Wuhayshi praised the November 2009 gun attack by Nidal Malik Hassan, the American Major who shot dead thirteen fellow servicemen at Fort Hood, Texas. Al-Wuhayshi then issued a direct appeal to Western Muslims, saying:

Oh Muslims, rise up in defence of your messenger – a man with his knife, a man with his gun, a man with his rifle, a man with his bomb, by learning how to design explosive devices, by burning down forests and buildings, or by running over them with your cars and trucks. The means of harming them are many … may our mothers be bereaved of us if we do not defend Him.

Such remarks by the emir of AQAP are used by Inspire as a means of reassuring Western volunteers that acts of individual jihad carry the highest sanction from their leaders and that operational success will not go without recognition. Also notable in this interview is the emphasis Al-Wuhayshi places on simple modes of attack, such as the use of vehicles to run down civilians in crowded areas. This attempts to address reader concern that the limited choice of weapons and means available to them will curb the effectiveness of any attack. In his interview, Al-Wuhayshi tries to convince readers that even the simplest attacks represent a valuable contribution to the overall jihadist effort.

Alongside the interview with Al-Wuhayshi, Issue 1 contains a feature called ‘The Dust Will Never Settle Down’ campaign, which urges readers to
wage jihad to avenge the Western ‘Cartoon Crusade against the Messenger of Allah’. The call to jihad in response to perceived offences against Islam closer to home rather than in response to ‘Zionist-Crusader’ aggression in the Muslim world is an attempt by *Inspire’s* editors to further the psychological threshold to mobilisation among the readership by leveraging a local grievance. The feature begins by providing a timeline of incidents of protest and violence that followed the publication of the first series of Prophet Mohammed cartoons by Western newspapers in 2005; it then provides a ‘hit list’ of several prominent cartoonists, writers and politicians alleged to have committed blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammed; finally, in an essay entitled ‘May Our Souls Be Sacrificed For You’, Anwar Al-Awlaki offers a theological perspective on the serious nature of blasphemy and the imperative to wage war on those who insult Islam.

Taken together, the feature expounds a narrative that begins with a summary of the threats facing Islam, then identifies those responsible for the campaign of blasphemy, and then finally issues a call to action through an explanation of the religious obligations upon Muslims to defend the threats to their religion. Specifically, *Inspire* seeks to impress upon its readers that it is an ideological imperative and a matter of pride and honour for Muslims in the West to confront the threats to their religion that are within closest reach, not just those occurring on foreign battlefields.

This multi-faceted approach to mobilisation was refined in Issue 2, which contained an emotive combination of articles including a motivational speech, entitled ‘Oh Hesitant One – It’s An Obligation’, by Abu Dujana Al-Khorasani. This was juxtaposed with an essay by Anwar Al-Awlaki on the pleasures awaiting those who become martyrs in the service of their religion. That essay was followed by a poem, ‘Please Excuse Me Mother’, supposedly written by a jihadi volunteer who had forsaken family life to meet his religious obligations by answering the call of jihad. The latter should be seen as an attempt by *Inspire’s* editors to overcome what may in some cases be a particularly powerful barrier to mobilisation – namely, the Islamic imperative to respect and obey the wishes of one’s parents.

*Inspire* bolsters its cocktail of incitement to violence with ‘exemplary models’ in the form of Muslims who had fulfilled their purported obligation to fight on the home front. A feature in Issue 4 focused on the examples of Roshonara Choudhry and Taimour Abdulwahab Al-Abdaly. Such features are designed in part to remind the would-be ‘individual mujahid’ that his or her actions will not go unnoticed by the movement or its leadership, and that they will be lionised whether or not they are successful. A full-page picture that follows this feature connects their choices to their purported rewards in the afterlife, powerfully juxtaposing a failure by some Muslims to act with the punishments of the grave that purportedly await them as a result of failing
to meet their religious obligations.

**Inspire’s Mixed Message: A Hindrance to Mobilisation?**

For all its powerful narratives and clever editorial composition, *Inspire* is dogged by a fundamental contradiction: it must be seen to legitimise and promote jihad in Yemen while simultaneously attempting to convince readers in the West to overlook the emotional pull of the same battlefront in favour of taking action at home. As Chapter I explained, terrorist strategic communication is at least in part aimed at uniting one’s membership under a single paradigm for action. The challenge for *Inspire*’s editors is how to separate what might be construed by some readers as mixed messages concerning exactly what type of action marks the most important priority for would-be jihadists living in the West. Put simply, the message should be clear; either the reader is being told to ‘fight at home’ or abroad. Legitimising and glorifying the jihad front in Yemen on one hand while almost simultaneously trying to persuade the reader to remain at home to undertake more controversial (not to mention theologically contentious) action only complicates the process of mobilising readers to wage domestic jihad.

*Inspire* struggles to address this fundamental challenge. In this respect, interviews such as that with Al-Wuhayshi in Issue 1, along with ‘The Dust Will Never Settle Down’ campaign, are perhaps the most comprehensive attempts to convince readers of the imperative to fight at home even while other sections of the magazine promote and glorify AQAP activities in Yemen. But nowhere is this contradiction more obvious than in *Inspire*, Issue 5, where the editors respond to a letter from a supposed jihadist supporter in the West enquiring about how to overcome practical obstacles to reach Yemen and join the fighting. The editor replies:

> Your situation describes the same position that many other brothers in the West are going through. They are ready to march forth but don’t have the concrete steps to meet their mujahidin brothers. What we recommend is that you focus on planning out attacks in the West.

The foreign brothers that join[ed] the mujahidin, many amongst them, conclude that it would have been better for them to return to the West and launch operations. This is because killing 10 soldiers in America for example, is much more effective than killing 100 apostates in the Yemeni military.

The editors then offer detailed guidance on operational security issues to help ensure that those persuaded to fight on the home front maximise their chance of success prior to detection. And while they acknowledge that many foreign nationals have reached Yemen to fight on the front lines, they caution that getting there from the West can be a long, dangerous and expensive
journey. The editors also point out that the strategic wishes of AQAP leaders should be considered; namely, that there are already adequate numbers fighting in Yemen, and that those volunteers in the West who want to join the group should consider staying and carrying out terrorist attacks there. That terrorist operations in the West are currently preferable to making *hijrah* (migration) to Yemen is a message that permeates *Inspire*. The magazine’s ‘What To Expect In Jihad’ section in Issue 5 describes the experience of attending a jihad training camp, though a note in the margin cautions: ‘Self-reminder – since group work can be easily shut down, do operations alone against the state.’

The Islamic jurisprudence that AQAP claims underwrites terrorist attacks in the West is a returning theme of *Inspire*, and is doubtless an attempt to address any concerns among readers that the targeting of civilians does not carry religious legitimacy. *Inspire* Issue 4, for example, contains a ‘question and answer’-style interview with AQAP jurist Sheikh Adil Al-Abbab that purports to explain why attacking non-Muslim civilians in Western countries such as the US complies with the *fiqh* [jurisprudence] of jihad.

*A Formula for Grassroots Mobilisation?*

The ultimate objective of strategic communication is not merely to stimulate a shift in the *perceptions* of a target audience, but to influence their *behaviour*. In the context of *Inspire* magazine, AQAP hopes that carefully crafted messages appealing specifically to a Western, English-speaking audience will ultimately *mobilise* some readers to plan and execute acts of terrorism independently with whatever means are at their immediate disposal. This involves convincing at least some readers that the knowledge imparted in the magazine mandates action in the form of violent jihad, and specifically on home soil rather than abroad. What evidence is there to date that these efforts have been successful? And what constitutes ‘success’ in this case anyway?

Since the 2009 Fort Hood shootings, some analysts have pointed to the relative lack of similar incidents in the West as evidence that *Inspire* does not appear to have had the impact that the Western counter-terrorism community initially feared. Such a view may be short-sighted. First, if the wealth of academic research on violent radicalisation conducted to date suggests anything, it is that there are most likely multiple pathways to violent jihadi mobilisation. Therefore, given the myriad of factors that appear to contribute to this process, a magazine such as *Inspire* – which, it must be remembered, was first published in June 2010 – is only ever likely to be a contributory element, rather than a key driver. Secondly, it is worth considering how the success of *Inspire* as a tool of mobilisation should be assessed. The intent behind the magazine may never have been to galvanise the masses into bomb and gun attacks on a weekly basis. It could be argued
that even if *Inspire* succeeds in mobilising a handful of jihadi supporters to carry out their own attacks, it may be considered worthwhile from AQAP’s perspective – an inexpensive, low-risk means of augmenting its international reach.

**What Next?**
For the time being, the direct impact of *Inspire* in mobilising grassroots jihadism is difficult to determine. In the meantime, however, two issues bear consideration.

First, qualitative insights from Western counter-terrorism court cases in recent years suggest Anwar Al-Awlaki, who made an important editorial contribution to *Inspire,* had a seemingly proven ability to help motivate would-be jihadis in the West to the point of engagement in terrorism. His lectures and writings have been a significant contributory factor in the radicalisation of several individuals who have subsequently executed, or attempted to execute, acts of jihadist violence. Although the effectiveness of the magazine may decline in the aftermath of Al-Awlaki’s death in late September 2011 (please see the Postscript for further detail), if *Inspire* continues to serve as an important vehicle for written treatises by those like Al-Awlaki, then this alone makes the magazine a matter of at least some concern in relation to its capacity to radicalise. In this context, it is noteworthy that copies of *Inspire* have allegedly been recovered from the possession of suspects in at least four Western counter-terrorism investigations in recent months. It remains to be seen to what extent the details of the forthcoming court proceedings will shed light on the role, if any, that the magazine played in the radicalisation or mobilisation of the suspects.

The second and perhaps more important consideration, however, is the formula used by *Inspire*, which seeks to combine a diverse range of content specifically in order to overcome the range of psychological barriers that still appear to dissuade many jihadi sympathisers in the West from engaging in terrorism on home soil. Perhaps the real risk here is that other jihadi groups and their Western supporters may seek to replicate this formula in similar publications. Over time, this may begin to stimulate further acts of ‘individual jihad’. Recent years have seen a portion of the highly-motivated, online jihadi support base in the West shift from being consumers and distributors of jihadi media to *producers* of original material in their own right. To what extent will this support base attempt to recycle the *Inspire* methodology?

The motivational potential of such ‘copycat’ publications, should they appear, may be marginal as long as they lack the official endorsement of an Al-Qa’ida franchise in the way AQAP has endorsed *Inspire*. As one senior US government official told one of the authors earlier this year: ‘If you’re fired up enough by Jihadi media to want to do something in the US, it helps if you
know the leader of AQAP is telling you to go for it, rather than some schmoe you met on a forum’. However, there is little to prevent other jihadist groups or Al-Qa’ida offshoots establishing similar English language publications under their official auspices in future.

Who is Behind Inspire?

*Inspire* appears to be primarily the work of Samir Khan, a twenty-four-year-old, US-Pakistani national formerly of Charlotte, North Carolina, who left the US for Yemen in late 2009. Khan’s track record as a self-starter pro-jihadi propagandist will not have been lost on AQAP. Khan had been blogging and distributing propaganda online in support of the jihadist movement since at least 2003 and was a well-known personality among English-speaking jihadist supporters on the Internet. His blog *The Ignored Puzzle Pieces Of Knowledge*, which operated between 2003 and 2009, quickly became a clearinghouse for statements and media from jihadi groups. Part of this popularity was as a result of the specific niche it occupied; namely as an onward dissemination point for material appearing first on password-protected jihadi forums, which those lacking access to such sites would otherwise have struggled to obtain. However, Khan also wrote avidly, commenting on jihadi media releases and responding regularly to feedback and questions from readers, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In October 2008, Khan and his associates launched the short-lived Al-Fursan Media. Billed as an English language jihadist media organisation, its stated aim was to ‘rupture the bubble that the Muslims in the West live in’ by exposing the reality of the purported Crusader-led wars on the Muslim world, and the obligation upon Muslims to defend Islam and their co-religionists. Al-Fursan released a small number of videos, at least one of which featured a soundtrack of English language *nasheeds* the producers appeared to have recorded themselves.

The most important written production to emanate from Al-Fursan was *Jihad Recollections*, a magazine released in April 2009. In hindsight this magazine can be seen as a forerunner of *Inspire*; the content and layout of the two magazines were strikingly similar, though *Jihad Recollections* lacked the official endorsement of an Al-Qa’ida branch organisation. Some time after the publication of *Jihad Recollections* 4 in September 2009, Khan departed the US for Yemen; *Inspire* Issue 1 appeared shortly afterward.

The major shift in focus between *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire* concerns the latter’s focus on convincing its audience to favour engagement in acts of jihadist violence at home, rather than emigrating to fight abroad. That the magazine’s editor has seemingly ignored his own advice and chosen instead to flee the US for Yemen rather than fight on the home front is an irony that will doubtless be lost on much of *Inspire*’s readership.
All Part of the Plan?

What does the appearance of *Inspire* suggest about AQAP’s international terrorist agenda? Are AQAP’s attempts to encourage domestic jihad in the West considered as important a part of this strategy as its centrally directed terrorist plots? Or is *Inspire* and AQAP’s ‘fight at home’ strategy a flash in the pan? This report argues that *Inspire* is the product of a terrorist organisation known for innovation in strategic communication, and with a firm interest in using strategic communication to stimulate acts of grassroots terrorism. As such, the authors consider that the domestic jihadism AQAP hopes to promote via *Inspire* is likely to be a sustained feature of its international terrorist strategy.

As was noted in Chapter II, founder members of ‘old’ AQAP, most notably Yusuf Al-Uyayri, fully appreciated the value of strategic communication – this was reflected in magazines such as *Sawt Al-Jihad* and *Muaskar Al-Battar*, and video productions such as *The East Riyadh Operation* that were among the most sophisticated jihadist media of their kind between 2003 and 2005. More specifically, it could be argued that *Al-Battar*, much like *Inspire*, was produced with the aim of inciting grassroots jihadism by offering basic military-technical information and guidance on tactics and targeting for the novice mujahed.

Therefore, it is likely that future editions of *Inspire* (and it is reasonable to expect that there will be further editions) will continue to stress to its readers the imperative of waging jihad at home in the West. We have also argued that *Inspire* represents a step forward in AQAP strategic communication, for the sophistication with which it delivers narratives designed specifically to reduce the psychological barriers to independent jihadist mobilisation. This has been significantly aided by AQAP’s access to individuals such as Samir Khan and Anwar Al-Awlaki, both of whom have lived in the West and who therefore know *Inspire*’s readership better the organisation’s Gulf Arab leadership.

Notes and References

1. Al-Malahim Media, *From Here We Begin And In Al-Aqsa We Meet*, op. cit.


3. Several air strikes against AQAP were reported in open sources in early 2010, and it is difficult to determine precisely which specific incident the author is referring to in this
instance. In January 2010, one month before the publication of the magazine, Reuters reported that an air strike in northern Yemen had killed at least six AQAP militants. Yemeni officials claimed at the time that the dead included AQAP military Emir Qassim Al-Raymi. This claim was later established to have been inaccurate. See Reuters, ‘Six Qaeda Militants Die In Airstrike: Official’, 15 January 2010.


5. *Inspire* magazine and the development of AQAP’s English language strategic communication is covered in greater detail later in the report.


7. Elsewhere in the magazine, the authors cite an *ayah* (verse) from the Quran to further describe the objective of the attack: ‘Indeed, those who disbelieve spend their wealth to avert people from the way of Allah. So they will spend it, then it will be for them a source of regret. Then they will be overcome.’ Al-Quran, Surah 8, Verse 36.

8. While a detailed analysis of the Al-Qa’ida movement’s interpretation of the recent ‘Arab Spring’ is slightly beyond the scope of this paper, it is appropriate to briefly acknowledge AQAP’s response to the political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa. Like the Al-Qa’ida leadership, AQAP has described the uprisings as praiseworthy and applauded the success of Arab peoples in overthrowing dictators they had long viewed as corrupt puppets of the West. Again, however, like Al-Qaida’s leadership, AQAP’s position is that this political upheaval should progress further than the removal of individual politicians and leaders, and should result in the total rejection of man-made law and the establishment of an Islamic state that implements a purely Sharia-based system of law and governance.

9. Al-Malahim Media, *From Here We Begin And In Al-Aqsa We Meet*, op. cit.


11. This rhetoric was not a sustained feature of AQAP messaging, possibly due to the fact that the protestors were not calling for the replacement of the Saleh regime with Islamic governance. On an ideological level, therefore, as an Al-Qa’ida franchise AQAP could not be seen to be showing too strong a level of support for a movement advocating rule by man-made law rather than Sharia.

12. For an examination of how AQAP has attempted to retain latitude to recruit and operate among the tribes in parts of central and southern Yemen, see Barak Barfi, ‘AQAP’s Soft Power Strategy In Yemen’, *CTC Sentinel*, 1 November 2010. For background analysis of Yemeni tribal custom as it affects the harbouring of terrorism suspects, see Asharq Al-
Benedict Wilkinson and Jack Barclay


13. Al-Malahim Media, From Here We Begin And In Al-Aqsa We Meet, op. cit.

14. ‘The Lions of Tawhid’ is a reference to the concept of Islamic monotheism – the core Islamic belief in one God (Allah) who exists without equal or partner.

15. Arabic for ‘the epic battles’.

16. According to Inspire’s editorial staff, the magazine’s title is taken from a verse from Surah Al-Anfal (Surah 8, Verse 65) of the Quran, which states: ‘And inspire the believers to fight’. It is worth noting that while Inspire appears to be the first English language magazine produced specifically by an Al-Qaeda franchise, it is not the first English language jihadi magazine. English language publications have been produced in hard copy since the 1990s by fugitive north African jihadists in London, as well as by ideological supporters of the global jihadist movement based in the UK, such as the now defunct extremist group Al-Muhajiroun. The editor of Inspire, Samir Khan, had already been producing an English language jihadist publication prior to his departure from the US for Yemen. He also ran a short-lived English multimedia production organisation, Al-Fursan Media.

17. Most notably the November 2009 Fort Hood shootings and the December 2009 Detroit airline attack. Al-Awlaki is suspected by US investigators to have been at the very least a key spiritual influence on both attackers. Al-Awlaki has since been connected to a further terrorist conspiracy in the UK by a British national, Rajib Karim. Karim, an IT engineer for British Airways, was convicted in March 2011 and sentenced to thirty years in jail for attempting to access information on behalf of Al-Awlaki to enable AQAP to bomb BA aircraft. See BBC News, ‘Terror Plot BA Man Rajib Karim Gets 30 Years’, 18 March 2011.


21. This attack mode was further explored in Issue 2 of Inspire, which recommended attaching blades to the front of an SUV to ‘mow down the enemies of Allah’.

23. The initial focus on the West’s alleged blasphemy against Islam is intended to generate moral outrage among readers and create what psychologists refer to as a ‘cognitive opening’; an opportunity for alternative perspectives and potentially a call to action to find resonance.

24. Otherwise known as Humam Al-Balawi, a Jordanian national who killed four CIA officers and one Jordanian intelligence officer when he blew himself up with a concealed explosive device inside a US combat outpost in Afghanistan, in December 2009. He had previously been a highly active contributor to at least one well-known password-protected Salafi-Jihadi Internet forum. The speech that appeared in Inspire Issue 2 was a transcript of that given by him in an As-Sahab video recorded shortly before he carried out his attack.


31. His most recent contribution is to Issue 5 of Inspire, in which he provided an analysis
of recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa from the perspective of
the jihadist movement. He also featured prominently in Issue 4, where he provided
an ‘Islamic ruling’ on ‘dispossessing the disbelievers’ wealth in Dar-al-Harb’, the latter
phrase referring to the ‘abode of war’ – designated territory where fighting and
appropriating the enemy’s land, wealth, and property is permissible.

32. The examples of Roshonara Choudhary, Omar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Nidal Malik
Hassan, and Rajib Kharim (all of whom are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this
paper) are demonstrable evidence of Al-Awlaki’s influence, though it should be noted
that the precise degree of that influence on their subsequent actions varied significantly
between individuals. As such, Al-Awlaki’s real influence has, at times, been exaggerated
by the mass media. For instance, Al-Awlaki was in direct contact with Rajib Karim to
the extent that he appeared to be assessing Karim’s usefulness as a terrorist operative.
By contrast, there is no evidence that Roshonara Choudhary and Al-Awlaki had ever
corresponded, but she later cited his lectures (which she had viewed on YouTube) as a
key influence in her decision to launch her knife attack on a member of parliament.

33. See Caroline Gammell, ‘Christmas Bomb Plot; Nine Men Remanded’, Daily Telegraph, 27
December 2010.


35. Islamic religious song typically sung by an individual or group without accompaniment
IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Al-Qa’ida affiliates have a long and intricate history on the Arabian Peninsula. Specifically, this report has highlighted the strategic failures which permeated ‘old’ AQAP and which led to its ultimate downfall in the face of Saudi counter-terrorism efforts. It has also described the re-emergence of AQIY from 2005 to 2009, focusing on the development of a communications and media arm – a major facet of today’s organisation. The report has concentrated throughout on the strategies designed by each group to achieve the same political goals. In this concluding chapter, we bring together our conclusions on the threat of ‘new’ AQAP and, based on this analysis, provide recommendations for improving existing methods for countering this organisation. While these recommendations focus exclusively on the UK, they clearly also have value for other Western states.

Conclusions

AQAP’s International Strategy

In line with its allegiance to AQC, AQAP has professed its desire to attack the West outside Yemen. Broadly speaking, the group has adopted a two-tiered strategy for this international agenda. First, it has continued to attempt what we might call ‘spectaculars’ – that is, centrally-approved and funded operations designed to cause extreme loss of life and garner maximum public attention. In this tier, the group has maintained the same predilection as AQC for exploiting weaknesses in aviation security. The attempt by Abdulmutallab was decidedly of the AQC mould. In contrast, Operation Hemorrhage – the attempt to blow up two cargo flights – demonstrated the organisation’s ability to adapt tactics to new contexts. Research conducted for this report suggests this will remain a central and worrying characteristic.

However, the similarity between AQAP’s international agenda and that of AQC ends there. Whereas AQC has tended to conduct only spectacular terrorist atrocities internationally, AQAP advocates a strategy of inflicting a ‘thousand cuts’ through acts of individual jihad carried out in almost any conceivable fashion. Indeed, for the group, it would seem that any tactic for killing on Western territory is satisfactory, supporting, as they do, jihad through forest fires and road traffic accidents.

Two points are of particular interest. First, that this represents a further diversification and dissolution of the Al-Qa’ida phenomenon: no longer the terrorist cell, commanded, financed and run from above; no longer, indeed, the nebulous structure of AQC which provided top-down approval and funding for major operations before giving the individuals a free hand. AQAP’s programme for grassroots mobilisation in the West is rapidly becoming more akin to a lone-wolf jihad. The strategy has its strengths: individuals, free of
contact with upper AQAP echelons, maintain their freedom of movement and action in their home countries; the group assures such individuals that any weapon is sufficient and legitimate and even attempts to confer status to these actions by promising to lionise individuals who take this path.

Secondly and more importantly, it should be noted that this type of strategy, whilst a great operational and organisational strength, is simultaneously the group's most fundamental and exploitable weakness on the strategic level. In the first place, there is the substantial risk that individual jihad, brought about through activities such as forest fires and car crashes, departs from terrorism and slips into murder. Acts of this type seem to be less about coercing political change through violence and creating fear in the general population than about the random killing of non-combatants. As such, they produce little or no coercive ‘traction’. To put it another way, the random killing of civilians through Al-Qa’ida-inspired hit-and-runs will not, in a strategic sense, force governments to change policy. Consequently, such action leaves the organisation open to narrative weakness: individual jihad of this kind is theologically hard to justify, politically difficult to reconcile and personally lacking in the kind of pride and status associated in jihadi circles with fighting on the main ‘fronts’. Nevertheless, the production of strategic communication through organs such as *Inspire* is time-consuming and demonstrates a deep-seated commitment to grassroots mobilisation – a commitment which is likely to remain firmly in place for the foreseeable future.

**AQAP’s Regional Strategy**

Aside from one attempted attack on the assistant minister of interior for security affairs, AQAP has remained remarkably cautious about attacking Yemen’s northern neighbour, Saudi Arabia, despite its position at the heart of their ideology. In part, this harks back to the success of the counter-terrorism operations during the group’s Saudi phase. It is also likely that there are severe constraints on operating in the Saudi environment, restricted as it is by well-financed and well-organised counter-terrorism forces and strategies. Indeed, rather than attempting to attack regional neighbours on the Arabian Peninsula, the group has opted instead to appeal to them. Thus, it has attempted to construct grievance-based ideological narratives appealing to disenfranchised and disillusioned co-religionists in the region. The regimes of the Arabian Peninsula, and Saudi Arabia in particular, are characterised as puppet apostates, acting for self benefit rather than for the benefit of their populations. In this respect, AQAP has sought to promise a better future, one untainted by US foreign policy. It remains to be seen whether this narrative has gained, or will gain, any traction with local populations. Either way, it once again lays emphasis on the substantial departure from the strategies of ‘old’ AQAP, which frequently sought to attack US and Saudi targets throughout the Kingdom. It is unclear whether the group will launch
attacks on Saudi territory in the future; at the time of writing, however, it seems that the group’s limited, but sizeable, resources are fully occupied in their local and global agendas rather than their regional ones.

AQAP’s Local Strategy
Locally, AQAP seeks to attack the Yemeni regime. Since its merger, it has been involved in a number of attacks on security service personnel, checkpoints, energy infrastructure (specifically, oil pipelines) and military targets. It has also attacked on Yemeni territory – on occasion successfully – non-Yemeni targets, particularly those associated with the UK and US embassies. Once again, this two-tiered strategy is designed to bring an end to Western presence in the southern Arabian Peninsula and, simultaneously, to remove what is seen by AQAP as Saleh’s apostate regime.

As described in Chapter I, terrorist communication, in all its forms, is bi-directional. Attacks on both parties are, in the authors’ view, not only designed to effect political change through coercion, but also to advertise the AQAP cause. This cause it supports, amply, throughout its ideological outpourings: for example, Western naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and continuing US drone attacks throughout Yemen are portrayed as methods of subjugation and oppression at best, and invasion and colonisation at worst. Unlike its Saudi predecessor, AQAP has few qualms about claiming attacks which involve the deaths of co-religionists, preferring instead to legitimise them in its written material. Thus, attacks on the government personnel are rationalised as attacks on apostate regimes.

The Threat of AQAP
The report has stressed throughout the substantial differences between ‘new’ AQAP and its previous manifestations in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The organisation has taken on a genuinely international agenda, one supported in full through its publications. Indeed, it seems that AQAP now sees itself as the primary executor, whether by design or default, of AQIC’s international strategy – to attack the ‘far enemy’ in order to achieve its political ends. The group’s difference from its Saudi and Yemeni origins is most clearly manifested in the development of this strategic vision. It is likely that these will continue to be major and permanent planks in the group’s manifesto for future action.

It is tempting, based on this assessment, to concur with much that is currently written about AQAP – that, in the language of the media, Yemen is a ‘new Afghanistan’, a ‘crucible of global terrorism’ or a ‘breeding ground for terror’.1

However, it is crucial to avoid overstating the case. In the first place, the organisation has, to date, failed to conduct successful attacks against the West – a fact which suggests a lack of expertise in addition to high-quality counter-
terrorism initiatives and co-operation. Indeed, bearing in mind the volume of
the organisation’s recruitment propaganda and strategic communications, it
seems that AQAP are equally cognisant of their lack of capacity. It remains
to be seen whether these materials provide the recruits, funds and materiel
the group needs, but as this report has argued, these publications have the
potential to be successful on this front.

Secondly, and more importantly, there is a critical difference between
strategic vision – methods for maximising one’s available resources in order
to achieve political ends – and accomplishing political goals. Strategies are
often extremely hard to implement, and often unsuccessful even when
they are perfectly executed. A number of strategies which the group has
proposed seem, if not doomed to failure, then open to counter-narratives
and strategies. Indeed, in our view, it is specifically on the strategic front that
AQAP is most vulnerable and most likely to fail – a topic which is dealt with
in the following chapter.

The following section provides recommendations geared specifically towards
the UK, but ones which are broadly transferable and representative of AQAP’s
local and international agenda. The counter-terrorism section falls into three
parts: it begins by focusing on the advantages of a stronger UK-Yemeni
counter-terrorism partnership, before examining a number of ways in which
the UK can increase its resilience against AQAP’s global threat. The third and
final part examines ways in which the UK can use strategic communication,
proactively and reactively, to weaken and delegitimise AQAP, laying particular
emphasis on the advantages of identifying and exploiting weaknesses in
AQAP’s strategic communications.

**Counter-terrorism Responses**

**Yemen-based Counter-terrorism Responses**

In early 2010, the UK offered Yemen assistance in the training of its elite
police units in order to counter the threat of AQAP and, in the aftermath of
attacks on British embassy motorcades, the Foreign Office sent detachments
from the Metropolitan Police to assist in analysis of the crime scene.
Partnerships of this type, if strengthened, can contribute usefully to Yemeni
counter-terrorism capabilities. Whilst Yemeni counter-terrorism capabilities
have improved dramatically in past years, there is still some way to go before
they will have acquired the level of expertise to counter the complex and
organised threat of AQAP. In particular, efforts should be directed towards
training Yemeni counter-terrorism resources in pre-incident reconstruction,
bomb analysis and post-incident scene analysis.

In addition to these specific training requirements, Yemeni counter-
terrorism capabilities would benefit from improvements in its criminal
justice system. To date, AQAP has been significantly bolstered by two major prison breaks – clearly, increased security of these facilities is required to counter AQAP successfully. More generally, however, the Yemeni counter-terrorism campaign would be significantly enhanced by a fairer judicial and legal system. Human rights abuses – both in terms of violence towards suspects and the lack of post-arrest trials – have long formed a major plank of AQAP propaganda and their prevention is central to creating a strong counter-narrative and a resilient society. Bearing in mind that the major UK-funded project in Yemen, amounting to £63 million over a six-and-a-half-year period, has recently expired, new funds should be concentrated not only on the failing Yemeni economy, but also on establishing the rule of law and improving the justice system more generally.

**UK-based Counter-terrorism Responses**

1. **Protect:** AQAP has shown its capacity to exploit weaknesses in Western security structures. Whilst the group’s flexibility in both modus operandi and target selection is a major strength, the desire to conduct large-scale attacks on the aviation industry has been a consistent thread. As a recent report argues, the industry demonstrates a number of weaknesses – largely in the frictions between national policies and international standards – which have left vulnerabilities open to exploitation by terrorist organisations. In much the same vein, this report recommends that Western governments devote greater time and resources to tracking inbound threats on both passenger and cargo flights. Moreover, there is a clear need to identify and remove existing vulnerabilities in order to prevent further attempted attacks on the industry.

However, while centrally produced terrorist plots remain a key concern for UK security, there are other facets to the threat posed by AQAP; for example, grassroots jihad is a very different kind of threat and requires different responses because such operations are difficult to identify, disrupt and prevent. But of greater concern is the fact that AQAP has proposed a strategy of ‘a thousand cuts’ which advocates the use of a range of tactics, from forest fires to random hit-and-run attacks. This strategy will undoubtedly stretch existing models which assess the risk posed to various targets. Financially speaking, it is impossible to harden all potential targets to the risk of attack and equally difficult to identify the perpetrators in advance. Whilst risk assessment should continue, particularly in the field of aviation security, the UK needs to explore other models for countering grassroots jihad.

2. **Prevent:** AQAP has expended considerable effort in the production and dissemination of its strategic communications. These publications and recordings, released for the most part on the Internet, are essential recruitment and mobilisation tools. Recent attempts have been made to limit
the effectiveness of AQAP media by sabotaging their published material. Intelligence officials were reported to have replaced much of the traditional content of the first edition of *Inspire* with a series of cupcake recipes.\(^5\)

Whilst there are operational mechanisms in place in the UK for removing jihadist material from the Internet, they coalesce around a single unit: the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU). The organisation, as of February 2010, had co-operated with Internet service providers informally but had made no recourse to legislative powers to remove publications from the Internet. In the most recent version of the UK’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the CTIRU received much-needed attention. In the future, this may lead to increased referrals of material which is in contravention of the Terrorism Act 2006; however, a number of challenges remain. In the first place, online publications are widely distributed across file-sharing sites and forums, frequently making it difficult to identify all copies and remove them. Secondly, it is likely that the publications are often passed between individuals as e-mail attachments or even hard copies, bypassing the referral system. Thirdly and most importantly, a good deal of radical literature occupies a grey zone between legality and illegality and, to date, there are no metrics for assessing this material.

The removal of even a small number of AQAP publications will limit the recruitment of supporters both in the UK and abroad, as well depriving the organisation of a key channel for disseminating and unifying its strategy. Nevertheless, there are substantial obstacles to the removal of all of this material. In order to counter the multiple and diffuse methods of disseminating this content, this report recommends that the prosecution of the owners, disseminators and propagators of material produced by terrorist organisations, which has become a secondary option, must be given far greater priority.

**Strategic Communication Responses**

Despite its elevated position in the most recent version of the UK’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST), online material remains largely unchallenged operationally and ideologically. CONTEST continues to be nebulous and imprecise when it comes to countering online material, stating only that the government will ‘endorse and will facilitate the development of international online media hubs for the distribution of material that counters terrorist propaganda’. Despite this, there is little said about the nature of these hubs, how they are intended to work and, most importantly, why their ideological content, endorsed by the government, will have appeal to potential AQAP recruits.

Similarly, the use of ‘hard’ interventions to remove AQAP media from the Internet, or to at least frustrate the ease with which such material can be accessed, has severe limitations. The nature of the jihadist movement’s
online support base is such that material released onto the Internet by AQAP is quickly distributed by a decentralised network of activists. This network assures rapid and widespread dissemination of AQAP media to multiple web forums, blogs, YouTube channels and media download sites. Other support networks act concurrently to translate AQAP media releases into multiple languages and to produce edited versions of AQAP videos with foreign language subtitles.

Consequently, an interdiction approach, while useful in some cases, will almost certainly not stifle AQAP online strategic messaging altogether. More importantly, a focus on policing such content fails to address the fundamental challenge – namely, the nature of the content itself and its potential to radicalise and mobilise an audience. Therefore, this report instead recommends a comprehensive strategic communication programme as a primary response to AQAP messaging. The proposed programme would comprise campaigns tailored variously to resonate with local (for instance, Yemeni), regional and international audiences; one size does not fit all, as AQAP itself has realised in crafting its own audience-specific communications.

The Internet is one of the most significant conduits for strategic messaging to regional and international audiences, not least because of its considerable importance as a channel for strategic communication by the adversary. Other conduits may be preferable for campaigns directed at Yemeni domestic audiences, however, given what is understood to be the fairly low degree of Internet penetration in Yemeni society, particularly outside major cities. At the very least, strategic communication best-practice must be employed first of all; formal and informal power structures must be mapped and understood, sources of information regarded as credible by target audiences must be identified, and mechanisms by which information is passed between individuals, groups and communities must be profiled. The outlook, values, attitudes, beliefs and factors affecting target audience decision-making must also be fully appreciated before crafting strategic communication campaigns; without this, these campaigns are unlikely to have any chance of influencing community-level behaviour towards rejection of AQAP narratives. With this in mind, it is clear that such a campaign must have proactive and reactive elements.

**Proactive**

1. **Campaigns to raise awareness of the effects of AQAP’s growing influence on regional stability:** Campaigns might draw the attention of a regional audience to AQAP’s international terrorist strategy of provoking further Western intervention. Messages would be developed to stoke concerns about the potential for further violence and instability that AQAP might selfishly promote to further its own political agenda – all at the expense of
the Yemeni population and those of neighbouring states. AQAP’s activities might be juxtaposed with those of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq, whose campaign of terrorism and sectarian violence cost the lives of thousands of Iraqi civilians and brought Iraq to the brink of civil war.

2. Campaigns to leverage the accounts of recanting AQAP members and detainees: This approach capitalises on the personal experiences of former AQAP volunteers to expose what they claim is the true nature of Al-Qa’ida and its affiliates – weak, nepotistic, factionalised and corrupt organisations generally loathed by the communities among which they attempt to operate.

Leveraging the accounts of Al-Qa’ida members for counter-narrative purposes is already a staple output of Saudi counter-narrative programmes. AQAP ‘turncoats’ can provide powerful rebuttals of the group’s narratives and inflict considerable damage on the mystique with which Al-Qa’ida strategic messaging often seeks to cloak activities such as the émigré jihadist experience.

Reactive

1. Campaigns to leverage AQAP operational mistakes and excesses: Strategic communication campaign planners could swiftly capitalise on tactical opportunities created by AQAP operational mistakes, particularly those resulting in the deaths of Yemeni civilians. An example of such an opportunity may have been the 29 March 2011 explosion at a munitions factory in Abyan province, which killed at least 150 civilians and which was partially blamed by some media sources on AQAP. Notwithstanding the tragic consequences of this event, it is worth considering how the details might have been leveraged to challenge the narrative of a jihadist movement purportedly acting in defence of its co-religionists. Such messages can powerfully exploit the often yawning gap between what groups such as AQAP say and what they actually do.

In addition to leveraging incidents of AQAP collateral damage, the growing influence of the group in parts of Yemen’s southern tribal regions may soon create additional opportunities for strategic messaging – namely campaigns that expose the brutal tactics often used by jihadis to control and intimidate communities. If Yemeni provincial security continues to deteriorate and AQAP attempts to establish more formal control over pockets of territory, such acts of intimidation and violence are likely as the group meets its doctrinal imperatives to implement its own uncompromising interpretation of shariah. If the examples of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq or the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) offers any guide, then potential AQAP attempts to use force to maintain a formal position of power in Yemeni communities are likely to be counter-productive. This offers valuable opportunities to juxtapose the brutality of
Al-Qa’ida leadership with its initial promises to stamp out corruption and immorality in favour of a more effective form of shariah-based social justice. Thus far, there are signs that AQAP has in some cases adopted a position of expediency, tolerating certain norms of community behaviour it might otherwise have forbidden in favour of retaining the hospitality of those communities, or of powerful tribal elements. It is noteworthy that AQAP recently established a new front organisation, Ansar Al-Shariah, to support a political programme in parts of southern Yemen where it has gained influence. Ansar Al-Shariah has reportedly been engaging in humanitarian assistance activities such as food aid distribution and offering teaching staff to work in under-resourced local schools. Ansar Al-Shariah communiqués, some of which have been posted to jihadist Internet forums, are presented in newspaper format, with an editorial focus on how the group is helping to support local communities and little obvious AQAP branding or jihadist iconography.

How long such social and political programmes last remains to be seen, however. At the point where AQAP finds it can no longer countenance what it considers ‘un-Islamic’ behaviours, or when it considers that it is powerful enough in certain locales not to have to, counter-terrorism strategic communication practitioners should be ready to identify and capitalise quickly on news of its operational excesses.

Notes and References


3. Ibid., p. 16.

4. Ibid., pp. 7–10.

Postscript

In late September, Yemeni authorities announced that Anwar Al-Awlaki had been killed in a US air strike in territory between Marib and Jawf provinces, along with Samir Khan, who Western intelligence assumes was the editor of *Inspire* magazine. The death of both men was confirmed by the US government and then, on 10 October, in a statement by AQAP.

In its statement, AQAP sought to draw attention to what it claimed was the US government hypocrisy of promoting human rights and respect for individual freedoms, while simultaneously approving a form of extra-judicial killing through the use of armed drones. The statement said:

> The Americans killed the scholar Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaqi and Samir Khan, but they did not prove any crime they committed and they never presented any proof against them from their laws of unjust freedom. So, where is the freedom, justice, human rights and respect of freedoms they boast of? Did America become so suffocated that it contradicted ... these principles it claims it established its country on?

The demise of these two individuals will, at least in the short term, inflict huge damage to AQAP’s English language strategic communication programme, and may also hamper the group’s international terrorist agenda.

With the death of Al-Awlaki, AQAP has been deprived of one of the lynchpins of its outreach to the West. According to the US, his connectivity with an enthusiastic audience of young, English-speaking Western Islamists allowed him, at the very least, to facilitate AQAP’s international reach, so from this perspective alone his death is a serious blow to the organisation’s attempts to conduct terrorist attacks on Western soil.

More broadly, the English-speaking jihadist landscape has lost one of its most talented communicators. While not an original thinker at the ideological level, Al-Awlaki demonstrated an extraordinary ability to reframe Al-Qa’ida grand narratives in a way that resonated specifically with young, English-speaking Muslims. What remains to be seen is the extent to which his legacy – in the form of numerous essays and particularly audio-recorded lectures and *khutbah* (religious addresses) – will continue to mobilise its audience.

Samir Khan’s talents as a propagandist, while not totally unique, will not be easily replaced by AQAP. *Inspire* magazine was the product of Khan’s experience in jihadi media stretching back almost a decade. Though Khan began as a consumer of such media, he quickly transitioned to the role of distributor and commentator with his blog, *The Ignored Puzzle Pieces of Knowledge*. Ultimately, he would graduate to the position of producer.
with the launch of *Jihad Recollections* and his eventual involvement with Al-Malahim Media and *Inspire* magazine.

Like Al-Awlaki, Khan, too, has left an important legacy. Beneath the flashy production quality and counter-culture feel of *Inspire* magazine lies a potentially effective model not just for jihadi radicalisation, but more importantly *mobilisation* of a reader to directly support or perpetrate acts of terrorism in the West. It remains to be seen to what extent AQAP or other components of the Al-Qa’ida movement will attempt to continue this practice in jihadi media production.

Meanwhile in October, shortly before this report went to press, a lynchpin of AQAP’s Arabic language media capability was also reportedly killed in another air strike. According to Yemeni Defence Ministry sources, an attack in southern Yemen, alleged to have been carried out by US armed drones, killed an Egyptian national, Ibrahim Al-Bana, who allegedly served as AQAP’s ‘media Emir’.⁠¹ Al-Bana is understood to have been an important guiding influence in AQAP strategic communication following the death of the previous incumbent, Nayef bin Mohammed Al-Qahtani, who was killed in Yemen in late 2010. At the time of writing it was not possible to confirm Al-Bana’s death, or to fully assess what impact it may have on AQAP’s media operations.

**Notes and References**

About the Authors

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Benedict Wilkinson is an Associate Fellow of RUSI and was formerly Head of Security and Counter-Terrorism at the Institute. In his previous role, he researched issues of radicalisation and the threat of terrorism to the UK, focusing in particular on those emanating from the Middle East. Throughout his time at RUSI, he continued to work on his PhD thesis at King’s College London in which he examines the narratives and strategies of violent opposition movements in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Yemen; he is currently conducting his fieldwork in these countries and divides his time between the UK and the Middle East.

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