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Yemen: Fallout from the al-Awlaki Airstrike

By Scott Stewart

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U.S.-born Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, an ideologue and spokesman for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al Qaeda's franchise in Yemen, was killed in a Sept. 30 airstrike directed against a motorcade near the town of Khashef in Yemen's al-Jawf province. The strike, which occurred at 9:55 a.m. local time, reportedly was conducted by a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and may have also involved fixed-wing naval aircraft. Three other men were killed in the strike, one of whom was Samir Khan, the creator and editor of AQAP's English-language magazine Inspire.

Al-Awlaki has been targeted before; in fact, he had been declared dead on at least two occasions. The first time followed a December 2009 airstrike in Shabwa province, and the second followed a May 5 airstrike, also in Shabwa. In light of confirmation from the U.S. and Yemeni governments and from statements made by al-Awlaki's family members, it appears that he is indeed dead this time. We anticipate that AQAP soon will issue an official statement confirming the deaths of al-Awlaki and Khan.

As STRATFOR noted Sept. 30, the deaths of both al-Awlaki and Khan can be expected to greatly hamper AQAP's efforts to radicalize and equip English-speaking Muslims. The group may have other native English speakers, but individuals who possess the charisma and background of al-Awlaki or the graphics and editorial skills of Khan are difficult to come by in Yemen. The al Qaeda franchise's English-language outreach is certain to face a significant setback.

This deaths of al-Awlaki and Khan and the impact their deaths will have on AQAP's outreach efforts provide an opportunity to consider the importance of individuals — and their personal skill sets — to militant organizations, especially organizations seeking to conduct transnational media and ideological operations.

Bridging the Gap Between Militant Ideology and Operations

When considering militant groups with transnational objectives and reach such as AQAP, we need to recognize that there are several components necessary for such groups to conduct successful operations, including finances, logistics, planning, training and intelligence. But at a higher level, there is also the distinction between those elements of the group that are dedicated to operations on the physical battlefield and those who are focused on operations on the ideological battlefield. While physical operations are important for obvious reasons, the ideological component is also critically important because it allows a group to recruit new members, maintain the ideological commitment of those already in the group and help shape public perception through propaganda. Because of this, the ideological component is especially important for the long-term viability and continuity of a group or movement.

Groups such as the al Qaeda core and AQAP appreciate the importance of the ideological struggle. Published three days before the airstrike against Khan and al-Awlaki, the seventh edition of Inspire contains an article written by Khan titled “The Media Conflict,” wherein he quotes AQAP leader Nasir al-Wahayshi (aka Abu Basir) as stating, “media work is half of the jihad.”

The role of the media in propagating militant ideology has been revolutionized by the Internet, which allows small groups in remote corners of the globe to produce and broadcast material that is almost instantly available to people all around the world. Indeed, jihadists have succeeded in radicalizing and recruiting people from disparate countries. Products such as Inspire or the video and audio recordings of militant leaders such as al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri are a giant leap forward from the way militants communicated 25 years ago, when groups like November 17 would send communiques to the newspapers and Hezbollah would release videos via major television networks of Western hostages they had kidnapped.

Interestingly, militant groups quickly recognized the significance of this media democratization and were early adopters of the Internet. By the mid-1990s, white supremacists in the United States had established Stormfront.com, and in 1996, jihadists inaugurated azzam.com, a professional-looking website that allowed them to provide inspiration, news and instruction to adherents to their ideology and to potential recruits. Azzam.com eventually became an important mechanism through which funds for jihadist groups could be raised and willing volunteers could find ways to link up with jihadist groups in places like Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia.

Thus, the Internet began to serve as a bridge that connected the ideological battlefield with the physical battlefield. When we look back at AQAP's media activities, we can see that they, too, were intended to bridge this gap. For example, the group's Arabic language magazine Sada al-Malahim (meaning “Echo of Battle”) regularly contained not only articles intended to propagate

and defend the jihadist ideology but also articles designed to give practical and tactical guidance. And when al-Wahayshi in October 2009 began advocating that jihadists in the West practice a leaderless-resistance style of operations rather than traveling to places like Yemen or Pakistan for training, they promoted that tactical shift via Sada al-Malahim.

Khan's and Al-Awlaki's Significance for Inspire

In July 2010, AQAP launched the first edition of Inspire magazine. Khan, a longtime publisher of jihadist material, was chosen to spearhead the Inspire project for AQAP. (Khan was born in Saudi Arabia to Pakistani parents but raised in the United States.) Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Khan began to publish an English-language pro-jihadist blog and eventually established jihadist websites and an Internet magazine called Jihad Recollections. It was the artistic similarities between Jihad Recollections and Inspire that helped identify Khan as the editor of Inspire. Khan left his parents' home in Charlotte, N.C., in 2009 to move to Yemen after he learned the FBI was investigating him for his connections to jihadist groups.

Inspire was established intentionally to help further al-Wahayshi's vision of jihadists adopting the leaderless resistance model. Its stated purpose was to radicalize and recruit young, English-speaking Muslims and then inspire and equip them to conduct attacks in the West.

Khan was only 16 years old when he began his jihadist propaganda activities in 2002, and he essentially grew up on the ideological battlefield. By the time he immigrated to Yemen in 2009, he was an experienced cyber-jihadist. In addition to his advanced computer security skills, Khan also energized the Inspire magazine project, and his youth, colloquial American English competency, graphic design flair and knowledge of American pop culture gave Inspire magazine an edgy quality that appealed to young, English-speaking Muslims.

Notably, Khan did not produce most of the written content for Inspire. In fact, he relied heavily on the speeches of al Qaeda figures such as al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, the books of Abu Musab al-Suri and interviews with AQAP figures such as al-Wahayshi and al-Awlaki. However, it was the way in which Khan packaged these materials that made them so appealing. Certainly, there may have been others working with Khan to produce Inspire, and other people undoubtedly can continue to translate portions of al Qaeda speeches or interview AQAP leaders, but Khan was the driving creative force behind the project. His death thus likely will have a substantial impact on the content and feel of Inspire — if the magazine continues at all.

AQAP's Arabic-language propaganda efforts suffered a blow in December 2010 when Nayf bin Mohammed al-Qahtani, the founder and editor of Sada al-Malahim and the founder of Malahim media, was killed in a battle with Yemeni security forces. Sada al-Malahim had been publishing an edition roughly every two months since its inception in January 2008. However, since the release of its 16th edition in February 2011, possibly an edition al-Qahtani had worked on, the promised 17th edition has yet to be published. It is possible Inspire will meet the same fate.

However, Khan was not the only American-born jihadist living in Yemen who possessed unique talents that were useful to AQAP's outreach efforts to English-speaking Muslims. Al-Awlaki had been the imam of congregations in Denver, San Diego and Falls Church, Va., but left the United

States in 2002 after being investigated for his ties to two of the 9/11 hijackers and links to a number of other jihadist figures and plots. Al-Awlaki initially moved to the United Kingdom, where he continued to preach, but as authorities began to clamp down on radical preachers in what has been termed “Londonistan,” al-Awlaki moved to Yemen, his ancestral homeland, in 2004.

During his years in the United States and the United Kingdom, al-Awlaki had become a high-profile imam known for his intellect, charisma and ability to appeal to young, English-speaking Muslims. His sermons became very popular, and audio recordings of those sermons were widely distributed on the Internet via his personal website as well as several other Islamic websites. (Thousands of these videos have been posted to YouTube and have received tens of thousands of hits.) Despite his being under investigation by the U.S. government, in 2002 al-Awlaki was asked to lead a prayer service at the U.S. Capitol and to speak at the Pentagon on the topic of radical Islam. These engagements reflected al-Awlaki’s popularity and added to the mystique that surrounded him. He was seen as a bit of a celebrity in the English-speaking Muslim world, and his presence in Yemen undoubtedly played a big factor in al-Wahayshi’s decision to expand AQAP’s outreach to al-Awlaki’s audience.

Through his work on the ideological battlefield, Al-Awlaki was able to draw men to the physical battlefield. These men could be sent on on suicide missions, such as would-be Christmas Day bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, or encouraged to conduct simple attacks where they live, as in the case of Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hasan.

It is important to remember that al-Awlaki was not AQAP’s primary theological authority. The group’s mufti, Suleiman al-Rubaish, a Saudi cleric with a degree in Islamic law, fought with al-Wahayshi and bin Laden at Tora Bora in 2001 before being captured and spending five years in captivity at Guantanamo Bay. After being returned to Saudi Arabia in 2006, al-Rubaish completed the Saudi rehabilitation program and then promptly fled the country to Yemen after his release. Moreover, AQAP’s Shariah Council, of which al-Awlaki was a member, is chaired by a Yemeni cleric named Adel bin Abdullah al-Abab.

Al-Rubaish maintains serious credibility among jihadists because of his friendship with bin Laden, his survival at Tora Bora and his time served in Guantanamo, and al-Abab is a respected Yemeni cleric. However, neither of the men possesses the native-English language ability of al-Awlaki. They also lack the ability to culturally relate to and motivate Muslims in the West in the same way that al-Awlaki did — and continues to do, via his messages that live on in cyberspace. Because of this, al-Awlaki will not be easily replaced.

AQAP’s Operational Ability Intact

This brings us to the ideas of leadership and succession in militant groups. Some have argued that arresting or killing key members of militant networks does not impact such groups, but experience seems to indicate that in many cases the removal of key personnel does indeed make a difference, especially in the near term and if pressure is maintained on the organization. This dynamic has been reflected by the ongoing post-9/11 campaign against the al Qaeda core and their inability to conduct their oft threatened, and purportedly more deadly, follow-on attacks to

9/11. It has also been demonstrated by the operations mounted against regional jihadist franchise groups in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. The removal of key personnel such as Saudi leader Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin and Indonesian jihadists Hambali and Noordin Top have had substantial impacts on those regional franchises.

Of course, while AQAP's English-speaking outreach will be severely crippled following Khan's and al-Awlaki's deaths, the core of its physical battlefield operational leadership remains intact. Al-Wahayshi is a competent and savvy leader. His military commander, Qasim al-Raymi, is an aggressive, ruthless and fierce fighter, and his principal bomb maker, Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri is creative and imaginative in designing his innovative explosive devices. There were rumors circulating that al-Asiri had been killed in the airstrike directed against al-Awlaki, but they proved to be unfounded. If al-Asiri had been killed, the airstrike would have impacted both the ideological and operational abilities of the group.

The recent increase of U.S. airstrikes, including the one that killed al-Awlaki and Khan, will serve to keep AQAP's leaders focused on survival, as will the conventional warfare in which the group is currently engaging as it fights for control over areas of Yemen. However, the AQAP leadership undoubtedly still desires to attack the United States and the West — perhaps even more so now to avenge their fallen comrades. If they are given the time and space to plot and plan, the AQAP leadership will continue their efforts to attack the United States. They certainly retain the capability to do so, despite the loss of two ideological leaders.