

Making al-Qa'ida legible: Counter-terrorism and the reproduction of terrorism

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How did al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) gain so much ground despite the US and its allies spending vast amounts of money countering it, and successfully killing many of its most effective leaders? This article argues that the answer lies in the competing ontologies of AQAP that underpin Western counter-terrorism discourses on the one hand, and Yemeni popular discourses on the other. I suggest that these opposing visions of what AQAP 'really is' – one legible, organizationally rational and thus and broadly predictable, and one not – cannot be reconciled. As a result, Western counter-terrorism practices target a different organization to the one that many Yemenis believe actually exists while missing, or even empowering, the amorphous entity that animates Yemeni discourses. Yemeni discourses suggest that the Western belief in the effectiveness of these practices helped AQAP to survive them. However, Yemeni views are actively silenced, thereby foreclosing alternative intellectual avenues through which to theorize the politics of counter-terrorism.

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In 2010, the US recognised Yemen's *al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula* (AQAP) as al-Qa'ida's most lethal franchise. Five years later, the Obama Administration declared that America's counter-terrorism strategy in Yemen – an approach characterised as airstrikes against AQAP's leadership combined with support for the state's security apparatus – had been so effective that it provided a model for combatting hostile extremist groups elsewhere (Bruce and Karl, 2015). Indeed, many of AQAP's top leaders were killed in the 104 airstrikes¹ that the US conducted between December 2009 and March 2015.² Yemen was also the largest recipient of American funding for the counter-terrorism operations of foreign militaries between 2006-2014 (Congressional Research Service, 2015: 27).

And yet, despite the Administration's declaration, AQAP grew substantially throughout this period. It directed three, possibly four, attempts to take down airliners, the publication of manuals allegedly used by the Boston Marathon bombers (2013) and, purportedly, the Charlie Hebdo assailants in Paris (2015). Within Yemen, AQAP claimed responsibility for a far more devastating array of attacks and exercised a (debated) degree of territorial control in Abyan (2011-2012), and Mukalla (2015-2016). The State Department estimated that AQAP's membership increased from 'several hundred' in 2010 to 'a few thousand' the following year, and was around 4,000 in 2015 when the Yemeni government collapsed and the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) military intervention began (International Crisis Group, 2017: 4, 9).

This article asks two questions about the growth of AQAP in the years prior to the Yemeni government's collapse. First, why did America's counter-terrorism strategy fail to contain AQAP despite killing so many of its most effective leaders and providing unprecedented support for the state's counter-terrorism apparatus? Second, and more importantly, why did the Administration think its strategy was successful? I show that these questions are indivisible: the strategy *was* reasonably successful against the version of AQAP that the Administration thought it was fighting. But that was a paired down, synoptic version of AQAP with limited resemblance to the less legible entity that animates Yemeni understandings of the group. I argue that the answer to both questions lies in the fact that there are two broad, but ultimately irreconcilable, ontologies of what AQAP 'really is,' and that the US counter-terrorism strategy (or any strategy based on the pre-emption and deterrence of possible future events) can only access one of them.

More contentiously, I argue that in accessing a legible version by targeting AQAP's tangible elements, the strategy strengthened the group's less coherent aspects. Drawing from a combination of fieldwork and other Yemeni sources about the 'real' nature of AQAP, this article provides a detailed case study of terrorism and counter-terrorism reproducing one another.

A brief summary of these two ontologies is necessary at the outset. I will argue that to counter-terrorism practitioners, and the scholars whose work these practitioners draw from, the al-Qa'ida franchise is, first and foremost, a legible and organisationally rational entity.³ It is knowable, and thus broadly pre-emptible, through systematic inquiry into its interacting parts: its structures, agents, ideologies, and sources of revenue. Once identified, these parts can be methodically targeted to the detriment of its overall capability. This ontology renders terrorism a stable, 'governable problem' (Stampnitzky, 2013: 106), that can be managed through bureaucratic processes, and the application of force against a knowable adversary. Consequently, depleting these elements by eliminating its leaders and amassing well trained and resourced proxy forces against it constitutes success.

The ontology of al-Qa'ida that underpins Yemeni discourses does not (usually) dismiss its tangible elements but is more ambivalent about the degree to which they combine to form a legible whole. While not monolithic, Yemeni discourses about AQAP tend to frame it as a fluid, multiple, and messy entity. It may contain rational and legible aspects but is not wholly defined by them. It is also an appendage of state and/or hegemonic power that preys on civilians to advance various political agendas, such that interventions by those same powers tend to reproduce it rather than defeat it (e.g. al-Khaiwani, 2016; Jerrett and al-Haddar, 2016). Here, al-Qa'ida, and particularly AQAP, is not a consistent entity. It is neither solely an independent terrorist organisation nor a simple proxy of powerful actors, but both at the same time, with parts that exist only in relation to an opaque and illegible whole. It is widely seen as a myth, or a political 'game' (*lu'ba*) – an entity enabled (sometimes) by predatory actors to dispense violence with plausible deniability in order to maintain their own power. Those predatory actors vary, ranging from Yemen's factionalised elites or 'deep state' to the CIA, Israel's Mossad, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or other regional states. However, the unifying strand is a presumption that al-Qa'ida is, at least partly, a creature of opaque manipulation rather

than a unitary and independent network that is consistently intent on defeating its declared enemies. The primary source of AQAP's resilience is, therefore, those opaque predatory actors and the strength they draw from counter-terrorism practices rather than any deep connection between AQAP and the grievances or aspirations of Yemeni society. AQAP is thereby rendered a contradiction, being both a reflection of, and a direct challenge to, the authority of state actors.

This essay hangs on the following point: Western counter-terrorism practices are structured to defeat coherent, organisationally rational (and thus broadly predictable) entities – which their targets may not exclusively be. At stake, therefore, is the way that the resilience of violent extremist groups is understood and, more importantly, the ways that the counter-terrorism strategies of the US and its allies generate and reproduce the threats they seek to contain.

Ontological instability and terrorism. The paper is grounded theoretically in two central propositions of the Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) literature. The first is that terrorism is an ontologically unstable category, the fundamental nature of which shifts according to context and observer (Jackson, 2007; Stampnitzky, 2013; Zulaika, 2012; 2016). To date, much of the literature on this instability has been on the multiple meanings of terrorism (e.g. Kapitan 2004; Skoll 2007; Schmid 2011), the silencing of state terrorism (e.g. Blakeley, 2009; Raphael, 2009), and the ways that states label the violence of their opponents as terrorism (Dixit 2016). This piece focuses instead on the instability of terrorist groups themselves (here AQAP), arguing that they are not necessarily concrete objects that fit neatly into established categories, such as state/non-state, civilian/terrorist, risk/reward, or legitimate/illegitimate. They are enacted in ways that are multiple, complex and, at times, contradictory (Law and Singleton, 2005, cited in Squire, 2013: 37). That multiplicity confounds counter-terrorism practices that rest on the integrity of those categories. For example, drone operators must be able to decipher terrorists from civilians if airstrikes are to be of consistent value to a counter-terrorism strategy. Likewise, if there is no definitive line between state actors and violent extremists within the partners on the front lines, enhancing the partner's security apparatus may strengthen the hand of the violent extremists with which it is intermingled.

The other core proposition of the CTS literature explored here is that terrorism and counter-terrorism generate and reproduce one another (Zulaika, 2012; Stampnitzky, 2013; Mueller and Stewart, 2016; Jackson, 2016). This article shows how Yemenis commonly portray AQAP's relationship to counter-terrorism practices as one of mutual regeneration rather than destruction, principally because the Yemeni regime received extraordinary assistance to prevent a threat that it benefited from sustaining. Seen in this light, America's counter-terrorism practices did not fail to defeat AQAP because they were executed imperfectly. They failed because in trying to pre-empt and control AQAP, they helped provide a pathway for its endurance.

Methodology. John Law uses the term 'mess' to describe the social world, arguing that inconsistency, contradiction, and multiplicity are not necessarily the product of poor research methodologies, but are integral to how the social world holds together and functions. Being integral, they cannot be stripped from research findings without artificially imposing clarity (Law, 2004: 1). If something 'is an awful mess,' Law (2004: 2) asks, 'then would something less messy make a mess of describing it?' Law is essentially questioning whether the pressure on researchers to produce unambiguous findings that, in turn, support actionable outcomes, requires researchers to implicitly sacrifice the 'messy' data that would seem to contradict more rationally intuitive (or tidier) findings (Perera 2017: 47).

In part, this essay is about the opaque, the ghostly, and the fleeting. It is about rumour, the unsubstantiated and, more importantly, the unsubstantiable. It is an attempt to work with, rather than against, research findings that are difficult, if not impossible, to rigorously triangulate, seeking instead to understand the impact of empirical details that cannot be definitively proven or disproven. It does so by looking beyond the specific data points, organisational structures, or social complexities that are presented in the discursive reproductions of AQAP to the perceived power relations that hold them together. I will also show that Yemeni discourses about AQAP are sometimes actively rejected by Western academics and policy-makers as irrational or conspiratorial. More often though, they are simply omitted. I argue, on the contrary, that they offer compelling insights into why AQAP has proven so resilient to standard counter-terrorism practices and, moreover, into how we might better theorise the politics that underpin these practices.

This study draws from several years of field research in Yemen about the politics of regime maintenance (conducted over a nine-year period), and ongoing analysis of a diverse array of published Yemeni analyses of AQAP (in English and Arabic).⁴ While AQAP was not the specific focus of my interviews (it did not formally declare its presence until shortly after my departure in late 2008), people would often ruminate on the murky relationship between violent extremists and the Yemeni regime. The changing contours of this apparent relationship was a popular source of conversation during the daily ‘*qat* chew’ gatherings that are a cornerstone of Yemeni social and political life.⁵ Qat chews are usually informal events (though they can sometimes be quite structured), where people socialise, discuss the issues of the day, and organise political activities. Regular attendance at qat chews is essential for anyone wanting to keep abreast of political currents in Yemen. I have used my field notes from these gatherings (2004-2008) in combination with (non-state) media commentary, policy analysis, and social media posts by Yemenis to make inferences about how the speakers understand what AQAP ‘really’ is; how it changes, endures, and relates to dominant power hierarchies.

In relying largely on non-elite, unofficial, and contested source material, this article is also a response to post-colonial concerns over the tendency of the security studies literature to prioritise what Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey (2006: 349) call ‘the politics of the strong’ over the views of those impacted by their politics. It takes seriously the perceptions of the people living in places targeted by Western counter-terrorism practices without reducing their views to the simple binary choices (such as supporting or opposing a particular group) that render those practices necessary and inevitable. My aim, therefore, is to spotlight an aspect of AQAP that is seldom addressed in either English language media commentary or academic scholarship: how Yemenis express their beliefs about the fundamental nature of AQAP in local media, social media posts, in qat chews, and in other mediums like political slogans.

The article proceeds as follows. It begins by outlining the two competing ontologies of AQAP that are the backbone of the argument: one legible, organisationally rational and thus and broadly predictable, and one not entirely so. Next, the article examines the implications of this analysis for the use of the counter-terrorism practices employed in the ‘Yemen model’ to combat the multiple, fluid, and inconsistent meanings that are so

widely assigned to AQAP within Yemen, but also to groups that use terrorism as a strategy elsewhere. These meanings include anti-Western sentiments that may radicalise people to committing acts of violence but extend well beyond them to include nuanced views about the nature of Western (particularly American) incursions into sovereign states, and the unequal global power relationships that underpin them. The paper concludes by suggesting that AQAP, being experienced as multiple simultaneous groups (as opposed to a coherent, organisationally rational one), cannot be defeated by the destruction of the material elements pertaining to only one of these groups, which may be irrelevant to, or even energise, its others. Part of its resilience lies in the fact that it can mean multiple, and not necessarily consistent, things at one time, even to the one observer, making current counter-terrorism practices incapable of achieving their stated objectives.

Legible al-Qa'ida. The key point of differentiation between the two broad ontologies concerns the legibility of their subjects, as understood by James Scott in his seminal work on early modern European statecraft, *Seeing Like a State*. Scott (1998: 3) argues that modernising states sought control over their populations and territories by 'rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format.' He discusses how this was achieved through the creation of things like population registers, cadastral surveys, permanent last names, row crops, and the standardisation of language, all of which gave states a greater ability to 'see' that which they aspired to govern. While this allowed them to more finely target their efforts to extract taxes, raise armies, or increase production, what they 'saw' was 'an overall, aggregate, synoptic view of a selective reality' (Scott, 1998: 11). That is, they gained access to certain snippets of reality at the expense of others, particularly the complex interactions that are difficult, if not impossible, to capture in the abstract. Being based on necessarily partial depictions, states' interventions often failed to achieve their goals, and sometimes had catastrophic unintended consequences.

I argue that Western counter-terrorism discourses also simplify terrorist groups by focusing on their most legible and, presumably, most malleable parts. These parts are 'formatted' to populate the databases, organisational maps, isolation or disaggregation strategies, and data signatures that counter-terrorists use to pre-empt or disrupt possible attacks. By excluding a terrorist group's 'hieroglyphic' aspects, such as the rumours with

which it is entwined, it is reconstituted as the sum of its legible parts. Once legible, it appears favourably vulnerable to the ‘carefully calibrated’ (Kilcullen, 2016: Kindle Location 325) ‘precise,’ or even ‘surgical’⁶ interventions of the counter-terrorist.

By definition, counter-terrorism practitioners seek to undermine those they define as terrorists, or the environments that produce them.⁷ Although counter-terrorism encompasses a diverse array of practices spanning immigration, counter-radicalisation, urban planning, financial regulation (Lindahl, 2016: 215), and international military or state-building interventions, each requires that terrorists be constituted as objectively knowable to, and malleable by, the counter-terrorist. Prominent military strategist, David Kilcullen, (who was lead author for the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Handbook, and served as Special Advisor for Counterinsurgency to the Secretary of State) describes ‘the consensus view of most Western governments and counterterrorism strategists on how to deal with AQ [al-Qa’ida]’ since 2005:

terrorism could be reduced to a manageable level by dismantling core AQ; maintaining pressure on its leaders so as to cut them off from regional franchises; helping governments deal with those franchises, once localized, through carefully calibrated capability-building efforts; countering the ideology that fuels militancy; and addressing the conditions that create fertile ground for terrorism (Kilcullen, 2016: Kindle Location 325-330).

To have purchase, this approach requires al-Qa’ida to be constituted as a legible and organisationally rational entity.⁸ The essential point is that to understand al-Qa’ida otherwise – as illegible – would remove counter-terrorism’s obvious target and make the practice of counter-terrorism, as currently understood, impossible.⁹

There is an extraordinary level of policy infrastructure, spending, and academic research devoted to capturing the empirical details of terrorist organisations. By 2010, for example, there were around ‘1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work[ing] on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States’ (Priest and Arkin, 2010). There is a voluminous qualitative literature depicting the hierarchies of command and control; internal management processes; financial systems; preference divergence; and

network/cell structure of terrorist groups.¹⁰ There are also a plethora of databases intended to help quantify key facts about terrorist actors and incidents.¹¹ Together, these activities attempt to build a more comprehensive picture of individual terrorist organisations, and in so doing increase their vulnerability to targeted intervention. An influential example is the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point Military Academy's *Harmony Project*, which has published dozens of major reports analysing documents held in the Defense Department's *Harmony Database*. The Executive Summary of one of its early publications explains the project's rationale:

Understanding a terrorist organization's internal challenges and vulnerabilities is key to developing effective—and efficient—responses to the threats they pose and to degrade these groups' ability to kill... Many of our prescriptions are intended to induce debilitating agency problems that increase existing organizational dysfunction and reduce al-Qa'ida's potential for political impact (Forest, et al, 2006: 2-3; see also Watts, et al, 2007: 12).

That is, because terrorist groups are coherent and organisationally rational, they can be pinned down, targeted, and eliminated – or at least undermined – through the exploitation of their organisational weaknesses. Rational organisations are predictable (and thus pre-emptible) because they operate within bounds that are at least theoretically discoverable. Jenna Jordan (2014: 8) illustrates this organisational perspective, writing in *International Security*: 'A terrorist group's ability to withstand attacks is a function of two factors: bureaucratization and communal support.' It follows that one or both of these elements must be disrupted if the group is to be disrupted. However, as critical theories of discourse analysis seek to illustrate (Fairclough, 1995; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), the vocabulary of rationalism constructs rational objects. That is, it provides the linguistic, and thus conceptual, tools and strategies to speak about the rational and coherent, while excluding tools and strategies that facilitate access to the non-rational or illegible (Cohn, 1987: 709).

A more specific examination of how AQAP is framed in mainstream English language narratives demonstrates that it is also typically framed as an organisationally rational, structurally coherent – or at least 'knowable' – entity. This can be seen in the ways that leading academics and policy analysts describe the group's resilience. The *Harmony*

Project's (anonymous) Yemen researcher, who produced one of the most detailed and nuanced pieces of fieldwork-based research on AQAP, explains that: 'AQAP has endured ... by maintaining rigid organizational discipline; crafting a consistent and highly nuanced discourse; and avoiding military or outreach efforts likely to spark a public backlash' (Koehler-Derrick, 2011: 11). The International Crisis Group's (ICG) meticulously researched report (2017: 6) similarly notes that AQAP's resilience derives from being: 'structured around a senior leadership whose members are dispersed over committees and councils... [which] allows it to better absorb the impact of assassinations.'

Most serious scholars of Yemen understand that AQAP is socially complex and that there are multiple layers to its existence (Bonney 2011; Johnsen 2013; Kendall 2015; 2016). Some refer to the fact that 'in Yemen it is widely held that [former president] Salih created or allowed AQAP to thrive in order to secure US economic and military aid' (Clausen, 2017: 54), or refer to an apparent 'tacit non-aggression pact' between the regime and AQAP (Johnsen, 2013: 144, 181-86; Kendall, 2018: 2). The ICG (2017, 2) notes that many Yemenis see 'the group as a tool for Yemen's political elite to resort to subterfuge for financial and military gain.' There are occasionally more specific allegations:

Since 2007, Salafis and al-Qaeda operatives from Wādī Āl Abū Jabārah had been deployed by 'Alī Muḥsin and the Popular Army against the Houthis. AQAP had partially ceased its previous attacks on security forces, and several high-ranking al-Qaeda figures were involved in combat with the Houthis (Brandt, 2017: 291).

However, there is almost no work that focuses on the intensity with which such allegations are maintained by ordinary Yemenis,¹² or the implications of this for how we understand what AQAP means to those directly affected by its presence. I do not suggest that AQAP does not have discernible structures or that studying them is misdirected, only that doing so reproduces a legible version of the group that is at odds with how Yemenis widely report to understand it. My concern is, therefore, with what AQAP looks like when we prioritise Yemeni observations about how the group is reproduced, which forces us to consider that it may be indivisible from the practices that seek to destroy it.

Illegible al-Qa'ida(s). Yemeni discourses express scepticism that there is indeed a strong, coherent, and independent al-Qa'ida, and widely portray it as an appendage of the political elites and their efforts to maintain power – a point extensively developed below. Yemenis often claim that there are, in fact, '*al-Qawa'id*' or al-Qa'idās – plural.¹³ Precisely how many al-Qa'idās there may be is unclear, but it is multiple, and the borders that delineate them are fluid and imprecise. The use of the plural captures the prevalent sense that those to whom the label may be applied can serve different, even contradictory, agendas or masters, and is seen in the way that the group is routinely referred to as 'the so-called al-Qa'ida' (al-Yafei, 2012). The use of the plural also captures the illegibility inherent to the way the group is understood throughout Yemen.

As demonstrated below, Yemeni popular discourses about AQAP tend to reject the notion that it is always a non-state actor, framing it instead as a pliable entity that sometimes acts in the interests of powerful state 'players' (*al-la'abeen*) with little independent agency. Whereas in Western counter-terrorism discourses, the relationship between al-Qa'ida and the Yemeni state is framed as overwhelmingly, if not entirely, adversarial (otherwise supporting the state to fight it would be nonsensical), in Yemen it is often seen as more accommodating and, at times, even symbiotic. Moreover, it is widely believed that the West either naively facilitated or malevolently manipulated the relationship between Yemeni state actors and AQAP. It did so by too readily supplying the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (in power 1978-2011) with weapons, money, and international legitimacy in exchange for assurances that it was committed to fighting AQAP. In this view, the Saleh regime was playing a double game by facilitating AQAP so that Yemen would continue to pose an international security problem, to which its own political survival would be seen by Western states as the only viable solution. In other words, the Saleh regime's failure to defeat the group was at least partly intentional – and this was suspected by Western government agencies which, apparently seeing no better option, continued to support the regime regardless.

The views presented below are not the isolated observations of either the urban elite or the undereducated, oppositionists or regime insiders, but chime closely with the analysis of a wide cross-section of Yemenis as I understood it during four years of fieldwork, and in my connections to the country since. This includes sources close to Saleh, one of

whom recounted an encounter where Saleh insisted he was still ‘in control’ of AQAP despite appearances to the contrary.¹⁴

I now turn to a more specific examination of how Yemeni discourses frame AQAP by focusing, in particular, on the logic of political violence that underpins them. Here, state actors are not presumed to refrain from facilitating violent non-state actors that challenge their ability to claim a monopoly on legitimate force, and neither are violent non-state actors necessarily identifiable by their distinction to the state. Whereas counter-terrorism discourses tend to frame state and violent non-state actors as inherently opposed to one another – and the ‘Yemen model’ explicitly sought to strengthen the state security apparatus on the assumption of a zero sum game between its strength and AQAP’s weakness – Yemeni discourses see them as potential collaborators that reproduce one another (Phillips, 2015; 2017).

Illegible al-Qa’ida(s) and the Yemeni state. In February 2006, 23 of al-Qa’ida’s top operatives tunneled out of a high security prison in Sana’a in an act that was widely believed to have been facilitated by senior regime members. As (purportedly) al-Qa’ida affiliated entities began claiming responsibility for operations later in the year, it was clear that the men were still suspected of colluding with the regime. In March 2008, a recurring topic at politically focused *qat* chews around Sana’a was an alleged citing of one of the most senior escapees, Qassem al-Raymi, at a funeral in Old Sana’a. My research notes from the time show that the veracity of his presence was taken for granted and the general conclusion was that he was either ‘sending a message’ to the regime, or that he was ‘confident’ that he would not be apprehended because the regime wanted to maintain the threat that al-Qa’ida appeared to pose.¹⁵

Over the next few months, a series of small and poorly orchestrated attacks occurred around Sana’a that were claimed by *Jund al-Yemen* (an entity allegedly linked to al-Qa’ida). Their operational incompetence prompted questions about the perpetrators’ ability to evade capture. The following passage is from notes where I summarised my observations at about ten politically-focused (and thus largely elite) *qat* chews in Sana’a in May 2008:

The main questions being asked are: To what extent are militant jihadists still a

part of the regime's networks? Is it the government's ability or its willingness to counter militants that is waning? ...

The difference in fingerprints between the Marib [suicide] attack [in July 2007] and the more recent attacks have contributed to theories about the relationship of the perpetrators to the regime, suggesting that the more haphazard attacks are a symptom of factional strife within the regime, with Ali Muhsin as the chief protagonist. This is because they seem to bear the marks of the military more than ideology (they value their own survival over their effectiveness)... the government's inability to capture any of the perpetrators [is strange considering] the logistical difficulties of firing mortar rounds in broad daylight in crowded parts of the capital city.

As protests built against the Saleh regime in 2011, photos of the demonstrations show protesters holding a banner that read 'remove the regime = remove al-Qa'ida.'¹⁶ In the Yemeni context, this was a reasonably banal statement, reflecting the longstanding accusation of complicity between President Saleh and AQAP.¹⁷ However, the desire to articulate it directly to an international audience clearly increased in 2011, as the US government ever more vocally committed itself to supporting the regime as 'the best partner we're going to have [against AQAP]' (Associated Press, 2011). Many Yemenis publicly warned of the self-defeating nature of this strategy. Yemeni journalist and al-Qa'ida expert, Ahmed al-Zurqa stated, for example, 'Once the regime falls, [al-Qa'ida] will disappear' (cited in Boone and al-Harazi 2011). In May 2011, the English Language *Yemen Times* quoted Judge Hamood al-Hitar, a Minister of Religious Affairs under President Saleh, who led a government dialogue program with al-Qa'ida, but had recently defected from the regime: 'Saleh uses the Al-Qaeda card to blackmail Arab and foreign countries into giving him more aid and financial assistance... The real size of Al-Qaeda in Yemen does not exceed ten percent of what is being portrayed by the media.' He concluded: 'Yemen will put an end to Al-Qaeda if Saleh stepped [*sic*] down' (Yemen Times, 2011). Ali Muhsin, then a powerful general (currently Vice President) who led the stream of military and civil defections in 2011, made a similar claim to al-Hitar: 'al-Qa'ida is present but it is exaggerated because the subject of al-Qa'ida has... become a money farm' (Okaz 2011). Ali Muhsin had, however, long been accused of facilitating al-Qa'ida alongside Saleh, illustrating the political weight this accusation is

perceived to have.

A tribal sheikh who claimed to be working against AQAP in his local area told a Yemeni journalist (al-Harazi, 2011) that it was the regime rather than the tribes that were permitting AQAP to maintain a foothold there. Sheikh Hussein bin Saleh bin Othman claimed that he had established a coalition of tribal leaders against AQAP in Azzan (Shabwa governorate):

We told [AQAP] that they have to leave our land and that we will not be watching them taking over. We are the majority and there is no comparison... Our tribal power enables us to gather over 10,000 warriors in less than two days to fight Al-Qaeda... *We managed to expel Al-Qaeda from our area and that is proof that they are urged by the state for political reasons* and not Islamic reasons as they claim. (Emphasis added).

In a 2012 interview with *The Nation*, the widely-cited Sana'a-based political analyst, Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani also claimed that the Saleh regime's 'agenda was to keep terrorism alive, because it was their cash cow' (quoted in Scahill 2012). Elsewhere, al-Iryani stated that Saleh had long: 'managed to use AQAP, and he actually harbored them and provided them protection and safe houses in Sanaa... I heard this from people who are intimately close to the process, including some people who are directly involved' (quoted in Cockburn 2015).

Local discourses about the nature of AQAP continued along similar lines since the protests in 2011, and after Saleh lost the presidency. When AQAP media sources issued a claim of responsibility for a suicide bombing that killed nearly 100 members of the Central Security Forces in central Sana'a in May 2012 (al-Jazeera 2012; al-Arabiyya 2012), Yemeni journalists offered a variety of alternative theories on who the 'real' mastermind of the attack was. Media outlets affiliated with former President Saleh claimed that General Ali Muhsin had recruited the bomber, while outlets affiliated with Ali Muhsin claimed it was that Saleh who had orchestrated the attack. The titles of some of these articles give a sense of the degree to which AQAP is seen as a strategic asset of a fractured elite rather than an independent, unitary terrorist group: 'Saleh Officer Accused of Masterminding the Saba'een Explosion in Sana'a' (Zaki 2012), 'Ali Muhsin

al-Ahmar was Involved in the Suicide Operation at Saba'een' (Hashad Net 2012), '100 Dead and Charges that Saleh and his Relatives are Behind the Bombing' (Nashwan News 2012, see also Asrar Press 2012, cited in Phillips, 2016: 75). There is a widespread belief that powerful military commanders have supported Qa'ida fighters in attacking military units that are led by rival commanders on other occasions as well (e.g. Yemenat 2013; al-Mokshi 2013).

Inter-regime conflict is also widely used to explain the hundreds of assassinations of security officials that have swept the country, predominantly in the south, since 2010. The killings are carried out by masked gunmen either on motorcycles or in open-top cars and have targeted some of the country's most competent security officials. Western analysts and the Yemeni government claim that the killings are the work of AQAP, as it attempts to systematically eliminate the security officials that pose a threat to the organisation (which some, or even all of them, of course may be). Many in Yemen see them, however, as part of the factional conflicts that metastasised after the regime ruptured in 2011 (Coombs and Poppy 2014; United Press International 2012; Bafana 2015). For example, Southern Yemeni journalist Yasser al-Yafei (2012) wrote in the Yemeni newspaper, *al-Akhbar*, that throughout the south it was widely believed that the assassinations were part of this elite conflict, and were unrelated to al-Qa'ida:

This [suspicion] was confirmed by an officer in the Yemeni army, Colonel Ali bin Ali Qamatah. 'Based on our military expertise, these incidents are a matter of settling scores between security forces... Charges are then fabricated against the so-called al-Qaeda, because this organization is manufactured by Saleh's regime and his security services. But we have major questions, since these assassinations are targeting officers from the South.

Likewise, Yemeni activist Fare'a al-Muslimi (2013) commented that it is 'hard to believe that any of these [assassinated] military figures are effectively confronting al-Qaeda... [they are] political acts that benefit the factions negatively affected by the ongoing political transformation process' – that is to say, former President Saleh and his supporters. In the most rigorous study of its kind, Martin Jerrett and Mohammed al-Haddar (2016: 13) surveyed local Yemeni media sources and found that at least 108 Political Security Organisation (PSO) officers were purportedly assassinated by AQAP

between 2009-2014. Of these, at least 83 were southerners. This suggests, they argue, that rather than targeting the National Security Bureau (NSB) officers tasked with fighting AQAP, or even the (Shi'a) al-Houthis, whom AQAP had sworn to annihilate, the assassinations targeted Sunni southerners with sympathies for southern secession. That is, they targeted the enemies of the (northern) political and military elite, rather than those posing the more likely threat to the survival of AQAP.

The charge that there are blurred lines between al-Qa'ida and other centres of power is extremely common. The famous Yemeni journalist, Abdul-Karim al-Khaiwani (a supporter of the al-Houthi movement who was assassinated in an attack claimed by al-Qa'ida), argued that there are 'five branches' of al-Qa'ida in Yemen: one attached to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh; another to General Ali Muhsin; and the other three to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and bin Laden's replacement, Ayman al-Zawahiri in Pakistan.¹⁸

The Yemeni media widely reported the Tweets of 'Tameh,' a source (with a peak following of nearly 375,000 before the account was deleted in 2017) believed to either have close access to, or be highly placed within, the Yemeni security services.¹⁹ Tameh alleged that the current leader (then deputy) of AQAP, Qassim al-Raymi, had cooperated with former President Saleh and his family on a number of occasions.²⁰ Tameh claimed, for example, that Saleh gave al-Raymi \$US70 million to publicly claim that AQAP was responsible for the brutal attack on the military hospital within the Ministry of Defense compound in Sana'a, in which 56 civilians were killed in December 2013.²¹ Tameh implied that this payment was made so that AQAP would claim responsibility for the attack, and thereby cover up that it was a failed attempt by Saleh and his supporters to assassinate President Hadi.²² While the factual detail of any of these scenarios is open to dispute, most Yemenis would accept that they are at least logically plausible.

Another example of this logical plausibility can be seen in some of the messaging strategies employed by the Houthi movement, an avowed enemy of AQAP.²³ In 2012, I visited the town of Kowkaban (an hour north of Sana'a), where the presence of their slogans in public spaces was striking. A central theme of the most prominent messages was 'al-Qa'ida is American made' (*al-Qa'ida Sanaa'a Amreekia*). From numerous informal conversations with people in the town, it was clear that this was taken as a banal

statement of fact. It was so uncontested that the only thing to elicit interest from my interlocutors in Kowkaban (and later in Sana'a) was the handwriting, which was large and stylised.²⁴ The multiple layers of meaning that the statement conveys is noteworthy. Al-Qa'ida could be seen as 'American made' for many reasons (Houthi partisan, inter-regime factional, neo-imperial, America's historical support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan, and so forth) depending on the audience. But each reason that is believed to be real 'is real in its consequences' (Merton, 1968: 475, cited in Zulaika, 2016: 40), and each reason here suggests that al-Qa'ida is (somehow) a tool of American power.

Finally, AQAP's media added its voice to the debate about the contested ontologies of violent extremist groups in Yemen by releasing a video in early 2016 titled 'The Hollywood Reality of al-Baghdadi's Group.' The video purports to show a defector from the Yemeni branch of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) explaining how a recent video of ISIS fighters storming buildings and killing people was faked in an effort to overstate the group's potency. AQAP's media thereby came full circle, tarring its ostensible competitors with the same accusation it had long been subjected to: that the threat they pose is overstated, and that their violence is simply a piece of theatre contrived for other purposes. That is, that there is no singular 'real' ISIS; only a collection of myths by which it perpetuates itself.

To reiterate, the point of this analysis is not to advocate for the truth or falsity of any of these claims. Rather, it is to highlight the ways that Yemeni discourses about AQAP are entwined in the fluid contours of elite politics in ways that fundamentally challenge the bifurcation of state/violent extremists, civilian/combatant, or legitimate/illegitimate that underpin counter-terrorism practices. It is also to suggest that Yemeni discourses may be read as allegories of power, in which AQAP represents the perceived opacity and double-dealings of the 'deep state' or, sometimes, those of global powers. Within this state, key elites (including former President Saleh, Vice President Ali Muhsin and, to a lesser extent, President Hadi) willingly facilitate violent non-state actors that challenge their ability to maintain power in a seemingly counter-intuitive exchange for their own political survival. While these stories seldom (if ever) contain verifiable evidence of their claims, they articulate an over-riding sense that Yemenis do not believe their government is *always* motivated to fight groups that violently and explicitly challenge its rule by seeking to install an alternative to the state. Instead, one component of AQAP is its

portrayal as a myth that elites use in an effort to extract resources and garner legitimacy from external actors, while settling internal factional scores. In this view, AQAP has never been an entirely autonomous terrorist organisation fighting a determined battle against the state (even though some within AQAP do engage in this), but also an outcrop of the state and its dysfunctions. As the next section demonstrates, these are dysfunctions that Western counter-terrorism practices are seen to have reproduced by failing to consider that AQAP might be countered by Yemenis' overwhelming belief that it was a coercive tool used against them by powerful actors, rather than a vehicle to express their grievances.

Illegible al-Qa'ida(s) and American hegemony. In addition to seeing AQAP as sustained, at least in part, by elite power politics, Yemeni discourses also highlight the strong historical links between it and the state's longstanding practice of co-opting militant jihadists for their martial skills. This is, of course, a practice that was supported by the United States as it sought to defeat its Soviet enemy in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In this respect, al-Qa'ida is less defined by what it did in 2001, as it is in the West, than by its Cold War origins, when its fighters were embraced but subsequently abandoned by the United States. These origins had profound political consequences for Yemen once its citizens returned home in the 1990s. Yemeni Islamist, intellectual, and al-Qa'ida expert Sa'eed Ali al-Jamhi (2008: 58-59) offers a paradigmatic summary of this view in his book, *al-Qa'ida in Yemen*, which offers an ideological critique of al-Qa'ida:

America did not support the Afghan jihad because they love Islam, or for the mercy of Muslims, but to make the Soviet Union weak... Then the mujahideen announced that they would fight against all non-Muslim countries while America thought it could control everything – and must now accept the consequences.

The effort to recruit Yemenis to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s was one that the country's leaders took seriously. The most powerful tribal leader of the Republican era, Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar (1933-2007), was heavily involved, and said later that, 'America was the main supporter of [this effort], and it was pushing nearby Arabic countries to support the jihad, and make it easier for young Arab men to join' (quoted in al-Gaisi, 2006: 85). President Saleh too, hosted young recruits at the presidential palace where, according to Gregory Johnsen (2013: 7), he 'compared

them to Mohammed's earliest companions.' Judge Hamood al-Hitar, who ran a famous series of religious dialogue sessions (2002-2011)²⁵ to dissuade convicted militants from their radical views (and later became Minister of Religious Affairs), also stresses the degree to which the Arab-Afghan fighters were encouraged by Western powers, saying they went 'with the support of Western governments and were guests in any Western capital that they went to.' When the war ended, thousands of men with active combat experience returned home though, al-Hitar notes, these fighters had also become 'vulnerable to prosecution anywhere they landed' (quoted in Naba News, 2010).

From a Western counter-terrorism perspective, the Yemeni government's efforts to reincorporate the returnees into normal life after the war have nefarious overtones. In 2000, the *New York Times* reported that General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar (then one of President Saleh's closest allies), received \$US20 million from Osama bin Laden to help resettle fighters in Yemen (Burns, 2000). The General's brother-in-law, Tariq al-Fadhli, who fought in Afghanistan and was personally close to Osama bin Laden until 1995, confirms that bin Laden spent lavishly in Yemen in the early 1990s in an effort to expel the remnants of the socialist government from the south of the recently unified country: 'Osama bin Laden had a relationship with all Yemen, he was supporting all of the tribes, and he gave money to lots of people in high government positions and in parties. He supported them with hundreds of thousands of dollars' (al-Balad News, 2012).

In the US, the fact that so many Yemenis fought in Afghanistan has been used to suggest that Yemenis are generally sympathetic to al-Qa'ida's ideology and methods. US Senator Carl Levin warned Congress in 2009, for example, that Yemen is a place 'where many mujahedeen returned to after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and, often forgotten, it is the ancestral home of Osama bin Laden' (Levin, 2009, cited in Phillips, 2017: 143). However, from a Yemeni perspective the men were returning home after fighting in a conflict that both their government and Western governments had deemed not only legitimate, but worthy of support. To leave them idle and well trained would have been both risky and improper.

These fighters became instrumental in Yemen's two-month civil war in 1994, mobilising on the side of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the northern regime against the Socialists in the south. Abu al-Fida al-Rashid was one of these fighters, and a close associate of

bin Laden between 1989-91. He was asked in 2012 whether all of the returned mujahideen participated in Yemen's 1994 civil war: 'Yes, all of them without exception, whether they were under the flag of the Muslim Brotherhood, or whether they were from the group that followed Sheikh bin Laden, who were mostly in the South' (Saada Press, 2012). Whether in the 1980s in Afghanistan or in the 1994 Yemeni civil war, the idea that militant jihadis willingly fight on behalf of the northern-based elements of the Yemeni regime has deep historical resonance. So too does the idea that al-Qa'ida emerged as a direct consequence of American efforts to extend its hegemonic power. These roots form part of the empirical web from which the more recent Yemeni ontologies of AQAP draw some of their baseline plausibility.

Reproducing al-Qa'ida(s). Whether true or false, the prevalence of the theories outlined above unravels the outward coherence of the group among the very population that the mainstream Western discourses portray as its 'natural base of... popular support' (Cilluffo and Watts, 2011) With these theories about AQAP's complex interdependence with the Yemeni (and American) states, it ceases to be an intelligible object capable of articulating itself with one voice. As a result, the meaning attached to AQAP is destabilised. It is not only a 'homegrown movement, with carefully cultivated ties to the local population' (Levinson and Coker, 2010; US Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2017: 171), or a group whose resilience can be best understood by its 'local integration and branding, tribal relations, community development, and youth engagement' (Kendall, 2018: 1) as widely portrayed in Western media outlets and by academics striving to define the essence of the group. It may include these things but it is simultaneously a mesh of unknowable domestic and international power relationships. This means that destroying one of its co-existing meanings will not defeat the group because other opaque relationships inevitably survive it. Indeed, the notion of AQAP becomes an allegorical representation of those opaque relationships, just as it simultaneously becomes a term no more meaningful than a pejorative for an opponent. In Yemeni popular discourses, al-Qa'ida is a multiple entity, the meaning of which is so fragmented and contested as to require that it be referred to either in the plural, or dismissively as the 'so-called al-Qa'ida.'

Some of the English language literature recognises that AQAP's strength lies partly in its nebulosity, and in the fact that the plausibility of claims about its reach are

unverifiable, giving it the appearance of greater potency and coherence than it necessarily possesses (e.g. Hellmich, 2012: 623; Koehler-Derrick, 2011: 45). But Yemeni discourses take this nebulosity further, essentially characterising AQAP as shape-shifting and ephemeral. Through its multiplicity, it is seen as capable of acting both in opposition to, and in support of, the Yemeni state as it mirrors the factional splits believed to shape Yemen's elite politics. As a product of deep, and sometimes invisible power, it morphs rapidly and unpredictably on the basis of opaque elite politics, both within Yemen and internationally.

In short, we have two incongruent ontologies of AQAP: one that animates counter-terrorism discourses, in which it is a legible (albeit physically illusive) entity, and one underpinning popular Yemeni discourses, in which it is multiple fluid entities morphing and reverberating under the one label. 'Precision' technologies like drones access the knowable, coherent AQAP that is constructed by counter-terrorism discourses. They have little, if any, purchase on the shadowy avenue of elite manipulation and hegemonic overreach that AQAP is so widely understood to represent in Yemen. In fact, they appear to help reproduce it.

Silencing Yemenis. Yemeni views about what AQAP 'really is' and what sustains it are generally classed as the products of the 'many conspiracy-minded Yemenis [who] believe that the gravity of the terrorist threat has been exaggerated' (Time, 2011), or because the muddy intrigues they articulate are a by-product of an 'opaque system of governance and a heavily partisan and polarized press' (for more see Craig, 2012). This may be partly true, but the result is that a more nuanced ontology may be dismissed as 'immediately invalid' upon the discovery of clear evidence that AQAP (or at least some acting in its name) genuinely sought to overthrow the Yemeni regime (e.g. Bonnefoy 2016). My analysis suggests that Yemeni discourses are only invalidated by an intention to overthrow the regime if AQAP is understood as a consistent, rational entity. A less legible ontology of AQAP has no problem incorporating the idea that the group also targets the state actors with whom it collaborates – in fact this multiplicity is part of its nature.

One Yemeni author commented on this general omission in English language commentary about the group:

is so frustrating... many [Westerners] are completely dismissive about the relationship between Saleh (and others in his former regime) with extremist groups. I say it sometimes and people accuse me of being a ‘conspiracy theorist.’ Saleh has a well-documented history of using extremist groups... Most Yemenis believe he [still] works with them, and to dismiss their perception is strikingly arrogant.²⁶

The same author noted that editors at major American media outlets have simply removed sentences that refer to possible connections between Yemeni state actors and al-Qa’ida prior to publication, as though they were brief lapses in an otherwise cogent argument. Through such practices, those living in states targeted by Western counter-terrorism policies are effectively silenced, and their interpretation of the politics that permeate their daily lives rendered ignorant and irrelevant. This silencing has obvious implications for ‘who speaks’ on global security matters, while also erasing alternative intellectual avenues through which to theorise the politics of counter-terrorism.

Despite the erasure of Yemeni beliefs about the regime’s complicity with AQAP, classified documents released by Wikileaks confirm that the US (and its regional allies) had long held similar misgivings (Miller, 2011 cited in Phillips, 2017: 147).²⁷ Concerns about the authenticity of Saleh’s commitment to Western counter-terrorism objectives were most notably raised in February 2006, when 23 of al-Qa’ida’s most senior figures tunneled their way to freedom from a high security prison (Johnsen, 2013: 195). At the time of the jailbreak Western analysts and officials widely suspected that the incident could not have occurred without some form of assistance from the Political Security Organisation (PSO), and that this could have gone all the way to President Saleh himself. One US Embassy cable sent from Sana’a reportedly emphasised: ‘One thing is certain: PSO insiders must have been involved’ (Hosenball 2006). As discussed earlier, funding to the Yemen security apparatus, led by Saleh and his family, increased dramatically from this time, regardless of these suspicions.

Former US Ambassador to Yemen Edmund Hull (2001-2004) noted that even before the prison incident in 2006, the historical relations between some Yemeni political elites and members of al-Qa’ida, including Osama bin Laden, during the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan (1979-89) had been an enduring cause for concern: ‘The FBI and the CIA were always very suspicious of these [historical] ties and were also concerned about officials within the Yemeni government who would have sympathy or obligations or personal relationships [with al-Qa’ida]’ (Hill and Kasinof, 2015 cited in Phillips, 2017: 147). Despite these concerns, the US Administration threw its weight behind the Yemeni government. US officials repeatedly proclaimed it as the only effective vehicle through which to fight AQAP, even though Yemenis were also loudly questioning that very notion, in English, and in the highly accessible platforms noted above. The Saleh government thus remained the sanctioned conduit for hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of counter-terrorism assistance – the majority of which, a source at the Pentagon later admitted, it could no longer account for (Whitlock 2015). This reliance on the Yemeni state is a reflection of the rationalist state-centric ontology that underpins Western counter-terrorism practices, in which states are necessary and inevitable to solving the problem of terrorism. Without states as partners against the terrorists that ostensibly threaten them, terrorism loses a key source of legibility, while counter-terrorism practices risk become most relevant for quelling anxieties about the governability of terrorism.

To many Yemenis, Western (particularly American) support for Yemeni state actors marginalised those best placed to contest al-Qa’ida: the majority of the population who believed at least some of its power to be an elite fabrication. Meanwhile, it emboldened state actors in whose interests it was to maintain the threat posed by AQAP, exacerbating the very threat that Western counter-terrorism discourses claimed to diminish. The fact that America’s own intelligence had consistently highlighted the likelihood of collusion between the Saleh regime and AQAP, while the US government remained at pains to offer that same regime inordinate support to fight AQAP, highlights a general inability to think beyond states as the answer to problems of insecurity. Moreover, it illustrates the consequences of an ontology that implicitly requires objects to fit into legible categories, such as ‘state’ or ‘non-state,’ but cannot process those that do not.

Conclusion. Charting the precise details of AQAP’s structure and numerical strength poses obvious epistemological challenges because of the paucity of verifiable evidence. This article has suggested, however, that there is an even more fundamental, and less explored, challenge at stake. This challenge is ontological: what do Yemenis – the people

that Western counter-terrorism discourses deem critical to AQAP's survival – believe that group to consist of? How do Yemenis define AQAP? How do their discourses suggest that the group emerged and has since been sustained? The crude assumption that people either support or oppose al-Qa'ida is incapable of processing the intense debates over the nature of what even exists for them to support or oppose. Individuals affiliated with AQAP can, of course, be successfully destroyed with lethal force, but doing so may ultimately have little bearing on the ability of the group to endure because its name is also used as shorthand for the way that Yemenis are silenced and marginalised by domestic and global power inequalities. It serves as an allegory of opaque and unaccountable power, the validity of which is sustained in part because it cannot be definitively refuted.

Similar discourses about violent jihadi groups to those analysed here can be found in states like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Algeria, where it is also widely believed that these groups are embedded in the state and its partnerships with Northern states, in complex ways (e.g. Akhtar and Ahmed, 2015; Lister 2016, Chapter 3; Keenan, 2007). As with the Yemeni case, it is within these perceptions that the rationalist ontology of counter-terrorism discourses is destabilised.

This piece has suggested that within Yemeni discourses about AQAP, there is no baseline conception of the group's fundamental nature. It is not consistently a violent non-state actor or a simple proxy of state power. It is both at the same time, and draws power from the inconsistency of these positions, which amplifies its perceived ability to dispense violence with plausible deniability, possibly at the behest of competing centres of power within and beyond the Yemeni state. Moreover, this power was materially reinforced by Western governments, which saw – or, at least, acted as if they saw – in the Yemeni state an entity that would inevitably fight violent non-state actors that call for its destruction. In Yemeni discourses this demonstrates the self-perpetuating nature of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

This piece has argued that AQAP consists of apparently mutually exclusive entities that, nevertheless, coexist meaning that it cannot be defeated on the assumption that it is a singular or consistent thing. This goes further than to say that there are simply different perspectives on AQAP, which is too obvious to warrant dissection. Rather, AQAP is

many different things because it is seen and acted upon as many different things (Law and Singleton, 2005: 342). To many Yemenis, there are al-Qa'idās, and these al-Qa'idās can contradict and oppose one another. This has limited its exposure to kinetic force, as the material aspects of AQAP that can be targeted in this way constitute only part of its overall being. Entities labelled as AQAP have behaved as violent challengers to *and* supporters of the Yemeni state apparatus; as violent challengers to Western interests *and* facilitators of Western imperial power in the Middle East; and as agents of one local elite *and* that local elite's rival. AQAP's evolution is interwoven with widespread beliefs that it was always less powerful than Western counter-terrorism discourses purported it to be – and that this gave it power because it justified the assistance being provided to state actors that benefited from AQAP's survival. Truly acknowledging the limits of the rational legible ontology of counter-terrorism practices opens the door to exploring the means by which such practices generate and reproduce the threats they purport to destroy.

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¹ Figure derived from the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* database, though cannot be considered definitive due to the program's secrecy.

² While AQAP has continued to gain ground since this time, it is analytically neater to focus on a period where US counter-terrorism practices can be seen in relative isolation from other forms of military intervention.

³ I consider academic work that problematizes terrorism (such as the strategic terrorism studies literature) to share this ontology. Stampnitzky (2013: 158) points out that terrorist organisations were not always conceptualized by experts as rational actors, noting also (p.19) that there is an ongoing tension over whether terrorists can be considered morally rational.

⁴ I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in Yemen over a four-year period between 2004 and 2008, with two short visits in 2012 and 2013.

⁵ *Qat* is a mild stimulant that is chewed and then stored in the cheek.

⁶ Extra-judicial killings by drone strikes are often referred to in counter-terrorism discourses as "precise" and "surgical."

⁷ The debate over whether the deeper goal of counter-terrorism is to secure national identity, enhance the state's security apparatus, or even to perpetuate terrorism, is beyond the scope of this piece. For discussion see Jarvis and Lister (2014).

⁸ Jacob Shapiro (2013: 21) writes that terrorist groups should be treated "as the intendedly rational organizations they so clearly are." He also notes (2013: 11) that "The most common method of analyzing terrorist organizations in policy documents is to treat them as unitary rational actors." Shapiro was a fellow in the *Harmony Project* discussed below.

⁹ Stampnitzki (2013: 203) makes the opposite point regarding legibility: "Counterterrorism in recent years has not relied upon governing the problem by making it legible. Rather than rely upon the creation of knowledge about terrorism, the dominant approach has rejected the very possibility of knowing terrorists." However, Stampnitzki is discussing the ongoing reluctance to talk to terrorists as this may be seen to rationalize

their ideology. I suggest that this is not the only way that terrorist groups become more legible and am using the term as James Scott did to refer to the simplification of their existence to an administratively convenient format (1998: 3).

¹⁰ For examples relating to specifically AQAP see Farrall (2011); Johnsen (2012); Gunaratna and Oreg (2015: 120-150). For more general work, see Sageman (2004); Byman (2012).

¹¹ Notable examples include: the Global Terrorism Database; BAAD Terrorist Group Lethality Set; ITERATE: International Terrorism Attributes of Terrorist Events; Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS); Profiles of Perpetrators of Terrorism in the United States (PPT-US); Worldwide Incidents Tracking System; the John Jay & ARTIS Transnational Terrorism Database; and the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents. See also Stanford University's *Mapping Militant Organizations* Project.

¹² Jerrett and al-Haddar (2016) is a noteworthy exception.

¹³ See for example, Yafi'a News 2015 (in Arabic), in which the author suggests: "al-Qa'ida has become al-Qa'idās." See also, the (posthumously published) interview with the well-known Yemeni journalist, Abdul-Kareem al-Khaiwani (2016: 8-9, in Arabic).

¹⁴ Interview with source close to President Saleh, other details of which cannot be given to maintain anonymity. Informal conversations with others close to him contained similar accusations.

¹⁵ Quotes are from my research diary, March 2008.

¹⁶ For photograph see Naseh News (2011). The quote in the text above is my translation of the Arabic on the banner (*raheel al-nidhaam=raheel al-Qa'ida*) rather than the English translation written underneath, which was 'step down the regime = step down al-Qaeda'.

¹⁷ The quotations in this and the following paragraph draw from Phillips (2017).

¹⁸ This interview was posthumously published in *al-Masar Newspaper* 2016.

¹⁹ See @tameh0 (in Arabic). For English language commentary on his Tweets see al-Arashi (2013). This paragraph draws from material presented in Phillips (2017: 149).

²⁰ See, for example, the various Tweets from @tameh0 on December 13, 2013.

²¹ See @tameh0, 27 December 2013.

²² Tameh made these allegations throughout December 13, 2013, in Tweets that begin with the word "classified."

²³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, some Yemenis allege that members of the Houthis and AQAP collaborate at times.

²⁴ This is based on several informal and random conversations with people in the town, and in Sana'a when I showed people photos of the slogans (Kowkaban and Sana'a: July 2012).

²⁵ The precise date on which the program ceased is unclear, and some place it a year or so earlier.

²⁶ Personal communication with Yemeni author, 29 May 2016 (cited in Phillips 2017: 151), who was offering a general view and was not referring to any specific writers.

²⁷ The United Nations Security Council reached a similar conclusion (2015: 19-20), as did the US commander of Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) Forward (SOC FWD) in Yemen from 2010-2012, cited in Dodwell and Ness (2015).