Research Debrief: Status of the Abu al-Abbas Group in Taiz

Efforts to stabilise the city of Taiz remain fluid despite improved security in 2018 and a drive by the Saudi-supported internationally recognized government to integrate the Salafist Abu al-Abbas group into the armed forces. The Abu al-Abbas group, named after its leader Adil Abduh Fari Uthman al-Dhubhani, known as Abu al-Abbas, is adept at handling pressure. The group claimed to have withdrawn from most of Taiz but maintains a strategic presence in the city. Abu al-Abbas is open to alliances with any groups opposing the Houthis, regardless of their political ideology. Abu al-Abbas is reaping benefits of allying with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Saudi-backed government without jeopardising links with Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP is present in Taiz with individual fighters; their hold is currently shrinking, however, as they withdraw to rural areas.

Security Situation
Civic figures and security personal in Taiz say security threats remain significant. They report clashes between armed groups and instances of murder and theft, often committed by prison escapees and members of the security forces. However, efforts by the Governor’s Office to re-establish rule of law have improved security. According to interviews with security officials conducted between October and December 2018, increased material and financial support to the police, as well as political support from the governor, have helped the police resume the solving of crimes and increase security in Taiz.¹

The power rivalry between fighters belonging to the Islah-party and the Abu al-Abbas group remain a cause of instability in Taiz. Attempts by the Taiz Governor’s Office to minimize threats arising from the two groups have not reduced the tension. A police commander who heads a police station in Taiz said his main security concerns revolve around the presence of AQAP elements and Salafi groups led by Abu al-Abbas, and the arbitrary behaviour of the Islah-party.² The police commander chairs a reconciliation committee between Abu al-Abbas and Islah-party.

Army Integration
In 2016, fighters belonging to several groups in Taiz were integrated into the armed forces of the internationally-recognized government. Resistance groups had formed in Taiz in the context of

¹ In a nationwide survey conducted by YPC in September 2017 with a random sample of 4000, 38% of the respondents based in Taiz said that the “police/security authorities” are the first to deal with a problem or security incident (MoE = 4.38%).
² Interview with head of police station in Taiz conducted by YPC on Oct 28, 2018.
the Houthi’s incursion in 2014/2015. The fighters affiliated with Abu al-Abbas were designated as part of the 35th Yemeni Army Brigade and became nominally under the command of Brigadier General Adnan al-Hamadi.

In an interview with YPC, a commander in the 35th brigade said many of the newly integrated soldiers do not understand the function of the army as a pillar of public order: “We should open a training centre to coach army members on self-control and discipline, as well as on how to deal with citizens.” The commander said that training already provided to the ex-militia fighters contributed to improvement in security in Taiz. He attributed the improvement in security to the deployment of army troops on fronts outside of the city. Among the troops were (ex-) militia from Taiz. However, militia members officially under the army banner have continued to act independently from the formal military structure.

There were rumours that the UAE, Abu al-Abbas’ closest external supporter, seek to incorporate Taiz into its Security Belt structure with the help of its local ally. These plans are difficult to implement as anti-Houthi forces in Taiz position themselves in favour of supporting the rule of law and Yemeni state institutions, rather than supporting the plans of an external actor. If the UAE was successful in incorporating Abu al-Abbas into the Security Belt, it would render Abu al-Abbas group unlikely to completely subjugate itself under the central command of the armed forces.

**Token Withdrawal**

In April 2018, the Supreme Security Committee, headed by the Taiz governor, sought to increase its control of the city by ordering all militias to hand over government buildings. The release order prompted clashes in Taiz between Abu al-Abbas fighters and Islah. Between April and August 2018 militiamen affiliated with Abu al-Abbas group handed over buildings in Taiz to the internationally-recognized government. Later in August, Abu al-Abbas announced that his forces would withdraw from Taiz.

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3 Interview with official of 35th brigade conducted in Taiz on Nov 18, 2018.
Abu al-Abbas requested safe passage for his militia and their families and promised to hand over his group’s positions to the government. Despite repeated announcements promising to withdraw from Taiz, the Abu al-Abbas group have had a continuous presence in Taiz, with Abu al-Abbas fighters appearing whenever clashes erupt. The continuous presence of Islah-affiliated militias serves as justification for Abu al-Abbas to remain in the city.

In a November 2018 interview, an Abu al-Abbas militia commander said three of the police stations the group had handed over to the government are under the command of police chiefs affiliated with Abu al-Abbas. The commander said the only building the group still controls directly is the Hayel Saeed compound. The compound mainly comprises a school built by the Hayel Saeed Group of Companies. Abu al-Abbas troops use the school as their headquarters. One classroom is being used as a prison for members of Abu al-Abbas who had committed what the group regards as violations.

Speculation of Leadership Change
Rumors surfaced in December/January 2019 that Abu al-Abbas has been replaced as leader of the group. If this turns out to be true, we assess this change to be superficial and to be understood on the background of al-Abbas’ designation as terrorist by the US treasury. Abu al-Abbas’s replacement is rumored to be Sheikh Momen al-Mikhafi, who was named by Abu al-Abbas as deputy commander in September 2018. The two men have been close allies since their days in Dammaj, the Salafi learning institute in Saada. Both were brought to Taiz in 2014 as part of a conflict resolution proposal made by the government headed by President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi after tension between Salafis and the Houthis escalated. However, leadership orders are executed in the name of Abu al-Abbas by an individual referred to as Abu Walid. Abu al-Abbas is expected by some circles in Taiz to make a television appearance soon to take a

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8. Interview with a 35th Brigade official conducted in Taiz on Nov 18, 2018. The police stations affiliated with Abu al-Abbas include the stations Bab Musa, al-Bab al-Kabeer and Sinah. The following buildings have been handed over to the government according to the interview: Fourth Checkpoint; Political Security Office; al-Kahera Castle; Faculty of Arts; Security Department; al-Jumhouria Newspaper; Finance Office; al-Jahmala Police Station; al-Jumhouri Hospital; al-Jumhouri Police Station; al-Hajar Checkpoint; Military Supply building; Salah Post Office; Military Hospital; Main Post Office; Facilities in the Ring Road; Local Water Corporation; Governorate Administrative Complex; Criminal Investigation Bureau; Passport Service building; Traffic Department; al-Okhowwah Hotel; al-Thawrah Hospital; Medical Training Institute; Military Police; Al Thulaya School; and the 26 September School.
9. An observation made by the YPC researcher during the interview at the school in November 2018.
position with regards to the speculations on the leadership changes. Attempts on behalf of YPC to verify the speculations failed and exposed YPC researchers to security risks.

**Relationship with al-Qaeda**

Abu al-Abbas, maintains a relationship with AQAP, although the Abu al-Abbas group is not part of the known AQAP command structure. In the context of the civil war in Taiz, Abu al-Abbas handed over some positions his group held to AQAP. Among them was the Finance Ministry’s branch in Taiz, and the al-Jahmaliya police station. Prominent members of AQAP, such as Hareth al-Ezi, have been sighted on the side of Abu al-Abbas. However, there are significant ideological differences between the Abu al-Abbas group and AQAP. Most importantly the differences regard the recognition by Abu al-Abbas of President Hadi’s authority, or in Islamic terms, meaning that he regards Hadi as “wali al-amr,” or holder of authority. AQAP regards the internationally recognized government as “kafireen”, or heretics. In October 2017, the US treasury department designated Abu al-Abbas on the terrorist list for his links to al-Qaeda.