

“Their Fate is Tied to Ours”: Assessing AQAP Governance and Implications for Security in Yemen

By Joana Cook



Global attention has for many years now been fixated on Islamic State and their governance project in Syria and Iraq. Yet, this was not the first instance of terrorist governance, nor is it likely to be the last.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen proved to be the first successful branch of al-Qaeda to implement extensive governance from 2011, yet remains an overlooked case.

AQAP also evolved their governance model across numerous years and cases - reigning in more severe hudud punishment, in favour of a more 'hearts and minds'-based approach.

Working through local councils to implement governance on its behalf, it also portrayed itself as a defender of the city of Mukalla, framing its evolving public image through rebranding efforts and local actors.

The governance work conducted by AQAP was often cited to be faster, more effective, and less corrupt than government efforts, gaining support for the group via these public goods over that of its ideology.

AQAP has also been able to consistently exploit local grievances to gain support.

These governance projects often came to an end through a combination of a lack of public support, perceptions of corruption, increasing violent punishments, and government-led campaigns.

For actors who want to counter AQAP resurgence in the future, the provision of key human security and social goods such as effective justice institutions; security; employment; and above all effective and accountable governance, are crucial to deter broad-based support for actors who seek to exploit such gaps.

Lessons learned from Yemen can inform other locations at risk from, or recovering from, terrorist governance.