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Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Yemen

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Question

What are the different groups involved in violent extremism and terrorism in Yemen? What are the structural drivers/enabling factors of violent extremism (e.g. poverty, unemployment, weak governance, state sponsorship, etc.)? What is the (un)appeal of violent extremism and violent extremist groups?

Contents

1. Overview

In November 2011, after months of protests for the president of Yemen to resign, Ali Abdullah Saleh signed over power to his deputy, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, who took over power in February 2012. However, with Hadi in power the change the public sought did not come quick enough and the Houthis,[1] who champion Yemen's Zaidi Shiite Muslim minority, took advantage of the political instability to take control of the Saada province and its neighbouring areas in the north. In September 2014 the Houthis moved into Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and by January 2015 they had surrounded the royal palace. Hadi managed to escape, and by March 2015 the Houthis were attempting to take control of the entire country, which is when the air campaign led by Saudi Arabia against the Houthis joined the government and other local actors fight on the ground with the aim of putting Hadi back in power and preventing what they saw as Iranian influence in the region. It is under this chaos that the violent extremist groups have managed to grow in prominence in Yemen, taking advantage of the political turmoil and the international focus on the Houthis to carve out their own space in the country.

This rapid review synthesises findings from rigorous academic, practitioner, and policy references, focusing on research produced after 2014 and the most recent escalation of conflict in Yemen, in order to examine the drivers behind, and the (un)appeal of, violent extremism in the country. As a conflict site, Yemen has been much under reported and researched and as a result there are limited studies on the various dynamics of violent extremism in Yemen. Consequently, this report will also point to research gaps and highlight areas where further research on violent extremism in Yemen is needed.

The rise of violent extremism is closely tied to the civil war dynamics, rather than any desire from the population for a global jihad. Extremist groups have taken advantage of political grievances, regional inequality, and the anger from the loss of lives from either Houthis or air raids to forge a space to operate. Through offering services, a chance for revenge, and/or a means to carry out sectarian attacks they have gained supporters and recruits. Religion and a desire to act against the West are not the main drivers of extremism in Yemen. Rather, as this report will highlight, it is in the history of bad governance and the civil war that motivations for supporting and joining extremist groups should be sought.

Key findings are as follows:

- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) first gained control of territory in 2011 when it took advantage of political chaos; it once again managed to take control of territory following the current civil war, which began in early 2015.
- AQAP's aim is to create a number of smaller emirates, which will eventually link to form a caliphate when they deem the time is right.
- AQAP is extremely well financed and has carried out a number of successful bank raids, kidnappings, as well as receiving finances from taxes through controlling ports and from smuggling.

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[1] The Houthis, or Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), began as a theological movement in Yemen in the 1990s and represent the Shiite Zayidi community in Yemen. Since 2004 they have intermittently been involved in conflict with the government over power division and the constitutional status of their stronghold the Saada Province.

- Islamic State (IS) operations in Yemen are currently fairly minimal and it does not share the same support as AQAP, as IS' tactics of mass killings and mosque bombings are at odds with societal and tribal norms.

- The civil war against the Houthis has opened up a vacuum for extremist groups to operate in, as not only are the Houthis the main focus of the government and coalition forces, but the government and coalition have also often made alliances with extremist groups in the fight against the Houthis.

- Bad governance and instability have allowed extremist movements to embed politically and exploit the situation to gain support; AQAP has taken particular advantage of this by providing services in previously marginalised areas.

- The perception of the population towards governance, levels of corruption, and the ability of the government to deliver services and security is extremely low, thus creating dynamics favourable to the rise of extremism.

- Sectarianism has increased with the onset of the civil war, particularly as the Houthis make inroads into territories where Sunnis live. Extremist groups are able to take advantage of this increase in sectarianism and offer the Sunni population a means to take revenge or protect territory.

- The proxy nature of the conflict with Saudi-Iranian competition in the Gulf being played out in Yemen, further amplifies the sectarian nature of the war and focuses the battle on a Sunni versus Shiite narrative, which in turn is used by extremists to gain supporters and justify violence.

- Poverty in Yemen is a serious issue and there are large regional disparities in poverty levels, thus creating marginalised communities. The connection between poverty and marginalisation are a key contributing factor to the rise of AQAP in Yemen.

- The 'hard' countering violent extremism (CVE) actions carried out by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and United States mainly against AQAP often negatively impact on the population, which in turn is used by AQAP for propaganda and recruitment purposes.

- The majority of the population does not share the ideologies of the extremist groups; motivations for supporting and joining these groups is rather found in the history of bad governance and the dynamics of the civil war.

- Although the tribes do not necessarily share the ideologies of the extremist groups, their allegiance with groups such as AQAP has been a source of legitimacy and recruits.

- Salifism in Yemen does not have a history of extremism, rather it was previously a factor in encouraging loyalty to the government; however, the dynamics of the civil war has pushed the support of the government more and more towards violence.

Research Gaps
➢ The links between AQAP and the Salafi groups, and IS and the Salafi groups, as well as the level of cooperation between them, is understudied.
➢ There is little information on the leadership and operations of IS in Yemen and considering that has been highlighted that IS could start moving its core operations out of Iraq and Syria, this is a much under researched topic.
➢ Likewise, the finances of IS in Yemen are not clear, there is a lack of information as to whether it is reliant on IS in Iraq and Syria (and if so, how does it transfer the funds), or whether it funds itself.
➢ The operations of the various Salafi groups is under researched and their existence within the army and resistance groups makes understanding them important for the post-conflict stage, as unlike AQAP and IS, they will likely remain within the official security system.
➢ The links between the extremist groups and the political parties needs to be further researched, as this will be important in any political settlement to the conflict.
➢ There is very little research focusing on female involvement in violent extremism.
➢ The research carried out by the Yemen Polling Center is very important for gauging the population's perception on a number of issues. However, they do not assess the population's perception on positive contributions by the extremist groups, which is important in order to counter the rise of extremism in Yemen.
➢ There is a lack of research on the dynamics of areas where AQAP has been pushed out. It is important to understand the post-AQAP governance in order to adequately gauge whether the issues responsible for its rise are being addressed.
➢ The Yemen Polling Center's research clearly demonstrates the importance of the tribes to Yemeni Society, however there is a lack of research into the role they can play against AQAP in Yemen, as the tribes did against AQ in Iraq between 2005 and 2010.
➢ Although the impact of hard CVE is often mentioned, there is not enough focused research on the role it plays in the rise of extremist groups in Yemen.
➢ The Rand Corporation points to there being a conflation between political violence and political activism, but does not study this further. Further research is needed to firstly confirm whether this is true, and secondly, if it is true, to examine how the two can be separated in a CVE programme.
➢ There is limited research on successful or unsuccessful CVE programmes in Yemen, and more research is necessary to identify potential areas for success, as well as to identify past mistakes.

2. Actors

This section examines the key actors involved in violent extremism in the south and east of Yemen in order to give a clearer understanding of their rise before examining the drivers of violent extremism in Yemen.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Background

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in 2009 after the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al Qaeda merged following the counterterrorism efforts of Saudi Arabia, which drove the Saudi branch across the border into Yemen (Stanford University, 2017). The earlier jihadist organisations which AQAP originate from consisted of a number of fighters who returned from Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s after fighting the Soviets. Amongst these fighters were a number of foreign jihadists, including Osama bin Laden, who pushed for a central role for Yemen in the global jihad. These groups were used by the Saleh regime to first fight the Soviet-backed government of South Yemen and then against secessionists in the south (Council on Foreign Relations, 2015). AQAP is currently led by Qasim al-Raymi who took over in June 2015 following the death of Nasir al-Wuhayshi in a US drone strike. Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP's chief bomb maker, is also crucial to the organisation's operations (Counter Extremism Project, 2016).

In 2011, AQAP created a parallel group, Ansar al-Sharia (AAS; Supporters of Islamic Law), to widen its domestic appeal and separate the local group from its international brand, which many Yemenis viewed as an instrument of the regime (International Crisis Group, 2017). Towards the end of Yemen's President Saleh's reign AQAP took advantage of the fractured political scene by establishing an insurgency in southern Yemen gaining direct control of territory in 2011. However, when Saleh was removed and replaced by transitional president Hadi in early 2012, AQAP lost control of the territory. Since civil war erupted in February and March of 2015, AQAP has used the political vacuum to develop its own pseudo-state in the southern region. AQAP has also been strengthened by the fact that Western intelligence forces have withdrawn from the country over safety concerns and Yemeni and Saudi forces have mainly focused on Houthi rebels, thus giving AQAP more space to function (Counter Extremism Project, 2016).

Ideology and Goals

AQAP is widely believed to be the Al Qaeda affiliate most ideologically similar to Al Qaeda's core. AQAP's goal is to establish an Islamic Caliphate and implement Sharia law and expel Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula. In order to achieve these goals AQAP follows a violent interpretation of jihad. AQAP's ideology and practices also follow Al Qaeda's wider aim of working towards global Islamist domination (Counter Extremism Project, 2016). Beginning with the creation of its affiliate Ansar al-Sharia, AQAP has focused on working within local norms, forging alliances with Sunni allies, and assimilating into militias. AQAP presents itself to the local population as being part of a wider Sunni front against Houthi expansion. There is the aim of creating territorial control through local backing with the purpose of creating multiple emirates that would eventually lead to the creation of a caliphate (International Crisis Group, 2017). This is part of Al Qaeda eventual goal to establish a global caliphate, with Yemen and Iraq seen as building blocks towards its establishment (USIP, 2016).

Income

AQAP has managed to take advantage of the political chaos in Yemen to make considerable financial gains, which in turn have aided its progress as an organisation. They firmly established themselves as part of the wartime political economy, which includes smuggling, kidnapping, robberies, and taxes. For instance, AQAP looted the Mukalla bank, in April-May 2015, of a figure reported to exceed $111 million. It also imposed import levies at the Mukalla and Ash-Shihr seaports, and has even been involved in smuggling fuel and goods to the Houthi forces. AQAP managed to gain a significant war chest through its control of the Mukalla port, and although they lost control of it in April 2016, the funds gained should last them some time. AQAP's accumulated revenues enhance its ability to purchase military hardware and attract recruits; it also allows it to offer salaries significantly higher than the government (International Crisis Group, 2017). AQAP has long used hostages as a way of extracting income and hostage taking is said to have significantly contributed to the running of the organisation in the periods before it managed to gain control of ports and carry out raids of large banks (Counter Extremism Project, 2016). According to the International Crisis Group (2017), AQAP also manages to gain funds and arms through their links to the forces fighting the Houthis on the ground.

Strength

The US State Department estimated in 2015 that AQAP's forces numbered approximately 4,000 fighters. The focus on defeating the Houthi forces has greatly benefited AQAP, allowing them to control territory for long periods of time, which in turn has allowed them to gain weapons, funds, and recruits (International Crisis Group, 2017).

AQAP's primary stronghold is located in the al-Mahfad area of the Abyan Province in southern Yemen where most of their training camps are based. However, they also have training camps in the governorates of Shabwa, Hadramawt, and Marib. Due to civil war in Yemen many of the security forces are fighting against the Houthi's in the north. This has opened up a vacuum for AQAP to operate in the south. Through providing security and public services to the local population AQAP have managed to gain some form of legitimacy. Their modus operandi is to gain the trust of the community through providing them with the missing services and infrastructure, rather than forcing them into submission like IS has done in Iraq and Syria (Counter Extremism Project, 2016).

AQAP's control of territory is changing daily (mainly between them and the government), however the following three maps from February, March, and June 2017 respectively give a better understanding of AQAP's presence in Yemen.

Figure 1: AQAP's control of territory in February 2017
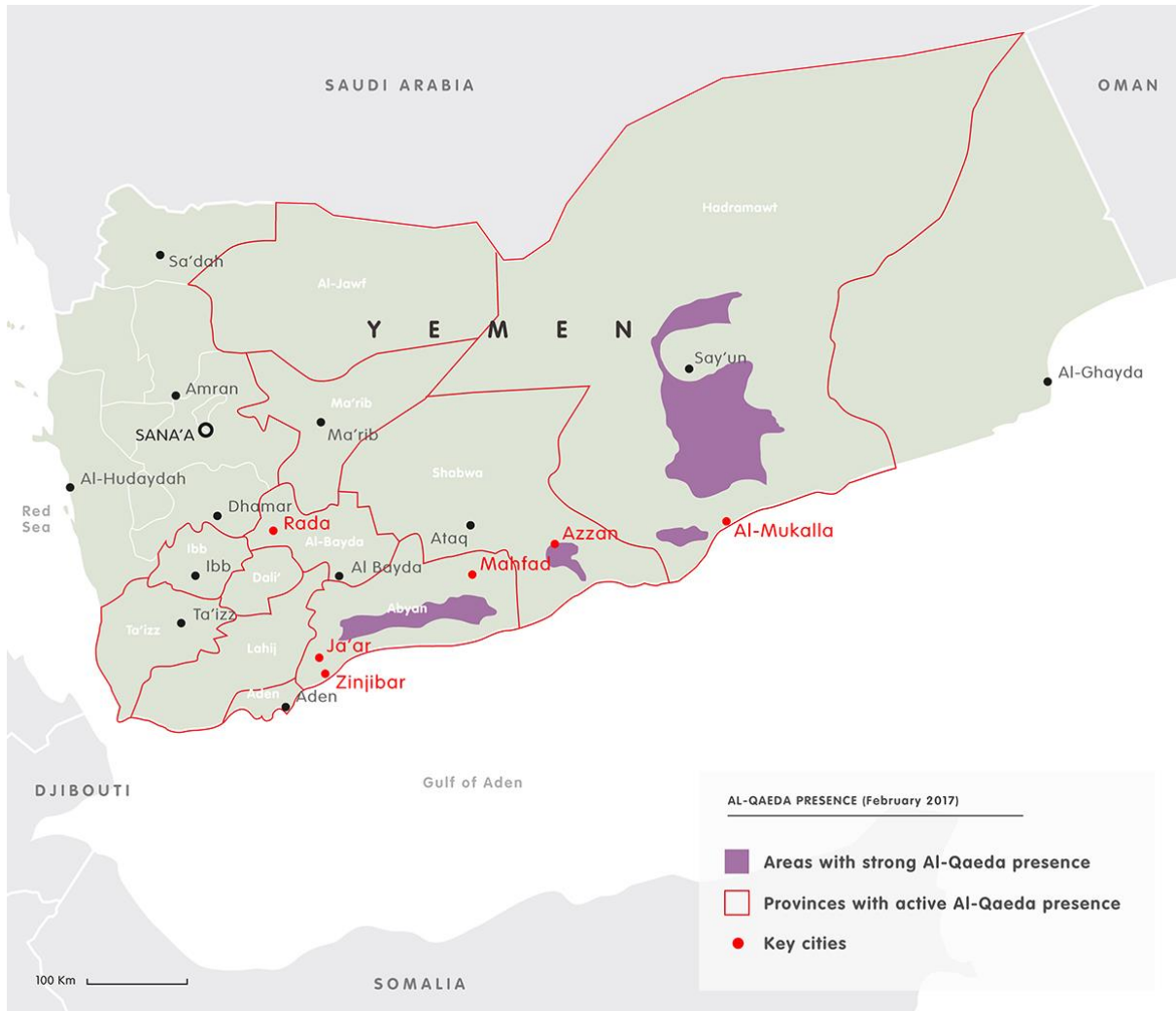
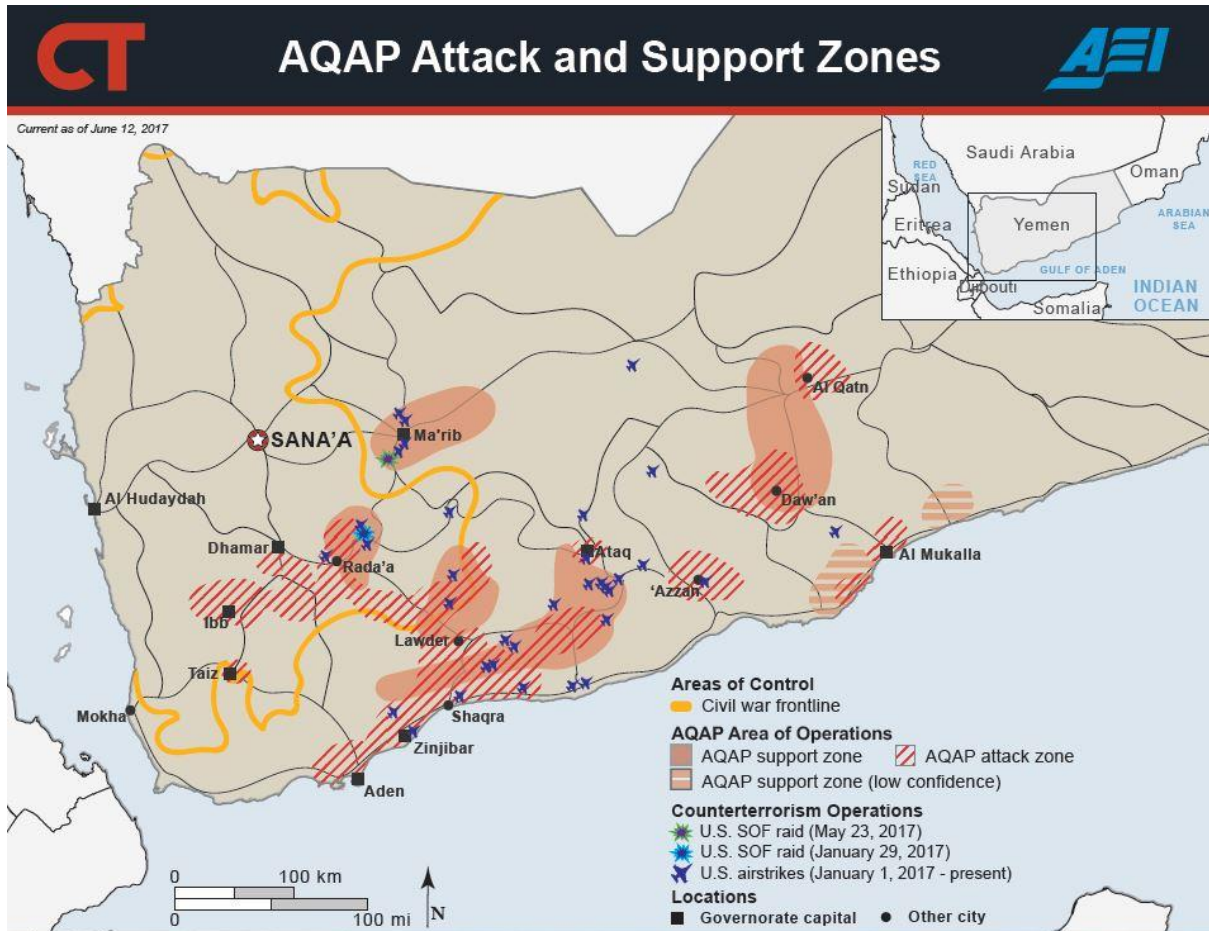Source: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017

Figure 2: Control of territory in Yemen in March 2017
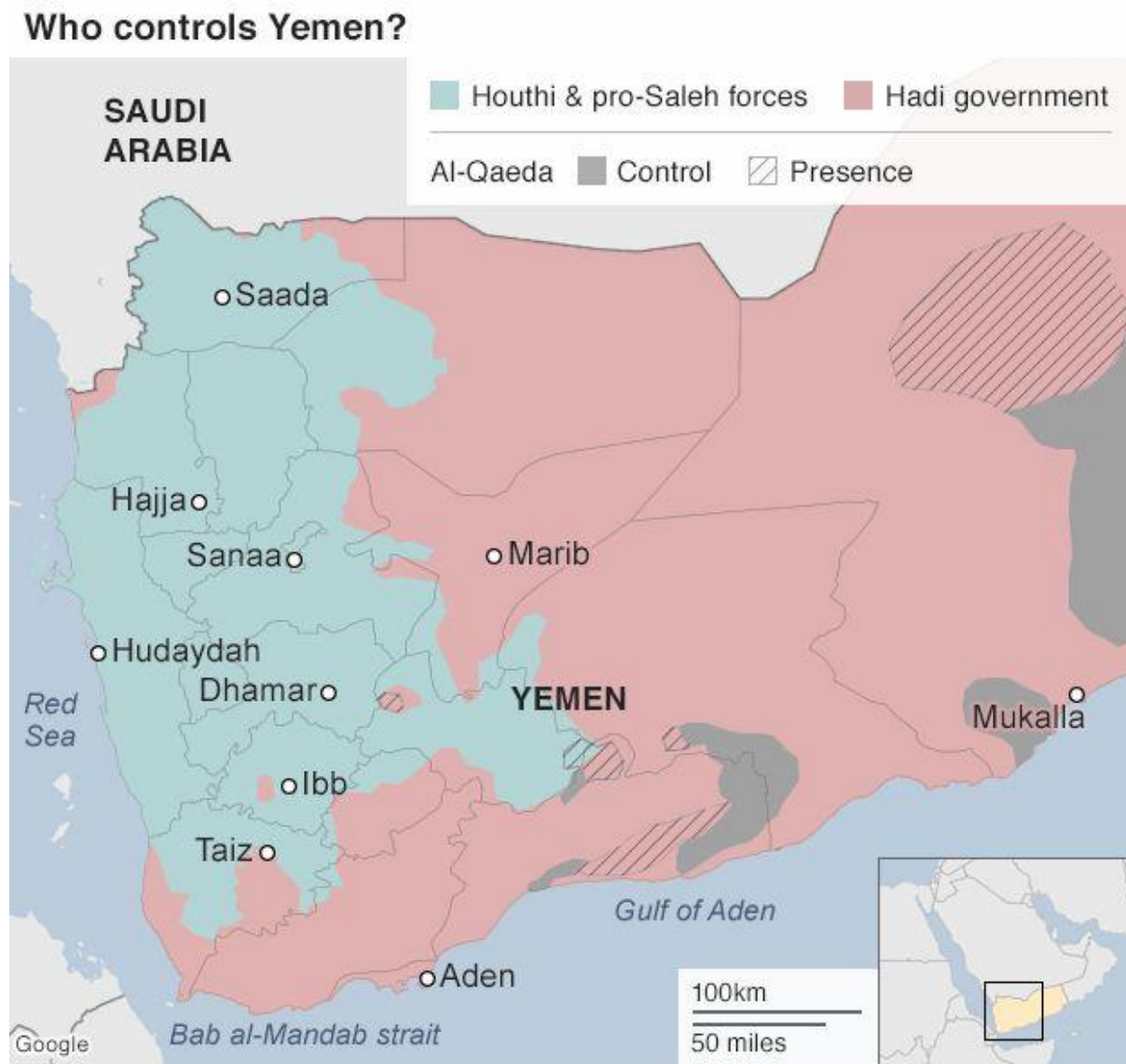
Source: BBC, 2017

Figure 3: AQAP's control of territory in June 2017

Source: Farrukh, 2017

Relationship with other groups

The Islamic State (IS)[2] is seen as direct competition to AQAP and its leaders have publicly criticised IS, denouncing its attacks on mosques. However, they have praised attacks by those claiming to act on IS's behalf in the West. Currently both groups are competing for the same supporters and recruits, rather than collaborating in any way. AQAP has links with the Salafi groups, however the workings of these relationships are understudied (International Crisis Group, 2017).

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[2] Although referred to as the Islamic State in this report, this term only came into being after a caliphate was declared on 29 June 2014 and they were formerly known, and are often still referred to, as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). They are also often referred to as Daesh, which is based on the Arabic acronym of their name and has negative connotations.

Islamic State (IS)

Background

IS' presence in Yemen was first announced in November 2014 when a group of fighters proclaimed their allegiance to IS' leader al-Baghdadi in an online audio recording, later the same month the IS Yemen affiliate was acknowledged by al-Baghdadi himself. IS has gone on to establish a presence in a number of Sunni-dominated areas in the governorates of Aden, Hadramawt, Sanaa, Taizz, Lahij, Shabwah, and al-Bayda. At the time of their arrival there was said to be an internal battle amongst the leadership of AQAP, which they hoped to take advantage of to gain support. Little is known about the leadership of IS in Yemen, however the most well-known leader is Nashwan al-Adeni (Kuoti, 2016).

Ideology and Goals

The ideologies of IS in Yemen follow that of IS itself in aiming to build a global caliphate and mobilise Muslims to engage in jihad against unbelievers in the West and alleged apostate states in the Muslim world. Yemen is of strategic importance to IS due to its border with Saudi Arabia, which is of religious significance for the group (Kuoti, 2016). However, they do not share the same level of support as AQAP, as IS' tactics of mass killings and mosque bombings are at odds with societal and tribal norms. Correspondingly, IS in Yemen has faced some difficulties with internal mutinies and over 100 members have publicly left the group claiming it was violating Sharia in Yemen (International Crisis Group, 2017). IS' vision in Yemen is for the Aden–Abyan Province to serve as its Yemeni capital (Arrabyee, 2016).

Currently IS' tactics in Yemen revolve around causing as much violent havoc as possible and they have used targeted assassinations, suicide attacks, and improvised explosive devices to reach this goal. IS' attacks have mainly focused on the Yemeni security forces, however they have also targeted a number of Houthi mosques. Unlike AQAP, IS does not currently attempt to gain and maintain control of territory Yemen (Kuoti, 2016).

Income

There is very little written on the income of IS in Yemen, although as it does not hold territory or provide services its operational costs would be minimal. Moreover, IS is well financed through its operations in Iraq and Syria.

Strength

Unlike AQAP, IS in Yemen does not attempt to provide the local population with services and also criticises AQAP for focusing on soft power rather than on global jihad (Kuoti, 2016). IS in Yemen is seen as far more brutal than AQAP and as a result they have been more successful in areas driven by sectarianism, such as the southern port city of Aden. Many of IS' members have experience in Syria and Iraq and they use the same strategy of embedded networks of informants and local propagandists. IS routinely uses suicide bombings at military recruitment centres and mass gatherings of soldiers collecting salaries (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Although IS does not control territory in Yemen, it does operate training camps in areas in the south (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). IS has also been gaining support in Houthi-controlled areas in the northwest, as Salafi groups turn to them following defeat at the hands of the Houthis (Arrabyee, 2016).

Like AQAP, IS has used the chaos of the battle between the government/coalition forces and the Houthis to increase its operations in Yemen. Correspondingly, as IS loses territory in Iraq and Syria, it is likely that more of its operations will move to countries like Yemen where the dynamics make it easier to operate (Kuoti, 2016). However, the maps below demonstrate that IS' operations in Yemen decreased in 2016 when compared to 2015.[3]
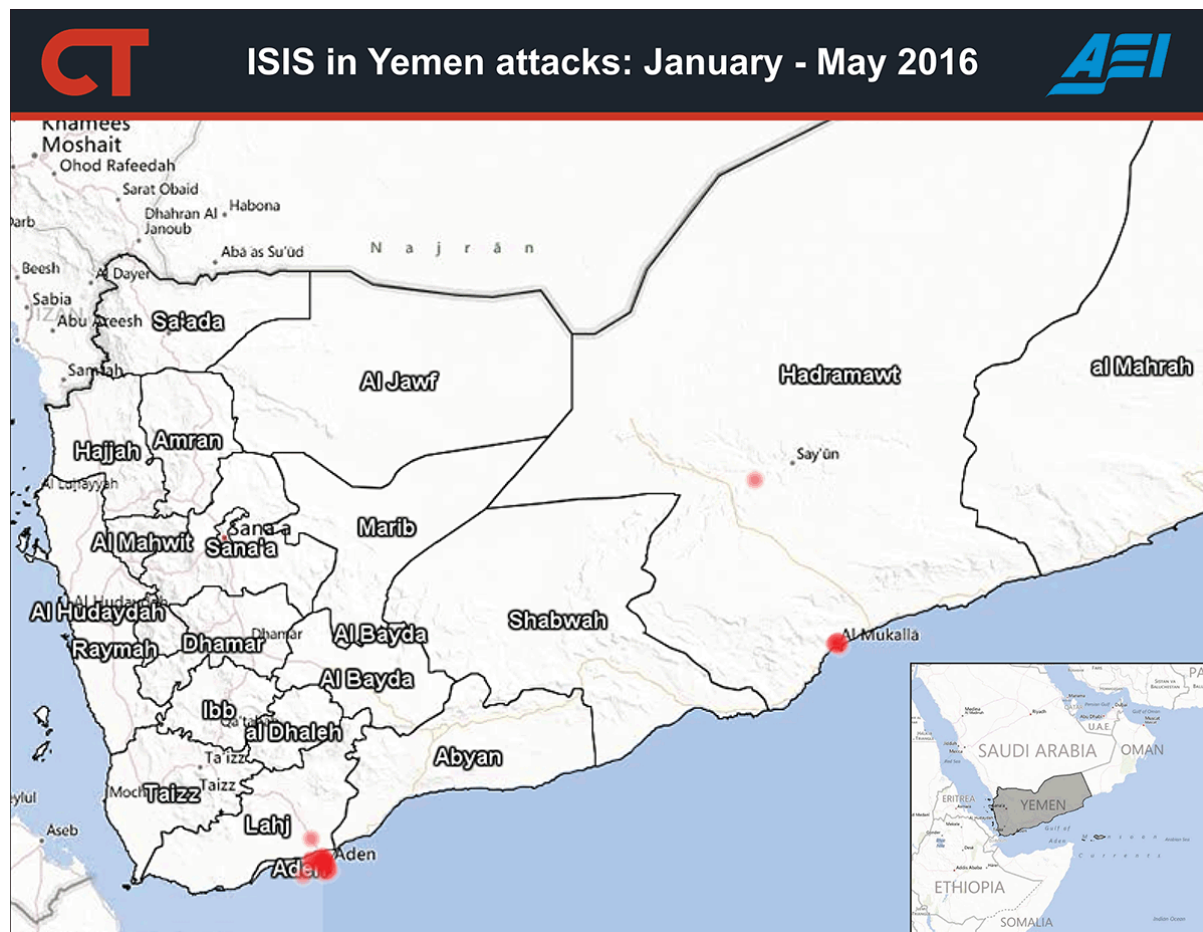
Figure 4: IS attacks in Yemen between March and December 2015
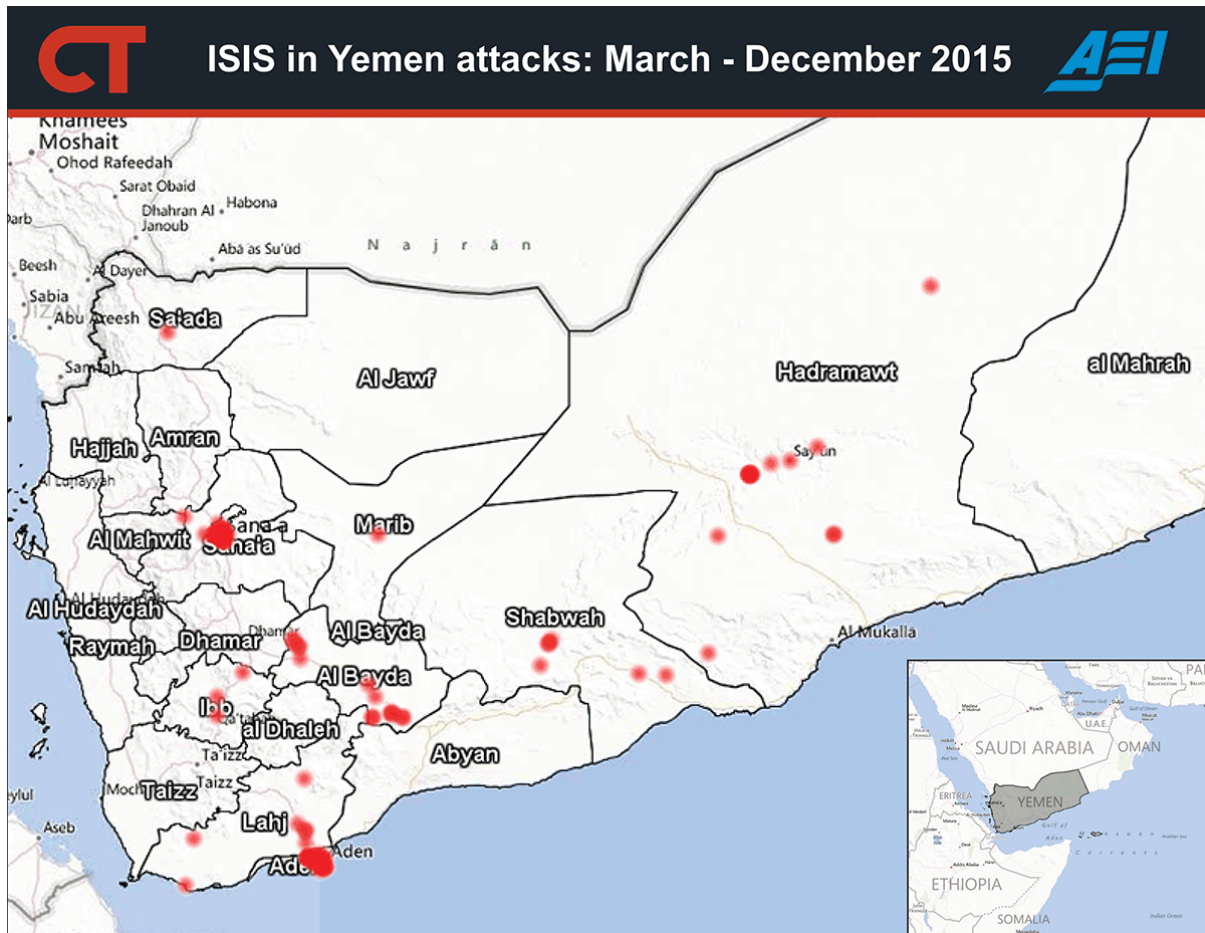
Source: Zimmerman and Diamond, 2016

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[3] Although the 2015 map covers a time period of ten months and the 2016 map only covers five months, when adjusted to take into account this difference there was still a decrease in operations.

Figure 5: IS attacks in Yemen between January and May 2016

Source: Zimmerman and Diamond, 2016

Relationship with other groups

IS and AQAP are in direct competition with one another for both support and operating territory, however IS is said to have some links with the Salafi groups (Kuoti, 2016).

Salafi Militias

Background

Yemen has been home to a range of Salafi groups for some time now, although prior to the war they were both non-political and mainly non-violent. The understanding of the workings of the Salafi groups is limited as it is IS and AQAP that dominate the headlines. However, the Salafi groups have extensively taken up arms in response to the Houthi's expansion towards the south.

Fighters from the Dar al-Hadith religious institute in Dammaj, Saada and from a religious institute in Kitaf, Saada have combined forces and are fighting Houthis on a number of fronts (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Salafis have grown in prominence due to the alliances they have forged and through the backing of the Saudi-led coalition. For example, in Aden, they act as state-sponsored irregular security forces with the backing of United Arab Emirates (UAE). The al-Mehdhar Brigade, based in Sheikh Othman and Mansoura districts, which acted as a local security force in 2015, joined other Saudi-supported Yemeni forces in crossing the Saudi-Yemeni border in an attempt to push into Saada, the Houthi stronghold in October 2016. Another group, the Security Belt forces – a UAE-supported militia established by presidential decree in May 2016 to help secure Aden and led by Nabil Mashwashi, a former South Yemen army commander – has a significant Salafi component (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Salafis are often at the forefront of the Saudi-led coalition-sponsored efforts to repel Houthi advances and there are a number of different factions whose alliances are continually changing. Since December 2016, Salafi and other resistance militias have nominally been integrated into the Yemeni army while remaining separate in reality (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Ideology and Goals

There are a number different factions within the Salafi movement in Yemen, however, they are tied together by their conservative views that Islam is represented by the early, righteous generations of Muslims, known as the *Salaf*, whose practices they aim to follow (Baidhani, 2016). Therefore, for many Salafis, Houthis (who practise Zaidi Islam) follow deviant practices considered to be un-Islamic (Barron and al-Muslimi, 2016).

Many Salafis are also fighting the Houthis for revenge following the Houthi move into Dammaj in the northern province of Saada where they expelled and killed many of the Salafi population in 2014 (al-Sakkaf, 2015).

Income

The Salafi groups receive support from Saudi Arabia and UAE, as well as through their traditional funding method of religious donations (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Strength

The Salafi groups are particularly active in Yemen's third largest city, Taiz, where it is said that their forces are the largest amongst the anti-Houthi resistance alliance. As Salafis fight within the coalition-backed forces it is difficult to gauge their numbers, however their influence is growing (Kalfood, 2016).

Relationship with other groups

The Salafi groups are connected to, and fighting with, the Hadi government. There are allegations against a number of groups that they have strong links to and are colluding with AQAP and IS. These include reports that they are fighting alongside each other and sharing arms that the Salafi groups receive from both Saudi Arabia and UAE (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Research Gaps

- The links between AQAP and the Salafi groups, and IS and the Salafi groups, as well as the level of cooperation between them, is understudied.
- There is little information on the leadership and operations of IS in Yemen and considering that IS will start moving its core operations out of Iraq and Syria, this is a much under researched topic.
- Likewise, the finances of IS in Yemen are not clear, there is a lack of information as to whether it is reliant on IS in Iraq and Syria (and if so, how does it transfer the funds), or whether it funds itself.
- The operations of the various Salafi groups is under researched and their existence within the army and resistance groups makes understanding them important for the post-conflict stage, as unlike AQAP and IS, they will be within the system.
- The links between the extremist groups and the political parties needs to be further researched, as this will be important in any political settlement to the conflict.

3. Drivers of Extremism

This section aims to examine the main drivers behind the rise of violent extremism in Yemen post 2014. However, it must be highlighted that there is a considerable lack of studies focusing purely on this topic and research addressing extremism usually form a sub section of analyses of conflict in Yemen.

Civil War

War zones provide a perfect environment for jihadi groups to recruit members and gain supporters. Moreover, conflict marginalises moderate political alternatives, allowing extremism to flourish. In both 2011 and 2015, AQAP took advantage of Yemen's chaos to capture territory in the south (USIP, 2016).

Additionally, the opportunity for extremists to exist in Yemen has long been there; the state has previously supported violent jihadist groups for its own political gain. This has given Jihadists a strong base from which to grow in Yemen. Since the transfer of power between Saleh and Hadi the dynamics have changed in Yemen as state institutions have faltered, which has allowed radical groups to capitalise and gain prominence. These favourable dynamics for extremism have been compounded by the Houthis taking control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in September 2014 and the onset of the current civil war in Yemen in 2015. The ability of AQAP to gain and control territory post 2011 increased its opportunities to gain recruits and support from the population (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The war dynamics following 2015 have further helped groups like AQAP and IS, as the security forces do not have the ability to focus on defeating them and a number of security vacuums have been created where AQAP and the Salafi groups in particular have been able to fill the gaps. The war against the Houthis has also made AQAP and IS a non-priority for the Saudi-led coalition, whilst the Salafi groups have become allies. Moreover, AQAP has been able to merge itself with the anti-Houthi opposition, which in turn has given it access to arms and finances. The relative ease of operation of these extremist groups has made it simpler to recruit and also blurred the

lines between their ideologies and that of protecting Sunnis and territory from the Houthis (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' mentality of those fighting the Houthis has allowed extremist groups, particularly AQAP and the Salafists, to not only operate without hindrance in many areas, but also to be aided when it suites the aims of those fighting the Houthis. This freedom makes it easier to recruit members and detracts from the illegitimacy of joining an extremist organisation (al-Dawari, 2014).

The graph below by the Yemen Polling Center demonstrates how in the south, where extremist groups mainly operate, the population sees the bad security situation as being the biggest threat to their security by a long way and nationally terrorism barely features as a threat to security.[4] This is important as both USIP (2016) and the International Crisis Group (2017) highlight these dynamics as being primed for extremist groups to take advantage of the situation.

Figure 6: Public opinion about main threats to security
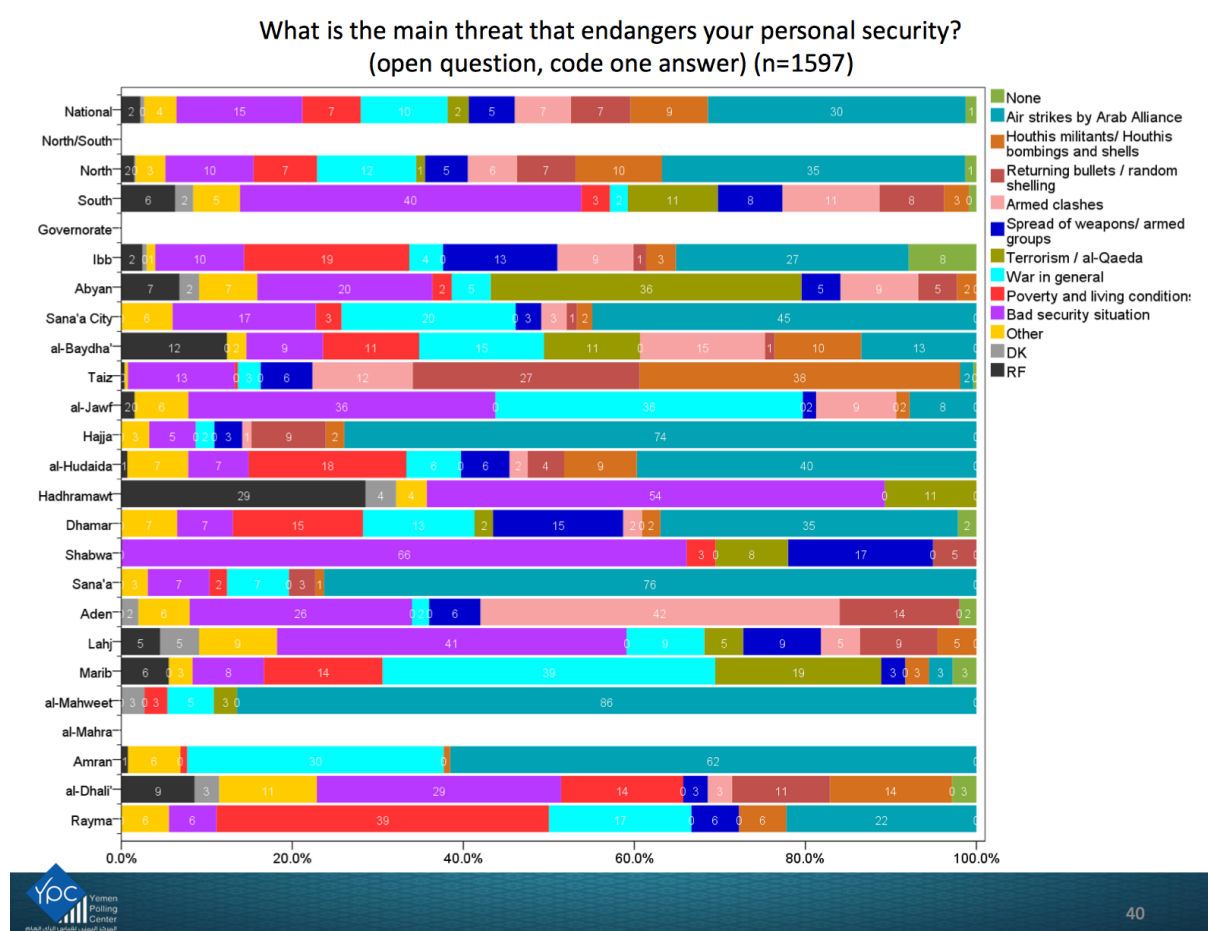
Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 40.

Bad Governance

The United States Institute for Peace (USIP) argues that bad governance and instability have allowed extremist movements to embed politically and exploit the situation to gain support. They go on to argue that the correlation between bad governance, instability and the rise of extremism is evident in the 2016 Fragile States Index, where Libya, Syria, Mali, and Yemen deteriorated the most over the past decade (USIP, 2016).

The historic bad governance in Yemen has seen the population seek out services from other providers and AQAP has filled this gap. Not only has AQAP provided services, such as water, electricity, education and a justice system, it has also paid compensation to families whose homes have been destroyed by drones and airstrikes. Thus, cementing the notion in some areas that the government and its allies are unable to meet the populations' needs, whilst AQAP is. Therefore, it has been argued that AQAP's support is based on its ability to fill the security and governance vacuum left by the government, rather than of any strong support of its ideologies (International Crisis Group, 2017). Additionally, many people in Yemen have supported extremist groups out of pure frustration of the government's inaction in providing services and better governance (al-Dawari, 2014).

AQAP has found success in parts of Yemen that lack of electricity or access to water. There is a correlation between an area's impoverishment and marginalisation and its susceptibility to infiltration by AQAP. Therefore, once AQAP delivers basic services they are able to win the population over to an extent, even if they do not follow the same ideological beliefs as AQAP. However, a support base opens up the opportunity for recruitment. This in turn points to bad governance and the lack of services as a key driver to the rise of AQAP in Yemen (al-Muslimi and Barron, 2017).

The two graphs below taken from the Yemen Polling Center demonstrate the perception that the population has of the role of governance units in their area, with the majority viewing them as not making any impact or of making a negative impact. This links to the argument that AQAP is able to gain support through the provision of missing services and infrastructure (Counter Extremism Project, 2016).
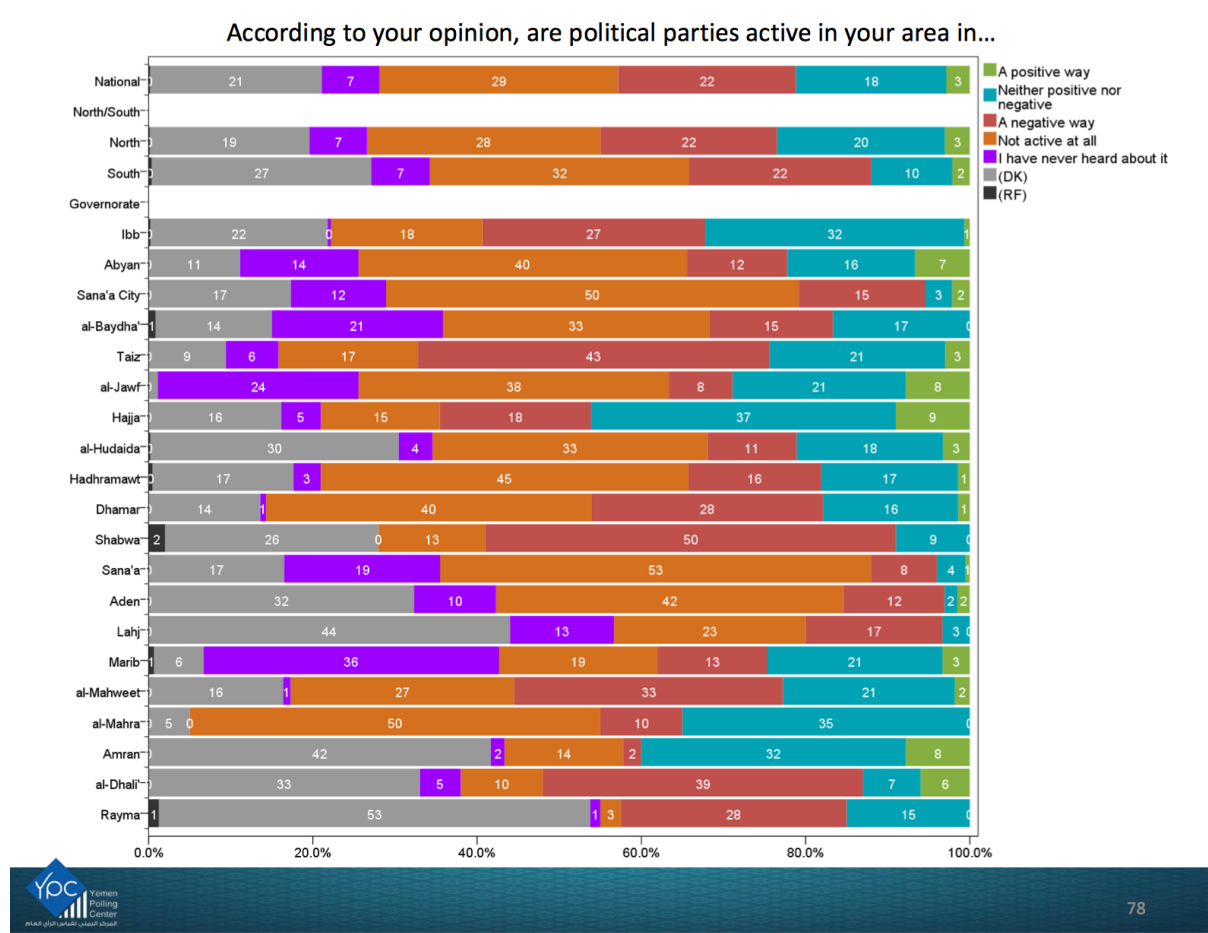
Figure 7: Public opinion on the role of local councils

According to your opinion, is the local council active in your area in...
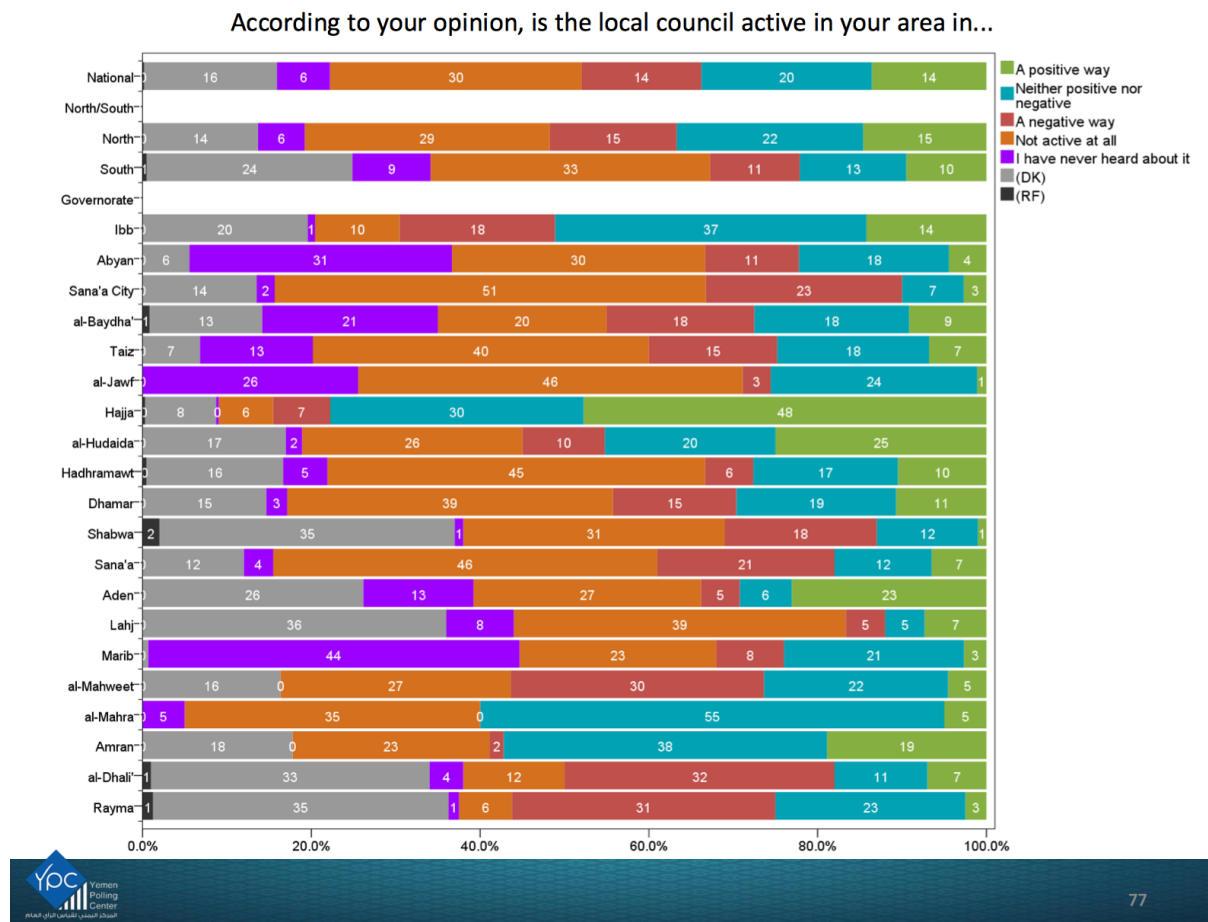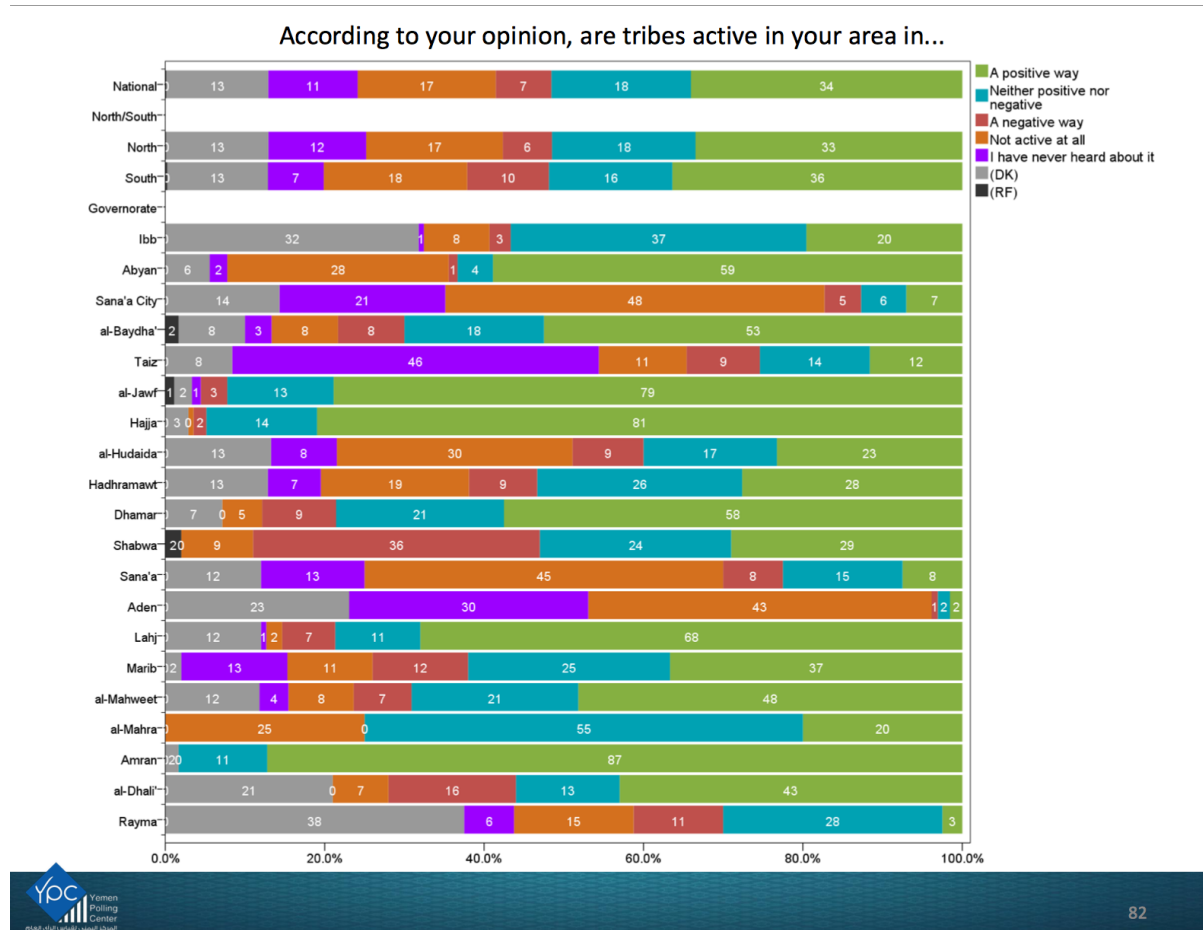
Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 77.

Figure 8: Public opinion on the role of political parties

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 78.

The above graph is particularly telling when the same question is asked about the tribes in the graph below where the people's perception is all together far more positive.
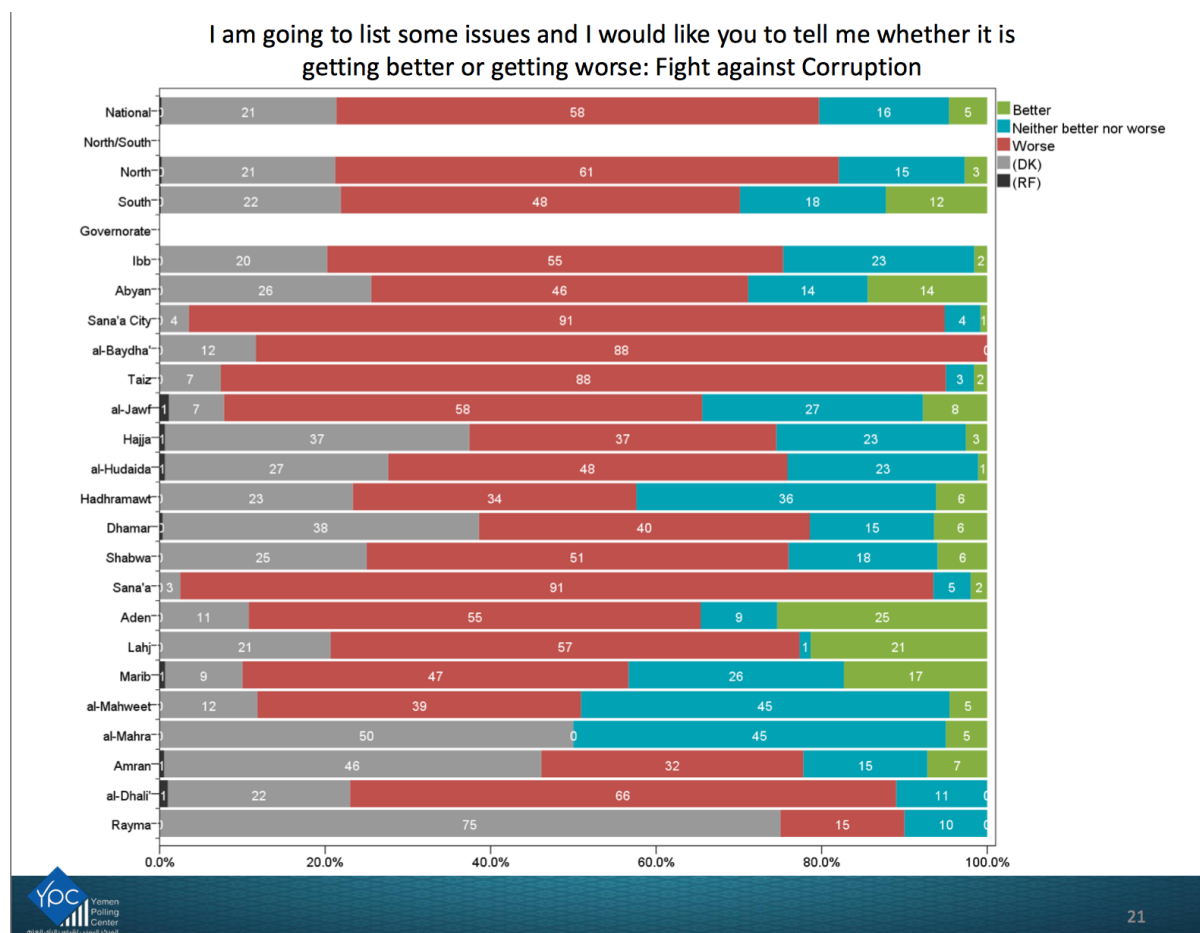
Figure 9: Public opinion on the role of tribes

According to your opinion, are tribes active in your area in...

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 82.

Issues with corruption are closely tied to bad governance and are also seen as partly responsible for creating anger that can lead to members of the population joining extremist groups. Therefore, the population's perception of corruption is an important factor in the growth of support for extremist groups (Shelley, 2014). The graph below demonstrates the extremely negative perception in Yemen of the prevalence of corruption and the lack of efforts to tackle it.

Figure 10: Public opinion on the fight against corruption

I am going to list some issues and I would like you to tell me whether it is getting better or getting worse: Fight against Corruption

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 21.

As argued by USIP (2016) and the International Crisis Group (2017) the bad security situation in Yemen, not only gives extremist groups an easy route into the country and territories, it also allows them to gain support and members through offering security where the government has failed to, thus increasing their legitimacy. The graph below demonstrates how little the population relies on the security services for the provision of security. It is important to note here that the questionnaire used by the Yemen Polling Center gives no option for the participants to demonstrate if they see security as being provided by AQAP or the Salafi groups and it is unclear whether the population may class these groups as 'popular resistance'. A common issue with the research conducted by the Yemen Polling Center is that they do not give the option for the participants to demonstrate what they see as positive contributions by the extremist groups, which in turn does not allow for an understanding of what the population sees as being offered by these groups in place of the government.

Figure 11: Public opinion on security provision

In reality, who brings security to this area? (open question, code three answers) First Answer
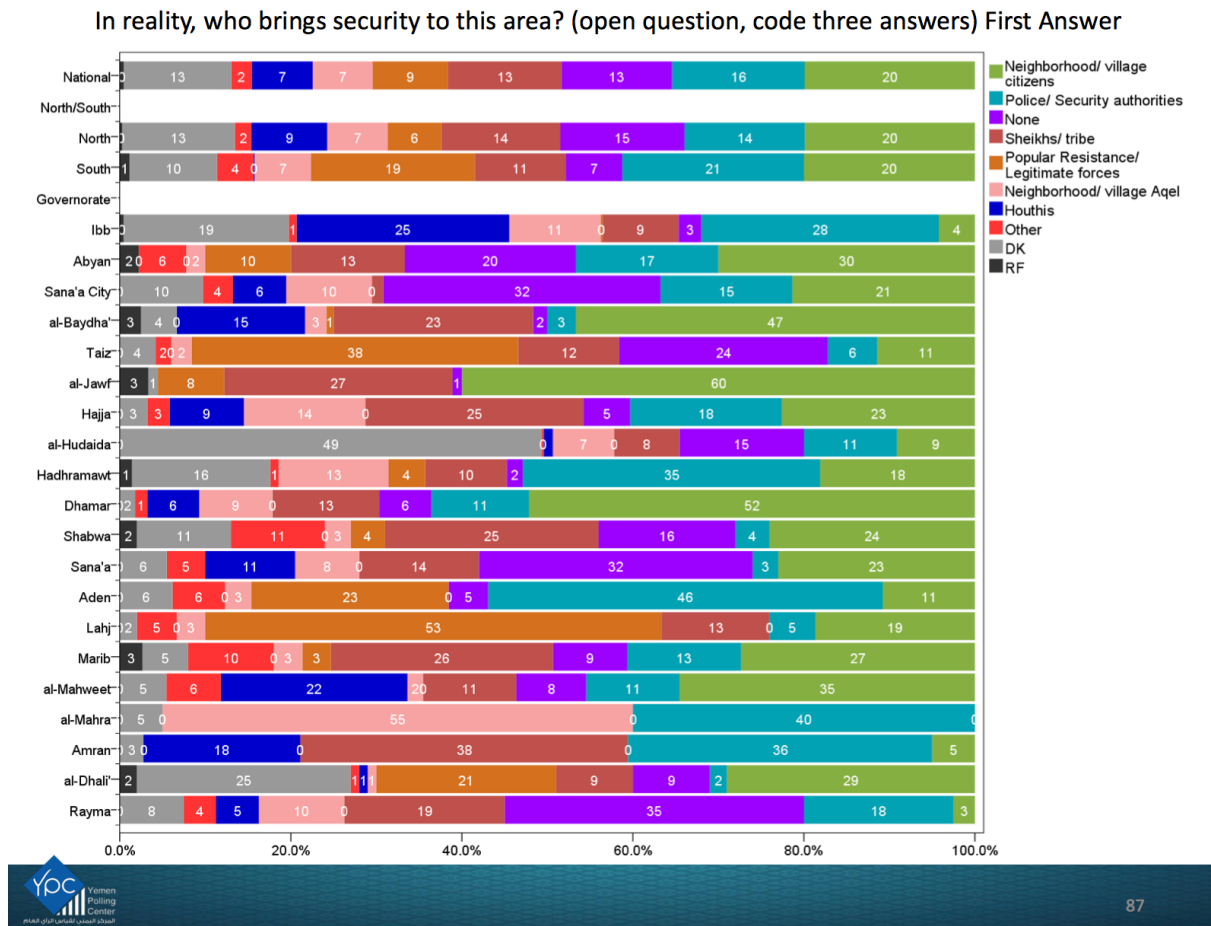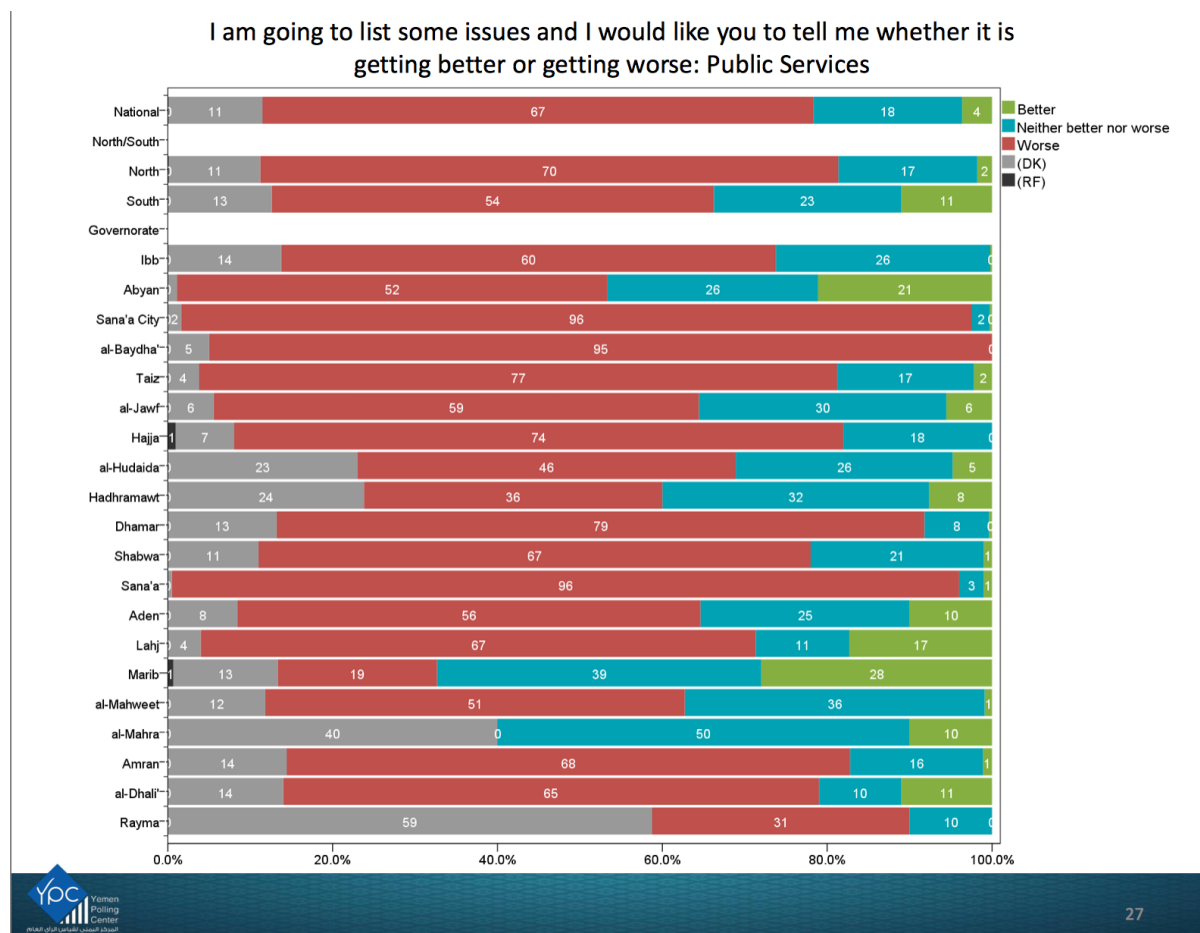
Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 87.

Bad governance and security provision, as well as the lack of delivery of services create dynamics favourable to the rise of extremist groups (al-Dawari, 2014; al-Muslimi and Barron, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017; USIP, 2016).
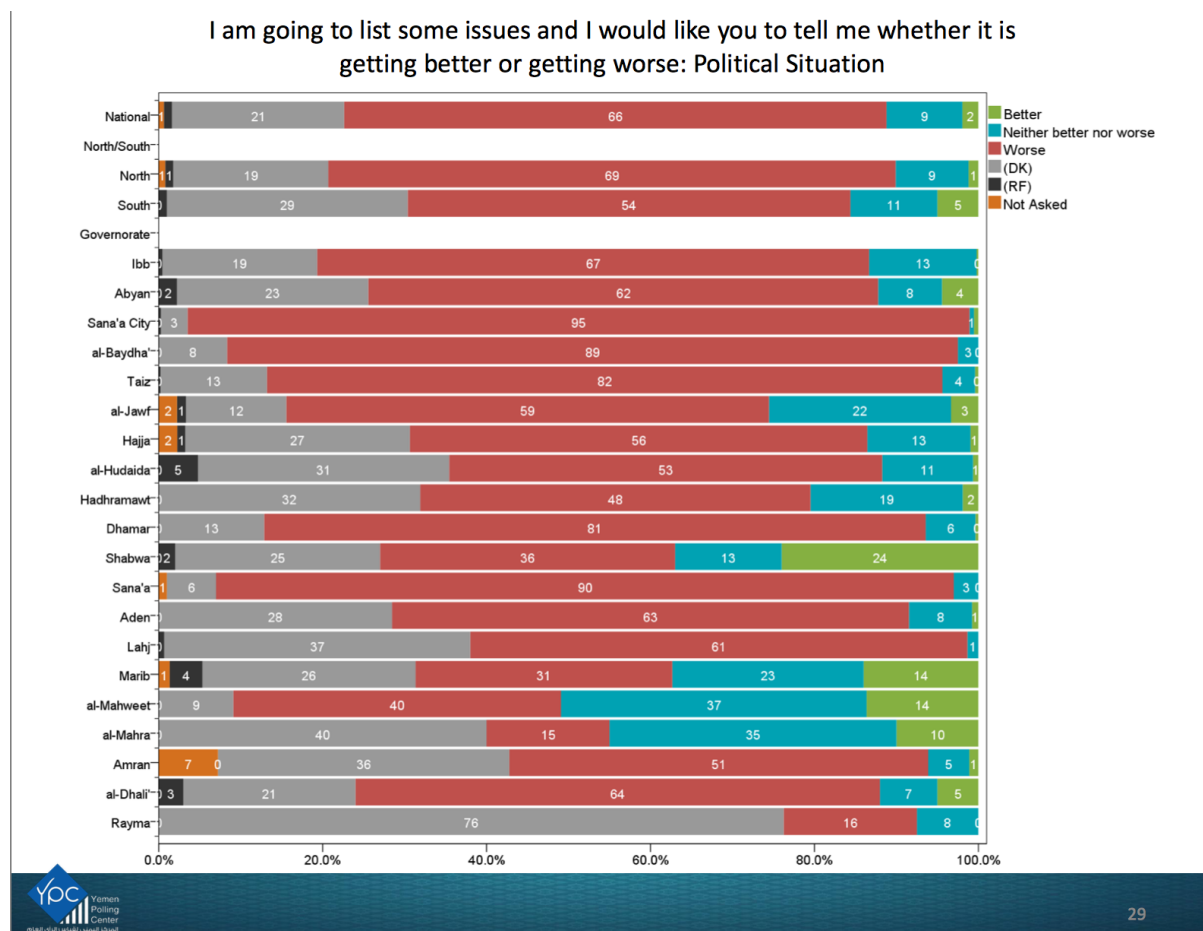
The three graphs below demonstrate the little faith the population has in the government, as they believe the political situation, the security situation and the provision of public services are getting worse.

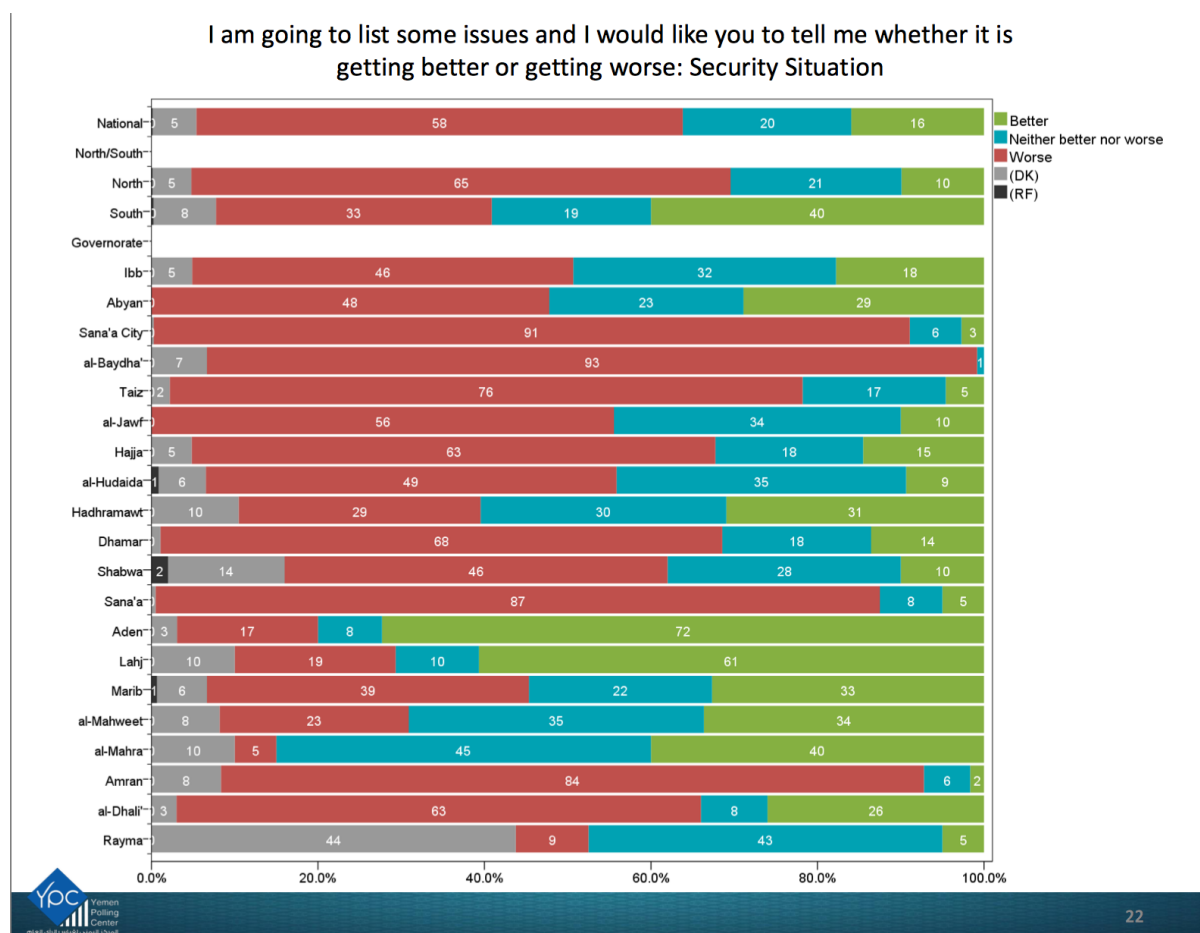Figure 12: Public opinion on the quality of public services

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 27.

Figure 13: Public opinion on the political situation

I am going to list some issues and I would like you to tell me whether it is getting better or getting worse: Political Situation

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 29.

Figure 14: Public opinion on the security situation

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 22.

Sectarianism

Conflict in Yemen has fuelled sectarianism and groups such as AQAP, IS and the extreme Salafists have benefited from it. Houthi military expansion into Sunni areas is predominantly responsible for the increase of sectarianism by Sunnis. At the same time, the conflict against the Houthis has opened opportunities for the extremist groups to forge alliances with locals. The actions by Houthis against Sunnis often creates anger amongst the population who in turn want to take revenge. Extremist groups feed on this anger to gain recruits and alliances (International Crisis Group, 2017). For instance, following the Houthi move into Dammaj where they expelled and killed many of the population in 2014, there was an increase in radicalisation as members of the population sought revenge against the Houthis, which extremist groups were able to take advantage of in their recruitment drive (al-Sakkaf, 2015). It was not until the war and the Houthis

capture of Sanaa that IS established a foothold in Yemen. Sectarianism not only gives extremist groups the ability to recruit, but also allows for them to establish themselves within local communities (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The proxy nature of the conflict, with Saudi (Sunni)-Iranian (Shiite) competition in the Gulf being played out in Yemen, further amplifies the sectarian nature of the war. The battle and the language on the ground has been that of Sunnis against Shiite (Zaidi), with both Houthis and extremist Sunni groups using this language to gain supporters and justify violence. The growing sectarianism and the idea of a Sunni defence against Shiite Houthis has been particularly helpful in AQAP forging alliances with the tribes and Salafis. Through creating AAS, AQAP has also made it easier for recruits to join, as membership does not have the same stigma or historical link to AQ and its global jihad. Rather, membership becomes a local Sunni defence against the Houthi enemy. This way affiliate groups are created to gain and protect territory (International Crisis Group, 2017). AQAP also has strong links to the local tribes, which help with recruitment and forming alliances against the Houthis (Engel, 2017).

Poverty

Poverty in Yemen is an issue that existed prior to the recent escalation of conflict and which has been compounded by the civil war. The Word Bank claims that poverty in Yemen is deeper and more severe than in other MENA countries, whilst the poverty gap is also high. More worryingly, in the context of the rise of extremist groups, is the large regional and governorate disparities in poverty, as this creates a feeling of unfairness that can be taken advantage of by extremists.[5] As has already been highlighted, AQAP has been the most successful in marginalised parts of Yemen, where they have taken advantage of the situation and offered benefits to the population.
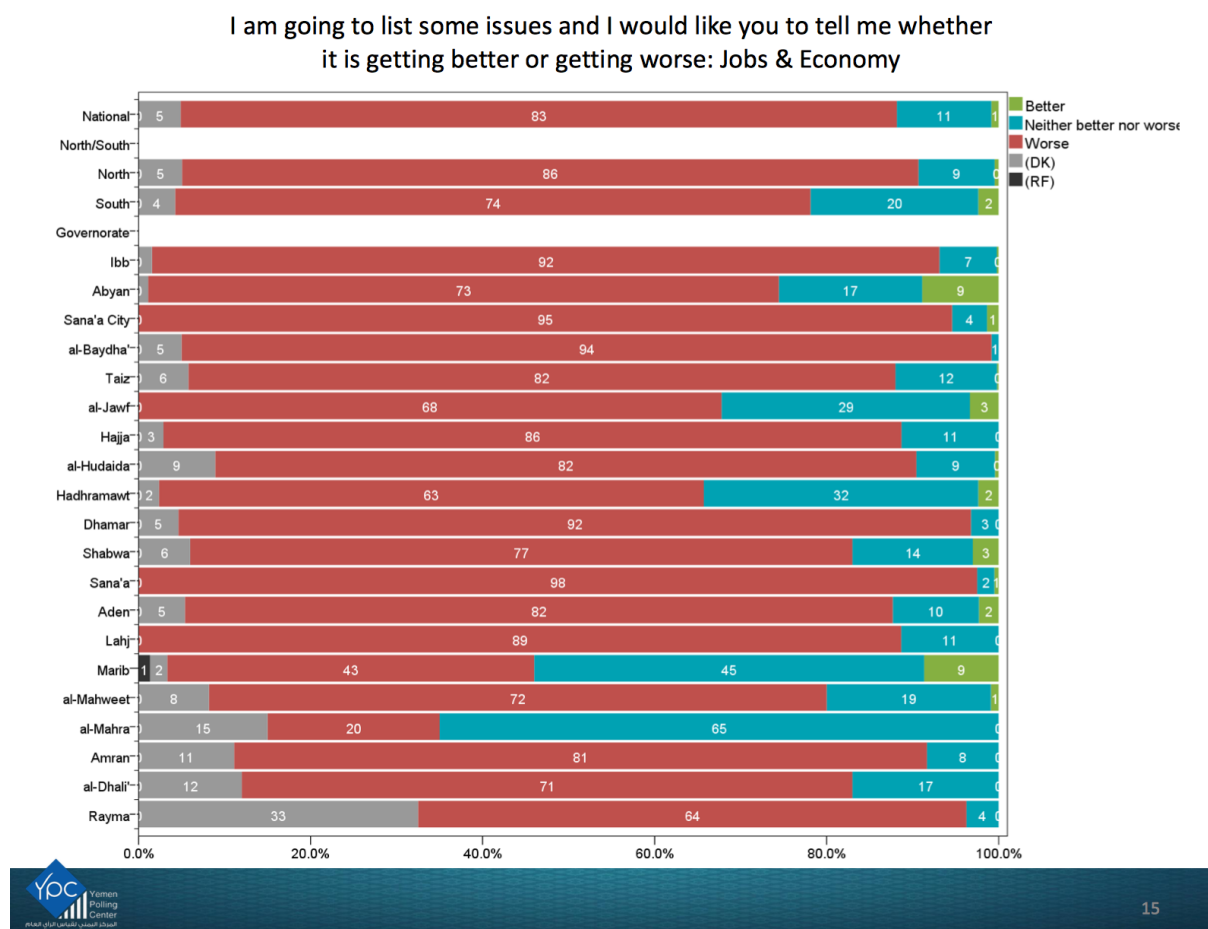
Poverty and unemployment cannot be viewed in isolation as causes for radicalisation, but they are argued to be contributing factors and this correlation cannot be ignored (Botha and Abdile, 2014). With little alternatives, radical groups offer employment and an opportunity to vent anger at the system. It is argued that many young people joined AQAP because they were poor and uneducated and AQAP provided employment, a sense of belonging, and a purpose for young recruits (International Crisis Group, 2017). However, as already highlighted, the issue goes beyond poverty to political grievances with a system that has fostered a significant poverty gap, and thus poverty becomes intertwined with political anger towards the system – to which extremist groups offer an outlet (al-Muslimi and Barron, 2017).

The graph below demonstrates people's perception of employment and the economy in Yemen. The negative perception demonstrated can potentially feed into radicalisation, or at least the population seeking alternatives (Botha and Abdile, 2014).

[5] http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2010/01/20/poverty-in-yemen

Figure 15: Public opinion on the situation for jobs and the economy

I am going to list some issues and I would like you to tell me whether it is getting better or getting worse: Jobs & Economy

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p. 15.

Whilst the graph below demonstrates how high poverty and living conditions feature on the issues of concern for the population.
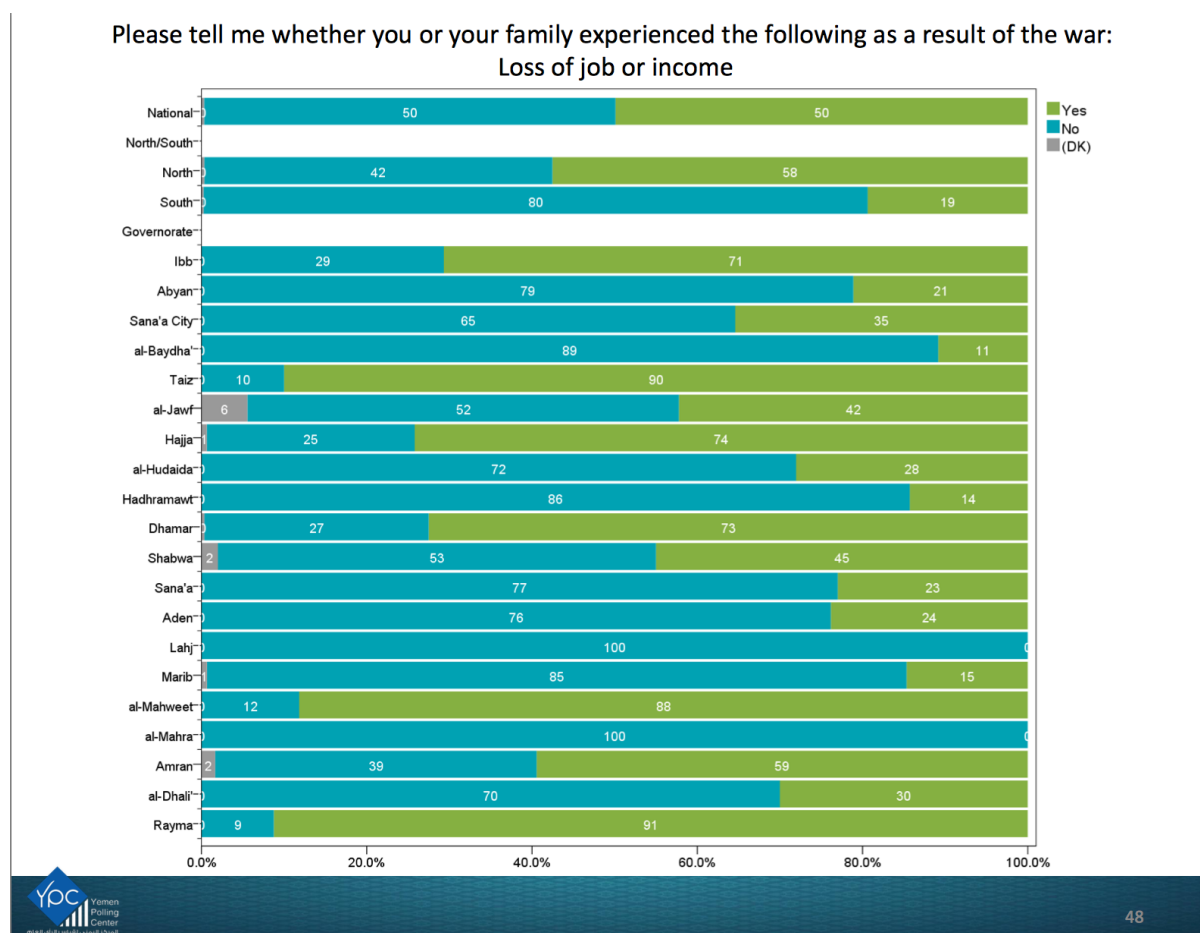
Figure 16: Public opinion of issues of greatest concern for people's lives
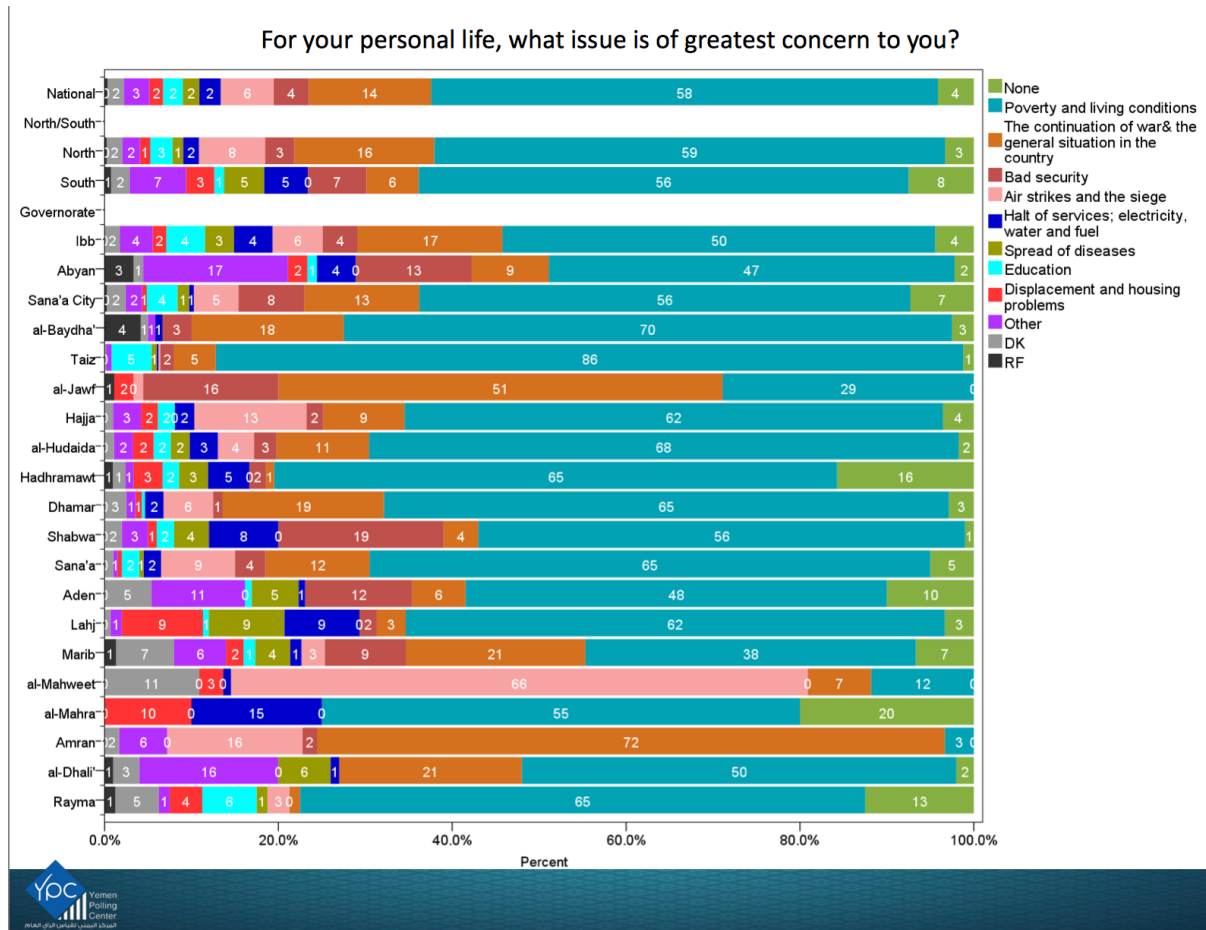
Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p.13.

Finally, the graph below demonstrates the effect the war has had on the employment and income status of the population. In summary, the population is extremely concerned about poverty, they feel it is getting worse because of the war, and the war has directly impacted the earnings of half those surveyed. Thus, if poverty is identified as one of the contributing factors to the rise of extremism, Yemen is primed for extremist groups to take advantage of the situation – as they already have (Botha and Abdile, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2017).

Figure 17: Public experiences of loss of jobs or income due to the war

Please tell me whether you or your family experienced the following as a result of the war:
Loss of job or income

Yemen Polling Center, 2017: p.48.

Hard CVE

The hard Counter Violent Extremism (CVE)[6] carried out by the UAE with US support is argued to be counter productive and fuels rather than counters extremism. Moreover, in areas, such as Mukalla, where forces backed by the UAE have managed to push out AQAP, the government has not been able to successfully improve local governance and services, thus in theory giving AQAP a symbolic victory (Engel, 2017).

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[6] Hard CVE refers to using aggressive force against violent extremists, whereas soft CVE refers to introducing policies that address the cause of violent extremism.

In addition the 'hard' actions by the UAE and US, as well as the forces they back, against AQAP often have a negative impact on the population, which in turn can be used by AQAP for propaganda and recruitment purposes. For instance, in January 2017 in a raid by UAE and US forces against AQAP it was reported that 25 civilians were killed including nine children under the age of 13 (Shabibi and al-Sane, 2017) According to the International Crisis Group:

> The use of U.S. soldiers, high civilian casualties and disregard for local tribal and political dynamics – many killed were local tribesmen motivated by the internal Yemeni power struggle as much as or more than AQAP's international agenda – plays into AQAP's narrative of defending Muslims against the West and could increase anti-U.S. sentiment and with it AQAP's pool of recruits (International Crisis Group, 2017: p.28.).

Whilst the United Nations accuses the Hadrami Elite Forces, which are backed by the UAE, of forcibly disappearing countless individuals and ill-treating others – many of whom are not known to have actual links to AQAP (UN, 2017). These actions along with the often-indiscriminate drone attacks are seen to be counterproductive, as instead of weakening AQAP they make them stronger by alienating the population and potential CVE partners on the ground. Moreover, AQAP has grown in strength and finances despite years of hard CVE against them (al-Muslimi and Barron, 2017).

Research Gaps

- The research carried out by the Yemen Polling Center is very important for gauging the population's perception on a number of issues. However, they do not assess the population's perception on positive contributions by the extremist groups, which is important in order to counter the rise of extremism in Yemen.

- There is a lack of research on the dynamics of areas where AQAP has been pushed out. It is important to understand the post-AQAP governance in order to adequately gauge whether the issues responsible for its rise are being addressed.

- The Yemen Polling Center's research clearly demonstrates the importance of the tribes to Yemeni Society, however there is a lack of research into the role they can play against AQAP in Yemen, as the tribes did against AQ in Iraq between 2005 and 2010.

- Although the impact of hard CVE is often mentioned, there is not enough focused research on the role it plays in the rise of extremist groups in Yemen.

4. The (un)appeal of violent extremism and violent extremist groups

This section addresses the factors that make members of the population of Yemen choose to support or not support violent extremism, although many of these elements have already been discussed in the previous section.

General Support

Many of the studies examined for this report highlight that supporters of extremist groups in Yemen do not necessarily follow the ideologies of the group, particularly that of a global jihad (see for example: al-Sakkaf, 2015; Engel, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017; Robinson et

al., 2017). Rather, people support the groups due to the governance and services they provide and join the groups as a means to carry out revenge, fight for their sect/territory, or to act on their political frustrations. This is further evidenced by the lower support that IS has in Yemen and that AQAP thought it necessary to form an affiliate group not connected to its global jihad in order to win the local population's support. Thus, there is a correlation between historic bad governance, the civil war, and the rise of extremist groups in Yemen and it is within these dynamics that motivations for supporting and joining extremist groups should be sought. It is important to note that the support for these groups in Yemen is not significant, as evidenced by the general population cheering when AQAP is pushed out of the territory it holds; rather extremists take advantage of circumstances and often gain support out of convenience (International Crisis Group, 2017). However, it is argued in areas with high levels of drone strikes and civilian casualties, public anger is fuelled and a cycle of vengeance is formed where extremist groups are able to take prominence as a means to achieve revenge (al-Muslimi and Barron, 2017).

Tribal Support

Tribal allegiances are very important in Yemen and AQAP has close ties to many tribes in the south of Yemen.[7] Again, this does not necessarily mean that the tribes follow the same ideologies, but rather it is argued that they are frustrated with the government and often form alliances with AQAP to avoid conflict in their territory, or as allies in tribal feuds. The links between tribes and AQAP is however a source of legitimacy and recruits for AQAP and has been instrumental to its growth (al-Dawari, 2014; al-Muslimi and Barron, 2017).

Salafism

Salafist movements are often seen as being closely connected to violent extremism. However, in Yemen, the history of Salafism is apolitical and more closely connected to charity work than jihad. That is not to say that there have not been violent elements, but rather that mainstream Salifism was connected to loyalty to the government and was typified by its charity work. Nonetheless, Salifist groups did carry out acts of violence against minority groups, but this was in conjunction with the government rather than in the form of a rebel militia. However, with the onset of the war, the increased sectarianism, and the rise of the Houthis, this government support has led to a closer connection between Salifism and violent extremism. Therefore, it can be argued that the connection between Salifism and violent extremism in Yemen is more to do with the dynamics of the civil war than the traditions of Yemeni Salifism itself (Bonnefoy, 2009; Baidhani, 2016).

Rejecting or Participating in Violent Extremism

The Rand Corporation has carried out a large research project examining what makes people in Yemen reject violent extremism. The study included six focus groups (three female, three male) within the 18-34 age group and a national survey with 1200 respondents in May 2016. Their

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[7] The al-Awaleq, al-Kazemi, and al-Nu'man tribes released statements against the government's operations against AQAP in their territory in 2014. Whilst al-Awaleq, one of the largest tribes in South Yemen, also singed an agreement with AQAP guaranteeing their safety if they refrained from fighting the military in the tribe's territory.

findings highlight that the respondents seemed to conflate political violence with political activism and thus those who were politically active were more likely to participate in violent extremism. Closely linked, those who did not see much chance of progress in Yemen were more likely to engage in violence. Respondents who had been assaulted by the security services were more likely to consider engaging in violence as an act of revenge. The Rand Corporation's study also found that urban respondents were more likely to engage in violence. Based on these findings the Rand Corporation argues that CVE should focus on protecting civilians from the security forces and concentrate CVE efforts in urban centres. Although the Rand Corporation points to the conflation between political activism and violence, they do not examine further how to separate the two and make political activism a viable alternative to violence (Robinson et al., 2017).

Research Gaps

- The Rand Corporation points to there being a conflation between political violence and political activism, but does not study this further. Further research is needed to firstly confirm whether this is true, and secondly, if it is true, to examine how the two can be separated in a CVE programme.

- There is limited research on successful or unsuccessful CVE programmes in Yemen, and more research is necessary to identify potential areas for success, as well as to identify past mistakes.

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