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How Yemen became a controversial battleground against Al Qaeda

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Yemen is a battleground where the U.S. has attacked an Al Qaeda branch that has tried to blow up U.S. airliners and assassinate targets in Saudi Arabia. Government officials announced Tuesday that Yemeni troops and southern tribesmen had [driven Al Qaeda militants out](#) of two strategic towns, aided by a U.S. military command center recently established in the southern desert.

But while U.S. and Yemeni officials have celebrated such blows to Al Qaeda, the increasing U.S. attacks, particularly drone strikes, also have fed fears of blowback from Yemenis angered by civilian deaths.

Islamic extremists have long gravitated to Yemen, with its rugged terrain, religious conservatism and close proximity to Saudi Arabia. In one of the most notorious terrorist attacks in Yemen, suicide bombers killed 17 American sailors aboard the U.S. destroyer Cole in the port of Aden in 2000.

The U.S. has been trying to combat Islamists there for more than a decade, partnering with Yemen. In 2002, it used a Hellfire missile to kill six suspected Al Qaeda operatives there, first igniting the debate about whether the U.S. should kill its enemies without trying them in court.

Badly battered nine years ago, Al Qaeda allies in Yemen began regaining strength when a Yemeni prison break in 2006 freed some noted Islamists, according to Princeton University scholar Gregory Johnsen. Three years ago, they regrouped with Al Qaeda members who had fled a Saudi Arabian government crackdown to form the newly named Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The re-energized group quickly became infamous. The Al Qaeda affiliate says it trained the underwear bomber who tried to down a Northwest Airlines jet near Detroit two and a half years ago, along with other attempted bombings that were halted before they could claim lives.

Yemeni extremists got a boost last year, a side effect of the Arab Spring unrest. While Yemeni forces were distracted by infighting and protests, they abandoned the south. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Ansar al Sharia, an apparently related Islamist group that has focused largely on local issues in Yemen, expanded their reach in southern Yemen.

“There was no one watching the store. They saw opportunity and went in,” said Barbara Bodine, a former ambassador to Yemen now teaching at Princeton University. Some Yemenis believe that Saleh allowed it to happen to convince the West that ousting him would be costly.

After Yemenis eventually prodded out Saleh, the new president, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, vowed to crush extremism. Under his watch, American drone strikes have escalated dramatically this year. The U.S. also sent special operations troops back to Yemen this spring to help pinpoint targets, according to U.S. and Yemeni officials who spoke to The Times last month about the sensitive operation.

The escalating conflict has raised alarm in Yemen and abroad. Although the drone attacks are meant to target Al Qaeda operatives, there are grave fears that the targeting is haphazard and that innocent civilians are being killed in the attacks -- concerns similar to those raised in Pakistan.

The killing of a U.S. citizen in one of those Yemen drone strikes, radical cleric Anwar Awlaki, spurred concern over how the U.S. creates and justifies its "kill list" to execute people abroad. His 16-year-old son was killed weeks later in a similar strike, adding to the alarm over the killings. Even more worrisome to many critics are "signature" strikes, which can target people whose identities aren't known.

Some analysts argue that such strikes will only end up fueling more militancy against the U.S. Despite the attacks, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is believed to have rapidly expanded its ranks in the last three years, growing from a few hundred members to more than 1,000 by some estimates.

"Are we recruiting more militants than we're executing?" asked Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

Bodine added that the drone strikes may ultimately undercut Hadi as a leader. "The last thing he needs is to be seen as an American puppet who isn't concerned about Yemeni casualties."

The intensifying strikes also have stirred up concern that the U.S. could get dragged into another conflict just as it is planning its exit from Afghanistan. The White House has insisted its role in Yemen is limited.

The battle with Al Qaeda is just one of a host of problems that Yemen faces. Hunger has spiked to catastrophic heights this year, with nearly half of the population in need. More than one-third of Yemenis are estimated to live in poverty, making it the poorest country in the Arab world.

The government also has to contend with separatists in the south, rebels in the north and a power struggle within the capital between Hadi, the former president and his family, and other political players. To help Hadi, the U.S. has ordered the Treasury Department to freeze U.S. assets of those who "threaten the peace, security and stability" of Yemen, a broad attempt to neuter Saleh loyalists.

But its actions don't go far enough, its critics argue. "The Obama administration appears to see Yemen through Al-Qaeda-colored glasses," Johnsen said. "That's dangerous. If Al Qaeda is the

one providing teachers to schools, if Al Qaeda is the one providing water and electricity, that goes a long way towards winning hearts and minds.”