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**Violent Non-State Actors:
The Case of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula**

Diplomová práce

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Anotace

Diplomová práca sa venuje štúdiu témy násilných neštátnych aktérov so sústredením na prípad al-Kájdy na Arabskom polostrove (AQAP) v Jemene. Cieľom práce je celistvá a hĺbková analýza tejto skupiny cez optiku teórií o násilných neštátnych aktéroch v medzinárodných vzťahoch. Analýza postavenia skupiny je skúmaná pomocou rámcu ARI od Ersela Aydinliho, ktorý upresňuje tri hlavné analytické kategórie pre štúdium násilných neštátnych aktérov – autonómiu, reprezentáciu a vplyv skúmanej organizácie. Diplomová práca rozširuje poznatky o skupine AQAP v globálnych, regionálnych a lokálnych súvislostiach a jej pôsobení počas občianskej vojny v Jemene čím prispieva k rastúcej literatúre o násilných neštátnych aktéroch. Práca ponúka podrobný rozbor o vývoji a postavení skúmanej skupiny a zároveň tieto poznatky zasadzuje do širšieho historického kontextu vývoja extrémizmu a džihadizmu v Jemene. Skúma vznik, postupnú evolúciu a pôsobenie al-Kájdy v Jemene od 90. rokov 20. Storočia, cez vznik al-Kájdy na Arabskom polostrove až po súčasnosť s úmyslom hlbšie porozumieť štruktúram, cieľom, stratégii a fungovaniu skúmanej organizácie AQAP.

Annotation

This diploma thesis focuses on the study of violent non-state actors with a focus on the case of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. The goal of this thesis is an in-depth analysis of the chosen group through the optics of theories of violent non-state actors. The analysis is based on the ARI Framework, created by Ersel Aydinli, which focuses on three main analytical categories – autonomy, representation, and influence. This thesis aims to broaden the existing knowledge and understanding of AQAP in its global, regional, and local contexts, as well as in the context of the ongoing Yemeni civil war. In this way, it contributes to the growing literature on violent non-state actors. This thesis offers a detailed study on the evolution and capacities of the case at hand and embeds these findings into a broader historical context of the development of extremism and jihadism in Yemen. It studies the evolution of al-Qaeda in Yemen since the 1990s, inception of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and tracks its existence until 2018 with the intention to provide a deeper understanding of the group's structure, goals, strategy, and overall functioning.

Klíčová slova

Násilní nestátní aktéři, al-Kájda, al-Kájda na Arabském poloostrově, AQAP, Jemen, ARI rámec

Keywords

Violent non-state actors, VNSA, al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, Yemen, ARI framework

Název práce

Násilní nestátní aktéři v Jemenu: Případ al-Kájdy na Arabském poloostrově

Poděkování

Na tomto mieste by som rada poďakovala PhDr. Radane Makariusovej, PhD, za rady, pomoc a expertízu, ktorú mi pri písaní diplomovej práce ochotne poskytla.

Violent Non-State Actors in Yemen: The Case of Al-Qaeda

Introduction to the Research Topic

Yemen is a state situated in the south of the geopolitically-important Arabian Peninsula which it shares with its two neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Oman. South of the Peninsula, there is the Gulf of Aden - one of the most important waterways in the world. It is connected to the Red Sea via the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a strategic chokepoint through which approximately 3,5 million barrels of oil flows on a daily basis. Apart from its strategic location, Yemen became infamously famous after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and subsequent civil war between Houthi insurgents and the Yemeni government that broke out in March of 2015 and is ongoing to this day. In addition to this, the country has been struggling with the presence of terrorist groups, tribes, secessionists, and other non-state actors – this further complicates the security situation. Yemen placed fourth in Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (The Fund for Peace 2017) and belongs to countries whose decline has been the most prominent in the last decade (ibid.). The state belongs to one of the world's poorest countries – more than 60% of its population suffers from hunger (The World Bank 2017), the government is unable to provide basic services to its population, and more than 80% of the people are in dire need of humanitarian help (ibid.).

Another aspect of the complicated security situation is the existence of Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which is known in Yemen also as Ansar al-Sharia. This offshoot of al-Qaeda is regarded to be its most active and most deadly branch in the world (Council on Foreign Relations 2015). This terrorist organization was officially established in the year 2009 after two branches of al-Qaeda – Saudi and Yemeni – joined forces under

one organization. In the first decade of the 21st century, al-Qaeda in Yemen focused overwhelmingly on its global agenda, attempting to strike mainly Western targets. However, the civil conflict and the still-ongoing counterterrorism operations against the organization presented AQAP with an opportunity to become an important actor in domestic and local affairs. With a new set of goals, they managed to overtake and remain in control of large swaths of Yemeni territory where they took over roles such as tax collection or provision of social services to the populace. While its territorial control has been under attack, the organization has shown that the ‘terrorist’ label is insufficient to explain the full, complex scope of its activities as a non-state actor within Yemen. The group has taken advantage of the growing sectarianism between the Sunnis and the Shi’ites, intervention and meddling of external powers (such as the Saudi Arabia, Iran, or the U.S.) in Yemeni domestic politics, or separatism of the Southern provinces. In the atmosphere of a weak, failing state and its institutions, and an ongoing conflict that is also externalized as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is not surprising that in such chaos, a VNSA like al-Qaeda benefits and grows.

Yemen has a long history of dealing with violent non-state groups such as the al-Qaeda or the Houthi insurgency. Yemen has been one of the main battlegrounds in the War on Terror since its beginning in 2001 and the complicated ongoing conflict, aimed not only at combatting terrorists but also at combatting Houthi insurgents, is benefitting al-Qaeda in its quest for victory and conquest. In the various vacuums created within the state, violent non-state actors (VNSA) such as the al-Qaeda can grow and flourish like never before. In my thesis, I would like to study al-Qaeda’s involvement in Yemen – both as the earlier version of al-Qaeda and the later organization AQAP – from the perspective of theories on the topic of violent non-state actors. I consider this topic to be important because of a current paradigm change in international relations that refers to the shifting of power from

state to nonstate actors and the increasing number of asymmetrical conflicts. While the study of VNSAs has been very fruitful and much attention is being paid to the topic, the case of al-Qaeda in Yemen remains under-researched – especially when we contrast it to the amount of literature written, for example, on the topic of ISIS or the civil war in Syria. AQAP is becoming stronger and has a great base in Yemen from which it can launch its operations (whether in Yemen, the broader Middle East region or the West) – the threat that AQAP presents is local, regional, and global. Without resolving the issue of AQAP and other VNSAs in Yemen, it is extremely unlikely that the complex security situation will be resolved. This conflict is also in danger of affecting the whole region and possibly spilling over Yemen’s borders as the pressure between Saudi Arabia and Iran mounts. As long as the status of al-Qaeda remains misunderstood and unresolved, it is unlikely that the devastating war will find its conclusion any time soon.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I will be focusing on the analysis of al-Qaeda in Yemen as a violent non-state actors. It is my goal to describe, as accurately as possible, the establishment, development, and their renewed and changing existence of al-Qaeda within Yemeni political system. This work will focus on understanding the factors of al-Qaeda’s genesis in Yemen, how it grew, operated and transformed itself into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. I will study if and how this VNSA affects Yemen’s domestic politics, what role it plays in the Yemeni and regional system and how this role evolved and changed through the years of their existence and demise. I will also look at the position of AQAP in the ongoing civil war, albeit this will not be the main goal of the thesis. The topic is geographically limited to the study of this particular VNSA within Yemen. As far as

temporal limitations go, I will try to include the most recent developments that will occur throughout 2018. Thus, my main questions I will try to answer in this diploma thesis are:

- How can we analyze AQAP in Yemen through the lens of violent non-state actor theories?
- What role(s) does AQAP play as a VNSA within Yemen? What is its position in the broader domestic, regional, global context?

Methodology, operationalization, and used data

This diploma thesis is taken as a one-case study with the goal of further deepening the understanding about this topic and bringing more clarity to our understanding of al-Qaeda's functioning in Yemen and also within the broader context of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula. The work is of an explanatory and descriptive character; its focus will be a detailed, geographically and temporally limited analysis of the topic at hand. These findings will be put into wider regional and global context and resulting implications will be analyzed from a broader perspective.

The goal of this thesis will be to analyze the case of al-Qaeda in Yemen, from the establishment and beginnings of the organization in this state, origin of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its development up to now. Since this conflict is currently ongoing, my goal will be to provide as recent information as possible including the year 2018. The thesis will try to understand al-Qaeda's position in Yemen and also the role it plays in Yemeni domestic political system; it will be shown how al-Qaeda is influencing and is being influenced by the ongoing civil war and other players, including other VNSAs and the state, taking part in it. It will also try to better understand al-Qaeda's role in Yemeni domestic and local politics and analyze how it took over Yemeni territory and how this territory was governed by this organization. It will be shown how this al-Qaeda branch falls into the broader, global structure of al-Qaeda and how it is internally diversified.

The thesis will use both primary and secondary sources. In its theoretical part, I will draw from academic articles, books, and other publications on the topic of violent non-state actors and their role in weak states and civil conflict (Chenoweth and Lawrence 2010; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Chaudry 2013; Idler and Forest 2015; Hoffman 2017; Perera 2015; Aydinli 2015; and many others). The topic of VNSAs is a popular one and there is no lack of theoretical background that can be applied to the case of this thesis. One of the ways to study this topic is to use the adjusted ARI framework (Aydinli 2015) that looks at the autonomy, representation, and influence of violent non-state actors and provides a good basis for starting out. The necessary facts about AQAP, like its military strength, economic sources and revenue, and facts about Yemen will be drawn from broad studies of international and non-profit organizations focusing on these topics, such as the World Bank, Fund for Peace, or the UN and their specialized agencies. Part of the analysis will also be claims and quotes, communications, publications, videos, and other sources that have a clear connection to al-Qaeda.

Structure of the thesis

- Introduction
- Theoretical Background on Violent Non-State Actors
- History of Violent Non-State Actors in Yemen
- Historical Developments: Establishment of Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Its Evolution. Establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.
- Analysis of AQAP through the theoretical lens of violent non-state actors.
- Conclusion and Possible Future(s)

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1. Introduction

It is undoubtable that research on the topic of non-state actors – violent or not - has been gaining prominence in the field of international relations. This development could be seen from the 1990s and continues until this day; this master thesis hopes to join what is, in my mind, the increasingly important field of study of violent non-state actors (VNSAs).

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a transnational terrorist group that operates in Yemen, is an example of such a violent non-state actor. While this group is well-known to global audiences as a perpetrator of terrorist attacks on Western targets (such as the attack on Charlie Hebdo in 2015 for which it claimed responsibility) and has been dubbed “the most lethal al-Qaeda franchise” (Council on Foreign Relations 2015), other aspects of its existence are less recognized and often understudied. These aspects include, most prominently, its domestic role in the chaotic Yemeni civil conflict that has been ongoing since 2011 and in Yemen’s society. Although the group is often reduced to its global agenda and the threat it poses to various actors outside Yemen – mainly Western states - it is often overlooked that simply categorizing the group as a transnational terrorist actor is insufficient and neglects the role it plays in Yemen. This affords us only a simplified look at what AQAP really is, how it functions, what are its goals and priorities, which can create distortions in our perception of the group precisely because we often disregard – or gloss over – local contexts in which the group exists. This thesis aims to study al-Qaeda in Yemen primarily in its local context and provide deeper understanding of the organization’s functioning. Furthermore, the research on the organization (and Yemen as a whole) has at times been overshadowed by other conflicts in the Middle Eastern region, most notably the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS. Available research on the topic has

also been very state-centric, meaning that AQAP has been analyzed most of the time by its relation to the state rather than independently.

In this thesis, I set out to study al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – abbreviated as AQAP – through the lens of violent non-state actor theory. For this purpose, I selected the ARI (Autonomy, Representation, Influence) framework by Ersel Aydinli, a prominent scholar in the study of VNSAs. By applying this framework to the workings of AQAP, I aim to provide an in-depth analysis about the group, its inner workings, capabilities, strengths all in the quest to deepen the current level of research on the topic. It is my opinion that while AQAP isn't thought to be a priority within the Yemeni civil war, without appropriate approach to combatting the group, the destabilized environment in Yemen is enabling AQAP's existence, continued evolution, and growing significance in Yemen's domestic politics. The key to countering the group and possibly defeating it lies in the thorough understanding of the group's inner workings, its goals, influence, and relationship with other domestic or international actors, as well as its relations with the broader Yemeni population. Given the extent of the humanitarian crisis, the chaotic situation on the ground, and a seeming lack of understanding of the local realities, research needs to propose a “more well-rounded understanding of local dynamics, actors, and interests” (Yadav and Lynch 2018, 4).

In my opinion, the need for a more well-rounded research also applies to the case of AQAP and its activities mainly in the southern provinces. International narratives tend to focus on the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its regional and global implications; or on the insurgency in the north between the Houthis and the Hadi and Saudi coalition (Yadav and Lynch 2018, 4). However, these topics often overshadow the developing situation in the south of the country where not only the threat of AQAP exists, but also where there is an ongoing rift between the secessionist Southern Transitional

Council and official regime forces, and the existence of tribes – often with competing visions and alliances – further complicates the situation (ibid.). The intervention of UAE in the South, combatting both Houthi forces and AQAP, has also added another layer to the conflict. Such complex and chaotic environment is benefitting AQAP as it can co-opt many of the actors’ grievances and extend its influence over the marginalized communities.

Most of the research within this thesis is focused on AQAP’s role as a domestic actor in Yemeni political arena and tracks the development of the group since its official inception in 2009 until today. This development includes a significant transformation from an actor focused on its global agenda to a domestic player with insurgent-like tactics; change in rhetoric and the group’s growing pragmatism; rising support for AQAP among the marginalized Yemeni populace; and a complex web of alliances and relationships it shares with nearly all the actors involved in the civil conflict, from the government to the local tribes.

It may seem that AQAP is only a marginal player in the broader Yemeni conflict. However, the group has manifested significant capabilities in governance, the ability to learn from its previous mistakes and embed itself into the fabric of the local population, great adaptability and flexibility even in the face of a strong opposition and loss of many leaders and members – all of which points to the fact that while the organization may not be quantitatively strong, it isn’t poised to leave Yemen anytime soon.

In the first part of the thesis, I will focus on providing theoretical underpinnings for the study of violent non-state actors as well as a detailed description of the ARI framework which will be used later in the text as a tool of analysis. The second part of the thesis provides general overview of the history of extremism and jihadism in Yemen since the 1980s which tracks the evolution of jihadism until the formation of al-Qaeda. What follows

is an account of the development and establishment of al-Qaeda in Yemen, its demise, and then its reemergence and the creation of AQAP. This section also provides a closer look at how AQAP functions and mentions the most important developments in its history. The third, and last, section provides the analysis based on the aforementioned ARI framework and is split into three sub-parts according to the categories of analysis. The thesis is summarized and concluded in the end and implications of the research are posited.

2. (Violent) Non-State Actors: Theoretical Background

This master's thesis and its topic – al-Qaeda in Yemen as a violent non-state actor (VNSA) – is aiming to become another part of the growing field of study of non-state actors within the international relations arena. Although the study of al-Qaeda and its offshoots and affiliates has been extremely popular (especially since the 9/11 attacks), there is a significant decline in research that focuses on studying al-Qaeda from the perspective of violent non-state actor theories. This thesis hopes to enlarge this field of study and, in the process, elucidate the inner workings, motivations, strategies, and position within the larger system of al-Qaeda's Yemeni branch called either al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or domestically known also as Ansar al-Sharia.

The rise of the non-state actor poses a significant challenge to the Westphalian order within which the state is considered the most important and relevant pillar of the international system. Since this transformation relates to the most fundamental building block of 'classical' international relations, the change in how we understand the international system is tremendous. The research dealing with this topic is fairly recent – it enjoyed a boom in the 1990s and has remained an important topic of study to this day – general theorizing on non-state often suffers from several shortcomings. These include a lack of universally-accepted conceptualization and study of fundamental theoretical underpinnings, overt focus on the state and its relation to non-state actors, and a shortage of theoretical frameworks enabling researchers to explore the topic further. Especially the 'statist' discourse has left a void in our understanding of how (V)NSAs operate, how they relate to each other and to their surroundings, or how they change and evolve. Additionally, as Aydinli (2016, 2) writes, it is ironic that significantly less attention is paid

to *violent* non-state actors even though they, arguably, pose a bigger challenge to the state than non-violent NSAs.

The working definition of non-state actor is very simple: it refers to any entities – individuals or organizations – that have enough power to influence its political surroundings but aren't a part of state or any of its institutions. A violent non-state actor is then an entity that fulfills this definition but additionally, uses illegal (i.e. illegitimate) violence to accomplish its goals (Chaudhry 2015, 167). This is just one of hundreds of definitions; Josselin and Wallace (2001, 3-4) define NSAs as organizations that a) are independent from the central government and its control, b) operates or participates in cross border networks, and c) acts in a way that aims at influencing political outcomes. One of the main differences that splits the NSAs into two categories can be drawn along the line of violence and whether or not the actors espouse violence as a tool for accomplishing their goals. According to Varin (2017, 5) VNSAs are groups of civilians “who are organized together in the illegitimate exercise of violence”. The provided definitions are very broad and among many; they can include a myriad of organizations and networks.

However, it is one of the hallmarks of (V)NSA study that even the most basic definitions of who/what constitutes a non-state actor aren't readily available and authors usually work with their own subjective understanding of the basic terms. This heterogeneity can even be seen on the most fundamental example – the differences in naming the group. Some authors use the term armed non-state actor or non-state armed group, some violent non-state actor, and others do not work with the general concept of (V)NSAs and rather focus on its concrete subgroups, e.g. rebel or terrorist groups. In this thesis, VNSAs are understood as groups distinct from the state that use illegitimate

violence to achieve their political goals and strategies which can (but does not have to) include the groups' opposition to the state.

Although it may seem to some that the idea of (violent) non-state actors is a novel one, this couldn't be further from the truth. Non-state actors have been around for hundreds of years and they have played significant parts in human history. However, it can be argued, that these actors have never been as significant to the international order as they have been for the last several decades as, up until the 20th century, most of these actors were overshadowed by the dominant standing of the state (Chaudhry 2015, 168). As Chaudhry (ibid.) states, "VNSAs play a prominent, often destabilizing role in nearly every humanitarian and political crisis faced by the international community." Furthermore, the rising prominence of non-state actors has been highlighted since the end of the Cold War when the field of IR started studying the diminished position and weakening of the state much more closely (Josselin and Wallace 2001, 11-12). This is not to say that the state as an entity has lost its importance and standing in the international system or that non-state actors have begun to dwarf the state. Rather, it is to say that the realm of international system has expanded to include many other new actors that are defined by their 'non-stateness'. These general claims are intentionally non-specific simply because of the diversity between various (violent) non-state actors. They range from transnational corporations, religious groups, non-governmental organizations, to criminal syndicates or people's liberation movements, to name a few examples. It is evident from the broad scope mentioned that the world of (V)NSAs is as heterogeneous as can be.

The rapid growth in number and types of (V)NSAs can be attributed to several changes that occurred in the last few decades. Among these are growth of cross-border trade; revolution in communication and information-sharing that enabled entities to communicate across borders more freely and quickly; the general trend of globalization

and global inter-connectedness in education, travel, politics which has contributed to the increase in the amount of cross-border interactions (Josselin and Wallace 2001, 1). Effects of globalization have provided ‘facilitators and force multipliers’ for VNSAs – in a globalized world, it is much easier for NSAs to gain access to weapons, funds, and other illicit resources (Chaudhry 2013, 174). Through globalization, the actors also have a better access to other sympathetic groups, states, or individuals which can often contribute financial or other types of support from all over the world.

2.1. State of research on (V)NSAs

A well-known theory within the realm of (V)NSAs is attributed to the work of Josselin and Wallace (2001) in which they created a framework distinguishing transnationalism and transgovernmentalism in regard to the power polity shift (Aydinli 2016, 3). Other authors have focused on studying concepts such as “informal violence”, “new warfare”, “private (or illicit) authority”, “power transfers between the state and the non-state” or “privatization of war” (ibid.). In regard to more security-oriented approaches, research has focused on the booming of irregular and asymmetric warfare or how VNSAs pose a threat to basic concepts (e.g. sovereignty). Research of VNSAs has often been a part of terrorism studies and focused on how these VNSAs can survive within the international system even when facing persistent opposition and persecution from the state – because of the independence from the state, this research is critical to understanding actorhood of VNSAs (Aydinli 2016, 6).

The studies that are most numerous in the field concern mainly the relationship between the state and the non-state actors; studies on how weak or failed governments relate to the emergence and growth of VNSAs; studies on how VNSAs exist and survive in

time of war; or how civil wars enable various non-state groups to take hold and increase their standing. From this we can see that, quite naturally, what has been the focus of the VNSA literature is the relationship between the state and the non-state. There are also studies available on how economic hardship, political and/or social grievances, authoritarian rule, and exclusion of certain groups from the political life enable formation of VNSAs (Davis 2009, 221). All in all, violent non-state actors are considered mostly a result of “regime instability, political disorder, violent conflict, and overall conditions of insecurity and violence” (ibid.). Similarly, as Krause and Milliken (2009, 210) state, a lot of research on VNSAs has centered around the topic of greed versus grievance. While this research has awarded us with many new insights on the topic, it is also guilty of creating another binary which does not account for the differentiated reality.

While this research is insightful, it can present a simplified understanding of VNSAs and their motivations and strategies – they often forgo the fact that sometimes these actors straddle both the state and society (Davis 2009, 223). Likewise, Valensi (2015, 59) stated that the discussion on the topic of non-state actors has “remained largely ‘state’ in a way that allows little room for a thorough understanding of non-state phenomena”. This can, in turn, create a sharp dividing line between the state and the non-state when, in reality, this boundary is blurred in many cases as a result of the vast complexities of the state/non-state relationship which can often be case-specific (ibid., 61). In this vein, Krause and Milliken (2009, 202) have also stated that the “label ‘non-state’ represents a barrier to understanding their multiple roles and functions” – claiming that by studying these actors in a ‘state-like’ function we are distancing ourselves from understanding the complex reality of violent non-state actors in their entirety.

Of course, the relationship between the state and the non-state actors is the most defining one within the study of NSAs as the existence of non-state groups is often

determined by the level and ‘style’ of opposition from the state. As Varin (2017, 2) writes, VNSAs usually prosper the most in places where the social contract between the state and its citizens is non-functioning or broken in one respect or another. Usually, if a VNSA faces a strong, determined, and credible state as its opponent, the chances of the VNSA’s defeat are fairly high (ibid.). However, it is important to note the changing paradigm of war itself – more and more often, the states stand in opposition to its citizens (ibid.). This line of thought spawned its own, vast research field on what has become known as the ‘new wars’.

There are classifications of VNSAs available that distinguish between various types of these actors. Although they can vary between texts, they often overlap. One of these typologies (Ezrow 2017) differentiates between de facto states and insurgencies, terror organizations and terror networks, marauding rebels and warlords, organized criminals and gangs, and PSCs and paramilitaries. The most well-known typology is probably the one distinguishing actors into warlords, militias, paramilitary forces, insurgencies, terrorist organizations, criminal organizations and gangs (Williams 2008).

As Durac (2015, 38) states, the mushrooming of NSAs included many VNSAs either forming or revitalizing themselves. The VNSA category includes many types of actors “including tribal and ethnic groups, warlords, drug traffickers, youth gangs, terrorists, militias, insurgents and transnational terrorist organizations” (ibid., 38). All of these groups differ in one way or another, so internal diversity within the realm of violent non-state actor is undoubtable. Another layer of complexity reveals itself when we add external factors to the mix – many foreign states support some (V)NSAs and fight against others. This means that the issue of non-state actors is not limited to one region or state, but rather can be seen as a geopolitical problem within the broader international community.

The study of the topic at hand – violent non-state actors and AQAP – in other academic theses of varying type in the Czech Republic hasn't been very widespread but most of the research has been recent, indicating a growing interest in VNSA study. There are theses focusing on the relationship between state and VNSAs (Eisnerová 2014) or territorial governance of VNSAs (Daniel 2012; Ludvík 2018); other works focus on counterterrorism and fight against VNSAs, mainly in the case of the US (Frumar 2015; Kopecká 2018). The case of the Yemeni civil war is also studied (Sejková 2018; Sadovenková 2012; Pařízková 2018) as well as Yemen as a failed state (Přikryl 2011) but AQAP usually plays a marginal role in these analyses. Studies also include discourse analysis of AQAP's media wing, for example, on the English-language magazine Inspire (Brzá 2017) or a broader study on militant Islamism in Yemen (Mádl 2012).

2.2. Transnational Terrorist Groups

While this thesis does not aim to study its object – al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – through the lens of the existing literature on terrorist groups but rather focus on the implications of a broader VNSAs analysis, it is nevertheless important to at least briefly introduce the study on terrorism as the studied group falls into the category of transnational terrorist actors, a specific subset of VNSAs.

Transnational terrorist groups refer to actors who operate through state borders and that profess “millennial, religious and other ideological goals, and which are networked across different states and territories in their operations” (Krause and Milliken 2009, 205). Usually their functioning is accompanied by spectacular showcase of violence that is meant to provoke fear and expose vulnerabilities. Even though their ‘death count’ is usually much smaller than those of insurgents, rebels, or criminal organization, their tactics

usually garner much attention (be it regional or international) for the group – and, subsequently, its cause which they can broadcast to a wider, sometimes global, audience.

Terrorist groups also suffer from the same lack of commonly accepted basic definitions as does the field of non-state actors study (Badey 1998; Phillips 2015). While the academic definitions usually try to encompass as much information as possible – in Badey’s words (1998, 90), they are “often lengthy, over-complicated and defy common usage”, and it is common that the governmental definitions are usually too vague so as to create a bigger umbrella that could be used for politically advantageous interpretation of various events (ibid.).

Terrorism has a few fundamental elements that appear in most definitions: intentional violence; this violence is used as a tactic to spread fear to a wide audience; and such behavior is politically motivated which is also the most debated point (Phillips 2015, 227). Terrorism is employed by groups (transnational or not) but also by individuals – so-called lone wolves. Definitions of terrorist groups vary – some say that all groups who use terrorism as a tactic belong in the category; some say that terrorist groups are those that have no territorial control (to distinguish them from guerilla groups); others say that terrorist groups are subnational entities; that terrorist groups are those who employ terrorism tactics regularly and primarily; and many others (Phillips 2015, 227-237). The difference between various understanding of the concept does not only blur the true meaning of what constitutes a terrorist group, but it can also contribute to difficulties during comparative studies or macro-level studies that would combine groups based on different definitions.

Terrorist groups can be motivated by a plethora of ideas, strategies, and goals. Currently, the ‘Fourth Wave’ of international terrorism has been underway since 1979 and the Iranian evolution – it is characterized by its religion-centric and millennium-oriented

ideologies (Klein 2016, 868). However, religion is not the only factor empowering terrorist groups of today. Even the well-studied Islamic terrorism can be misunderstood – the terrorist groups involved have different interpretations of Islam, jihad, or their general goals (whether they are ‘strategic’ or ‘universal’/abstract) (ibid., 870). Universal Islamic terrorist groups tend to aim at changing the world order, or some of its very basic tenets; these groups also usually bypass the government as these goals can seldom be accomplished through the ‘official’ way. These groups also usually engage in more lethal attacks (ibid.). Strategic groups are on the other side of the spectrum – Hamas is a good example of a group that engages with the government, its goals are limited in scope (geographical or ideological), and it mostly operates domestically (ibid.).

2.3. The ARI framework

Building on some of the theoretical foundations described above, Aydinli (2015, 428) created the ARI (Autonomy, Representation, Influence) framework for studying violent non-state actors and their ‘actorness’ – a term most-well known for its connection to studies of the EU as an actor of IR. This framework aims to better understand position of VNSAs within a broader political context and to describe its ‘global political potential’ (ibid.). All of the three main categories are meant to elucidate the inner workings of violent non-state actors and try and help to place them along an actorness spectrum. It is important to note that autonomy, representation, and influence aren’t ‘either/or’ concepts but rather continuums that try to accommodate the complexity of the studied phenomena.

What follows is an overview of the ARI framework, which will be used in this thesis on the particular topic of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The next passages will

describe as well as possible the framework and its details based on which my analysis of the case at hand will be built. All of the criteria will be discussed individually and in detail.

2.3.1. Autonomy

Aydinli (2015, 428-429) first talks of autonomy: in essence, the dynamic spectrum of independence from the state, international system, or persecution from either that the group enjoys. The ‘autonomy’ category can be further split into two: distance from the state and distance from the state-centric regime (ibid., 429-430).

Distance from the state refers to the amount of ties the VNSA has to the state and how ‘ beholden ’ it is to the state – meaning, for example, the amount of financial or infrastructural support it receives and how *dependent* the group is on this support (ibid.). This distinction of being beholden to the state is an important one. Many violent non-state groups are connected to the state – they use their territory, are supported or paid by the state, or cooperate with it in some other way. However, if the actor is dependent on this support to survive, or if it has to do the state’s bidding, it’s autonomy will be quite low. If the group is able to survive without support from states while it is in conflict with (some of) them, we could say that the group enjoys a high degree of autonomy (ibid.). Furthermore, Aydinli makes a distinction in this degree of autonomy by distinguishing ‘being able to survive without state support’ (passive autonomy) and ‘being able to survive state persecution’ (active autonomy) (Aydinli 2016, 9).

On the other hand, **distance from the state-centric regime** refers to the VNSA’s distance from the ‘legitimate’ system of “state-based institutions and organizations, practices, instruments, and norms” (Aydinli 2015, 430). This refers to how well the organization is able to supplement this system by creating an alternative one so that it is able to survive, and also to how well the group is able to take advantage of weaknesses in

the existing regimes (e.g. within weak and failing states) (ibid.). If the VNSA manages to create a new, alternative regime instruments or utilize the existing state system and its shortcomings, its autonomy increases (Aydinli 2016, 10).

2.3.2. Representation

Secondly, Aydinli (2015, 430-435) talks about representation as a criterion for assessing VNSAs. Representation refers to the ideas, opinions, visions, and goals that are shared by its members and followers. The purpose of common identity in this case is twofold: it keeps the group organized and coherent, and it helps the group to regenerate and grow (ibid.). The main purpose behind tracking representation is to find out whether the group is able to continually provide for its constituents and in turn keep itself meaningful and active (Aydinli 2016, 11). This includes improving the group's recruitment and attracting new members while also maintaining its old membership; generating loyalty from its members, legitimacy, and level of recognition as well (ibid.). However, rather than focus on concrete ways that VNSAs use to attract and recruit new members (which are too numerous), the author focuses on "underlying support mechanisms for recruitment capacity" (ibid.).

Regeneration refers to how the group is able to maintain its followers and gain new ones. If the common identity is defined by geographical belonging of its members, it's potential for growth is much smaller than a group whose identity is defined by religion or ideology (Aydinli 2015, 431). Another point of regeneration is the question of legitimacy and whether the group is able to legitimize itself in the eyes of its members, current or future or the group's audience(ibid.). Of course, the term 'legitimacy' is in this case divorced from its normative meaning in legal terms – rather, it refers to the belief of the members that the particular VNSA is able to fulfill its promises and proposed agenda and

people view it as a valid actor in the particular system. Aydinli (2015, 432) claims that the group in question “must present itself as a viable alternative representative of, and provider for, the targeted constituents”. In order for a VNSA to be able to carry out these functions, it has to make use of illicit means because it cannot use legal resources and institutions.

To accomplish this - providing security, financial rewards, social services, among others – the VNSAs use violence to achieve their goals and keep themselves alive. The use of violence and whether it is an effective tool of wielding power and influence has been a debated question in academia (Abrahams 2012; Krause 2013; Downes 2007; and others). Some have pointed out that the use of radical violence, such as terrorist acts, is an ineffective tool. Others claims that it is important to look at this tactic within a certain context – if it allows the actor to accomplish some of its proposed goals (rather than the entirety of their stated objectives), it can be viewed as, at least, a partially effective strategy. Additionally, the media coverage and the ‘spectacularity’ of such a strategy can also accomplish several goals on its own – be it propagating the group’s agenda or reaching possible new audiences.

Naturally, it is never enough for a VNSA to be able to ‘only’ gain new members – more importantly, if the VNSA is to be functioning and effective, it requires loyalty of its members. Loyalty is described by Aydinli (2015, 433) as “the degree and depth to which members feel connected to the group”. A loyal member base strengthens the position of the VNSAs and boosts its internal legitimacy, subsequently also how well it is represented in the broader arena and what influence it wields. Additionally, a loyal member base can mean greater adaptability and thus, longer ‘livelihood’ for a VNSA. It is also important to ask whether the VNSA’s members can feel ‘double loyalty’ – to state and the non-state actor at the same time – if we are to talk about a ‘polity shift’ from the state to the non-

state. The question then becomes whether the VNSA is able to substitute state's role in an individual's life and how well this process works.

However, it may present a problem if the VNSA was to grow too rapidly – a fear of 'overstretch' is, therefore, reasonable (especially for VNSAs with greater potential member base). The main reason behind this is the possibility that the member base will grow so much that it will create internal divisions vis-à-vis their common identity and shared ideas (i.e. the members will no longer create a homogeneous, cohesive group but, rather, an internally diversified community). There is also a worry that rapid growth may result in inefficient management of the VNSA, as the group cannot/does not know how to manage a group of a much bigger size (Aydinli 2015, 434). Overstretch can also be classified as 'territorial' (expanding controlled territory too quickly/to an unmanageable size) or 'deterritorial' (management becomes ineffective and/or increased chance of mistakes; loss of ideological and/or operational cohesiveness) (Aydinli 2016, 14-15). These reasons might make the group more vulnerable to persecution by the state.

2.3.3. Influence

Thirdly, the author describes the last factor, influence which can otherwise be described as the capabilities and capacity to exact the group's vision and goals in the broader political arena. There are ways to study influence of NSAs – for example, by looking at their membership in various international institutions and how they influence political outcomes through these official structures (Aydinli 2015, 435). However, quite obviously, this is an inadequate way to measure influence of violent NSAs that are often deemed illegal and illegitimate by the broader international order (Aydinli 2015, 435) – but this does not mean that such actors cannot influence their surroundings or the international arena. The author thus studies influence by two factors: sustainability and impact.

Sustainability, according to Aydinli (2015, 436), refers to “being based on a deterrent-free motivation and having adequate flexibility and adaptability”. By deterrent free, the author means that the group and its members must be able to carry on in their existence and actions even in the face of persecution and opposition from the state (which can usually be presupposed in the case of VNSAs). This strong motivation to continue fighting even in face of tremendous opposition can be driven by vision of monetary gain, ideology, religion. However, the author claims that “ideological principles, in particular religion-based ones, have been shown to be the deepest and most binding, and therefore are arguably the most deterrent-free” (Aydinli 2016, 17).

Another factor of sustainability are **flexibility** and **adaptability** (Aydinli 2015, 136.). By flexibility, the author means the willingness of the VNSA to change its tactics, infrastructure, or general strategy extremely fast – the quicker the actor can regroup and adapt, the more chance it stands in opposition to the state. These changes can include even the willingness to change the group’s core ideology (ibid.). The group may also need to change its location to what the author calls a “transnational space” which can be termed as locations where the state has diminished reach and the space is less accessible to state regulation – either physical spaces like failed states, and non-physical spaces, e.g. cyberspace (Aydinli 2016, 17.). In face of persecution, these spaces allow the VNSA to regroup, continue to evolve, and hide from its opposition. Additionally, these spaces can contribute to expand resource capabilities (e.g. illegal armament) and subsequently, empower the group’s chances of long-term survival (ibid.)

In regard to **impact**, according to the framework, there exist two types – the degree to which the VNSA’s impact is compelling (i.e. it compels a reaction from opposition), and the degree to which it is transformative (i.e. leads to change in opposition’s behavior) (Aydinli 2015, 437). When the opposition is required to respond to the VNSA, it must

acknowledge the group's existence and recognize it. Once again, VNSAs are almost never legitimized by the state as it can happen with nonviolent NSAs (positive recognition). However, some violent non-state actors can use their violent tactics and asymmetric warfare to transform into a non-state actor that is granted recognition by the state (Aydinli 2016, 18). It must be noted that not all VNSAs would use this strategy as their goals and tactics might differ altogether. For example, in the case of terrorist attacks and suicide terrorism, it can be argued that terrorist groups can use this tactic to pressure the state into withdrawing its military from certain territories (ibid.).

This section of the thesis provided the theoretical background of violent non-state actor study and provided basic definitions of the broad category; subsequently, Aydinli's ARI framework was presented and explained, as this is going to form the backbone of the analysis. What follows next is a chapter detailing the necessary context of extremism and jihadism in Yemen so as to provide a historical record of the developments that, in one way or another, enabled AQAP to exist in its current form. Furthermore, it also talks more closely about the group's origins and evolution while also providing a brief overview of the group's structure, ideology, and goals. This particular part does not offer an all-encompassing information on the group as most of this information is a part of the analysis based on the theoretical underpinnings within the first chapter.

3. Extremism and Violent Non-State Actors in Yemen

The emergence of violent extremism in the form of salafi-jihadi organizations in Yemen can be dated back to the 1980s when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan mobilized large portions of Muslims who wished to join the conflict in disagreement with the USSR

military invasion. These sentiments of anger and injustice at seeing the developments in Afghanistan reached Yemen, too. Figures like al-Wadi'i or al-Zindani, both well-known Islamic scholars, have been credited for reviving Salafism in Yemen, mainly through their educational institutions, which were also used to recruit thousands of Yemenis to join the fight in Afghanistan (McDonnell et al. 2017, 5). It is important to note that these scholars were representatives of traditional Salafism rather than violent jihadist-Salafism represented by al-Qaeda and while they mobilized Islamic fighters, they did not espouse radical ideology akin to current AQ dogmas.

After the end of the war, many Yemenis wished to return home – and the Yemeni government was one of few in the region that openly welcomed returning fighters (McDonnell et al. 2017, 5). This has contributed to many mujahedeen flocking to Yemen, creating a disorderly faction that would be later used even by President Saleh in the 1990s and would play a significant role in the development of the newly-unified nation (ibid.). These fighters would go on to establish and play roles as violent non-state actors engaging in terrorism and in the case of al-Qaeda, also transnational violence. They would be similar in their religious ideology – establishing a ‘true’ and ‘legitimate’ Islamic state based on shari’a law, rejecting ‘illegitimate’ secular governments, and opposing Western and non-Islamic way of life.

There is little doubt that Yemen has provided extremism an enabling environment in which it has developed more extensively than in other neighboring countries. The Yemeni political system – centered for decades around President Saleh and the surrounding elites - has been known for its ineffective and exclusionary governance, high levels of corruption, patronage politics or rigged elections, which are all drivers of anger and frustration among the populace (McDonnell et al. 2017, 11). The Yemeni system is often built on alliances between various parties who share a common enemy, highlighting

identity division, harsh exclusionary rhetoric towards opponents and growing sectarianism within the country (ibid.). This narrative causes division among the population and can be used as legitimization of VNSAs. These aspects of the political system have been around virtually since Yemeni unification in 1990 – in large part, they are also what fueled the civic unrest in the country's history. It is unsurprising that since 2011, the conditions for creating an enabling environment for extremism have improved. The frustration and anger between Yemenis is widespread and has reached unprecedented levels – in a survey from 2011, only 3% Yemenis expressed that they thought Yemen was going in the right direction (ibid.); it is very likely that this number dropped even lower after the worsening of the domestic situation.

Another significant factor contributing to the disillusionment of the Yemeni population and increasing the possibility for the spread of extremism can be found in recurring economic crises, poor governance, underdevelopment, inadequate government services such as education, health care, or the maintenance of law and order. Furthermore, many Yemenis have negative perception towards Western states and organization, and to some extent towards Gulf states, that are intervening in Yemeni domestic affairs (McDonnell et al. 2017, 12). The continued presence of these states within Yemen further contributes to creating a permissive environment in which violent non-state actors can flourish; the abovementioned factors also create an environment in which more people are prone to radicalization because of their political, economic, and social grievances, all within the context of a widespread, chaotic conflict.

The chaos created by the ongoing, complex conflict has enabled the proliferation and mushrooming of VNSAs in the country and gain previously unseen prominence. It is violent non-state actors that use these grievances to their advantage, building on

inequalities, poor provision of basic goods, services, and security, ‘war fatigue’, growing tensions and sectarianism or ‘internationalization’ of the war by foreign powers.

Additionally, the domestic and international focus has, for the most part, been turned on the Houthi rebellion, which in turn allowed other actors to exist and act more freely and virtually unchecked and without significant opposition. This ‘category’ encompasses AQAP as well which has, to a certain amount (because of various CT operations), benefitted from the lack of government attention that has been focused elsewhere. In an environment where there are many VNSAs that enjoy significant leeway in their actions, it is unsurprising that an almost-ideal habitat has been unintentionally made for the VNSA boom. This is further supported by the fact that since the 1990s the government and various groups have had a history of co-opting various VNSAs for political and military gain (e.g. returning mujahedeen fighters used to fight against the Marxist Southern regime in the early 1990s) – in a way, this approach has legitimized these actors to an extent, in that the group’s existence was acknowledged by the state and the actors benefitted from this cooperation because of gained benefits (such as freedom to exist without significant persecution, gaining government positions, connections or influence, and subsequent legitimization in the eyes of the populace).

From the above-stated facts, it can be seen that the main drivers behind Yemeni extremism are mostly of economic or political nature rather than being religiously-motivated. While various VNSAs and jihadi-Salafist organizations have been active in Yemen throughout the decades, they have never enjoyed significant or overwhelming support of the population. They have been supported mainly for non-religious reasons such as interferences in Yemeni domestic politics by foreign states and organizations, poor governance, corruption, and lack of basic resources and services (McDonnell, Burbridge

and Salloum 2017, 8). The motivations behind supporting violent non-state actors (in this case AQAP) will be further discussed in this thesis.

3.1. Yemen and the implications of failing governance

As was mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis, much research and discussion on the topic of VNSAs or, more precisely, transnational terrorist groups like AQAP, has been focused on the connection between the emergence and existence of violent non-state actors and weak/failing/failed states (Aliyev 2017; Newman 2007; Coggins 2015; Piazza 2008; many others). This literature often debates the topic of grievances and how they are co-opted by VNSAs in order to increase the group's influence, membership, or receptive audience. In the case of Yemen, the amount of grievances suffered by most of the population cannot be understated, ranging from lack of security and ongoing conflict to the astonishing number of people suffering from hunger or diseases. Although there have been political and diplomatic dialogues and attempts at resolution of the conflict, these efforts have done little to help the actual Yemeni population (Zimmerman 2014, 4). In fact, most of these peace talks were between the two warring sides – the Houthis and the pro-government forces – while other key actors in the country are left out, best seen on the example of members of the growing Southern Transitional Council (Slemrod 2018). The disconnection between peace negotiations and reality on the ground that is much more complex can also be seen as a potential driver for supporting extremism as a way of opposing exclusion from the 'official' channels.

Lackner (2018) wrote that “the main characteristic of the Hadi government is its absence.” This concisely sums up the root of many grievances present among the population – availability of services, water, food, electricity is non-existent in some parts

of the country. Furthermore, state institutions have largely disintegrated as the regime didn't pay state employees' salaries (ibid.). The regime fails to provide security and health services, review and adjudicate legal cases, or offer basic public services. In 2017, it was estimated that over 17 million people didn't have access to even the most basic health services; over 11 million people needed assistance in the provision of security and safety; an estimated 8 million people have lost their livelihoods (UN OCHA 2017). Similarly, Yemen's porous borders, another sign of failing governance, contribute to the spread of extremism and violent jihadi-Salafism as possible new AQAP members can enter the country without much trouble.

The government's ability to effectively govern the country has been eroded for years before the outbreak of the war – historically, Yemen included many factions that felt economically and politically marginalized in the country. Marginalization and underdevelopment – increasingly heightened by the conflict – has been used as a narrative for the justification of the Houthi rebellion and has been one of long-standing reasons for the North-South Yemen conflictual tensions (Zimmerman 2014, 6-7). Marginalization often fuels people's feeling of anger and dissatisfaction with the central government, making the population more receptive to extremist 'Robin Hood' messages.

The availability of humanitarian aid incoming into the country has been fluctuating because of the periodic economic blockade of Yemen by the Saudi coalition and because of occurrences of misappropriation of the aid (Walsh 2018). The Yemeni humanitarian crisis is reaching historic proportions – almost 18 million Yemenis, out of total 29 million, are food insecure and the country stands on the brink of famine (Casey 2018). The conflict and situation in Yemen has been dubbed the world's worst humanitarian crisis today (Almosawa et al. 2017; Walsh 2018). Similarly, the UN SG, Antonio Guterres, claimed that in the conflict's fourth year (since the beginning of the Houthi takeover in 2014/2015)

“more than 22 million – three quarters of the population need humanitarian aid and protection” (United Nations 2018).

The gradual worsening of the humanitarian situation in the country has been often attributed to the tactics of the Saudi-led coalition forces which has followed a highly-criticized, almost-indiscriminate bombing campaign which has affected many civilians and non-combatants. Saudi Arabia’s strategy has been criticized for purposefully targeting Yemeni food sources and the fishing industry in order to cripple food production and distribution (Craig 2018). Furthermore, the three-year campaign has also taken its toll on Yemen’s water sources and sanitation centers which has, in turn, created a health epidemic and unprecedented spread of cholera; more than 19 million people live without access to clean water (Suter 2018). Another criticism aimed at the Saudi-led coalition concerns the unnecessary killing of civilians – examples include a school bus bombing in which 40 children and 11 adults died in August 2018 (Borger 2018) or a 2016 funeral hall bombing in which 140 people died and 600 others were wounded (The Guardian 2016).

In addition to the air warfare, Saudi Arabia has also been behind periodic economic blockades and sanctions against Yemen (Karasz 2018). This has caused a sharp rise in prices at a time when people lack the funds necessary to obtain food and basic necessities - those have become a luxury item for many on the Yemeni market. Coupled with the high unemployment rate and the regime’s inability to pay staff salaries, most of Yemenis are unable to support themselves and their living standards have dropped dramatically.

3.2. History of al-Qaeda in Yemen

Yemen’s history of violent jihadi-Salafist actors and sympathizers can be traced back at least to the 1980s when the war in Afghanistan was raging on. At some

opportunities, jihadists claimed that Yemen was one of the best places where jihad could evolve and develop more-or-less independently without much interference. Its rural population in the distant and marginalized hinterlands, harsh terrain, geostrategic and oil-rich location, proximity to Saudi Arabia and the ‘heart of Islam’, and Yemen’s tribal networks are all long-term factors why Yemen has been viewed favorably by the jihadists and other violent actors (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 19). Together with an enabling environment - written about in the previous chapter – Yemen was seen as an almost-ideal place. This has been relevant mainly since the 1980s as in this time, several prominent jihadists identified the country as promising for religious revolution; Osama Bin Laden has even been cited that the idea for the establishment of al-Qaeda “germinated ten years ago in the earth of Yemen” (ibid.). Furthermore, he also claimed that Yemen would be a suitable place for AQ to possibly rebuild if the Afghanistan base was to be lost – an opinion shared also by Hasan al-Tajiki, AQ member and author of recovered letters, or Abu Musab al-Suri, dubbed “architect of the new Al-Qaeda” (Cruickshank and Ali 2006).

What follows is a quick and thorough overview of jihadist and al-Qaeda history within Yemen in which I present the developments of these VNSAs and place their existence into broader context. The overview is split into three main periods. The last and most recent period - that includes the foundation and existence of AQAP – will be elaborated on in the most detail, as it is this thesis’ topic. Information about AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia will be given together with an account of anti-AQ counterterrorist campaign that has been waged against this VNSA.

It is important to note that while this thesis discusses the long-term presence of al-Qaeda in Yemen and its historical roots, this does not mean that each of the violent jihadist actors who preceded AQAP are analytically conflated and identical. Each of the jihadi groups – Islamic Jihad in Yemen, Army of Aden Abyan, or al-Qaeda in Yemen – is

distinct in its own way and as Koehler-Derrick (2011, 15) argues, neither of these organizations managed to reach the sophistication and influence of AQAP. Neither of al-Qaeda's predecessors shared its cohesive ideological narrative and its global aims or significant operational capacity needed for resilience and regeneration necessary to survive (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 21-22).

3.2.1. 1990-1999

A closer account on extremism and the revival of Salafism was provided in the previous chapter; this part will be concerned with AQ in Yemen and its predecessors. The history of al-Qaeda's roots in Yemen can be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. Bin Laden - closely bound to Yemen, his ancestral home, and its neighbor, Saudi Arabia, his birthplace – had aims to expand al-Qaeda into these two countries during the 1990s (Knoll 2017, 12). It was also Bin Laden who was in support of a central role for Yemen in his transnational jihadi agenda (CFR 2015). His interest in Yemen, the birthplace of his father, manifested as soon as 1988 when he began financing and arming jihadism in the country in opposition to the Soviet-backed, Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY; South Yemen) (ibid.).

As was mentioned earlier, many Yemenis who felt the need to act had joined the fight in Afghanistan against intervening Soviet army which ended officially in 1989. Anti-Soviet jihad fighters started to return to a recently re-unified Yemen after the war's end and the gradual withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Yemen was one of few countries that openly welcomed returning fighters which is the reason behind its multinational jihadi community (McDonnell et al. 2017, 5). Many mujahedeen flocked to Yemen because of its suitable environment with limited persecution and Yemen's porous borders, creating a disorderly 'faction' that would be co-opted even by the government in

the 1990s and would end up playing a significant role in the development of the newly-unified nation (ibid.). In the incoming mujahedeen, the North Yemeni government saw an influx of new fighters that could be helpful in its fight against South Yemen. This alignment and co-optation of Islamists was supported by the Islah party, a Sunni Islamist party with close ties to Muslim Brotherhood that provided a political outlet for the returning fighters. President Saleh and Islah of North Yemen stood in opposition to the southern Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and used jihadists to attack and erode YSP's capabilities. The jihadists were used by the government frequently in the early 1990s; some of them were even legitimized by the Saleh government and gained influence within the government structures, some were hailed as heroes.

At the same time, a group of mujahedeen who used to train under Bin Laden in Afghanistan have joined in 1990 to form a new organization, "Islamic Jihad in Yemen" (IJY) – likely the first jihadi organization in the unified state and a predecessor to al-Qaeda – which disbanded in 1993/1994. After disbandment of IJY, dozens of its former members would become a part of a new jihadist group, the Army of Aden Abyan (AAA), the first jihadist VNSA with a transnational agenda in Yemen. It pledged loyalty to Bin Laden and AQ, and focused on Western targets until its leader was killed in 1998/1999 and the group disbanded (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 29). While these two AQ-linked groups have played roles in Yemeni domestic politics – the IJY as a proxy to fight the secessionist South, the AAA creating a 'template' for AQ, combing local grievances and Western expansion - their significance is limited by their short existence (ibid.). Both of these groups have been involved in terrorist attacks on their opponents (mainly in the South) and AQ-linked attacks on the US that happened as soon as 1992 when a hotel in Aden housing US troops was attacked (International Crisis Group 2017, 2-3).

Even though the two groups were different from AQ in a myriad of factors, they both had strong links to Bin Laden and managed to pave a way and create a functioning ‘template’ for existence of Islamist VNSAs in Yemen which al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) benefitted from. The first steps towards establishing an ‘official’ AQ branch in Yemen can be traced back to 1998 when Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a Saudi national and future head of AQ operations in the Persian Gulf, suggested directly to Bin Laden an attack on a US warship in Aden’s port – this warship would be the USS Cole, attacked in 2000, which killed 17 US soldiers (International Crisis Group 2017, 3). The success of the attack and the global media attention made al-Nashiri a prominent AQ figure and a US target; another person of significance was Abu Ali al-Harithi, identified as the most senior AQ member in Yemen who was a part of the *USS Cole* and *MV Limburg* attacks (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 32). However, it is likely that rather than a show of AQY’s capabilities, the attack was an act of simple opportunism from al-Nashiri and other AQ-backed associates (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 31). At this time, al-Qaeda in Yemen was most likely just an idea being slowly – and maybe almost unintentionally – realized.

3.2.2. 2000-2006

The first attack of al-Qaeda in Yemen – at this point, not a cohesive and independent organization – on *USS Cole* in October 2000 was followed by a quiet period of time when the group didn’t appear to be very active (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 33). Nevertheless, the next suicide bombing of a French tanker, *MV Limburg*, in 2002 can be seen as a “clear turning point in the early development of a truly indigenous” AQ since many members of the *Limburg* cell played a role in future AQAP endeavors (ibid.).

It was the 2000 USS Cole attack that brought Yemen global attention as one of the ‘hotbeds’ of violent jihadi terrorism. After the attack, the US responded with a full-scale

investigation after which the leader of the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda – al-Harithi – was killed in a missile strike in November 2002 (Lewis 2013, 85). Together with al-Harithi's death, nearly all of AQ leaders in the country were arrested or killed – this turn of events had crippled the nascent organizations (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 35). The organization didn't manage to exist long enough to create significant ties, networks, and defense mechanisms that would allow it to continue to exist even after its main leaders were jailed (ibid.). Furthermore, with the US pressure (only heightened by the events of 9/11) on the Yemeni government in regard to the War on Terror and its insistence that the Yemenis respond to the terrorist threat, the Saleh regime together with the US moved against the jihadists in counterterrorist operations. The relationship between Saleh and the violent jihadists has been questioned, as well as the nature of the Yemeni CT campaign – this topic will be explored later in the text, in a part relating specifically to CT efforts of various actors.

The crackdown on the jihadists and AQY has helped the government tighten its grip on the extremists within the country and has been generally viewed as successful. It can be said that by 2003, Yemen together with US support had managed to mostly dismantle al-Qaeda in Yemen after killing or imprisoning its top members, simultaneously as the Saudi authorities took a similar hardline approach to combatting al-Qaeda (Knoll 2017, 26). It seemed that the group was as good as dead. However, the two governments both shifted focus quickly after they deemed al-Qaeda dealt with – the Yemenis turned to the al-Houthi problem, the US to anti-corruption programs (Boucek 2009).

At the end of 2003, the problem of violent jihadism in Yemen seemed to be contained. In hindsight, it can be judged that while AQY wasn't able to operate and was incapacitated, the counterterrorist strategy didn't manage to defeat the organization wholly. This can be seen from the quickness of its recovery and reemergence after the 2006 Sana'a prison break in which 23 AQ-linked detainees escaped into southern provinces of Abyan,

Hadramout, and Shabwa. The official story was that the prisoners dug out a tunnel with the help of spoons and plates (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 8-9). However, some analysts believe that some persons from the Saleh regime aided the escape as a way of covertly pressuring the US into increasing its counterterrorism funds after it withdrew some of its financial aid (ibid.).

Between the escaped prisoners were also Qasim al-Raymi and Nassar al-Wuyashi who would both become founders and leaders of AQAP in the future. Jamal Ahmad al-Badawi who was involved in the *USS Cole* bombing and Jabel al-Banna, a US citizen of Yemeni descent and a member of the ‘Lackawanna Six’¹ are both still present on the FBI Most Wanted Terrorists list. The prison escape was detrimental in revitalizing the declining, almost non-existent violent jihadism of AQ in Yemen. Within the chaotic context of the Middle East region, AQ had an opportunity to regroup and gain new strength in remote Yemeni areas. The terrain provided good hideouts and was appropriate for smuggling activities which funded the group and provided it with a good start for their operations (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 9).

3.2.3. 2006-2018

The difference between its predecessors and what was at this time called al-Qaeda in the Land of the Yemen was evident shortly after the prison escapes from the amount of operations (and simultaneous propaganda through media) it staged (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 37). In its first official release in October 2006, the group called for the renouncement of secularism and cessation of ties with the US (ibid., 40).

¹ Lackawanna Six, or the Buffalo Six, is a group of 6 US citizens of Yemeni descent that were convicted of sympathizing with AQ and providing material support for the group. They travelled to Afghanistan in 2001 where they visited the al-Farouq training camp (Satkalmi 2004).

In January 2009, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was formed by the joining of Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda branches into one, after the Saudi counterterrorism efforts forced the Saudi branch of AQ to move across the border into Yemen (International Crisis Group 2017, 4). The merger was introduced in a video of al-Wuhaysi, al-Raymi, al-Shishiri (al-Wuhyashi's deputy, former Guantanamo detainee), and al-Awfi (field commander, former Guantanamo detainee) titled "*We start from here and we will meet at al-Aqsa²*" (Hellmich 2012, 619). At the head of the newly-formed VNSA stood six Yemeni and six Saudi jihadists. In the merger of the two AQ branches, the Yemeni al-Qaeda was able to gain new sources of funding from Saudi Arabia and also gain know-how on better bomb-making skills and gain from the combined experiences of the leaders (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 10). AQAP was officially designated a foreign terrorist organization by the US government in January 2010.

The official establishment of AQAP was followed by a significant media campaign and 6 attacks on government employees or foreigners in the span of 11 months (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 47). Simultaneously, AQAP staged its attacks both within and beyond the Yemeni borders – domestically, in the Hadramout province (2009 suicide bombing of South Korean tourists), regionally, in Saudi Arabia (the 2009 attempted murder of Saudi counterterrorism chief, Mohammad Bin Nayef) and globally, in the US (attempted 2009 Christmas day bombing) (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 50). We can see that by 2010, the group still managed to operate 'two-track' strategy – both global and domestic – which would later change in favor of domestic and local interests (Zimmerman 2013). In the period of time between 2006 and 2011, AQAP still waged a relatively low-intensity terrorist campaign with increasing sophistication (McDonnell et al. 2017, 6).

² Al-Aqsa – a mosque in the Old city of Jerusalem; the third holiest place of Islam.

The group has expanded its area of operations since January 2011 when the Yemeni crisis began with protests against the Saleh regime (Zimmerman 2014, 2). These protests created a suitable environment for various VNSAs because they could appropriate their opposition to the state to fit their own agendas. AQAP realized that if the group was to retain its relevance, it must create a rhetoric around which Yemenis could rally and in this way, increase its involvement in domestic affairs. During this time, AQAP's strategy changed from an internationally-focused one to an organization with "significant local insurgency component" (International Crisis Group 2017, 6). AQAP's campaign has grown in size and ambition, launching an insurgency in the south and intermittently seizing territory (McDonnell et al. 2017, 6). In the following years and within the chaos of the civil conflict, the group has enjoyed a rise in influence and popular support. In 2011, the group also created a parallel organization – Ansar al-Sharia – which managed to control significant territory in the south for various periods of time.

For the first time after the Battle of Zinjibar, it gained control of several southern cities, among them also Abyan, the provincial capital and governed in the area for more than a year (International Crisis Group 2017, 7). Interestingly, AAS/AQAP didn't lose control over the city due to military or economic losses but rather because it lost public support after AQAP crucified a man in Ja'ar (Al-Awsari 2018, 11). AQAP suffered a setback after President Hadi replaced President Saleh in 2012; the government and local forces managed to drive out AQAP from Abyan and surrounding areas, while Hadi gave the US 'carte blanche' on CT operations (International Crisis Groups 2017, 7-9). Even though there were voices in the US and Yemeni administrations saying that AQAP had been officially defeated (once again) in 2012, this claim has shown to be untrue in the following months (Zimmerman 2014, 10). In spite of setbacks, the group managed to hold

its presence in the southern provinces and managed to launch attacks even after losing control of much territory (ibid.).

The next, even more ambitious, ‘high-intensity’ campaign followed in 2015 when AQAP took advantage of the created power vacuum and attention that was shifted elsewhere in the context of the intensifying fight against the Houthis. Preceding this high-intensity campaign was rapid Houthi expansion into nearly all provinces which caused outrage among the local populace on which AQAP built much of its propaganda and rhetoric (Al-Awsari 2018, 12). In the following months, AQAP fought the Houthi rebels – at one point, on 11 different fronts (Shaheen 2015), increased its popular support, for the first time moved into Taiz and Aden and surrounding areas, and AQAP-affiliated groups took over Hootah (Lahij Province), Mukalla (Hadramout Province), and retook Zinjibar and Ja’ar (Al-Awsari 2018, 12). The group learned from its previous failures in governing and ruled these areas until 2016 when UAE CT efforts drove AQAP out of the southern towns and areas.

AQAP’s influence waned after it was driven out of Mukalla by UAE and US forces in 2016 (even though this operation is also thought to be backed by a secret deal in which AQAP agreed to move out of the city – a point elaborated on later in the text), and this counterterrorism campaign further impeded their development during the latter half of 2017. Together with the rising death toll within the organization and desertions to the UAE side, AQAP decided to focus more on attacking UAE targets, rather than concentrating almost solely on the Houthis (Kendall 2018, 29). A UN report published in 2018 on the status of AQAP stated that the organization “maintains a strong organizational and leadership structure” and appears to sustain its threat levels despite the counterterrorism operations (Farrukh et al. 2018). AQAP fighters remain operational in various southern provinces, scattered among the local populations with which they are continuing to

strengthen ties and fund social projects (UN 2018, 8). However, because AQAP is dispersed in the South, its frequency of attacks and media output has lessened in 2018 in comparison to 2017 (Pate 2018).

3.3. AQAP: structure, leadership, goals

Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, a radical and violent Salafi-Sunni organization, is currently led by Qasim al-Raymi, a Yemeni national who was among the 23 al-Qaeda-linked prisoners that escaped out of a Yemen prison in 2006. Previously, he served as a military chief and deputy leader under Nasir al-Wuhayshi - similarly a prison escapee like al-Raymi; before 9/11, al-Wuhayshi fought in Afghanistan, became bin Laden's personal secretary and aide, and between 2013-2015 acted as al-Qaeda's overall deputy under al-Zawahiri as a 'general manager' of AQ (Joscelyn and Roggio 2013). Al-Wuhayshi was killed in 2015 in a U.S. drone operation and consequently replaced with the current leader, al-Raymi.

Both of these men were instrumental in the revitalization of AQ jihadism in Yemen – in 2007, the pair re-established al-Qaeda in Yemen, months after their prison break. Other important people within the group include Ibrahim al-Qosi from Sudan, Bin Laden's former bookkeeper (Knoll 2017, 4) or a founding member and the chief of security Ibrahim al-Banna from Egypt. Important in revitalization of al-Qaeda and creation of AQAP were also two Saudi nationals and former heads of AQ in Saudi Arabia – Said al-Shihri and Mohamed al Awfi who were both repatriated to their home country after being released from the Guantanamo prison; the whole senior echelon had many years of combined experience – training in Afgahni training camps, with almost all of the senior leadership active in AQ before 9/11 (Zimmerman 2013). Many members of AQAP's multinational senior leadership were killed by various counterterrorism efforts - however, the group has

shown remarkable ability to replace its top leaders and effectively continue to carry out its operations.

Reflecting on the senior membership of AQAP – alive or dead - shows a close connection to the core of al-Qaeda, from al-Wuhayshi's close ties to Bin Laden and to the AQ core which is mostly involved in an advisory fashion (Madhani 2010); AQAP also frequently discussed and consulted strategy with the AQ core (Knoll 2017, 6). From the recovered correspondence, it is evident that the two networks were in regular communication, mostly relating to AQAP's strategy (ibid.). AQAP can also be credited with revolutionizing the 'old', hierarchical mode of function of al-Qaeda by fostering new relationships with other groups, within and outside of Yemen, and thus creating interconnected networks in the wider region that facilitate better communication and cooperation between various cells (Zimmerman 2013). The close connection to AQ core can be also gathered from AQAP's refusal to pledge loyalty to Al-Baghdadi of ISIS after it established a branch in Yemen, and the strong rebuke of the IS by stating its declaration of caliphate as illegitimate (Cruickshank 2014). The group also has strong ties to the Somali militant group, al-Shabaab to which it provided explosives training or even hosted "hundreds" of al-Shabaab fighters on Yemeni territory (Knoll 2017, 8). The group is also tied to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (ibid.), allegedly supported Egyptian Islamic Jihad (Zimmerman 2013).

The structure of the group is hierarchical – below the emir, there are regional commanders and other sub-units, like media, security, sharia or outreach committee (Knoll 2017, 4). The group's structure has been characterized as "compartmentalized and hierarchical, with a strict division of labor" (Stoian Karadeli 2017, 181). The group is the author of propaganda journals like Inspire, an English-language medium, and Sada al-Malahim or Al Masra, both Arabic-language mediums. It also utilizes the Internet and

other new communication channels (e.g. WhatsApp). In the past, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan (both killed by drone strikes) had been well-known members of the AQAP media group which has been regarded as the most active media wing of any AQ offshoot and even AQC in itself (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 13).

The group's main goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate with its heart in Yemen according to the al-Qaeda interpretation of the holy texts and its religious beliefs. It shares many goals of the al-Qaeda core – such as the fight against the US and other Western states in their vocal opposition to the Western interventionism in Muslim countries (Knoll 2017, 9). At the same time, and quite naturally, its goal is to survive and prosper in its local environment and in the context of strong opposition primarily from the Saudi coalition, the state, or the Houthis (ibid.). AQAP adheres to Al-Qaeda's long-term strategy – first, “‘exhaust’ the US, then overthrow the local authorities, and then create and Islamic caliphate” (Knoll 2017, 7). In a 2010 video, this strategy was confirmed, saying that the goal is the expel “Jews and crusaders” from the region, create a caliphate in which it would implement shari'a and in doing so would liberate Muslims (Welby 2017). Unsurprisingly, AQAP is also in opposition to Muslim states – like Saudi Arabia or UAE – which it regards also as co-operating with the ‘crusaders’ (i.e. the U.S.)

A lot of the time, AQAP has been fighting in Yemen through its offshoot, Ansar al-Sharia, which helps the organization distance itself from violent jihadism, focus on domestic grievances, and thus gain favor among the local populace. With the help of this organization, AQAP hopes to overtake “all administrative, political, economic, cultural, monitoring, and other responsibilities” within the state (Roggio 2012). While AQAP currently has its eyes set on the gradual takeover of Yemen, it still manages to weave through anti-Western/Saudi coalition messages in its narratives and justification. Furthermore, it encourages individual (lone-wolf) and small group attacks, both through

video messaging and through print channels, most notably the Inspire magazine (Australian National Security 2016).

The group operates mostly in the southern regions of Yemen - ‘southern provinces’ refer not to the southern parts of the country but rather to the provinces of what used to be South Yemen - the description isn’t geographically accurate, since these provinces occupy not only the southern but also eastern parts of Yemen. AQAP is, for the most part, self-financed but also benefits from various sympathizers and wealthy donors. It gains funds from the black market, smuggling, robberies, kidnappings and ransom. In the past, it was involved in oil trade or taxation, which significantly raised its financial status. It is deeply embedded in Yemeni society although it is not officially supported by Yemeni tribes and their leaders; the group continues to exploit population’s grievances and growing sectarianism in the country which contributes to its increasing popularity among the civilians. Particular points raised in this paragraph (and the sub-chapter) are meant to serve as a brief introduction to the group and its functioning – however, topics such as funding, recruitment, used narratives, ideology, and others will all be elaborated on in the following part of the thesis which focuses on the ARI framework.

4. The ARI framework: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

4.1. Autonomy

In Aydinli’s framework, autonomy refers to the VNSA’s distance from the state, the domestic and international system, and persecution from other actors; this category is further split into two subcategories that involve ‘distance from the state’ and ‘distance from the state-centric regime’ (Aydinli 2015, 428-430). Generally, the questions of

autonomy relate to how much the VNSA depends on the state to exist and how much it has to accommodate its functioning to the wishes of the state. There is also passive autonomy (survival without state support) and active autonomy (surviving state persecution) (Aydinli 2016, 9). The next questions lie in how is the group able to supplement or take advantage of the state system (ibid., 10).

The jihadist predecessors to AQAP in the 1990s were more openly involved with the state than can be said for contemporary AQAP. This is mainly because there were significant links between the jihadists and the Saleh regime that were well-known, especially in late 1980s and early 1990s when the jihadist groups and returning mujahedeen fighters were utilized by the government in its fight against Southern Yemen and secessionists therein. Nevertheless, this is not to say that links between government forces and AQAP do not exist currently – the two are still intertwined together as a result of a tangled relationship between jihadist groups and the government regime lasting for decades but, in the case of AQAP, these connections remain much more covert than they were during the early to mid-1990s. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Yemen was among few countries that openly welcomed back the mujahedeen fighters. A significant Islamist party in Yemen connected to the Muslim Brotherhood – al-Islah, still active today – served as a political outlet for some of the returning fighters (International Crisis Group 2017, 2-3). In this case, the distance from the state was very small, because the existence of the jihadi VNSAs was highly dependent on the state support and its institutions which allowed the groups to exist without significant persecution. Furthermore, both the Islamist and the government forces shared a common enemy – the Soviet-backed People’s Republic of Yemen and the Yemeni Socialist Party. The state helped develop an enabling environment for the creation and continued existence of jihadists, often turning a blind eye

to the VNSAs' actions and even, in some cases, rewarding some of the jihadists with government positions and other 'perks' (International Crisis Group 2017, 3).

It can be said that in the 1990s, before the *USS Cole* bombings or the attacks on 9/11, jihadists were treated mainly as criminals by the state and not as significantly dangerous groups that could undermine the state. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the main counterterrorism strategy was aimed primarily at repression of these VNSAs together with careful tolerance of their existence; Yemen was also one of the first countries that started a relatively successful deradicalization program (McDonnell et al. 2017, 13). Although the US did have its sights set on Yemen as a potentially dangerous source of transnational terrorism even during the 1990s, it got involved in counterterrorist operations within the country after an increase in attacks on international targets originating in Yemen. The bombing of *USS Cole* and the 9/11 attacks brought unwanted attention to Yemen as a 'jihadi hub' in the Arabian Peninsula. With the increased US pressure on Yemen to combat violent jihadism in its territory, the Saleh administration wanted to please the US as much as possible – especially after Yemen's decision at the UN Security Council to not support the US motion to invade Iraq in the build-up to the First Gulf War (Johnsen 2009). This decision was undoubtedly regretted by the Saleh regime – after the vote, a US diplomat was recorded to have said to his fellow Yemeni representative that “this was the most expensive no-vote you ever cast” – essentially meaning that Yemen would be cut off from funds and aid programs (Hellmich 2012, 625).

Both countries – Yemen and the US - tightened their grip on al-Qaeda in the country, in counterterrorism and intelligence matters as well. The Saleh government allowed the US to carry out its CT plan within Yemen fairly independently with much leeway for the US to pursue its own goals. After 9/11 and the declaration of the “War on Terror”, the use of drones became central in the US counterterrorism strategy. The first

targeted killing in Yemen happened in November 2002 which killed 6 AQ members, among them Sinan al-Harithi – suspected from involvement in the *USS Cole* plot – and Abu Ahmad al-Hijazi – a naturalized US citizen (BBC 2002 in Horton 2017). Drone warfare would prove to be the ultimate US fighting strategy, especially during the Obama and Trump administrations both of which have employed drones heavily (Horton 2017).

The tightened grip on AQ operations – a change from the 1990s when the jihadi threat was significantly deprioritized by the government – lowered its autonomy to a point of non-existence. Many members and AQ leaders were either killed or jailed. By 2004, both the US and Yemen deemed al-Qaeda to have been defeated – although the rigorous counterterrorism was criticized by some portions of the Yemeni population, mainly because of arbitrary arrests and the independence US military and CIA enjoyed on Yemeni territory – going as far as being able to launch attacks on unidentified targets (Hellmich 2012, 626). The counterterrorism efforts have been heavily criticized for years for their “aggressive and uncritical” nature and the fact that they often result in unnecessary civilian deaths (Hellmich 2012, 619). This contributed to anti-US sentiments among the populace; ‘anti-Americanism’ and opposition to the West – and increasingly also the intervening Gulf states - are now very common in Yemen and they are one of the reasons behind AQAP’s success; AQAP and the Houthis both share a strong anti-American rhetoric (Embassy of the Republic of Yemen 2017, 8). Upwards of 75% asked in a survey about which factors/groups fuel terrorism and violence the most assigned blame primarily to NATO countries (US, Europe); upwards of 50% of the respondents also thought the GCC countries (SA, UAE) were very significant in driving violence in the country (McDonnell et al. 2017, 8). Interestingly, not many perceived religious/cultural/ideological factors to be very significant – further confirming that grievances such as lack of law and order, high

unemployment, corruption and corrupted politicians and lack of basic resources are viewed as the most significant factors fueling terrorism (ibid.).

Current counterterrorist operations are mainly carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, more specifically the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which has been heavily involved in the southern provinces with speculations that Abu Dhabi is inclined to support Southern independence (Dahlgreen 2018, 21). Similarly, the UAE has been criticized as well for its counterterrorism strategy – mainly for causing unnecessary civilian casualties or for the establishment of detention centers that do not adhere to basic human rights standards (ibid.). There have also been reports of UAE (and UAE-backed Yemeni groups like the Security Belt or Hadrami Elite Forces, both southern militias), supporting arbitrary arrests, torture, abuse of children, disappearing of people and critics (Human Rights Watch 2017). Together with the US drone campaign, these CT operations have caused aggravation, frustration and alienation of suffering civilians and in turn, provided AQAP with a ‘Robin Hood’ narrative that further enlarges its receptive audience and can be used as a reason for recruitment.

Although the various counterterrorist strategies do not allow AQAP to exist autonomously without persecution, the group has provided that it is able to withstand vigorous CT campaigns and to overcome incurred losses of human or material resources. Furthermore, there have been allegations that during the 2006-2011 period the Saleh regime supported AQAP, which has possibly continued even after Saleh’s step down from power (Knoll 2017, 9-10). President Saleh used the jihadist to consolidate his power further among his opponents; another popular argument is also the possibility that Saleh tolerated al-Qaeda because he wanted to attract more US counterterrorism funds to Yemen (ibid., 22). There are some reports claiming that Saleh personally stole up to \$60 million in his 33 years as president, much of the money coming from U.S. counterterrorist efforts

(Watson 2018). The Saleh regime's counterterrorism has been accused by some of aiding the jihadists during the 2006 prison break or generally, by "giving them enough time to escape" in the past, or failing to protect informants from tribes that also included tribal leaders (Al-Dawsari 2018, 30).

While there are significant connections and history of co-operation between jihadist VNSAs and the Yemeni government, it does not seem that AQAP has been beholden to the state. Even if this were the case - e.g. AQAP's co-operation with President Saleh/Hadi or other persons connected to the government as a quid-pro-quo relationship - AQAP would most likely vehemently deny such actions because their appeal lies in their opposition to the state and admission would most likely cause damage to the group's credibility (Knoll 2017, 10). It could be argued that if it wasn't for Saleh regime's support of jihadist groups during in its fight against South Yemen and subsequent co-optation of these groups for the regime's financial or political gain, AQAP as we know it today would not exist.

However, AQAP's current distance from the state is quite significant – not only does it stand in direct opposition to the state government, it has also proven that it does not need state support to survive. Even though the organization operates on Yemeni territory, this does not decrease its autonomy significantly, mainly because Yemeni government is not present in most of the southern provinces and thus cannot oppose the group regularly and in an organized, sustained fashion. AQAP also makes use of the non-physical spaces which are hard to govern and control effectively, mainly using the Internet for propaganda and communication. The group is thus able to operate more or less independently and deals mostly with southern tribes that hold much of the sway in the southern parts of the country. It can be argued that AQAP has higher autonomy because of Yemen's failing institutions and subsequent power vacuums which AQAP can fill and create an alternative to the state itself. While the UAE and US counterterrorism operations have been able to weaken

AQAP, the fashion in which the CT operations are carried out may be eventually helping AQAP more than they are hurting it because of the way AQAP constructs its narrative of the counterterrorist strategies as being harmful to the civilian population.

We can argue that AQAP's passive autonomy – surviving without state support – is quite high. Similarly, its active autonomy – surviving state persecution – is high as well since the group has been able to survive intense CT campaigns in the span of several years, and has been able to regroup and adapt to many of its members and leaders being killed or detained and being driven out of conquered cities. Furthermore, distance from the state-centric regime is significant. AQAP has been able to supplement the failing state system of government with its own variety based on the group's interpretation of Islam. During their takeover of southern cities in 2011 and 2015, the group has showcased the ability to govern people in a stable fashion and to learn from previous mistakes in governing that mainly meant toning down its violent and radical rhetoric, as well as its global agenda. The group has created parallel institutions – judicial, financial, religious, educational, or security-oriented.

AQAP's gradual development of operational capacities and transformation from a global actor to a more local one was allowed to occur because battling AQAP wasn't a particular priority for the Saleh regime or the Saudi coalition – these forces recognized the Houthis as the main threat and focused on battling this VNSA, leaving AQAP unattended and free to pursue its goals and ambitions. Much to the dismay of the US which still perceived AQAP as its main threat in Yemen, AQAP became a second priority to the regional coalition; to the domestic balance of power, the group was relatively small and insignificant in relation to the Houthi conflict (International Crisis Group 2017, 4). This de-prioritization has allowed AQAP/AAS fighters to blend into the anti-Houthi opposition

and thus also gain access to weapons, valuable contacts and new revenue pipelines (ibid., 15).

This capacity-building, general growth, and the emulation of the state system could be seen in AQAP's pursuit of intermittently seizing territory in the southern provinces. In the wake of its campaign in the South, the group has showcased that it is able to provide governmental services to the local populations where the government and its institutions are absent. From 2011, AQAP has adapted to the new Yemeni political context by morphing into more of an insurgent group that is able to challenge state authority and control state territory; the group has shown unexpected pragmatism and sensitivity to local contexts (International Crisis Group 2017). Additionally, the group has also shown that it is capable of learning from its own mistakes and it's willing to change their approach which AQAP showed in its takeover and a year-long governing experiment in Mukalla in 2015/2016 (International Crisis Group 2017, 9). The group lost control over Abyan and surrounding areas in 2012 mainly because of AQAP's harsh tactics which caused alienation of the local populace and AQAP's ignorance of the importance of tribes and tribal elites – the organization's strategy adjusted accordingly in their second governing 'experiment' in Mukalla (Horton 2018). Even though AQAP didn't manage to rule for longer periods of time, it gained a reputation of a "reliable and relatively capable force that was willing to work with those elites whose interests overlapped with its own" (ibid.). In other words, the organization proved it can exist autonomously and govern autonomously, building alliances and providing basic services.

The group has been able to take advantage of Yemen's financial market and illicit sources of revenue and material resources. It has exploited much of the weak, failing state institutions – not only by emulating them and providing services to the locals, but also by looting government's banks, controlling state ports or acquiring weapons from military

camps (International Crisis Group 2017, 9). The group provided finances to affected schools and universities to keep them operating; helped repair damaged infrastructure; set up its own religious courts; or even prepared for and helped to evacuate coastal residents before cyclone Chapala in late 2015 (Salisbury 2016). Its institutions were often more quick and efficient (e.g. the religious courts) and included not only AQ members but also elders and Salafis; local servants received their salaries; companies continued to trade with the group (Kendall 2016). Not only has AQAP proven it is capable of executing state functions (and, in most cases, executing them more reliably and effectively), it has presented itself as a “viable and indeed better” alternative to the state (ibid., 11).

The group exploits local political and security vacuums which are the result of the weak and failed institutions. In both cases of territorial control – i.e. Abyan and Mukalla – the state security forces proved unwilling or unable to fight AQAP (ibid., 10). The group finances its activities by importing oil, smuggling goods on the black market and through Yemen’s porous borders; it has even benefitted from the Saudi blockade, because it granted AQAP a monopoly on imports into the country that amounted to approximately \$2 million dollars a day (Kendall 2018b). The group has also taken advantage of another state function – taxation of locals and of local companies, allegedly in its pursuit of bettering community services (ibid.). AQAP’s funding has also benefitted from war economy and bank looting. What has also contributed significantly to the group’s longevity and operational capacity is AQAP’s wide range of weaponry acquired from various sources among which we can find the Yemeni military or arms from the Saudi-led coalition intended for anti-Houthi militias (International Crisis Group 2017, 9). The Yemeni market is already teeming with weapons – Yemen belongs to one of the most-armed countries in the world with easy access to guns which can be bought even at city markets (The Economist 2018) which further improves the group’s capacities to fight.

The group has also managed to exploit other military networks of various militias, tribes and even the Saudi-led coalition, gaining primarily access to advanced weaponry and further embedding its fighters into the local populace fighting the common enemy. AQAP exploits the ambiguous relationships between different warring sides and various alliances to gain intelligence, weapons, and access to trade networks (Horton 2018). Furthermore, an AQAP operative told AP that “the front lines against the Houthis provide fertile grounds to recruit new members” (Michael et al. 2018). The chaotic war in Yemen has worked to AQAP’s advantage – according to the AP, there have been numerous deals struck between coalition forces and AQAP (Michael et al. 2018). These deals included the coalition paying al-Qaeda to leave al-Said, a district of villages in the Shabwa province while recruiting tribal members and among them, also AQAP members, to the coalition ranks; or a deal that allowed AQAP to leave Mukalla peacefully without much coalition interference – allegedly, coalition forces allowed the group to leave Mukalla unharmed with all their war spoils, including money and weapons; similar accord was also allegedly struck in the Abyan province (Michael et al. 2018). This knowledge shows how much AQAP is embedded in the Yemeni population. The deals, if true, also legitimize AQAP as a separate, autonomous player who is in contact with the main warring parties in negotiations and secret talks; they also point to a carefully orchestrated and pragmatic strategy on AQAP’s side.

Another factor that contributes to the group’s autonomy is the close relationship between AQAP and AQ Core (AQC) – AQAP leaders served under Bin Laden and keep a regular correspondence with AQC; additionally, AQAP has also developed inter-group relationships with other AQ offshoots – most notably Somalian al-Shabaab (Zimmerman 2013). The merger of AQAP in itself caused that the new organization could capitalize on information, known contacts, funding networks, or bomb-making skills they gained from

their Saudi counterparts (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 10). These efforts not only improve the group's resiliency, they also improve its autonomy because the group has other affiliates it can possibly rely on when in need. Closer co-operation also allows the organizations to take advantage of transnational networks built by each group which further improves the group's autonomy and outreach because it does not have to rely only on its own networks and can exploit other connections in different parts of the world. The groups can also exchange information, opinions, experiences and recommendations. Other affiliates can also provide know-how, other sources of revenue and weapons, other resources or manpower.

4.2. Representation

In the ARI framework, representation refers to how a VNSA is able to represent its members and sympathizers by producing common identity through discourse or its actions. It touches on the topic of belonging into a group and creating a sustainable 'identity' and whether a VNSA is able to provide for its members by keeping its promises, reaching its goals, and generating loyalty from the member base. This includes how a VNSA is able to attract new members, retain old members, and generate loyalty and legitimacy in the eyes of its supporters (Aydinli 2016, 11). Finally, this factor asks whether a VNSA is able to make a "viable alternative" to a state and represent its constituents (Aydinli 2015, 342).

Undoubtedly, AQAP has made great strides to improve its 'representation factor' since the outbreak of the 2011 popular protests that sparked the conflict. While before the protests, the group mostly focused on Western/global transnational agenda it slowly transformed into a domestic actor with primarily local priorities that involved exploiting local grievances in its fight against the coalition, the state forces, and the Houthis as well. As other AQ franchises, AQAP needs to carefully balance the local and the global to stay

relevant on both stages. The group employs a gradualist approach that begins with building acceptance of the local population, gradually gaining active support, controlling small territories where multiple emirates would be established with the end goal of establishing a caliphate (International Crisis Group 2017, 7).

While AQAP is certainly recognized as a terrorist group and not many people support their radical and violent ideology, the group has, nonetheless, proven to be helpful to the suffering marginalized communities (Kendall 2016). Therein lies the fundamental problem – AQAP has shown that it is able to create safe havens for itself and prosper due to its ability to create relationships with the local population and leaders that, in most cases, disagree with the group’s ideology but nevertheless tolerate them because of their focus on local grievances (ibid.). The group aims to tap into local anger, frustration and the population’s wish for revenge and through its provision of welfare services it aims to increase the population’s tolerance (if not their support) for the group even in spite of its extremist and violent ideology (ibid.). Exploiting the population’s anger and frustration increases the size of AQAP’s possible recruitment pool as it sometimes presents AQAP as seemingly the only organization that is interested in resolving local grievances.

The ability of AQAP to distance itself from the state and state institutions while creating its own parallel ones was talked about in the previous chapter. The thesis has shown that not only was AQAP able to supplement state functions – albeit for a limited time only – in the eyes of some of the populace, it could also provide better services for the constituents than official state institutions. For example, in the city of Mukalla that was liberated from AQAP rule two years ago, one resident claimed that “life was better under al-Qaeda, compared with now” (Edroos and al-Batati 2018). The city is “drowning in sewage and darkness” and the lack of any provision of basic goods and services has been termed an “ignominious failure of the local authority” (ibid.). This showcases that – in the

absence of any local or state authority providing for the locals – AQAP was better able to represent the interests of the populace. This is also supported by the fact that when AQAP demonstrated its draconian tactics in Abyan that didn't reflect public beliefs, AQAP had to withdraw from the city due to the loss of public support because of their misrepresentative violent tactics that the populace didn't identify or agree with. In another case which showed the learning curve in AQAP's governance attempts, when people demonstrated against AQAP's control of tactics that included killing scholars and fighters in a city south of Mukalla, the group agreed to withdraw its fighters from the controversial checkpoint (Kendall 2016). It seems that AQAP has learned from al-Qaeda branches in Iraq or Saudi Arabia and rather than focusing on solely fighting tribes and Shi'ites or focusing their attacks on the government and elites, AQAP partially put itself to the role of a welfare institution (Jones 2011, 910).

Even though the group has focused mainly on domestic affairs in the last few years, it has not abandoned its global agenda; it still manages to connect the local matters to wider, global phenomena which is often used as justification for action – for example, the counterterrorism campaign, in which many innocent civilians have been killed, has been used for justifying AQAP's violent tactics, their strong opposition to the intervening countries and ultimately, a call for action (Kendall 2018b, 28). There were video interviews with grieving locals together with claims by AQAP in which the group takes on the responsibility to exact revenge for civilian/tribal deaths (an important part of the ethos of tribes); the group also organized a “Festival of Martyrs of the American bombings” with an anti-US poster competition (ibid.).

The group has also made it one of its goals to limit the number of civilian deaths and not target women and children even if they belonged to the one of its enemies' sides (ibid.). After the Islamic State attack in Sana'a during Friday prayer in which hundreds of

people were killed or injured, AQAP publicly distanced itself from the brutality of such tactics and claimed it wouldn't attack mosques, markets, or crowds while also apologizing for its past attacks on a Sana'a hospital in 2013 or the 2014 beheadings in Hadramout (ibid., 29). Once again, this can be directly tied to representation as AQAP's agenda and narrative revolves around exploiting population's grievances in order to widen its appeal – precisely because the group is trying to appeal to as large of an audience as it can get, waging a non-discriminate campaign of terror would be counterproductive.

The group also focuses on the high number of civilians killed in counterterrorism operations led by the US, Yemeni government or by the UAE and coalition forces, which it utilizes to address civilians opposed to these campaigns. Although the CT operations have been viewed by their perpetrators as a success that resulted in pushing AQAP into Yemeni interior, the side effect of this often-ruthless campaign has been the deaths of thousands of civilians. Added to the number of civilians killed in the overall conflict and the coalition air war, the death toll reaches staggering numbers – between 2015 and September 2018, “the coalition has undertaken 18,000 airstrikes – one every 99 minutes – one third of which have hit non-military targets” (Beaumont 2018). Many of the target AQAP/AAS members are not even involved in the group's transnational terrorist agenda because their interests lay in fighting the Houthis (Longley Alley 2017). AQAP in turns argues that because the coalition forces do not distinguish between anti-Houthi fighters and AQAP, the fighters at risk may as well join AQAP; additionally, by joining they can also exact revenge for other deaths (Horton 2018). It is no surprise then that these war campaigns alienate the suffering population – and AQAP exploits these sentiments of anger, resentment and frustration at innocent deaths. The used narratives center around the Western war against Muslims and how the Yemeni government is also complicit in aiding and allowing the Western and Gulf countries to kill Yemeni civilians. On the other hand, AQAP can also claim that by

targeting anti-Houthi fighters on the ground, the US is actually clandestinely supporting the Shia minority, another point that resonates with the Sunni and anti-Houthi population (Longley Alley 2017).

AQAP is using the extremely high number of civilian deaths caused by the war as an important propaganda point in its narratives. For example, when the group retreated from Mukalla, it announced that this was done in order to save the citizens of the city and surrounding areas and protect them from the military onslaught that may have occurred if AQAP chose to fight the coalition forces (Al-Dawsari 2018, 14). AQAP has used its discourse to make itself seem as the only actor on the ground that can “defend the interests and integrity of ordinary Yemenis” in which jihad is posited as the only solution to the existing problems (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 41). The organization uses narratives that appeal to all Muslims – for example, that every Islam believer should not support the illegitimate “apostate” Sana’a government because it is not legitimate from a religious point of view (ibid., 42). The narrative often connects the regime with the ‘corrupted’ West and claims that the only legitimate government should rule on the basis of shari’a (ibid.). As Koehler-Derrick (2011, 44) points out, AQAP “has positioned itself not as an organization distinct from, but rather a reflection of the local population and the global community of subjugated Muslims.” This not only heightens the group’s representation factor but also its legitimacy among a wider audience.

The group has used several media outlets to reach its followers such as newspapers like ‘Wikalat al-Athir’, ‘Al-Masra’, ‘Inspire’ or ‘Sada al-Malahim’. By analyzing the most-well known medium from these, the English magazine ‘Inspire’, Droogan and Peattie (2018) found out that while in the first few issues, anti-Western sentiments were the most prominent, with time passing, more local issues started to be included in the medium (ibid.). The main goals behind publishing media are legitimating the movement,

propagating the group's message and intimidating opponents; they also help to broaden social support and boost recruitment (Lee Ludvigsen 2018, 29). Newspapers like 'al-Masra' and 'Wikalat al-Athir' have been used to further the group's local campaign and to display beneficial works done by AQAP such as repairing infrastructure or dispensing aid (Kendall 2016). In 'Sada al-Malahim', articles often claim that "Yemen's experiments with democracy and socialism have shown each to be inadequate, leaving a return to shari'a achieved through jihad the country's only choice" (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 42).

To improve AQAP's ability to widen its potential recruitment pool, the organization established Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) in 2011 that serves to gain popular support from people that would normally be discouraged by the association to al-Qaeda. The group's tasks include building popular support for the group and taking territory when possible (Knoll 2017, 16). It has been termed the insurgent arm of AQAP and can be seen as a further attempt of AQAP to focus on its local agenda and broaden its representational pool of possible recruits or supporters within Yemen by rebranding and enlarging the receptive audience (Simcox 2013, 58-60). AAS does not present global initiatives that are of little importance to the Yemenis; the group rather focuses on local grievances and power vacuums waging a 'hearts and minds' campaign (ibid., 61). In order to gain popular support, AAS has portrayed itself as a "force for effective governance" in videos that showed members repairing electricity, destroying un-Islamic monuments or interviews of regular Yemenis praising their work in security (Knoll 2017, 17). AAS has taken credit for "repairing schools, building roads, funding hospitals, connecting electricity and water, dispensing aid, mending fishing nets and solving land disputes" with the help of local branding (Kendall 2016). Furthermore, the group is more open to new recruits – save for its senior leadership, it does not require its members to swear allegiance to AQAP's ideology (International Crisis Group 2017, 14). Ansar al-Sharia helps AQAP with

increasing its representation factor and also with broadening AQAP's support base which further increases the group's pool of possible recruits (Al-Muslimi and Barron 2017).

Attempts at rebranding do not stop at Ansar al-Sharia. For example, when the group had gained control of Mukalla, it claimed that it had been the work of "Sons of Hadramout" in a "Sunni tribal takeover" (International Crisis Group 2017, 9). Another use of a similar name is in "Sons of Abyan" (Kendall 2016). One of AQAP members claims that this change in name was justified by an AQAP member saying that "we are all Muslims, we are all brothers" (ibid.). In these claims, we can once again see the rebranding of AQAP and its narrative that tries to reach as many people as possible, trying to appeal to non-members as well. The creation of these 'alternative' groups also serve as a way to deal with potential 'management overstretch' because they enlarge the structures that control the group's recruits. At the same time, AQAP's membership is in the low thousands – estimated at 6000 by the UN (2018) – which means that although the group addresses the wider Sunni population of Yemen, it is unlikely that this tacit support of AQAP/AAS would cause a surge in AQAP membership which would result in management overstretch.

As was mentioned earlier, AQAP realizes that if it is to survive and stay relevant in Yemen's affairs, it needs at least tolerance, if not support, of the local populations and from the various local Yemeni tribes. These tribes and their leaders play an important role in Yemen's political system. Anwar al-Awlaki declared in 2010 that "the cradle for Jihad today are tribes" (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 97). AQAP understands that if it alienates the tribes and tribal leaders, it will lose operational space, access to new possible recruits, and gain new, powerful enemies in the already chaotic Yemeni war. Rather, the group has made efforts to further embed itself into the fabric of Yemeni society by marrying women from various tribes or fostering relationships with local tribal leaders (Jones 2011, 911). In AQAP research, there have been claims that the reason why it enjoys so much success in

the southern regions is because of tribes and their leaders that are portrayed as giving sanctuary to the jihadists because they are sometimes conflated with the stereotype as anti-state and rogue entities in the Yemeni political system (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 15). However, this is far from the truth. The tribes aren't lawless organizations and neither do they overwhelmingly or officially support AQAP. However, tribal members have been one of AQAP's receptive audiences and a recruitment pool for the organization.

One of the main reasons for tribal tolerance of AQAP are security concerns and overall marginalization of the southern provinces. It would be more accurate to say that tribes are engaged in alliances of convenience with AQAP, because it seems that the group is one of very few actors that actively focuses on local grievances. Most of cooperation between the jihadists and tribes has been centered around fighting a common enemy, mainly the Houthis (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 27). AQAP has also presented itself as a tool of revenge for civilian and tribal deaths caused by the war or the CT campaign (Kendall 2018b, 29). There are reports of AQAP paying blood money to various tribal members in order to settle disputes (Al Dawsari 2018b). This is significant because the concept of revenge forms an important part of the tribal ethos. Additionally, AQAP has positioned itself as a 'savior' of the tribes and aims to capitalize on their distrust of the government and its "divide-and-rule strategy" – referring to the official regime rewarding tribes that support the government and marginalizing those in opposition (Phillips 2011, 105). Another example can be seen AQAP's narrative twisting the goal behind counterterrorism operations into "attacks on Yemen's noble and defiant tribes" (Koehler-Derrick 2011, 123). In several statements made by AQAP, the group's narrative was very positive towards tribes and invoked their rich history and courage (Kendall 2018a). It also framed this narrative in a way that made it seem as though the jihad waged by AQAP was a

continuation of the tribal fight – ‘jihad’ - against the British colonialists in the 1960s (ibid.).

AQAP also realized that it needs the quiet tolerance of tribes and has so far been trying to avoid confrontations or aggression towards the tribes; furthermore, it probably realizes it couldn’t withstand the onslaught of large and armed tribes (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 24). Additionally, the longer AQAP manages to avoid a conflict with tribes the more it is likely that it will be perceived as a legitimate political actor (Phillips 2011, 107). It is necessary to say that even when AQAP and tribes do cooperate, this cooperation is not built on ideological or sectarian terms but rather on pragmatic reasons (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 27). Many tribes are also in open conflict with the Houthis who they see as infringing on their territory and as undermining their power (Al Dawsari 2018b). Additionally, the tribes in themselves are distrustful of the government regime – during the Saleh’s presidency, tribes that supported the president were obviously favored by the regime; as an example, there have been also accusations that the Saleh regime may have given the US bad intelligence in order to take out local leaders that did not support the official regime (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 31).

Similarly, AQAP also exploited the neglected and marginalized Southern movement that fights for greater autonomy (some parts of the movement fight for Southern independence) and better standing for Southern Yemen in the unified republic. AQAP reconstructed the southern narrative of opposition to the Northerners as a fight between the Sunnis and Shi’ites (represented by the Houthis) – in this way, political conflict was converted into a religious one (Kendall 2018b, 28). The case of AQAP trying to accommodate the Southerners grievances in its discourse further shows the growing sectarianism in Yemen and AQAP’s desire to capitalize on the Sunni/Shi’ite tensions and on the fight against the Houthis. Former leader, al-Wuhayshi, even proclaimed support for

southern independence and southern tribes saying that independence is “your right, guaranteed by your religion” and that “injustice, oppression, and tyranny cannot be employed in the name of preserving unity” (Al-Dawsari 2018a, 21-22).

Sectarianism is a relatively new occurrence in Yemen – a state that had a reputation of religious co-existence and toleration and past conflicts which weren’t usually driven by religious differences (Al-Muslimi 2015). This has changed since the outbreak of the war when sectarian discourse became a new tool of recruitment (ibid.). AQAP has purposefully blurred the lines between Sunnis and the Houthi (Shia) population, and has on several occasions connected all Houthis to Iran. For example, the Houthi takeover of Sana’a was presented by AQAP as a “Shia plot to seize control of Yemen”, the group claiming that Houthis are “Iranian outsiders” rather than Yemeni citizens (Salisbury 2016, 23). Furthermore, other forces fighting against the Houthis often use sectarian rhetoric full of anti-Shi’ite narratives as well. Similarly, the Houthis have also contributed to the growing sectarianism by conflating various groups – Islah, Salafist tribes, Southern separatists – together with terrorist organizations such as AQAP or the Islamic State (International Crisis Group 2017, 13). Sectarian rhetoric has been used by nearly all of the warring parties, raising tensions in the population and conflating vastly different groups into one category (e.g. Houthis referring to Sunnis as ‘Daesh’) (Al-Muslimi 2015). The involvement of the Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran in a proxy conflict within Yemen also amplifies sectarian divisions in the country (ibid.). The splitting of the country into two big camps – Sunnis and Shi’ites – benefits AQAP, as they can address the whole Sunni audience in conflictual narratives about a Sunni vs. Shia war.

We can claim that the group has focused on appearing as a viable alternative to the government; it has shown pragmatism and ability to compromise and learn from its mistakes. Paradoxically, it has also benefitted from the emergence of the Islamic State –

most of international attention focused on the new group and its unprecedented violent tactics in Yemen (such as the 2015 Sana'a prayer double bombing in which almost 500 people were killed or injured) made AQAP look like the more 'reasonable' choice (Kendall 2018b, 29). In November 2018, the group even celebrated "defection of many brothers from the Islamic State in Yemen" (Kendall 2018a). As far as representation goes, a US analyst Johnsen claimed in 2010 that "al-Qaeda is the most representative organization in Yemen" because "it transcends class, tribe and regional identity in a way that no other organization or political party does" (Harris 2010, 5). If this claim was true in 2010, AQAP's representativeness has only increased through their evolution into an insurgent-like actor building its existence on local grievances and sectarian rhetoric.

4.3. Influence

Influence is described by Aydinli as the capabilities and capacity of the group and subsequently its ability to achieve its goals and project its influence on its surroundings. The author studies sustainability and impact as two main categories of influence. Sustainability means being based on a deterrent-free motivation in addition to having flexibility and adaptability – so the ability of the VNSA to change and adapt in the face of persecution (Aydinli2015, 436). Additionally, Aydinli (2015, 437) also tracks impact and the degrees to which it is compelling and/or transformative.

Undoubtedly, AQAP poses a very deterrent-free motivation because the organization has managed to survive many attacks and CT operations. The group has survived in spite of extremely small odds; it has endured the killing of many of its leaders and members; it came close to being destroyed several times during its existence. As Aydinli claims, "ideological principles, in particular religion-based ones, have been shown to be the deepest and most binding, and therefore are arguably the most deterrent free"

(Aydinli 2016, 17). While AQAP definitely has an extremely loyal member base, it is necessary to point out that this member base is much smaller than AQAP's support base (i.e. supporting the group but not being a member) and it does not necessarily include Ansar al-Sharia members, because they are not required to pledge allegiance to AQ's ideology. While AQAP's ideology is very deterrent free, it is important to say that most of the support it gets in Yemen is not based on adherence to the group's violent ideology but rather on its focus on local grievances. Thus, its deterrence-free ideology does not translate to the reality of the Yemeni conflict. This weakness could be most well-seen during the group's ouster from Abyan when the public opinion on the group's tactics shifted and its previous tacit supporters quickly abandoned the group because of its drastic display of violence.

The close and twisted relationship between jihadists including AQAP and Yemeni ex-president Saleh was already mentioned several times in the thesis. Although even during his term at the office, AQAP was pursued as a violent terrorist group and Yemen had its own CT campaign along the ongoing US one. However, it seems that Saleh's willingness to persecute the jihadist threat wasn't a top priority for his regime as the continued existence of AQAP brought many funds into the poor country. In a paper published by the Yemeni embassy in the US, the embassy acknowledged that "the Saleh regime's unwillingness to address the root causes of terrorism genuinely contributed to its rise" (Embassy of the Republic of Yemen 2017, 3). Not only that, but the Saleh regime used AQAP to its benefit, allegedly even supplying the group with explosives in 2008 (ibid., 4). In a paper published by International Crisis Group (2017, 2), the authors pointed out that not many analyses also showcase how AQAP has been at times used as a tool for "Yemen's political elite to resort to subterfuge for financial and military gain."

This changed when Saleh was replaced by President Hadi who initiated a much stricter counterterrorism campaign while openly voicing his support for US CT operations (Al-Batati 2017). The new president was sworn in 2012 when AQAP was in control of the city of Abyan and surrounding areas. During his swearing-in ceremony, Hadi declared that fighting AQAP is a “national and religious duty” – a significant departure from the lukewarm responses of President Saleh and result of AQAP’s transformative capacity (Kasinof 2012). After Hadi’s appointment, the new president adopted a new Comprehensive National Counterterrorism Strategy (CNCS) and intensified its counterterrorism programs ((Embassy of the Republic of Yemen 2017, 5). However, it is important to note that AQAP members and various government officials are “inextricably entwined with organized crime networks in Yemen’s east, profiting from the smuggling trade fueled by the booming war economy” (Kendall 2018a). Although AQAP definitely wasn’t the only reason for the appointing the new president but with its unexpected takeover of Abyan in 2011, the threat posed by AQAP rose significantly together with the need to combat the group’s unexpected rise. As the group was gaining territory and mounting attacks, there was also a surge in US drone operations (Miller 2012). In this way, the group elicited a change in its opposition’s tactics.

AQAP’s compellence has been quite high since it is often considered the most lethal and dangerous branch of al-Qaeda that has capabilities to strike both in Yemen and also behind its borders. Its threat is also recognized because in the decades-long counterterrorism engagement, jihadism in the current form of AQAP is alive and well. The group has also managed to infiltrate the state and the coalition forces - its connection to the state is deep and has historical roots. The infiltration of coalition forces has been the result of having a ‘common enemy’ – the Houthis – whose defeat is seen as the top-most priority in the Yemeni conflict, to the benefit of the jihadists.

Furthermore, it can be said that AQAP was legitimized by various secret deals struck between the government and/or coalition forces and the group. These deals demonstrate that the famous saying of not negotiating with terrorist does not necessarily apply to Yemen. Through secret negotiations that were made public, AQAP gained legitimacy as an important actor in the conflict with power and influence to not only have connections to the highest representatives of various parties but also to be recognized as a threat and a potential ‘partner’ in negotiation as well. There have also been claims that tribal leaders have served as ‘intermediaries’ between the two sides, “a role no doubt replicated by other tribal groupings” (Jones 2011, 911). Not only have coalition countries allegedly negotiated secret deals with AQAP about withdrawing from various territories the group held (and even paying AQAP members to leave), it has been claimed that AQAP fighters are also regularly recruited by the coalition forces in their fight against the Houthis (Michael et al. 2018). Once again, AQAP has benefitted from the chaos on the ground. Even though battling terrorism is a recognized priority by the coalition forces, it is still not as important as the ongoing Houthi conflict and in the spirit of “enemy of my enemy is my friend”, tacit cooperation with AQAP has been allegedly going on (ibid.). Furthermore, not only have AQAP members been regularly fighting alongside coalition forces, an AQAP commander told AP that “the front lines against the Houthis provide fertile ground to recruit new members”, concluding that “if we send 20, we come back with 100” (ibid.).

As far as flexibility and adaptability goes, AQAP has shown remarkable skills at surviving at very small odds. The group is organized hierarchically with a “precise leadership structure, including doctrinal, propaganda, military, security, and financial subdivisions” (UN 2018, 9). Al-Qaeda’s structure is specifically designed in a way that it allows the organization to continue existing even after key leaders are killed or detained (International Crisis Group 2017, 6). While obtaining correct factual information on the

ground is very complicated, the UN estimates that there were approximately 6,000-7,000 AQAP fighters on the ground as of July 2018 (UN 2018, 9). This number has grown from “several hundred” members in 2010 to 4,000 in 2015 (Johnsen 2018). According to Kendall (2018b, 27), the organization’s influence reached its peak in 2015 and 2016, after the coalition forces decided to militarily intervene in Yemen. The organization managed to “entrench its position and fuel its recruitment drive using a number of parallel strategies that were at once practical, tactical and ideological” (ibid.). At this time, it is very likely that the organization had more than 4,000 members (ibid.). However, their strategy wasn’t to gain active support of the population and tribal leaders; rather, it was to gain passive acceptance of their presence in the provinces. It struck a power-sharing deal with Hadrami People’s Council; rebranded itself in the region as ‘Abna’ Hadramawt’ (Sons of Hadramawt) which supported regional development. The south-eastern regions where AQAP was present were also seemingly in much better shape than the war-torn west with good access to fuel, food, and other basic necessities that weren’t impeded by the coalition blockade imposed on Yemen’s western ports (Kendall 2018b, 27).

The gradual increase in AQAP membership can be attributed not only to the group’s evolution into a pragmatic actor but also to the many prison escapes orchestrated by AQAP – in Aden, Mukalla, Sana’a. It is estimated that in the span of 2006-2014 there were at least 23 prison breaks which resulted in over 400 prisoners being freed, most of them connected to al-Qaeda (Madabish 2014). During AQAP’s time occupying Mukalla, another prison break was arranged in April 2015 – AQAP members broke out approximately 300 prisoners from the local prison, among them also Khalid Batarfi (senior AQAP leader); later in the year, in June, another prison break occurred in Taiz (the third largest Yemeni city) when more than 1,200 felons escaped – most of them al-Qaeda suspects (Alkaff 2015, 99). Furthermore, many prisoners held at the US detention facility,

Guantanamo Bay, have connection either to al-Qaeda or AQAP; as of 2015, more than half of the 166 prisoners were from Yemen that, if released would be likely repatriated and join past Guantanamo detainees that returned to their jihadist way of life within AQAP (Council on Foreign Relations 2015).

AQAP can be considered a well-funded group that has different sources of gaining revenue, although after the loss of territorial control over Mukalla and surrounding areas, financial status of the group has decreased significantly (Fanuesie and Entz 2017, 2). However, it still manages to exploit the war economy in Yemen and even capitalize on the Saudi blockade which leaves AQAP as one the very few importers of goods in the country. As of 2017, the group was likely funding its functioning through criminal efforts (looting, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, trafficking, extortion) and donations, and possibly still uses the money it gained during its takeover of towns and cities in the south in the past (ibid.). AQAP gained approximately 60 million dollars from a Mukalla branch of the Yemeni Central Bank (and approximately 750 million dollars of revenue from the city port) (ibid., 7). The group has been reported to pay the grieving families of lost fighters and provide better and more consistent salaries to its fighters, thanks to its vast and diversified sources of funding (ibid., 4). However, it is important to point out that while AQAP has several funding pipelines, its funds come from unstable sources of revenue and cannot guarantee a stable financial income.

Even when under pressure and intensified CT campaigns, AQAP has managed to mount attacks both within and outside of Yemen. It has shown creativity and flexibility in its bomb designs – from the ‘underwear bomber’ in 2009 (attempted Christmas Day attack on the US) to shipping explosives hidden in printer cartridges in 2010 (Rich 2012). The group also has significant weapons arsenal which increases its capability to fight its opponents and continue to wage war. There is a booming weapons market in Yemen –

analysts claim that Yemen belongs to a group of most well-armed societies around the world (Eleftheriadou 2014, 417). The presence of various violent non-state actors in the country, past of civil wars and conflicts, independent tribes, and a booming black market have all contributed to the proliferation of easily-accessible weapons in the country. Another reason can be found in the arming of some groups on the ground in exchange for military support, done mainly either by the Yemeni government or other states like Saudi Arabia or UAE. Along various types of guns, the group also possesses sophisticated weaponry including rocket launchers, surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft cannons, mortars, combat vehicles, and anti-tank missiles (UN 2018, 10). These weapons are often looted from military camps or gained from coalition-backed militias in which AQAP fighters fight against the Houthis.

The group has also shown ideological flexibility – for example, when it deprioritized its focus on the West in favor of developing its domestic agenda or when it deprioritized spreading its radical and violent ideology and instead pose as a pragmatic actor that builds alliances, recruits and trains fighters, and places most emphasis on survival (Horton 2018). It has rather focused on a ‘Yemen-first’ approach while limiting most of its West-oriented agenda to inciting lone wolf attacks (International Crisis Group 2017, 7). The group also changed its focus of attacks – before 2014, it could be said that AQAP relatively tolerated Houthis but this changed as the civil war caused an increase in Yemeni sectarianism and the Houthis grew stronger (Knoll 2017, 19). Nowadays, Houthis, together with the Saudi coalition forces present a number one enemy to AQAP.

AQAP has also changed its long-term strategy of inciting fear to a more nuanced ‘Robin Hood’ approach that has proven to be much more effective. It has learned from the mistakes of other AQ offshoots and worked hard on avoiding alienating tribal leaders and local populations, realizing that it needs their tolerance at the very least if the group is to

continue to grow and maintain operational bases. As Horton (2018) claimed, the organization started focusing on gaining skilled fighters, building alliances, and focusing on gaining money and weapons that would enabled the group's long-term survival. AQAP has also learned from its governance experiments in Abyan and Mukalla and toned down its violent rhetoric and tactics.

A US counterterrorism expert was reported to have said in 2013 that AQAP had shown “remarkable resiliency and adaptability, surviving several leadership changes and major crackdowns in both Saudi Arabia and Yemen” (Wells 2013, 7). It has survived the deaths of Al-Shihri, deputy leader, Al-Wuhaysi, AQAP leader, Al-Asiri, chief bomb-maker, Al-Awlaki, recruiter and propagandists, and many others. AQAP has also proven to be an adaptable group through its strategic retreats that showed that the group's ultimate goals was its survival and long-term growth (Horton 2018). When the organization lost control over significant parts of their territory, AQAP encouraged its fighters to return home to their villages, further assimilating its members into the Yemeni population (ibid.). In a nutshell, AQAP has made great strides towards adapting itself into the local realities by developing pragmatic alliances with ideologically-different groups or by strategically retreating when possible losses outweigh possible gains (ibid.).

5. Conclusion

Based on the provided theoretical underpinnings in Chapter Two relating to the theory on violent non-state actors, this thesis has dealt with the topic of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its standing in the current local, regional, and global context from its inception in 2009 until current developments in 2018. The group has been analyzed through the lens of VNSA theory and more specifically, according to the ARI framework intended for such analysis. The work focused on analyzing the levels of autonomy, representation, and influence the group currently wields.

As was shown in the previous chapters, the group enjoys high levels of autonomy as it operates in provinces with a significant lack of government control and also makes use of non-physical spaces like the cyberspace. The organization has proven that it can withstand opposition and continue to exist even in the face of multi-party persecution that has resulted in the killings of many important figures within AQAP. By functioning independently, the group has also shown that it is able to survive on its own without the

need for state support. Although it functions on Yemeni territory, this does not decrease its autonomy significantly because of the failing government which has virtually no control in most of the southern provinces – rather, the group usually deals with tribal leaders that can limit its autonomy because the presence of tribes restricts the possibilities of action on the territory. Its autonomy is also limited due to the presence of the Saudi coalition and its conduct of various counterterrorism operations. While jihadist groups in Yemen, including variations of al-Qaeda in Yemen, did have ties with the government in its past – and there are reports claiming that these ties extend to the present – it was mostly the regime in power that needed the groups’ help and sometimes also aided the groups. The extent and depth of these secret relationships is largely unknown save for the fact that jihadist groups in Yemen have been used as a tool of financial or political gain by the regime. It could be argued that, in this way, the state implicitly allowed the group to operate and without such ties between the two actors, AQAP as we know it today wouldn’t exist. Nevertheless, it can be argued that both AQAP’s passive and active autonomy is high and enables the group to operate independently – of course within the context of the intensity and efficiency of the ongoing CT operations or other fighting in the provinces. Similarly, the group has proven it can create parallel, state-like institutions that can be used by the population while showing it is receptive to feedback from its members and audience. At the same time, it has also managed to exploit the existing institutions such as the black market or failing financial institutions which it has used as sources of revenue, or military bases from which it has gained advanced weaponry.

As far as representation goes, the group has managed to significantly improve this factor since its inception in 2009. It has turned its global strategy into a more local-based one, created Ansar al-Sharia in 2011, and focused on enlarging its receptive audience by co-opting the population’s grievances and frustrations. In this way, it has also managed to

embed itself deeper into the Yemeni society and its tribes – although it is important to say that it does not enjoy any official alliances with these tribes and most of AQAP-tribal cooperation was struck because of convenience. Relatively few people support AQAP's radical and violent ideology, especially in contrast with supporters that tolerate and accept AQAP as an alternative to the state or as an effective fighting force against the Houthi insurgency. The group uses various sectarian and social narratives that appeal to wide audiences with the help of media or the Internet and it has proven to be an effective government force that is able to satisfy the needs of the population.

AQAP's influence finds an important point in its 'deterrent-free' motivation because of the religious nature of its ideology and its ability to survive sustained persecution and keep more-or-less stable membership while also keeping its operations active. It is of course necessary to point out once again that AQAP's member base is quite small in comparison to the 'unofficial' support it gets from the population based on the group's co-optation of grievances rather than its religious ideology. Because of the smaller member base, the group also doesn't have to deal as much with management of possible overstretch. Rather than gain active support from the population, it is looking for passive acceptance and maybe tacit support from the locals or tribal leaders. AQAP's rise after the outbreak of violence in 2011 also showcased its transformative power which resulted in more intense counterterrorism operations from more actors (US, Yemen, UAE) aimed at the group. The group's influence rises because many of its members are intertwined with other networks within Yemen – tribal, crime, or even ones among the coalition forces. The organization has shown great adaptability and flexibility – even in the matters of its ideology and how this ideology is presented to an audience or in the strategy it employs; it has diversified incomes of revenue, although it is not as wealthy now as it was when it governed – and exploited – territory.

Nevertheless, it still remains true that it is very hard to accurately pinpoint the power and influence which AQAP wields in 2018. Due to the highly complex situation on the ground, it has become hard to distinguish AQAP attacks and trace its activity amid the violence and chaos. Furthermore, the amount of warring parties – all with different objectives – further complicates the understanding and predictability of AQAP’s future. Not only has the group shown that it is able to withstand losing its members and parts of the senior leadership, it still continues to thrive in a permissive environment within Yemen and its failed institutions and chaos of the civil war. The group has shown remarkable resiliency, flexibility, and adaptability, as well as an unusual amount of pragmatism and moderation in its operations and narratives. It has capitalized on the population’s marginalization, the failing government and its lack of basic services and goods, chaotic environment, anti-American and anti-Saudi/UAE sentiments, growing sectarianism, among others. In this environment, it is easy to claim that AQAP is “a shadow of its former self” (Johnsen 2018) or “stronger than it has ever been” (International Crisis Group 2017), but it is much harder to confirm its current standing. However, one thing is clear – at least for the foreseeable future, the Yemeni AQAP is here to stay.

Závěr

Diplomová práca sa venovala analýze teroristickej skupiny al-Kájda na Arabskom polostrove a na jej pôsobenie v Jemene a jemenskom občianskom konflikte. Táto analýza bola podložená na teoretickej báze o násilných neštátnych aktéroch a využila rámec ARI od Ersela Aydinliho ako nástroj analýzy – základné teoretické východiská boli upresnené v druhej kapitole. Tretia kapitola sa venovala historickému kontextu vývoja extrémizmu a džihádizmu v Jemene do ktorého bol zasadený vznik a vývoj skúmanej skupiny AQAP. Táto časť taktiež prezentovala permisívne prostredie v ktorom AQAP pôsobí a ktoré prispelo k jeho vzostupu. V štvrtej kapitole práce bolo hlavným cieľom prezentovať analýzu na základe spomínaného rámca ARI založeného na štúdiu autonómie, reprezentácie a vplyvu skúmanej organizácie.

Výsledky analýzy poukázali na pomerne priaznivé hodnotenie pre AQAP v troch zmienených kategóriách. Poukázali na vysokú autonómiu, vyplývajúcu z prostredia zlyhávajúceho štátu a štátnych inštitúcií v Jemene a schopnosti AQAP dlhodobo odolávať perzekúcií zo strany viacerých štátov a nepriateľských skupín čo prispieva k vysokej adaptabilite a flexibilitě organizácie. Skupina taktiež zvýšila stupeň svojej reprezentatívности najmä tým, že si vybudovala imidž skupiny schopnej efektívne nahradiť štát a jeho funkcie čím sa legitimizuje v očiach civilného obyvateľstva. Prostredníctvom svojho diskurzu, založeného na využívaní krívd, narastajúceho sektárstva a marginalizácii obyvateľstva sa skupine darí rozširovať svoje publikum a získavať si podporu – alebo toleranciu – obyvateľstva. Skupina disponuje finančnými a materiálnymi kapacitami, ktoré jej umožňujú prežiť; zároveň poukázala na svoju schopnosť zvládnuť stratu hlavných lídrov a množstva členov organizácie.

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