

Amid Yemen chaos, U.S. spies a resurgent al-Qaeda affiliate

by [Michael Holtz](#)

April 9, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Al-Qaeda militants in Yemen have wasted little time in exploiting the country's recent collapse into chaos, from storming a remote border post to breaking into a prison to free a senior leader.

The rapid resurgence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as the Yemeni branch is called, has put national security officials in the United States on high alert, given the group's determination to launch attacks on the West. At the same time, the U.S. must navigate the complicated web of regional Shi'ite-Sunni rivalries that has turned Yemen into a proxy battlefield.

U.S. defense secretary Ash Carter on Wednesday said AQAP is making "great gains" amid the turmoil. He warned that the collapse of Yemen's central government at the hands of Houthi rebels makes it harder to conduct counterterrorism operations against it, reports The Associated Press.

"That doesn't mean that we don't continue to take steps to protect ourselves. We have to do it in a different way, but we do and we are," Mr. Carter said at a press conference in Tokyo.

U.S. officials told the *Washington Post* that intelligence and logistical support to Saudi Arabia, which launched an air campaign against the Houthis last month, has not diverted resources from tracking AQAP. But the *Post* reports that the conflict, which intensified in January with the forced resignation of Yemen's president, has restricted U.S. drone strikes against the group:

The United States has not carried out a drone strike in Yemen since mid-February, when Houthi rebels formally declared their takeover of the government. The drone campaign has been characterized by such pauses for several years, but U.S. officials said that they are likely to become more common and lengthy as ground-level intelligence missions in the country grind to a halt. ...The chaos would appear to give

AQAP a major opening, a chance to ramp up terrorist plotting against the West while also asserting itself as the defender of Sunni Muslims across Yemen who are threatened by advancing Shi'ite-dominated Houthi militias.

Analysts consider AQAP to be one of the most dangerous al-Qaeda affiliates in the world—one that seeks to strike Western targets, including the U.S. The U.S. State Department estimates the organization had close to a thousand members in 2014, an increase from some 200 to 300 in 2009.

The group has played key roles in a wide range of terror plots—some successful, some not—over the past two decades. Al-Qaeda in Yemen, one of several AQAP predecessors, carried out the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden, the southern Yemeni port where fighting raged this week. Seventeen U.S. servicemen were killed when two suicide bombers detonated several hundred pounds of explosives into the hull of the warship.

Since 2006, affiliated militants have attacked U.S. and European embassies, foreign tourists, a Japanese oil tanker, and even a Yemeni military hospital.

More recently, AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris. The *New York Times* has reported that at least one of the brothers involved in the attack traveled to Yemen to train with the group in 2011. But experts question whether it directed or inspired the massacre that left 12 people dead.

A report from the Council on Foreign Relations points out that AQAP has yet to hit its number one target:

AQAP-linked operatives have also attempted, unsuccessfully, to strike the U.S. homeland: Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to bomb a Detroit-bound jet on Christmas Day, 2009, but failed due to a technical malfunction; two attempts to down Chicago-bound cargo planes with bombs disguised as printer cartridges were intercepted in October 2010 based on Saudi intelligence; and a May 2012 attempted bombing of a U.S.-bound airliner was foiled by a double agent.

While AQAP remains a top priority for Western security officials, “its star has been eclipsed among fans of jihad by the so-called Islamic State,” *The Christian Science Monitor*’s Dan Murphy wrote in January. Whether IS has the ability to hit targets outside of its Middle East stronghold is unclear, but it likely has more resources and manpower than even a resurgent AQAP.