

In Yemen, a struggle to claim mantle of Sunnis' champion

by [Taylor Luck](#)

September 30, 2015

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* As the so-called Islamic State attempts to gain attention and support in Yemen with deadly sectarian attacks, it faces a series of obstacles that could prevent it from replicating its success in Iraq and Syria.

After directing a series of bombings, IS recorded its boldest attack last Thursday: Suicide bombers struck a Shi'ite mosque in Sanaa, the capital, during Eid prayers, one of the largest gatherings of prayer-goers on the Islamic calendar.

The attack, which claimed 30 lives, was not IS's largest in Yemen. A series of bombings across the country on March 20 that targeted Shi'ite Houthis killed more than 130. It also has been eclipsed by an errant Saudi airstrike Monday on a wedding party in central Taiz province that reportedly killed 131 people, the deadliest single attack of the war.

Last week's bombing was a direct attempt to paint the war between Houthi militias and the Saudi Arabia-backed government as a sectarian conflict, positioning ISIS as the "protector" of Yemen's Sunni population.

But observers say that this aspiration pits IS against a crowded field of competitors. The biggest is al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a merger of the Saudi Arabian and Yemeni al-Qaeda branches with influence in several of Yemen's provinces.

"Al-Qaeda has invested in Yemen much more than ISIS has; they have attempted to form a local, functioning government whereas ISIS just enforces things through violence," said Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni political analyst and visiting scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut.

AQAP has expanded rapidly since the launch of Saudi Arabia airstrikes in late March, taking over the coastal city of Mukalla in April and working with local tribes to exert control over the central province of Hadramout, nearly one-third of Yemen's territory.

'ISIS is only just surviving'

Then there are Yemen's Salafis, followers of a conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, who have been locked in a four-year battle with Houthis since militias drove them from their base in the northern town of Dammaj.

The Salafi fighters, who number some 5,000, officially reject al-Qaeda's ideology, but in recent months have reportedly been open to fighting alongside AQAP to regain Dammaj.

And Islah supporters, a coalition of Islamists led by Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, also have been instrumental in the fight against Houthis in their base in Taiz. Their mainstream form of political Islam poses the biggest ideological threat to ISIS.

"It's going to be much harder than Syria or Iraq—ISIS is only just surviving," said Hisham al-Omeisy, a Yemeni political analyst and activist in Sanaa. "Within Yemeni society, I do not think they will get a lot of traction."

Then there is the matter of sheer numbers. Unlike in Iraq or Syria, where the movement drew thousands of foreign fighters over porous borders, activists and analysts say IS has only managed to amass a couple hundred in Yemen, which is bordered by Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Despite its ability to strike with suicide bombers the true number of ISIS fighters in the country remains unknown.

Activists in Aden and Sanaa say IS retains several "sleeper-cells" totaling some 100 to 200 fighters near the two cities, but after nearly a year has yet to exert control over any village or neighborhood in Yemen.

"They are trying to form a presence in Sanaa, to capture an audience, but do not have the numbers to take over," said Patrick Skinner, former CIA case officer and director of special projects at The Soufan Group, New York-based security intelligence firm. "They might take a little area in the hinterland and claim it, but that will be the extent."