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Anti-Terror Alliances: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United States vs. al-Qaeda and its Affiliates

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As the anniversary of Osama Bin Laden's killing (May 1, 2012) approached, al-Qaeda commanders in Saudi Arabia planned a terrorist attack that involved downing a passenger plane in the United States. The attack that was foiled was to be launched by a suicide terrorist carrying explosives in his underwear. The attack was a repeat performance – albeit more sophisticated – of a failed attempt in late 2009 to blow up a plane over Detroit. These attempts reflect the Yemeni-Saudi organization's determination to continue to carry out sophisticated, mass-casualty terrorist attacks against the United States, thereby challenging the optimistic assessments made recently by senior US administration officials about al-Qaeda's imminent collapse.

Yet once more, it was demonstrated that Yemen has become a key arena in which al-Qaeda and its affiliates operate with a relatively high degree of freedom. The United States has therefore increased its efforts to step up cooperation with Yemeni security forces, by expanding exercises and training anti-terrorism units, and investing more heavily in the country. At the same time, the United States has increased its air strikes targeting al-Qaeda activists in Yemen. This policy, which began during the tenure of the previous president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has continued with greater urgency since Saleh stepped down and was replaced by his deputy, Abed Rabo Mansour Hadi.

The events of the "Arab Spring," which left their imprint on Yemen, have given al-Qaeda and its supporters new momentum and maneuvering room in the country, manifested by their takeover of several provinces, especially in the east and south, in Shabwa, and in cities such as Zinjibar, al-Kawd, Shaqra, Rada'a, Ja'ar, and recently also Lawdar located in the Abyan province in southern Yemen. This region has recently become the major area

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of conflict between militias associated with Ansar al-Sharia and al-Qaeda on the one hand, and the military, on the other. The struggle has intensified; at times, battles have resulted in rebel victories and cold-blooded killings of soldiers, some executed publicly. Other soldiers have been captured and held for ransom in return for the release of rebels held in Yemeni and Saudi jails.

The organization's focus on terrorism against the United States is in keeping with the strategy preferred by Bin Laden. According to letters seized from his home after he was killed, Bin Laden asks Nasir al-Wuhayshi, his former protégé and personal secretary and current leader of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, to suspend activity against the Yemeni government and its military in order to avoid alienating the local population and losing their critical support, for the sake of victory in the more important struggle against America's presence in the region.

At the same time, the foiled aircraft attack reveals the depths of current cooperation between the Americans and the Saudis, which has increased over the years, despite the mutual distrust between the nations. The roots of that distrust lie in the role played by many Saudis in terrorist attacks in the United States and the Saudis' former ambivalent policy on fighting al-Qaeda. Over the years, the Saudis turned a blind eye to the organization's activities, in return for the organization's commitment not to carry out attacks within the kingdom. The moment such attacks occurred and the unwritten agreement was broken, the Saudis adopted a tough stance, and most al-Qaeda members in Saudi Arabia were either killed or jailed. Some escaped and reestablished a base of operations in Yemen under the united umbrella of al-Qaeda in Hijaz. Alongside its policy of punishing terrorists, Saudi Arabia has also instituted a reeducation program to rehabilitate anyone seeking to leave the path of terrorism.

In order to contain negative influences and the threat to the regime's stability given the shockwaves of the "Arab Spring," Saudi Arabia has initiated economic and social reforms in the kingdom. The Saudis have also started to take action against the global jihad's sources of funding, primarily wealthy citizens in the kingdom, and have further increased intelligence cooperation with the United States, following the expressed American displeasure with Saudi Arabia's meager efforts in this regard. The bond between the countries is based on shared interests in the fight against al-Qaeda and its affiliates and on fully exploiting the relative advantages inherent in the Saudis' close familiarity with the arena in their country and Yemen and their ability to leverage this into recruiting sources and collaborators among Yemeni and Saudi operatives. This advantage became apparent in October 2010 with the revelation of al-Qaeda's attempt to blow up cargo planes using explosives that had been hidden inside printer ink cartridges, which were intercepted in Britain and Dubai before reaching their destination: Chicago.

The Americans have contributed their operational and technological superiority to these joint efforts. Specifically, the Americans can quickly and efficiently translate intelligence reaching them from local collaborators into surgical air strikes against al-Qaeda commanders. This was the case with the September 2011 assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki, the organization's spokesman, as well as that of Fahd al-Quso on May 6, 2012. The latter had been a wanted man with a large reward for his capture because of his role in the attack on the *USS Cole* and the attempted attacks on the cargo planes. The air strike that killed al-Quso was made possible by intelligence relayed by the Saudis to the Americans from a Saudi source who was supposed to have played the role of suicide bomber in the attack on the American plane meant to commemorate the first anniversary of Bin Laden's assassination. This success is indicative of the depth of the Saudi intelligence penetration of Yemeni and Saudi terrorist organizations, but the fact that it has become public knowledge is liable to heighten the level of alertness among al-Qaeda operatives in the peninsula. They have already proven their ability to overcome such obstacles: one of their people, who was ostensibly reformed and had entered the Saudi rehabilitation program, was able to penetrate the layers of Saudi security and set off explosives hidden in his underwear in the vicinity of Saudi Arabian Deputy Interior Minister Prince Bin Nayef. The latter escaped unscathed from the attempt on his life.

It thus seems that the upheavals in the Arab world, optimistically called the Arab Spring, have at least for now created instability among Arab governments, thereby affording al-Qaeda and its affiliates a wide playing field for action and future possibilities despite the blows they have sustained in the last ten years. Despite the premature announcements of American officials about al-Qaeda's impending demise, it seems that only close, effective cooperation between the United States and its allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and others, is likely to prevent showcase attacks that the terrorists continue to plan and attempt to launch in the West. The technological operational capability that is undetected by scanning devices, used in the latest incident, alongside sophisticated weapons such as anti-aircraft missiles in the hands of global jihad movements, constitutes a serious security challenge that requires special preparedness on the part of Israeli security elements, in order to thwart a mass attack on civilians.