



Exploratory Paper | April 2023

The Impact of Terrorism and Violent Extremism on Women in South Yemen

| Farida Ahmed

Index

Background	2
Women are the victims of terrorism	4
Abyan Governorate	5
Hadramout Governorate	8
Aden Governorate	10
The impact on Society	12
Recommendations	14

After the outbreak of the Yemeni revolution in 2011, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is Al-Qaeda's most dangerous branch according to the US designation, tried to seize a number of areas in South Yemen including Abyan and Shabwa. Later, AQAP's activities expanded more in the governorates of Hadramout, Aden and Lahj after the beginning of the Arab Coalition's military operations in March 2015 against the Houthis. Despite the intensity of the disparate military and security operations implemented against the group's militants, especially by Southern forces, AQAP repeatedly made a comeback and returned more active than before.

Amid the terrorist groups' counter operations, it was not easy for women in South Yemen to be subjected to a violent bitter experience, let alone violations related to religious extremism or "terrorism." Over the last years of conflict or prior to them, the test of violent experiences has caused great trauma to women as well as severe physical and psychological repercussions, whether they experienced it personally or by their lovers and close circles. This has negatively affected women. However, these violent practices have constituted ongoing instability and deterioration threats against local communities. This has had dire effects on women's levels in education, culture, and awareness. Concurrently, women's efficiency and influential participation within the society have deteriorated.

This paper is an exploratory one by its nature. It focuses more on women's experiences through the impact of the terrorist groups on them personally and on the whole society in South Yemen in general, especially during the periods when these groups sought to control a number of areas there.

Background

Since the late 1980s, the phenomenon of extremist groups' spread in Yemen has constituted the biggest threat against its security and regional

surroundings. The former Yemeni regime used some of these groups in many operations after the Yemeni unity in 1990. This aimed to eliminate Southern civil or military cadres or to involve them in wars in partnership with the regime. Thus, groups of jihadists participated alongside the Yemeni government forces. Additionally, there had been a binary agreement between former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and cleric Abdulmajeed al-Zindani, the Leader of the Islah Party, to summon extremist Yemeni and Arab fighters from Afghanistan to participate in the ongoing fighting in Yemen. ¹ The “fatwa” issued by the then Justice Minister Abdulwahab Al-Dailami, a cleric affiliated with the same party, contributed to the killing of women and children in South Yemen during the 1994 war between North and South. He permitted killing them as long as the Southern “enemy” took them as “shields.” He claimed that if they are not killed, “the enemy” would be able to raid their homes according to the fatwa. ²

There is no exaggeration to say that targeting women in South Yemen was one card among the tactics of the extremist group. The latter was used by the former Northern regime during and after the 1994 war. From a jihadist view, women gave birth to the children of the “apostate infidel enemy.” Therefore, Southern women were basic targets along with men. This is due to the importance of women’s roles within the family system and their contribution in the increase of young people’s awareness in South Yemen. After the war, extremist religious employment has impacted the lives of many women. The subsequent changes have caused a kind of depression for women, especially the women of Aden who were more open than their peers in other regions before the unity. Unlike other countries of the Arabian Peninsula in the last century, former Socialist South Yemen made a lot of reforms for women and enabled them in

¹ Who is “Abdulnabi” who pledged allegiance to Bin Laden before following Al-Baghdadi(alarabiya.net)

² Al-Dailami’s fatwa which excommunicated Southerners in 1994-You Tube

several fields. However, they have gradually retreated after the Yemeni Unity.³

Although South Yemen was known for its religious moderation at that time, especially in Hadramout, the spread of religious groups after invading it has led to circulate more restrictive and extremist religious ideas. This particularly targeted women restraining their rights and freedom. Many women were affected by these changes to the extent that they convinced several women who exported those ideas to others. This was achieved through female gatherings, seminars and religious lectures which were held in mosques and homes periodically. This was not limited to “South Yemen” but extended to North Yemen and many of neighboring states during the so-called “Islamic Revival” (Islamic Sahwa) that was exported by Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the rise of the Houthis after 2011 and their subsequent coup against the state in 2014 contributed to transforming South Yemen to a fertile environment for the growth of these groups and the spread of their ideas. Based upon that, many aspects of the battle turned sectarian considering the polarization.

Women are the victim of terrorism

On September 17th, 2009, the United States used Tomahawk cruise missiles to bomb Al-Majalah village in Abyan governorate in South Yemen. They targeted two suspected AQAP camps. This led to the killing of 41 residents, including 14 women and 21 children.⁴ Thus, women and children were victims twice, the first due to the lack of security as well as the terrorist attacks carried out by these groups every now and then. The other one is related to the counterterrorism measures targeting these elements. Some of the preemptive anti-terror practices can cause counterproductive results, especially if women and their children are among their victims. This would lead them to retaliatory violent responses

³ Women of South Yemen: Challenges and Empowerment's Hardship

⁴ Yemen: Images of missile and cluster munitions point to US role in fatal attack - Amnesty International

in their societies. This included for example joining these groups, incitement or feeding those around them with violent ideas against all who combat this phenomenon.

On the other hand, several studies in the Middle East⁵ proved that many women who are subjected to violence from their husbands or fathers or brothers are more inclined to join radical groups based upon violence. This is a reaction towards depriving women of their rights as well as gender inequality and discrimination on the other hand, spreading extremist ideas against women among men contributes to the emergence of violent practices and discrimination against them regarding their social rights, especially in the rural areas. Moreover, when recruiting men, some “terrorist” groups were keen to recruit their female family members also. This enables these groups to use women as a pressure tool against men by threatening the latter of using violence against females if they retreat or stop short of pledging allegiance to these groups. On the other hand, women are being threatened and forced not to reveal the location of their hideouts or moves, especially if their husbands or relatives belong to extremist groups.

In addition to the fact that women are victims of terrorism, it is important to detail the impact and direct damage against them during the period when AQAP and radical religious groups controlled a number of South Yemen’s governorates including Hadramout, Abyan, Aden, Lahj and Shabwa. However, the interviews included in this paper are limited to three governorates only. They can be divided as follows:

Firstly: Abyan Governorate

After the 1994 War, AQAP took Abyan as a bastion for its fighters. The group called the first army it established there as the “Aden-Abyan Army.” Its first “terrorist operation” was in December 1998 when it kidnapped 17

⁵ The violence based on gender pushes women to join extremist groups(scientificamerican.com)

foreign tourists in Abyan and killed 4 hostages.⁶ This was followed by the operation of bombing the USS Cole in Aden in 2000 which is believed to be implemented by the same "terrorist" group. The escalation of the "terrorist groups' activities in Abyan since 2010 required military intervention. Accordingly, there have been successive military operations against the group's militants on the ground by which AQAP lost many of its fighters. Furthermore, the battles led to a massive exodus of people.

During the years of AQAP's spread in Abyan, especially before the "revolution of change" in Yemen, many women joined extremist groups. Feminist (M.S.) who is based in Abyan and has been repeatedly threatened⁷ said: "Many women in Abyan joined AQAP during the first years of the escalation of its activities. Even some girls were being married to AQAP members." She added: "Many women have been affected by the extremist ideology after 2011 and impacted other women in Abyan. They included females who belonged to some political parties such as the Islah and the Salafist "Al-Rashad." They believe that supporting women's rights aims only at drawing attention and fueling the situation. They work against the idea of feminist movement." She noted that "Women adopting radical ideologies visited female preparatory schools and urged girls there for early marriage, claiming that this will protect them, and that any girl will ultimately go to the home of her husband." She continued saying: "Radicalism has been recently reduced in Abyan. However, some ideas are still penetrating the heads of those affected by them. Furthermore, there are some mosques in which you can see different nationalities from Afghanistan and others, but their influence is limited."

Many men in Abyan spoke about the suffering of their families during the era of AQAP's presence there. Religious restrictions were imposed on women by forcing them on staying at home as well as imposing a strict

⁶ Abu Huraira, one of those who kidnapped and killed tourists in Abyan in 1998 was arrested.(alayyam.info)

⁷ An interview conducted by the author with an activist in Abyan in January 2023. During the interview, the activist played out an audio recorder for a radical cleric in Abyan in which he describes her personally as being a threat which has to be combated and eliminated due to her role in raising women's awareness of their rights.

dress code and movement rules. The conservative tribal nature has contributed to the presence of such restrictions” according to journalist (A.S.M) who works in Abyan.⁸ He added: “They organized advocacy groups who forced women and mothers at work to convince and advise their peers of the permissibility of "marriage of minors" by going to their homes. They were forced to urge women to donate their money, such as gold and jewelry for the sake of God.”

According to (A.S.M), “secret logistic recruitment operations were carried out to a number of women in Abyan. This was achieved through training them to monitor the street’s movement and to repeatedly inform each other about that by activating the domestic fixed line service.” One female resident who is the sister of a former AQAP’s member recounted that he tended to teach his sisters how to use weapons. This was derived by a religious motivation to protect themselves and to secure himself also. One woman said: “They intervened in the family planning operation. Many women advised their peers not to take contraceptive pills or give birth in hospitals as it is forbidden for women to show their bodies to male doctors.” Moreover, women were being used to report against the civil feminists and volunteer and community activists or those who adopt Western traditions according to the common description by religious extremists in Abyan”.⁹

In 2012, Major General Salem Ali Qatan succeeded in making a qualitative move in reducing the presence of “terrorist” groups. He caused real damage within AQAP’s ranks in Abyan and Shabwa. This led to a remarkable reduction of the group’s role. Later, he was assassinated in a suicide attack in June of the same year in Aden. The second war against terrorism in 2014, led by Major General Mahmoud Al-Subaihi, helped in the decline of the extremist groups’ role which partially grew after Major General “Qatan” was killed. However, their roles emerged again after the

⁸ An interview conducted by “South 24 Center’s reporter Raad Al-Rimi during his visit to Abyan in January 2023.

⁹ Many interviews with women in Abyan conducted by “South 24 Center” reporter Raad Al-Rimi during his visit to Abyan in January 2023.

outbreak of the Yemen civil war in 2014. The Houthi coup against the state helped those groups to emerge in a more coherent and powerful way than ever, especially between 2015-2017. Later, AQAP's role declined gradually with the expansion of the efforts made by local military and security forces including the "Security Belt," "Counterterrorism" and the "Military Elites" forces affiliated with STC. They carried out widespread counterterrorism operations, the latest of which was the "Arrows of the East" operation in September 2022 which expelled the group out of its historical bastions in Abyan.

Secondly: Hadramout Governorate

At midnight of April 2nd, 2015, AQAP's fighters controlled the city of Al-Mukalla in Hadramout. AQAP's domination on the whole cities of the Hadrami coast was not expected, especially that they faced no resistance by the military and security forces at that time. Related questions were similarly raised by Hadrami women who were interviewed about how AQAP controlled Al-Mukalla in this effortless way. One of them described what happened as being a "conspiracy" and "collusion" with military entities and brigades which were supposed to defend the city, the coast, and valley's districts. For women there, the most difficult moments were when AQAP began to impose its rules and beliefs on them. (F. A.) ¹⁰said: "Days after AQAP's control, women were banned from working in institutions that have gender mixing such as the National Committee for Women or the Women Union. These headquarters were raided and plundered."

These practices were not limited to the civil society headquarters. She further said that "gender mixing was banned in public facilities and universities, whether in lecture rooms or work. As I work as the director of one charitable institution, I made a separation between men and

¹⁰ An interview conducted by the author with a female activist in Hadramout in February 2023. The activist asked to be identified through codes as a kind of self-protection.

women in the office. As we were close to the "the Hisba's" headquarters affiliated with AQAP, we had to end our work early in order not to be questioned." Indeed, AQAP's militants detained a number of male and female students who attended a graduation party organized by the university after raiding a shopping center in Al-Mukalla. They were investigated and accused of "gender mixing".¹¹

(F. A.) recalled her experience by saying: "one day, AQAP stole the bus of the institution where I work. When they were reviewed about this, they told us that a group affiliated with them took the bus to Shabwa. It turned out later that they used the bus in carrying out a suicide operation there." She added: "There is no doubt that many women have been subjected to violations in Al-Mukalla. A colleague's home was raided while she was carrying her two-month baby. She received death threats after they seized all her devices as she works in the humanitarian and accommodation field." They also kidnapped her husband who works as a journalist. Things were not limited to that level, as they carried out a lapidation (stoning) penalty against a woman publicly after accusing her of obscenity without unambiguous evidence. She was killed in front of her children.

Nabila Mohammed¹², who works for a famous feminist organization in Al-Mukalla said: "Targeting women was not understood. Our organization was looted. They seized all its contents before expelling us from it." She added: "AQAP also published a list that included the names of famous female leaders in Hadramout and threatened to target them. This caused much horror for many women to the extent that some of them completely disappeared from the civil scene in fear of their safety and lives. Furthermore, many girls who got out from their homes were abused and sometimes arrested and dragged into unknown places. This has

¹¹ Yemen: AQAP detains students in Al-Mukalla because of gender mixing-BBC News Arabic

¹² A pseudonym for a Hadrami feminist who asked to use a pseudonym because she is still under threat due the the presence of some AQAP's cell in the valley and coast of Hadramout.

become unsafe and unnatural for many women, especially those who are active in the community.”

She continued saying: “During the era when AQAP controlled Al-Mukalla and the coastal cities, big organizations like Hadramout Women Union, the National Committee for Women, Federation of Trade Unions and Agricultural Cooperation, civil society leaders and feminists called for a demonstration in the center of the city to denounce AQAP’s presence. She added” “The heavy female participation in the demonstration was remarkable. We were in the forefront of the protest. Even the demonstration’s statement was read by a woman. AQAP tried to harass and hinder us, but they failed due to the massive momentum. They seek to avoid clash with the society, and they are desperate to apply a conciliatory policy with it.”

The Hadrami moderate religious awareness and peaceful conduct contributed to preventing turning Hadramout to emirates controlled by some terrorists. With the help of the “Hadrami Elite” managed to expel AQAP one year after the group seized control over Al-Mukalla and the Hadrami coast’s districts. This was backed by logistic support from the UAE. The same thing occurred in Shabwa as the “Shabwani Elite” contributed to driving the group’s fighters out of several districts there.

Thirdly: Aden Governorate

Despite the disparity between the extremist groups and the differences in their ideologies and methods, they adopt a unified and traditional position towards women. This includes restricting their freedom and imposing strict rules for movement and a dress code. In Aden, the situation was not much different from other areas. Zina Al-Ghalabi, an engineer, a political activist, and a feminist,¹³ recalled her personal experience with the extremist groups. She said: “In 2012, particularly in the “Sakran Café” in Crater, I, along with a group of women, were sitting

¹³ An interview conducted by the writer with political activist and feminist

there before an extremist group insulted and beaten us. They were irritated by seeing women inside a popular cafe.” She added: “For me, it is the first time I feel alien in my city. We face people who want to practice guardianship on our simplest rights.” After 2015, some extremist groups sought to control Aden to exploit the nature of the security situation which collapsed after the fall of the state institutions. They were encouraged by AQAP’s control on Al-Mukalla and some districts in Abyan and Shabwa in the early phases of the conflict.

Zina said: “The extremist groups began to emerge in Aden in an obvious way as a reaction against the opposite ideology in North Yemen. The war partially started to take a sectarian character. Naturally, civilians became the first victims of this war. Although Aden was completely liberated in mid-June 2015 from the Houthi militia and other terrorist cells which spread at that time, the threats have remained persistent. Political assassinations and terrorist operations that target influential figures on political or military or even the society fields did not stop.” Al-Ghalabi recounted a painful experience when she lost close relatives. She said: “I lost my cousin who was killed by the Houthis before liberating Aden. My uncle was assassinated for political reasons by extremist groups. In 2017, I lost my friend Amjad Abdulrahman, the founder of Al-Naseya Cultural Club. He was killed by parties claiming they were part of the military institution at that time before they turned out later to be terrorists.”

It is important to indicate that the crime of killing” Amjad Abdulrahman” was unprecedented as they prevented his body from reaching his family’s home. They also deprived his parents and sister from giving him farewell glances. Furthermore, they prevented holding funeral prayers for him in mosques. Al-Ghalabi said: “I worked as a deputy of Amjad in the Cultural Club. We had a wide variety of cultural activities. We were threatened and abused repeatedly. However, we do not imagine that these threats will turn into such criminal acts including killing, arresting four of our colleagues and chasing all who work in the Cultural Club. As a result, I had to move to Egypt and to leave my work and education. Less than two years

later, I received news about the assassination of my other cousin at the hands of terrorist groups also near his house.”

In fact, the capital, Aden, has faced a lot of challenges by radical religious groups, especially after 2015. The most prominent of them emerged in the series of assassinations and bombings adopted by these groups to eliminate many influential Southern political, military and security figures. Tough questions have been always raised about the focus of the terrorist groups on South Yemen’s areas and why they are limiting their targets to these figures. However, the Southern security entities have continued making big efforts in combating the implementation of these operations and reducing their impact.

The impact on society

The dramatic developments of political and military events in the country after 2011 led to the emergence of the role of religious groups from both parties in a remarkable way. They include those affiliated with the Iran-backed Houthis or those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, or jihadist groups (AQAP and ISIS) on the other hand. Prior to that, the religious impact negatively affected the community after the 1994 War. The schools of extreme religious fanaticism and violent groups emerged in a number of South Yemen’s governorates. These moves were systematic and well-prepared. Their aim is to put pressure on these areas and divert the path of their political demands as well as making a security vacuum for instability. So far, local communities in South Yemen suffer from the impact of religious extremism and their repercussions, especially on women.

Recently, a female music band in Aden ¹⁴ has stirred a wide controversy and has been denounced. A large number of commentators described the band as being alien to society and prohibited in Islamic law. By monitoring social media platforms, it is remarkable that some responses threatened

¹⁴ The first female music band in Aden-You Tube

the lives of women who are participating in the music field. They called for the need for tightening the noose on the culture and ideas imported from Western organizations. Indeed, this reaction sounds the alarms about the spread of extremism and violent approaches in a remarkable sector within the local communities, particularly after the Houthi control over large areas in the country in 2014. Along with the religious group's promotion for their extremist persistent ideas during their years of control, the coerced return of many Yemeni families from Saudi Arabia after 2016 due to the new work and residence systems there has impacted on the local communities in Yemen in general, especially that the return preceded the openness changes which expressed the Saudi "Vision 2030".

As for her view about the changes in the Adeni community, Zina Al-Ghalabi said: "Niqab has spread in Aden more than other governorates¹⁵ which is an indicator about the changes in the nature of the Adani society." She continued saying: "Women's concerns about working in civil society organizations have increased. This is due to the picture depicted by extremists about civil society and that gender mixing is moral degeneracy." However, "Al-Ghalabi" said that "the impact of these groups has been gradually reduced. A large part of people became more aware of the identity of terrorism. Moreover, there has been resistance in different fields to restore Aden's cultural and enlightening role. Although these bloody incidents left many concerns within us and hampered our lives for a prolonged period, they have in deliberately created community awareness about the importance to defend the principles of citizenship and variety as well as knowing the extremism phenomena before turning from mere social manifestations into systematic groups."

Along with the manifestations which have affected public life due to the alien extremist and radical ideology in South Yemen's communities as well as the big psychological impact on many of its members, the financial and the economic levels have deteriorated day after day due to the conflict

¹⁵ Niqab is a black veil which covers women's faces except their eyes.

which broke out in 2014. Additionally, the state's budget has been depleted by fighting the extremist groups on both sides. This led to the governmental failure to provide basic needs of people as well as other effects related to domestic violence, escape, dropping out of schools and the changes in the conduct of many individuals from both genders. This raises a question about what we can do in this stage, especially if this is linked with an approach that would mitigate these effects on women. This would also take more practical measures that can help them to bypass these experiences and enhance their role and participation in a more influential way in public life.

Recommendations

The local, regional, and international counterterrorism efforts can make a positive outcome regarding changing the reality of women and community parallel to changes on the ground. This would enable them to face the scenarios of the violent extremism in their communities, especially that the current phase experienced by Yemen is still thorny. For building more safe peace operations, work must be mingled with proactive nature to achieve this. There is a number of relevant recommendations as follows:

- Setting a comprehensive national strategy to counter extremism and terrorism can be built upon previous regional and international experiences, especially which emanated from the UNSC Resolution (1325) on "Women, Peace, Security". It will be important to include the strategy among the future peace operations.
- Enabling women to take part in political life, decision making and building peace to maintain social peace and protect society from the risks of violent tendencies and terrorism.
- The engagement of more women in the security system. This was encouraged by the High Commissioner during the Global Counterterrorism Forum in 2014 as part of an UNSC open debate

about “women's role in combating terrorism extremism¹⁶ as well as the need for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

- Activating the role of social workers in the schools and universities of South Yemen’s governorates as well as developing their public awareness of extremism and terrorism risks. This would contribute to explaining their risks in a preemptive way against the radical ideas.
- Enhancing the role of civil society organizations, especially those which deal with women. This includes the branches of the Yemeni Women Union in the governorates which are most affected by the extremist groups including Hadramout, Aden, Shabwa, Abyan and Lahj as well as the National Committee for Women. Moreover, they should work to organize training programs to increase the level of women's awareness of the threats of “terrorism” and extremism.
- It is important to ensure that building peace and security as well as renouncing violent extremism will not be achieved amid women’s absence from the decision-making circles.
- The media awareness about the risks of violent extremism and terrorism is important. This has to be included in the plans of the satellite channels. Moreover, the level of awareness should be increased through websites and print press.
- Imposing more strict sanctions and monitoring hatred speech against women on social media can help in reducing the radical ideologies and mitigating the sharpness of the possible threats that target them.
- Enhancing the role of religious institutions and mosques in generalizing the culture of equality among members of society and denouncing acts of violence and terrorism against women.
- Contacting influential feminist figures who adopt a moderate religious approach to encourage them to spread social values among other women and encourage them to accept and respect the other’s freedom and views.

¹⁶ UN High Commissioner for Human Rights report on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms as part of counterterrorism, December 19th 2014.

- Being funded by the government as well as regional and international organizations interested in combating extremism and terrorism is a main factor to support the organizations that work in the field of women affairs. This will activate their roles in raising awareness about the dangers of violence, especially in the governorates that have been affected by the extremist groups such as Hadramout, Abyan, Shabwa, Aden and Lahj.

NOTE:

THIS PAPER IS BASED ON INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED DURING JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 2023 WITH A GROUP OF FEMALE ACTIVISTS IN THE POLITICAL AND FEMINIST FIELDS IN A NUMBER OF THE GOVERNORATES AFFECTED BY THE IMPACT OF THE "TERRORIST" EXTREMIST GROUPS, ESPECIALLY IN ABYAN, ADEN AND HADRAMOUT. SOME OF THEM ASKED TO BE IDENTIFIED BY PSEUDONYMS OR INITIALS TO MAINTAIN THEIR PRIVACY AND SAFETY.

"SOUTH24 CENTER" EXTENDS ITS THANKS AND GRATITUDE TO ALL WOMEN WHO SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES. WE STRESS THAT THEY ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE VIEWS INCLUDED IN THIS PAPER.

Cover photo: Dr. Zainab Al-Qaisi, a woman from South Yemen on one of the anti-Houthi battle fronts in northern Al-Dhalea in 2019 (local activists)

The Impact of Terrorism and Violent Extremism on Women in South Yemen

| Farida Ahmed
Executive Director of South24 Center

All rights reserved to:

South24 Center for News and Studies
South24.net

SOUTH 24