

Yemeni militants hit back, leaving more than 20 dead

Two deadly attacks this weekend signal the ongoing ability of Al Qaeda-linked militants to hit the government even after being dislodged from their strongholds earlier this year.

By Adam Baron, Correspondent / August 19, 2012



Army soldiers keep watch from atop an armored personnel carrier patrolling a road, where Eid al-Fitr prayers were held, in Sanaa, August 19.

Two deadly attacks rocked Yemen's restive south within 24 hours Saturday and Sunday, demonstrating the resilience of local militants and the continued challenges facing the Yemeni government as it aims to restore stability to this conflict-wracked nation.

At least 20 people were killed in Saturday's attack on the Intelligence Headquarters of the southern port of Aden, as masked fighters suspected to be affiliated with Al Qaeda opened fire on soldiers guarding the compound while accomplices detonated a car bomb nearby. A suicide attack on Sunday in the neighboring province of Abyan killed a local commander of an anti-Al Qaeda militia.

Al Qaeda-linked militants took large swathes of territory in Abyan last year as the government's grasp on the country weakened during an Arab Spring-inspired uprising against former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The militants, fighting under the banner of Ansar al-Shariah, managed to maintain their hold on much of the province for more than a year, before they were finally pushed out following a US-backed offensive by Yemeni forces and allied tribal fighters this June.

But while Ansar al-Shariah has abandoned control of towns held since last spring, there was little sign that they had given up the fight. The bulk of the fighters, military officials acknowledged, were able to flee to hideouts elsewhere – or, in some other cases, reintegrate into normal society.

As militants have continued to launch attacks targeting government forces and their allies in Abyan itself – earlier this month, an attack on a funeral left more than 50 dead – they've also

taken the fight to major cities as well. A series of bold attacks and assassination attempts have rocked Aden and the capital, Sanaa, killing scores of soldiers and a number of senior military officials, including Gen. Salem Qattan, commander of Yemen's Southern Military District and a key leader in the battle in Abyan.

Pointing to the continuing attacks, some analysts say the military's offensive in Abyan and its counterterrorism cooperation with the US may have radicalized some of the Yemeni population. The use of American unmanned drones has long been controversial in Yemen, and some security officials have quietly claimed that resentment of the policy has helped to spur recruitment.

"The number of Yemenis who sympathize with Al Qaeda is small," said one high-ranking security official, speaking on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject. "But with every American drone strike – with every civilian killed – it continues to grow."

Military reforms

Yemen's government also faces the challenge of consolidating its power as it battles the local extremists. The post-Saleh government has had to reckon with a divided military, still split as a result of the defections of many top officers during the uprising against the former president.

While Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Saleh's successor, has earned praise from many observers as he's embarked upon a gradual, though wide-ranging, process of military restructuring, his actions have failed to quell divisions between rival factions.

Fears that lingering tensions within the military could spark renewed fighting briefly returned to Sanaa earlier this week, as an attack on Yemen's Ministry of Defense by dozens of members of the Republican Guard, which is led by Saleh's son, left five dead.

The recent violence has largely been forthrightly condemned by fatigued Yemenis. Aghast at the increasing regularity of attacks, many here say the violence has left them feeling increasingly unsafe and fearful of what the future will bring.

"The frequency and methods of these terrorist attacks is unprecedented in Yemeni history," says Mohamed Hail, a high school teacher in Sanaa. "We're really losing any feeling of security here."