

## **The relations between Al Qaeda of Arab Peninsula and the Houthis and the war in Gaza**

***Shaul Shay***

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council)

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Al Qaeda of Arab Peninsula (AQAP), which was considered the most dangerous branch of the organization and whose terrorist activity has declined in recent years, is about to change its strategy due to 3 main reasons: new policy of the central command of al Qaeda, a new leader for the organization and the war in Gaza. These reasons caused a historic change in the relations between al Qaeda and the Houthis in Yemen from hostility and conflict to cooperation and this raise concerns that AQAP will once again be a significant actor in global terrorism.

### **The central leadership of al Qaeda**

Saif al-Adl, is widely believed to be al Qaeda's current global emir after al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a US drone strike in Afghanistan in 2022.<sup>1</sup>

Saif al-Adl maintained a relationship with former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Forces commander Qassem Soleimani starting in the late 1990s, which continued even after the Iranian regime detained and kept him under house arrest from 2003.<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, Iran released five senior members of al Qaeda, including Saif al-Adl. Iran's release of the five men was part of a prisoner swap in March 2015 with AQAP, the group holding Nour Ahmad Nikbakht, the Iranian

Cultural Attaché at the Iranian Embassy in Sanaa who was kidnapped by the group in Sanaa in July 2013. <sup>3</sup>

In Saif al-Adl's view, the supreme ideological objective of al Qaeda – fighting the West and its allies in the region – necessitates a strategic alliance with Tehran. This is why, even after being released from house arrest Saif al-Adl chose to remain in Iran, making it the permanent base of his jihadist activities.<sup>4</sup>

AQAP maintained strong ties with al Qaeda's central leadership and especially with Saif al-Adl. <sup>5</sup> Al-Adl's son, Khaled Mohammed Salahaldin Zidane, is currently deployed to Yemen as his personal representative, where he “plays a critical role in recruitment, media and managing AQAP internal strife,” according to the UN. <sup>6</sup>

Saif al-Adl has attempted repeatedly to move to Yemen and shift al-Qaeda Central's command there. He has advocated for an increased focus on attacks against Western interests, Saudi-led coalition forces, and anti-Houthi forces, and is seen to have an increasing influence on AQAP. <sup>7</sup>

### **The leaders of AQAP**

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), announced on March 10, 2024, that the leader of the group, Khalid Al-Batarfi, is dead but it offered no details on the cause of his death. Al-Batarfi is believed to be in his early 40s.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Qaeda released a video on the eve of Ramadan, the Muslim holy fasting month, showing Al-Batarfi wrapped in a funeral shroud of the Al-Qaeda black-and-white flag. “Allah took his soul while he patiently sought his reward and stood firm, immigrated, garrisoned, and waged jihad for His sake,” the militants said in the video.

In the announcement, the group said Sa'ad bin Atef Al-Awlaki would take over as its leader. The US has a \$6 million bounty on him, saying Al-Awlaki “has publicly called for attacks against the United States and its allies.”

Since 2022 the AQAP is believed to be divided into three factions: a Saudi faction led by AQAP leader Khalid Batarfi, a Yemeni faction led by Sa'ad Atef al-Awlaki, the group's emir in Shabwa province, and an

Egyptian faction led by senior AQAP official Ibrahim al-Banna and the son of the de facto leader of al-Qaeda Central, Saif al-Adl.<sup>9</sup> A rift has surfaced between Batarfi and his second in command, Sa'ad al-Awlaqi, with both reportedly leading competing factions within the group.<sup>10</sup>

AQAP's activity declined after painful blows delivered to the group by the Southern forces in Abyan and U.S. drone strikes that targeted its leadership. Anwar al-Awlaki, a prolific AQAP propagandist and operational planner, was killed in 2011, and successive leaders of the organization have also been successfully targeted—Nasir al-Wuhayshi in 2015 and Qassim al-Raimi in 2020. Between January and February 2023, three more senior AQAP officials were killed by U.S. drone strikes, including two notable explosive experts and Hammad al Tamimi, the group's media chief and leader of its Shura Council.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the painful blows and the fact that the noose around it was tightened as never before, the group was keen to survive and its weakness probably led the leaders of the group to change its strategy and to stop hostilities against the Houthis.<sup>12</sup>

### **Khalid Al-Batarfi**

Al-Batarfi, born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, traveled to Afghanistan in 1999 and fought alongside the Taliban during the US-led invasion in 2001, after the 9\11 attack.

He joined the branch of al Qaeda in Yemen, known by the acronym AQAP, in 2010 and led forces in taking over Yemen's Abyan province and he became the leader of al Qaeda for Abyan governorate in 2010. He was arrested by Yemeni authorities in 2011 and imprisoned until 2015 when he was freed in an al Qaeda led jailbreak in the port city of Mukalla.

After rising to a position as a senior official on the group's main shura council, he was Al - Rimi's deputy and group spokesman.

In February 2020, AQAP confirmed the death of its leader Qasem Al-Rimi, killed by a US drone strike and appointed Khaled Al Batarfi as the successor. Batarfi pledged allegiance to al Qaeda leader Zawahiri on March 20, 2020.

In his first appearance since being appointed leader of AQAP on March 20, 2020, *Batarfi vowed AQAP would become a “nightmare to Americans”*. The warning came in a video recorded by AQAP’s media arm, Al-Malahem Foundation.<sup>13</sup>

Khalid Al-Batarfi had a \$5 million bounty on his head from the US government over leading the AQAP. In 2020, there had been claims that Al-Batarfi had been detained, which later were denied.

### **Sa’ad bin Atef Al-Awlaki**

Sa’ad bin Atef Al-Awlaki was chosen as the successor of Batarfi to take over as the overall emir of AQAP. Al-Awlaki, had long served as a deputy to Batarfi, one of the top officials on AQAP’s main shura council, and the group's Emir for Yemen's Shabwa Governorate.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Awlaki is a member of the influential Awlaki tribe, which plays a prominent role within al Qaeda. Another infamous Awlaki is Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born jihadi preacher who held an influential role within AQAP as well a beloved preacher for al Qaeda within jihadi circles and a critical recruiter of westerners. Anwar helped found AQAP’s Inspire Magazine, which encouraged Western Muslims to wage jihad both at home as well as within Muslim countries.<sup>15</sup>

### **The shift in AQAP's strategy**

AQAP viewed Shiite Muslims like the Houthis as heretics. Since July 2014, as Houthi forces broke out of their Saada stronghold, AQAP has moved into provinces where they've had little presence before to counter Houthi forces spreading across the north. In 2014, after Houthi rebels took control of the capital Sanaa, Al-Qaeda declared war against the Shia Houthis with support from the defeated government forces.

A statement allegedly issued by al Qaeda called on Yemen's Sunnis to take up arms against the Shiite Houthi group, which wrested control of most state institutions in capital Sanaa.<sup>16</sup>

The group lashed out at the Houthi leadership, accusing it of destroying mosques and burning religious books. It also accused Houthi militants of carrying out a "Persian" plot in Yemen.<sup>17</sup>

Along the years of the civil war in Yemen, al-Qaeda killed several hundred Houthis by suicide bombings, kidnappings and ambushes but in last decade the relations between al Qaeda and the Houthis has been changed.

In 2015, Iran released five senior members of Al Qaeda, including Saif al-Adel, a senior member of Al Qaeda's ruling body, known as the Shura Council and today the leader of Al Qaeda. Iran's release of the five men was part of a prisoner swap in March 2015 with AQAP, the group holding Nour Ahmad Nikbakht, the Iranian Cultural Attaché at the Iranian Embassy in Sanaa who was kidnapped by the group in Sana in July 2013.

<sup>18</sup>

This deal had a positive impact on the security situation in the areas controlled by the Houthis. It seems that this was part of Iran's objective behind its contact with AQAP. It led to the cessation of AQAP's activities in Houthi areas, as the two parties continued with their deals to exchange abducted persons with prisoners over the next years. <sup>19</sup>

Between May 12 and July 4, 2023, AQAP carried out seven attacks using armed drones in the Shabwa governorate of southern Yemen. The attacks were targeted primarily at members of the Shabwa Defense Forces, which are aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), an organization that advocates for the secession of South Yemen. The attacks were claimed by AQAP on the organization's social media channels. <sup>20</sup>

The use of drones almost certainly required some form of external support. UN report from 2023 has noted the Houthis trained AQAP in the use of drones. <sup>21</sup>

*If the Houthis are providing AQAP with drones, it reflects a strategic shift in the relations of the two groups. The Houthis have significant experience carrying out drone attacks and cooperation between the two groups may open channels for additional cooperation and coordination between the Houthis to AQAP.*

## AQAP and the war in Gaza

Al-Qaeda's central command and its branches have been keen to exploit the Israel-Gaza war, as well as Muslim outrage over the rising casualty toll of Palestinians, and have issued numerous messages to call for violent retaliation.

The Israel-Gaza conflict prompted increased media activity by AQAP including the revival of its Inspire magazine. AQAP was among the first of al-Qaeda's branches to issue a statement of support for the Hamas al-Aqsa Flood attacks, and followed it with a series of short videos that showed its militants expressing solidarity with Gaza fighters. AQAP also said it was pausing its Yemen-focused media operations to dedicate its productions and messaging to the war in Gaza.<sup>22</sup>

*AQAP former leader, Khalid Batarfi, called for attacks on Jews, Americans and Brits, and urged Muslim scholars to issue religious edicts to call for mobilization and jihad in response to the ongoing conflict.*<sup>23</sup>

*On December 26, 2023, AQAP in a video entitled 'What America and the West do not expect', it called for attacks in America and against Jewish and western targets, including US, British and French airlines and high-profile figures.*

*The video offered a list of key targets, dividing them into "civil aviation" and "American economy high-profile personalities". **For the first category, it lists American airliners United, Continental and Delta, British airliners British Airways and Easyjet, and French companies Air France and Air France-KLM.***<sup>24</sup>

As for individual targets, it lists Elon Musk, Bill Gates and American economist Ben Bernanke, who served as chairman of the US Federal Reserve from 2006 to 2014. It described such figures as "the people who run the American economy".<sup>25</sup>

## Summary

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was once among the most dangerous anti-U.S. terrorist groups in the world, but in recent years it has greatly weakened.

The strategic vision of Saif al-Adl, the leader of al-Qaeda is based on abandoning attacks against local adversaries in favor of external operations targeting Western interests and alliance with Iran. The war in Gaza may have created an opening for his vision of cooperation between AQAP and the Houthis in Yemen.

If the Houthis are providing AQAP with drones, it reflects a strategic shift in the relations of the two groups and this strategic shift is in line with directives from al-Qaeda Central.

***The new coordination between the Houthis and AQAP can lead the groups to join forces in the current war against Israel the US and its allies and the new cooperation between AQAP and the Houthis is something to be watched closely.***

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qaeda's Yemen Branch Says Leader Khalid Al-Batarfi Dead in Unclear Circumstances, Asharq AL Awsat, March 11, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Assim Sabri, How the Gaza Crisis Could Bring Iran and Al-Qaeda in Yemen Together, Sanaa, December 11, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Ali, will the Gaza war deepen the old rapprochement between Iran and AQAP? South 24, January 28, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Assim Sabri, How the Gaza Crisis Could Bring Iran and Al-Qaeda in Yemen Together, Sanaa, December 11, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Roggio, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula names new emir; U.S. has \$6 million bounty on his head, long war journal, March 11, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Reuben Dass, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift, Lawfare, August 20, 2023.

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Qaeda's Yemen branch says leader Khalid Al-Batarfi dead in unclear circumstances, Arab news, March 11, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Reuben Dass, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift, Lawfare, August 20, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, ACLED, January 31, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Reuben Dass, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift, Lawfare, August 20, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Kendall, Death of AQAP Leader Shows the Group's Fragmentation—and Durability, The Washington Institute, Policy Watch 3263, February 14, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> New leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen threatens to be a 'nightmare for Americans', the new Arab, March 22, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Roggio, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula names new emir; U.S. has \$6 million bounty on his head, long war journal, March 11, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ali Oweida, Qaeda allegedly urges Yemen's Sunnis to fight Houthis, Anadolu Agency, September 24, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibrahim Ali, will the Gaza war deepen the old rapprochement between Iran and AQAP? South 24, January 28, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Reuben Dass, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift, Lawfare, August 20, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Roggio, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula names new emir; U.S. has \$6 million bounty on his head, long war journal, March 11, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Briefing: Al-Qaeda's 'Inspire' video urges attacks in the West to avenge Gaza, BBC, March 30, 2024.

<sup>23</sup> The Q&A was fronted by AQAP leader Khalid Batarfi, BBC insight, October 30, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Briefing: Al-Qaeda's 'Inspire' video urges attacks in the West to avenge Gaza, BBC, March 30, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.