# AL-QAEDA'S DECLINE IN YEMEN:
# AN ABANDONMENT OF IDEOLOGY AMID A CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP



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*COVER PHOTO: AQAP militants in Azzan, Shabwa, in 2012 / Photo by Abdelrazzaq al-Jamal*

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# INTRODUCTION

The decline of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen over the past five years was unexpected. Indicators in the years prior to the onset of the current conflict showed a group primed to expand its influence. The wave of protests against then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, and his subsequent resignation the following year, had left the country in disarray. A new president was at the helm and struggling with the ascending power of the Houthi movement. Conditions were thus favorable for AQAP to thrive amid the disorder and make inroads in Yemen outside its traditional areas of influence.

Circumstances shifted in 2015, however, as AQAP was at the height of its power. In April of that year, AQAP head Nasir al-Wuhayshi was killed in a US drone strike. Some observers have linked the killing of Al-Wuhayshi and other senior figures with the group's decline in subsequent years, concluding that AQAP was going through a leadership crisis.[1] However, this reading of events, even if logical, oversimplifies the issue. It does not fully take into account the conditions, events and decisions that not only led to rifts within the group but, more importantly, caused an unprecedented identity crisis within AQAP. The most urgent crisis of Al-Qaeda in Yemen is linked not only to its faltering leadership, but also critically, wavering faith in the group's ideology.

This paper tracks the evolution of AQAP from the period following Yemen's 2011 Arab Spring-inspired uprising to the present day. Major topics covered include: the group's reaction to the armed Houthi movement's takeover of Sana'a and military expansion across large swathes of the country; its participation in the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen, a turning point that exposed fatal security gaps; and the growing tensions with the Islamic State in Yemen, eventually leading to intra-jihadi conflict, internal security measures that alienated many members and ideological fractures within the organization.

Information for this paper was gathered through discussions with Al-Qaeda members, figures affiliated with the group, tribal leaders and former jihadis, conducted from 2014-2021, in the quest to understand the circumstances that have

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[1] Gregory Johnsen, "Khalid Batarfi and the Future of AQAP," Lawfare Blog, March 22, 2020, https://www.lawfareblog.com/khalid-batarfi-and-future-aqap.

led to the declining power and footprint of the group in Yemen. Events related to AQAP and media content released by AQAP and others about the group over the same period were monitored and analyzed. Discussions were conducted through face-to-face meetings, virtual communications, as well as via intermediaries for those for whom a direct meeting was deemed too risky. All sources cited in this paper have been granted anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed.

# A GOLDEN ERA

Between 2013 and 2014, AQAP carried out a large number of operations in different governorates in Yemen, despite high-level cooperation between President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government and the United States in the "War on Terror". This included Al-Qaeda raids on military bases and prisons, the assassination of dozens of military, security and intelligence officers, the partial seizure of major cities, and attacks within Saudi territory such as the twin suicide bombing in the border town of Shararah in 2014.[2]

At the time, the main threat from AQAP came as a result of its flexibility and ease of movement around the country, despite the heightened military, security and intelligence efforts aimed at countering it. Cooperation between the Yemeni government and international partners on countering terrorism, particularly the United States, proved ineffective in the facing of a security vacuum and a lack of state presence across many areas of the country. The group demonstrated an extraordinary ability to target sites across multiple governorates. Over a short period, AQAP managed to raid the 2nd Military District headquarters in Mukalla in September 2013,[3] the Defense Ministry complex in the capital Sana'a in December 2013, the 4th Military District headquarters in Aden's Al-Tawahi district in April 2014, as well as various smaller military camps, security headquarters and barracks.

Perhaps the most audacious operation during this pre-war period was the raid on the central prison in Sana'a in February 2014, during which AQAP militants freed 29 detainees. What made the prison break such a feat was not only that it was carried out in the capital far from the group's main strongholds, but also that the militants were able to smuggle the prisoners that same day to Al-Jawf governorate, 170 kilometers north of Sana'a, and later to Abyan through Marib and Shabwa.[4] Following the jailbreak, Al-Qaeda released a video of a military parade welcoming the newly-freed members. The gathering included about 400 people and was the largest known AQAP-affiliated gathering in Yemen up to that

[2] "Attack on Saudi border post kills ten," Al-Arabiya, July 5, 2014, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/07/05/Two-militants-blow-themselves-up-in-southern-Saudi-Arabia-.

[3] "Gunmen attack the leadership of the eastern military region in southern Yemen," BBC Arabic, September 30, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2013/09/130930_yemen_clashes

[4] Information conveyed to the author by a mid-level Al-Qaeda commander in the aftermath of the prison break.

point. The US State Department spokesperson at the time, Marie Harf, avoided analyzing the significance of the parade itself, but said it was clear that AQAP had been "gaining strength."[5]

The escalation in Al-Qaeda operations dampened the celebratory mood that followed the liberation of Abyan governorate from AQAP control by government forces in mid-2012. That major offensive was seen at the time as the start of a new phase in the War on Terror in Yemen, which had been previously exploited by President Saleh for political and financial gains. In particular, Hadi, as Yemen's new president, was keen on achieving tangible results against Al-Qaeda in order to gain favor abroad.

Meanwhile, Washington had yet to translate the security and military concessions it had gained over the years in Yemen as part of the War on Terror into practical achievements. Some Yemenis, analysts and observers of AQAP at the time argued that US-Yemen cooperation on counterterrorism had backfired. For instance, the perceived violation of Yemen's sovereignty in the 2000s, mainly through the increasing use of drone strikes, may have actually created an atmosphere of increasing sympathy for Al-Qaeda, most notably among Yemen's tribes.[6] Despite the nearly two-decade-long campaign against it, AQAP attacks against military and security targets during the period after Saleh's resignation became more violent than in the past. At the same time, US strikes on Al-Qaeda targets in 2013 and 2014 were not successful in curbing the group's activities nor limiting its mobility. In fact, the militant group viewed the use of drones as evidence of the failure of the military campaign against it.[7]

However, the increase in AQAP's local operations during 2013-14 was not an indication of the group's power globally, as there was a significant decrease in its international activities. The opposite was true in 2009 and 2010, when AQAP carried out major, albeit unsuccessful, operations abroad. These included an assassination attempt on then-Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Nayef in August 2009, a botched bombing attempt aboard a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas Day 2009, and parcel bombs placed on cargo planes in Dubai and the United Kingdom that were intercepted in October 2010.

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[5] "Video: Mass Al Qaeda Meeting in Yemen", Newsweek, April 16, 2014. https://www.newsweek.com/video-mass-al-qaeda-meeting-yemen-246523.

[6] "Insight: In Yemen, al Qaeda gains sympathy amid U.S. drone strikes," Reuters, December 13, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-us-drones-insight-idUSBRE9BC0A020131213.

[7] Al-Qaeda's Inspire Magazine, Issue 11, 2013.

These ultimately unsuccessful international operations, which were modest in number and capability, were not an accurate barometer of the group's actual power. This contradicts the prevailing view at the time, including at the CIA, which in August 2010 said AQAP had become a bigger threat to US security than the Al-Qaeda core parent organization.[8] Rather, the international operations attempted by the group were possible because AQAP had seized the initiative and taken advantage of security gaps. In reality, AQAP had reached a point of relative weakness by 2010, eventually announcing its inability to receive new recruits due to a financial crisis.[9] However, the tide would change for the group in the coming years amid the growing conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement.

[8] Greg Miller, "CIA sees increased threat in Yemen," Washington Post, August 25, 2010, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/24/AR2010082406763.html.

[9] Recording released by then-senior AQAP commander Qassim al-Raymi in 2010, Malahim, https://archive.org/details/abiharaira.

# AQAP REACTS TO THE HOUTHI EXPANSION

The rise of the Houthi movement in Yemen seemed like a boon for AQAP. The Houthis, which had fought a series of wars against government forces in the 2000s, began advancing southward from its stronghold in the mountainous region of Sa'ada in the wake of the 2011 uprising, and by September 2014 had seized the capital Sana'a. Four months later, President Hadi escaped house arrest by the Houthis and fled to Aden, leaving behind collapsed military and security institutions and intelligence agencies. As a result, the priority of the War on Terror and the government's capacities to wage it were severely diminished. The government's lax reaction to the Houthi expansion gave new life to AQAP recruitment campaigns, especially in tribal areas

The rise of the Houthis, who adhere to the Zaidi sect of Shia Islam, turned Yemen into a fertile ground for Al-Qaeda to heavily employ sectarian sentiment in its recruitment efforts. Calls to resist the Houthis on religious grounds were welcomed by some Yemenis, especially by members of Salafi movements and youth in the Islamist party Islah, many of whom were students at the conservative Al-Iman University in Sana'a. Many pro-Islah students at the time were disillusioned by their party's decision to stand on the sidelines in the fight against the Houthis and were eager for action; Al-Qaeda was there to take advantage of the students' anger.

One student who attended Al-Iman University said that growing resentment toward Islah was first felt around 2011 when the party's leadership began cozying up to Washington by promising to provide enhanced cooperation in the campaign against AQAP. The student added that these promises, made by senior Islah party leaders like Mohammed Qahtan, Mohammed al-Saadi and Abdul Rahman Bafadhl, appeared to be a "tactic" to block then-President Saleh's attempts to use counterterrorism concerns to garner international support against the revolution that was unfolding in Yemen in 2011. This disenchantment would only grow as Islah gained more influence following the 2011 uprising. "The party's promises became reality following the transfer of power to Hadi, who then allowed unprecedented

violations of sovereignty," the student said.[10] Furthermore, the student cited the difference in how the Houthis and Al-Qaeda were viewed in counterterrorism terms. The fact that the Houthis, a militant group subscribing to Zaydi Shia Islam, was not considered a terrorist group while Sunni AQAP was, caused the US-Yemen war on Al-Qaeda in the country to be viewed in an increasingly sectarian light. As a result, some students adopted views closer aligned with Al-Qaeda's positions and orientation than those of Islah's political wing.[11]

While religious ideology, within the context of Sunni-Shia conflict, was a factor in changing some views toward AQAP, it was not the sole factor. Rather, the main driving force behind the increased sympathy toward AQAP was the seeming inability of any Yemeni party to confront the Houthis' military expansion, and Islah's initial refusal to be drawn into the war until after the launch of Saudi military operations in Yemen.

[10] In-person interview with a student from Al-Iman University, January 19, 2021.

[11] Ibid.

## Joint Concerns between Al-Qaeda and the Tribes

Yemen's tribes, meanwhile, were similarly wary about the Houthi expansion. In late-2014, prominent Al-Qaeda leader and tribal sheikh Nabil al-Dhahab made an appearance at a large tribal gathering in Qayfa in the central governorate of Al-Bayda. There, Al-Dhahab called on tribes to fight against the Iran-aligned Houthis and threatened more violent attacks than those being carried out by the Islamic State group (IS) against Shias in Iraq.[12] Some tribes in Al-Bayda later allied with Al-Qaeda in fighting against Houthi forces in villages in western Rada' district in late 2014.

Tribal leaders interviewed as part of this research were cautious when discussing the role of Al-Qaeda in those clashes, which marked one of the fiercest confrontations between the militant group and the Houthis, for fear of being labeled as "terrorists". Still, details emerged, with one tribal sheikh saying that US drone strikes on Al-Qaeda targets in Rada' had tipped the scale in Houthis' favor, leading them to win the battle and ultimately take control of the governorate in 2015. The sheikh said that the drone strikes had targeted specific Al-Qaeda leaders, including Al-Dhahab, and led to a loss of morale among tribal fighters, "who were gripped by the feeling that they were fighting while exposed."[13] He added that the tribes had fought against the Houthis in defense of their land, while Al-Qaeda had fought because they viewed the Houthi movement as a perpetual enemy. "One land brought us together in fighting a common enemy, though each side had its own motives," the sheikh said.

Regardless of the cautious language used by Yemen's tribes when discussing Al-Qaeda, it appears that an alliance with Al-Qaeda was generally seen by them as a lesser evil when tribal lands were threatened by Houthi forces. Earlier, in 2013, a tribal sheikh from Al-Jawf warned that local tribes would resort to an alliance with Al-Qaeda if the government continued to ignore Houthi expansion into the governorate. The tribes of Rada' in Al-Bayda turned the threat into reality in late 2014.

[12] Amateur video received at the time from sources based in Al-Bayda.

[13] In-person interview with Al-Bayda tribal sheikh, January 19, 2021.

# THE BEGINNING OF THE DECLINE: THE TRAP OF SAUDI ARABIA'S WAR

The Saudi-led military coalition's intervention against the Houthis in March 2015 seemed to provide another opportunity for Al-Qaeda to expand its sphere of influence and popularity; however, it proved to be the start of the militant group's decline in Yemen. Amid the rapidly unfolding events following the coalition's entry into the Yemen war, this decline was not immediately noticeable, as AQAP did manage to expand its influence in some areas, most notably the group's takeover of Mukalla in April 2015. At the time concerns were raised, including among US officials, about the potential negative impact of the unfolding civil war on ongoing counterterrorism efforts in Yemen.[14]

It was clear from the coalition's statements that Saudi Arabia did not consider Al-Qaeda to be a military priority in its campaign in Yemen. In April 2015, then-coalition spokesperson Major General Ahmed al-Asiri said, in response to a question about Al-Qaeda, that the coalition's operations had specific objectives in Yemen and denied it had targeted AQAP and Islamic State (IS) positions.[15] These statements, however, were not an indication that the war on Al-Qaeda had been suspended; rather, the coalition continued to participate on the intelligence side of the counterterrorism campaign. Saudi Arabia has long played a major intelligence role in the War on Terror, with many of Washington's biggest achievements against Al-Qaeda in Yemen having relied on Saudi information.[16] In fact, most of the espionage cells that Al-Qaeda uncovered, and whose information led to the killing of many of the group's leaders, had been planted by Saudi intelligence.[17]

Still, a visible change did occur in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and AQAP amid the growing focus on the conflict with the Houthis. As a case in point,

[14] "Chaos in Yemen Stymies U.S. Counterterror Operations," Wall Street Journal, March 22, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/houthi-militants-launch-offensive-on-yemeni-city-of-taiz-1427026848.

[15] "Asiri denies Coalition attacks on Al-Qaeda and IS targets," Sputnik News, April 16, 2015, https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/201504161014030134/.

[16] "Understanding the Threat to the Homeland from AQAP," US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence Hearing, September 13, 2013, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg86483/html/CHRG-113hhrg86483.htm.

[17] "Demolishing Espionage," a three-part video series released by AQAP in 2018 broadcasting alleged confessions from spies within the organization.

the group released then-Saudi deputy consul in Aden, Abdullah al-Khalidi, on March 2, 2015, three years after his kidnapping. In doing so, AQAP abandoned its previously-stated main condition for freeing the diplomat: the release of female detainees held in Saudi prisons, including Hala al-Qaseer, who was known for her loyalty to the group. Additionally, Al-Qaeda stopped carrying out operations on Saudi territory, despite threatening additional attacks on the kingdom after the Sharurah operation in 2014. For its part, Riyadh turned a blind eye to Al-Qaeda's participation in the coalition-backed offensives against the Houthis in 2015. According to several sources within and linked to Al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia provided financial and military support to "popular resistance" groups formed to fight the Houthis, especially during a battle in Ras Abbas in Aden, despite the implicit knowledge that AQAP fighters were active, and often the most experienced fighters, in some of these groups. At the time, Al-Qaeda members, including an emir in the group, Wael Saif, known as Abu Salem al-Taizi, were moving around freely under the coalition's flag.

The material support provided by the coalition to popular resistance groups included various types of arms and a large quantity of ammunition. An Al-Qaeda source said this military aid would arrive through Al-Buraiqah district in Aden and then be distributed to different groups and fighting fronts, including Al-Qaeda. This support, according to the source, helped reinforce a belief in AQAP that "King Salman's Saudi Arabia" was very sensitive to the "Iranian threat," and was willing to back any Sunni faction willing to combat it. However, this conviction can be seen as the beginning of Al-Qaeda's reversal of fortunes; instead of benefiting from the Saudi war on the Houthis, AQAP became a part of it, leaving its security exposed and its troops depleted in the wars of others.

## *Shariah Policies*

A high-level Al-Qaeda commander said the group promoted a religious approach in dealing with the Saudi campaign, adding that fighting the Houthis had become the priority after Houthi-aligned forces had captured most of the governorates in Yemen. The prevailing belief among Al-Qaeda was that coalition operations would accomplish in a short time what the group itself would need years to achieve. Based on this notion, the AQAP commander said the group issued the following directives: "Unify efforts in the fight against the Houthis; coalition forces and the forces they support are not to be targeted; no operations outside the scope of the war against the Houthis are allowed, as to avoid drawing international attention; fight on frontlines alongside the [local] resistance; do not disseminate news in Al-Qaeda's name from the frontlines."[18]

Following these orders, Al-Qaeda stopped publishing news from the Sirwah frontline in Marib, having previously released information about its activities there through the Ansar al-Shariah Twitter account.[19] The directive barring attacks on coalition and allied forces also became one of the main points of contention with the IS branch in Yemen, according to the Al-Qaeda commander. As a case in point, in October 2015 IS targeted the government's headquarters and the headquarters of coalition member United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces in Aden.[20]

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[18] Private communication with the commander in late 2014.

[19] AQAP adopted the alias Ansar al-Shariah in 2011 after the revolution broke out in Yemen in an effort to rebrand itself as a new local organization due to the unpopularity of the Al-Qaeda name among Yemenis.

[20] Mohammed Mukhashaf, "Islamic State kills 22 in attacks on Yemen government, Gulf troops, mosque," Reuters, October 6, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-aden-hotel-idUSKCN0S009E20151006.

## A Bitter Harvest

The entry of the Saudi-led coalition into the conflict against the Houthis coincided with an influx of Saudi nationals into the ranks of AQAP. According to a former AQAP member, the group saw this as implicitly facilitated by Saudi authorities, given that Riyadh had prevented Saudis from traveling to Yemen in the past over fears they would join Al-Qaeda. At the time, AQAP viewed the development as a normal reaction to the exceptional circumstances, and part of a show of broader enthusiasm for the fight against the Houthis. However, because Al-Qaeda believed that Saudi Arabia was in dire need of the group's participation in its war, it abandoned many of its security precautions. AQAP members were present on frontlines alongside other armed factions that did not adhere to its ideology. However, Saudi Arabia still needed to prove to Western allies, particularly the US, that its military campaign in Yemen would not come at the expense of counterterrorism efforts, especially after Al-Qaeda captured the port city Mukalla, the capital of Hadramawt governorate, in April 2015, under the pretext of protecting it from the Houthis. Al-Qaeda would abandon the city a year later in the face of an operation to retake it by Emirati-backed forces.[21]

Between Riyadh's need to record achievements in the war on Al-Qaeda, and AQAP's belief that Saudi Arabia needed it, the most dangerous security breaches in the group's history emerged. After the coalition launched its campaign in Yemen, Al-Qaeda's top cadres started dropping dead. Soon after Al-Qaeda captured Mukalla, US drones eliminated seven of the group's most prominent figures between April and July 2015. This included AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, his second-in-command Nasr al-Ansi, Sharia officer Ibrahim al-Rubaysh, dawah leader and top commander Mamoun Hatem, top field commander Jalal al-Marqashi, Al-Qaeda spokesperson Muhannad Ghallab, and religious chanter Khaled Baquaiti, better known as Abu Hajar al-Hadrami.

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[21] For more information on the AQAP takeover of Mukalla and its period of rule in the city, see: Al-Ganad, Johnsen, Al-Kathiri, "387 Days of Power: How Al-Qaeda Seized, Held and Ultimately Lost a Yemeni City," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 5, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/12247.

# THE EMERGENCE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE GROUP IN YEMEN: A COMPLEX ROAD TO REJECTION

The emergence of the Islamic State in Yemen in late 2014 did not immediately pose a problem for AQAP, despite the fact that it was composed of low-ranking Al-Qaeda defectors and new recruits. Soon, however, AQAP was facing an emergent crisis among the ranks between those who were eager to embrace IS, given its documented efforts to establish a "Caliphate", and those who remained wary of it.

AQAP was initially hesitant to declare a position in the dispute between the Al-Qaeda central leadership in Pakistan, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, and IS regarding the latter's unilateral declaration of an Islamic caliphate in the vast territories it had captured in Iraq and Syria in June 2014. The AQAP leadership's caution was justified, as it feared confronting the issue would lead to internal divisions. Unlike most other Al-Qaeda branches, AQAP was closer to the local IS branch than it was to the Al-Qaeda parent organization in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[22] Some AQAP members even publicly declared support for IS, including, most notably, field commander Mamoun Hatem, who released an audio statement titled "The Yemeni Support for the Islamic State."[23]

AQAP also refused to classify IS as khawarij (a term referring to the first known dissident sect in Islam that was notorious for accusing other Muslims of being heretics and infidels), asserting in a statement that "they are our brothers, and are not khawarij".[24] This was a notable deviation from Zawahiri's characterization of the group, which came after IS killed Abu Khalid al-Suri, a commander with the Al-Qaeda-linked Ahrar al-Sham group in Syria, in February 2014.[25]

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[22] Author's note: I found this out when I was in areas under Al-Qaeda's control during the battles with government forces in Abyan and Shabwa in 2011 and 2012.

[23] Author's note: Because Hatem had believed that AQAP would announce its support, he initiated contact with IS. IS appointed him as a tribal officer in his home district Al-Suddah in Ibb. The move was unannounced, and Hatem later changed his position for unclear reasons.

[24] Statement released by AQAP in 2014, entitled: "Letters to the jihadi factions in the Levant".

[25] Author's note: My private information confirms that Zawahiri had a personal relationship with Abu Khalid al-Suri, making it likely that personal motives might have been behind the classification.

When asked in 2014 about AQAP's position, Hatem said it would only be one in "support" of IS.[26] Later on, in a development that suggested a growing dispute in the higher ranks of AQAP over the caliphate issue, Hatem publicly called in a tweet[27] for Qassim al-Raymi, instead of Al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP at the time, to pledge allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[28]

One former commander said that AQAP generally held the same position as the Al-Qaeda central leadership, but avoided addressing the IS issue to maintain "unity within the ranks". However, following Hatem's audio statement, the AQAP leadership threatened members with prison if they showed any position in support of the rival group. The commander also noted that Al-Wuhayshi had initially promised to pledge allegiance to IS if it expanded to Yemen, but then later chose to follow Al-Zawahiri, warning that any other position would be seen as disobedience.[29]

Months after Al-Zawahiri denounced IS, the AQAP leadership decided to publicly fall in line, and started preparing its members for the inevitable announcement. AQAP assigned some of its leaders, including Ibrahim al-Rubaysh, Harith bin Ghazi al-Nathari, and Abu Zakaria, to conduct internal courses and seminars focusing on points of ideological contention between Al-Qaeda and IS, according to a former AQAP member.[30] It was an uphill battle for AQAP to reverse the connection some members felt toward IS. Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen was enamored with the IS, and, in some ways, tried to emulate it through its media, military operations, and training. There was even a famous song popular among AQAP members praising Al-Baghdadi and the IS caliphate.

Given IS' popular appeal, AQAP viewed the internal courses as an essential step toward mitigating negative repercussions expected to come following an announcement denouncing IS. Those running the courses seized on controversial statements issued by IS to bolster Al-Qaeda's position. For instance, after IS published an attack on Al-Zawahiri in May 2014 in a statement entitled "Sorry, Emir of Al-Qaeda",[31] instructors criticized IS for failing to respect and glorify the forebears of jihad.

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[26] Conversation between Hatem and the author in late 2014.

[27] Hatem's Twitter account was banned in 2014.

[28] Author's note: I remained in touch with Hatem to stay informed on the evolutions of AQAP's thinking related to the IS issue. He told me that he had advised Al-Raymi that AQAP needed to take a clear stance or risk losing members, who were patiently waiting for the pledge of allegiance.

[29] Online communication with the AQAP former commander, January 27, 2021.

[30] In-person meeting in 2019 between the author and a source who defected to IS.

[31] "ISIS attacks Al-Zawahiri, denies that it is a branch of Al-Qaeda, and reveals its position on Al-Sisi and Morsi in Egypt," CNN Arabic, May 12, 2014, https://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/05/12/isis-zawahiri-egypt-army-sisi-morsi.

AQAP finally announced its position on IS in late 2015, pledging loyalty to Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda central. This led to some defections, although the internal courses helped limit the expected wave of dissent, according to several persons who were active in AQAP at the time. In a statement released in response to an IS speech, titled "To the Dismay of the Disbelievers", AQAP argued that Al-Baghdadi's group had revealed its "hidden doctrine".[32] This term was carefully chosen to justify how IS went from being "brothers" to "khawarij". This reversal importantly also sought to motivate and justify future confrontations with AQAP defectors who had joined IS in Yemen.

The limited number of defections was not an indication that most AQAP members were convinced of the leadership's position and rhetoric related to IS. Rather, most members ultimately decided that staying with AQAP was the safer option, particularly after the twin attacks carried out by IS on the Badr and Hashoush mosques in March 2015.[33]

Still, the split between AQAP and IS in Yemen critically challenged Al-Qaeda's raison d'etre of achieving a pan-Islamic caliphate. By going to war with IS, many AQAP members lost faith in the idea and the absolute willingness to sacrifice for it. This loss of faith became practically visible on the ground in the decline in the number of inghimasi operations.[34] While observers have focused on the general decrease in AQAP's operations, this particular point – the dramatic drop in inghimasi operations, which represent the highest level of readiness to sacrifice for the cause – went largely unnoticed.

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[32] "A Reading Behind the Joint Statement of the Two Al-Qaeda Branches in Yemen and Morocco," Yemen Monitor, November 15, 2015. https://www.yemenmonitor.com/Details/ArtMID/908/ArticleID/4136.

[33] According to a statement by an Al-Qaeda source to the author in December 2020.

[34] Unlike regular suicide bombers, Inghimasi are well-trained fighters who detonate explosive belts when surrounded and threatened in battle.

# ABANDONING THE IDEA OF "ESTABLISHING A STATE"

In early 2010, Al-Qaeda in Yemen announced that it had laid the foundation for an Aden-Abyan army, but said it could not receive new recruits for financial reasons. A year later, it called on Muslims to mobilize to Abyan, where it said it had established an Islamic emirate in the security vacuum left by then-President Saleh's preoccupation with mass protests in Sana'a and other parts of Yemen demanding his resignation. Changing tack from its position a year earlier, the group announced that it was now ready to receive and equip anyone who would join it.[35]

While AQAP at the time lauded its administration of its so-called emirate in Abyan, it would refrain from later replicating the Abyan model in other governorates, most notably in Mukalla in 2015. Instead, AQAP was forced to shelve the idea of dominance, fearing that pursuing expansionist aspirations would oblige it to pledge allegiance to its rival IS, which had already announced the establishment of an Islamic state, and accordingly, any territorial gain should come under IS rule. In this context, Khaled Batarfi, a leading AQAP figure who would succeed Al-Raymi as the group's leader after the latter's death in a US strike in January 2020, said in a video that territorial gains did not fall under Al-Qaeda's total control, and therefore could not be considered part of an Islamic state. As a case in point, in 2015 and 2016 Al-Qaeda was active in major cities in Aden, Lahj, Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramawt governorates. It had managed to amass considerable financial resources and arms through its participation in the fight against the Houthis, and through its management of the ports of Mukalla and Shihr. However, AQAP did not announce the establishment of an Islamic emirate over concerns that it would be compelled to pledge loyalty to IS. Instead, AQAP tried to conceal the extent of its territorial control, even in Mukalla where the group was the most powerful actor on the ground by claiming to have handed over management of the city to a local council.

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[35] A statement by Al-Raymi released in a late-2011 video produced by Al-Malahim, titled "One Nation".

# STRIKING THE INCUBATOR

In 2016, as UAE-backed forces conducted a campaign against Al-Qaeda in southern Yemen, the group withdrew from cities to remote strongholds. When under attack, AQAP followed a well-established strategy employed during past conflicts of retreating to remote mountainous areas like Mahfad district in Abyan or the Kawr al-Awaliq region spanning Abyan and Shabwa. However, unlike in the past, this time the war would follow AQAP to its safe havens.

This was possible because the UAE had recruited locals from the governorates to engage in the counterterrorism campaign.[36] By enlisting local cooperation, the UAE took into account tribal sensitivities toward outsider forces operating in tribal areas and was able to deal a blow to AQAP's traditional tribal incubator. Al-Qaeda could not have gained a foothold in tribal areas without cultivating the support of tribal leaders who could provide the group's members with the necessary protection. An Al-Qaeda commander said that without relations with tribes, many strongholds would not have been safe havens, and the group would have had to operate under more complex security circumstances. "For example, there were more than 70 of us in Al-Mahfad in Abyan, and it was our most prominent stronghold. But were it not for Ali bin Lakra', we would not have been able to remain in the area, despite the fact that he was just one man,"[37] the commander said, in reference to a local who led the AQAP cell in Al-Mahfad.[38]

The commander also argued that controlling the tribes was a planned component of the international War on Terror in Yemen, adding that Washington had previously tried to infiltrate tribes through "rural projects" but had failed. Ground operations against AQAP in tribal areas represented a new development in the counter AQAP campaign in Yemen. In response, Al-Qaeda made a calculated decision to not confront the UAE-backed campaign against it in Mahfad in Abyan, Kawr al-Awaliq and Markha in Shabwa, and Wadi al-Musaini in coastal Hadramawt. Instead, AQAP militants, seeking to avoid creating vendettas among local tribes that had protected its presence for years, retreated to areas in Al-Bayda and Marib governorates without a fight.

[36] Hussam Radman, "Al-Qaeda's Strategic Retreat in Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April 17, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7306

[37] Online discussion with the Al-Qaeda commander through an intermediary, January 28, 2021.

[38] Lakra' was killed in government airstrikes targeting militant training camps in Al-Mahfad in April 2014.

# AQAP'S WAR WITH IS

Although Al-Qaeda withdrew from its strongholds in Shabwa, Abyan, and Hadramawt to avoid clashes with the UAE-backed forces, battles with IS were lying ahead in Al-Bayda. IS had left Aden for the Yafa region in Lahj governorate in 2016, before settling in Al-Bayda's district of Wald Rabi', one of Al-Qaeda's most important strongholds in the governorate. Up until the summer of 2018, Al-Qaeda and IS were locked in a "jihadi cold war",[39] but their presence in the same district was enough for the simmering dispute to lead to direct confrontations for the first time in four years. In July 2018, fighting broke out after an Al-Qaeda convoy refused to stop at a checkpoint manned by IS militants in Qayfa. IS captured 12 Al-Qaeda militants, and in response, AQAP conducted a large-scale attack on IS positions that left scores dead and wounded on both sides.

Under the banner of war against khawarij, Al-Qaeda mobilized forces to fight IS in Al-Bayda. The confrontation took a hit-and-run character and would continue until Houthi forces launched a multi-front offensive against both militant groups in the summer of 2020. In August 2020, Houthi forces overran Wald al-Rabi' in a fierce battle that killed nearly all IS fighters and commanders present, including its emir in Yemen, Abu Walid al-Adani. A source close to IS in Yemen said that the Houthis then transferred the families of IS members to Dhamar before handing them over to relatives. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda managed to avoid a battle with the Houthis by withdrawing its fighters to other areas following tribal mediation.

[39] Gregory D. Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," January 31, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13042.

# INTERNAL DOUBTS AND FRACTURES

Al-Qaeda suffered heavily as a result of its dispute with IS. It had lost men and influence in Al-Bayda. More critically, a state of suspicion infected the ranks after some members and commanders had objected to militarily confronting IS. Tension escalated when AQAP took practical measures to deal with the issue; notably, high-ranking commander Abu Omar al-Nahdi, the former emir of Mukalla, was first charged with attempting to join IS toward the end of 2018. He was later accused of luring Al-Raymi to an area outside of Qayfa where he was killed in a US drone strike in January 2020. Although Al-Nahdi was never formally arrested, his movements were restricted by AQAP.

Around the same period in 2018, AQAP announced that a major espionage network planted by Saudi intelligence had been uncovered within its ranks. In a three-part video series entitled "Demolishing Espionage", AQAP accused the spy network of contributing to the elimination of most of the group's leadership in Yemen since 2015. The videos included confessions from alleged spies, some of whom were longtime Al-Qaeda members.

Further security measures were enacted by AQAP after the discovery of the spy cell. These included a ban on meetings, on any talk about the movements of leaders and members, and on the use of electronic devices. A large number of Al-Qaeda members who were suspected of having ties to intelligence agencies were also detained.[40] Some leaders and members objected to these measures, including Al-Nahdi, amid concerns that many detainees were tortured in order to extract confessions. The espionage crisis marked a new chapter in Al-Qaeda's decline and precipitated another wave of defections led by Al-Nahdi. IS later leaked a letter sent by an AQAP member to Al-Raymi listing the names of senior members who had quit the group on account of the harsh security measures, with some surrendering to the governments of their home countries.[41]

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[40] According to statements by individuals who defected from Al-Qaeda to join ISIS.

[41] The content of the letter was shared with the author.

# THE FUTURE OF INTRA-JIHADI CONFLICT IN YEMEN

Despite the defection of the group led by Al-Nahdi in 2019, it is unlikely that the dispute between AQAP and Al-Nahdi's group will lead to armed confrontations. Both believe internal jihadi conflicts should be avoided. The crisis, unlike the one between AQAP and IS, is not an ideological one as both groups agree on following Al-Zawahiri as a primary reference. However, a source close to Al-Nahdi's group said that things could not return to the way they were before, even if the defectors received assurances in exchange for rejoining AQAP. The issue is no longer a dispute over security measures, but rather one of lack of trust.[42]

A former Al-Qaeda commander who participated in the operations to capture Abyan in 2011 and later left the group believes both sides have their own reasons to prevent the dispute from turning into armed confrontations.[43] Al-Nahdi's defectors are cautious and prefer to maintain the status quo. The splinter group also lacks a unified ideology and its members are few in numbers, putting them at a military disadvantage compared to AQAP. Finally, Al-Nahdi's group mainly seeks a safe life away from persecution and displacement and is less committed to pursuing a jihadi agenda. Meanwhile, for AQAP, the commander claimed that the group's modus operandi under Batarfi did not include confronting dissidents unless they displayed evidence of apostasy. He likened the defectors to a "black box" holding Al-Qaeda's dangerous secrets; thus, the group fears that any provocation might endanger AQAP's broader security. Furthermore, AQAP is currently dealing with a severe financial crisis and is not in a position to open new fighting fronts.

[42] Online discussion with the source close to Al-Nahdi's via an intermediary, January 25, 2021.

[43] Online discussion with the source close to Al-Nahdi's via an intermediary, January 28, 2021.

# CONCLUSION: WILL AQAP'S RETREAT CONTINUE?

There are two factors that indicate that AQAP's decline will continue: the waning belief in the core idea of Al-Qaeda among many members; and the fact that the current leadership has proven incapable of dealing with the crisis in confidence.

A former jihadi who was close to Osama bin Laden believes that the Al-Qaeda branch in Yemen will likely go into a catatonic state for years to come. He attributes this mostly to the fact that Batarfi lacks leadership characteristics and is an ideological extremist.[44] AQAP's second in command, Ibrahim al-Qawsi, known as Abu Khabib al-Sudani, shares similar failings with Batarfi. "I say this because I know him well, back from the days of jihad in Afghanistan when he was Sheikh Osama's personal chef and one of the Shariah leaders close to him," the former jihadi said.

Another former AQAP commander seconded these observations and stressed that the group's leadership issues dated back to Al-Wuhayshi's killing. His successor, Al-Raymi, was a brave fighter but lacked strategic vision and nuance.[45] "For instance, most of his strategy talks focused on the United States, and ignored Saudi Arabia, even though the latter was a bigger threat [to the group]," the former commander said. This misreading of the situation became clear when Saudi Arabia engaged Al-Qaeda under Al-Raymi to fight the Houthis, which ultimately weakened the ideological commitment and fighting spirit of the group's members and critically undermined its security. The former commander has a more negative view of Batarfi, who he sees as lacking leadership qualities and strategic vision, as well as allowing emotions to guide his decision-making.

On the ground, Al-Qaeda has lost its main strongholds in multiple governorates and its number of local operations have significantly decreased. Its ideological foundation, meanwhile, has grown unstable as internal discord widened and a state of paranoia took hold of the group since 2015, leading to many defections and resignations.

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[44] In-person meeting with a former Al-Qaeda commander, January 17, 2021.

[45] In-person meeting with a former Al-Qaeda commander, January 20, 2021.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen is certainly going through a leadership crisis. However, this is not the main factor behind its steady decline. The killing of Al-Wuhayshi and other prominent leaders in a short period was indeed unusual in the wider context of AQAP's losses, but the direct link between his death and its regression does not tell the entire story. It was rather an indication of major flaws that existed before Al-Wuhayshi's killing and persisted thereafter.

Since 2015, AQAP has misread Saudi Arabia's intentions and left its security exposed; it allowed itself to be swept in the coalition's war against the Houthis at a time when conditions were right for it to instead expand its independent influence; it sided with Al-Zawahiri's position on IS against the general internal mood of the group; finally, it adopted a series of internal security measures that alienated many members. Whether it was out of arrogance, incompetence, or fear for its existence, the AQAP leadership made a series of decisions that shook the trust of the group's members. The group's main crisis lies in the weakening belief in its ideology, without which no willingness to sacrifice for the bigger cause can be mustered.

The intricacies of Al-Qaeda's existence in Yemen, not least of which is its complex relationship with different segments of Yemeni society, and the road that led to its decline, call for further research to shed more light on how to counter the potential threat posed by the group. Topics for future study could include the relationship between AQAP and Al-Nahdi's breakaway faction, as well as looking into the experience of counterterrorism efforts in southern Yemen by groups such as the Elite Forces. Finally, the Yemeni government and other countries whose citizens have joined AQAP should take advantage of the state of restlessness felt by many members to facilitate and encourage their return to their home countries and reintegration into society, which could be done through measures such as a general amnesty or reduced sentences.

**Abdelrazzaq al-Jamal** is a Yemeni journalist and researcher specializing in Al-Qaeda in Yemen since 2006. He is one of few Yemeni journalists to have interviewed senior AQAP leaders in Yemen, for both television and print media. Between 2012-2011, he traveled to Abyan and Shabwa when parts of the governorates were under AQAP control, staying there for eight months to cover developments in the battles between AQAP and the Yemeni army. Al-Jamal has authored several articles, reports and research papers on AQAP published in local and foreign newspapers and research centers, and conducted interviews with AQAP leaders broadcast on local television channels and published in regional media.

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