

Batarfi's Death and Al-Qaeda in Yemen's New Emir: What Comes Next?



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The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) made a surprise announcement on March 10, 2024, publicizing the death of its leader, Khaled Batarfi, and the appointment of Saad al-Awlaqi as his successor. Al-Qaeda's official statement, delivered by jihadist leader Khabib al-Sudani, did not disclose any details about the manner of Batarfi's death. This might be the first time that news of the death of a senior Al-Qaeda leader was shrouded in such mystery. In the past, the United States was the first to announce the assassination of jihadist leaders – as happened with former AQAP leaders Nasser al-Wuhayshi and Qassim al-Raymi, as well as with global Al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda would then deny the news, or confirm it and announce a new emir. In the recent case of Yemen, the process of installing Al-Awlaqi was swift and smooth, contradicting the expectations of many due to reports of internal disputes over his leadership.^[1]

This analysis outlines the rise of Batarfi and Al-Awlaqi to the top of the organization's hierarchy in Yemen and details the competitive relationship that existed between them in recent years. It will also explore the circumstances of Batarfi's death and Al-Awlaqi's ascent, and the implications for Al-Qaeda in Yemen's future behavior and strategic direction. Along with published reports and media about the group, the report relies mainly on information provided by three senior jihadist sources from within the group,^[2] a former senior figure inside Al-Qaeda in Yemen, and two local sources close to the organization.

Batarfi and Al-Awlaqi: Peer Rivalry

In February 2020, Al-Qaeda's leadership managed to defy the circumstances of war and constant US pursuit from above to call its Shura Council for an urgent meeting at its fortified headquarters – at the time – in Al-Bayda governorate. The group's leader, Qassim al-Raymi, had just been killed by a US strike on January 31, and his successor needed to be chosen immediately.

In parallel with the increased movements of jihadist leaders on the ground, the US intensified overflights and intelligence gathering in the hope of hunting more targets. The focus was on two key individuals, Saad al-Awlaqi and Khaled Batarfi. The primary candidates to succeed Al-Raymi, both were listed on the US State Department's 'Rewards for Justice' bounty program that same month,^[3] US planes even dropped leaflets over parts of Al-Bayda governorate to familiarize citizens with their images and explain how people could report sightings to authorities and get the cash.^[4] The two men were treated as almost equal threats, with the US offering slightly more for Batarfi.

[1] Assim al-Sabri, "How the Gaza Crisis Could Bring Iran and Al-Qaeda in Yemen Together," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 11, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/21453>

[2] They include a senior leader from Al-Qaeda in Yemen's shura council, a figure on its sharia committee, and another from its security committee.

[3] "Batarfi's first appearance: The new leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen gives allegiance to Al-Zawahiri [AR]," Al-Arabi al-Jadid, March 21, 2020, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الظهور-الأول-لباطرفي-زعيم-القاعدة-الجديد-باليمن-يباع-الظواهرى>

[4] "US leaflets call for informing on Al-Qaeda [AR]," Hudaydah Live, March 5, 2020, <https://livehod.com/2020/03/05/منشورات-أميركية-تدعو-للإبلاغ-عن-قيادة>

Meanwhile, within Al-Qaeda there was a sharp polarization between supporters of the two candidates. It took nearly three weeks of deliberation and discussion for the Shura Council to reach a decision. Initially, expectations were in favor of Al-Awlaqi. He was a natural extension of the Yemeni leadership tradition within Al-Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula branch, established by Al-Wuhayshi and Al-Raymi. Due to his proven track record in the field and organizational connections, there was broad consensus surrounding Al-Awlaqi's candidacy both among senior leaders and at the grassroots level.^[5]

Things didn't go to plan, however. An alliance emerged as three influential currents coalesced over Batarfi's candidacy: the Saudi-Hadrami current led by Hamad al-Tamimi, who announced Batarfi's inauguration on February 23; the Egyptian current led by Ibrahim al-Banna; and followers of ex-chief Al-Raymi, led by Ammar al-Sanaani. It would later become clear that the behind-the-scenes architect of this tripartite alliance was Saif al-Adl, the Egyptian jihadi leader based in Iran and now the de facto leader of Al-Qaeda.^[6]

These factions not only succeeded in tipping the scales toward Batarfi; they also undermined Al-Awlaqi's future role in decision-making within the organization. Al-Awlaqi adopted an ambivalent stance toward the new leadership, not hesitating to oppose many of its decisions and criticize its strategic direction while avoiding any outright hostility that would threaten Batarfi's position. He also steered clear of any dissent that would threaten the internal unity of the organization.^[7] Meanwhile, Khabib al-Sudani assumed the role of firefighter, mediating tensions between Batarfi and Al-Awlaqi in closed meetings in safe areas and forcing them to talk. This dispute-resolution mechanism was crucial in saving the group from the threat of fatal internal division over the past three years.^[8]

The last direct meeting between Batarfi and Al-Awlaqi was in January 2024, where debate raged over organizational and financial issues without reaching a conclusion. At the end of February 2024, Al-Awlaqi was invited by Al-Sudani for urgent consultations at one of the organization's safe havens in Marib. But when he arrived, Al-Awlaqi was surprised to find that the reason for the invitation was not to reconcile with Batarfi, but to prepare him to take over the group's leadership.^[9]

^[5] Interview with a senior leader inside the group, March 2024.

^[6] Ibid.

^[7] "The future of AQAP: Between disintegration and Subjugation [AR]," Future UAE, March 20, 2024, <https://futureuae.com/ar-AE/Mainpage/Item/9103>

^[8] Interview with a committee member, March 2024.

^[9] Ibid.

A Parade of Suspicious Al-Qaeda Deaths

Khaled Batarfi's health had been continuously deteriorating since November 2023. Normally, senior leaders only receive treatment through Al-Qaeda's medical committee, but if a health problem is severe, the group is forced to transfer its leaders to the best available hospital near their safe havens.^[10] This happened in 2020, when Al-Raymi was moved to areas outside the group's safe havens in Al-Bayda governorate for treatment, a decision that appears to have led directly to his death by revealing his whereabouts and exposing him to US attack. Despite the apprehension of Al-Qaeda's security officials toward this option and their attempts to avoid it, they were forced during the last four months before his death to transfer Batarfi twice to a hospital outside the group's safe havens over liver complaints.^[11]

After the first time, Batarfi's health stabilized for a few weeks before suffering a more severe setback, after which the organization was forced to treat him for the second time, without any improvement. His health continued to deteriorate until he died in his bed.^[12] According to the same senior Al-Qaeda sources, he died at some point between February 28 and March 1.^[13]

While the exact nature of Batarfi's illness is not known, some of his close associates say Batarfi had no previous history of liver-related illness.^[14] This is likely what prompted some first-tier leaders not to accept natural causes as the reason for his sudden demise, foremost among them being Al-Qaeda's top security official Ibrahim al-Banna.^[15] Al-Banna began to suspect that the Al-Qaeda leader had been poisoned during his first stint in hospital. Over time, these suspicions began to spread to other jihadist leaders.^[16]

Days after Batarfi's death, jihadist leader Suleiman bin Daoud al-Sanaani was killed in a traffic accident on a road connecting Abyan and Shabwa governorates in southern Yemen. Al-Sanaani was a prominent field commander in the group responsible for developing its drone weapon capacity. He was also considered to be a part of Saif al-Adl's sphere of influence.^[17] Then, in mid-March 2024, a large fire broke out in a home in the Marib countryside that was being used as a safe house by Saif al-Adl's son, known as Ibn al-Madani, leading to his death a few days later.^[18]

^[10] Interviews with two committee members, March 2024.

^[11] Interview with a committee member, March 2024.

^[12] Interviews with two committee members, March 2024.

^[13] Ibid.

^[14] Interview with a committee member, March 2024.

^[15] Ibid.

^[16] Interview with a committee member, March 2024.

^[17] "After the death of its leader: Death of a senior AQAP figure in eastern Yemen [AR]," Hashd.net, March 16, 2024, <https://hshd-ye.net/news5248.html>

^[18] Interview with a source close to the group in Marib and a committee member, March 2024

This sudden series of deaths fueled suspicions about an organized assassination campaign. Yet the sources inside the group say Al-Qaeda's new leader, Al-Awlaqi, has not been interested in investigating the possibility. This differs from past precedent, when after Al-Wuhayshi's death, Al-Raymi ordered a security committee to look into what happened, consider mistakes, and assign responsibility for any failures.

Where Al-Awlaqi won't go, however, others are stepping in. Ibrahim al-Banna has already begun to investigate the events on his own initiative, attempting to ascertain if any Al-Qaeda elements were involved in poisoning Batarfi, or assassinating Al-Sanaani and Ibn al-Madani.^[19] Al-Banna did not need to wait for an official mandate from the new emir, relying instead on his reputation and experience as the man who succeeded in exposing the largest spy network ever within Al-Qaeda in 2018.^[20] He is hoping to get results quickly with regard to Batarfi – since his movements and contacts had been restricted since at least November due to health and security precautions, making it easier to narrow down and investigate potential suspects.^[21]

Al-Awlaqi's Inauguration: A Return to Consensus

Saad al-Awlaqi was an obvious potential successor to Batarfi, but the immediate consensus he generated on the organization's Shura Council and among various competing factions within the group was perhaps unexpected. Barely a week passed after Batarfi's death to the pledge of allegiance to Al-Awlaqi. For comparison, it took five days between the death of Al-Wuhayshi and the inauguration of Al-Raymi in 2015 and 20 days between Al-Raymi's death and the inauguration of Batarfi in 2020.

Khabib al-Sudani, who had assumed leadership duties temporarily as Batarfi's condition worsened and in the immediate days following his death, was the chief mastermind of the smooth transfer of power. His initiative was lent further stature by his positions as a member of the organization's general command and on the Shura Council.^[22] During this period, Al-Sudani transformed from firefighter to kingmaker, forging a consensus around Al-Awlaqi.

Al-Awlaqi's jihadist credentials and leadership abilities made the job easier. A native of Shabwa, he joined Al-Qaeda at an early age and was close to its founding leader, Nasser al-Wuhayshi. Al-Awlaqi was a champion of what's sometimes called inside the organization the "Yemenization of Al-Qaeda", strengthening alliances with local tribes, promoting Yemenis over other nationals, and maximizing the independence of the Yemeni branch from the central leadership. This was seen as the best way to

^[19] Interview with a committee member, March 2024.

^[20] Al-Qaeda's internal investigation was presented in a documentary series made by Al-Qaeda titled "Destroying Spies" from 2018 to 2020. The investigation was led by Ibrahim al-Banna, a veteran Egyptian jihadist with nearly three decades of experience building Al-Qaeda networks in Yemen. See Elisabeth Kendall, "Where is AQAP Now?" Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 21, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15357>

^[21] Interview with a committee member, March 2024.

^[22] Interviews with a senior leader within the group and with a committee member, March 2024.

achieve the structural flexibility to adapt to various security conditions.^[23] In 2011, Al-Awlaqi was one of the founders of Ansar al-Sharia, the local backbone of Al-Qaeda. He then took command of Shabwa (wilayat Shabwa) for five years while participating in organizational and military tasks in the neighboring governorates of Abyan, Al-Bayda, Marib, and Hadramawt. His meteoric rise saw him become a member of the general command of AQAP and the Shura Council around 2015.^[24]

During the Qassim al-Raymi era, no real rival emerged to compete with Al-Awlaqi as a rising star with the exception of Batarfi, a Saudi jihadi of Yemeni origin who had his own network of alliances behind him. During the Batarfi era, Al-Awlaqi's role in decision-making began to decline. While it is true that he remained an important power center in the organization's internal balance of power, he was not as influential as he had been. Instead, leaders from the same generation as Al-Awlaqi gained further influence during Batarfi's tenure. These included Hamad al-Tamimi, Ammar al-Sanaani, Hassan al-Hadrami, and Abdulwahid al-Najdi. The four men formed the leadership of Al-Qaeda's cell that was responsible for special external and internal operations.^[25] They had played an important role in tipping the scales during Batarfi's inauguration and were expected to play a pivotal role in the choice of his successor. But fate was on Al-Awlaqi's side – all four were killed in US strikes over the past three years, clearing the path for Al-Awlaqi to fill the leadership vacuum.

A further critical factor is the influence of Saif al-Adl. The Egyptian leader was able to establish influence over Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen from outside in recent years, though he was unable to gain absolute control over all of its components.^[26] Since his inauguration as emir of the group in 2020, Batarfi relied on two key figures to assist him, Al-Tamimi and Ammar al-Sanaani, a system that had been agreed with Saif al-Adl.

In March 2022, Ammar al-Sanaani, Al-Qaeda's military chief, was killed in a US strike. Saif al-Adl proposed appointing his son, Ibn al-Madani, to replace him as the acting head of the organization's military committee, but Batarfi instead appointed Abu Ali al-Disi, head of the Sharia Committee.^[27] In February 2023, another senior figure, Hamad al-Tamimi, was killed in another US strike. Al-Tamimi held three sensitive positions: he was a member of Al-Qaeda's general command, in charge

^[23] Interview with a former leading figure in Al-Qaeda in Yemen, March 2024.

^[24] Ibid.

^[25] This cell oversaw the implementation of the two most important AQAP operations in 2020. A British ship was targeted in May off the coast of Hadramawt via an explosive boat. A large-scale operation was also planned in October targeting Arab coalition forces in Al-Mahra governorate, but was thwarted by security forces. See Assim Taha al-Sabri, "Hamad al-Tamimi: What does the death of the last of the strong Saudis in AQAP mean? [AR]" Akhbar al-Aan, March 31, 2023, <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/03/31/أحمد-التميمي-ما-الذي-يعنيه-مقتل-آخر-السعوديين-الأقوياء-بتنظيم-القاعدة-في-اليمن>

^[26] Hussam Radman and Assim al-Sabri, "Leadership from Iran: How Al-Qaeda in Yemen Fell Under the Sway of Saif al-Adel," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 28, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/19623>

^[27] Interviews with two committee members, March 2024.

of the Special External Operations Cell, and he led the Media Committee. Given these multiple roles, Al-Tamimi was effectively the second most important figure in the group after Batarfi.^[28] Saif al-Adl again pushed strongly for the vacant posts to be transferred to his son, and Ibn al-Madani was indeed given some tasks relating to external operations. But Batarfi appointed one of his close associates to head the media committee, while Al-Tamimi's position in the group's general command remained unfilled.^[29]

During March and April 2023, Saif al-Adl and Batarfi escalated this tug-of-war for control of the organization. The Egyptian group led an internal movement calling for a restructuring of Al-Qaeda and a reduction of Batarfi's authority, taking advantage of the widespread discontent, especially by Al-Awlaqi and his men.^[30] In return, Batarfi hinted that he could form an alliance with Al-Awlaqi, end internal operations against government and Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces in southern Yemen, reconsider the strategic alliance with Iran, and resume operations against the Houthis.^[31]

A compromise was reached whereby the organization would maintain Saif al-Adl's policy in exchange for full support for Batarfi's continued leadership. The effects of this deal quickly manifested themselves when Al-Qaeda obtained drone weapons for the first time in May 2023, which was the culmination of its rapprochement with the Houthis.^[32]

In return, Batarfi ordered an intensification of military operations in southern Yemen and expanded the targets to include high-ranking individuals, the most prominent of which was Abdullatif al-Sayyid, commander of the STC's Security Belt Forces in Abyan, who was killed in August 2023. The organization also resumed operations in Taiz, Marib, and Hadramawt, leading observers to note that the group had apparently revived after an apparent near death.^[33]

^[28] Assim Taha al-Sabri, "Hamad al-Tamimi: What does the death of the last of the strong Saudis in AQAP mean? [AR]" Akhbar al-Aan, March 31, 2023, <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/03/31/حماد-التميمي-ما-الذي-يعنيه-مقتل-آخر-السعوديين-الاقوياء-بتنظيم-القاعدة-في-اليمن>

^[29] Interviews with two committee members, March 2024.

^[30] This movement was led by Ibrahim al-Banna and Ibn al-Madani. Their vision for restructuring was based on three points: Batarfi's position and a redefinition of his authority, the reformation of the organization's Shura Council, and restructuring the executive committees (military, security, media, and sharia) because of assassinations of their leaders and the need to find new figures with broader consensus. The proposal included the creation of the position of general supervisor to oversee the executive committees. Ibn al-Madani wanted this post, following the vacuum caused by Hamad al-Tamimi's death. See Assim Taha al-Sabri, "The dagger of betrayal: How Saif al-Adel prepares for his son to take over AQAP [AR]," Akhbar al-Aan, May 10, 2023, <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/05/10/إعادة-الهيكله-سيف-العدل-يمهد-الطريق-لتنصيب-نجله-زعيمًا-على-القاعدة-في-اليمن>

^[31] Assim Taha al-Sabri, "What made Batarfi attack Iran in his last appearance [AR]," Akhbar al-Aan, May 31, 2023, <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/05/31/من-الذي-دفع-باطرفي-لمهاجمة-إيران-في-آخر-ظهور-له>

^[32] Assim Taha al-Sabri, "How did AQAP obtain drones and what are the reverbations of its recent attacks [AR]," Akhbar al-Aan, June 15, 2023, <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/06/15/كيف-حصل-تنظيم-القاعدة-في-اليمن-على-الطائرات-المسيرة-وما-تبعات-هجماته-الأخيرة>

^[33] One of the most prominent security operations was the assassination and kidnapping of international employees, such as the World Food Program's Muayyad Hamidi. Two senior jihadist sources and a government security source confirmed that he was assassinated by a cell affiliated with Al-Qaeda. The group also carried out kidnappings in Marib.

This uneasy alliance between Batarfi and Saif al-Adl in Iran allowed Saad al-Awlaqi a margin of maneuver to maintain his importance to both sides as a force able to tip the scales in the case of polarization. At the same time, the latent tension undermined the ability of either side to impose absolute control over the Yemeni organization and thus ensure that the future leadership would follow their tune. When the time came for a transfer of power, Saad al-Awlaqi was able to step into the breach as a consensus candidate.

Al-Awlaqi benefited from a broad base of support within the organization's Shura Council (its size is not known). He also benefited from a possible nod in his direction from Batarfi in his final days when he called Al-Awlaqi to his place of residence. We can only speculate about Batarfi's reasons, but they likely centered on more trust in Al-Awlaqi to ensure the group's survival and doubts over the policy choices of Saif al-Adl, and behind him Iran. Finally, Al-Awlaqi emerged victorious because the Egyptian wing was unable to counter Al-Awlaqi's candidacy with an alternative name.^[34]

Al-Awlaqi as Emir: What Comes Next?

The extreme secrecy over the news of Batarfi's death, as well as the speed of Al-Awlaqi's installation and the smoothness of the consensus process, showed that, despite the severe blows it has suffered, Al-Qaeda has not yet lost its ability to adapt and is still able to draw on its historical and institutional reserves to replace leaders and maintain its organizational structures. This refutes popular belief of the organization's collapse and disintegration.

The facts of the power transition revealed that the organization still has an acceptable level of internal cohesion, that all of its active wings are still managing their internal conflicts without letting them get out of hand, and that they are willing to set aside differences to ensure unity. Most likely, the rise of Al-Awlaqi will give the group the momentum to overcome the ongoing disputes, and the leadership change will have tangible implications for its internal operations and external actions. But it is still too early to delineate exactly how.

In all likelihood, 2024 will be a transitional period for the group, during which Saad al-Awlaqi will focus on three priorities. Firstly he will take control of the crucial parts of the organization, specifically: the general command, which includes the emir along with 6-8 other leaders who share decision-making authority; the executive committees (military, financial, media, security, and special operations); and the emirs of the regions and governorates. So far, all three of these bodies in the organization are either vacant or under the control of leaders loyal to Batarfi or Saif al-Adl. Al-Awlaqi will have to either win over the loyalty of the current leaders or appoint new leaders loyal to him.

^[34] Interviews with a senior leader within the group and a committee member, March 2024.

Secondly, Al-Awlaqi will try to repair the strained relationship with Yemeni social and tribal groups, especially in Abyan and Shabwa governorates. One of the reasons for Al-Awlaqi's reservations about Batarfi's approach to resuming military operations in the south was that it would bring them into direct confrontation with the tribes. Additionally, during the Batarfi era, Al-Qaeda kidnapped a number of foreign hostages and was not concerned about tribal mediation efforts to release them. This later evolved into kidnapping Yemenis for ransom.

In February, armed groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda kidnapped four Yemenis from the Shabwa governorate in two separate operations. When there were tribal mediation efforts to release them, the militants demanded a ransom of 100,000 Saudi riyals. However, as soon as Al-Awlaqi became emir, he ordered the tribal mediation to be accepted and a swift release. This incident gives a sense of the likely new approach to Sunni tribal communities, especially in Marib, Shabwa, and Abyan. But Al-Awlaqi may have trouble regaining the trust of the tribes of Al-Bayda governorate as this would require him to confront the Houthis.

Thirdly, he will avoid any early internal shocks by working to win over Batarfi's men (the Saudis, Hadramis, and Sanaanis, or those associated with Al-Raymi) and bringing isolated and rebellious leaders and elements back into the fold. At the same time, he will work to contain the Egyptian group by maintaining its current positions of power, especially Ibrahim al-Banna's leadership of the security committee. He will temporarily look for an approach that harmonizes Saif al-Adl's cooperation with the Houthis and Al-Awlaqi's anti-Houthi orientation, maintaining more distance from the Houthis.

At the same time, during this transitional phase, Al-Awlaqi is likely to avoid taking any decisive positions on a number of key issues, the most important of which is his relationship with Saif al-Adl. Al-Awlaqi will be the first Yemeni Al-Qaeda leader who does not know exactly who to pledge allegiance to as the legitimate emir of Al-Qaeda worldwide, since Saif al-Adl's status is still officially *de facto*. The likelihood is that Al-Awlaqi will not challenge the legitimacy of Saif al-Adl's leadership. After all, Al-Awlaqi holds him in high esteem and considers him a natural continuation to bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, and has never questioned his integrity and dedication to the jihadist movement. However, this does not mean that the new leader of the Yemeni branch will be the first to officially pledge allegiance to Saif al-Adl as a legitimate leader. As for the details of managing Al-Qaeda in Yemen, Al-Awlaqi will try to maneuver as much as possible, as Batarfi did before him, so that recognition of the legitimacy of Saif al-Adl's leadership does not have a negative impact on Al-Awlaqi's position and the autonomy of the Yemeni branch.

Further, Al-Awlaqi will avoid major changes in the organization's relationship with the Houthis. Al-Awlaqi is unlikely to engage in open battles with the Houthis in the short-term, but he will gradually work to step further away from them. It is important to note that the Houthis' relationship with the former leader of the organization witnessed an important turning point last January.

After the circumstances of the Israeli war on Gaza created the conditions for official cooperation with the 'Axis of Resistance' groups, Batarfi was surprised that the Houthis began to exert great pressure on them to resume internal operations in the south and avoid carrying out any attacks against Western targets – likely to avoid worsening the relationship with the United States which was already bad over the Red Sea attacks, but also to avoid giving Al-Qaeda a chance to gain street kudos for championing Gaza. Batarfi tried to absorb and circumvent these pressures. Al-Awlaqi can capitalize on this atmosphere to question the feasibility of rapprochement with the Houthis and gain more time.

In addition, Al-Awlaqi will not make any changes to the group's military policy in the liberated areas. He will most likely avoid opening any fronts with the various security and military forces loyal to the Presidential Leadership Council, but he will not reformulate the relationship with them on the basis of an alliance. He will also not hesitate to respond strongly if government forces start targeting his personnel.

Finally, there will be no change regarding external operations. Most likely Al-Awlaqi will not object to any operations that were already planned during the Batarfi era, and is unlikely to deviate from the policy of inciting lone wolf operations in Western countries in solidarity with Palestinians. But despite the Israeli war in Gaza, he is unlikely to instigate any major operations against foreign forces inside Yemen or against any targets outside Yemen, whether inside the region or in the West. Al-Awlaqi will have enough on his plate managing the various domestic files during this transition period, not least for an organization that must operate constantly in the shadows. At least in the short-term, it will be difficult for Al-Awlaqi to direct his attention and the group's resources towards any such risky moves.

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