

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: *Leaders and their Networks*

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U.S. Policy: Degrading Terrorist Leadership

“Despite Anwar al-Aulaqi’s death, [AQAP] maintains the intent and capability to conduct anti-U.S. attacks with little to no warning.”

– National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew G. Olsen, September 19, 2012

- American counterterrorism strategy aims to deny terrorist groups space to operate, disrupt attempted attacks, and degrade the organization’s leadership.
- Despite the targeted killings of Awlaki and other AQAP leaders, however, U.S. strategy in Yemen is achieving only partial and reversible success.
 - U.S. strategy in Yemen relies on direct action against AQAP leaders and supporting local Yemeni security forces to clear and hold safe-havens.
 - AQAP has exhibited a depth of leadership and resilience to leaders’ deaths. The founding leadership also remains intact.
- Targeted killings will weaken AQAP in the short term, but new leaders will continue to emerge as long as AQAP has a sanctuary in Yemen.
- American strategy in Yemen is not on track to achieve lasting success against the al Qaeda franchise there.

What is al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?

- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen that formed as a merger between the Yemeni and Saudi branches in January 2009.
- Previously al Qaeda had separate Saudi and Yemeni branches.
 - Saudi Arabia pursued aggressive counter-terrorism actions and effectively denied al Qaeda operating space within the Kingdom in the mid-2000s.
 - Yemen absorbed many of the Saudi al Qaeda operatives, who crossed the Yemeni-Saudi border and connected with al Qaeda’s Yemeni branch.
 - Al Qaeda’s Yemen branch, which had been weakened between 2002 and 2006, resurged after 23 operatives escaped from prison in February 2006 and benefited from the introduction of Saudi members.
- AQAP has since become al Qaeda’s most operational node and has attempted to carry out at least three terrorist attacks on the United States.

Emergence of AQAP in Yemen

- AQAP leadership announced the group's formation in a January 2009 video.
- The leadership was identified as:
 - *Commander*: Nasser al Wahayshi
 - *Deputy Commander*: Said al Shihri
 - *Military Commander*: Qasim al Raymi
 - *Field Commander*: Mohammed al Awfi*
- The leadership draws on key figures from al Qaeda's affiliates in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.
- All four featured leaders had previously been in American or Yemeni custody.

* Mohammed al Awfi turned himself in to authorities the following month.



al Malahem
Media Foundation

Produced by AQAP's media arm



***We Start from Here...
and in al Aqsa We Meet
January 12, 2009***

Featured:



Nasser al Wahayshi



Said al Shihri



Qasim al Raymi



Mohammed al Awfi

Notable AQAP Leaders and Former Leaders

Saudis and Yemenis make up the leading AQAP figures; nearly all key figures had been detained.

Nasser al Wahayshi



Leader / Emir
 Yemeni
Escaped from prison

Said al Shihri



Deputy Leader
 Saudi
GTMO #372

Anwar al Awlaki



External Operations
 Inspirational Cleric
 Yemeni-American

Qasim al Raymi



Military Commander
 Yemeni
Escaped from prison

Uthman al Ghamdi



Commander
 Saudi
GTMO #184

Fahd al Quso



Operational Member
 Yemeni
Escaped from prison

Ibrahim al Asiri



Explosives Expert
 Saudi
Jailed in Saudi Arabia

Ibrahim al Rubaish



Spiritual Leader
 Saudi
GTMO #192

Nayef al Qahtani



Media Official
 Saudi

Adil al Abab



Shari'a Official
 Yemeni

Mohammed al Awfi



Field Commander
 Saudi
GTMO #333

Mohammed al Umdah



Commander
 Yemeni
Escaped from prison



Deceased



Surrendered



Wanted

AQAP Leadership's Shared Histories

- AQAP's founding leaders were operational before January 2009.
- There are clear points of convergence in the leaders' histories:
 - Nearly all of AQAP's Saudi leadership was once incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay. The individuals were transferred from Guantanamo to Saudi Arabia for a rehabilitation program, and from there, resumed terrorist activities. The Saudis who joined AQAP are collectively called the "Saudi Eleven."
 - Nearly all of AQAP's Yemeni leadership was once incarcerated in a Yemeni political security prison. Of those who had been imprisoned, the majority participated in a February 2006 prison break. A handful of others either escaped or gained release prior to 2006.
- Many of AQAP's founding leaders traveled to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in 2001 to fight. It is likely that relationships formed during their time there persist.

AQAP Leadership in al Qaeda in Yemen

- Yemen had made progress against al Qaeda in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and invasion of Afghanistan; however, a February 3, 2006 prison break – allegedly facilitated by an insider – freed operatives who would rise to the head of Yemen’s al Qaeda branch, and then AQAP.

23 al Qaeda operatives escaped from a Yemeni Political Security Prison in Sana’a

 *Deceased*  *Surrendered[†]*  *Wanted*

| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|--|
|  Fawaz al Rabia |  Mohammed al Dailami |  Ibrahim Muhammad Abdu al Muqri * |  Abdul Rahman Ahmad Hasan Basurah |  Aref Mujali * |  Nasser al Wahayshi |
|  Mansour al Baihany |  Umar Jarallah |  Abdullah Yahya Salih al Wada'i |  Hizam Mujali * |  Jabir Ahmad Salih al Banna |  Qasim al Raymi |
|  Shafiq Zayd |  Yasir al Hamayqani |  Zakaria al Bayhani |  Abdullah al Raymi |  Zakaria al Yafia |  Jamal al Badawi |
|  Hamza Salim Amar al Qayti |  Mohammed Said al Umdah |  Khalid Muhammad Abdullah al Batati |  Fawzi Muhammad Abd al Qawi al Wajayhi |  Ibrahim Muhammad Abd al-Jabar Huwaydi | |

← **Wahayshi:** Named leader of al Qaeda’s Yemen branch, and is now *emir* of AQAP.

← **Raymi:** Coordinated terrorist attacks in Yemen, such as July 2007 car bomb that killed eight tourists. Now he is AQAP’s military commander.

← **Badawi:** Coordinated USS *Cole* bombing and remains at large.

[†] Operatives denounced militancy. Those marked by a * are believed to be incarcerated.

AQAP's "Saudi Eleven"

- At least 120 Saudi Guantanamo Bay detainees were transferred to Saudi Arabia between May 14, 2003 and June 12, 2009.
- Eleven of these individuals appeared on a February 2009 most-wanted list released by Saudi Arabia, indicating their return to terrorist activities.
- All eleven had fled to Yemen and joined AQAP; two appeared in AQAP's January 2009 leadership video.
- One of the transfers of Guantanamo detainees to Saudi Arabia occurred on November 9, 2007. Five of the 14 transferred detainees are members of the "Saudi Eleven." They are: Said al Shihri, Yussef al Shihri, Mohammed al Awfi, Turki Asiri, and Murtada Magram.



Adnan Mohammed
 Ali al Saeq



Turki Michaoui Zayed
 al Jabali Asiri



Uthman al Ghamdi



Yussef Mohammed
 Mubarak al Shihri



Jabir Jubran al Fayfi



Mishaal Mohammed
 Rasheed al Shadoukhi



Said al Shihri



Fahd Saleh
 Suleiman al Jetalli



Mohammed Atiq Owaed
 al Owfi al Harbi



Murtada Ali
 Saeed Magram



Sheikh Ibrahim
 Suleiman al Rubaish

Former Saudi Guantanamo Detainees in AQAP

Osama bin Laden and AQAP Leaders

- AQAP’s leadership members and Osama bin Laden had developed trust through shared experiences or associates.
- AQAP leadership relationships developed with bin Laden:
 - Nasser al Wahayshi had previously served as bin Laden’s personal secretary.
 - Mohammed al Umdah was purported to have been a body guard for bin Laden.
 - Ibrahim al Rubaish fought in Tora Bora when bin Laden was known to be there.
 - Qasim al Raymi claims to have met bin Laden while training at al Farouq camp.
- This personal capital is extremely important to al Qaeda’s network.
 - AQAP leader Nasser al Wahayshi asked bin Laden whether Anwar al Awlaki, who did not personally know the al Qaeda leader, should be given AQAP’s lead role.
 - Bin Laden’s response revealed the value he placed on personally knowing an individual and on the individual’s displayed commitment to the cause.
 - Bin Laden wrote regarding Awlaki’s credentials: “We here [in Pakistan] become reassured of the people when they go to the line and get examined there.”
 [Declassified letter dated August 27, 2010]

Revelations from the Abbottabad Raid

Declassified letters from West Point's Combating Terrorism Center

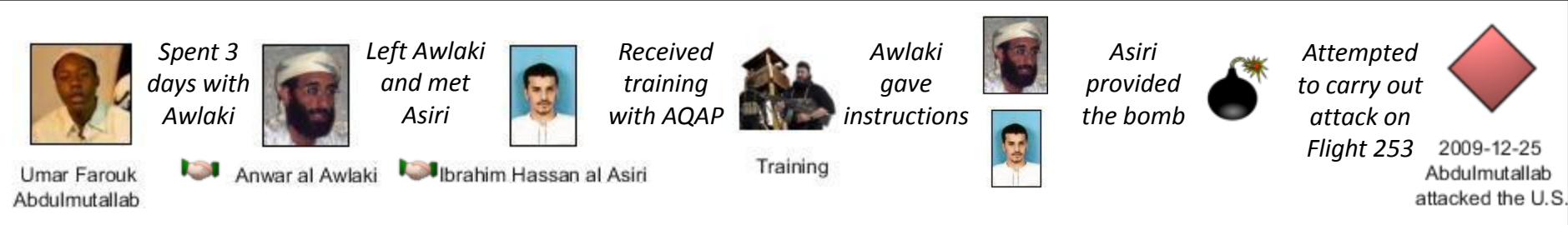
- The private communications provide insights into the relationship al Qaeda and AQAP, as well as the personal relationship between the two leaderships.
- Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Atiyah Abd al Rahman, were in contact with AQAP's top leadership, including: leader Nasser al Wahayshi, deputy leader Said al Shihri, military commander Qasim al Raymi, and senior leader Anwar al Awlaki.
- Communications between Wahayshi and the al Qaeda leadership lend insight into the al Qaeda leadership's opinion of the Yemeni government as a U.S. counter-terrorism partner.
 - Bin Laden's apparent reluctance to support the overthrow of Ali Abdullah Saleh suggests that the much-trumpeted counter-terrorism partnership between Saleh and the U.S. was less effective than many in Washington believed.

- Wahayshi writes: "If you want Sana'a, today is the day."
 - *Was this written just before the beginning of AQAP's territorial offensive in Yemen?*
- Bin Laden (possibly written by Atiyah) responds: "We do not see escalation as necessary at this point because we are in the preparation stage; therefore, it is not in our interest to rush in bringing down the regime."
 - *Did bin Laden's death affect AQAP's decision to wage an insurgency?*

Yemen: AQAP's Safe Haven

- AQAP's leadership has operated out of established safe havens in Yemen, where the group finds sanctuary.
- Historical safe havens in Yemen have existed in the country's eastern areas.
- These safe havens provide a physical destination for prospective militants.
 - Take the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab as an example.
 - Deeply religious, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab originally followed a Nigerian cleric, Sheikh Gumi, who died in 1992. Abdulmutallab later became completely committed to Anwar al Awlaki's teachings.
 - He went to Yemen to find Awlaki in August 2009.
- The safe havens also allow time and space for recruits to be vetted before being accepted into AQAP.
 - Abdulmutallab expressed his desire to be a suicide bomber for AQAP.
 - Awlaki texted Abdulmutallab, initiating a conversation that resulted in a promise that Awlaki would find a way for Abdulmutallab to be involved in jihad.

Operational Freedom in Safe Havens



- AQAP operatives are able to personally introduce recruits to other operatives, creating a network of trust.
 - Awlaki hosted Abdulmutallab for three days in Yemen.
 - From there, Abdulmutallab was introduced to Ibrahim al Asiri, who discussed with him would become the December 25, 2009 attack.
- AQAP also runs terrorist training camps in its safe havens in Yemen.
 - Awlaki approved of Asiri’s plan.
 - Abdulmutallab then received training at a one of AQAP’s camps.
- The freedom of movement afforded operatives in safe havens facilitates preparations for a terrorist attack.
 - After training, Abdulmutallab received instructions from Awlaki to detonate the bomb, given to him by Asiri, over the United States.
 - Abdulmutallab then left to carry out the attack.

For more on AQAP and Yemen, visit
www.criticalthreats.org/yemen