

# Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

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## HOW TO CITE

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## SUMMARY

**Formed:** January 2009

**Disbanded:** Group is active.

**First Attack:** March 15, 2009: AQAP claimed responsibility for killing four South Korean tourists with a suicide bomb in the city of Shibam in southeast Yemen (4 killed, 4 wounded).<sup>1</sup>

**Last Attack:** February 11, 2020: AQAP claimed responsibility for an attack on Colonel Jamal Al Awlaki, a senior Yemeni counterterrorism official. Two vehicles of gunmen wounded several guards and three members of the official's family. The attack took place in Al Hamra village in Abyan Governorate, Yemen.<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is a Sunni terrorist organization and Al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate based in Yemen. Emerging from the 2009 merger of the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian branches of Al Qaeda, AQAP has claimed numerous attacks in Yemen and has also targeted Westerners at home and abroad. The group is known internationally for the "underwear bomber" who attempted to detonate a bomb on a Detroit-bound airplane in 2009 and for the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. AQAP is distinguished from other AQ branches as one of the more capable members in the global AQ network. The group is uniquely competent in managing media and distributing messaging. In 2014, AQAP created an offshoot organization called Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen in order to rebrand the AQ name with greater attention to domestic issues. In 2015, AQAP expanded its wealth significantly after it seized territory in the southeast of Yemen, including the port of Mukalla, and seized port taxes and central bank funds. In February 2020, the United States announced that AQAP's latest leader, Qasim al-Raymi had been killed in Yemen.

As of mid-February 2020, AQAP has not named Raymi's successor or officially acknowledged his death.

## **NARRATIVE SUMMARY**

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) formed in 2009 when Saudi Arabia pushed the branch of Al Qaeda (AQ) located within its territory across the border into Yemen. This move initiated a merger of the Saudi and Yemeni AQ franchises into a single group that operated with the name AQAP.<sup>3</sup> Though AQAP was officially established in 2009, the organization traces its roots back to the 1990s. After the conclusion of the Soviet-Afghan war, mujahideen fighters traveled to Yemen, including both those who were from Yemen and the now stateless foreigners whose countries denied them re-entry. Resettling in Yemen, they were granted sanctuary by the ruling Saleh regime. While most former mujahideen integrated into Yemeni society, a small group remained determined to wage violent jihad. Some reportedly collaborated with the regime to fight the Marxist government in South Yemen until the country was unified, while others fought for the opposition.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, AQ leader Osama bin Laden began funding the jihadist movement in Yemen. Recruits and resources were rerouted from Afghanistan and instead funneled into southern Yemen.<sup>5</sup> Several predecessors to AQAP formed during this time. The Islamic Jihad in Yemen (IJY) formed in 1990, though it lacked a clear command structure or coherent organizational structure. IJY had largely dissolved by 1994, and remaining members combined with other Yemeni and Afghan fighters into the Army of Aden Abyan (AAA). AAA broke down after its leader, Zain al-Abidin al-Mihdar, was executed by the Yemeni government in 1999.<sup>6</sup>

It is unclear when AAA's successor, Al Qaeda in Yemen (AQY), officially came together as a cohesive organization. AQY's first large-scale attack targeted the *USS Cole* in 2000. U.S. and Yemeni authorities responded to this attack by ramping up counterterrorism operations against AQY. By 2003, these efforts had largely incapacitated AQY.<sup>7</sup> In 2006, AQY began to regroup and carry out attacks after several of its members escaped from prison. The group merged with the AQ branch based in Saudi Arabia to form AQAP in 2009.<sup>8</sup> A video produced by AQAP leaders that announced the merger suggested that AQAP would also include the Yemen Soldiers Brigade, another AQ franchise in Yemen.<sup>9</sup> Four days after this video announcement, the group released a 19-minute video titled, "We Start from Here and We Will Meet at al-Aqsa," outlining their goals and ideology.<sup>10</sup> (See the AQY profile for more information on Al Qaeda in Yemen.)

Following the merger, AQAP officially began to launch and claim attacks within and beyond Yemen's borders. In August 2009, an AQAP suicide bomber attempted but failed to assassinate Saudi prince Mohammed bin Nayef. AQAP was also accused of training Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab who attempted to blow up a Detroit-bound plane by injecting chemicals into a package of Pentrite explosive in his underwear on December 25, 2009. This attack attempt solidified fears that AQAP had become a global threat and prompted the U.S. to increase development aid to Yemen.<sup>11</sup> On October 29, 2010, AQAP attempted to send parcel bombs on cargo planes to a U.S. address, but the plot was foiled. Nevertheless, the attempt drew more global attention to AQAP and led some analysts to consider it more dangerous than even Al Qaeda's central branch headquartered in Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> Many Yemenis suspected that the government, despite its collaboration with the U.S., also maintained ties with AQAP. This alleged relationship may partially explain the group's resilience.<sup>13</sup>

AQAP maintained an active media presence that included a bimonthly magazine tailored to Yemeni audiences called Sada al-Malahim (“The Echo of Battles”).<sup>14</sup> AQAP also produced English language propaganda aimed at Western audiences through Inspire magazine, a project initiated in 2010 by U.S.-born Anwar al-Awlaki and Pakistani-American Samir Khan.<sup>15</sup> Despite the deaths of Awlaki and Khan in an American drone strike in 2011, the magazine continues to be influential.<sup>16</sup>

In 2011, AQAP leaders established an offshoot organization called Ansar al-Shariah Yemen (ASY) in southern Yemen.<sup>17</sup> AQAP leaders admitted that the creation of ASY was an attempt to rebrand the organization to attract more local Yemenis.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. State Department has listed ASY as an alias for AQAP.<sup>19</sup> ASY initially had high organizational and military capacity. The group took over parts of southern Yemen by spring 2011 and held them for over a year. Additionally, the group provided services like electricity and water and enforced Shariah law in the areas it controlled. ASY maintained this high level of influence until an anti-militant government offensive drove it out.<sup>20</sup>

Though Yemeni forces (aided by local militias and U.S. airstrikes) were able to take back territory from ASY, dislodging AQAP from Yemen proved to be more difficult.<sup>21</sup> In 2011, U.S. Homeland Security Advisor John Brennan described AQAP as “the most active operational franchise” of Al Qaeda.<sup>22</sup> AQAP claimed responsibility for the January 2015 attack on the Paris headquarters of satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, which killed twelve people.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the civil war in Yemen, which erupted in February and March of 2015, provided AQAP room to expand. From its base in the south and southeast, AQAP fought against both the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels.<sup>24</sup> In April 2015, AQAP seized an airport and a port on the Gulf of Aden and released approximately 300 of its members from prison. Following these operations, U.S. intelligence officers withdrew from Yemen due to security concerns, which temporarily reduced the number of U.S. drone aimed at limiting the group’s movements.<sup>25</sup>

The conflict entered a new phase in April 2015 when a Saudi-led coalition comprised of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, and Qatar (until June 2017) initiated military operations targeting the Shia Houthi rebels. These actions worsened humanitarian conditions and further contributed to the power vacuum in which AQAP has successfully thrived. AQAP has been a primary beneficiary of the civil war in Yemen. The group capitalized on the chaos by labeling the Houthi forces as an Iranian proxy, which allowed it to legitimize its actions as a Sunni front against Iran. AQAP’s ability to hold territory, even for limited periods, provided the group with opportunities to raid banks, tax ports, and gain indirect access to additional weapons.<sup>26</sup>

In 2016, U.S. drone strikes began to increase, nearly doubling from 23 in 2015 to 44. Strikes peaked in 2017 at 131, most of which were directed at AQAP.<sup>27</sup> On January 29, 2017, a U.S. attack on AQAP resulted in the death of a member of the U.S. Navy’s Sea, Air and Land Forces (SEALs) and the loss of an American aircraft. A number of civilians and 14 AQAP fighters also perished in the attack.<sup>28</sup>

By the summer of 2018, AQAP had lost about half of the territory it held in 2015. However, the group maintained a membership of approximately 4,000 fighters dispersed over a wide geographic area. At that time, officials in the United States Department of Defense considered the group to be the most lethal AQ affiliate.<sup>29</sup>

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### A. LEADERSHIP



Photo: [VQA editorial](#)

**Nasser al-Wuhayshi** (2009 to June 2015): Wuhayshi, also known as Abu Basir, was the founder and leader of AQAP until his death in 2015. He also reportedly served as a general manager of AQ. Reports of his death in 2011 were unsubstantiated. In June 2015, a drone strike in Yemen's Hadramout region killed Wuhayshi. This was confirmed by AQAP official Khaled Batarfi.<sup>30</sup>



Photo: [Lenta War Journal](#)

**Qasim al-Raymi/al-Rimi** (2009 to 2020): Raymi, also known as Abu Hurayra, is the current leader of AQAP. He succeeded Wuhayshi following his 2015 death.<sup>31</sup> On February 6, 2020, the United States confirmed that Raymi had been killed as part of on-going counterterrorism operations, though no details or dates were provided.<sup>32</sup> As of mid-February 2020, AQAP had not named Raymi's successor or officially acknowledged his death.



Photo: [United Muslim Ummah](#)

**Anwar al-Awlaki** (2009 to 2011): Awlaki, a dual American and Yemeni citizen and the group's chief ideologue, was killed by an American drone strike in southern Yemen in 2011, setting off a national debate on the legality of killing American citizens without a trial.<sup>33</sup>



Photo: [Daily Mail](#)

**Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri** (2009 to present, although reported killed August 2018): Asiri is believed to be responsible for assembling some of the most high-profile AQAP bombs, such as those used in the attempted assassination of Saudi prince Mohammed bin Nayef and the attempted bombing of an airplane en route to Detroit, both in 2009.<sup>34</sup>



Photo: [Big Think](#)

**Nayif Mohammed Saeed al-Qhatani** (2009 to April 2010): Qhatani was a senior leader in AQAP, responsible for establishing AQ cells and training camps in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia. He is known for serving as a connection between the Yemeni and Saudi branches of AQ before the merger. Qhatani was killed in a shootout with Saudi security forces in April 2010.<sup>35</sup>



Photo: [Counter Extremism Project](#)

**Said Ali al-Shihri** (2009 to September 10, 2012): Shihri, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, became AQAP's deputy emir and held that post until he was killed in a military operation in Yemen in September 2012. Shihri was responsible for determining targets, recruiting new members, planning attacks, and assisting in operational support for carrying out attacks.<sup>36</sup>



Photo: [Times of Israel](#)

**Khalid Batarfi** (April 2015 to present): Batarfi, a former member of AQAP's shura council, was the top commander for AQAP in Abyan Governate, Yemen. He escaped during an AQAP attack on the Central Prison in al-Mukalla.<sup>37</sup>

### B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group. However, Ansar al-Shariah Yemen (ASY) has been listed as an alias for AQAP by the U.S. State Department.<sup>38</sup>

### C. SIZE ESTIMATES

AQAP is comprised of Yemenis, Saudis, and foreign fighters. As of 2010, roughly 56% of the group was Yemeni, 37% was Saudi, and 7% was foreign. The group's fighters include veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and international recruits who attended religious schools in Yemen.<sup>39</sup>

- July 1, 2010: 100-300 (Aspen Institute)<sup>40</sup>
- August 31, 2010: 300-several thousand (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)<sup>41</sup>
- October 30, 2010: 600 (CBS News)<sup>42</sup>
- November 8, 2010: 500 (CNN)<sup>43</sup>
- April 2012: more than 1,000 (CNN)<sup>44</sup>
- 2013: approximately 1,000 (U.S. State Department)<sup>45</sup>
- 2017: low thousands (U.S. State Department)<sup>46</sup>
- December 30, 2017: more than 3,000 (New York Times)<sup>47</sup>

#### D. RESOURCES

Before Saudi Arabia's crackdown, AQAP received considerable funding from Islamic charities. Although the Saudi government clamped down by tightening money transfer rules, AQAP was also funded by cash donations from wealthy individuals, a process that is much harder to track. AQAP does not require considerable resources to be effective; for example, the October 2010 parcel bomb attempt probably cost less than \$500 to engineer and deliver.<sup>48</sup>

AQAP's funding primarily came from robberies and kidnappings for ransom and, to a lesser degree, from donations from like-minded supporters. AQAP is said to have extorted up to \$20 million in ransom money according to 2013 estimates.<sup>49</sup>

The civil war in Yemen provided further financial opportunities for the group. Seizing the port city of Mukalla allowed AQAP to loot \$60 million from the central bank and collect another \$2 million per day from port taxes between 2015 and 2016.

#### E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

**Disclaimer:** This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

AQAP is headquartered in southern and southeastern Yemen.<sup>50</sup> In 1996, after spending time training militants there, Osama bin Laden identified the country as an ideal location to base Al Qaeda should he be ousted from Afghanistan, citing its tribal society, its mountainous geography, and its armed people.<sup>51</sup> The strategic maritime location contributes to AQAP's core competencies of facilitating, financing, and smuggling. The group frequently acting as a critical node between AQ and outlying franchises including Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and a variety of groups in Egypt.<sup>52</sup>

### STRATEGY

#### A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

AQAP has a globally and locally focused Salafi-jihadist agenda. Broadly, the group seeks to expel foreigners from the Arabian Peninsula and spread jihad to Israel to "liberate Muslim holy

sites and brethren in Gaza.”<sup>53</sup> AQAP also condemns Arab leaders who have imposed blockades on Palestine and promises to free imprisoned Salafi-jihadists in Saudi Arabia.<sup>54</sup> AQAP, in conjunction with Al Qaeda, strives to create an Islamic caliphate through the unification of states in the Arabian Peninsula. According to Al Qaeda central ideology, “Al Qaeda will mobilize four armies that will march from the periphery of the Muslim world to the heart of Palestine: one army from Pakistan and Afghanistan, one from Iraq, one from Yemen, and the last from the Levant.” AQAP asserts that it will form the army that will be sent from Yemen.<sup>55</sup> As outlined by Osama bin Laden, the United States and other Western countries are Islam’s main enemies, and Saudi Arabia and Palestine are under “crusader Zionist occupation.” AQAP does not consider itself to be a part of the Islamic State (IS), contrary to claims by IS in 2014.<sup>56</sup>

AQAP has also worked to marginalize sectarian minorities, especially the Houthis in northern Yemen. AQAP has accused Houthi insurgents of receiving foreign assistance from Iran and fighting to impose Shia religious law in Yemen.<sup>57</sup>

## **B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

AQAP aspires to overthrow the Saudi Arabian and Yemeni regimes and establish an Islamic theocracy. Officially, AQAP refuses to engage with the Yemeni government. However, some experts believe that former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh (in office from 1990 to 2012) may have fueled jihadist threats by working with AQAP in order to ensure Western backing for his regime. Further, in 2009 Saleh was accused of recruiting AQAP militants to suppress a southern rebellion movement in return for releasing jihadist prisoners.<sup>58</sup>

In 2011, AQAP leaders established an offshoot organization called Ansar al-Shariah Yemen (ASY) in southern Yemen.<sup>59</sup> AQAP leaders admitted that the creation of ASY was an attempt to rebrand the organization to attract more local Yemenis.<sup>60</sup> The U.S. State Department has listed ASY as an alias for AQAP.<sup>61</sup> Under the ASY name, the group provided basic public services and established a system of justice based on Sharia law. The seizure of the large port city of Mukalla in 2015 reflected growing political savvy. In Mukalla, AQAP established the Hadramout National Council with local residents rather than impose its rule without local buy-in. The group also attempted to win local support by not enforcing strict rules and making an effort to socialize with civilians. AQAP leader Wuhayshi even ordered that AQ’s characteristic black banner not be displayed. The group further cultivated its relationship with Mukalla citizens by organizing street festivals, distributing food to needy families, and providing hospitals with supplies. This reflects the gradualist approach AQ has adopted to win the allegiance of the population, in strong contrast with the doctrine of the Islamic State.<sup>62</sup>

## **C. TARGETS & TACTICS**

AQAP has utilized both conventional and unconventional methods to attack its enemies and recruit members. The group makes use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), kidnappings, shooting attacks, mail bombs, and bombs on planes. The group has also dissuaded dissenters from rising up against AQAP by assassinating local officials who opposed them.

AQAP has also used non-violent methods to garner international support and issue threats. Publications such as Inspire, AQAP’s English publication, and the Arabic-language magazine Sada al-Malahim (“The Echo of Battles”) are aimed at expanding AQ’s network and recruiting fighters. In particular, Inspire justifies campaigns of violence against the West and encourages lone wolf attacks by providing how-to manuals, bomb-making instructions, and contact information to enable recruits to connect to the Al Qaeda network.<sup>63</sup> AQAP’s leadership states

that it is not necessary to carry out large-scale 9/11 attacks that require sophisticated planning and tactics. Instead, the group promotes conducting smaller operations where less is at stake. According to them, if several attacks succeed, the cumulative effect will bring down the U.S. confidence in security and have negative impacts on its economy.<sup>64</sup>

In the region, AQAP has targeted foreigners and security forces as part of their scheme to overthrow Saudi and Yemeni governments and establish an Islamic caliphate. Abroad, the group has also targeted the United States, as seen with the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound flight in 2009. AQAP views Israel as one of its main enemies in the region and also targets U.S. allies in Europe. For example, AQAP claimed responsibility for the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack.<sup>65</sup> The group also has attacked British diplomats in Yemen, asserting that their attacks are justified because Britain is “the main ally of America in the war against Islam” and “gave the Jews control over the land of Palestine.”<sup>66</sup>

## MAJOR ATTACKS

**Disclaimer:** These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization’s history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

**March 15, 2009:** AQAP claimed responsibility for killing four South Korean tourists with a suicide bomb in the city of Shibam in southeast Yemen (4 killed, 4 wounded).<sup>67</sup>

**March 18, 2009:** AQAP claimed responsibility for a suicide bomber who targeted a South Korean delegation traveling to the airport in Sana’a to investigate the Shibam terrorist attack. The bomber failed to cause harm to the delegates (1 killed, 1 wounded).<sup>68</sup>

**June 12, 2009:** AQAP abducted nine foreigners (four German adults, three German children, a British man, and a South Korean woman) outside the city of Sa’dah. Three were executed. The children were released, but the whereabouts of the others are unknown (3+ killed, unknown wounded).<sup>69</sup>

**August 27, 2009:** AQAP attempted to assassinate Saudi Assistant Minister of Interior for Security Affairs Prince Mohammed bin Nayef with a suicide bombing. Nayef was only slightly wounded, and the bomber died in the blast (1 killed, 1 wounded).<sup>70</sup>

**December 25, 2009:** AQAP was accused of training Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, “the underwear bomber,” who tried to blow up a Detroit-bound plane by injecting chemicals into a package of penrite explosive in his underwear mid-flight. The attack was not successful (0 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>71</sup>

**April 26, 2010:** An AQAP suicide bomber detonated in front of the convoy of the British Ambassador to Yemen, Timothy Torlot (1 killed, 3 wounded).<sup>72</sup>

**October 2010:** AQAP militants shot two rocket-propelled grenades at the car carrying Fiona Gibb, Britain’s second highest ranking diplomat in Yemen (0 killed, 3 wounded).<sup>73</sup>

**October 29, 2010:** AQAP hid bombs in packages shipped from Yemen to synagogues in Chicago. The bombs were discovered aboard cargo planes in Dubai and London (0 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>74</sup>

**February 25, 2012:** AQAP claimed responsibility for a suicide car bombing that targeted Yemeni Republican Guard troops in Bayda (26 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>75</sup>

**May 21, 2012:** A suicide bombing attack targeted a military parade in Sana'a (96 killed, 300 wounded).<sup>76</sup>

**December 5, 2013:** An attack targeted a hospital at the Defense Ministry complex. No group initially claimed responsibility for the attack, but AQAP issued an apology for the attack in a video on December 22, 2013 (56 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>77</sup>

**January 6, 2014:** AQAP attacked military bases in the town of Rada'a, which is in central Yemen (10 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>78</sup>

**October 16-20, 2014:** AQAP claimed responsibility for 16 separate attacks that targeted Houthi rebels, most of which took place in the city of Rada'a. The group stated that "tens" of Houthis had been killed in several of the attacks. Battles between AQAP members and Houthi rebels from October 19 to 20 were estimated to have resulted in 60 deaths (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>79</sup>

**January 7, 2015:** Said Kouachi and Cherif Kouachi – brothers that were allegedly affiliated with AQAP and trained in Yemen by the group – attacked French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo's headquarters in Paris (12 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>80</sup>

**April 2, 2015:** AQAP attacked multiple Yemeni government facilities in Mukalla. In so doing, they freed 300 prisoners, including Khalid al-Batarfi, the former AQAP emir of Abyan province (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>81</sup>

**April 16, 2015:** AQAP seized the Riyan Airport near the city of Mukalla in southern Yemen (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>82</sup>

**May 11, 2016:** AQAP claimed a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack in northern Hadramawt province. The attack wounded General Abdul Rahman al Halili, commander of Yemen's first military region (0 killed, 1 wounded).<sup>83</sup>

**August 19, 2016:** AQAP claimed an attack that killed three Houthi officials in Sana'a (3 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>84</sup>

**January 29, 2018:** AQAP is suspected to have carried out a suicide attack using a car bomb against a checkpoint near Ataq run by the Shabwa Elite Force, an armed group supported by the United Arab Emirates (11+ killed, 3 wounded).<sup>85</sup>

**February 2, 2020:** AQAP claimed "full responsibility" for an attack on the U.S. Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida. The attacker, Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, was a member of the Saudi Air Force who was training at the base. AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack in a video released in early February 2020. However, AQAP did not provide direct evidence of the group's involvement (4 killed, "several" wounded).<sup>86</sup>

**February 11, 2020:** AQAP claimed responsibility for an attack on Colonel Jamal Al Awlaki, a senior Yemeni counterterrorism official. Two vehicles of gunmen wounded several guards and three members of the official's family. The attack took place in Al Hamra village in Abyan Governorate, Yemen (0 killed, 3+ wounded).<sup>87</sup>



## INTERACTIONS

### A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

#### Group designations:

- January 19, 2010: The U.S. Department of State designated AQAP as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.<sup>88</sup>
- March 7, 2014: Saudi Arabia formally designated AQAP as a terrorist organization in an announcement posted on the official website of the Saudi Press Agency.<sup>89</sup>
- November 15, 2014: The Cabinet of the United Arab Emirates included AQAP on its published list of designated terrorist organizations.<sup>90</sup>

#### Individual designations:

Top AQAP leaders have been designated under U.S. Executive Order 13224 in an effort to freeze the assets of individuals believed to pose a risk to the national security of the United States. The designations formally prohibit the supply of material support and weapons to AQAP and impose immigration restrictions on designated individuals in an attempt to stop the flow of finances to AQAP. They also give the Department of Justice jurisdiction to prosecute AQAP members.<sup>91</sup> Former AQAP leaders Nasir al-Wahishi and Said Ali al-Shihri had also been included by the UN on a list of individuals associated with Al Qaeda or the Taliban, subjecting them and the organization as a whole to asset freezes, travel bans, and an arms embargo.<sup>92</sup>

*Table 1: Individuals designated under Executive Order 13224.*<sup>93</sup>

Listed	Individual	Delisted
19-Jan-10	Nasir al-Wahishi	17-Nov-15
19-Jan-10	Said Ali al-Shihri	26-Nov-14
11-May-10	Qasim al-Rimi	N/A
11-May-10	Nayif Bin-Muhammad al-Qahtani	27-Jun-13
7-Dec-10	Fahd Mohammed Ahmed Al-Quso	26-Sep-13
24-Mar-11	Ibrahim Hassan Tali Al-Asiri	N/A
16-Jun-11	Othman Al-Ghamdi	N/A
17-Jun-14	Shawki Ali Ahmed al-Badani	N/A
15-Jul-14	Anders Cameroon Ostensvig Dale	N/A
18-Dec-14	Ibrahim al-Rubaysh	N/A
29-Sep-15	Peter Cherif	N/A
05-Jan-17	Ibrahim al-Banna	N/A
04-Jan-18	Muhammad al-Ghazali	N/A
23-Jan-18	Khalid Batarfi	N/A

### B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Some analysts note that AQAP depends on a strong relationship with local communities in Yemen for recruitment and protection. Local Yemeni tribes have reportedly provided a safe haven for AQAP and served as fertile recruiting grounds for the group. Analysts cite high unemployment rates, pervasive poverty, and dwindling supplies of oil and water as reasons locals have been so accepting of AQAP. AQAP has actively worked to win favor by marrying group members into local tribes and providing social and financial assistance to areas plagued by abject poverty. AQAP has provided services for local communities, such as digging wells, paying for medical treatments, and giving monthly allowances to widows.<sup>94</sup> AQAP bolsters the local economy by pays higher than market price for commodities such as goats. In exchange for these services, some local tribesmen have allowed AQAP to recruit their sons and have provided shelter for AQAP members. This has allowed insurgents to blend into local Yemeni populations.

Beyond economic and political measures, AQAP has made extensive use of cultural factors, such as Arabic poetry (*anashid*), to improve its relationships with local constituencies. The use of Arabic poetry remains an important means for the group to present itself as more orthodox and connected to local and tribal traditions.<sup>95</sup>

Though some reports suggest that AQAP maintains a relatively positive relationship with local communities, other reports are more pessimistic. For example, the *New York Times* in 2010 argued that the number of tribal leaders that welcomed AQAP was very low and asserted that several tribes banished AQAP members from their areas.<sup>96</sup> AQAP's recruits have been historically small in number, in part due to the differences between AQAP's ideology of violent jihad and the local culture's emphasis on conflict resolution.<sup>97</sup>

AQAP has also attempted to exploit local frustrations to attract new members. The group focused recruitment videos on corruption and the failing Yemeni government rather than global jihad. More recently, AQAP's communications have focused on unity against "enemies of Islam" – such as the United States, Europe, and Iran – while also issuing messages that support al-Zawahiri.<sup>98</sup> AQAP has engaged in efforts to galvanize Sunni Muslim opposition against the Houthis in Yemen, whom they claim are supported by Iran. AQAP has made efforts to engender good will among civilians affected by the fighting, especially since the fall of the Yemeni government. The group has even gone as far as to compensate the family members of those killed in U.S. drone strikes and of those harmed by the group's own operations.<sup>99</sup>

### C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

AQAP has largely remained loyal to AQ's core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>100</sup> There is evidence that AQ central communicated directly with AQAP leadership to plan attacks.<sup>101</sup> In 2015, the group affirmed that it remained "committed to the guidelines of Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri," the leader of AQ central.<sup>102</sup>

In April 2010, after AQAP officially established its base in Yemen, Somali government officials claimed that AQAP made contacts with Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab. Somali Minister of the Treasury Abdirahman Omar Osman stated that twelve AQ officials entered Somalia from Yemen to bring monetary assistance to bolster Al Shabaa's recruitment capabilities.<sup>103</sup> In February 2010, AQAP leader Said al-Shihri announced that AQAP would seek to control the Bab el-Mandab Strait – a waterway between Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea – "with the help of Somali mujahedeen to achieve global influence."<sup>104</sup> In addition, U.S. officials believe that AQAP has shared its chemical bomb-making capacities with other militant groups, including Al Shabaab.<sup>105</sup> The U.S. captured Ahmed Warsame, a high ranking Al Shabaab operative, in 2011 as he was leaving Yemen in a skiff. Warsame had brokered an agreement between AQAP and Al Shabaab in which

Al Shabaab could buy weapons directly from AQAP.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, Al Shabaab sent 300 fighters to train and fight with AQAP against the Yemeni government.<sup>107</sup> In May 2019, Al Shaabab released a message aimed to improve morale among AQAP members after the group experienced several setbacks.<sup>108</sup> In October 2019, an AQAP senior leader (in conjunction with AQ central) issued a statement that praised Al Shaabab's recent operations in Somalia.<sup>109</sup>

Since the entrance of the Islamic State into the Yemeni conflict in 2014, AQAP has been engaged in a fierce competition for territory, recruits, and political relevance. Initially, AQAP announced support for IS and offered advice to the group in a written statement on its website in August 2014.<sup>110</sup> However, in November 2014, AQAP declared the IS caliphate illegitimate after IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed that Yemen was a part of his Islamic State.<sup>111</sup> The Islamic State in Yemen (IS-Y) was formally established in November 2014, and it quickly gained prominence among jihadists in Yemen. Many AQAP members defected to IS-Y, and IS-Y capitalized on the civil war to radicalize young men affected by heavy fighting between government and insurgent forces.<sup>112</sup> Threatened by IS-Y, AQAP has acted to maintain its position as the most prominent jihadist group in Yemen. AQAP leveraged its status in Yemeni communities as a group that respects Yemeni norms to maintain strong relationships with local tribes.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, the group pushed back against IS-Y by with a targeted media campaign in which it publicly denouncing IS-Y's attacks on mosques and mocked Baghdadi.<sup>114</sup> The IS leadership returned these reputational attacks with its own condemnations of AQAP and its "failed strategy."<sup>115</sup>

Since 2014, the two groups have vied over the control of territory, resources, and recruits. However, AQAP and IS-Y did not directly clash until June 2018; rather, the two groups focused on battling their shared enemy, the Houthi rebels. It is speculated that tensions between AQAP and IS-Y began as a series of minor conflicts at checkpoints that soon became unmanageable. Another explanation points to disagreements over whether AQAP was receiving more weapons from local tribes. Whatever the cause, the two groups soon turned much of their military might against each other. One estimate suggests that two-thirds of AQAP's operations between June 2018 and April 2019 had been directed against IS-Y forces.<sup>116</sup>

Since 2015, the civil war has provided space for AQAP to reorganize, establish alliances with local tribal and political factions, recruit and train fighters, and develop revenue streams. In the Hadramawt region, these local alliances of convenience allow AQAP to assume the role of protector of marginalized local elites who fear colonization by the Saudi and Emirati governments and theft of oil wealth. AQAP's ideological flexibility relative to IS has enabled adaptation and cooperation with various groups and factions, at times allegedly including the Yemeni National Security Agency.<sup>117</sup>

#### **D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

AQAP has no known state sponsors. It has been speculated that the Yemeni government has provided aid to AQAP. Some experts believe that former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh (in office from 1990 to 2012) may have fueled jihadist threats by working with AQAP in order to ensure Western backing for his regime. Further, in 2009 Saleh was accused of recruiting AQAP militants to suppress a southern rebellion movement in return for releasing jihadist prisoners.<sup>118</sup> The alleged relationship between AQAP and the Yemeni government may partially explain the group's resilience.<sup>119</sup>

## MAPS

- Global Al Qaeda
- Global Islamic State

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