

AQAP's Defections: Reasons, Actors and Ramifications

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By Ibrahim Ali

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Introduction

Since the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2009, the Yemeni branch has witnessed several defections that have destabilized its organizational and leadership structure. The reasons behind these defections are attributed to ideological differences and disagreements about the work strategy. This is in addition to conflicts over power, influence and resources. These differences have developed over time to become a major factor for defections, or the defections have been triggered by certain events.

Although not every disagreement within the AQAP leads to defections, the outcomes sometimes may be the same. The AQAP general leadership intervened many times to restrain or freeze internal conflicts that could have developed into real armed confrontations. Sometimes, such interventions have led to adverse results.¹

On the surface, the AQAP may look cohesive. However, the events of the last years have revealed fragility in its organizational structure and ideological allegiances. This includes during the ISIS' declaration of establishing a caliphate in 2014 and the Saudi-led military operation against the Houthis. These two events have led to unprecedented shifts within the organization that will be mentioned later.

It can be said that the AQAP has relatively succeeded in containing the defections during the past years but it hasn't survived its impacts, especially the defections resulting from the disagreements with the ISIS. Adding to its troubles is that the latest defections have coincided with the Southern force's unprecedented operations against the AQAP.

It is true that during the period, the anti-AQAP war wasn't a priority for the Western countries sponsoring the international counterterrorism campaign. However, the Southern forces were able to independently inflict severe defeat on the AQAP in its important strongholds.²

¹ Such as the disputes between late AQAP chief Khaled Batarfi and dissident leader Abu Omar Al-Nahdi, according to exclusive sources

² The Counterterrorism Successes by Our Armed Forces, the Beginning, the Strength Elements, the Importance, and Dimensions at the National and International Levels(deraalganoob.com)

This paper highlights the individual and collective defections within the AQAP since its foundation in 2009. Furthermore, it points to the reasons and motives behind them and the nature of their impact on the future of this branch and its internal cohesion.

The Emergence of the AQAP

In 2009, the AQAP was founded by merging the Al-Qaeda's branches in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.³

To understand the nature of the defections that have destabilized the AQAP as well as their reasons and ramifications, it is necessary first to know the nature of its structural and ideological foundations that govern its activities, in addition to the changes that occurred within it.

The Organizational Structure: The AQAP consists of some councils and committees as shown below:

- The Shura Council: It is the AQAP's top decision-making body which is responsible for appointing the Emir and supervising operations of the group.
- The Operations Committee: It is responsible for planning and executing military operations.
- The Media Committee: It is responsible for promoting the AQAP's propaganda and ideas.
- The Financial Affairs Committee: It is responsible for collecting money and funding the organization's activities.
- The Emir: He is the leader and the general commander of the AQAP and supervises all its activities.
- Local leaders: They are responsible for supervising the organization's operations in different areas.
- The Cells: They are small units consisting of a limited number of fighters who carry out certain operations.

³ The Qaeda, the Foundation, History, and Leaders(The Encyclopedia, aljazeera.net)

Changes in the Organizational Structure: Over the past years, the AQAP has witnessed changes in its organizational structure as a result of the US airstrikes and the military counterterrorism operations. Following these strikes, the organization has become more decentralized. It began distributing powers among a wider scope of local leaders. Moreover, the AQAP has become more focused on secret and organizational activities than large public operations.⁴

The Ideological Structure of AQAP: The AQAP is considered an extension of the global organization the 'Al-Qaeda' ('the Base' in Arabic), which was founded by Osama bin Laden. The different branches of the 'Al-Qaeda' share the same basic ideology but they may differ in some details and tactics that don't contradict the general jihadist orientation.

The basic ideology of AQAP is based on the following points:

- Jihad against enemies: The organization considers the United States and its allies as enemies of Islam and Muslims. It believes in the necessity of jihad against them to establish a global Islamic caliphate.
- Takfir (excommunication): The organization excommunicates many Islamic governments and regimes, deeming them as agents of the West. Based on this belief, it launches its war against them and targets the institutions and individuals linked to them.
- The Islamic Sharia: The organization believes that the Islamic Sharia laws should be applied accurately. It strongly condemns any laws against the Sharia. The AQAP attempted to apply the Sharia, according to its own understanding, when it controlled vast areas in Abyan and Shabwa governorates in South Yemen between 2011-2013.

⁴ Exclusive sources spoke to "South24 Center"

- Violence: It believes that violence is a valid tool to achieve its goals and uses violence against its enemies and to spread fear. However, the Al-Qaeda endorsed the popular protests that demanded the downfall of regimes in some Arab countries between 2011-2012. It claimed to have participated in them with and without weapons.⁵

The AQAP's Ideological Structure includes some unique elements:

- Focusing on the internal enemy: The AQAP increasingly focuses on fighting the "internal enemy". This basically includes the Southern forces. The organization usually attempts to link its rivals with the US and "Zionists". When the conflict in Yemen began nearly 10 years ago, the AQAP at the time fought against the Houthi militia in some fronts. However, the relationship between the two groups later turned into cooperation, posing a threat against South Yemen, according to the British newspaper 'The Telegraph'.⁶
- Taking advantage of local circumstances: The AQAP is capable of taking advantage of the local circumstances in Yemen, such as poverty, unemployment, and instability to recruit more members for engaging in its armed operations.
- Relationship with other armed groups: The AQAP forges ties with other armed groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood that fought beside it against the Southern forces in Abyan and Shabwa. Senior AQAP leaders admitted to this participation on more than one occasion.⁷

⁵ Sheikh Fahd Al-Quso, the third wanted person on the American list: The Yemeni tribes did not turn against us, and Saudi Arabia's stance on the revolution is shameful, and Bin Laden is a mujahid and died as a martyr... and "Al-Qaeda" is part of the fabric of society (alquds.co.uk)

⁶ Houthis team up with feared Al-Qaeda branch in new threat to Yemen(telegraph.co.uk)

⁷ Terrorism and the Yemeni "legitimacy." A Story of Strong Alliance With the Muslim Brotherhood and the AQAP, Al-Habib Al-Assoued(alarab.co.uk)

This ideological makeup has largely affected the AQAP's activities in Yemen as shown below:

- Launching attacks against “enemies”: The AQAP launches constant attacks in some governorates in South Yemen. Previously, it used to launch attacks every now and then against Emirati and Saudi forces in Shabwa and Hadramout. The group has also targeted some civilians accusing them of cooperation with “the enemies”.⁸
- Recruitment: The AQAP seeks to recruit more members by promoting its ideology. Over the past years, it has tried to exploit the Houthi control on most of North Yemen to present itself as the bearer of the Sunni banner, despite the emergence of much evidence that confirms its direct relationship with the Houthis⁹, and even with Iran.
- Collecting money: The AQAP has used different ways to collect money, including kidnapping and blackmail. Over the past years, the AQAP has amassed millions of dollars¹⁰ as a result of financial ransom, mediated by some Gulf States.
- Spreading fear: The AQAP has sought to spread fear in the society through threats, violence, applying sharia, and committing terrorist operations.

⁸ The AQAP claims responsibility for targeting UAE forces with two missiles in the Yemeni governorate of Shabwa-RT Arabic

⁹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift | Lawfare (lawfaremedia.org)

¹⁰ Kidnapping Foreigners in Yemen, A source of Funding the Terrorist Organization with International Mediations (south24.org)

Individual Defections

Saleh Al-Oufi

In 2009, when the merging of the Al-Qaeda's branches in Yemen and Saudi Arabia was declared and named 'Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula', the new organization witnessed the first defection of prominent leader Saleh Al-Oufi, who held Saudi citizenship. According to Saudi media sources, Al-Oufi sought to establish a new organization called the 'Shabab Al-Tawhid' (Youth of monotheism).

As for the reasons behind his defection, security sources said at the time that it was linked to disagreements with AQAP leaders about his approach which he gained from his fighting experience in Chechnya and Afghanistan.¹¹ However, he failed to establish his new group in Saudi Arabia as he was killed in fighting with the security forces in Al Madinah in 2005.¹²

Al-Oufi's defection didn't have much resonance as he didn't succeed in his subsequent task, and moreover it was within the framework of the same ideology of the organization. This is unlike some cases in which dissidents returned to their countries after communicating with the security forces.

Mohammed Al-Oufi

A year before the killing of Saleh Al-Oufi, the prominent leader Mohammed Al-Oufi announced his defection from the AQAP and turned himself in to the authorities of his own county, Saudi Arabia.

During a televised interview, Mohammed Al-Oufi attributed his defection to the AQAP's modus operandi of putting Saudis in the forefront during attacks while there is no Saudi field commander behind the scenes.¹³

¹¹ Al-Madina: Al-Oufi defected from the AQAP to establish "Shabab Al-Tawhid"(addustour.com)

¹² Saleh Al-Oufi! (wikipedia.org)

¹³ The General Department for Counter Extremism(moi.gov.sa)

Mohammed Al-Oufi hasn't been the only Saudi leader who surrendered to his country's authorities after discovering the dubious affairs within the AQAP. Scores of Saudis returned to their country after staying for some time as members of the organization.¹⁴

Jabir Jubran Al-Fifi

After he returned from the Guantanamo Bay detention in 2006, Jabir Al-Fifi joined a temporary rehabilitation program. Later, Al-Fifi, who holds Saudi citizenship, joined the AQAP where he rose to become one of the top leaders. However, he surrendered himself to Saudi Arabia in mid-October 2010.¹⁵

In a televised interview, he mentioned some reasons that pushed him to defect from the organization and surrender. They include ideological reasons as he believed that the AQAP's ideas could not withstand many arguments. He added that the turning point came after attending a debate in a Yemeni governorate (about the rulers of Islamic countries and targeting the foreign covenanters). The debate ended in favor of the rival group, according to Al-Fifi. This debate was an important turning point in his association with the organization as he began seriously to think of turning himself in to the Saudi authorities. Al-Fifi also mentioned other reasons related to his family.¹⁶

He revealed how the AQAP adopts some practices to avoid defections within its ranks. He pointed out that a Yemeni suicider was initially supposed to carry out the terrorist attack executed by Saudi citizen Abdullah Asiri in the palace of Mohammed Bin Nayef in Jeddah in 2009. Al-Fifi believes that the reason behind this was the organization's fear of Saudi defections. Such a behavior indicated that the organization can resort to trickery and fraud to avoid the defection of its members and leaders.

¹⁴ Exclusive sources spoke to "South24 Center"

¹⁵ General/Interior Ministry/ A statement about the wanted Jaber Al-Fifi's surrender himself to the security authorities (spa.gov.sa)

¹⁶ Al Riyadh Newspaper/ Al-Fifi: the survival of Prince Moheemmed Bin Nayef from the failed assassination attempt shocked the AQAP» (alriyadh.com)

Commonalities

Examining the three individual defection cases, it is clear that most of their reasons are attributed to disagreements about issues related to the ideological aspect, whether the aim of dissidents was to correct the organization's doctrine and approach or to abandon them completely.

Moreover, though a limited number of members and leaders of the organization defected during that period it doesn't mean that those who remained within its ranks believe completely in its ideals. This is because defection is considered an advanced phase of rejection of the principles. Attaining the stage or not depends on the circumstances and experiences of each one separately. For example, Jabir Al-Fifi revealed details of incidents that pushed him to this stage, including the debate between a leader of the organization and a mosque imam.

The defection cases that occurred after this period weren't only a result of incidents related to the individuals. They were also a result of the accumulation of rejections and reaching the conviction that quitting the organization is better than remaining within its ranks.

Along with the ideological reasons that led to the defection of some AQAP leaders, the organization admits that there are psychological reasons behind the disagreements among its elements that often develop into defections or armed clashes.

For example, former AQAP Deputy Saeed Al-Shihri, complained that "the clashes within the organization are a psychological matter not an ideological one, and that if it isn't treated, it will accumulate and become uncontrollable". This, according to him, "will become the main source of concern of a member, distracting him away from jihad".¹⁷

¹⁷ An AQAP Recording Reveals Disputes between two Leaders in the Organization (aawsat.com)

Collective Defections

The ISIS crisis

Although the ISIS' Islamic caliphate declaration in 2014 didn't cause an immediate crisis for the AQAP, the latter found itself subsequently obliged to adopt a stance toward it. This was especially related to the growing disagreements between ISIS and the Al-Qaeda's general leadership. The initial problem that the AQAP faced was the enthusiasm among many of its members and leaders to join the ISIS.

It is known that the AQAP is closer to ISIS than its mother organization. Therefore, many had expected that it would be the first branch of the Al-Qaeda to endorse the caliphate declaration. What enhanced such conviction is the stance of the AQAP toward the disputes between ISIS and the Nusra Front (a previous branch of Al-Qaeda) in Syria. The Nusra Front gave ISIS an ultimatum to leave Aleppo and threatened to use force against it if they didn't move out. The AQAP issued a statement titled 'Messages to the Jihadi factions in the Levant', in which it criticized the threat of using force. This statement was considered as siding with the ISIS.¹⁸ Likewise, when the Nusra Front fought elements affiliated with the ISIS, describing them as being "kharijites" (separatist faction), the AQAP issued a statement that literally said, "They are our brothers, not kharijites".¹⁹

Furthermore, some AQAP leaders publicly endorsed the ISIS and its caliphate declaration, including the prominent advocacy leader Mamoun Hatem who made an audio speech titled 'The Yemeni endorsement of the Islamic State'.²⁰

Hatem gathered around him many members affiliated with ISIS without any objection from the AQAP leadership. Due to his awareness about the deep relationship between the two organizations, Hatem thought that pledging allegiance to ISIS was inevitable and behaved according to this conviction. As a result, ISIS contacted Hatem and appointed him as responsible for the clans in Al-Saddah, Al-Nadira, and other areas in Ibb

¹⁸ Will the Star of the AQAP Fade Awayal-akhbar.com)

¹⁹ibid

²⁰ Sheikh Manoun Hatem: The Yemeni Endorsement of the Islamic State

governorate.²¹ However, what happened after that wasn't expected and paved the way for the first collective defection. As a result, the AQAP suddenly announced that the caliphate declaration is illegitimate and that there is no way to pledge allegiance to ISIS. Most branches of the Al-Qaeda, except for AQAP, announced they were rejecting pledging allegiance to the ISIS in line with the stance adopted by the general leadership.²² In the case of AQAP, its sudden decision of rejection of the caliphate declaration could likely lead to big internal divisions. Therefore, it was keen to pave the way for accepting the rejection through internal courses by some of its leaders. They focused on the importance of taking jihadi pioneers as role models and respecting them along with other matters. According to exclusive sources, these courses were among the reasons behind the killing of former AQAP leader Nasir Al-Wuhayshi in a US drone strike in June 2015, after he abandoned part of his security apparatus to participate in the courses that were followed by declarations of the rejection of the ISIS caliphate.²³

Although these courses didn't prevent defections, they blocked the occurrence of big defections that reflected the previous deep relationship between the two organizations. Tens of AQAP elements defected and pledged allegiance to ISIS caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. They began to move and work independently.²⁴

Regardless of what the new dissident organization had become, it can be said that the AQAP was relatively comfortable as the losses weren't huge. However, it didn't realize that there was a silent defection too, which is more dangerous than the declared one. This was reflected in the decreasing enthusiasm of most AQAP members and leaders who initially believed that pledging allegiance to ISIS was the right decision. However, they preferred staying within the ranks of AQAP to avoid the ramifications of defection. This factor was amplified among them when the disagreements developed into armed confrontations between the two organizations in Al-Bayda (central Yemen) between 2017-2020. Many

²¹ Exclusive Sources spoke to "South24 Center"

²² Al-Zawahiri: ISIS is illegitimate and Al-Baghdadi is not worthy of the caliphate (france24.com)

²³ Exclusive Sources spoke to "South24 Center"

²⁴ Islamic State – Yemen Province([Wikipedia](#))

believed that the AQAP had reversed its previous stance toward ISIS without logical justifications. Ironically, the AQAP, which denounced the Nusra Front's description of ISIS elements as "kharijites", fought them under the same pretext. It sought to mobilize the Bayada's tribes to fight ISIS by using this pretext.²⁵

This contradiction between the AQAP's previous and subsequent stance toward the ISIS, including the caliphate declaration, the ideological classification and confronting it with weapons, has created mistrust within the AQAP. The latter tried to take advantage of the developments to add ideological weight to the dispute. For example, former AQAP leader Khaled Batarfi made use of a speech by ISIS Spokesperson, Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani, titled "Even if the disbelievers hate it" to accuse ISIS of excommunicating Muslims "to avoid presenting the stances of AQAP due to being contradictory". Batarfi said that "the Baghdadi group" revealed their inner ideologies. He meant that the AQAP's new stance was a result of facts revealed about the opponent and didn't contradict its previous position. The AQAP found a pretext to fight the ISIS. However, it was the same justification for which it fought the 'Nusra Front'.²⁶

Despite adding an ideological character to the new conflict, this hasn't achieved what was actually sought by AQAP. The internal situation after rejecting pledging allegiance to ISIS has been completely different from before. Exclusive sources told 'South24 Center' that many AQAP leaders and elements were reluctant to fight ISIS in Al-Bayda as the pretext given for doing so failed to convince them. The sources described this reluctance as being similar to "silent defections" as many retired from the organization and didn't participate in any of its activities without leaving it to avoid splits.

The sources indicated that the widening of the doubters circle and its subsequent practical measures were among reasons behind the defection of prominent leader Abu Omar Al-Nahdi along with a group of AQAP members, including lower rung leaders.

²⁵ Violent clashes between ISIS and the AQAP in Al-Bayda (anfarabic.com)

²⁶ After the Collapse of ISIS..the Qaeda Is facing the Unknown(al-akhbar.com)

During that period, the AQAP adopted a police mentality in dealing with its members. This pushed many of them, some of whom are Saudis, to step away.²⁷

Other Ramifications

Defecting in favor of ISIS hasn't been the most negative impact of the AQAP's rejection of the caliphate declaration. The AQAP was also hit by what can be considered a strategic loss. It is known that the establishment of the Islamic caliphate is the reason behind the existence of the Al-Qaeda or its ultimate goal. However, it fought against this ideal when the ISIS moved it from theory to reality, according to AQAP members. They didn't directly announce this but they indirectly expressed this in several ways, such as avoiding fighting the ISIS or refraining from involvement in the AQAP's activities in general. Besides, the AQAP found itself obliged to behave in a manner consistent with its rejection of the caliphate declaration under the pretext of lack of empowerment. For this reason, it omitted from its dictionary the idea of controlling land and declaring Islamic provinces. For example, when the AQAP controlled the cities of Al-Mukalla and Al-Shihr in the Southern governorate of Hadramout in 2015, it didn't declare them an Islamic province. Instead, it established a community council of the Hadramis to manage the governorate or to hide its control over it".²⁸ Later, the AQAP confined itself to what it called "the partial downfall" of areas, in effect meaning the temporary control of cities to achieve financial and military goals and withdrawing from them later.

This is despite the fact that the AQAP previously controlled Abyan and Shabwa governorates in 2011 and 2012 and declared them two Islamic provinces in which it applied sharia rules according to its own understanding. This wasn't a mere security management and the

²⁷ Exclusive Sources spoke to "South24 Center"

²⁸The AQAP in Hadramout handed over Al-Mukalla's security to the Community Council(alaraby.co.uk)

Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in areas suffering from a security vacuum.

All of this created an internal silent split that has largely affected the AQAP's operational activities and cohesion, as well as the spirit and enthusiasm of its members. Amid this backdrop, the AQAP carried out very few "suicide" operations after 2016 although they used to occur monthly and sometimes weekly earlier. The suicide operations are considered the top level of expressing enthusiasm for the idea and the willingness to sacrifice for it. Before disagreement crept among its ranks, the AQAP's members were characterized by absolute faith in the idea and willingness to sacrifice for it.

The Defection of Abu Omar Al-Nahdi group

As mentioned before, the defection of the 'Abu Omar Al-Nahdi' group along with some of the AQAP elements was one of the major impacts of the AQAP disagreement with the ISIS over the "caliphate declaration". This isn't related to the belief of Al-Nahdi and other dissidents in what was declared by ISIS. It is related to the measures taken by the AQAP after refusing to pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. The AQAP accused Al-Nahdi of trying to defect and join the 'Baghdadi group' in Al-Bayda during the confrontations between the two parties.

One day, Al-Nahdi attempted to get off the roof of a house, carrying a 'BKC' machinegun to mend it after it was damaged during the confrontations. He was arrested and imprisoned and released later. He left the AQAP along with some other elements.²⁹ It seems that the AQAP's doubts weren't behind this move. This was a result of a previous dispute with Al-Nahdi that put him and his behavior under the microscope. This means that the AQAP dealt with those who weren't convinced by its stance toward the caliphate declaration as being dissidents in favor of ISIS.³⁰

²⁹Sources close to the organizations spoke to "South24 Center"

³⁰ Al-Qaeda's Decline in Yemen: An Abandonment of Ideology Amid a Crisis of Leadership(sanaa.center.org)

Although the disagreement with Al-Nahdi was reported to the then Leader of the Al-Qaeda Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the response was in favor of the AQAP. The latter presented the dispute in a way that condemned Al-Nahdi, according to close sources. Al-Nahdi was opposed to measures by the AQAP that hit some of its members, including torture, detainment, with others claiming that they are “spies”. The leaks about Al-Nahdi didn’t reveal closeness to the ISIS or endorsement of their moves announced in Iraq and Syria after 2013. The personal disputes between Abu Omar Al-Nahdi and Khaled Batarfi (former AQAP Leader) played a role in the defection operation. It hasn’t been known till now what happened after this defection.³¹ However, sources stressed that Al-Nahdi’s defection wouldn’t end like Mamoun Hatem’s group. This is because the two parties were keen to avoid armed clashes. Moreover, the disagreement between them was about the jihadi approach and not about ideology.

According to the sources, the difference between the defections of Al-Nahdi group and the Hatem group is that Al-Nahdi and the AQAP believe in the general leadership of the Al-Qaeda as a main reference in any dispute. This is contrary to the ISIS that attacked its general leadership and accused it of being misleading.

The AQAP’s stance toward dissidents doesn’t require fighting, except in cases of falling into apostasy and in cases requiring self-defense.

It is important to point out that the AQAP’s fight against ISIS in Al-Bayda has largely drained it. It is unlikely that it will repeat the experience with other dissidents, especially in light of its current fluctuating situation in several fields.

The Disagreements between Saad Atef and Batarfi

Along with defections, the AQAP has been hit by many disagreements among members, the most prominent of which was between Khaled Batarfi and Saad Atef Al-Awlaki (the current AQAP Emir). The appointment

³¹ Sources close to the organizations spoke to “South24 Center”

of Batarfi as AQAP Emir after the killing of Qasim al-Raymi did not meet the consensus of the leaders of the Shura Council and it was imposed by a decree from the general leadership (Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri).³² Many AQAP leaders and members favored Saad Al-Awlaki to succeed Al-Raymi. However, the instructions of the general leadership resolved the dispute in favor of Batarfi due to his personal relationship with Al-Zawahiri. What confirmed this information is the way of drafting the statement which announced Batarfi as the AQAP Leader. The statement, published by the 'Malahem Foundation' affiliated with the organization, said that the opinions of members of the Shura Council were taken into consideration as much as possible. It attributed this to "the intensified crusade against the group which is being pursued by the enemy's planes amid the spread of enemies from everywhere".³³ This was also detected in the way the general leadership blessed the appointment of Batarfi as the leader of its Yemen branch. It was largely different from the way in which it blessed the appointment of Saad Al-Awlaki as his successor.³⁴

Coming Defections

Former Jihadi sources³⁵ have predicted possible incoming defections within the AQAP. They may look more justified than the previous ones, especially after revealing AQAP's ties with Iran which hosts the general leadership of the Al-Qaeda. The sources said that some previous dissidents, such as Mohammed Al-Oufi, justified leaving the organization as a result of its "relationship with external parties", in reference to Iran.

The Iranian presence within the AQAP's activities is bigger than the organization's ability to hide it. However, it could likely resort to the Palestinian cause³⁶ as a pretext to justify its links with Iran, by presenting it as a priority and a unifying cause. Sources believe that this will likely lead

³² Exclusive Sources spoke to "South24 Center

³³ Batarfi the New AQAP Leader.. The Saudi Influence wins (al-akhbar.com)

³⁴ A specialist in the affairs of armed groups(X)

³⁵ A former jihadi leader spoke to "South24 Center"

³⁶ «O Al-Aqsa: We are Coming» - How AQAP and Iran Exploit the Palestinian Cause(South24 Center)

to new defections within the AQAP which has become weaker than ever with regard to its organizational structure.

There is a dominant belief that Ayman Al-Zawahiri³⁷, who succeeded Osama bin Laden as the leader of the Al-Qaeda, lacked the experience and vision required to lead the organization. This was clear in his way of managing several key issues, especially the disputes with ISIS and the internal disagreements within the AQAP.

As a result, Al-Zawahiri faced major difficulties in maintaining the Al-Qaeda's unity and strength under his leadership. This was unlike Osama bin Laden who had an authoritative and magnetic character which helped the group mobilize support and attract followers from a number of Islamic countries. Under Bin Laden's leadership, the organization hadn't witnessed divisions in the way it has done after his death. Therefore, the Al-Qaeda is expected to witness big changes at several levels under the leadership of its new de facto chief Ahmed Saif Al-Adel who lives in Iran.

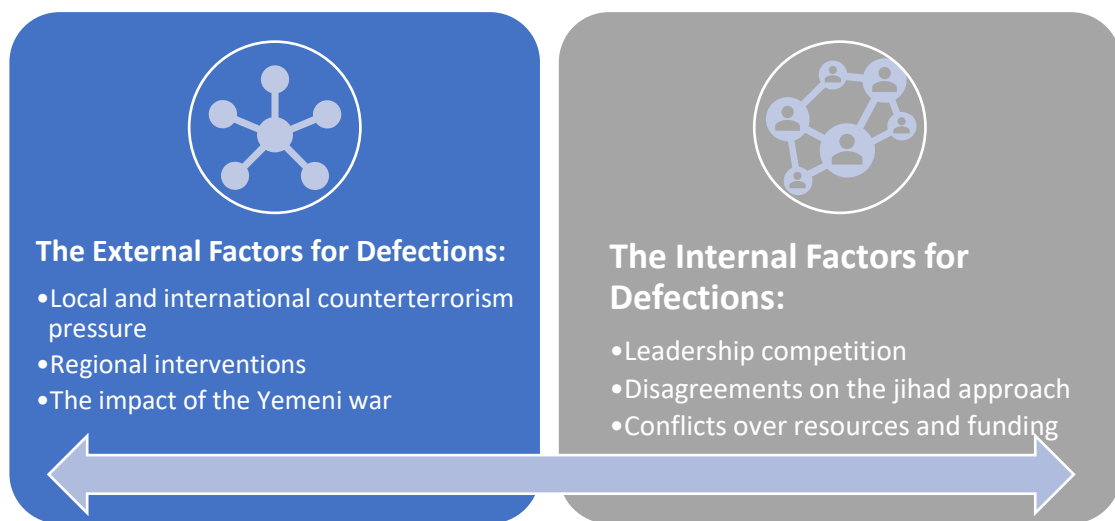
Given the special relationship between Saif Al-Adel and the AQAP as the latter led a deal with Iran to release him³⁸ in 2015, it isn't unlikely that there is direct contact and coordination between the two to manage activities and the disputed issues. What confirmed this attention is that Saif Al-Adel sent his son to Yemen.³⁹

³⁷ After the Killing of Ayman Al-Zawahiri.. What Next? The Ahrum Center for Political and Strategic Studies(ahram.org.eg)

³⁸ Leadership from Iran: How Al-Qaeda in Yemen Fell Under the Sway of Saif al-Adel(sanaa.center.org)

³⁹ Leadership from Iran: How Al-Qaeda in Yemen Fell Under the Sway of Saif al-Adel(sanaa.center.org)

The Defection Factors



Competition and Ideological differences: They have emerged as a main driver for defections as some leaders sought to detach themselves from the central leadership or impose their own ideas.

The Yemeni civil war: The war has sparked internal conflicts among the organization's members regarding their stance toward the warring parties. This has led to new disagreements.

US military operations: US drone raids have targeted senior leaders of the organization belonging to its first, second, and third ranks. This has weakened its cohesion and the ability to control its branches.

Local Counterterrorism Operations: The Southern forces, since the establishment of their first units in 2016, backed by the UAE, have launched an unrelenting war against the AQAP's elements and bastions in several governorates in South Yemen. The ongoing operation 'Arrows of the East' in Abyan since mid-2022 has been so far the most important one in the history of Yemen against the extremist organization. This operation has weakened the AQAP's capabilities at several levels. It has also contributed to widening the rifts within the AQAP, especially after many Yemeni tribes joined the war against it.

The Future and Ramifications

The possible defections within the AQAP structure will further divide and weaken the organization and make it less capable of launching attacks, of collecting money, and recruiting members. This will also strip the AQAP of its credibility in the eyes of its followers, making it hard to maintain the support of the current members. The dissidence will likely lead to internal conflicts among the different factions of the organization. This will distract it and reduce its ability to achieve its extremist goals. These disagreements may also reduce the enthusiasm of the AQAP members. However, it's too early to determine the long-term impact of the defections witnessed by AQAP. Nonetheless, the previous defections and the likely future ones are a big challenge for the future of the organization. They may lead to important changes in the AQAP's attitude and structure. They may push it to expand the scope of its coordination and cooperation with other armed groups such as the Houthis.

The organization will unlikely be able to reunite its dissident branches amidst the ideological disputes and power conflicts. The dissident AQAP groups may continue as local armed groups, focusing on launching small operations in certain areas.

Accordingly, the organization's survival ability depends on the development of the conflict in Yemen, the path of the other extremist groups in the region, the effectiveness of international and local counterterrorism efforts, and the extent of dealing with the root factors that led to its emergence and prominence, including poverty, unemployment, and political instability.

Ibrahim Ali is the pseudonym of a researcher specializing in armed groups' affairs. He has requested anonymity for personal reasons.

Note: This is a translated version of the original text written in Arabic on May 16, 2024.

South24 Center for News and Studies

