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From Explosive Devices to Drones -

How and From Where has AQAP received Weapons?

By a specialized team at
'South24 Center'

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| Introduction

For the Al-Qaeda in Yemen (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, known as AQAP) or any other country, possessing weapons is governed by its security position. The organization has engaged in unconventional wars against its rivals using the latest weapons. During the time it controlled territory in Yemen, the type of weapons used by the outfit changed according to the nature of the war, and its transformation into a mix of conventional and flash operations. This was seen during AQAP's control over the two Southern governorates of Abyan and Shabwa in 2011 and 2012. During that period, AQAP used all types of cannons in addition to tanks and some weapons seized from military camps affiliated with the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

In the wake of the escalation¹ of AQAP's attacks in South Yemen during the first half of 2023, this paper details the weapons used by the terror organization since its establishment in Yemen, and how it came to possess dangerous arms such as drones. The paper also examines the sources of these weapons, including local groups or other possible parties.

| Explosive devices and light weapons

Since the establishment of AQAP in 2009 or prior to that, the organization has used explosive devices, with the necessary improvisations. AQAP's sources said that preparing explosive devices doesn't require a lot of capabilities as they are made out of relatively cheap materials available in the local market.

Moreover, AQAP's use of suicide explosive belts has declined since 2015 as this weapon requires members willing to commit suicide. AQAP's members often wear these belts and detonate them to avoid being arrested. This weapon has also witnessed improvisations. For example, according to sources close to AQAP², more than 13,000 shrapnels were implanted into the two sides of the explosive belt worn by the perpetrator of the May 2012 Sabeen Square³ suicide bombing in Sanaa against the Central Security Forces during the rehearsal of a military show.

¹ [6 Months of AQAP's Escalation Against the Southern Forces \(south24.net\)](https://south24.net)

² Exclusive sources talked to "South 24 Center" on condition of anonymity.

³ [Yemen: "Dozens killed" in a suicide attack in Sanaa, BBC, May 21, 2012](https://www.bbc.com/news/yemen-20120521)

The bombing killed nearly 100 soldiers. The AQAP also succeeded in preparing explosive belts or devices that could escape detection in the airports. They put this to use during their attempt to assassinate Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in his Jeddah palace on August 27, 2009,⁴ as well as the attempt to detonate a bomb on board an airline by Nigerian national, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, also known as the “underwear bomber”, on December 25, 2009. Prince Mohammed’s would-be assassin -- identified as Abdullah Hassan al Asiri -- was able to conceal plastic explosive inside his underwear. While al-Asiri died in the explosion, the Saudi prince escaped with slight injuries as he was standing a few feet away from the terrorist.

Likewise, in Abdulmutallab’s case, he hid the plastic explosives, said to be PETN and TATP, inside his underwear, and dodged the screening devices. However, when he tried to set off the explosive device on board Northwest Airlines’ Flight 253 as the plane was on descent into Detroit Metropolitan Airport, he set



Photo1, The engineering teams of the Southern forces dismantled some mine networks and explosive devices in Wadi Omran and Janan Mountains in Mudiya District in Abyan, August 2023, AIC

off a fire but it didn’t explode. Passengers and flight attendants tackled him and extinguished the fire. The brain behind these explosive devices was AQAP’s chief bomb-maker, Saudi militant Ibrahim Tali al-Asiri. He was killed in a US drone attack in 2017.⁵ It can’t be confirmed whether al-Asiri had transferred his expertise in making explosives that evaded airport security checks to other AQAP members or not, or whether these others are still alive.

Machine guns were used by AQAP to carry out raids and ambushes. However, for their assault operations in later years, particularly since 2012, the outfit began to use a different weapon: the car bomb. This is used in suicide missions to carry out attacks that end with detonating the cars against certain targets or to facilitate breaking into a fortified site or camp. The organization used the car bombs to raid military areas in Aden

⁴ [An attempt to assassinate Nayef Bin Abdulaziz-Wikipedia\(wikipedia.org\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attempt_to_assassinate_Nayef_Bin_Abdulaziz)

⁵ [The US confirms the death of AQAP’s bomb-maker Asiri\(\(aljazeera.net\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2017/10/12/us-confirms-death-of-aqap-bomb-maker-asiri)

and Hadramout and to break into the Yemeni Ministry of Defense's building in the capital city of Sanaa⁶ in 2013, besides in attacks on other camps in Shabwa, Abyan, Lahj, Al-Bayda, and other cities over the past years. The use of car bombs has declined since 2015 as it requires a suicider.



Photo 2: The engineering teams of the Southern forces dismantled some mine networks and explosive devices in Wadi Omran and Janan Mountains in Mudiya District in Abyan, August 2023, AIC.

During their operations between 2009-2011, AQAP used other weapons such as mortars and B-10⁷ recoilless rifles (a Soviet-origin rocket launcher). However, the lack of capabilities limited their use of these weapons. According to sources⁸ close to AQAP, the organization in 2010 had one B-10 recoilless

rifle and had moved it from one area to another according to the needs of its operations. However, this changed drastically since 2011. Till that year, AQAP had one artillery expert called Ammar Abadah Nasser al-Waeli. Although he was killed in June 2011⁹ during an airstrike in Zinjibar in Abyan¹⁰, he had transferred his expertise to others. This coincided with an important time for the organization that seized large quantities of this weapon and others after taking control of Abyan and parts of Shabwa during the massive protests against the Saleh regime. Exclusive sources confirmed to 'South24 Center' that AQAP borrowed the B-10 recoilless rifle before 2011 from some tribal leaders in Marib (while declining to give out their names) who sympathized with the organization. However, it is important to note that many of Marib's tribal leaders possess heavy weapons, including long-range cannons. Wadi Obeida in Marib is considered a big arms market as it is out of the central government's control.

⁶ [AQAP claims the responsibility for the attack against the Yemeni Ministry of Defense in Sanaa\(france24.com\)](http://AQAP%20claims%20the%20responsibility%20for%20the%20attack%20against%20the%20Yemeni%20Ministry%20of%20Defense%20in%20Sanaa%28france24.com%29)

⁷ [B-10 | Weaponsystems.net](http://B-10%20|%20Weaponsystems.net)

⁸ Exclusive sources who spoke with "South 24 Center"

⁹ [Ammar Abadah Nasser al-Waeli-Wikipedia\(ewikiar.top\)](http://Ammar%20Abadah%20Nasser%20al-Waeli-Wikipedia%28ewikiar.top%29)

¹⁰ [AQAP confirms deaths of 2 commanders in US airstrike | FDD's Long War Journal](http://AQAP%20confirms%20deaths%20of%202%20commanders%20in%20US%20airstrike%20|%20FDD's%20Long%20War%20Journal)



Photo 3: Wadi Obeida in the Northern governorate of Marib (South24 Center, by Google Maps)

Wadi Obeida, which serves as a historical bastion of AQAP's members, is under the influence of sheikhs and figures affiliated with the Yemeni Islah Party (The Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen). Over the past years, Wadi Obeida has witnessed a massive number of American drone operations against AQAP leaders, the latest of which was carried out in January 2023.¹¹ No one knows whether AQAP's weapon-borrowing operations are still in place or not. However, what is certain is that some AQAP elements are still based in a few parts of Wadi Obeida. Furthermore, the latter area has sometimes witnessed violent tribal clashes in which tanks have been used.¹²

¹¹ [Yemen: An airstrike in the north east of the country killed 3 AQAP'S elements-I24NEWS](#)

¹² [Marib's mediation ends a tribal dispute that used bombs and tanks \(Independent Arabia\)](#)



Photo 4: AQAP's militants seized a machine gun (PKM) in Abyan, 2012 (DPA)

| Tanks and rocket launchers

After establishing its control over Abyan and parts of Shabwa in 2011 and 2012 as well as storming¹³ some of the state's military camps and being handed over others, the AQAP acquired heavy weapons like tanks and rocket launchers for the first time.

In May 2011, the organization exploited the Saleh regime's focus on the huge anti-government protests in the main cities such as Sanaa, Taiz, and Aden and wrested control over the main areas of Abyan. It also took advantage of the former regime's investment in the terrorism file¹⁴. AQAP seized all the regime's arms in Abyan besides the weapons belonging to the 25th Mechanized Brigade, which remained steadfast till driving the organization out¹⁵ of Zinjibar in 2012. At that time, the US carried out an

¹³ [Terrorismus im Jemen: Al-Qaida erobert Waffen und Panzer - DER SPIEGEL](#)

¹⁴ [Yemen: Fierce battles against AQAP and Al-Ahmar accuses the regime of colluding with terrorists groups\(BBC News Arabic\)](#)

¹⁵ [The Yemeni army held full control over Zinjibar and Jaar after driving AQAP out.\(france24.com\)](#)

escalating campaign of drone strikes over these governorates and destroyed some of the outfit's weapons and heavy equipment. As a result, the AQAP tried to camouflage its weapons while using them or hid them under dense foliage.



Photo 5: A tank belonging to the Yemeni army seized by AQAP in Abyan in 2011 (Photo circulated by the group)

In order to maintain control of its areas, AQAP needed to engage in conventional wars with the advancing government forces in Aden and Lahj by using tanks. Although the use of tanks was new to the organization, dozens of captive soldiers were forced to drive them and to teach the AQAP's members how to use them. Later, the AQAP released the soldiers after summoning their relatives to Zinjibar. According to sources with close ties to the organization, the soldiers were released¹⁶ in return for their services. There are other accounts that look at the use of captive soldiers as a method to help the AQAP deal with the new heavy weaponry. However, there is no conclusive evidence to confirm this.

¹⁶ [Al-Qaeda in Yemen releases 73 soldiers in Abyan Governorate, BBC, April 29, 2012](#)

In the following table, 'South24 Center' has published a list of the most prominent weapons used by AQAP in Abyan in 2011 and 2012:

No.	Weapon	Type
1	Tanks	T34, T54, T55
2	Long-range heavy artillery	S-2, 130mm
3	Large amounts of artillery and tank shells	
4	Rocket launchers	BM- 21
5	Armored vehicles carrying machine guns	
6	Troop-transportation trucks	BTR-60
7	Machine guns of different types such as DShK	12.2 mm
8	Anti-aircraft guns	23 mm
9	Big amounts of mortar shells	L-16
10	Large amounts of RPG-7	RPG-7
11	Kalashnikov weapons	AK 47

Table 1: The most prominent weapons used by AQAP in Abyan in 2011 and 2012 (South24 Center)



Photo 6: AQAP members on a Yemni army vehicle, carrying a modified PKM machine gun, in Azzan, Shabwa, in 2012 (AQAP's media)



Photo 7: A four-wheel-drive vehicle in Azzan, Shabwa, carrying a modified PKM machine gun, 2012



Photo 8: Former AQAP leader Jalal Belaidi stands in front of a tank that the organization seized from a military camp in Khanfar, Abyan in 2012 (pic sourced from an AQAP film)



Photo 9: An anti-aircraft weapon seized by AQAP from a military camp in Abyan in 2011 (AQAP media)

It is worth mentioning that the aforementioned weapons were part of the arms seized by AQAP during their raids of Abyan and Shabwa in 2011 and 2012. The outfit also used other weapons about which 'South24 Center' was unable to obtain information.¹⁷

In 2011, before AQAP gained full control over Khanfar in Abyan, the organization had seized massive amounts of weapons and munitions from a weapons factory in Batige in the district after the military forces suddenly abandoned it on March 26 that year. Thus, AQAP was able to control the weapons inside which helped it tighten its grip on the district. Two days later, an ammunitions warehouse exploded within the factory itself, killing 150 people and left dozens injured. Some analysts believe that the sequence of events reveal some kind of implicit support rendered

¹⁷ Exclusive tribal sources to "South 24 Center"

to AQAP by the Saleh regime, which at the time had needed to stir up terrorism fears to gain Western support to remain in power.¹⁸

AQAP realized that it had to relinquish its control over Abyan's cities following the power transfer from former President Saleh to his successor Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi in February 2012. The US pressed for accelerating the achievement of the political solution in Sanaa to kick off the Abyan liberation battle. Therefore, according to exclusive sources, AQAP moved massive amounts of weapons and munitions to its fortified mountainous bastions in Abyan governorate. This included heavy weapons with an aim to sell them later. The sources confirmed that the organization sold some of the heavy weapons and also exchanged heavy weapons in return for the release of some AQAP prisoners, without revealing more details.

During 2013 and 2014, AQAP returned to its unconventional operations after being driven out of the areas under its control in Abyan and Shabwa. The organization made a more aggressive comeback. It benefited from the knowledge it had gained during its grip on the two governorates. Thus, it launched a ferocious phase of operations using car bombs carrying tons of explosives. The AQAP also made use of the ISIS' expertise in developing this kind of explosives. The cars would carry massive amounts of explosive materials and would often be used to storm fortified sites or camps. This was an offensive tactic that began with detonating the car bomb and ended with raiding the target. The car bombs were used with remarkable effect during its operations targeting some military areas in Aden, Hadramout, and Sanaa as well as camps in Abyan, Shabwa, and others. However, the use of this mode of attack has declined since 2015, for reasons related to the organization's conditions and operational policy in the wake of the Saudi-led military operations in Yemen. It is important to note that AQAP imitated the ISIS in its assaults using car bombs. ISIS explained some of its operational tactics as part of video releases under the name 'The Demolition of Fences' (Hadm Al-Aswar)¹⁹

¹⁸ [More than 100 persons were killed by an explosion in the Yemeni governorate of Abyan/DW](#)

¹⁹ [Qaeda in Iraq claims responsibility for the attack on Abu Ghraib prison and Al-Hout Al-Taji \(france24.com\)](#).

| The Coalition's weapons

After the forces affiliated with the Houthis and former President Saleh invaded South Yemen in 2015, a spontaneous popular resistance was formed in Aden and other Southern cities. The Saudi-led Coalition then lacked official Yemeni ground forces due to the collapse of the military institution in Sanaa whose remnants joined the Houthis.

AQAP exploited the security chaos with the aim of seizing some of the weapons delivered to the parties. The military situation then was not prepared to prevent AQAP from making such gains.²⁰ This was achieved later when the Southern resistance and the security forces backed by the UAE expelled the forces that came from Sanaa as well as the AQAP's elements from Aden and the main cities in Lahj²¹, Abyan and Mukalla on the coast of Hadramout. It is worth mentioning that AQAP's defeat in Aden and Mukalla coincided with the defeats suffered by the Houthi militia and Saleh's forces there.²²

According to our sources,²³ AQAP in Aden, led by a leader nicknamed 'Abu Salem', obtained large amounts of various munitions and weapons, but declined to identify the types and numbers. A source, who fought the Houthis within the ranks of the Southern resistance in Al-Mansora District, told 'South24 Center' that "foreign security agencies likely provided AQAP with qualitative weapons while these were beyond the reach of the resistance fighters themselves". This was noted through the security grip imposed by AQAP for several weeks on many areas in Aden at the time.

In 2019 and 2020, AQAP participated²⁴ on the side of forces that were mostly affiliated with the Islah Party, in Abyan against the Southern forces. Shabwa served as a safe haven for AQAP after it left Al-Bayda in 2021.

²⁰ [Islamist Militants Emerge in Aden as It Descends into Chaos\(reuters.com\)](#)

²¹ [Planes affiliated with the Arab Coalition bomb AQAP's gatherings in Aden\(akhbarelyom.com\)](#)

²² [Yemen: AQAP's militants in Mukalla and the Houthis withdraw from the center of Aden-BBC News Arabic](#)

²³ Exclusive sources spoke to "South 24 Center"

²⁴ [Saudi «Counterterrorism» Efforts in Yemen: Fatal Loopholes](#)

According to exclusive tribal sources, AQAP accessed part of the support that reached these forces, including weapons, munitions, and money. The sources indicated that the organization received the support as a main part of the military operations against the Southern forces.

The areas under the control of the Islah Party weren't only a safe haven for the AQAP but also served as an armament source. During its participation in the battles, AQAP obtained large amounts of medium and light weapons and munitions, according to the same sources.

Since 2015, AQAP has been able to receive weapons, support, and safe havens, directly and indirectly, from known parties without any notable efforts. The outfit has used these weapons in its current battles against the Southern forces.

In 2020, Yemeni reports said that the 8th Thunderbolt Brigade, affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), arrested some persons while smuggling spare parts as "scrub" from a military camp to areas located in north Abyan and Al-Bayda.²⁵ The detained persons admitted during the investigations that commanders in the forces affiliated with former President Hadi sold seven tanks to AQAP elements. Later, the leader of the 8th Thunderbolt Brigade survived an assassination attack carried out by AQAP.²⁶

²⁵ [Investigations confirm that Hadi provided AQAP with 7 tanks from Abyan\(alkhabaralyemeni.net\)](http://alkhabaralyemeni.net)

²⁶ [The Leader of the 8th Thunderbolt Brigade survived a terrorist explosion in Wadi Oemran-Youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

| Drones

In 2022 and 2023, AQAP has been faced with an unprecedented shelter crisis. This came after it was expelled from its strategic bastions in Abyan and Shabwa following the major ongoing anti-terror military operation 'Arrows of the East'²⁷ carried out by the Southern forces affiliated with STC. Prior to that, areas under the control of the Islah Party, especially in Shabwa, acted as safe havens²⁸ for AQAP.

With tightening of the noose on the remaining bastions of AQAP, the organization has suddenly taken to launching drone attacks²⁹ on military targets and sites affiliated with the 'Shabwa Defense Forces' (SDF, a branch of the Southern forces). It was the first time that AQAP used this particular type of weapon, at least in South Yemen's governorates. Its ability to use drones, a new kind of weapon, is unusual, and confirms that AQAP received intensified training from other parties that have expertise in using this weapon. It seems that drones used by AQAP carried out monitoring, and documenting operations besides bombing attacks.

Apparently, these drones were not primitive as suggested by the media. The outfit used explosive-laden drones to attack gatherings, locations, and individual moving targets. Although AQAP is using this type of weapon for the first time, it can be said that its attacks have been successful and accurate.



Photo 10: The projectile dropped by an AQAP drone in its first attack on the Shabwa Defense Forces in Al-Masaniah, May 12, 2023 (South24 Center)

²⁷ «Arrows of the East» Military Operation in Abyan(south24.net)

²⁸ [The Real Reasons Behind AQAP's Comeback in Shabwa](#)

²⁹ [Photos published by AQAP and reposted by British expert in the armed groups affairs Elisabeth Kendall](#)

It is true that AQAP carried out a few attacks by using drones and during a limited period of time, but its ability to access or manufacture drones, if true, constitutes an important development in its offensive operations. It isn't unlikely for the organization to repeat these attacks in Abyan and Shabwa or in other governorates and cities. It may expand its use at the regional level too.

On May 19³⁰, 2023, AQAP claimed responsibility for an attack that had targeted the Shabwa Defense Forces in Al-Masaniah, in Shabwa, using a drone on the 12th of May.³¹ It was the first time that the organization used this kind of weapon.

Later, local media sources reported that SDF commander Major Ahmed Al-Sulaimani was injured in a drone attack on a military site in Al-Said District, in the southwest of Shabwa. AQAP claimed responsibility for the operation in a video statement, circulated by media platforms.^{32,33}

'South24 Center' has documented eight drone attacks so far by the AQAP in Yemen in 2023. All of them targeted the SDF in Al-Masaniah in Al-Said District. According to our monitoring team, the attacks were carried out on May 12, May 23, June 12, June 14, June 22, June 26, July 3, and July 5, and were successful.



Photo 11: May 19, 2023: A photo published by AQAP's media (Ansar Al-Sharia) in which they claimed responsibility for the May 12 drone attack against SDF in Al-Masaniah, Shabwa.

³⁰ AQAP claims responsibility for a drone attack that targeted Shabwa Defense Force (South24 Center)

³¹ A drone targeted Shabwa Defense Forces in Al-Masaniah, May 12, 2023 (South 24 Center)

³² AQAP Inserts Drones in Its War Against the Southern Forces..How did it Obtain Them?-alyoum8.net

³³ 3 Attacks by AQAP in Shabwa Within Hours (south24.net)



Photo 12: June 5, 2023, AQAP claims responsibility for a drone attack that dropped two projectiles on Al-Qanaa affiliated with the SDF in Al-Masanih, Shabwa.

| What are the Sources of AQAP's drones?

This is undoubtedly the most important question regarding AQAP's possession of drones and its expertise in using them. There are several possibilities as shown below:



Photo 13: One possibility is that AQAP used photo-capturing drones and added some fixtures so that these could carry a limited amount of explosives. This technique was used in Iraq by ISIS (Picture Source FUTURE ZONE)

1. Local manufacturing

AQAP is suffering from lack of geographical bastions and poor financial conditions. It has no permanent stronghold apart from some heights in the mountainous range between Abyan, Al-Bayda, and Shabwa along with Wadi Obeida in Marib and the desert areas in Wadi Hadramout. It has repeatedly resorted to abductions for huge ransoms to cover its financial deficit.³⁴ The organization lacks infrastructure and its supply chains have been hit due to the spread of the Southern forces in Abyan and Shabwa, especially after the departure of the local authorities affiliated with the Islah Party there. However, manufacturing drones is a possible option for the AQAP, though a weak one.

It is important to note that AQAP isn't the first jihadist entity that uses drones. In 2013 and 2014, ISIS manufactured³⁵ and used such weapons in Iraq and Syria. Videos, released by ISIS, revealed drone operations against individuals and vehicles affiliated with Iraqi militias. During its control over vast areas in Syria and Iraq, ISIS attracted members from different countries in addition to some remnants of the Baath Party who opposed the sectarian government in Iraq. Some of them had extraordinary military and technological expertise. The ISIS' control period served as an opportunity for new innovations. This is similar to the period between 2011-2012 when AQAP held sway over Abyan and Shabwa. The difference is that AQAP lacks such experienced leaders in these sectors. Moreover, the quality of the used drones shows that it is beyond AQAP's ability to manufacture or develop such weapons.

It is also to be noted that the Houthi's locally manufactured drones are not very different from those used by AQAP in Shabwa. This also

³⁴ [Kidnapping Foreigners in Yemen: Funding Source for Terrorist Groups with International Mediation\(South24 Center\)](#)

³⁵ [ISIS attempted to manufacture drones with jet engines-BBC news Arabic](#)

means that manufacturing drones locally by the AQAP, even, if possible, remains a weak possibility.



Photo 14: Drones presented at an unknown exhibition in North Yemen- published by the Houthi media office (Reuters)

2. Houthi drones

The Iranian-backed Houthis have benefited from AQAP's ongoing activities in South Yemen. The terror organization's operations have provided the Houthis with an opportunity to offer a reasonable denial of their own involvement in attacks. This also serves as a pretext for the Houthi militias to resume their military operations in the region in the name of counterterrorism. Thus, analysts don't rule out that AQAP has received the drone technology from the Houthis. Furthermore, AQAP's use of drones in which the Houthis have excelled in the past

years indicates that the organization has a strategic partnership with the Iran-backed militia in its activities against the Southern forces.³⁶

Reports indicate that the drones used in the Shabwa attack were provided to AQAP by the Houthis. The drones were obtained by Abu Osama Al-Dayani, a Yemeni jihadist leader who has close ties with AQAP top leader Khaled Batarfi and maintains strong links with the Houthis, according to press reports.³⁷

On October 7, a cell affiliated with AQAP revealed the involvement of the Houthi militia in financing the extremist organization's activities against Southern forces.³⁸ Two AQAP members arrested by the SDF said that the outfit obtained drones and explosive devices from the neighboring Marib governorate which is under the control of the Islah Party and the Houthis. The weapons coming from Marib included a shipment of Katyusha rockets to target the strategically important 'Balhaf' gas facility in Shabwa. One detained member added that "IED detonators were purchased by AQAP affiliates in Shabwa from a Houthi member".³⁹

The drone attacks indicate that AQAP has intensified its retaliatory efforts against the 'Arrows of the East' operation launched by STC. These attacks are part of AQAP's operation known as 'Arrows of Righteousness' (Siham Al-Haq), announced in September 2022.

Additionally, AQAP's strategic shift from targeting the Houthis⁴⁰ to attacking the STC is consistent with the approach adopted by Al-Qaeda's central organization. Saif al-Adel, who has become the head of Al-Qaeda following the July 2022 death of Ayman al-Zawahiri and

³⁶ [Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift | Lawfare \(lawfaremedia.org\)](https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-s-drone-attacks-indicate-a-strategic-shift)

³⁷ [Who Pushed Batarfi to Criticize Iran in his Latest Appearance?\(akhbaralaan.net\)](https://www.akhbaralaan.net/who-pushed-batarfi-to-criticize-iran-in-his-latest-appearance/)

³⁸ [AQAP cell reveals involvement of Houthis in financing its activities](#)

³⁹ [Confessions by An AQAP i cell published by SDF on X](#)

⁴⁰ [Why Did AQAP Halt Their Attacks in Houthi-controlled Areas?](#)

lives in Iran, has called for putting more focus on the Western interest, the Coalition, and the anti-Houthi forces.⁴¹

Recently, information was circulated about Iran's management of Al-Qaeda, especially its Yemeni branch, through Saif al-Adel. Reports said that AQAP has received Iranian support through Saif al-Adel.⁴²

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence to confirm that Iran has directly funded AQAP, Tehran uses this as an international threat related to territorial waters in which naval vessels of several Western countries operate.

3. Weapon companions

Following eviction of the forces affiliated with Islah Party out of Abyan and Shabwa and the launching of security and military operations against AQAP's remnants in the two governorates in 2021 as well as the dissatisfaction of external parties towards these developments, the defeated forces may be forced to effectively support AQAP in an attempt to compensate for their losses. This could be an extension to their previous support but with the inclusion of a weapon that suits the needs of AQAP. This may not only be related to the losses but has also something to do with the feelings of unhappiness over the fact that some rival parties (such as the Southern forces) have notched up achievements in counterterrorism efforts.

What enhances this hypothesis or raises doubts regarding the Islah Party's involvement is what was published by the media months ago about AQAP's use of drones. Information indicates that militants affiliated with AQAP seized some drones from a truck coming from

⁴¹ [Leadership from Iran: How Al-Qaeda in Yemen Fell Under the Sway of Saif al-Adel - Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies \(sanaacenter.org\)](#)

⁴² [Webinar: Experts Call for Strengthening Counter-Terrorism Efforts in South Yemen](#)

Marib on its way to Wadi Hadramout in the Abar Road. The militants moved these weapons to their stronghold in Wadi Obeida in Marib. ⁴³

The three religious-based groups, the Houthis, AQAP, and the Islah Party, have a common hostility against the Southern forces backed by the UAE in South Yemen. Thus, any secret strategic cooperation among these parties is possible to get rid of their 'separatist' opponents who seek to establish their own independent state there.

| International threat

The danger related to AQAP's new weapons (the drones) is that it may turn into an international threat. We should remember that the Houthis, by using drones, have been able to largely reverse the path of the battle against them following their attacks on economic and civil targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2022. They currently threaten the international navigation lines and the naval forces operating there. Moreover, the Houthis recently launched drone and missile attacks against Israel, which is engaged in an unprecedented war against the Palestinian factions in Gaza.⁴⁴

Though drones are cheap to manufacture, Saudi Arabia faced difficulty in confronting them. Despite the Houthis' modest beginning in the use of drones, the group has constantly managed to develop them. The most sophisticated Houthi drone is 'Samad-3' that can carry 18 kg of explosives. Its maximum range is 1,500 km while its top speed is 250 km/h. ⁴⁵

AQAP may tread the same path as the Houthis to develop this weapon. James Rogers, Assistant Professor in War Studies at the London School of Economics, believes that developing drones isn't a difficult task. He said: "Many drones are local copies of those manufactured in Iran. They were enhanced by available commercial drone engines, wires, control systems,

⁴³ [Serious information reveals that the Islah Party provides fighting planes and qualitative weapons to AQAP in Marib\(yemen-window.com\)](#)

⁴⁴ [Why have the Houthis Attacked Israel?\(South 24 Center\)](#)

⁴⁵ [The Houthi Drones is Low-Cost Threat against the UAE, 27/1/2022/ DW](#)

and cameras.” This enables any group to manufacture these fighting tools at a low cost.

Despite the obvious risks posed by such weapons, the international response to them has been weak, if not absent. Senior experts discuss the missing international role in supporting counterterrorism efforts in South Yemen. This was discussed during a virtual webinar organized by 'South24 Center'. Experts were critical of the current US Administration's lack of understanding of the common threat posed by Houthis, AQAP, and Iran.⁴⁶

So far, AQAP has carried out limited drone operations. However, this doesn't mean that its drone stock has run out. The organization, which is trapped in remote mountainous areas between Abyan, Shabwa, and Al-Bayda, realizes the risks involved in using drones. This would largely trigger Western concerns and may revive the war against the outfit as a priority threat in Yemen. AQAP can't withstand more pressure in light of its current conditions. Therefore, it may refrain from using drones for some time after its successive and very successful first experience.

| Recommendations

- AQAP's use of any type of drones is a dangerous development which requires constant efforts to learn more details about its sources as part of the international counterterrorism war.
- The drones are part of the different weapons acquired by AQAP, and effortlessly, from certain local or external parties over the past years. This needs serious investigation to identify their sources.
- AQAP's ability to acquire this weapon should raise the alert, regardless of its use. The acquisition is related to the organization's operational policy rather than the availability of the weapon.
- AQAP's acquirement of this kind of weapon should push the US Administration to reconsider its dwindling interest in the counterterrorism file in Yemen.
- AQAP's possession of drones requires an immediate international move so that it does not turn into a threat against international

⁴⁶ [The lack of Regional and International Role in the Counterterrorism Efforts in South Yemen-You Tube](#)

navigation in the Red Sea. The use of drones also expands the AQAP's regional and international threats.

- Counterterrorism efforts by the Southern forces affiliated with STC in South Yemen should be enhanced with logistic and intelligence support, as well as by tracking the sources of weapons and the networks involved in AQAP's selling and smuggling operations.
- Strict and deterrent legal measures should be taken against the groups that supply or help in delivering these weapons to AQAP at both local and regional levels. This includes the Houthis, the Islah Party, and the tribal figures whose involvement is proven.
- Efforts by the Yemeni coast guards should be consolidated in the Red Sea, the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the coasts of Al-Mahra that borders Oman.

From Explosive Devices to Drones – How and From Where has AQAP received Weapons?

A team specializing in armed groups and counterterrorism affairs

Supervised by:

**Ayad Qassem,
Chairman of 'South24 Center'**

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