

**Analysis Paper |
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WHY HAS INTERNATIONAL INTEREST IN THE AQAP DECLINED?



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Introduction

Prior to the Saudi-led military operation 'Decisive Storm' in Yemen in 2015, international interest in the AQAP (Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula) was quite high. Each foreign country's stance against the AQAP was in keeping with the War on Terrorism's needs. The internal parties to the Yemen conflict were quick to realize this and took advantage of the situation by leveling terrorism accusations against each other.

The international war against the AQAP was used to put down any obstacles, including the protests that finally toppled former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011 and 2012.

For example, the US refused to take a stance on the widespread protests until it was reassured about the future of its military operations against AQAP. This is not a deduction but it was confirmed by senior US officials at that time.

The US' designation of the AQAP as the "most dangerous branch" of the Al Qaida was based upon the terror group's operations carried out in 2009 and 2010 in Saudi Arabia, UK, and the United States. At that time, 'Washington Post' quoted US officials, who requested anonymity, as saying that the CIA's new assessment ¹ urged the US administration to intensify operations against the AQAP, including increase the use of drones as part of the US military attacks.

In the same report, an official familiar with the CIA's assessment, confirmed that the group was increasing its numbers and firepower. He said: "We have become more worried than ever about the AQAP's threat."

¹ Al-Riyadh Newspaper/ Yemen rejects the participation of foreign forces and takes the responsibility of counterterrorism(alriyadh.com)

Previous US interest

The AQAP, formed in January 2009 through a union of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al Qaeda, launched two of its major operations outside the Yemeni borders. The first² one, on August 27, 2009, targeted Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, who was then Assistant Minister of Interior for Security Affairs, in his Jeddah palace. The attacker was Al Qaeda operative Abdullah Talea Asiri, who sought a meeting with the minister ostensibly to turn himself in. During the meeting, Asiri detonated a bomb hidden in his underwear, killing himself and injuring the Saudi minister. The second³ operation, on December 25, 2009, targeted a plane on way to Detroit. Nigerian national Omar Al-Farouq Abdulmuttalab attempted to detonate explosives hidden in his underwear on board a Northwest Airlines flight travelling from Amsterdam to Detroit. He was subdued by passengers after he set his pants on fire. Abdulmutallab reportedly received training and explosives from the AQAP in Yemen. Following the attacks, there were growing American concerns regarding the Al Qaeda's presence in Yemen. US officials considered Al Qaeda's threat in Yemen more dangerous than of any other country, including Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Based on these concerns, the US' interest in Yemen began to increase. The US aid to the Yemeni government increased in late 2009 from \$70 to \$150 million. Although the US administration was not convinced by what the Saleh regime had achieved in its war against AQAP, there were few options available for the United States. However, these attacks served as a lever to pressure Saleh to exert more efforts in fighting the AQAP.⁴

The US State Department designated AQAP as a foreign terrorist organization in January 2010. Direct US military engagement against AQAP was carried out in secret, which the Yemeni government denied, but leaked American documents later revealed the facts.⁵

² Al-Riyadh Newspaper/ Interior Ministry reveals the details of "treachery and betrayal" (alriyadh.com)

³ Al-Qaeda claims responsibility for the attempt to bomb the Detroit plane amid warnings against new attacks against the West (DW | 24.01.2010)

⁴ US Intelligence: Yemen's commitment to fight AQAP is not clear/Reuters

⁵ Yemen denies what was published by Wikileaks (emaratayoum.com)

The AQAP's attacks in 2010 were equally dangerous. Besides the outfit's rapidly increasing military activities locally, it continued to pursue attacks on American targets through its October 2010 parcel bomb plot. The AQAP attempted to mail bombs loaded in printer cartridges via UPS and FedEx to Jewish community centers in Chicago. The bombs made their way from Yemen to the UK and Dubai before a last-minute tip from Saudi intelligence helped foil the plot. This again brought the international spotlight back on the group.⁶

The parcel bomb plot caused considerable panic in the West. Then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, addressing MPs after chairing a meeting of the government's emergency planning committee Cobra, said: "The threat from the Arabian Peninsula and from Yemen in particular has grown... It is clear we must take every possible step to work with our partners in the Arab world to cut out the terrorist cancer that lurks in the Arabian Peninsula."

Though British Chief of Staff Peter Wall said that "Yemen mustn't be allowed to become another Afghanistan", he ruled out the possibility of any military intervention in the Arab state. The main feature of the Western move was support delivered to the Yemeni government to tackle the AQAP along with more pressure on the Saleh regime.⁷

On December 24, 2010, less than two months after the parcel bomb plot, the Yemeni government announced that it will set up four new branches for the country's elite counterterrorism units in the four Yemeni governorates of Abyan, Shabwa, Marib, and Hadramout. This decision was a result of the UK's proposal.

In a statement, the Yemeni Interior Ministry said: "These counterterrorism branches in the four governorates will be set up according to the highest levels. They will undertake the same preparations as done by the Counterterrorism Unit affiliated with the Central Security forces".⁸ On the same day, US President Barack Obama's Senior Counterterrorism Advisor John Brennan urged Yemen to intensify its war against the AQAP.

⁶ Yemen is chasing the senders of the parcel amid suspicions around AQAP/[Reuters](#)

⁷ British Military Chief of Staff: Yemen shouldn't be another Afghanistan/[alquds.co.uk](#)

⁸ The Ministry of Interior establishes new branches of the Counterterrorism Unit in 4 troubled governorates - Al-Masdar Online ([almasdaronline.com](#))

The White House said that Brennan called Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh on December 23 to “emphasize the importance of taking a forceful action against AQAP in order to thwart its plans to carry out terrorist attacks in Yemen as well as in other countries, including the US Homeland”. It can be said that 90% of communications then between the US administration and the Yemeni government were related to counterterrorism.⁹

A week before the aforementioned call, Brennan told a think-tank that US-Yemen relations were strained due to Washington’s frustration over the slow pace of economic and political reforms, and Yemeni complaints about the snail pace of US security and development assistance. Brennan said that by combining military aid with development assistance the US aims to strengthen the Yemeni government’s capacity to eradicate “the terrible cancer of al-Qaeda”.

We note here that the Western interest in counterterrorism was not limited to security and military support but also included political reforms. American and British experts supervised training at the Counterterrorism Unit announced by the Yemeni Interior Ministry. However, this was limited to the capital city of Sanaa.

In early January 2011, referring to the establishment of the four new counterterrorism units, the British newspaper ‘The Times’ said that “Britain and the US are expanding their military training mission in Yemen by sending advisers to four new counter-terrorism camps.” “For the first time, British and American trainers will be deployed alongside Yemeni troops in the provinces of Marib, Shabwa, Hadramout and Abyan. These areas serve as safe havens for AQAP”.¹⁰

A source told the British newspaper: “We have been trying to get out of the training centers near Sanaa to the countryside for a while. With the new counterterrorism unit, we will be able to get out into the fields for the first time. This is vital if we want to achieve any progress against AQAP.”

⁹ The United States urges Yemen to take a firm stance against AQAP | [Reuters](#)

¹⁰ Marib Press | The Times reveals the departure of American-British forces to Marib, Shabwa, Hadramaut and Abyan (marebpress.net)

The newspaper added: “The current British military presence is described as moderate -- in the tens -- comprising special forces and regular trainers. The US has trained Yemeni counterterrorism forces since the so-called ‘War on Terror’ was launched 10 years ago. However, the number of American trainers doubled last year [2010] to about 100, following Omar Farouq Abdulmuttalab’s attempt to bring down a passenger plane over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.”

On January 13, 2011, a leaked American document said: “The special Yemeni counterterrorism units that were formed by intensified American support to target AQAP were used instead by President Saleh to crack down on Houthi rebels in North Yemen.”¹¹

It was apparent that the Western interest in combating AQAP had reached its climax during that period. Later, following massive protests against Saleh, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi took over as President in 2012. The then US Ambassador to Yemen Gerald M. Feierstein stated that “President Hadi’s cooperation with the US in this field is much better than his predecessor Saleh.”

The Yemeni Opposition had realized this matter earlier. Therefore, they intensified their meetings with the US Ambassador in Sanaa. The Head of the Parliamentary bloc of the Islah Party Abdulrahman Bafadl called on the Opposition to reassure the United States, France, and the West of their cooperation on the counterterrorism issue. He said: “We will open our airspace to the American and French planes for one or two years to hit the AQAP.”¹²

During the Hadi era, the West’s interest in taking counterterrorism measures in Yemen was associated with a comfort level with the Hadi regime in terms of the level of cooperation. In fact, the Hadi regime delivered on every aspect to the US administration. The Opposition, which looked at the limited American air raids during Saleh’s era as a violation of Yemeni sovereignty, didn’t object to hundreds of US drone attacks in the Hadi era and in fact even praised them. What is important to note is that the US administration delivered unlimited military, security, and intelligence support to the Hadi regime although the

¹¹ Analysis - American Drones... the Epicenter of a More Secret War against Al-Qaeda | [Reuters](#)

¹² An interview with Dr. Abdulrahman Bafadl - [YouTube](#)

outcome of the counterterrorism cooperation was not at the same level as the support it received, except for what was achieved by drone strikes and conventional airstrikes. Between 2013-2014, AQAP carried out a massive number of operations across different governorates.

The absence of the Saudi role

In addition to the Western involvement in the counterterrorism efforts in Yemen, Saudi Arabia too played a key role in combating AQAP. It can be said that Saudi Arabia played an important role in providing information. According to a visual publication released by Al Qaeda, the foremost of which is called “Demolishing of Espionage”,¹³ Riyadh recruited informants and planted them within the group. Those informants facilitated the American drone strikes used to target senior AQAP leaders.

In 2015, the year that witnessed the launch of the Saudi operation ‘Decisive Storm’, a large number of prominent AQAP leaders were killed. Informed sources revealed that Saudi Arabia provided crucial information about these leaders. This was in apparent exchange for the impact of the Saudi military operations against the Houthis on the counterterrorism front. However, this changed later as both Saudi and Western interest in counterterrorism declined. The United Arab Emirates’ interest in this campaign emerged as it led the operations of the Arab Coalition in Yemen along with Riyadh before the UAE withdrew in 2019.

The Southern forces and the lack of support

Since 2016, the Southern forces - which were formed after the outbreak of the war in Yemen in 2015 with Emirati military and logistic support - launched fierce battles against AQAP without receiving any significant support except what was delivered by the UAE.

Although the Southern forces achieved big victories on this side and drove the AQAP out of its most important bastions in Abyan and Shabwa, they didn’t enjoy

¹³ Al-Qaeda executed him secretly... Who is Abu Turab al-Sudani? - akhbaralaan.net

adequate support. Thanks to the security and military operations carried out by the Southern forces in 2016 and 2017 in Hadramout, Shabwa, and Abyan, they were able to storm AQAP strongholds which the regular Yemeni forces had failed to do before.

Since the launching of "Arrows of the East" operation in August 2022, these forces have engaged in ongoing battles against the AQAP in Abyan, particularly in Mudiya and Al-Mahfad districts which border Shabwa and Al-Bayda. Joint operations by security and military forces led to the arrest of prominent AQAP leaders.¹⁴ They were also able to go in pursuit of AQAP elements in the rough mountain ranges that constitute Abyan's geographical border.¹⁵

Although AQAP is currently exposed at the security level and its presence is limited to a narrow and clear geographical area, the American drones don't attack its locations and members anymore. This is unlike what they did in Al-Bayda in 2017 when the group's presence was spread across nearly three districts. At that time, the US drones launched many raids on the group.

This may not be only related to the decline of Western interest in the AQAP but also to the policies of international parties towards local security forces in South Yemen in light of the complications of the Yemen conflict.

Nonetheless, some informed sources point to a limited international presence in this regard. While logistic and intelligence support is provided, it is not adequate taking into consideration the nature of threats posed by terrorist groups in Abyan and Shabwa. American and Emirati military experts have limited presence in a military base in Hadramout. They previously played a pivotal role during the operation to liberate Sahil, Hadramout from the group's grip in 2016. They also played a role in the airstrikes that targeted senior leaders of the AQAP.¹⁶

¹⁴ The Southern Forces arrest an AQAP Member in Abyan (south24.net)

¹⁵ "Arrows of the East.." Abyan Security Chief confirms the end of the second stage of the "Siuf Hos" Campaign by clearing Al-Hankah (deraalganoob.com)

¹⁶ An informed source, who asked for anonymity, spoke to 'South24 Center'

Along with the Southern forces' security and military efforts against AQAP, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) also contributed majorly in the efforts to free UN employee Akam Sofyol Anam, who was kidnapped by AQAP in February 2022. Anam was freed from captivity in August 2023, after 18 months of captivity.¹⁷

It is undoubtedly a tough task to free anyone kidnapped by the Al Qaeda, whether through security operations or negotiations. In December 2014, a US operation to free American hostage, journalist Luke Somers, and South African teacher Pierre Korkie, led to them being killed by Al Qaeda militants in Shabwa region during a failed rescue bid. The operation was carried out by joint US and Yemeni special forces. In previous hostage cases, the hostages were released only through mediation efforts of the governments whose citizens were kidnapped by the group.

In the case of the UN employee Anam, the STC used its connections with the tribal groups and security forces in the operation to help secure his release. This essentially indicates that the STC's efforts – through supporting the military measures against the AQAP -- can yield promising results in the counterterrorism effort, apart from its political struggles to arrive at any peace initiative in the country.

The assassination of Abdullatif Al-Sayed

The West's declining interest in counterterrorism in Yemen, specifically the US', has become apparent for many Southern activists. The comment published by the US Embassy in Yemen after an AQAP explosive device targeted senior military commander, Brigadier General Abdullatif Al-Sayed, commander of the 'Security Belt' forces in Abyan province, on August 10, 2023, has provoked many questions among the people.

The US Embassy said: "We have been informed of the killing of the commander of the Security Belt Forces in Abyan governorate, Abdulatif Mohammed Hussein

¹⁷ Al-Zubaidi received UN employees who were released by AQAP in Abyan(stcaden.com)

Bafakih (Al-Sayyid) and a number of his companions this morning. As we offer our sincere condolences for this great loss, we affirm the continued support of the United States to Yemen in the fight against terrorism and its eradication".¹⁸

The tweet stirred a wave of questions about the dwindling US interest in combating the AQAP and not providing support to the Southern forces which are engaged in fierce battles against the group in Abyan. The comments ranged from queries, to voicing amazement, and also demands for support in fighting terrorism, along with some alleging that the US was in "collusion with terrorist groups".

Cessation of AQAP's external operations

The decline of the West's interest in combating the AQAP may also be related to the cessation of the group's attacks on Western targets and on Western soil, which earlier distinguished it from other Al Qaida branches around the world. We note that most of the West's involvement in combating the AQAP was due to its attempted attacks on Western soil.

Since 2013, the group has not carried out operations outside its stronghold. Moreover, the US drone operations in Yemen killed many of its leaders who were the masterminds of its external operations. These included senior AQAP leader Anwar al-Awlaki, USS Cole bombers Abdul Munim al Fathani and Fahd al Quso, AQAP senior operative Mohamed Said al Umdah, spiritual leader Adil al Abab, and deputy leader Said al Shihri. In mid-2015, US missile strikes killed AQAP leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi and senior leader Harith al-Nadhari. The bombing of the USS Cole in the Port of Aden in 2000, killed 17 American sailors and injured 39.

Furthermore, the US administration probably believes that the group has become weak which has affected its internal activities and halted its external operations. However, the US administration should know better about this

¹⁸ U.S. Embassy to Yemen." / X (twitter.com)

group: that the decline or the suspension of its activities does not mean its end or the impossibility of its return.

The cessation of Saudi support

By supposing that the decline of Western interest in tackling the AQAP has nothing to do with the cessation of its external operations, we can talk about the decrease in Saudi counterterrorism efforts in Yemen in the light of its military intervention in the nation and also being the country that shares the longest geographical border with Yemen.

From the Saudi perspective, there are reasons for this decline. Although the US announced it was standing behind KSA in its war against the Houthis in addition to providing military and intelligence support, Riyadh didn't feel that Washington was serious about confronting the Iran-backed group. There is a common belief that the US is against the elimination of the Houthis. Many statements by figures who have close ties with the Saudi-led Arab Coalition stressed that Washington prevented the entry of the Yemeni government forces into Sanaa after they arrived in "Furdal Nihm" (areas located in the east of the Yemeni capital city).

For example, outgoing Yemeni Parliament Speaker Sultan Said Al-Burkani claimed that after the government forces arrived in Furdal Nihm they wanted to move towards Sanaa. However, the then US Ambassador Matthew Tueller called PM Ahmed Obeid Bin Dagher and told him literally: "Sanaa is a redline and you can't move forward towards it".¹⁹

Al-Burkani also criticized the international community, especially the United States, accusing it of colluding with the Houthis during the years of war. He described the Western-sponsored "Stockholm Agreement" between the Yemeni government and the Houthis in late 2018 as "a document of treachery and the curse of Stockholm".

¹⁹ The Speaker of the Yemeni Parliament accuses the Americans of colluding with the Houthis (arabi21.com)

Thus, it is not unlikely that Saudi Arabia treated the US regarding its attitude to the AQAP in the same way. This can actually explain the decline of the Western interest as the support which was provided by Saudi Arabia at the level of information was critical.

There is another factor behind the cessation of Saudi interest in AQAP, which is related to Riyadh's stance toward the Southern forces that confront AQAP. Some believe that this has something to do with the conflict of interests between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen. The Saudi position towards the Southern forces has been remarkable on many occasions. For example, Riyadh supported forces affiliated with the Islah Party (the Muslim Brotherhood's branch in Yemen) despite some of them having links with the AQAP. Likewise, the kingdom sent military reinforcements comprising forces affiliated with the Islah Party to areas controlled by STC. Moreover, Riyadh supported forces loyal to the Islah Party in the fighting in Abyan between April-July, 2020, while the UAE supported the STC.

The elimination of Anwar Al-Awlaki

The elimination of top AQAP leader Anwar Al-Awlaki in 2011 probably played a role in the decline of the US' interest in combating the group. The dominant belief of the then US administration was that Al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric, played a key role in turning Al Qaeda's branch in Yemen into a major threat.²⁰

Former CIA director John Brennan, who was then serving as assistant to the US President for Homeland security and Counter-Terrorism, said the threat posed by AQAP against the US was bigger than that of its parent organization Al Qaida led by Osama bin Laden, which was active in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In the wake of several anti-US attacks by the AQAP, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during a visit to Sanaa in January 2011, said: "There are terrorists operating from Yemeni territory today, many of whom are not Yemeni, some of whom, I'm sorry to say are American citizens. This is an urgent concern for both

²⁰ Al-Riyadh Newspaper | Washington plans to intensify its operations in Yemen within months (alriyadh.com)

of us. They sought to attack our country. Therefore, ending these threats would be a priority for any country as well as for the US.”

Clinton’s statement came during her surprise visit to Yemen, the first by a US Secretary of State in 20 years.²¹ The high-level visit revealed the extent of the US’ interest in combating AQAP at the time.

Surprising retreat

In an attempt to explain the Western retreat, a former jihadist expressed his surprise at the decline of the US counterterrorism efforts in Yemen over the past few years. He believes that the war on terrorism is mainly American and that the United States is responsible for supporting the parties who fight against terrorism.

The person expressed surprise at the US not providing aerial support to the operations carried out by the Southern forces that forced the AQAP to emerge from hiding and be exposed to security forces. According to the former jihadist: “In 2014, US planes targeted AQAP elements during their battles with the Houthis in Rada in Al-Bayda. They probably did so to support the Houthis or to make the most of the AQAP’s public emergence.”

He ruled out the lack of intelligence information as a reason, saying the AQAP moves within a small geographical domain. “The military operations on the ground have forced the group to constantly move within this area. It is easy to monitor and target it by using drones”.²²

Has the AQAP threat ended or declined?

If the United States deals with AQAP according to its size and determines its actions to counter it in light of such data, some pertinent questions arise here: Are the US intelligence assessments about the AQAP’s strength and capabilities

²¹ Clinton arrived in Sanaa on a surprise visit - [BBC News Arabic](#)

²² An exclusive interview with ‘South24 Center’

over the last years accurate? And if not, how much time will it take to tide over the consequences of wrong estimates and at what cost?

It is unlikely that the United States has thought in this way about an issue it is familiar with, and which has troubled it a lot. However, one should talk about the AQAP on this side. Some estimates about the strength and the weakness of the group are often based on the rise or decline of its activities. This is a catastrophic mistake for the Yemeni case as shown below.

Voluntary retreat

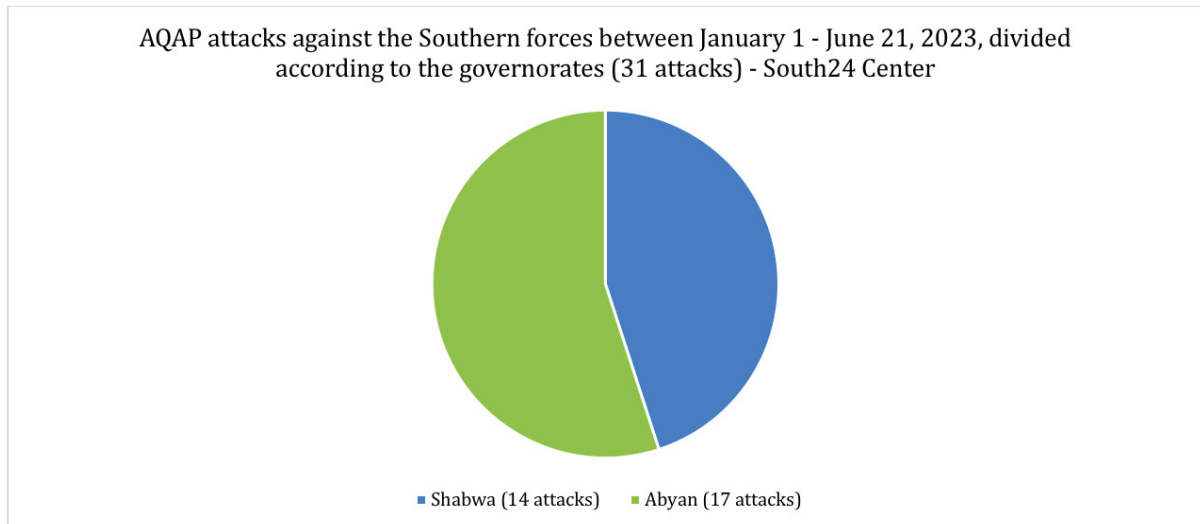
It is true that AQAP's activities in Yemen have remarkably declined over the past years. It is also true that the group received painful blows and that its disputes with "ISIS" negatively affected it. However, these factors are not the main reasons for its decline. A point to note is that a decline of its activities doesn't mean the decline of its strength and capabilities.

Following the outbreak of the Saudi military operation in Yemen, the AQAP drastically changed its operational approach. As part of its new policy the AQAP began rearranging its enemies. It classified the Houthi militia as its enemy no. 1 by taking into consideration that it is a Shiite group linked to Iran, before changing this strategy later.²³ At second spot of AQAP's enemies are the Southern forces and the UAE due to their resolute war against terrorism. The group considers Saudi Arabia and its backed formations as a secondary enemy or probably removed them from its enemy list.

For example, the AQAP's activities completely ceased in the areas which were under the Islah Party's control after 2019, such as Shabwa and some districts in Abyan. This is because the forces dominating these areas were no longer its target. On the contrary, AQAP considered them war partners against joint enemies. This means that the group voluntarily suspended its activities in these governorates, and wasn't influenced by external factors in this. Therefore, the level of the AQAP's strength and weakness cannot be estimated through the decline or cessation of its operational activities.

²³ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift | Lawfare (lawfaremedia.org)

This can prove to be a dangerous and disturbing sign. The availability of safe havens for the AQAP and receiving support as part of formations affiliated with government forces have been important gains for the group without it having to exert any remarkable effort. This was confirmed when the group's activities made a strong comeback after the forces affiliated with the Islah Party were driven out of areas that were under their control despite AQAP losses at the hands of the Southern forces.



[6 Months of AQAP's Escalation Against the Southern Forces \(Read more on: South24 Center\)](#)

Eradicating AQAP

Given the AQAP structure and the way it works, eradicating it looks like a hard task even with external support. However, it would be tougher without this support. Furthermore; supporting the war against AQAP is the responsibility of external parties, and should not be limited to providing help based on certain conditions. The responsibility of external parties towards Yemen is likely to increase. This is because the external terrorist attacks by AQAP were launched from this country and could even be resumed in case countries do not back the Southern forces in their counterterrorism mission.

An important factor to be noted is that the cessation of AQAP's external operations could be related to the operational policies it has adopted since the beginning of the Saudi operation in Yemen. The group has been keen not to draw

attention to itself after the outbreak of the Yemen war. Before the 2015 war against the Houthis began, the AQAP was the main target against which all the parties of the conflict had united, but this has changed.

The development of AQAP's tools

Contrary to the dominant notion about the decline of AQAP over the past years, the group's terror operations in Abyan and Shabwa come as a continuing reminder of the danger this extremist group poses.

The difference in the latest AQAP terrorism attacks against the Shabwa Defense Forces - which are part of the Southern forces - over the past few months is that the group for the first time used explosive-laden drones. Such weapons can pose a danger not only to foreign attachés but to local political, sovereign, and military facilities but also to the ships sailing in the Red Sea and territorial waters. This comes alongside the current threats posed by the Houthi militia. The dangers posed by AQAP may increase if it manages to develop its tools. The group bears unbridled hostility towards the international community and doesn't recognize laws or rules of war.²⁴



An aerial photo published by AQAP which said that it was taken during a drone bombing of a site affiliated with the Shabwa Defense Forces in Al-Masaniah, June 14, 2023.

According to experts, the recent drone attacks launched by the AQAP against forces affiliated with the STC in Shabwa indicate that the group has new partners

²⁴ AQAP added drones in its war against the southern forces.. How did it obtain them? (alyoum8.net)

and may be part of a strategic axis, and could even receive support from the Houthis.²⁵

Late realization and indirect messages

The US' latest moves in South Yemen indicate that there are growing concerns about the dangers posed by AQAP. Coinciding with the visit of US Ambassador Steven H. Fagin²⁶ to Wadi Hadramout on August 30, 2023, in the first such visit in 10 years, American drones hit a vehicle in Marib killing at least two persons.²⁷ Although the United States condemned²⁸ an aerial attack that occurred on the same day it said that the attack targeted a camp for internally displaced persons south of Marib. The attack also coincided with the visit of the UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg to Marib, for the first time.

Hadramout Governor Mabkhout bin Madi said the goal behind the visit of Ambassador Fagin was "security and counterterrorism".²⁹ However, talking about counterterrorism in areas under the control of Saudi-backed military formations may deliver a direct or indirect message to Riyadh that "AQAP is reviving in areas controlled by forces affiliated with KSA".

Summary

There are two reasons behind the waning of international interest in AQAP. The first is the decline of the Saudi role in Yemen since the launch of the "Decisive Storm" operation. The second is the mistaken belief that the group no longer poses a threat as it did before.

The decline in the Saudi role can be attributed to two factors: the first being that Riyadh dealt with Washington using the "an eye for an eye" method. The United States didn't properly support the Saudi war against the Houthis. The second reason is the Saudi stance toward the STC and the UAE, which happens to be the

²⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift | Lawfare ([lawfaremedia.org](https://www.lawfaremedia.org))

²⁶ Statement by US Ambassador to Yemen Stephen Fagin, 30.08.2024 ([South24 Center](https://south24center.com))

²⁷ Yemen.. An American drone targeted a bus twice twice south of Marib Governorate - [RT Arabic](https://rt.com)

²⁸ [X page of the US Embassy in Yemen](#)

²⁹ Statement by Hadramout Governor following his meeting with the US ambassador at Seiyun Airport in Hadramout, 08/30/2023 ([South24 Center](https://south24center.com))

top backer of counterterrorism efforts in South Yemen. The decline or cessation of AQAP's terror activities outside Yemen has its own reasons which should cause concern.

The reasons include the collapse of the Yemeni state institutions, especially the security and military ones, after the Houthi invasion of Sanaa in late 2014. However, the effect of this collapse cannot possibly last for more than eight years, especially since the areas in which the group is currently active are away from the Houthi control, and have the presence of highly-qualified forces, especially in the field of counterterrorism. In addition, the Saudi-Houthi war in general has affected the international interest in the AQAP.

Additionally, the international community has been preoccupied with other issues. Over the past years, the international community has faced several crises and challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukrainian war, and the growing Chinese influence. These developments could lead to decreasing interest in other issues such as the AQAP in Yemen.

Recommendations

- Some estimations about the conflict in Yemen have served as a lifeline for AQAP. With a prolonging of the conflict situation, the group would get the opportunity to rebuild its capabilities without being monitored or tracked. This could turn into a complicated and difficult problem. In view of this, the war against terrorism needs to be above all calculations as it has the potential to harm everyone.
- The attempt to assess the AQAP's current capabilities and strength based on the rise or decline of its activities won't lead to accurate results. The AQAP's latest comeback should push the thinking towards reconsidering previous stances and perceptions.
- The failure to support the Southern forces that fight the group would only serve to help the AQAP, which doesn't engage in conventional war.

Additionally, this will hinder people's support for military and security campaigns against it.

- Despite the decline of international interest in AQAP, the group still poses a dangerous threat to regional and international security. AQAP has demonstrated its ability to launch fatal attacks in the past and may resume more such external terror activities. Therefore, it is important to continue the international efforts to fight the AQAP in Yemen to prevent it from regaining in strength.
- The delay in providing support to the forces that fight the group would also serve to double the costs of fighting it in the future. What can be achieved today will be harder to accomplish tomorrow.

**This analysis was authored by a team specializing in terrorism affairs
for 'South24 Center'**

The cover photo: An explosion that occurred while the forces of the “Arrows of the East” operation were moving forward on the public road in Mudiya District in Abyan, October 10, 2022 (The photo was taken from local media platforms).

Note: This is a translated version of the original text written in [Arabic](#).

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