Al-Malahim Foundation:

How does AQAP's Media Communicate Inside Yemen?

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Recently, several prominent AQAP leaders delivered speeches on the developments in Yemen, especially in the Southern governorates. The three speeches were released by Al-Malahim Foundation, the group's media outlet in the Arabian Peninsula. The first speech was an audio recording[1] in August 2022 by the prominent leader Abu Ali Al-Hadrami. It interacted with incidents that occurred in Shabwa's Aden. Via the speech, AQAP condemned expelling forces affiliated with the Islah Party out of the city. Moreover, AQAP threatened the Southern forces and their UAE backers of launching an open war.

The second speech was a video recording[2] in January 2023. It was delivered by the current AQAP leader Khaled Batarfi. It was an extension of the first speech considering its theme and content. The only exception was the admission of the group's decline and lack of capabilities. The speech urged the tribes to provide support and denounced the position adopted by some tribal leaders towards it. One month after Batarfi's speech, prominent leader Atef Al-Awlaki[3] made an unprecedented appearance. He briefly talked about the Houthis. He also called the tribes to support the group in the war against the UAE-backed Southern forces. He stressed the Sunni identity of Shabwa and Abyan tribes adding that he belongs to them. It was an attempt to win their sympathy and mobilize them to fight those forces.[4]

The three speeches came concurrently with security and military operations by the Southern forces against AQAP's bastions.[5] Additionally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) created new military formations into three STC controlled areas. This has been a result of KSA's objection to the advancement made by STC's forces towards Wadi Hadramout.

Khaled Batarfi during his latest appearance in January 2023 published by Al-Malahim as part of its Edition "People of Faith and Wisdom" (Source: AQAP)

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[1] AQAP Warns of the «Secession» of South Yemen (south24.net)
[2] Batarfi speaks for the first time after AQAP's defeat in Abyan(south24.net)
[3] A New Attempt to Mobilize the Yemeni Tribes.. The Appearance of Saad Al-Awlaki Confirms AQAP's Crisis in Yemen (akhbaralaan.net)
[4] Several statements published by AQAP between September 2022 and February 2023
[5] "Arrows of the East": A Military Operation in Abyan

How does Al-Malahim operate?

Away from the harmony between KSA, the Islah Party and AQAP in the stance towards the Southern forces, there has been a question about the whereabouts of the group's leaders who emerged in new speeches over close intervals of time. What is their communication mechanism with Al-Malahim Foundation considering their security situation and far-distance distribution as well as the hardships related to meeting them to record and film media materials?

Before discussing the paper's question, it is important to indicate that AQAP has suffered from a harder and complicated security situation after the Southern forces tightened the noose around it in the governorates of Shabwa and Abyan, and previously in Aden and Lahj. Its moves are supposed to be more difficult.

However, sources close to AQAP stressed that communication is no longer complicated as before and that it is possible to use the internet in an incredibly careful way and according to instructions and restrictions to achieve this task as per their description.[6] The sources indicated that those who work in Al-Malahim are not banned from using the internet. AQAP issued such a ban in 2018. This is because Al-Malahim staff members need to follow, produce, send, and publish materials. According to sources, the staff members of Al-Malahim receive intense training courses known as "jihadist security" to deal with the internet safely. The sources indicate that senior AQAP leaders are allowed to use the internet in their way.

For example, the sources noted the killing of Saeed Al-Shahri, who was a Saudi national and served as a deputy leader of AQAP. He was tracked through browsing the internet. Others were killed similarly.

According to the sources who spoke to "South24 Center", the media staff members of Al-Malahim do not use the internet without coordinating with the security committee. The same applies to the moves allowed for the staff.

The sources said that the foundation sometimes consists of merely a laptop or a mobile phone with a person who is professional in dealing with the internet. They indicated that there is an exaggerated care about the safety of Al-Malahim's media team as substituting them is hard. The sources pointed out that statements by any AQAP leader to any media organization inside the group are different from doing this to an external organization. This suggests that things became easier in the presence of the internet and different means of communication. Although AQAP has

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[6] Exclusive sources contacted by the writer including a former AQAP leader

remarkably declined recently as its moves have become harder and more restrictive, the internal coordination is still there, and its core still works as before.

Therefore, delivering speeches by some leaders at close intervals does not mean that those leaders are gathered in one place. This is because any statement can be taken by any communication tool and under any pseudonym with quick and limited use of the internet. Receiving the full content of one material may take days according to the sources, it is more complicated than expected.

Wadi Hadramout

Despite the sources' talks about Al-Malahim's way of work and communication, the presence of the group's leaders in one place is not unlikely. This is especially considering its more tightened conditions in a number of the Eastern governorates of South Yemen.

For example, when AQAP was expelled from the coast of Hadramout and the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa between 2016 and 2017, several of its leaders were present in Al-Bayda which served as a safe bastion for it at that time.

We also noticed that the US intelligence agencies intensified their focus on Al-Bayda during that period. They succeeded in killing prominent leaders including the legitimate leader Saleh Abdulmoghni and Mohammed Al-Harazi as well as the famous landing operation which aimed at arresting the then AQAP leader Qasim al-Raymi, but he was able to escape.[7]

Currently, it can be said that Marib, especially Wadi Obeida as well as Wadi Hadramout are among AQAP's safe bastions where senior leaders may be there. Days earlier, US drones were able to target a senior AQAP leader, Hamad bin Hammod Al-Tamimi who held the Saudi nationality. It seemed that Al-Tamimi who was killed by an airstrike in the desert of Marib was among the senior leaders. Therefore, the Al Qaeda branch in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Shabaab Movement in Somalia and others issued obituary statements to mourn him.[8] The Yemeni branch itself, through Al-Malahim, issued a statement to mourn the slain leader. According to the information, Al-Tamini served as the Head of the group's Shura Council and one of its senior judges, but he kept a low profile on media.

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[7] According to exclusive sources, Abdulmoghni was one of the senior leaders. He belonged to Al Radmah District in the governorate of Ibb.
[8] Confirming his death during an airstrike, AQAP mourns Hamad Al-Tamimi (aawsat.com)

One-member staff and a laptop

A former leader in the group said that the media team enjoys special security protection due to the difficulty in substituting its members. Therefore, according to him, media staff members are not allowed to gather in one place. They prefer the one who can do more than one job.

The leader told "South24 Center" that the entire foundation of Al-Malahim is often limited to one person and one laptop. For example, a leader called "Abu Mohammed Al-Najdi" who was a Saudi national was making the biggest part of the technical matters related to the editions. However, he was killed during a US raid. According to the source, Abu Mohammed was an expert in Montage and other skills. His tools were merely a laptop and a camera.

Al-Awlaki and Khan and "Inspire"

It can be said that Al-Malahim became famous after the American-Yemeni preacher Anwar-Alwlaki joined the group. Al-Awlakis's video speeches directly targeted American citizens. Therefore, they were met with official US attention, especially regarding tracking their publication sources.

Along with the video speeches, Al-Malahim issued an English-speaking magazine called "Inspire." This name is derived from the word "inspiration". It also harmonizes with the goal of the magazine to achieve remote impact within American and Western society in general. The magazine played a role in some operations inside the US. This included, for example, for example the operation carried out by Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and his sibling Tamerlane in Boston which targeted a Boston marathon on April 15th, 2013, that killed three people including a child, and injured 264 people.

At that time, American prosecution said that the two brothers worked unilaterally and learned how to make bombs from the internet through a magazine issued by AQAP. [9] It meant "Inspire" magazine issued by AQAP. It included titles such as "How can you make a bomb in your mother's kitchen?" For its part, AQAP acknowledged its responsibility for the operation in the 11th edition of "Inspire".

"Inspire" issued by Al-Malahim turned out to be a source of horror to the US Department and attracted much attention. Because of it, the security and intelligence circles highlighted the so-called "lone jihadist" or "the lone wolf" who is an unknown person to both "CIA" and "FBI" and who can carry out operations in unexpected places

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[9] The trial of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev who is accused in Boston bombings kicked off (France24.com)

after being influenced by the AQAP media speech. The "lone jihadist" is the one who implements operations unilaterally and without coordinating with the group. To make his work effective and disciplined, the 11th Edition of the magazine published a small manual entitled "the guidelines for the lone jihadist". It included instructions supported by photos and maps to implement terrifying and costly operations in the United States.

The FBI's conclusions on the Boston operation pointed to the impact of the "cyber jihad" on the Youth generation in the US and the world. According to the investigations, the person who was involved in the Boston bombings was impacted by Al-Qaeda's jihadist scenes through the internet from which he learned to make bombs.[10]

It can be said that AQAP, particularly its branch in Yemen "managed to use the internet extensively to serve its goals which are not limited to certain places or geographical areas with low cost".

It can be said also that during the era of Anwar Al-Awlaki and the Pakistani Samir Khan, Al-Malahim Foundation reached its maximum threat level through the English-speaking editions. However, this aspect related to Al-Malahim largely declined after the killing of Al-Awlaki and Khan in the Jawf Desert in 2011 by a US bombing carried out by drones.

Ongoing bleeding

The strikes against AQAP which affected both the group and Al-Malahim Foundation have not been limited to Al-Awlaki, Khan, or Abu Mohammed Al-Najdi but they continued and reached the group's prominent leader Abdullah Al-Maliki.

In this regard, Rita Katz, the Director of the American research center "SITE" said that "distributing AQAP lectures in Ramadan has been halted after the killing of AQAP Leader Abdullah Al-Maliki. This was related to his communication with Al-Shamrani who carried out the Florida Air Base operation. He was killed by an American strike in Marib, northeast Yemen in early May 2020. He pointed out that this suggests "to what extent Al-Maliki's roles were extended between media and the coordination of the attack. [11]

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[10] "ISIS and the New Jihadists"..a book authored by the Iraqi researcher Jassem Mohammed
[11] Who Funds ISIS's Media in North Yemen?

Inability to substitute

AQAP lost important media leaders and substituting them is extremely hard. This has impacted Al-Malahim's activities in quantity and quality. For example, we noted that the impact at the external level has declined or stopped completely since the killing of Anwar Al-Awlaki and Samir Khan. Since then, Inspire Magazine was issued twice with lower quality before it stopped completely.

Al-Malahim's impact has not been limited to the loss of media leaders. The Sharia and advocacy leaders who were killed by an American airstrike made important fingerprints in Al-Malahim's activity. For example, they include Saudi advocacy official Ibrahim al-Rubaysh, Sharia official Adel Al-Abab and his successor Harith Al-Nazari and the second military official Nasr Al-Ansi. Edition (11) of Inspire included speeches for Qasim al-Raymi, Ibrahim al-Rubaysh and others. According to exclusive sources, these leaders played a role in preparing many magazine materials or supervising them.[12]

Besides that, Al-Malahim has been impacted by AQAP's general decline over the past years after the death of most of its senior leaders.

Losing the influence tools

Among the important materials which were produced by "Al-Malahim" were the Incitement songs. They played a significant role in feeding AQAP's armed elements with fighting energy. However, this kind of publication has been discontinued since the killing of the group's minstrels Khawlan Al-Sanaani (Shawki Al-Badani) and Abu Hajar Al-Hadrami. The first was killed in Al-Bayda in 2014 while the second was killed in Hadramout in the same year. This means that the media foundations lost most influence tools.[13]

Since the death of the influential minstrels, Al-Malahim has not issued what could be of interest in this aspect.

Madad Agency (Temporary alternative to Al-Malahim)

When AQAP controlled Abyan and parts of Shabwa in South Yemen between 2011 and 2012, it was keen to hide its identity under the name of "Ansar Al-Sharia". Thus, it must conceal its tools also. It did not then issue anything in the name of AQAP or Al-Malahim except for the obituary statement for Osama bin Laden's son and Ayman al-

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[12] An AQAP leader warns the American people (skynewsarabia.com)
[13] Al-Badani is a fatal blow for AQAP in Yemen (alarabiya.net)

Zawahiri's allegiance statement. They were two events separated from what happened in Abyan.

AQAP then issued a monthly newsletter under the name of "Madad" to cover the news of the group's battles and activities within the areas under its control as well as monitor the community's interactions with its management in these areas. The newsletter was prepared by the same staff of Al-Malahim as well as the other readable and visual publications.

Furthermore, the group gathered the biggest phone numbers of journalists and media figures, especially foreign media correspondents, to provide them with news through text messages (SMS) under the name "Madad Agency".

The content published by the group at that time suggests that the staff members have a lot of experience in the field of editing, direction, and other skills. However, Al-Malahim had nothing to offer on the external level, after the killing of Al-Awlaki and Khan.

Communications and the Houthi responsibility

Undoubtedly, Al-Malahim media team uses modern tools for communicating between its members or with the AQAP leader. However, it makes this with great caution and within a program managed and supervised by the security apparatus.

For example, the group's members and leaders' use of mobile phones which have "touch" features is very narrow and limited. This includes using the internet as part of a special "encryption" program through which they can browse, send messages, and receive them. As for the phone calls, they make them through old devices whose sim chips are being changed now and then. It is unknown exactly how AQAP obtains such SIMs from the Yemeni local communication companies. However, most telecom operators do not impose identity restrictions or verification on users.

The big problem here is that most or all these companies in addition to "Yemen Net," the only internet provider in Yemen, are subjected to the Houthis. This means that no other body can track AQAP through its cyber activities.

Since AQAP is no longer active in the Houthi areas and as the Houthis do not care about the counterterrorism war, AQAP's use of the means of communication will be much easier, wider, and less conservative and cautious, compared to the past. But if there is coordination between the two parties, as confirmed by a lot of information

and evidence, then AQAP's use of means of communication and the internet will become normal like any other party.
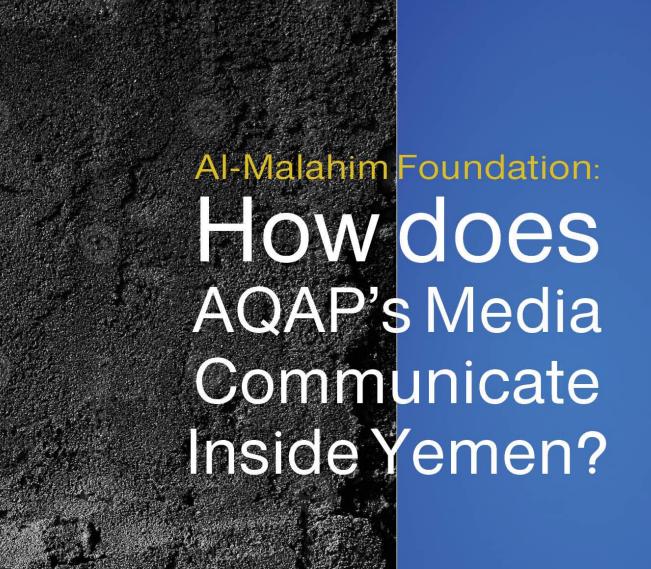
It is important to indicate that the Houthi ongoing control of the communication and internet companies complicates the task of the war against terrorists in Yemen, especially since this is an information war in the first place.

Summary

Al-Malahim staff depend on the internet for internal communication as well as browsing and following the news. This is achieved by coordinating with the security body in AQAP, especially when it is related to messaging senior leaders.

Additionally, the foundation's staff uses old phone devices to communicate with extreme caution. However, such caution has declined recently due to the Houthi control of the public and private telecom companies in Yemen. This has led to a lack of coordination with the US in the field of counterterrorism. AQAP has largely exploited this point as its use of the means of communication has become more expanded and less cautious.

*Ibrahim Ali is a pseudonym of a researcher specialized in the armed group affairs. He demanded anonymity for personal reasons.

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