

AL-QAEDA (AQAP) IN WADI-HADHRAMAUT:

The Odds of Decline and survival



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24. June 2021



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In May 2015, our bus had stopped on the Sanaa-Seiyun road in Hadhramaut Governorate. At a checkpoint, where the distinctive black flags of Al Qaeda (AQAP) were hovering, two men, one masked, asked if there were military elements among the bus passengers, and the answer was “no”. Suspiciously, they had checked up some ID. Cards before they permitted the driver to go on his way and apologized to us for such a routine procedure.

A month earlier, specifically on April 2, 2015, Al Qaeda had seized control of the entire city of Al Mukalla in Hadhramaut, the second most important city in South after Aden. That is why raising questions about military members and searching for them were not surprising given Al Qaeda’s efforts to enhance its influence and control over the city. Therefore, the military elements had two choices, whether to join Al Qaeda and accept working under their command or risking death by confronting them. In 2014, the organization executed 14 soldiers after intercepting their bus during their return from their bases near the city of Shibam in Hadhramaut. Although the soldiers, in civilian clothes, did not resist, Al Qaeda had carried out and recorded those field executions to retaliate losing 11 armed members during an earlier confrontation with the army.

Al Qaeda took advantage of the chaos and the deterioration of the security and political situation during the Houthis’ control of Sanaa and the beginning of the Decisive Storm operation on March 25, 2015, to tighten its grip on Al Mukalla for a whole year.

It had controlled the city’s port and attracted hundreds of youth as well as providing huge financial resources to manage its affairs through bank robberies and collecting taxes and royalties from traders and companies. Additionally, Al Qaeda had run a network of trading oil derivatives in the black market. The daily profits of the organization at that time, including the port’s revenue, were about 2 million dollars according to the then Minister of Transportation. [\[1\]](#)

It is important to note that the organization attempted to appear in a different atypical way by dealing with people, securing some services for them, establishing dispute resolution mechanisms, and showing flexibility in implementing sharia rulings so as not to alienate the residents. The researcher, Dr. Elisabeth Kendall dubbed the general situation as being “Robin Hood’s Strategy,” [\[2\]](#) especially during the era of Nasir Al Wuhayshi, the former leader of the organization who had tried to secure some form of governance. This led to the establishment of what was known as “Hadhrami Domestic Council” led by figures affiliated with the Al Islah party headed by Omar Bin Shaki Al Jaidi and Abdulhakim Mahfouz. Al Mukalla had been run by hard-line leaders divided between Al Qaeda and Al Islah party which played the role of a mediator between the organization and the legitimate government.

This Cooperation and harmony between Al Qaeda and Al Islah-The M.B. branch in Yemen- is not the first of its kind as their mutual exchange of interests and experience has been rooted for many years since the war in Afghanistan. After such a war, they had been welcomed by the regime of the then Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to the extent that some of them held important military positions, especially within The First Armored Division, totally controlled by Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar, the current Vice President of Yemen.

The two compatible parties, Al Qaeda and M.B. met again in the 1994 War, among fighters in the ranks of the Northern Forces due to the political crisis that erupted in the wake of the 1990 unity. The spearhead of the war was what is known as “the Arab Afghan” who belongs to Al Qaeda and Al Islah. Moreover, the two sides have exchanged roles in the latest civil Yemeni war since 2015 especially within areas where Al Qaeda is active on an operational level. These areas are under the control of the National Army which is also run by the Vice President and Al Islah party.

The Popular anger and the decline of the organization

Killing the organization’s leader Nasir Al Wuhayshi in June 2015 by a drone attack, and selecting the reckless military figure, Qasim Al Raymi as his successor has delivered a fatal blow to Al Qaeda. This changed its management course away from the cautious policy based on flattering the local residents and gaining their support to a more radical one on many levels including the strictness of applying the Sharia rules and the establishment of Hisbah(promotion of virtue and prevention of vice)based upon the organization’s understanding of the Islamic Sharia. Such a reversal has resulted in punishing women for adultery and witchcraft and lashing men in public. Moreover, the organization’s members raided houses, detained people, tortured suspects, including activists and journalists, and executed two Saudi accused of spying for the U.S. and the Arab Coalition.

In the meantime, Al Mukalla has witnessed many furious protests against the existence of the organization [3] under the slogan “No more Qaeda from now on”. With forming “the Hadhrami Elite Forces”, under the supervision of the Arab Coalition, with big U.A.E support and American technical backing, thousands of Hadhramis voluntarily joined the ranks after agreeing with the tribes to liberate Al Mukalla from the grip of Al Qaeda. The Hadhrami Elite Forces succeeded in regaining Al Mukalla after one year of being under the control of Al Qaeda which preferred to withdraw with the least loss.

The withdrawal of the organization’s fighters while keeping their weapons and about 100 million dollars of looted funds, according to some reports, has sparked many questions about a possible deal brokered by tribes in the region. Given Al Qaeda's choice of tactical withdrawal, retreating from an inevitable losing confrontation that may end its story in the Arabian Peninsula is a proper decision; especially it held enough funds to maintain its organizational structure. Therefore, Al Qaeda has resorted to other safe havens in Shabwa, Abyan, and Wadi-Hadhramaut after its decline in the capital city of Mukalla.

The option of a tactical withdrawal from traditional military confrontations is a favorite Hypothesis for the jihadi organizations that depend on hit-and-run specific light operations to avoid losing the most important elements, the ideological fighters who can attack with the least available weapons and it is difficult to substitute them. There are earlier references chronologically close to the operation to liberate Mukalla such as the withdrawal carried out by

the organization following the military operations against it in 2012; the first led by General Salem Qaten, and the second by General Mahmoud Al Subaihi.



The Hadrami Elite Forces during a graduation ceremony in the 2nd Military District in the city of Mukalla, Hadramout Governorate, January 26, 2017 (Al-Mandab News)

On February 17, 2018, the Hadhrami Elite Forces and the Barshed Brigade launched the “Al-Faisal Operation” with the support of the Emirati forces. This aimed at regaining control over areas where the organization’s fighters took them as bases or places for training and moving their operations to cities in Hadhramaut and Shabwa, which are linked by the valley of Al-Musini, west of Mukalla. This operation, which lasted for more than 48 hours, inflicted Al Qaeda heavy personnel and equipment losses which led to their retreat.

Later, the commander of the Second Military Region and the Governor of Hadhramaut, General Faraj Al Bahsani announced the success of the operation. Days later, the operation of “Decisive Sword” was launched with the participation of the Shabwani Elite Forces, and the support of Emirati forces, to announce later their control of the entire Al Said District in Shabwa with no resistance from Al Qaeda.

The locations and moves of Al Qaeda

The existence of Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula in Hadhramaut Valley is connected to the National Army forces under the control of Ali Mohsin Al Ahmar and Al Islah party where the

organization's activities are focused within the operational range of the First Military Region based in Hadhramaut Valley's districts. The organization also exists in the adjacent areas between Hadhramaut and Shabwa from the valley side according to what a local source told South24.

It seems that Al Qaeda's benefits from such existence in the valley is not confined to its protection but extends to recruiting new unknown young fighters within the army ranks to avoid tracking the familiar field figures by regional and international intelligence agencies. The second reason is related to youth themselves whose frustration has increased due to the internal and leadership conflicts within the organization especially after Khalid Batarfi assumed the leadership in the wake of the killing of Qasim Al Raymi in February 2020. Batarfi faces some legitimacy challenges prompting some members of the organization to join the army while keeping their jihadist beliefs and push others to join ISIS.

It can be said that the rich environment that the dominant military forces have provided in Wadi-Hadhramaut is one of the reasons behind the existence of Al Qaeda pockets within it. It appears that Al Qaeda has rearranged itself to spread again towards wider areas in various governorates in case of any military developments or chaos in Marib and others especially if the conflict parties don't reach political solutions soon. It can be said also that the indulgence of the Arab Coalition in its war against the Houthis has given Al Qaeda more times to relocate itself in different areas including Abyan, Shabwa, and the valley of Hadhramaut, and increase its operational activities against the STC's affiliated security units such as the Security Belt, the Shabwani Elite or Hadhrami Elite in South.

Moreover, the attempts of the Al Islah party to divide Hadhramaut into two separate governorates (Hadhramaut Coast, and Wadi-Hadhramaut), in addition to a fait accompli partition by the forces dominating the military, security, and administrative decisions in the valley (Wadi), represented in Al Islah party, would contribute mainly in expanding Al Qaeda's activities and securing its moves.

There have been furious reactions on the levels of elites and social-political formations in the governorate with a view that belonging to Hadhramaut goes beyond geography to identity, and that any partition projects that disrupt Hadhramaut's administrative coherence, harm its social unity. Interestingly, some parties in the Yemeni legitimacy have suggested seiyun replace Aden as an interim capital under the unstable conditions in the valley.

However, the STC and the public opinion in the southern governorates would resist such a proposal which contradicts the Riyadh Agreement. Additionally, the presence of capital in the middle of Hadhramaut Valley, the safe haven of Al Qaeda, does not secure the stability of members of the government and its institutions.

Possible threats

The general situation of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula suggests some possible threats are constructing their way. The appearance of the organization leader (Emir) Khalid Batarfi, known as Abu al-Miqdad al-Kindi, in a video about Al Malahim, Al Qaeda's media outlet, has sparked doubts towards a UN report claiming he was detained in Al Mahra Governorate. However, his last appearance, according to experts, has been recorded 4 years ago. [\[4\]](#)

Despite the strategic and organized mentality of Batarfi by which he has tried to show the organizational capabilities of the organization through a series of local operations in Abyan and Shabwa, he still faces some challenges. The most prominent challenge is the lack of consensus over him which has created a legitimacy problem inside the organization's ideological and military wings. This was demonstrated in particular through the disputes of the Nahdis led by Abu Amr Al Nahdi after the failure of the reconciliation efforts due to executing some of their elements accused of spying during the Al Raymi era. They later decided to retire and refused to pledge allegiance to his successor Batarfi.

The other possible threat for Batarfi is the difficulty in dealing with the Yemeni communities because he is a Saudi citizen. In contrast, his Yemeni predecessors, Al Wuhayshi and Al Raymi tried to "Yemeniza" the organization resulting from merging the two Saudi and Yemeni branches at the beginning of 2009. The environment around those two former Emirs has tried to contain and protect them because they belong and being part of these communities.

Regardless of the international mentality of the multinational and the cross-border movement, enhancing ties and establishing alliances with the local tribes to ensure the security of the organization has been a big obstacle for Batarfi pushing him to ask other channels to serve as a mediator between him and the local communities to facilitate his moves especially in Wadi-Hadhramaut and Marib in which Al Islah party controls the decision-making centers.

On the general local level, there is a growing tribal refusal of Al Qaeda's existence in Yemen as its radical mentality represents a burden for the tribal environment and the social fabric. This represents another threat for the organization, especially on the communication level among its elements which Al Qaeda has attempted to reduce, fearing whistle-blowers and in the face of tribal and popular refusal.

There is no doubt that the existence of ISIS (Daesh) as a more extreme alternative, especially in Al Baydaa represents another source of threat for Al Qaeda. Despite the divisions and the doctrinal differences between the two groups, Al Qaeda recognizes Daesh as an organization that has enhanced its presence more after the killing of many Qaeda leaders in contrast to ISIS who has not declared losing any of its leaders in Yemen.

Regional and international coordination to combat terrorism

On the regional and international levels, UAE has made great efforts in combatting terrorism. Its dynamic work in South played the most prominent role in establishing the Security Belts in Aden and Lahij, as well as the Shabwani and Hadhrami Elites to combat terrorism along the administrative borders of the Hadhramaut coast.

The Hadhrami Elite Forces maintain security and stability in spite of the big pressure of Hadi Government which has ignored the extremist group and released many Al-Qaeda-affiliated suspects after being handed over by the Elite Forces according to what a well-informed source told South24.

After the UAE became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, it is likely that it will adopt a comprehensive approach to combat terrorism based upon its deep experience in the region, and Yemen in particular, in addition to its awareness of the course of events and the identity of the parties who have obstructed reaching a final solution to the Yemeni war.

That is to say, Al Qaeda's threats in Hadhramaut, Shabwa, and Abyan are still going on despite the challenges. They are subject to changes based upon the rapid developments in Yemen. The organization can regain its strength and activities in a short time if the current scene changes.

This requires developing a work plan for the regional and international parties concerned with combating terrorism in coordination with the reliable military forces in South.

The STC-affiliated forces such as the Security Belts and the two Elite forces in Shabwa and Hadhramaut have been a priority target of the organization over the past two years.

Finally, the coordination of combating terrorism efforts is not just a local affair but is extended to the regional and international levels. This requires the international community to show more interest and support to confront terrorism due to the danger it poses to international peace and security.

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Image: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claims grad missiles attack on Elite Forces camp In al-Ghabar, Januari 2018(Wardefenseenews)

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