

# Kidnapping Foreigners in Yemen: A Funding Source for the Terrorist Groups with International Mediations



| Ibrahim Ali

## Introduction

**The** Financial ransoms have constituted one of the most important sources to fund AQAP since its establishment in 2009. The group has seized a massive amount of money based upon this source since 2011 after kidnapping several nationals who belong to Western countries, and international organizations. This has not been limited to money but has gone beyond to achieve other gains such as putting pressure to release prisoners affiliated with them including big leaders.<sup>1</sup>

For releasing their subjects, the countries of the victims find themselves obliged to pay money to AQAP away from any considerations of what the latter would do with it and how can this contribute in killing others as well as its negative impact on the international counterterrorism war which has largely focused on tracking and drying terrorism's sources of support and funding.

Although the US opposes paying money to AQAP in return for releasing hostages, it turned a blind eye towards a number of operations in Yemen. It also ignored the role of external mediations that facilitated the task of releasing abductees in return for paying millions of dollars to the group. Certainly, this was carried out with Washington's green light as no mediation party can gamble or deal with a group which is internationally fought without going back to the US.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to indicate here that this happened at a time when the US administration deemed AQAP as the most dangerous globally because of its exportation of transboundary operations such as the explosive parcels in Britain and the attempt to target Christmas's celebrators in the US and other countries.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the repeated kidnapping operations for ransoms, there is much ambiguity which is still surrounding this file from the way of kidnapping and

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<sup>1</sup> This happened with the Cultural Attaché at the Iranian Embassy in Sanaa, Ahmad1- Nikbakht according to our exclusive sources.

<sup>2</sup> Paying ransoms to AQAP and its affiliated branches violate UNSC Resolution no 1904 which stipulates that all countries "must immediately freeze funds, financial assets and economic resources of these individuals, groups, projects and entities. The resolution added that this also applies to "paying ransoms"

<sup>3</sup> According to the designation of the CIA between the years 2009/2010

hiding victims to the intervention of local and international mediators to release them.

## The quality of targets

The group selects its targets which it considers as a guaranteed main source of money. These targets are often from the European states as these countries are keen on securing a safe return of their subjects at any cost. On the other hand, the US doesn't pay to AQAP in return for releasing its abductees. Being a leader of the international war against terrorism, Washington deals strictly with everything related to this file. When AQAP kidnapped American journalist Luke Somers from Sanaa in 2012, Washington refused to respond to AQAP's demands and tried to free him through launching a security and military operation in Hadramout and Shabwa southeast of Yemen although it realized that such an attempt is very risky and could lead to his death.<sup>4</sup> In addition to money, there are kidnapping operations which aim to pose pressure for making other gains such as freeing prisoners. Some examples in regard to this include abducting Ahmad Nikbakht, the Cultural Attaché at the Iranian Embassy in Sanaa, and Abdullah Al-Khalidi, Saudi Deputy Consul in Aden Abdullah Al-Khalidi. Information indicates that AQAP was able to release a large number of its prisoners from the Houthi prisons in Sanaa in return for releasing the Iranian Cultural Attaché. Other data indicated that Iran released the prominent Egyptian leader in AQAP Ahmed Saif Al-Adel as part of the same deal.<sup>5</sup> However, Abdullah Al-Khalidi returned to the group and gave up a condition to release female Saudi prisoners and accept the release in return for a big ransom according to special sources.<sup>6</sup>

## Reaching the victim

After each kidnapping operation, media outlets publish different accounts, some of which talk about the group as a direct actor. Others are about using

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<sup>4</sup> Somers was killed during an attempt to free him in an American landing operation in Nissab district, Shabwa governorate, in December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> According to our own sources

<sup>6</sup> The sources confirmed that the group got a large amount that exceeded what it got from the Swiss hostage and others.

tribes in return for money because of its ease of movement. This happened in more than an abduction operation. However, the truth is that the group was sometimes behind the rumors that the tribes played a role in kidnapping foreigners. Holding the victim by the tribes lifts the embarrassment from the parties which will pay the ransom as they won't directly pay to "terrorists".

Furthermore, following the kidnapping of Al-Khalidi, the circulating story indicated that tribal armed men were involved in the abduction operation and sold him to AQAP. However, the group confirmed that the kidnapping of Al-Khalidi came two years after monitoring and tracking.<sup>7</sup> The group can't risk the engagement of elements outside its circle in complicated security operations like this according to sources close to AQAP.

When AQAP kidnapped Swiss teacher Sylvia Abrahat, Yemeni media platforms stressed that the tribes were behind the kidnapping operation. However, it turned out later that they had nothing to do with this.<sup>8</sup>

The sources also indicated that the group could buy an abductee from the tribes if they made this independently, but it won't coordinate with them to do something like.

Another example: After the operation to abduct Akam Sofyol, Director of the UN Office of Security and Safety in Yemen from Abyan, there were talks that tribes were responsible for the operation. Later, media outlets stressed that AQAP bought him in return for a large amount of money and weapons. However, there is nothing yet to categorically confirm or deny this.<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that tribes fear cooperating with AQAP in such a file, especially that it is designated as a terrorist group.

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<sup>7</sup> A video version issued by Al-Malahem, followed by the writer at the time.

<sup>8</sup> According to Al-Masdar Online website ([almasdaronline.com](http://almasdaronline.com))

<sup>9</sup> This is included in a video version in English and Arabic whose duration is 3.5 h



## Hiding the identity of kidnappers

When AQAP kidnapped Sylvia Abrahat in 2011 from Al-Hodeidah governorate, it found it difficult to get a ransom in return for releasing her despite all appeals.

Although AQAP didn't initially claim responsibility for kidnapping Abahat, her appearance in the video appeals confirmed this as she was wearing a hijab and decent islamic dress.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2013, Abrahat suddenly arrived at Doha. After, a Qatari mediation by which AQAP gained millions of dollars. At that time, Al-Jazeera website said that the amount of money paid didn't exceed 50000 \$ although the money spent by the group on the kidnapped teacher was much higher. According to "South24 Center's" sources, a local tribal mediator obtained 300000 US\$ in the same deal.<sup>11</sup>

After arriving in her country, the Swiss teacher disclosed the details of her abduction experience and how AQAP's elements dealt with her for over a year. This means that the group revealed itself to her as being the kidnappers.

Prior to this operation, the group had released 3 French persons in return for a big financial ransom without complications after an Omani mediation. Unlike what was circulated by media platforms at that time, France denied that it paid money in order to release its kidnapped subjects. The important thing here is the growing concerns that such a matter can encourage AQAP to carry out more kidnapping operations to get money.

After releasing the Swiss teacher, the group was keen not to appear in the scene to be able to get money quickly without complications. Thus, there have been different ways of displaying the appeals of its abductees. This was remarkable in the operation of kidnapping three people who are from Finland and Austria. Sources close to the group said that AQAP likely received advice

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<sup>10</sup> The group published more than one video l appeal, and the writer followed it up at the time.

<sup>11</sup> The Swiss hostage in Yemen arrives in Doha | Arabic News | [Al Jazeera Net](#)

from the mediator body regarding such a matter. The sources told “South24 Center”: “This may be understood from the way this body dealt with it”.

In this regard, sources said that the embassy of one European country in Sanaa exerted much efforts to release the three abductees (from Finland and Austria) but it made more efforts to know whether the hostages were in the grip of AQAP or tribes. This means that the group succeeded in camouflaging the kidnappers or to make itself a mere possible and uncertain option.

This came although the formal Yemeni narrative confirmed that the three people were kidnapped by tribal armed men before being sold to AQAP according to official sources at that time.<sup>12</sup>

### Long-term breath policy

Although AQAP accompanies the appeals of hostages with threats related to their life, they adopt the long-term breath policy as their own goal behind kidnapping is obtaining money or other gains.

In case of not reposing, AQAP resorts to pose pressure against the hostages' countries by exploiting the embarrassment related to its appearance. This is similar to what happened in the case of Abdullah Al-Khalidi who was forced by AQAP to admit that his state is behind conspiracies and allegations of that kind.<sup>13</sup>

AQAP has not killed any of its detained hostages. Both American Luke Somers and South African Pierre Corby were killed during an attempt to free the first hostage through a landing operation of Special Forces in Shabwa in December 2014.

However, the long-term aim of AQAP does not mean that it won't commit foolish acts against hostages in case of reaching an advanced level of despair regarding obtaining a ransom.

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<sup>12</sup>Finland sends a diplomat to Yemen after the kidnapping of two of its nationals ([aljoumhouria.com](http://aljoumhouria.com))

<sup>13</sup> Al-Khalidi appeared in a short video saying things that may have been dictated to him, and the writer followed him at the time.

## Mediators

### Qatar

Although the intervention of Arab states to release hostages held by AQAP may have happened at the request of the abductees' countries, selecting certain states to communicate with the group raises a lot of questions. But what is really surprising is the group's feelings of trust towards these countries which directly contacted it or via local mediators without informing the Yemeni government.

For example, Qatari officers arrived in Yemen in 2013 before they left through Sanaa International Airport accompanied by the Swiss kidnapped Sylvia Abrahat without passports. Due to the power held by the Islah party (Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen) at that time, Qatar didn't find difficulties in doing this. The Qatari officers arrogantly dealt with the airport's security and employees after they demanded their travel documents.

Away from the entry and exit of the Qatari officers without travel documents, our exclusive sources stressed that they met with some of the group's leaders and directly received the Swiss kidnapped woman in return for a big amount of money which was delivered to those leaders on the same day. According to the same sources, a local mediator was paid about 300000 US\$.

As for the party which paid the money, we could not obtain information about this. Nonetheless, Qatar's enthusiasm to solve the issue of the Swiss kidnapped woman stirs doubts that Doha is the one which paid the money. According to well-informed sources who spoke to "South24 Center", the communication between three groups and the Qatari side had been for a long time before releasing the hostage. According to the sources, it is unlikely that the group received a very big amount of money. It is also unlikely that the hostage issue was just an entry through which Doha engaged with AQAP to influence or affect it like what happened with Al-Nusra Front in Syria.

Over the past years, it is remarkable that AQAP moved away from ISIS in favor of more rapprochements with the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, AQAP engaged in a fierce battle against ISIS in Al-Bayda governorate to expel them. However, it stood alongside the Muslim Brotherhood in Abyan and Shabwa. After expelling forces affiliated with the Islah party from the city of Ataq, the group's audio speech by the leader Abu Ali al-Hadrami- declared the war against the governmental forces and the Saudi-Emirati led Coalition.

### **Sultanate of Oman**

Although Oman's endeavors in the Western hostages issue exceeded Qatar, its communication with the group was dominated through local mediations according to our exclusive sources.

In any case, the group received big amounts of money in return for releasing the hostages. This is although France denied paying money to release three of its subjects held by AQAP. However, this does not necessarily mean that Oman is the one who paid the ransom.

The Western countries usually deny paying money to armed groups. In 2009, the Swiss government denied paying any ransom in return for releasing hostages who hold its nationality in Africa. France Press reported at that time that "the Swiss officials give credit to Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure for securing Werner Greiner's release". They stressed that Switzerland didn't negotiate or pay a ransom for his release.

However, a private government meeting in Switzerland a few months after releasing the two hostages indicated that the government agreed to pay a ransom in return for releasing them.<sup>14</sup>

Although it is difficult to determine the paying party, the Omani interference in this way boosted the financial ransom market of the terrorist groups in Yemen.

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<sup>14</sup> Is it Right to Pay Ransoms for the Release of Hostages? - [BBC News Arabic](#)



Oman exploited its good relationships with Yemeni tribal figures to negotiate about releasing the hostages and paying money.

It is important to note that in addition to the Omani intervention to release Western hostages held by AQAP including the three French abductees in 2011, and three other hostages from Australia and Finland, it also intervened to release Western hostages held by the Houthis with whom Muscat has good relationships.

In 2015, The Omani efforts succeeded in releasing an American citizen detained by the Houthis. The same thing happened in 2016 with a German citizen, the French Isabelle Prim and the French citizen with Tunisian origin Nouran Hawas in 2016 who were all held by the Houthis.

Like AQAP, the Houthis received millions of dollars in return for releasing the Western hostages. As France denied paying a ransom to AQAP to release the three hostages, it also denied paying money to Isabelle Prim's kidnappers. The French denial came in response to translator "Sherine Makkawi" who was kidnapped with Prim before being released two weeks later as she confirmed that the kidnappers received 3 million US\$ from Paris.

In this regard, according to US media outlets, France is considered the biggest Western contributor in the kidnapping business. In fact, it has paid more than 58.1 million US\$ to AQAP and others since 2008 in return for releasing many French hostages.

### **Financial support and political gains**

Although Oman mediated with the Houthis at the request of the hostage's native countries, this intervention sometimes turned out to be a form of support to the group to provide several sources to back its military operations.

This is more likely in the cases in which the group hid its link with the abduction process such as Isabelle Prim and Nouran Hawas. The Houthis may

release others without money to make political gains based on their close relationship with Oman.

As for the Houthi gains, they may be in the form of concessions in the Yemeni file in their favor with the help of this reliable international mediator.

### **Houthi-AQAP coordination**

Regarding the Houthi political gains from releasing Western hostages, sources confirmed to “South 24 Center” that the Houthis bought some hostages from AQAP before releasing them later with Omani mediation.

The sources didn’t reveal the name of those hostages, but they indicated that there has been communication between the Houthis and AQAP since releasing the Iranian Cultural Attaché at the Tehran Embassy at Sanaa in 2014 who was kidnapped by AQAP.

According to the sources, the Houthi acquisition of hostages from AQAP in return for money or releasing some AQAP leaders, and members from Houthi prisons.

Moreover, the number of those who were released from the Houthi prisons is much less than the Houthi prisoners who are detained by AQAP. Over 300 prisoners, including big leaders, were released. The sources didn’t exclude a wider coordination between the two parties to manage the kidnapping operations in a way that exceeds the subject of buying and selling, as they claim.

### **The expansion of the kidnapping operations circle and its impact**

Given the success achieved by AQAP and the Houthis in managing the kidnapping operations and earning millions of dollars, it is not unlikely that other gangs enter the same line. This in light of the ongoing war, and the weak influence of the Yemeni government, and the presence of multi de-facto authorities.

It is not also unlikely that these new gangs engage in partnership with AQAP or the Houthis to manage these kinds of operations to receive money or achieve political gains, especially with the presence of an international mediator who is always ready to bargain with the kidnapers and lure them with money.

Such a matter would duplicate Yemen's humanitarian tragedy given the fact that foreigners who were lately subjected to this kind of operations and may face it in the future work in the humanitarian field such as Nouran Hawas and the UN official. The war has largely reduced the visits of those who used to come to Yemen for tourism and other purposes.

## Conclusion

- AQAP in Yemen relied upon the financial ransoms as an important funding source during the past years.
- There is no confirmation about the tribal involvement in the operations of kidnapping foreigners and selling them to AQAP in return for money. However, this could happen.
- The intervention of the external mediator tempts armed groups to carry out this type of operation.
- There has been a sort of coordination between the Houthis and AQAP on this side.
- The kidnapping operations may open the door to support the terrorist groups under a humanitarian pretext which is freeing hostages.
- The continuation of kidnapping operations would largely impact humanitarian work in Yemen.



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Is a pseudonym of a researcher specialized in armed group affairs. He demanded anonymity for personal reasons.

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