



The Leadership crisis of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

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The leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been under arrest for several months, according to a United Nations report. The document said Khalid bin Umar Batarfi, also known as Abu Miqdad al-Kindi, the leader of AQAP for just under a year, was arrested and his deputy, Saad Atef al-Awlaqi, died during an operation in Ghayda City, Al-Mahrah Governorate, in October 2020.¹ So far, the group has not announced who replaced Batarfi as the leader of AQAP.

On February 23, 2020, AQAP announced that it had selected Batarfi as the group's new leader. Batarfi was AQAP's third leader since the group was formed in January 2009. AQAP's first two leaders, Nasir al-Wuhayshi and Qasim al-Raymi, were both killed in U.S. drone strikes: Wuhayshi in June 2015 and Raymi in January 2020.²

The report -- filed to the Security Council from a UN monitoring team specializing in extremist groups - is the first official confirmation of Batarfi's arrest following unverified reports:

- On October 2, 2020, a pro-ISIS Telegram channel claimed that Batarfi turned himself into Yemeni forces following a Saudi-led raid in al-Mahrah. Allegedly, two key AQAP commanders were also killed in the raid.³
- The SITE Intelligence Group noted "unconfirmed reports" in October 2020 that Batarfi had been arrested by Yemeni security forces and then handed to Saudi Arabia.⁴

Given Batarfi was the "emir" of AQAP, there has arguably not been a more senior al Qaeda leader captured alive since Bin Laden founded the group more than 30 years ago.⁵

The loss of Batarfi is the latest in a string of setbacks for AQAP. It was reported that the leader of the group in Abyan, Al-Khadr al-Walidi, was killed in November 2020, and that the group was routed in Bayda', with remnant fighters from that governorate dispersing towards Shabwah, Ma'rib and Abyan.⁶

AQAP is not only involved in longstanding conflict with ISIS, but suffers from internal divisions and conflicts which ended up revealing two main camps within the organization. The first camp was led by Batarfi, who had the support of prominent and senior leaders such as, Saad Atef al-Awlaqi, Judge Hamad al-Tamimi and Ammar al-San'ani, while the second camp includes Abu Omar Al-Nahdi and Daoud Al-Sayari. The internal conflict in AQAP strengthens the influence and rise of ISIS that so far has not announced the death of any of its leaders.

Khalid bin Umar Batarfi

Batarfi is from a Yemeni family but was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1979.⁷ Although he was born in Riyadh, Batarfi graduated high school in Jeddah, eventually studying with a number of prominent Salafi shaykhs including al-Qaeda linked ideologue Abu Qatada, before leaving for Afghanistan in 1999.⁸

He spent eight months in Afghanistan, training at al Qaeda's al Farouq camp near Kandahar and fighting alongside the Taliban. Batarfi returned to Afghanistan months before 9/11 and in 2001,

¹ Al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen under arrest: UN report, Al Arabiya, February 5, 2021.

² Gregory D. Johnsen, Khalid Batarfi and the Future of AQAP, *Lawfare Blog*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/khalid-batarfi-and-future-aqap>.

³ <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/khalid-batarfi>

⁴ Al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen under arrest: UN report.

⁵ Paul Cruickshank, Al Qaeda's leader in Yemen under arrest, UN report reveals, CNN, February 4, 2021.

⁶ <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/khalid-batarfi>

⁷ The U.S. Department of Treasury's specially designated nationals listing also gives 1978 and 1980 as possible dates of birth.

⁸ Gregory D. Johnsen, Khalid Batarfi and the Future of AQAP.

Batarfi fought alongside the Taliban and Al Qaeda against the Northern Alliance and U.S. forces (operation "Enduring Freedom"), before slipping across the border to Pakistan and eventually to Iran. He was imprisoned in Iran for a short time before being sent to Yemen.

Batarfi in Yemen

Batarfi returned to Yemen in 2002 and then-Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh held him in prison for two years before releasing him in 2004. Between 2004 and 2008, Batarfi maintained a low profile. Al-Qaeda didn't have much of a presence in Yemen in 2004 or 2005, and Batarfi spent much of his time providing support for Yemenis traveling to Iraq to fight. Batarfi also married a local Yemeni woman during this period and had two sons.⁹

Batarfi - 2010-2015

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed by the 2009 merger of Al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemen branches. In 2010, Batarfi joined AQAP in Yemen.¹⁰ That year Batarfi led AQAP's push into Abyan and was later named the group's emir in that governorate.

In March 2011, he was arrested at a check point outside of Taiz on a visit to his family. He was sent to prison in Sanaa, but in late 2013 Batarfi was transferred to the Central Security Prison in al-Mukalla.

AQAP took advantage of the chaos and fighting across Yemen to launch an offensive on al-Mukalla in April 2015. As part of this offensive, AQAP took control of the local prison, freeing Batarfi and more than 200 other inmates.¹¹

Batarfi – 2015 – 2020

After his release from prison, Batarfi slowly emerged as one of AQAP's preeminent ideologues and appeared to have been Qasim al-Raymi's deputy and group spokesman. Batarfi has appeared in numerous AQAP videos and gave many interviews to the media:

- In this period AQAP claimed responsibility for the deadly 2015 terrorist attack in Paris on French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, targeted for its cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad and Batarfi praised the attack.
- When AQAP's ideological leader Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi was killed by a U.S. drone strike in April 2015, Batarfi officially announced his death.
- In August 2015, AQAP released a video of Batarfi praising Chattanooga shooter, Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez and condemning "America, France, and other kufr nations."
- In June 2016, Batarfi issued a statement praising AQAP's leader Nasir al Wuhayshi after he was killed in a U.S. air strike that month. Batarfi threatened that al-Qaeda would target the U.S. economy, attack U.S. interests, and "destroy them."
- In June 2017, Batarfi condemned Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt for severing ties with Qatar. Batarfi issued a statement of solidarity on behalf of AQAP after the four countries designated several Muslim Brotherhood- and al-Qaeda-related individuals in Qatar. Batarfi condemned the terror list as a "war against Muslims" and called all Islamic scholars, preachers, and groups to support "jihad" against "the tyrants."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In 2008, Batarfi rejoined al-Qaeda's recently resurrected affiliate in Yemen.

¹¹ Gregory D. Johnsen, Khalid Batarfi and the Future of AQAP.

Batarfi and Israel

President Trump in December 2017 said his administration recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and move its embassy there from Tel Aviv. The move was hailed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and by leaders across much of the Israeli political spectrum. It also provoked fury from the Palestinians, who said the US could no longer serve as a peace mediator, and prompted condemnations from much of the international community.

On October 17, 2018, Batarfi called US President Donald Trump's precedent-breaking declaration on Jerusalem "a declaration of a new Jewish-Crusader war" and called on Muslims to "rise and attack the Jews and the Americans everywhere. The Muslims inside the occupied land must kill every Jew, by running him over, or stabbing him, or by using any weapon against him, or by burning their homes."

On October 18, 2018, he was placed on the US State Department's list of global terrorists and the U.S. Department of State offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to the capture of Batarfi.¹² According to State Department announcement, "This designation seeks to deny Batarfi the resources he needs to plan and carry out further terrorist attacks." Among the consequences of the designation, "all of Batarfi's property and interests in property subject to US jurisdiction are blocked, and US persons are generally prohibited from engaging in any transactions with him."¹³

In the wake of the Abraham Accords, Al-Qaeda's Al-Sahab Media, as well as Al-Malahim Media of AQAP, issued statements condemning the leadership of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, warning other countries against following suit and calling on their followers to retaliate by attacking foreign interests in the region.

Summary

The United States considers Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to be al-Qaeda's most dangerous branch and indeed the group has claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks including: the 2009 "pants bomb" plot, in which an explosive device failed to detonate on a Northwest Airlines flight as it approached the US city of Detroit on Christmas Day. The attack on the offices of the French satirical publication Charlie Hebdo in 2015 and the mass shooting in 2019 at a US naval base in Florida, in which a Saudi air force officer killed three American sailors.

Yemen has been racked by conflict since 2015 when a Saudi-led coalition intervened after the Iran-backed Houthis seized control of the capital Sanaa. AQAP thrived in the chaos of years of civil war between Yemen's Saudi-backed government and Shia Houthi rebels. AQAP has carried out operations against both the Houthis and government forces.

The U.S. has waged a long-running drone war against the leaders of the group and AQAP suffered serious setbacks. In February 2020 its leader Qassim al-Raymi was killed in a US air raid in Yemen. Raymi had himself succeeded Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was killed in a US drone attack in Yemen in June 2015. As a result, the group's abilities on the ground have dwindled, although it still inspires attacks carried out by "lone wolf" armed group members or former operatives.

Qassim al-Raymi's successor, Batarfi, was arrested during an operation in Ghayda City, Al-Mahrah Governorate, in October 2020. The same operation also led to the death of the group's second in command, Saad Atef al-Awlaqi. For AQAP, which has not acknowledged Batarfi's arrest, the rare capture of one of its senior operatives alive will be seen as an embarrassing setback. In addition to leadership losses, AQAP is suffering an erosion of its ranks caused by dissensions and desertions, led

¹² Al-Qaeda leader who urged attacks on Jews and Americans put on US terror list, *The Times of Israel*, January 24, 2018.

¹³ *Ibid.*

primarily by one of Batarfi's ex-lieutenants, Abu Omar al-Nahdi.¹⁴ The death of many experienced al-Qaeda leaders and the internal conflicts in the organization strengthens the influence and rise of ISIS, which is much more radical and brutal than al-Qaeda.

AQAP has suffered major setbacks that have hampered its operational capabilities. Yet, the group has not been defeated and it remains to be seen whether it can rehabilitate itself and re-establish its status while taking advantage of the conflicts between the Hadi government and Houthi rebels on the one hand and southern separatists on the other.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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