

CFR Backgrounders

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

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Introduction

The militant Islamist group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in January 2009 through a union of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of [al-Qaeda](#). Jihadist antecedents in the region date to the early 1990s, when thousands of mujahadeen returned to Yemen after fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. Analysts rate the Yemen-based group as the most lethal Qaeda franchise, carrying out a domestic insurgency while maintaining its sights on Western targets. The group's threats have disrupted operations in dozens of U.S. diplomatic facilities in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, and it has inspired or directed attacks in the United States and Europe.

Yemen, long a fractured and fragile country, is on the brink of collapse. Popular protests succeeded in ousting President Ali Abdullah Saleh in February 2012. His successor, President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, tasked with transitioning the country into a democracy, has confronted AQAP militants and Houthi rebels. The Houthis, Shia militants who took over the capital in September 2014, forced Hadi to flee Sana'a in February 2015. A sectarian conflict in Yemen could help [AQAP exploit the instability](#) and expand its domestic insurgency among Sunni communities. U.S. counterterrorism operations—particularly drone strikes—continue, but face challenges as clashes between the country's political and sectarian groups escalate.

A Legacy of Jihad

In the late 1980s, the Saleh regime fostered jihad in what was then North Yemen by repatriating thousands of Yemeni nationals who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. [Saleh dispatched these mujahadeen](#) to fight the Soviet-backed Marxist government of South Yemen in a successful bid for unification, and subsequently, to crush southern secessionists.

The returning Yemenis were joined by other Arab veterans of the Afghan war, foremost among them Osama bin Laden, who advocated a central role for Yemen in global jihad. A corps of jihadists who had trained under bin Laden in Afghanistan formed the militant group Islamic Jihad in Yemen (1990–94), one of several [AQAP predecessors](#). Other such groups include the Army of Aden Abyan (1994–98) and al-Qaeda in Yemen, or AQY (1998–2003).

In October 2000, a skiff piloted by two members of AQY detonated several hundred pounds of explosives into the hull of the USS Cole, which was moored in the port of Aden. Seventeen U.S.

servicemen were killed. Two years later, another suicide bombing orchestrated by AQY, on the French oil tanker M/V Limburg, killed one crew member and further highlighted the threat to Western interests in the region. Several militants involved in the Limburg plot would eventually hold top leadership positions in AQAP.

Many analysts believe Saleh may have stoked the jihadist threat to ensure Western backing for his embattled regime.

Following the Cole bombing and the al-Qaeda-led attacks on September 11, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush's administration pressed the Saleh government to begin aggressive counterterrorism operations against AQY. Many analysts believe Saleh may have stoked the jihadist threat (he was accused of facilitating [prison escapes](#) of convicted terrorists) to ensure Western backing for his embattled regime, which viewed northern insurgents and southern secessionists as a greater threat than al-Qaeda.

Washington dispatched Special Forces and intelligence personnel to Yemen to aid the counterterrorism campaign. A U.S. drone strike in 2002, the first such operation in the region, killed AQY's leader, [Abu Ali al-Harithi](#). By the end of 2003, AQY faced a precipitous membership decline.

Resiliency

In February 2006, twenty-three convicted terrorists escaped from a high-security prison in the capital of Sana'a, a turning point for al-Qaeda in the region. Many of the escapees worked to "[resurrect al-Qaeda from the ashes \(PDF\)](#)" and launch a fresh campaign of attacks.

In late 2008, a crackdown by the Saudi government led remnants of the local al-Qaeda franchise there to flee across the border and unite with the resurgent jihad in Yemen. The two branches [merged](#) in 2009.

The U.S. State Department estimates the organization had "[close to a thousand members](#)" in 2014. This represents an increase from some [two hundred to three hundred members](#) in 2009, Yemen expert Gregory Johnsen notes, even as so-called al-Qaeda central, based in Pakistan, has declined.

AQAP has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks in the region since 2006. These have included the failed August 2009 [assassination attempt](#) on Saudi prince Mohammed bin Nayef (now deputy crown prince of the kingdom), an attack on the U.S. embassy in Sana'a in 2008, attacks on Italian and British embassies, suicide bombings targeting Belgian tourists in January 2008 and [Korean tourists](#) in March 2009, and the bombing of a Japanese oil tanker in April 2008. In May 2012, a [suicide bomber](#) killed more than ninety Yemeni soldiers rehearsing for a military parade in Sana'a. A December 2013 attack on the defense ministry and military hospital left more than fifty people dead, and elicited a rare apology from AQAP for the [killing of unarmed health workers](#).

AQAP-linked operatives have also attempted, unsuccessfully, to strike the U.S. homeland: Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to [bomb](#) (PDF) a Detroit-bound jet on Christmas Day, 2009, but failed due to a technical malfunction; two attempts to down Chicago-bound cargo planes with

bombs disguised as printer cartridges were [intercepted](#) in October 2010 based on Saudi intelligence; and a May 2012 attempted [bombing](#) of a U.S.-bound airliner was foiled by a double agent. The group claimed responsibility for the January 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris that killed twelve people, but experts question whether [AQAP directed or inspired the massacre](#).

More than half of the 166 prisoners held in the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay are Yemeni, and President Barack Obama's long-standing pledge to [shut down](#) the facility is contingent on [repatriating them](#). But some U.S. lawmakers have objected, raising concern about the prisoners' return to the battlefield through detention and reintegration programs.

An Effective Propaganda

The primary goals of AQAP are consistent with the principles of militant jihad, which aims to purge Muslim countries of Western influence and replace secular "apostate" governments with fundamentalist Islamic regimes observant of [sharia](#). AQAP objectives include overthrowing the regime in Sana'a; assassinating Western nationals and their allies, including members of the Saudi royal family; striking at related interests in the region, such as embassies and energy concerns; and attacking the U.S. homeland.

The group has also mastered recruitment through propaganda and media campaigns. A bimonthly AQAP magazine in Arabic, *Sada al-Malahim* ("The Echo of Battles"), is tailored to a Yemeni audience and offers theological support and praise for jihadists. The U.S.-born Anwar al-Awlaki and Pakistani-American Samir Khan were central figures in AQAP's production of propaganda aimed at Western audiences. Though they were killed in an October 2011 U.S. [drone strike](#), their English-language propaganda magazine *Inspire* continues to be [published](#). U.S. Major Nidal Hasan exchanged emails with Awlaki prior to Hasan's shooting rampage at the U.S. Army's Fort Hood in 2009.

Analysts say that AQAP's messaging attracts recruits by "[emphasizing national struggle](#)," focusing on jihad as an answer to local grievances while remaining focused on what jihadists call the "far enemy"—the United States, particularly for its unholy alliance with Saudi Arabia.

The Houthi advance can help AQAP find recruits and allies among Sunni tribes seeking defend against what they view as a Shia and Iranian incursion.

Houthi rebels—Zaydi Shias who practice a religion closer to Sunni Islam than Shia Iran's dominant Twelver strain—have encroached into Sunni areas in Yemen. Houthis dominate northwestern Yemen and the capital, while AQAP is expanding its presence in southern and central provinces. The groups have clashed, and the Houthi advance can help [AQAP find recruits and allies](#) among Sunni tribes seeking defend against what they view as a Shia and Iranian incursion.

Leadership and Funding

[AQAP is hierarchical \(PDF\)](#), compartmentalized, and decentralized, analysts say, which allows it to withstand attacks and arrests.

Nasser al-Wuhayshi, AQAP's long-time leader, served as bin Laden's aide-de-camp in Afghanistan for some four years. He was reportedly appointed "general manager" of al-Qaeda by Ayman al-

Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor, effectively making him the organization's second-in-command globally. In June 2015, Wuhayshi was killed in an [apparent U.S. missile strike](#), and AQAP [announced](#) military commander Qassim al-Raimi as his successor.

[Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri](#), the organization's chief bomb maker, made explosives for the failed 2009 Christmas Day bombing, demonstrating the technical capacity to avoid typical airport detection and strike at the United States.

Financing for AQAP follows the patterns of other al-Qaeda affiliates, according to U.S. officials. This includes sources such as bank robberies, drug proceeds, and phony charities. Kidnapping for ransom continues to generate [tens of millions of dollars](#) in revenues for AQAP and other al-Qaeda groups, say U.S. Treasury officials. A December 2009 classified memo from then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated donors in Saudi Arabia were "the most significant source" of [funding to Sunni terrorist groups](#), including al-Qaeda.

Yemen's Troubled Landscape

Yemen's political and economic challenges have been compounded by the [overthrow of its government](#) by the Houthis and the subsequent Saudi-led air campaign and blockade.

One of the poorest Arab countries, Yemen had a poverty rate of 54.5 percent in 2012, [the World Bank estimates](#). Nearly half the people require food assistance, the [United Nations said in 2013](#). The World Bank [suspended its operations](#) in the country in March 2015 due to political and security constraints. Rapid population growth has heightened pressure on natural resources—especially water—and public services. Unemployment is rampant.

As the Arab Spring protests spread to Yemen in 2011, Saleh moved troops deployed throughout the country to Sana'a in a last-minute bid for survival. Amid the security vacuum in the south, Islamist militias seized territory in the southern province of Abyan. Ansar al-Sharia, an Islamist insurgent group that analysts say is either a rebranding of AQAP or a nationalist-Islamist insurgency more loosely affiliated with AQAP, declared Abyan an Islamic emirate. The "[Taliban-like insurgent movement \(PDF\)](#)" has restored social services, repaired infrastructure, and established [sharia courts](#).

Yemen has become increasingly fractured since President Hadi was ousted from the capital and went into exile. The [country is torn](#) between ascendant Houthis, remnants of the former regime, AQAP, and a secession movement in the south, and none are capable of controlling the entire country. A transition plan backed by the Gulf Cooperation Council and the United States has faltered. Foreign embassies have been closed in the capital. Civil war, [which Hadi warned of](#) in 2013, and foreign intervention have created further instability for AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia to exploit.

U.S. Policy in Yemen

The Obama administration has a three-fold strategy for Yemen: combating AQAP in the short term, increasing development assistance in the long term, and organizing international support for stabilization efforts.

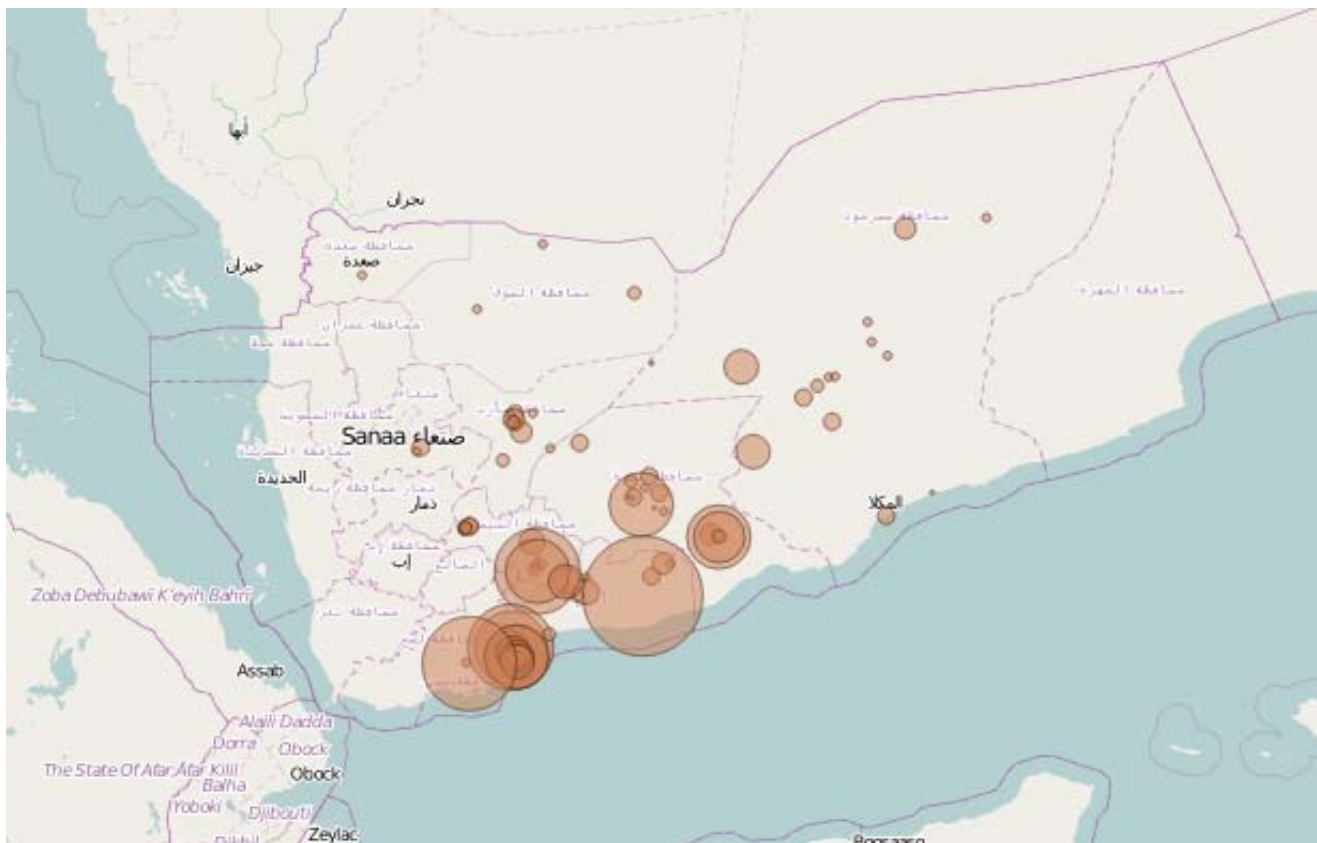
In January 2010, the Obama administration designated AQAP a foreign terrorist organization and [amended the order](#) to include Ansar al-Sharia after a May 2012 suicide bombing killed

ninety-six in Sana'a. The United Nations has maintained sanctions on AQAP's leadership since 2010.

The United States collaborated with Yemen on counterterrorism since the USS Cole bombing and 9/11 attacks, but the Saleh regime's violent crackdown on protestors in 2011 strained the relationship. Events culminated in May 2011 with the [U.S. backing of the GCC transition initiative](#) that removed Saleh from power. In May 2012, the Obama administration issued an [executive order](#) threatening sanctions on individuals who disrupted the political transition under President Hadi. Hadi maintains strong relations with the United States, analysts say, because his domestic base is not particularly strong.

The U.S. campaign of [targeted killings](#) expanded with the construction of secret bases in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. In all, the CIA and Joint Special Operations Command have carried out scores of drone strikes in Yemen under the Obama administration (the Bush administration carried out one, in 2002). [Conservative estimates](#) suggest 650 casualties, while the [New America Foundation](#), a Washington-based policy institute that compiles local and international news reports, puts the total killed as high as 1,100 as of March 2015. The program continued even after Hadi left the capital, with the killing of [Harith an-Nadhari in January 2015](#). Four suspected militants were [killed the following month](#).

This strategy has been on hold in 2015 since the Houthis overran Sana'a. Washington has [withdrawn special operations forces](#) that were training and assisting Yemeni troops, and the Saudi air campaign has reportedly [destroyed military installations](#) belonging to U.S.-trained Yemeni counterterrorism units.



Known drone and air strikes in Yemen targeting al-Qaeda and other militants. Size of circle relative to average estimate of those killed (Courtesy New America Foundation).

Despite tactical successes, including the killing of Awlaki, Khan, and possibly [Said al-Shihri](#), who, after his release from Guantanamo Bay, rose to AQAP's number-two position, critics challenge the strategic wisdom of [drone strikes](#). Some analysts argue that they engender anti-Americanism, alienate populations from the Yemeni government, and make aggrieved kinsmen of victims sympathetic to AQAP, swelling AQAP's ranks. [Signature strikes](#), in which targets are chosen based on behavioral profiles, remain particularly contentious.

Mohammed Sergie contributed to this report.

Additional Resources

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Services [offers](#) (PDF) background on U.S. interests and policy in Yemen.

The [New America Foundation](#), [Long War Journal](#), and [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) maintain databases of drone strike casualty estimates.

Former CFR National Intelligence Fellow Charles E. Berger [proposes](#) a rehabilitation program as the cornerstone of the U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism relationship.

Sheila Carapico [critiques](#) U.S. and GCC discourse and policies in *Muftah*.

This [Foreign Policy](#) article charts the alliance of convenience between Yemen's former president Saleh and AQAP.

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