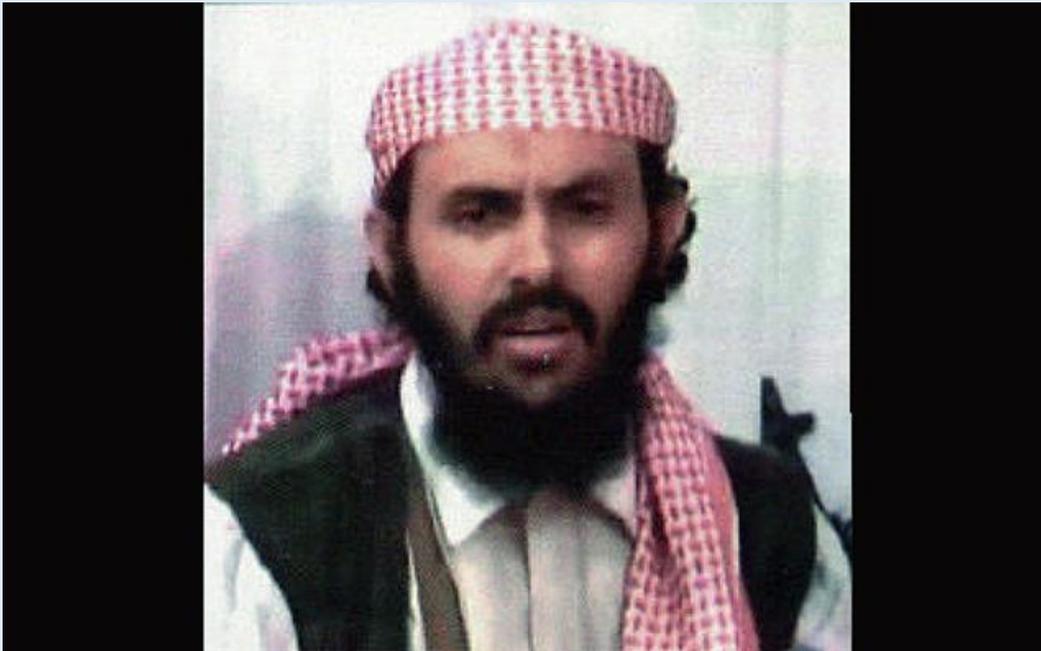




Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

AQAP's Future and the Problems of Succession



By Max Quigley

Abstract

With the loss of their charismatic leader al-Wuhayshi, AQAP's future is anything but certain. On the threshold between irrelevance and ample opportunity, this jihadi faction's future seems to hang on the capability of their new leader Qasim al-Raymi and his ability to exploit the opportunities the environment of Yemen's civil war has provided while simultaneously hedging AQAP's position against the potential threats of opposing domestic and foreign forces.

Introduction

As Yemen plummets further into civil war and sectarian violence, one of the big questions is what will become of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Commentators were largely of the opinion that AQAP was a prime beneficiary of the turmoil. In particular, the Saudi-led airstrikes against Shiite Houthi targets was seen as nothing short of a leg-up for AQAP.

The jihadi group, whose previous activity in Yemen amounted to something like a cat-and-mouse game with the Hadi government, a cyclical routine of capturing and then losing territory, was now faced with a starkly reduced and badly organised government force and a rebel group who were less interested in AQAP held territories than they were in government-controlled and southern areas. And, importantly, a US military presence became virtually absent in Yemen. In the face of this kind of unprecedented opportunity, AQAP swept in to put entire towns under their control, free al-Qaeda operatives from prison and capture crucial army bases from government forces.

That is not to say there was no opposition to them. Government forces and other rebel groups certainly put up a fight, and with the appearance of ISIS into the fray, a united Sunni jihadi force remained out of sight. Still, it looked as if, as Naseer al-Omari, the New York based political commentator said, the real winners in Yemen will eventually be al-Qaeda and ISIS.

At least it looked that way until June 12 when the news broke that AQAP's charismatic leader and al-Qaeda general manager, Nasir al-Wuhayshi had been killed by a US drone strike. Since then, al-Qaeda's future in Yemen has been somewhat shaken with commentators asking, what now?

Nasir al-Wuhayshi

Nasir al-Wuhayshi, al-Qaeda's number two and global manager, was killed by a US drone strike on June 12, 2015. While his death came around the same time as that of another important al-Qaeda figure, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Wuhayshi's was by far the more important. In fact, his death marks the most significant in al-Qaeda since the killing of bin Laden himself.

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Yet, this central figure in al-Qaeda's complex hierarchy seems to have been a somewhat obscure character and was never a particularly public figure. Yet, he was of crucial importance to both AQAP and indeed al-Qaeda as a whole.¹

After serving as secretary to Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan, Wuhayshi was arrested in Iran in 2001 and two years later was extradicted to Yemen where he remained imprisoned until 2006. It was during this time that Wuhayshi gained prominence amongst his fellow jihadis, earning himself a reputation for piety.²

One account even suggests he was so well versed in Quranic scripture that he could cite a verse for any given situation at any time.³

Following the death of another al-Qaeda head in 2002, Wuhayshi assumed the leadership role of al-Qaeda's Yemen operations and in 2006 escaped from prison along with 23 other Yemeni captives. These would come to be the core group of AQAP members. In 2009, the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda fused forming Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Wuhayshi's appointment to the leadership position was confirmed by the head of al-Qaeda Core, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in an online video message.

Thereafter, Wuhayshi's public addresses were conducted much like any other al-Qaeda chief, posting online videos inciting violence against western oppression against Muslims in and beyond the Middle East. However, it was his organisational skills coupled with his charismatic personality that transformed AQAP from a motley band of jihadis into what would in time become considered the most dangerous al-Qaeda affiliate.⁴

Wuhayshi had led al-Qaeda's Yemeni operations since about 2008 and would come to transform the future AQAP into an organisation with a formidable reputation both home and abroad. His leadership abilities would also mean a promotion to the position of al-Qaeda general manager in 2013. This afforded him enough authority within the group to commission transnational operations. In fact, it was Wuhayshi who claimed responsibility for the attack

on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015. Wuhayshi had, however, been responsible for conducting operations much earlier than that. In 2010, when the U.S. State Department deemed AQAP a terrorist organization, they identified Wuhayshi as “responsible for approving targets, recruiting new members, allocating resources to training and attack planning, and tasking others to carry out attacks.” Wuhayshi had certainly proven himself capable and climbed the ranks of al-Qaeda. Following bin Laden's death in 2011, he endorsed Zawahiri as successor to al-Qaeda Core, after which he himself became a contender to succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Under Wuhayshi, AQAP continued to call for violence within the US and for the overthrow of the Crusader enemies, calling for the removal of the Cross and the bearers of the Cross; namely the United States. Wuhayshi had become such a high value target, that the US government put out a \$10 million reward for his capture.⁵

Wuhayshi's death was certainly a big win for US counterterrorism operations, but the speed with which AQAP appointed their new leader, Qasim al-Raymi, highlights an important fact; that while Wuhayshi's death can certainly be considered a victory for US security services, targeted leadership killings cannot be expected to disassemble the group.

AQAP are quick to act and unwilling to leave the position void for any amount of time to maintain stability in their hierarchy and avoid leaving them

vulnerable to a fracturing of their cohesion. As Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer pointed out, “Decapitation strikes have yet to defeat an [al Qaeda] franchise. It won’t defeat AQAP.”⁶

Adam Baron, of the European Council on Foreign Relations said, "it is a great time for AQAP [...] when you look at the situation on the ground. As long as the war continues, as long as Yemen continues inching further and further into the abyss of being a failed state, AQAP and other groups will continue to capitalise. Celebrating the death of al-Wuhayshi as if it means the death of AQAP is a very flawed way to look at this."⁷

Qasim al-Raymi

The native Yemeni, Qasim al-Raymi has acted as AQAP's military commander since it was established in 2009. According to an article published in the International Business Times, al-Raymi was instrumental in persuading the group's leadership to stay loyal to al-Qaeda instead of shifting alliances to the Islamic State when the major ideological split happened in 2014.

While al-Raymi never fought alongside the al-Qaeda Core leadership in Afghanistan, his connection to AQAP and indeed Wuhayshi himself is long and illustrious. He was one of the prisoners who escaped with Wuhayshi and has been implicated in several high level activities including

suicide attacks on tourists and the failed underwear bomb plot.

He has appeared in several al-Qaeda videos with the other AQAP central leadership. In one of these videos al-Raymi was particularly vociferous on the shortcomings of Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, accusing him of valuing Lebanese lives above those of Palestinians.

Over the course of his career with AQAP al-Raymi has been subject to several false rumours of his death, first in 2007 and again in 2010. Then, in 2010, he was added to the US State Department's most wanted terrorist list.⁸

An item of importance that needs to be taken into account with al-Raymi's succession is the personal enmity the Saudi monarchy may have towards him. In 2011 al-Raymi reminded them that they were still considered 'apostates', and publicly announced several royal family members including Saudi King Abdallah,

Crown Prince Sultan, Interior Minister Prince Nayif and his son, Muhammad bin Nayif to be on the AQAP hit list. This may have interesting implications as far as the Saudi aerial campaign against Yemen is concerned, who have until now not actively targeted AQAP.⁹

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predecessor, or if he buckles under the pressure of the various challenges AQAP faces.¹⁰

AQAP's Challenges

Among these challenges are not only ongoing US drone strikes. The Islamic State is providing AQAP with a headache too. The group's level of influence is still unclear and presumably still in its infancy compared with AQAP, but could certainly continue to grow. Their propaganda and targeted, devastating attacks on the Shia community in Yemen could be a strong draw for jihadis there. In fact, the IS has helped to transform the conflict from a civil, largely territorial conflict into an increasingly sectarian one. As Daniel Byman and Jennifer Williams put it, "this challenge will put pressure on AQAP to join the sectarian fight against the Houthi 'apostates' or risk being seen as irrelevant".¹¹

But AQAP has traditionally steered clear of this extreme takfiri style of militancy. Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders continually urged their followers to refrain from violence directed at the Shia community. In fact, it was his denouncement of extreme takfirism that drew the line in the sand between him and, the man who can be seen as the founding figure of IS, Abu Musab Zarqawi, and later denounce the IS as a whole in 2014.¹²

So far, the Syrian based al-Qaeda subsidiary, Al-Nusra Front, has refrained from this kind of extreme sectarianism. This is as ideological as it is political. Both IS and al-Qaeda are trying to win the hearts and minds of the Sunni populations across the region, to be seen as the defenders of Islam. But this kind of approach in Yemen could prove a double

edged sword for AQAP. On the one hand, the Sunni population may find a degree of refuge in the less extreme governance of AQAP than IS. AQAP has explicitly determined to govern less strictly than IS for this reason.

AQAP's experience in garnering support from locals is, therefore, a valuable asset and one which they need to exploit. Unlike, arguably ISIS, AQAP have learned that the imposition of an excessively strict form of sharia has the effect of antagonizing the locals and have instead opted to work with local leaders. This is an important aspect in the crafting of their public image as the champions of Sunni Islam. While the divide between al-Qaeda and Islamic State supporters may certainly prove an inconvenience, their governing policies may serve them well in gaining the support of local Sunni tribes and militias.

On the other hand, AQAP need to be careful not to lose their following as new recruits and even AQAP members may be tempted to join IS's sectarian fuelled fight in light of the huge Houthi surge. For Sunni tribes and militant groups, the Houthis currently present the most immediate threat and defeating them is of the foremost concern.

While IS and AQAP have already had scuffles, their rivalry has failed to produce the kind of mutually destructive, full scale battles their Syrian franchises have engaged in.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia seems to be clearing the way for these Salafi groups to dig their heels in in Yemen. AQAP hasn't denounced the Saudi bombing, which is to be expected since the

airstrikes almost only target their enemies, the Houthis.

For the time being, AQAP look to be set on consolidating their strength in their already held positions. Waiting and watching how Saudi-airstrikes and the southern pro-government's fight with the Houthis plays out, is currently probably their best option. Getting embroiled in a long, protracted ground war is dangerous and AQAP have already learned from their past mistakes.¹³

Nasir al-Wuhayshi, for example, urged al-Qaeda outfits to act prudently. Letters sent by Wuhayshi in 2012 to the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abu Musab Abdel al-Wadoud, shed insight into his thoughts at the time and the lessons learned by AQAP. Wuhayshi urged Wadoud not to repeat previous mistakes, including the announcement of an emirate prematurely. Wuhayshi wrote "As soon as we took control of the areas, we were advised by the General Command here not to declare the establishment of an Islamic principality, or state, for a number of reasons: We wouldn't be able to treat people on the basis of a state since we would not be able to provide for all their needs, mainly because our state is vulnerable. Second: Fear of failure, in the event that the world conspires against us. If this were to happen, people may start to despair and believe that jihad is fruitless."¹⁴

Even bin Laden had warned his fellow jihadists not to act too rashly, and certainly not in relation to

establishing an Islamic emirate. He wrote, "we have to continue with exhausting and depleting them until they become so weak that they can't overthrow any state that we establish. That will be the time to commence with forming the Islamic state."

Wuhayshi and bin Laden clearly wanted the organisation to remain obscure and hard to pin down, waging a slow war of attrition against western targets, believing a territorially defined jihadist entity represented an easy target for the US.¹⁵

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Hit-and-run tactics like their jailbreak and subsequent capture of the poorly defended southern city of Mukalla is, therefore, the kind of strategy likely to continue to be implemented, along with a less strict version of sharia in the areas they control than the IS would be likely to employ.¹⁶

Conclusion

With the removal of the US military and diplomatic presence in Yemen, but with continued drone attacks, AQAP may be largely confined to focusing their efforts in Yemen. Their leaders are on the run from drone strikes and if they don't vigorously defend the physical territory they have taken, they risk slinking into obscurity and irrelevance. AQAP's predicament lies in the fact that they need a proactive approach to keep attracting foreign financiers and recruits, while simultaneously

needing to avoid full scale battles to preserve their organisation against formidable local enemies.¹⁷

So, for the time being, it looks like AQAP's attention will need to be turned to mostly Yemen. But the jihadists will still have to carefully weigh up the risk – reward ratio of fighting an insurgent war against the Houthis. On the one hand, they have the opportunity to position themselves as a redemptive force against the encroaching Shiite rebels. On the other hand, a long drawn out ground fight against a well-equipped enemy can easily deplete resources and manpower.

Meanwhile, the potential threat of an AQAP defection to IS has been dissipated by Qasim al-Raymi's pledge of *bayat* to Zawahiri. This was vital for Zawahiri as AQAP represents al-Qaeda's most effective wing and as such, a strategically important factor. This doesn't, of course mean there may not be individual defections to IS. Supposing al-Raymi proves a weak leader, AQAP could potentially see AQAP fighters switch sides. But as a whole, Zawahiri can still claim AQAP to be under his wing.¹⁸

This is vital for al-Qaeda Core, as a real source of strength for them has been its affiliate organisations. Al-Qaeda Core benefits considerably through the presence of such groups by expanding their global reach and mission capabilities, increasing their relevance in the jihadi world and providing logistical means and hardened fighters. These affiliates benefit too, not simply by adopting the al-Qaeda brand name but also in the area of networks, logistics, manpower, training, recruiting and

finances.

Affiliate organisation can, however, present their own problems. Chief among these can be ideological dichotomies between leaders. Jihadi entities who choose to operate under the al-Qaeda umbrella may need to put their initial goals on hold for a time and get on board the Core's transnational mission.¹⁹

Up until now, AQAP hasn't been overtly affected by this problem. This can largely be attributed to the close personal links between Wuhayshi and al-Qaeda Core's leadership, namely bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. With al-Raymi now taking the mantle of leadership, a man who never fought side-by-side with the aforementioned leaders, it remains to be seen whether he proves capable of faithfully maintaining the mission of his forebears and superiors.

It is worth reemphasizing AQAP's dominance in the jihadi scene. They are by far the more dominant force and for the time being IS pose no immediate existential threat to them. Furthermore, al-Qaeda's capture of Mukallah, under the guidance of Wuhayshi, galvanized their position as top dog, flooding them with small arms, light weapons, heavy artillery and vehicles as well as tens of millions of dollars looted from the central bank.²⁰

IS cells now operate in eight Yemeni governorates and these are organised according to the ISIS global 'wilayat' or province structure. However, there is no sign yet that IS are actually trying to implement any form of governance here. These cells don't necessarily seem to coordinate their attacks and one

of these groups, wilayat Shabwa, even fought alongside Sunni tribal fighters against Houthi fighters.

Yet, IS has not received much public support. Interestingly, early IS activity included suicide bombings against Shia targets. These seem to have stopped altogether possibly indicating minimal recruitment success as they lack enough members to dedicate to suicide bombings. Instead they have begun using improvised explosive devices and hit-and-run tactics with a seemingly total aversion to capturing territory. Their aim is to fuel sectarian tensions which they certainly intend to exploit once they gain a more domineering presence. IS will continue to try to establish a foothold in the midst of instability, so its in their interest to keep creating it.²¹

While the IS threat to AQAP currently remains limited, AQAP will be eyeing their movements with close attention. Luckily for AQAP, the Mukallah central bank raid and weapons influx came at a perfect time; it gave them material support as well as a much needed boost of morale for their recruits. Recruits IS would see as potential defections.

Despite the ongoing conflict in Yemen, the United States have proven capable of gathering enough

intelligence to successfully target AQAP members. As well as Wuhayshi, the US also managed to kill AQAP's top ideologue and spokesman in recent months. This is not only a major blow to the hierarchical structure of the group, but on a practical level, it makes governing an extremely difficult task as AQAP members remain hidden and on the run.

Even with these losses, the group will continue to push the opportunity afforded to them by Saudi's war on the Houthi rebels. Fortunately for AQAP, the brunt of the conflict is focused in the northern and western parts of Yemen, leaving the eastern provinces, and the traditional Sunni tribal heartland wide open for the taking as pro-government forces, Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia all have bigger fish to fry in other parts of the country. The question is whether al-Raymi possesses the strategic intelligence and personal charisma to make the most of chaos.

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME:

Scope & Rationale:

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although Jihadism is ‘lethal’, it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging.

In retrospect; the death of Osama bin Laden, the onslaught of global war on terror, the Arab revolution and post Arab-revolution crises etc. have seriously impacted on Jihadists landscape which is constantly changing. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national i.e. Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists’ landscape changes; the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of ‘Neo-Jihadism’.

“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.

Methodology & Research areas/questions:

This programme aims to conduct fact-based analyses of actual and potential uses of militancy and Jihadism as a tactic and belief and the changing concept of ‘war’ in the Muslim world; so that we may provide policy guidance to government officials and private sector decision-makers with alternative policy analyses. The key research questions are:

- How has Neo-Jihadism developed?
- Is Neo-Jihadism a new concept of war or culture?
- How Jihadism is perceived within the Islamic world and does it still carry meanings of a ‘just war’?
- How do its adherents maintain and facilitate it to transcend borders?
- Why have neo jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring and what trends are emerging
- Why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of Neo-Jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring?

Programme Deliverables:

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape
3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.

4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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