

A House Divided: AQAP, IS, and Intra-Jihadi Conflict

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In recent months, as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's organization, known as the Islamic State (IS), has grown in influence and renown, tensions between it and other al-Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East have increased. For the time being, al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), led by Abu Basir al-Wuhayshi, is trying to put off a confrontation with IS in order to avoid internecine conflict and divided loyalties within its membership. As al-Qaeda's major personalities clash over differences in strategy and ambition, the question remains: Is AQAP headed for a bloody civil conflict?

The following discussion considers the current state of relations between al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and IS: AQAP's attempts at peacemaking among both major jihadi personalities and the ranks of ordinary militants, its desire to contain IS and maintain its own territory, and the threat posed by IS's growing popularity. This report will also take a look at the most influential characters allied with IS in Yemen: their shifting personal allegiances; their public statements and appearances; and the potentially violent repercussions of their private grievances, alliances, and betrayals.

AQAP as Peacemaker: Maintaining Neutrality and Distance

AQAP's strategy for rapprochement between al-Qaeda and IS in Syria has three major components. Its first goal is to maintain its members' allegiance to the mother organization, al-Qaeda. Second, it wants to distance itself from disputes between al-Baghdadi and the Nusra Front's leader, al-Julani, and to refrain from public criticism of IS. Finally, it is trying to discourage members from any involvement in a conflict that could weaken or even dismantle al-Qaeda. AQAP has taken an indirect approach toward realizing these goals, one that points to the emergence of cracks within its own organization.

On March 27, 2014, AQAP broadcast a statement entitled "A Message to Jihadis in the Levant." It stated that AQAP stands in solidarity with all fighting groups in Syria. It called upon Muslims to avoid disputes and infighting among the organizations. The statement spoke of AQAP's efforts to reconcile the quarreling groups in Syria, calling upon all of them to accept its mediation or at least to pool their resources in order to fight their common enemy. Of course, AQAP's statement fell on deaf ears.

In June 2014, al-Malahim Association, the media wing of AQAP, published a video entitled "The Responsibility of the Word," featuring two of AQAP's theorists, the Saudi Ibrahim al-Rubaysh and the Yemeni Harith al-Nizari. The video reminded AQAP followers not to denigrate senior scholars and jihadi leaders. The subtextual aim of the video was to address attacks by some IS

supporters on jihadi leaders and theorists from other camps, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and the Palestinian Abu Qatada. Later, al-Malahim broadcast a poem entitled “O Brother in Islam, Come!” written by al-Zawahiri. In the beginning of this broadcast, al-Wuhayshi, the AQAP leader, praised al-Zawahiri effusively.

When disagreements arose between al-Baghdadi and al-Julani, the leader of the Nusra Front, in late 2013, AQAP made no comment, and al-Wuhayshi refrained from recruiting Yemeni insurgents in Syria into either group. Since then, al-Baghdadi’s message has found a popular foothold in Yemen. In January 2014, Ma’moun Hatim, a mid-tier AQAP leader, gave a speech entitled “Yemeni Support for the Islamic State,” in which he called for assistance to IS. Notably, the broadcast consisted largely of attacks on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the end of the broadcast, Hatim called for unity among the jihadis, asking Syrian insurgents either to support IS, to work to bridge the gap between it and other insurgent groups, or to work within their individual organizations without interfering with IS operations.

Throughout this period, AQAP had been mediating between IS and the Nusra Front to maintain unity and defuse the alleged KSA scheme to sow dissension among jihadis. Al-Julani, however, spoiled reconciliation efforts when he issued a speech attacking al-Baghdadi’s organization and threatening to drive it out of Syria and Iraq. In response, Ma’moun Hatim tweeted a message entitled “Urgent Call to the Leader al-Julani,” condemning his words.

Containment and the Fight to Control Yemen

In order to prevent IS’s expansion into Yemen, AQAP has adopted two approaches.

Its primary approach has been to intensify terrorist activities inside and outside Yemen in order to show its strength. Even so, some of the attacks have been absurd, such as AQAP’s break-in at al-Wadi’ah, the Saudi-Yemeni border checkpoint, and the attack on the General Directorate of Investigation Bureau (Mabahith) in Sharurah.

Its second aim has been to learn from the Nusra Front’s mistakes and to take initiative in its dealings with IS. The Nusra Front has always seemed one step behind al-Baghdadi, reacting only belatedly to the agenda set by IS. For instance, when ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as IS was initially called) announced its conversion into the “Islamic State” and al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph of the Muslim community, the Front was confused and responded with hesitation. It reacted at first by announcing an Islamic Emirate in Syria. Later, it backtracked on the announcement and declared that, while it intended to establish an emirate at a suitable time, for the present it would merely apply Islamic laws and regulations. During this time, a video broadcast by al-Julani (intended as a response to al-Baghdadi’s speech in Mosul) was announced but never published. In an effort at aspirational rebranding, AQAP has also been using the term “Supporters of Shari’a in the Arabian Peninsula” instead of “Supporters of Shari’a in Yemen” (“Supporters of Shari’a” is the political and administrative term for al-Qaeda).

When the international coalition started its air attacks on IS in Iraq and Syria, AQAP released a statement in support of IS, calling the latter “our brothers” and asking for support for them against the Americans. The statement also refused to refer to IS as Kharijites (after an early dissenting sect, literally: means deviators). Interestingly, this statement met with condemnation both from IS and from al-Qaeda supporters in Syria. The al-Qaeda supporters objected to the

description of IS as brothers, rather than Kharijites. They also complained that the statement requested support for IS against the Americans but did not name any other jihadi group. IS supporters, meanwhile, argued that the statement was not enough: if the AQAP leaders were sincere, they should join IS and leave al-Qaeda.

Shifting Loyalties: Major IS Supporters in Yemen

The following profiles describe Yemen's most influential IS supporters, along with some notes on their relationships with each other and with other jihadi networks.

Abd al-Majid al-Hittari al-Raymi

Al-Raymi was born in AH 1375/AD 1956 in the Raymah Governorate of Yemen. He was brought up in a Salafi atmosphere and taught by Muqbil al-Wadi'i; after leaving the latter's tutelage, he became close to Abd al-Majid al-Zandani. In the 1990s he joined a group of Salafi activists (the Sururis) to found al-Ihsan Association. He was appointed a member of al-Ihsan's advisory council. Following the Arab revolutions, al-Hittari was "born again" (in his own words) and became close to the jihadis. He launched a major attack on his former friends in al-Ihsan, who had embraced traditional political involvement during the transitional period. Consequently, he was expelled from the organization. He also signed the ISIL document "Statement of Islamic Brotherhood for the Support of the Islamic State." The signatories stated that all Muslims in and beyond the Levant, whether or not they fell under the organization's rule, were obligated to support IS verbally, spiritually, and financially. They advised aspiring jihadis to travel to Syria and join IS. They also recommended that all other insurgents withdraw from their organizations and join IS. They added that if fault should be found with IS, it should be corrected by speaking privately with al-Baghdadi, not in public.

Later, al-Hittari issued a statement addressed to supporters of the "caliphate," as he described them. He asked them to support and fight for al-Baghdadi and called upon Arabs to travel to fight under IS's leadership.

In late April 2014, Yemeni aircrafts assaulted an AQAP training camp in the al-Mahfad Directorate of Abyan Governorate. The attack left dozens dead, including al-Hittari's 14-year-old son Jarullah. After the tragedy, al-Hittari announced that his son had joined the camp without his knowledge and accused AQAP's security apparatus of negligence in gathering such a large number of people in one place and making them vulnerable to bombing.

Al-Raymi's second son, Hibatullah, has joined the fight in Syria with al-Muhajirin and al-Ansar Brigade. Al-Hittari, in a public attempt to defend and clarify his own views, published a prolonged discussion with his son, who was critical of IS. The father reproved his son for his criticisms, asking him either to join and fight for IS or to return to his home country, or else be disowned as a son. Al-Hittari has publicly given his blessing to IS to kill his son if he fights against them. It is not certain whether Hibatullah has accepted his father's warnings and advice, but it seems probable that he has joined IS.

Ma'moun Abd al-Majid Hatim

Hatim is an AQAP member and a resident of the city of al-Sadd in Ibb Governorate. He escaped

an attack by an American drone in March 2014. After IS first started gaining significant victories, Hatim drew closer to the Islamic State. He is a signatory of “The Statement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Support of the Islamic State” and a leading defender of IS. As mentioned earlier, he issued and broadcast announcements defending IS and attacking its opponents. In his recording “Remarks on the Fruits of Victory in Iraq and the Levant,” Hatim gave tribute to “the penetrator of walls, the invader of regions, the terrifier of the nonbelievers, the supporter of the oppressed, the apple of the faithful’s eye, the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qurashi, may Allah prolong his glory, raise his flag, and expand his territory.” Hatim claimed that IS’s recent victories proved that its approach was correct and its leaders were honest and capable of winning the battle, just as the battle itself testified to the honesty and righteousness of IS’s beliefs and goals. At the end of the recording, he urged all branches of al-Qaeda to join forces with IS.

AQAP members have reacted in different ways to Hatim’s extremism in support of IS and his call for al-Qaeda national branches to join forces with it. A number of AQAP supporters initially responded that Hatim’s statements expressed his own opinions, not those of AQAP. In response, Hatim issued a clarifying statement, saying, “If you think I speak for AQAP, you are mistaken. If you think I represent just myself, you are mistaken twice. If you think supporting the oppressed and uttering what is right constitutes a break in ranks, you are mistaken once again.” His statement reveals the presence of a current within AQAP ready to secede and join IS.

Growing Popular Support for IS

IS owes its growing support base in Yemen to a number of factors. Its victories on the ground have brought it momentum and wealth that it has harnessed to advocate for itself. Furthermore, as we have seen, personal relationships play a major role in jihadi activities, and AQAP is closely affiliated with the larger al-Qaeda apparatus, especially Abu Basir Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who in turn is closely linked to Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, there are personal links between AQAP and IS as well. Turki al-Binali, a major Bahraini IS ideologue, joined AQAP because of his close ties to al-Wuhayshi, who introduced him to Ma’moun Hatim. However, al-Binali relocated to IS territory to defend al-Baghdadi’s organization and called upon insurgents to join him. It is likely that al-Binali may be speaking to close friends in Yemen and inviting them to withdraw from AQAP and to join IS.

Elite infighting aside, a groundswell of enthusiasm for IS is emerging among the ranks of insurgents in Yemen. Young men returning from fighting in Syria and Iraq, already energized by IS ideology and a shared hatred of al-Qaeda, will most likely be equipped with the money and resources necessary to take advantage of instability in Yemen.

Looking Ahead: The AQAP-IS Divide and Its Consequences

It seems that the definitive break between AQAP and IS will begin with a whimper and end with a bang. Not all jihadi leaders have ties to both camps: only some IS supporters were once members of AQAP, although some of them, including Abd al-Majid al-Hittari, are now vocal in their condemnation of al-Qaeda. IS leaves no room for peaceful coexistence: it considers itself the only Islamic state and asserts that its leader is the caliph to whom all Muslims must pledge allegiance.

That AQAP, the strongest branch of al-Qaeda, is facing disintegration could be a blessing in disguise for the organization, if it were to take advantage of this moment to take stock of its own problems. However, the long-term impact of the breakup will be disastrous for jihadi organizations and the territories in which they operate. The groups will compete with each other by attacking Saudi Arabia with escalating vehemence. Of the two organizations, IS is by far the more brutal organization and the one that poses a greater regional threat.

Alarmingly, IS seems to be very keen on acquiring biological and chemical missiles. Some IS supporters have called for the exchange of their American prisoners for Aafia al-Siddiqi, an American citizen of Pakistani origin and a PhD in neurology who had previously belonged to al-Qaeda. In 2008, she was arrested in Afghanistan while in possession of documents on how to prepare chemical weapons. Interestingly, al-Qaeda has never asked for her release, while IS is eager to exchange her for its American captives. Some reports mention that IS is seeking to recruit Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP's explosives expert, in order to benefit from his expertise in making biological bombs and chemical missiles. The ultimate fear is that the Assad regime will facilitate IS's acquisition of biological weapons in order for them to be used against civilians or other insurgent groups.