



Justice4Yemen Pact
ميثاق العدالة لليمن

ANALYTICAL BRIEF

Evidence of Houthi/al-Qaida Cooperation in Yemen

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Introduction

Recent reporting from the United Nations has indicated the possible resurgence of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).ⁱ AQAP conducted over 40 attacks during the second half of 2024 against security forces aligned with the internationally recognized Government of Yemen (GoY), including a suicide bombing that killed 16 soldiers.ⁱⁱ UN reporting indicates that AQAP's tentative resurgence has been aided by the Houthi de facto authorities: the two groups reportedly maintain a "pragmatic agreement" including "mutual non-aggression, prisoner exchanges and the movement of weapons."ⁱⁱⁱ

Most worryingly, AQAP is thought to aspire to maritime attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, potentially in support of the Houthis' own maritime operations.^{iv} Since October 2023, the Houthis have attacked commercial shipping in response to the Gaza War, disrupting global trade, threatening freedom of navigation, and prompting a military response from the EU and US. Earlier this year, the US administration re-designated the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization in part over these attacks.^v

AQAP-Houthi cooperation bodes ill for Yemen. Should such cooperation result in AQAP maritime attacks, this could dramatically escalate Western military strikes and worsen Yemen's dire humanitarian state given the country's reliance on seaborne aid.^{vi} If AQAP can capitalize on its relationship with the Houthis to regroup and expand its control, Yemeni civilians would be at risk of grave human rights abuses. For example, AQAP announced in December 2024 that it had previously executed nearly a dozen civilian hostages taken early in the war, including journalist Muhammad Qaid Al-Maqri, claiming without evidence that these hostages were spying on its fighters.^{vii} Al-Maqri was the husband of Dr. Abha Owaydan, director of the Women's Cultural and Social Development Foundation and a member of the Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition.

About the Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition

The Justice4Yemen Pact is a coalition of human rights organizations and civil society actors that are united for the promotion and protection of human rights in Yemen. The coalition's mission is to advocate for the rights of all Yemeni people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. The coalition is committed to addressing the systemic human rights violations that have been plaguing Yemen through years of conflict and violence. The Justice4Yemen Pact works to empower Yemeni people to claim their rights, raise awareness of violations, and advocate for justice and accountability at local, national, and international levels. The Justice4Yemen Pact is guided by the principles of respect for human dignity, equality, justice, and non-discrimination. The coalition believes that by working together, its members can end impunity, provide meaningful support and redress for victims, and contribute to a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for Yemen.

Given the potential ramifications of AQAP-Houthi collaboration for Yemeni civilians, regional security, and freedom of navigation, this report summarizes the publicly available evidence of such collaboration.

From Fighting to Mutual Non-Aggression



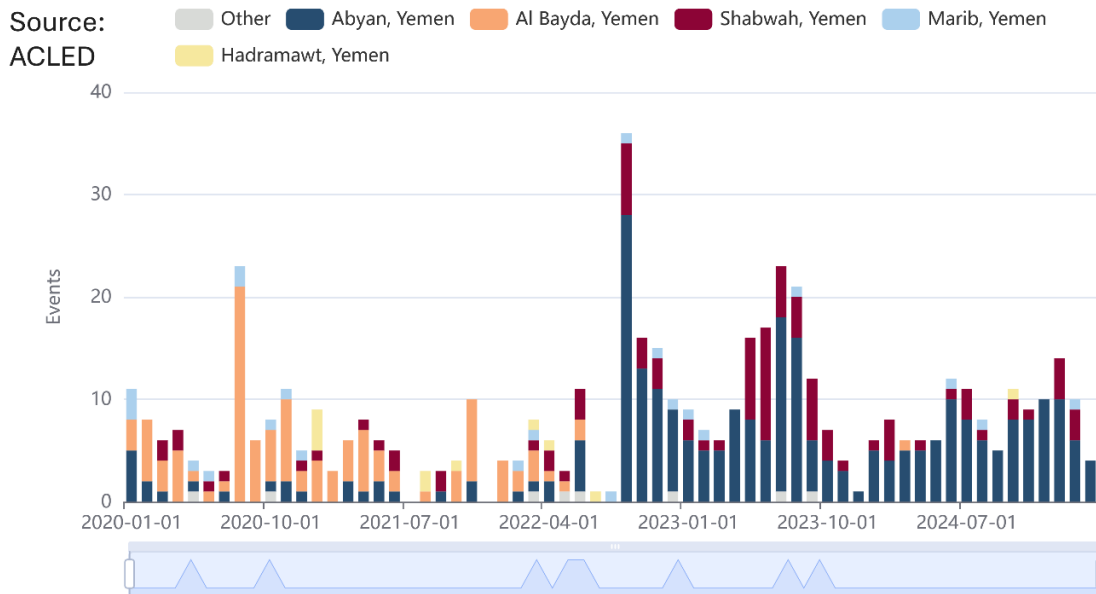
AQAP fighters during “Arrows of Truth” operations against UAE-backed STC forces. Source: Al-Malahem Media

The Houthi de facto authorities and AQAP are declared enemies in the Yemeni war. From the start of the conflict until late 2022, the Houthis and AQAP fought one another across the country, most notably in al-Bayda governorate.^{viii} Houthi media has regularly publicized anti-terror operations and trials targeting alleged AQAP members.^{ix} For its part, AQAP presents itself a protector of Yemen’s Sunnis against a Shiite expansionist project enacted in Yemen via the Houthis, whom they accuse of being agents of Iran.^x

However, the two groups largely stopped fighting each other in late 2022. In August of that year, the UAE-backed STC, part of Yemen’s internationally recognized government, launched the “Arrows of the East” campaign against AQAP in two southern governorates, Abyan and Shabwa. AQAP then launched its own “Arrows of the Truth” campaign against STC-affiliated forces.^{xi} Since that time, few AQAP attacks targeting the Houthis have been documented. Instead, AQAP has predominantly launched attacks in Abyan and Shabwa against STC-affiliated forces, a shift that has been extensively documented in UN reporting.^{xii} In February 2025, the UN’s Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team wrote that “mutual non-aggression” characterized the three-year old AQAP-Houthi agreement.^{xiii} An October 2024 report by the UN’s Panel of Experts on Yemen went further, writing that since the start of that year, AQAP and the Houthis had coordinated operations directly.^{xiv}

The following graph was created from publicly available data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) initiative.^{xv} It shows that starting in late 2022, political violence involving AQAP shifted from al-Bayda, where AQAP was primarily fighting the Houthis and the Islamic State, to Shabwa and Abyan, where AQAP was primarily fighting STC-affiliated forces.

Political violence involving AQAP in Yemen (525 events total) from January 2020 to March, 2025, by governorate.



Source: ACLED, accessed via the [Explorer tool](#). Search criteria: Event counts, political violence, 1/1/2020 to 3/27/2025, Yemen, all governorates (admin 1), group by admin 1, AQAP, group by month. Accessed on 3/27/2025.

Transfer of Weapons and Training



Footage from an AQAP drone attacking UAE-backed STC forces in Shabwa. Source: al-Malahem Media

Additional evidence of collaboration between the Houthis and AQAP is the transfer of weapons and training between the two groups. The UN Monitoring Team wrote in January 2024 that AQAP had “developed unmanned aerial systems capabilities, establishing a specialized drone unit, with operational training from the Houthis.”^{xvi} Six months earlier, the Monitoring Team reported, citing a member state, that “Houthi elements provided AQAP with the drones and were training their members to use them.”^{xvii} The above claims were made in reference to a series of AQAP drone attacks targeting STC-affiliated forces in Shabwa in 2023. Previously AQAP had only infrequently used drones in attacks, with the first such attack reported in April 2022.^{xviii} “Given that AQAP has limited technical

capability in developing their own drones, especially after the recent deaths of their explosives experts, external support for sourcing these weapons was probably crucial,” wrote one analyst remarking on the Shabwa attacks.^{xix}

UAE-based news website Akhbar al-Aan has published several reports on AQAP receiving drones and training from the Houthis to attack GoY forces in Shabwa.^{xx} The outlet identified Abu Osama al-Dayani as AQAP’s point man for Houthi-assisted drone development.^{xxi}

In addition, UN reports indicate the Houthis are supplying weapons to al-Shabaab, al-Qaida’s Somali affiliate. The UN’s Monitoring Team reported in February 2025, citing a member state, that al-Shabaab held at least two meetings with the Houthis in Somalia during 2024, to discuss weapons transfers in exchange for al-Shabaab increasing its piracy activities.^{xxii} “During this period, Al-Shabaab was reported to have received some small arms and light weapons and technical expertise from the Houthis,” noted the report.

In October 2024, the UN’s Panel of Experts on Yemen cited the GoY as reporting “increased smuggling activities between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab, mostly involving small arms and light weapons.”^{xxiii} The Panel noted that both groups possess weapons of the same models, and with serial numbers from the same batches, indicating “either the supply and illicit transfer of weapons between the two groups or the existence of a common supplier, or both.”



Type 56-1 assault rifle (left) and MPiKMS 72 assault rifle (right) for sale in Houthi areas. Both rifles are consistent with those captured from al-Shabaab in Somalia. Source: UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, S/2024/731, Annexes 135 and 143

Prisoner Exchanges

Additional evidence of AQAP-Houthi cooperation is a series of prisoner exchange deals between the two groups over the past three years, including the 2024 release of former AQAP leader Sami Dayan.^{xxiv} However, it is

important to note that the two groups have exchanged hundreds of prisoners since the start of the Yemen war, including during periods when they were actively fighting each other.^{xxv}

The Role of Sayf al-Adel

Some journalists have attributed AQAP's cooperation with the Houthis to the influence of al-Qaida's de facto leader, Sayf al-Adel, who resides in Iran, including:

- Hussam Radman and Assim al-Sabri, who reported for the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, in February 2023, that Sayf al-Adel “has been able to convince [then-AQAP leader] Batarfi of his strategic approach, focused on confronting Western states and their allies in Yemen – the Saudi-led coalition, the Aden-based government, the United Arab Emirates and its allies – rather than confronting the Iranian-backed Houthi movement.”^{xxvi}
- News platform Akhbar Alan has run a series of reports on how Sayf al-Adel, and his now-deceased son, who was sent to Yemen in 2015 to serve as his liaison, represent a “Trojan horse” by which Iran is trying to take control of al-Qaida.^{xxvii}

The UN Monitoring Team appeared to suggest that Sayf al-Adel was pushing AQAP towards cooperation with the Houthis, when it noted in July 2024, citing member states, “potentially tense relations between [AQAP chief] al-Awlaki and Sayf al-Adel on dealing with the Houthis.”^{xxviii}

Conclusion

Cooperation between al-Qaida and the Houthis is not a new phenomenon, but dates to the 1990's when the Houthis offered shelter to operatives from the extremist group.^{xxix} Throughout the current war, even during periods of sustained combat, they have swapped prisoners. Nevertheless, the AQAP-Houthi relationship has evolved during the past three years. In addition to refraining from attacking each other, AQAP and the Houthis have transferred weapons and training, and according to one UN report, have begun to coordinate operations directly. The war in Gaza has provided new opportunities for collaboration, with some al-Qaida operatives reportedly open to allying with anyone to support Palestinian militant groups.^{xxx}

The biggest immediate threat from this collaboration is AQAP maritime attacks, which could provoke a major military response from Western states and worsen Yemen's dire humanitarian situation. Moreover, if AQAP can capitalize on this cooperation to regroup and expand its influence, this will expose more Yemeni citizens to the extremist group's human rights abuses.

Contact

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ⁱ S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraphs 33-38

ⁱⁱ S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, paragraph 69

ⁱⁱⁱ S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, paragraph 70; S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraphs 33-36

^{iv} S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, paragraph 70; S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraph 36

^v “Designation of Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization,” The White House, January 22, 2025,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designation-of-ansar-allah-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/>;

“Designation of Ansar Allah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” US Department of State, March 4, 2025,

<https://www.state.gov/designation-of-ansarallah-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/>

^{vi} “The Houthi attacks...who pays the real price?”, al-Hurra, December 20, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/42dfv657>

^{vii} “Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition Calls for Action Against Al-Qaeda's Atrocities in Yemen,” Justice 4 Yemen Pact, January 1,

2025, <https://justice4yemenpact.org/justice4yemen-calls-for-action-against-al-qaedas-atrocities-in-yemen/>

^{viii} “The Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen,” ACLED, December 14, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/12/14/the-wartime-transformation-of-aqap-in-yemen/>; “Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula: Sustained Resurgence in Yemen or Signs of

Further Decline?” ACLED, April 6, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/04/06/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-sustained-resurgence-in-yemen-or-signs-of-further-decline/>

^{ix} See, for example: “The Criminal Court in al-Hudayda sentences 18 accused of belonging to al-Qaida organization,” Saba.ye, February 27, 2023, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3226212.htm>; “Arrest of a Dangerous Criminal Cell Belonging to Al-Qaida in al-Bayda,” Saba.ye, February 13, 2021, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3128352.htm>; “The Security Services Arrest an al-Qaida Leader,” Saba.ye, August 29, 2020, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3107201.htm>

^x “Who cooperates with the Houthis and America against Yemenis?” al-Malaham Media, 1446 Hijri (corresponding to July 2024-May 2025)

^{xi} S/2023/130, February 21, 2023, Annex 7

^{xii} S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, paragraphs 69-70; S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraphs 37-38; S/2024/556, July 22, 2024, paragraph 62; S/2024/92, January 29, 2024, paragraph 63; S/2023/833, November 2, 2023, paragraphs 19, 46-48; S/2023/549, July 25, 2023, paragraph 62

^{xiii} S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, paragraph 70

^{xiv} S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraphs 34-36

^{xv} “About ACLED,” ACLED, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/about-aced/>

^{xvi} S/2024/92, January 29, 2024, paragraph 63

^{xvii} S/2023/549, July 25, 2023, paragraph 62

^{xviii} S/2023/833, November 2, 2023, paragraph 48

^{xix} “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift,” Reuben Dass, Lawfare, August 20, 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-s-drone-attacks-indicate-a-strategic-shift>

^{xx} “Who pushed Bateerfi to attack Iran in his last appearance?”, Asem Taha Sabri, Akhbar Alaan, May 31, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/5hcyp84f>; “Al-Qaida in Yemen strives to obtain Houthi support...sources tell Akhbar Alaan,” Assem Taha Sabri, Akhbar Alaan, <https://tinyurl.com/5s64xm74>

^{xxi} “Who pushed Bateerfi to attack Iran in his last appearance?”, Asem Taha Sabri, Akhbar Alaan

^{xxii} S/2025/71/Rev.1, February 6, 2025, paragraph 40

^{xxiii} S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraph 40

^{xxiv} S/2024/731, October 11, 2024, paragraph 35; S/2024/92, January 29, 2024, paragraph 63; S/2023/833, November 2, 2023, paragraph 49; “Houthis team up with feared al-Qaida branch in new threat to Yemen,” Ali Mohammed and Sophia Yan, The Telegraph, May 4, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/05/04/houthis-team-up-feared-al-qaeda-branch-new-threat-yemen/>

^{xxv} “Al-Qaeda’s Shifting Alliances During the Yemen War,” Abu Bakr Ahmed, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, October 13, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/20984>; “The Curious Tale of Houthi-AQAP Prisoner Exchanges in Yemen,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, December 17, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16002>

^{xxvi} “Leadership from Iran: How Al-Qaeda in Yemen Fell Under the Sway of Saif al-Adel,” Hussam Radman and Assim al-Sabri, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, February 28, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/19623>

^{xxvii} “Sayf al-Adel and Mustafa Hamed...agents of the Trojan jihad to serve Iran,” Islam Mansi, Akhbar Alaan, October 9, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mdpeybjv>; “From Tehran to Yemen, the knight of the Trojan jihad, the son of Sayf al-Adel...what do we know about him and news of his death?”, Mohammed bin Faysal, Akhbar Alaan, March 22, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/5t343knc>; see also the “Tehran Syndrome” متلازمة طهران reports by Akhbar Alaan.

^{xxviii} S/2024/556, July 22, 2024, paragraph 61

^{xxix} “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Jihadi Threat in the Arabian Peninsula,” Elisabeth Kendall, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

^{xxx} “How the Gaza Crisis Could Bring Iran and Al-Qaeda in Yemen Together,” Assim al-Sabri, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, December 11, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/21453>