

# Another Round of Negotiations with the Houthis: AQAP as Potential Spoiler in Yemen

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## If talks with the Houthis continue to ignore key Yemeni stakeholders, al-Qaeda is poised to absorb disillusioned tribal groups into its ranks.

In what appeared to be a moment of relative stability in Yemen, Saudi and Omani delegations arrived in Sanaa on April 8 to hold talks with the head of the Supreme Political Council in the Houthi-led government. However, negotiating with the Houthis alone will not bring stability to Yemen, as numerous other factors may still have an impact on the situation. There are a number of groups active in Yemen whose interests fail to align with these negotiations. Aside from the secessionist rhetoric of the Southern Transitional Council, the continued presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) serves as a potential flashpoint for violence that remains unaddressed in the current negotiations.

Moreover, as Saudi Arabia appears to increasingly distance itself from the al-Islah Party, which still holds popular legitimacy in certain sections of Yemen, the movement could be pushed closer to AQAP as their influence within the internationally recognized government dwindles. If coalition forces leave Yemen as a result of negotiations that don't involve Yemen's various other groups, the Houthis will become the dominant force in the country. These shifting lines may prompt other groups, including al-Qaeda, to pursue different avenues to confront the Houthis. One possibility is that Yemeni tribal groups and even al-Islah may align with al-Qaeda as a joint front, the foundations of which have already been laid

### AQAP's recent activity

AQAP did not wait long to declare its stance on the Recent negotiations. In mid-April 2023, the al-Qaeda media outlet *al-Malahim* issued a statement affirming that they would continue to pursue their current activities to overcome the Houthis in Yemen. Al-Qaeda's warning came at a [time \(https://acleddata.com/2023/04/06/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-sustained-resurgence-in-yemen-or-signs-of-further-decline/\)](#) when the organization's leadership in Yemen, including Musab al-Jadni, Hamad bin Hamoud al-Tamimi, and Hassan al-Hadrami—who was involved in manufacturing IEDs and other explosives—were recently targeted in drone strikes.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), AQAP activity in Yemen increased during 2022, especially in southern Yemen where the group became active again in late 2022 and early 2023, although its recent clashes have taken place with the Southern Transitional Council forces rather than the Houthis.

[Some reports \(https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/analysis-ar/19638\)](#) suggest that Khalid Batarfi, the leader of AQAP, met in January with various leaders on the ground—including Abu al-Haiji al-Hudaydi, Abu Ali al-Dissi, Abu Osama al-Diyani, and Abu Mohammad al-Lahiji, asking—they to prepare for suicide car bombings in Shabwah, Abyan, Hadhramaut, and Aden, all of which would target the Southern Transitional Council. At the same time, these leaders were trying to avoid operating in Houthi-controlled areas.

Al-Qaeda's shift to avoiding confrontation with the Houthis is driven by various factors related to the challenges that the group faces in Yemen. As Batarfi explained in an interview that al-Qaeda published in November 2021, AQAP had failed to effectively engage with Houthi forces and was scaling back operations while facing financial difficulties.

On a larger scale, al-Qaeda seems to be experiencing internal crises and rifts after Saif al-Adel took control of the group following the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Adel is reportedly very unpopular with other branches of al-Qaeda for being a vocal critic of Osama bin Laden, having characterized him as a ["dictator" \(https://alrai.com/article/462877/%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525AD%2525D9%252584%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA/%2525D8%2525A3%2525D9%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252581-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%252584-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525B5%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%25258A-%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A6%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525A7-%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525A4%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525A7-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525A9\)](#) due to bin Laden's refusal to listen to his advice regarding the [September 2001 attacks \(https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/11/opinions/osama-bin-laden-changed-history-bergen/index.html\)](#). Bin Laden subsequently refused to name al-Adel as his deputy despite Atiyah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi recommending him for the role. Al-Adel has also gained several enemies after criticizing other al-Qaeda leadership from this era. According to the Harmony Documents, al-Adel has especially had problems with Saudi members of al-Qaeda after expelling the founder of the Saudi branch, Yusuf al-Ayeri.

Given the disagreements over al-Adel in Yemeni jihadist circles, al-Adel's control over the AQAP's restraint toward the Houthis will likely prove short-lived. AQAP is likely to once again confront the Houthis, especially as the current dynamics in Yemen favor the Houthis, leading to conflicts between the latter and Yemeni tribal groups.

### Houthis Renege on Agreements with Yemeni Tribal Groups

Given this potential future dynamic, there are several frustrated parties that may respond to AQAP overtures in a renewed fight against the Houthis. It is notable, for example, that the Houthis have repeatedly failed to follow through on various agreements made with Yemeni tribal groups, in contrast to longstanding AQAP efforts to foster relations with these segments of Yemeni society.

Such failures predate the current round of conflict; in June 2004, tribal groups attempted to mediate during a first round of negotiations, but the Houthis scuttled the agreement by killing a tribal leader. After this, the tribes brokered another agreement with the Houthis, but the latter continued to mobilize and recruit forces which led to another outbreak of conflict. Violations such as this continued to happen throughout the six wars beginning in 2004.

The Houthis have also violated agreements with tribes in various other settings, [including \(https://abaadstudies.org/pdf-56.pdf\)](#) an agreement with the Ministry of Defense in 2010—which the Houthis violated after the February 2011 revolution—the al-Jawf Agreement of 2011, the Hajur agreement of 2012, and the Dammaj agreement of 2013. The same can be said of the National Dialogue Conference of 2013, the second al-Jawf Agreement, and subsequent agreements brokered in Ajmar, Arhab, Muabar, Ibb (on two occasions), Amran (also on two separate occasions), Saada, and al-Hudayda in 2014; and agreements with the al-Awadh tribes in 2017, the al-Husha tribes in 2019, and the Abu Asha tribes in 2020.



These and other violations of agreements have clearly demonstrated that the Houthis do not respect tribal customary laws ( *‘uri*) in Yemen, which are often more powerful in these areas than other forms of law. With no other parties involved in the negotiations and no guarantee that the Houthis will follow through, violence is likely to erupt once again.

Al-Qaeda's attempt to attract the Yemeni tribes

In November 2022, AQAP issued “A Statement and Clarification to the Noble Tribes of Yemen in their Faith and Wisdom,” in which it warned Yemeni tribes against aligning themselves with forces that it described as hostile. While such a statement may be perceived as a veiled threat, al-Qaeda has shrewdly demonstrated its respect for tribal customary law, unlike the Houthis, leading to pragmatic cooperation between the group and Yemeni tribes on several occasions. In 2014, for example, al-Qaeda and several tribal groups united after the Houthis entered al-Bayda. At that time, the Houthis had violated an agreement promising cooperation with the tribes, and they set out to curb (https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/02/08/ar-pub-75485) tribal power in al-Bayda—killing four sheikhs, destroying homes, and imposing exorbitant taxes.

These tribes came to view the Houthis as a greater threat than al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda was able to take advantage of the opening. Al-Qaeda members attended tribal meetings to discuss the Houthi threat. This included Nabil al-Dahab, the brother of Tariq al-Dahab—who had been a leader in Ansar al-Shari’a, an al-Qaeda affiliate in Yemen—and who attended one such meeting in Manasih in October 2014. Al-Qaeda’s involvement with the tribes played an important role in the fight against their common enemy, the Houthis. An al-Qaeda leader at the time compared the Houthi control of Sanaa to the situation in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. This cast Ansar al-Shari’a, and in extension al-Qaeda, as the defenders of the Sunnis in Yemen. One al-Qaeda leader stated (https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base) : “We are united with the [Sunnii] tribes as never before. We are not al-Qaeda now. We stand together as the Sunni army.”

Given the Houthis’ rising power, a similar collaboration is not unimaginable now. Moreover, this collaboration could involve al-Islah, a tribal, Salafist group who likewise anticipates the growing threat of the Houthis. Although al-Qaeda has previously called on al-Islah to work on its behalf, they issued more statements in al-Malahimin in August 2022, entitled “To Our People in Yemen: A Statement on Recent Events in Shabwah.” This contained comments from leader Abu Ali al-Hadrami calling on al-Islah to join forces with al-Qaeda and to end its involvement within Yemeni state institutions. Al-Hadrami also encouraged (https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/arab-world/2022/08/28/%2525d8%2525a7%2525d9%252584%2525d9%252582%2525d8%2525a7%2525d8%2525b9%2525d8%2525af%2525d8%2525a9-%2525d9%25258a%2525d9%25258f%2525d9%252586%2525d8%2525a7%2525d8%2525b5%2525d8%2525b1-%2525d8%2525a7%2525d9%252584%2525d8%2525a5%2525d8%2525ae%2525d9%252588%2525d8%2525a7%2525d9%252586-%2525d9%252581%2525d9%25258a-%2525d8%2525a7%2525d9%252584%2525d9%25258a%2525d9%252585%2525d9%252586-%2525d9%252588%2525d9%25258a%2525d8%2525af%2525d8%2525b9%2525d9%252588-%2525d9%252584%2525d8%2525a7%2525d9%252586%2525d9%252582%2525d9%252584%2525d8%2525a7%2525d8%2525a8-%2525d8%2525a8%2525d8%2525b9%2525d8%2525af-%2525d8%2525a3%2525d8%2525ad%2525d8%2525af%2525d8%2525a7%2525d8%2525ab-%2525d8%2525b4%2525d8%2525a8%2525d9%252588%2525d8%2525a9) younger members of al-Islah to become involved with al-Qaeda and to topple the current leadership.

Such calls could well appeal to younger members initially attracted to Islah’s tripartite identity of tribal, Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafist, although the organization leadership has repeatedly distinguished itself from AQAP and at one point possessed significant leverage within the internationally recognized government. Nevertheless, its current waning influence could tempt its members to turn towards a group more actively confronting the Houthis.

Whether or not al-Qaeda is able to unite these various groups, the Saudi-Houthi negotiations will undoubtedly generate some pushback as the Houthi ’s power grows in Yemen, especially given the lack of inclusion of Yemeni stakeholders. Though the Saudi and Omani delegations may have expected talks to de-escalate tensions, violence and destabilization still loom on the horizon. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

New Saudi Opinion Poll Shows 40 Percent Still Back Some Ties with Israel; Three-Fourths Say Rocket Fire Against Israel Will Have Negative Effects

May 15, 2023  
David Pollock  
(/policy-analysis/new-saudi-opinion-poll-shows-40-percent-still-back-some-ties-israel-three-fourths)

الذي والتعصير والتعاقب الآراء دون حيلولة، وكذلك المبادئ (١) (٢) من العهد الدولي الخاص بالحقوق المدنية والسياسية.

وإسناداً لقطاعات المصنوعة لهذه الآراء والاتصالات وفقاً لتكامل القسمين (١) (٢) (٣) (٤) (٥) (٦) (٧) (٨) (٩) (١٠) (١١) (١٢) (١٣) (١٤) (١٥) (١٦) (١٧) (١٨) (١٩) (٢٠) (٢١) (٢٢) (٢٣) (٢٤) (٢٥) (٢٦) (٢٧) (٢٨) (٢٩) (٣٠) (٣١) (٣٢) (٣٣) (٣٤) (٣٥) (٣٦) (٣٧) (٣٨) (٣٩) (٤٠) (٤١) (٤٢) (٤٣) (٤٤) (٤٥) (٤٦) (٤٧) (٤٨) (٤٩) (٥٠) (٥١) (٥٢) (٥٣) (٥٤) (٥٥) (٥٦) (٥٧) (٥٨) (٥٩) (٦٠) (٦١) (٦٢) (٦٣) (٦٤) (٦٥) (٦٦) (٦٧) (٦٨) (٦٩) (٧٠) (٧١) (٧٢) (٧٣) (٧٤) (٧٥) (٧٦) (٧٧) (٧٨) (٧٩) (٨٠) (٨١) (٨٢) (٨٣) (٨٤) (٨٥) (٨٦) (٨٧) (٨٨) (٨٩) (٩٠) (٩١) (٩٢) (٩٣) (٩٤) (٩٥) (٩٦) (٩٧) (٩٨) (٩٩) (١٠٠) (١٠١) (١٠٢) (١٠٣) (١٠٤) (١٠٥) (١٠٦) (١٠٧) (١٠٨) (١٠٩) (١١٠) (١١١) (١١٢) (١١٣) (١١٤) (١١٥) (١١٦) (١١٧) (١١٨) (١١٩) (١٢٠) (١٢١) (١٢٢) (١٢٣) (١٢٤) (١٢٥) (١٢٦) (١٢٧) (١٢٨) (١٢٩) (١٣٠) (١٣١) (١٣٢) (١٣٣) (١٣٤) (١٣٥) (١٣٦) (١٣٧) (١٣٨) (١٣٩) (١٤٠) (١٤١) (١٤٢) (١٤٣) (١٤٤) (١٤٥) (١٤٦) (١٤٧) (١٤٨) (١٤٩) (١٥٠) (١٥١) (١٥٢) (١٥٣) (١٥٤) (١٥٥) (١٥٦) (١٥٧) (١٥٨) (١٥٩) (١٦٠) (١٦١) (١٦٢) (١٦٣) (١٦٤) (١٦٥) (١٦٦) (١٦٧) (١٦٨) (١٦٩) (١٧٠) (١٧١) (١٧٢) (١٧٣) 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East and West: Which Way Does Turkey Face?

May 15, 2023

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Soner Cagaptay

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