

# THE IRAN-AQAP CONNECTION



***Insight Forward***

## AQ Leadership and Strategic Realignment

Following the killing of Al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by a U.S. drone strike in Kabul, Saif al-Adel has [assumed](#) de facto leadership of AQ. Al-Adel, a former Egyptian army special forces lieutenant colonel, has been a part of AQ [since the 1990s](#). Despite Iran's denials, he is believed to reside there, maintaining significant ties with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). His connections notably include [a close relationship](#) with the late IRGC Quds Forces General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. missile strike in Iraq in 2020. Al-Adel's involvement with the Iranian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah dates back to the early 1990s. The 9/11 Commission's final report states that Hezbollah training, which al-Adel received, provided AQ with the [tactical expertise](#) necessary for the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. For his role in these attacks, a U.S. federal grand jury [indicted](#) and charged Al-Adel in November 1998.



Figure 1: From FBI Most Wanted Poster

Under Al-Adel's leadership, AQ's future strategy and its cooperation with Iran have come into question. In particular, he has maintained [close ties](#) with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, placing his son, Khaled Mohammed Salahaldin Zidane (known by multiple aliases), with AQAP in 2016. Zidane plays a pivotal role, acting as a conduit between his father, AQ core, Iran, AQAP, and groups in Somalia. He is also [instrumental](#) in AQAP's recruitment and media strategy. Saif Al-Adel's influence over AQAP is seen as solidifying under his AQ leadership, aligning its ideological thinking and strategic

approach more closely with Iranian interests in Yemen and the broader region. This alignment suggests an increased likelihood of AQAP activity in strategic partnership with Iran and possibly the Houthis.

## Operational Dynamics

There is evidence of growing cooperation between Iran, the Houthis, and AQAP in Yemen. Notably, an ongoing truce between AQAP and the Houthis has been observed, and Al-Adel is reported to have [urged](#) AQAP leaders to halt attacks in Houthi-held territory. Iran is also arming and training AQAP, with weapons also extended to AQ-linked groups in Somalia through [smuggling routes](#) that also supply the Houthis. AQAP's [possession](#) of unmanned aerial systems and the establishment of a specialized unit for their operation, reportedly trained by the Houthis, further underscores this cooperation. The release of several AQAP members and explosives experts by the Houthis in September 2022 seems to reinforce these ties.

Although forging closer ties between AQ and Iran would be unusual it is not [unprecedented](#), as the Hezbollah training of AQ in the 1990s highlights. Iran also works strategically with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad despite their ideological differences. Therefore, the support that AQAP appears to be receiving from Iran is not coincidental, given the relationship with al-Adel. A closer alignment between Iran and AQAP would support Iran's strategic objectives of forcing the U.S. out of the Middle East, which AQAP shares, and provide AQAP with better weapons and resources to conduct attacks.

Since the 7 October Hamas attack in Israel AQAP has been quick to revitalize its media strategy, exploiting Israel's response to incite lone-wolf attacks in the West. The resurgence of 'Inspire' magazine, aimed at encouraging and instructing individual attacks, also coincides with the [appointment](#) of new leaders of AQAP's media wing, following the killing of Hamad bin Hamoud al-Tamimi in February 2023. This shift is likely a result of Saif Al-Adel's focus on external operations against Western interests and his son's influence within AQAP. Al-Adel's history of involvement in significant foreign operations,

including the 2019 attack against U.S. military recruits in Florida and the 2003 attacks against Western compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, underscores his aspirations for AQ's involvement in similar high-profile attacks.

Additionally, Iran, through its proxies in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, is trying to put as much pressure on the U.S. as possible to stop Israel's military operations in Gaza without it escalating into a full-scale kinetic conflict between Iran and the U.S. Therefore, AQAP could carry out attacks in the region giving Iran plausible deniability that they are involved. This would pose a problem for the U.S. of how to respond to an additional regional threat actor.

However, not all [AQAP leadership](#) aligns with al-Adel's ties to Iran or the decision to halt attacks in Houthi territories. Consequently, attacks in strategic alignment with Iran may not materialize, and AQAP's capacity for such attacks beyond Yemen is questionable, given the U.S.'s successful degradation of its capabilities through airstrikes. Iran has also previously [detained](#) al-Adel and expelled AQ fighters from Iranian territory, which it is likely to do again if desired. For example, if AQAP attacks bring unwanted attention to Iran because of al-Adel's presence there.

## Implications

Closer cooperation between Iran and AQAP has several implications.

1. There is a possibility that Iran will try to use AQAP as a proxy to launch attacks against Western interests in Yemen and the broader region. This is particularly concerning if Iran is indeed supplying weapons to AQAP, with potential targets including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and U.S. interests in the Gulf.
2. AQAP's close links with Al-Shabab in East Africa heighten the risk of attacks on Western assets in that region. The collaboration between these groups could lead to more coordinated and potentially more lethal operations against Western interests.
3. Inside Yemen, AQAP's targeting of the Yemeni government could further destabilize the country. This destabilization might inadvertently lend greater legitimacy to the Houthis, thereby complicating the political and security landscape in Yemen.

The most immediate and significant risk appears to be within Yemen, and the risk of AQAP targeting Western interests, Saudi-led coalition forces, and the Saudi-backed Yemeni government.

Although AQAP has not demonstrated the capability to conduct attacks outside of Yemen in recent years, the terrorism risk in the U.S. and Europe is elevated because of the war in Gaza. AQAP's media strategy may further motivate Jihadist sympathizers to carry out attacks. AQAP has "inspired" lone wolf/self-radicalized attacks in the U.S. and Europe previously, and the primary risk will be low-capability attacks using firearms, bladed weapons, and vehicles targeting crowded public places.

## Impact to corporations

Low capability attacks by self-radicalized individuals pose mainly indirect and incidental risks to businesses, but AQAP has regularly named high-profile individuals such as business leaders, and western commercial interest as potential targets in Inspire magazine. While it does not increase the risk substantially, it remains important to track AQAP's media publications and activity, particularly AQAP attacks or plots outside of Yemen for indicators of increased risks to executives and commercial assets.

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