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# **The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia**

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## **About the Author of “The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia”**

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**The opinions expressed in this report are the author’s and do not reflect the official positions of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other U.S. government agency.**

## Executive Summary

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This paper traces and assesses al-Qa'ida's efforts to launch an insurgency in Saudi Arabia from the mid-1990s until today. It examines the background of Usama bin Ladin's 1996 declaration of jihad, al-Qa'ida's activities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 1996 to 2002, and the causes and evolution of the campaign waged by the group "al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP) from 2003 to 2006.

The paper argues that despite the widespread view of Saudi Arabia as "al-Qa'ida country," and despite the recent developments in Yemen, the jihad in Saudi Arabia has failed so far. The late 1990s saw no operations in the Kingdom because Bin Ladin's infrastructure there was too weak. The AQAP campaign, made possible by the massive influx in 2002 of al-Qa'ida members from Afghanistan, petered out in 2006. Today, practically nothing remains of the original AQAP organization. Nevertheless, its legacy and propaganda continues to inspire amateur cells, and al-Qa'ida in Yemen is actively planning operations in the Kingdom.

The Saudi jihad failed because it lacked popular support. From his exile in Sudan and Afghanistan, Bin Ladin overestimated popular resentment of the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia and underestimated the Saudi public's aversion to domestic unrest. The violence in 2003 and 2004 was the exception that proved the rule. AQAP represented an alien element on the Saudi Islamist scene. Most of its militants had gone through the peculiar socialization processes of al-Qa'ida's Afghan training camps. The launch of the campaign in 2003 was the result of a momentary discrepancy between the very high organizational capability of returnees from Afghanistan, and the weakness of the Saudi intelligence apparatus. That gap has since been closed. Today, country-wide, organized political activism of any kind is more difficult than ever before.

In addition to the lack of popular support and the coercive power of the state, al-Qa'ida's efforts suffered from an ideological split in the Kingdom's militant Islamist community. The followers of Bin Ladin's doctrine of "global jihad" were in constant competition for resources with the much more numerous supporters of 'Abdallah 'Azzam's doctrine of "classical jihad." Global jihadists approved of terrorist attacks against Western targets anywhere, including in Saudi Arabia, while classical jihadists preferred guerrilla warfare in clearly defined war zones, such as Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq. This internal

conflict proved fatal for the AQAP campaign, which coincided with the Iraqi insurgency.

The current AQAP in Yemen represents a different organization from its Saudi namesake. The alleged merger between Yemeni and Saudi al-Qa'ida in January 2009 was a public relations ploy designed to gloss over the defeat of Saudi AQAP and create a false impression of organizational continuity. Still, Yemeni AQAP currently poses a greater terrorist threat to Saudi Arabia than any other network and, as demonstrated by the Christmas Day 2009 failed attack, a threat to the United States.

## Introduction

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On Christmas Day 2009, Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit was very nearly blown up in mid-air by a Nigerian man trained and dispatched by the Yemen-based group al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>1</sup> The incident immediately focused attention on the group, with media speculation centering around whether this regional affiliate of al-Qa'ida posed a graver threat than previously understood and the degree to which Yemen represented a major front in the struggle against terrorism. Lost in the deluge of emerging facts about the Christmas Day plot, however, was the fact that the group that claimed responsibility for it was not the "original" AQAP, but a second incarnation, quite distinct from the earlier organization.

This represented a subtle but significant victory for the group's strategic-communications effort. After all, it had chosen to call itself AQAP precisely to create an illusion of continuity. The original AQAP, based in Saudi Arabia, had essentially ceased to exist in 2006, after its campaign of violence against the Saudi state ended in failure and defeat. So far, the Yemen-based militants who represent the second iteration of AQAP have succeeded in obscuring – or at least minimizing – that history. Yet an understanding of the failure of the Saudi AQAP is vital, as it may hold crucially relevant lessons for the effort to combat the Yemeni heirs to the AQAP mantle.

When Usama bin Ladin declared jihad in Saudi Arabia in August 1996, the very notion of a jihad in the Kingdom seemed absurd to some. Oil-rich Saudi Arabia had never been colonized or occupied in the conventional sense, and it constituted one of the most homogenously Muslim and religiously observant societies on the planet. To others, it was not the launch, but the failure of the Saudi jihad that was surprising. Given the number of Saudi extremists and the unpopularity of the regime, how could Bin Ladin's initiative have failed?

But failed it has. Militarily, it took al-Qa'ida seven years to mount a decent fighting force in the Kingdom, only to see it crushed by the state just a couple of years after launching its offensive in 2003. Politically, the militants have been isolated from the overall population and even the mainstream Islamist community, especially since 2003. However, even a failed jihad can begin anew.

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<sup>1</sup> Anahad O'Connor and Erik Schmitt, "Terror Attempt Seen as Man Tries to Ignite Device on Jet," *New York Times*, 26 December 2009; Peter Baker, "Obama Says Al Qaeda in Yemen Planned Bombing Plot, and He Vows Retribution," *New York Times*, 2 January 2010.

The call for jihad in Arabia, immortalized on the Internet, is waiting to be picked up by future Saudi activists. They will draw lessons from the history of the Saudi jihad – and so should we.

This paper will examine the evolution of the Saudi jihad from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s with a particular focus on the AQAP campaign launched in 2003. It will address three key questions: Why was the jihad launched? Why did major combat only take place in 2003? In what ways has the jihad failed and why? The analysis draws on a wide range of secondary and primary sources, including extensive fieldwork in the Kingdom and a close reading of Saudi jihadist literature. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part examines the background, context and ideological justification for the 1996 declaration. The second part explains the evolution of the jihad between 1996 and 2002. Lastly, the third and most substantial part analyzes the AQAP campaign from 2003 to 2006 and the reasons for its failure.

### **Background and Context of the Declaration of Jihad**

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Unlike many other jihad campaigns, the beginning of the Saudi jihad can be traced to a formal and dated declaration, namely Usama bin Ladin's "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Sanctuaries," published in *al-Quds al-Arabi* on 23 August 1996.<sup>2</sup> This announcement, along with Bin Ladin's numerous subsequent statements in the second half of the 1990s, sheds light on the motivations behind the call for jihad.

The *casus belli* of the jihad was the continued presence of U.S. troops deployed in Saudi Arabia during the 1990-1991 Gulf Crisis, which Bin Ladin considered totally unacceptable, for several reasons. First, the infidel presence ran counter to religious imperatives regarding the exclusively Muslim character of the Arabian Peninsula with its two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Second, the foreign military presence amounted to an occupation of sovereign Muslim territory and the domination of the Saudi population by a non-Muslim power. Third, it facilitated the exploitation of oil resources and enforced expensive arms deals on the Saudi state. Indeed, all the problems and evils in Saudi society – of which Bin Ladin listed many – were the result of the Crusader occupation.

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), 23-30.

In the eyes of the al-Qa'ida leader, the continued U.S. presence also undermined the legitimacy of the Saudi regime. By inviting U.S. troops and allowing them to stay indefinitely, while at the same time stifling domestic opposition, the regime had become an accomplice to the American occupation. In the past, Bin Ladin argued, the regime had made at least some effort to appear Islamic, but the arrival of the American troops had exposed the un-Islamic nature of the government and sparked a process of serious societal decay. The turning point, according to Bin Ladin, was the imprisonment of the leaders of the Islamist opposition (the Sahwa) in 1994, after which the Saudi regime lost its legitimacy. Before 2003, Bin Ladin never directly and publicly stated that the regime or any of its individual members were infidels, but he went a very long way toward denying the political and religious legitimacy of the Al Saud dynasty. In other words, there was an important revolutionary dimension to Bin Laden's thinking, but in the final analysis, the fight against the so-called "far enemy" was deemed to have priority. As he noted in 1997:

Regarding the criticisms of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, the first one is their subordination to the U.S. So, our main problem is the U.S. government while the Saudi regime is but a branch or an agent of the U.S....The people and the young men are concentrating their efforts on the sponsor and not on the sponsored. The concentration at this point of jihad is against the American occupiers."<sup>3</sup>

Bin Ladin's America-first strategy set the Saudi jihad apart from the jihad in 1990s Egypt and Algeria, where regime change was explicitly stated as the primary objective of the armed struggle.<sup>4</sup> Of course, one did not necessarily exclude the other. Internal al-Qa'ida documents and testimonies from detained al-Qa'ida leaders suggest that Bin Ladin envisaged the Saudi jihad as a two-step process in which Americans would be confronted and evicted first, whereupon the regime would fall almost automatically.<sup>5</sup> However, the very fact that the al-Qa'ida leadership played down its revolutionary agenda for the Kingdom says something very significant about Saudi political culture, as we shall discover later in this monograph.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Usama bin Ladin conducted by Peter Arnett, broadcast by CNN on 10 May 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad went Global* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "Letter from Abu Hudhayfa to Abu 'Abdallah," *HARMONY Database (AFGP-2002-003251)*, 20 June 2000. Senior al-Qa'ida leader Khalid Sheikh Muhammad told interrogators Bin Ladin wanted regime change in Saudi Arabia; George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 248.



There are four important points about the background and context of the 1996 declaration that help account for its subsequent evolution. First is the fact that in the mid-1990s, the Saudi population was relatively unaccustomed to political violence, especially of the Sunni Islamist kind. Since the end of the so-called Ikhwan revolt in the late 1920s – when the religious militia established by the Kingdom's founder, 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, turned against their leader – the Kingdom had seen remarkably low levels of internal unrest, at least by Middle Eastern standards. With the exception of a few isolated incidents such as the 1979 Mecca mosque siege, Saudi Arabia had largely been spared the Islamist unrest that had plagued Arab republics such as Egypt and Syria in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup> By calling for violent operations in Saudi Arabia, Bin Ladin was asking Saudis to break a widely-held taboo.

Second, the idea of a jihad in Saudi Arabia was hatched during the height of the confrontation between the Saudi government and the Sahwa. The reformist Sahwa movement, which had emerged in the 1970s and gained momentum in the late 1980s, had seized opportunistically on the deployment of U.S. forces to articulate a critique of the regime and propose a broad platform of political and socioeconomic change. Led by the charismatic preachers Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali, the Sahwa inspired historically unprecedented levels of anti-regime activism, prompting the government to arrest all the senior leaders in the fall of 1994.<sup>7</sup> The success of the Sahwist mobilization depended on a broad range of factors, but seen from the outside, it seemed to be a linear expression of public resentment against the U.S. military presence. This no doubt led Bin Ladin and the al-Qa'ida organization to overestimate the level of popular support for a violent campaign against U.S. interests in the Kingdom.

A third and related point is that although the Sahwa inspired Bin Ladin, the latter's agenda was different from that of Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali.- Unlike the Sahwa, Bin Ladin's declaration was not the result of an organic domestic social movement, but rather an ideological experiment by radicalized activists living in exile. Usama bin Ladin issued the 1996 declaration "from the mountains of the Hindu Kush" – meaning Afghanistan – and he had only spent

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<sup>6</sup> For more on 1979 Mecca incident, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holiest Shrine* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). The 1979 incident traumatized the regime, which reacted by expanding the power and budgets of the religious sector, thereby fuelling the Sahwa.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Sahwa, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) ; and Stéphane Lacroix, "Les champs de la discorde: Une sociologie politique de l'islamisme en Arabie Saoudite (1954-2005)," (PhD Thesis, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2007).

two of the preceding ten years in the Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> The idea of a jihad in Saudi Arabia was developed in Khartoum in the first half of the 1990s by Bin Ladin and his entourage of fellow al-Qa'ida leaders, most of whom were non-Saudi Arabs. All, including Bin Ladin, were veterans of the Afghan jihad who could never return to their home countries for fear of imprisonment or worse. Bin Ladin followed events in the Kingdom as best he could, but he was understandably somewhat out of touch with the grassroots in his home country.

The fourth factor is that Bin Ladin's ideological justification for jihad in Saudi Arabia represented a controversial innovation that had to compete with other, more established and more widely-accepted justifications for jihad prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Bin Ladin's call for jihad in Saudi Arabia was part of the nascent doctrine of "global jihad," which proposed an international terrorist campaign to coerce the "Crusader-Jewish alliance" into withdrawing from the Muslim world. The global jihadist doctrine differed from the "classical jihadist" doctrine developed a decade earlier by the Jordanian-Palestinian ideologue 'Abdallah 'Azzam, which called on Muslims to join their co-religionists' struggles of national liberation, independently of their respective governments.<sup>9</sup> The classical and global jihadists differed on two crucial points. The first was tactics: the former preferred conventional warfare in confined theaters of war, while the latter employed international terrorist tactics on civilians. The second difference was in the degree of respect for political and religious authority; while most classical jihadists heeded the rulings of senior Saudi *ulama* regarding what constituted legitimate jihad fronts, global jihadists did not. For Bin Ladin and his followers, the regime and its scholars lacked the legitimacy to rule on matters of jihad; hence their objections to jihad in Saudi Arabia should be dismissed. This was a highly controversial stance in a country where religious scholars continued to command tremendous influence and respect. The distinction between classical and global jihadists was highly operational in post-1996 Saudi Arabia and would have deep practical implications. It would notably divide supporters of the Saudi commander Khattab in Chechnya from supporters of Bin Ladin in Afghanistan, and it would prove fatal to the AQAP campaign, as we shall see below.

The Saudi jihad, then, was to some extent a utopian enterprise from the start. Launched by exiled activists over-enthusiastic about the Sahwist mobilization,

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<sup>8</sup> Bin Ladin moved to Pakistan in 1986 and returned to the Kingdom in late 1989. He spent a year in Peshawar again from 1991 to 1992 before moving permanently to Khartoum, Sudan; see Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Kepel et al., *al-Qa'ida in Its Own Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 81ff.

the jihad project was in fact highly controversial within the Saudi Islamist community, not to mention the Saudi general public. Soon after the 1996 declaration, Bin Ladin would come to learn this the hard way.

### **A Slow Start (1996 to 2002)**

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In the first few years after the 1996 declaration, Bin Ladin struggled to recruit Saudis to his cause. People who met Bin Ladin in Jalalabad in early 1997 noted that most of his companions were North Africans, and that he was very keen if not desperate to recruit more Saudis and Yemenis.<sup>10</sup> Collections of biographical information on al-Qa'ida recruits suggest that very few Saudis went to Afghanistan between 1996 and 1999.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the paucity of Saudi recruits on the Afghan front, al-Qa'ida apparently did not undertake any military operations in Saudi Arabia itself in 1996 and 1997, most likely because it did not have the capability.<sup>12</sup>

During the course of 1997, Bin Ladin was nevertheless able to establish a small network of operatives in the Kingdom, a key member of which was 'Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a Hijaz-raised Yemeni who would act as al-Qa'ida's main director of operations on the Arabian Peninsula until his arrest in November 2002. In late 1997, al-Nashiri initiated a plot to attack a U.S. target (possibly the U.S. consulate in Jidda) using anti-tank missiles.<sup>13</sup> The plot was foiled in January 1998, when the missile shipment was intercepted near the Yemeni border. The seizure was followed by a vast crackdown on the jihadist community that sent some 900 people, mostly Saudi veterans of the Afghan and Bosnian jihads, to prison.<sup>14</sup> Later in 1998, there seems to have been at least one additional attempt to bring missiles into the country, again prompting the arrest of several hundred jihadists.<sup>15</sup> In each of these crackdowns, authorities cast a wide net, arresting anyone with a jihadi background. The numbers are thus not indicative of the size of al-Qaida's infrastructure in the Kingdom.

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<sup>10</sup> "Interview with Abu Jandal - part 4," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 26 March 2006; *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), 152.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2006).

<sup>12</sup> The June 1996 Khobar bombing was carried out by Shiite militants. See Thomas Hegghammer, "Deconstructing the Myth about al-Qa'ida and Khobar," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 3 (February 2008).

<sup>13</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 152; Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 213.

<sup>14</sup> "820 Mujahidin Imprisoned in Saudi Arabia," [www.azzam.com](http://www.azzam.com), March 1998, accessed 23 February 2002; Interview with Faris bin Huzzam, Dubai, November 2005.

<sup>15</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 128-29; "Over 300 Bin Laden Companions Arrested in Saudi Arabia," *Ausaf*, 26 March 1999.

The 1998 crackdowns undermined the already fragile al-Qa'ida networks in the Kingdom and led Bin Ladin to conclude that premature operations were counterproductive. At that point, Bin Ladin decided to temporarily suspend operations in Saudi Arabia until a more robust operational network was in place.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, al-Qa'ida would focus on international operations and cultivate Saudi Arabia as a recruitment and fundraising ground. This was no doubt a wise decision, because Saudi Arabia would go on to become al-Qa'ida's most important support base in terms of money, recruits and clerical opinions in support of its strategy and actions. Between 1999 and 2001, the number of Saudi recruits to al-Qa'ida's Afghan camps skyrocketed to somewhere around a thousand.<sup>17</sup>

Al-Qa'ida's improved fortunes in Saudi Arabia resulted from a number of developments that occurred around 1999. One was an eruption of new international conflicts involving Muslims, notably the Kosovo crisis (1999), the second Chechen war (1999) and the second Palestinian *intifada* (2000), all of which contributed to a resurgence of pan-Islamist sentiment in the Kingdom. Another factor was the introduction of the Internet in Saudi Arabia in early 1999, which facilitated the spread of jihadist propaganda.<sup>18</sup> A third factor was the release from prison in 1998 of Yusuf al-'Uyayri, a veteran jihadist and skilled social movement entrepreneur who would play a crucial role in establishing an al-Qa'ida network in the Kingdom between 2000 and 2003.<sup>19</sup>

Against the backdrop of this improved environment, the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 caused Bin Ladin to reconsider the moratorium on operations in the Kingdom. The loss of a safe haven in Afghanistan and the launch of the "global war on terror" altered the cost-benefit analysis of preserving Saudi Arabia as a support base as opposed to a battlefield. Thus, in or around January 2002, Bin Ladin formally ordered Saudi fighters in Afghanistan to return to the Kingdom and start preparing for a campaign.<sup>20</sup> During the first five months of 2002, between 300 and 1,000 Saudi al-Qa'ida

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<sup>16</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, *Idarat al-tawahhush* [The Management of Savagery], [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws), 2004, 29; Tenet, 248.

<sup>17</sup> Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia."

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Jehl, "The Internet's 'Open Sesame' Is Answered Warily," *New York Times*, 18 March 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Roel Meijer, "Yusuf al-Uyayri and the Making of a Revolutionary Salafi Praxis," *Die Welt des Islams* 47, no. 3-4 (2007); Thomas Hegghammer, "Islamist violence and regime stability in Saudi Arabia," *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (July 2008), 708-712.

<sup>20</sup> This is amply documented in the jihadist literature, see e.g. Fawwaz al-Nashmi, "fahd bin samran al-sa'idi," *Sawt al-Jihad*, 15 (2004).

recruits made it home via third countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Syria and the United Arab Emirates. Many of them would later enter AQAP's ranks.

To increase the chances of success, Bin Ladin had cleverly maintained two parallel networks in the Kingdom in 2002.<sup>21</sup> The first one was headed by 'Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri and was operational from the start. It planned several attacks in late 2002 until al-Nashiri was arrested in November of that year.<sup>22</sup> The other network was overseen by Yusuf al-'Uyayri, who worked more slowly and discreetly to build the organization that would become AQAP. While the attention of U.S. and Saudi intelligence was focused on al-Nashiri, al-'Uyayri and his group operated under the radar of the authorities. The strategy also provided redundancy, which was proved by the fact that al-Nashiri's November 2002 capture did not affect the al-'Uyayri's network to any noticeable degree. However, now that al-'Uyayri was the last man standing, the top al-Qa'ida leadership in Afghanistan increased the pressure on him to launch the jihad.

### **The AQAP Campaign (2003 to 2006)**

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On 12 May 2003, almost seven years after the 1996 declaration of jihad, al-Qa'ida launched its first sustained military campaign in Saudi Arabia. The opening shot was the so-called East Riyadh operation, in which three suicide car bombs struck compounds housing Western expatriates, killing thirty-five people and wounding hundreds. Over the next few years, Saudi Arabia witnessed historically unprecedented levels of internal violence as the 500-strong al-Qa'ida network battled Saudi security forces while trying to mount attacks on Westerners in the Kingdom.<sup>23</sup>

The tactical decision to launch the May 2003 bombings seems to have come from the top al-Qa'ida leadership in March or April 2003. The reasoning behind this timing remains unclear, but there are several possible explanations, including the leadership's desire to capitalize on anti-U.S. sentiment generated by the Iraq war, which began in March. Bin Ladin and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, may also simply have been impatient. Interestingly, in early 2003, Saudi and Western intelligence agencies allegedly intercepted messages indicative of a fierce debate within al-Qa'ida over the wisdom of launching the May 2003 offensive. The

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<sup>21</sup> Author interview with a Saudi security source, Riyadh, January 2007.

<sup>22</sup> "Biographies of High Value Terrorist Detainees Transferred to the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay" *Press Release, Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, 6 September 2006.

<sup>23</sup> For a chronology of the AQAP campaign, see J. E. Peterson, "Saudi Arabia: Internal Security Incidents Since 1979," *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, no. 3 (2008).

debate allegedly pitted the Afghanistan-based leadership, who wanted immediate action, against Yusuf al-'Uyayri, who insisted his men were not ready.<sup>24</sup> The former prevailed, but history would prove the latter right.

The East Riyadh bombing provoked a massive security crackdown in the summer of 2003 that dented the al-'Uyayri network very severely. Top leaders – including Yusuf al-U'yayri himself – were killed, and many others were detained. Radical scholars such as Nasir al-Fahd and 'Ali al-Khudayr were also arrested, leaving the militants without clerical backing. Moreover, the network lost crucial resources and infrastructure as security services uncovered numerous safe houses across the country.<sup>25</sup> Still, the sheer size and the cell-based structure of the network meant several mid-level leaders and perhaps a hundred fighters were able to escape the crackdown.

The remaining militants soon started a process of reorganization and rebranding. One notable aspect of this effort was the founding, in late September or early October 2003, of a media unit called *Sawt al-Jihad*, which was charged with producing propaganda magazines and videos.<sup>26</sup> For over a year, AQAP ran a sophisticated media campaign that made the organization appear larger and more powerful than was really the case. In November 2003, the group began using the name “al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula” for the first time.<sup>27</sup> Claiming close links to the top al-Qa'ida leadership may have been a way to compensate for setbacks on the ground and rapidly eroding direct links to al-Qa'ida central. Incidentally, this was the first case of a regional jihadi organization making “al-Qa'ida” part of its official name; this has since become the standard nomenclature for al-Qa'ida affiliates.

By November 2003, the organization had regrouped and was ready to launch a new offensive. On 8 November came AQAP's second major operation in the Kingdom: the so-called Muhayya bombing, which killed seventeen people. The attack was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the 7th-century Battle of Badr, and the bombing vehicle carried registration number 313, evoking the

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, *National Security in Saudi Arabia*, 113; author's interviews with Western security officials.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed chronology of the crackdown, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia 1979-2006: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism*, (PhD dissertation, Sciences Po Paris, 2007), 615-617.

<sup>26</sup> Muhammad al-Shafi'i, *mawqa' usuli yabuthth muqabala ma' ahad al-matlubin al-19 fi'l-sa'udiyya* [Fundamentalist Website Airs Interview with One of the 19 Wanted Saudis], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 13 October 2003.

<sup>27</sup> “*Bayan hawla al-taraju'at al-akhira* [Statement on the Recent Retractions],” *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 5 (2003).

number of Muslims commanded by Muhammad in his historic battle against members of the Quraishi tribe. The AQAP video *Badr of Riyadh* later documented the preparation and execution of the attack in extraordinary detail. However, the operation was a public relations disaster for the militants. Most of the casualties were Arabs and Muslims – many of them children. Muhayya was widely considered a turning point in the campaign because it shifted public opinion firmly against the militants.<sup>28</sup> After the May Riyadh bombings, part of the Saudi Islamist community still entertained the conspiracy theory that the bombings had been orchestrated to justify a crackdown on Islamists. Muhayya silenced such voices.

December 2003 saw a new development: the first AQAP attacks against Saudi security forces. These attacks were clearly motivated by a desire for revenge after the heavy security crackdown.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, the attacks were not claimed by AQAP, but rather by a mysterious organization called the Haramain Brigades [*kata'ib al-haramayn*].<sup>30</sup> At the time, the appearance of a new group caused much speculation among analysts.<sup>31</sup> It has since emerged that the attacks were in fact carried out by AQAP members, and that the Haramain Brigades was a fictitious entity invented to dissociate AQAP from the “dirty work” of attacking Saudi policemen.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that the militants feared being perceived as revolutionaries, as this was likely to undermine whatever public support that remained for their campaign. In other words, AQAP was sensitive to public opinion and wary of using excessive violence against Muslims.

However, the December 2003 attacks marked the beginning of a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat violence between AQAP and the security forces that would gradually shift AQAP's discourse and operational priorities in a more revolutionary (i.e.

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<sup>28</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Among Saudis, Attack Has Soured Qaeda Supporters,” *New York Times*, 11 November 2003.

<sup>29</sup> On 4 December gunmen wounded Major-General ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Huwayrini, a senior Interior ministry official, in an attack in Riyadh. In mid-December, police defused a car bomb near the headquarters of the Saudi intelligence services. On 29 December, a small bomb exploded in the parked car of Ibrahim al-Dhali’, a major in the intelligence service.

<sup>30</sup> “*Bayan kata'ib al-haramain* [Statement of the Haramain Brigades],” ([www.hostinganime.com/kataeb](http://www.hostinganime.com/kataeb), 2004).

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Breffni O'Rourke, “Saudi Arabia: Does Recent Violence Herald New Regional Instability?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* ([www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)), 23 April 2004; *Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Shooting, Hostage Taking, Kidnapping Wave May/June 2004 (v 1.1)*, Intelcenter.com, 10 July 2004, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Mahmoud Ahmad, “Al-Qaeda Operatives Are an Ignorant Lot, Say Former Members,” *Arab News*, 3 October 2003. A reliable source with contacts in the Saudi security establishment told this author that the Haramain Brigades was a cell led by ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin. During a discussion about the Haramain brigades on the jihadist forum al-Hisba in 2006, a prominent contributor (Abu al-Qa’qa’) was adamant that the Brigades had been a cell led by Sa’ud al-Utaybi; “*madha hadatha li-jama’at kata'ib la-haramain?* [What Happened to the Haramain Brigades?],” ([www.al-hesbah.org](http://www.al-hesbah.org), 2006.)

regime-focused) direction. This shift was illustrated on 21 April 2004, when a suicide car-bomb attack – the third of its kind during the AQAP campaign – caused an explosion in front of the headquarters of the traffic police in the Washm area of central Riyadh, killing six people. The Washm bombing was another public-relations setback for the militants, because all of the casualties were Muslims. Once again the militants tried to blame the attack on the Haramain Brigades in a carefully choreographed act of media manipulation.<sup>33</sup> Incidentally, the trick did not work since, by all accounts, most Saudis saw the militants as a homogenous mass. All it did was to prompt speculation among foreign observers that new groups were entering the scene and that the terrorism problem was spinning out of control.

To reinforce the message that AQAP was only after Western targets, the militants launched a wave of simple yet spectacular attacks on Western expatriates in May and June 2004. On 1 May, four militants infiltrated a business complex in Yanbu on the west coast and opened fire on employees, killing five Westerners. Less than a month later, on 29 May, a very similar operation targeted a compound in Khobar, on the opposite side of the Kingdom. A group of four militants entered an expatriate residential complex and went on a shooting spree, killing Westerners and other non-Muslims before barricading themselves in a building with a small group of hostages. The attackers apparently hoped to create an international hostage crisis, and reportedly called the television station *al-Jazeera* and demanded to be given air time. (The station refused.)<sup>34</sup> When the drama ended a day later, twenty-two people were dead (including two attackers), while three of the militants had escaped.

Shortly before the Khobar attack, militants in Riyadh had embarked on a different, but no less attention-grabbing strategy: assassinations of individual Westerners in Riyadh. In the course of three weeks, five such attacks shook the expatriate community. The pinnacle of this wave of violence was reached in Riyadh on 12 June, when a cell led by ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin kidnapped and later decapitated Paul Marshall Johnson, an American engineer.

All these relatively simple operations seriously undermined the sense of security among Western expatriates, many of whom began leaving the Kingdom. Western media and foreign observers believed the Saudi authorities had lost the

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<sup>33</sup> “*al-Bayan al-rabi*” [Statement no. 4],” (www.qal3ah.org, 2004); ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, *27 April Audio Statement* (Sawt al-Jihad, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Michael Knights, “The Khobar Rampage, May 2004,” *JTIC Terrorism Case Study* (Coulson, England: Jane's Information Group, 2005); *al-Ra'i al-Amm*, 31 May 2004.



ability to maintain security, and some even believed the stability of the regime itself was at stake.<sup>35</sup> In reality it was AQAP that was on the brink of collapse. Spectacular as they seemed, the new tactics were a sign of weakness. The militants had simply been forced to use handguns for lack of explosives, and most of the May and June operations were the result of a single cell led by 'Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin.

The structural weakness of the AQAP organization became clear in late June and July 2004. In this period, Saudi security services inflicted two lethal blows to AQAP. On 18 June, security forces located and killed al-Muqrin in Riyadh. On 20 July, police raided a Riyadh house that had served as the organization's de facto headquarters and the center for its media production. The group was so dependent on al-Muqrin's leadership and on the Riyadh safe house that their removal made the organization start imploding. Initially, it was difficult to see that AQAP was under heavy pressure. Assassinations of individual westerners continued into August and September, bringing the death toll of the 2004 assassination spree to nine people, all Westerners. However, information from the Riyadh safe house – combined with interrogations of captured militants – enabled the security services to round up a large number of AQAP operatives and facilitators across the country in the autumn of 2004.

Still, in December 2004, it became clear that some cells had escaped the dragnet. On December 6, a group of five gunmen calling themselves the Falluja Squadron [*sariyat falluja*] attacked the U.S. consulate in Jidda in a very well-planned operation that killed six non-American embassy staff.<sup>36</sup> A few weeks later, on 29 December, a squadron named after the deceased al-Muqrin (*sariyat al-muqrin*) launched a much less successful twin suicide car-bomb attack on the Interior Ministry and a National Guard facility.<sup>37</sup> Neither of the two bombs detonated at the right location, and only militants were killed. The ability of AQAP to carry out large-scale bombings was clearly in doubt.

The final blow to the AQAP organization was delivered in early April 2005, when security forces raided a farm near the town of al-Rass that housed almost all of the group's remaining leaders. The three-day gun battle at al-Rass left

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<sup>35</sup> See Dan Murphy, "All-Out War Between Al Qaeda and House of Saud Under Way," *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 June 2004. One of the most gloomy predictions was made in "Saudi Arabia: Al Qaeda's Many Layers," *Stratfor Intelligence Brief*, 16 June 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Knights, "Operation Conquest of Falluja: Assault on the US Consulate in Jeddah, December 2004," in *JTIC Terrorism Case Study* (Coulsdon, England: Jane's Information Group, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> *Bayan hawla 'amaliyyat al-dakhiliyya fi al-riyadh* [Statement on the Interior Ministry Operation in Riyadh], ([www.qa3edoon.com](http://www.qa3edoon.com): 2004).

fourteen senior militants dead and marked the end of the original AQAP. By that point, practically all of the militants who had been part of Yusuf al-'Uyayri's original network were now dead or captured. The people who continued the jihad from mid-2005 onward represented a new generation of relatively inexperienced young activists.

By early 2006, the shootouts had become even less frequent, and it seemed that the campaign was dying out. But once again, the militants surprised observers. On 24 February 2006, a group of militants attempted, unsuccessfully, to drive two explosives-laden vehicles into the Abqaiq oil refinery.<sup>38</sup> This was AQAP's first attack on an oil facility and it sent shockwaves through the global oil markets. However, spectacular as it may have been had it succeeded, the Abqaiq operation was a failure, illustrating the operational weakness that had plagued AQAP since mid-2004.<sup>39</sup>

Although shootouts and low-level attacks persisted, it was clear by the end of 2006 that the jihad on the Arabian Peninsula had lost its momentum. The rate and quality of operations had decreased significantly. All of the original AQAP leaders were gone. The number of active militants had decreased to somewhere in the low tens.<sup>40</sup> There was a small trickle of new recruits, but they did not possess the skills and capabilities of the AQAP pioneers. Their bi-monthly magazines, *Sawt al-Jihad* and *Mu'askar al-Battar*, were defunct, and the level of jihadist Internet activity in Saudi Arabia had decreased considerably. By any measure, the campaign had failed. Why?

### **Explaining the Failure of the AQAP Campaign**

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Three crucial factors shaped the outcome of the jihad on the Arabian Peninsula. The first was the coercive power of the state, the second was lack of popular support for AQAP's project, the third was the Iraq war, which divided the classical and global jihadists to the latter's disadvantage.

If Saudi Arabia's policing of its militant Islamist community had been periodically complacent or inefficient in the past, its approach changed completely after the East Riyadh bombing. From May 2003 onward, the state

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Knights, "Abqaiq Attack Underscores Terrorist Failings and Highlights Growing Focus on Oil Targets." (London: Olive Group, 2006)

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Ulph, "Mujahidin Explain Away Failures of the Abqaiq Attack," *Terrorism Focus* 3, no. 9 (2006).

<sup>40</sup> Author interview with a Saudi security source, Riyadh, January 2007.

devoted its full resources to combating Islamist militancy. The resources allocated to counterterrorism were colossal: the total security budget in 2004, 2005 and 2006 was estimated at \$8.5, \$10 and \$12 billion respectively.<sup>41</sup> The Interior Ministry constructed state-of-the-art training facilities and electronic surveillance systems. The training of Special Forces was intensified with considerable assistance from the United Kingdom. CIA analysts and technical experts came to Riyadh to work side by side with their Saudi counterparts.<sup>42</sup> Advances in technical surveillance gave the authorities de facto hegemony over the Internet, the telephone network and the road network. And the many casualties among police ranks increased the resolve of the security services. In short, the May 2003 bombing sparked a total overhaul of the Saudi security establishment. The result of these efforts was a dramatic increase in the so-called “hard counterterrorism” capability of the Saudi security apparatus. Change did not happen overnight, but the overall trend was one of considerable improvement.

However, the Saudi response to AQAP was not based on hard counterterrorism alone. In fact, the state’s use of force was relatively measured and targeted, at least compared with other Arab countries’ handling of militant Islamists. The “soft” Saudi approach worried many foreign commentators, some of whom even criticized Saudi Arabia for not using repressive measures like those favored by the Egyptian and Algerian governments. In retrospect, it is clear that it was precisely the relatively restrained and diversified nature of Saudi counterterrorism that made it so effective.

Saudi “soft counterterrorism” had many different components, three of which are crucial to understanding AQAP’s downfall. First was the circumscription of the organization’s resources. Authorities filled the many loopholes in the charitable and financial sectors that had enabled the militants to obtain funds. The state cracked down on the huge illegal arms market and boosted border control, making explosives and detonators more difficult to procure. These measures, combined with the seizure of safe houses and weapons stores, slowly but surely dried up AQAP’s resources.

The second key element was the creation of exit options for militants. The authorities declared month-long general amnesties in mid-2004 and mid-2006,

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<sup>41</sup> Nawaf Obaid, “Remnants of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: Current Assessment,” (Presentation at Council of Foreign Relations, New York, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> “Saudi-US Cooperation in War on Terror Sharply Up: Official,” *Arab News*, 25 October 2003.

and militants were encouraged to surrender throughout the campaign.<sup>43</sup> Discreet mediation initiatives involving influential Islamists such as Safar al-Hawali and Muhsin al-Awaji were also undertaken.<sup>44</sup> Surrenders were highly publicized and repentant militants regularly appeared on television, in order to give the impression that desertions were common which, in fact, was not the case.<sup>45</sup> The regime also made an effort to appear merciful and forgiving toward repentant militants. This began with abstaining from serious prisoner abuse. By all available accounts, it seems that the police did not torture captured AQAP militants; at least not in the way they did during the mid-1990s.<sup>46</sup> The authorities also tried to create a degree of transparency regarding prisoner treatment by broadcasting interviews with detainees praising the prison conditions in a more or less convincing fashion.<sup>47</sup> The government also launched a much-publicized prisoner re-education program that aimed to de-radicalize detained militants and re-integrate them into society.<sup>48</sup> While the soft treatment of detainees produced few desertions from AQAP, it had the much more important effect of stemming new recruitment and preventing further radicalization of detainees.

Saudi authorities also conducted a sophisticated campaign for the hearts and minds of the population in general and the Islamist community in particular. The state used all available outlets – including the mass media, the official religious authorities, and the education system – to convey one overarching message: the militants were confused rebels bent on creating disorder and killing Muslims. The key to the success of this information strategy was that it portrayed the militants as revolutionaries, thereby exploiting the taboo against

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<sup>43</sup> “Terrorists Offered Amnesty,” *Arab News*, 24 June 2004; “Saudi’s Qaeda Rejects Renewed Amnesty by King: Web,” *Reuters*, 4 July 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Mshari al-Zaydi, “The Mediators”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat English* (Online), 31 May 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Starting in January 2004, Saudi TV broadcast a three part series entitled “Inside the Cell,” in which captured AQAP militants spoke of their experiences in the underground; Dominic Evans, “Saudi Militants Shown Repenting on State TV,” *Reuters*, 12 January 2004; Rawya Rageh, “Ex-Militants: al-Qa’ida Preys on Young Men,” *Associated Press*, 22 September 2004; Sebastian Usher, “Saudi Militants Repent ‘Errors,’” *BBC News Online*, 6 December 2005. During the July 2004 amnesty, a militant was shown on TV explaining why he had surrendered; Asma Al-Muhammad, “Man Killed in Shootout Wasn’t Rashoud,” *Arab News*, 2 July 2004.

<sup>46</sup> This author interviewed several detained and recently released Islamists in 2007 and 2008, all of whom denied they had been tortured. They may well have been afraid to tell, but other Islamists detained in the 1990s and interviewed by this author in 2004 and 2005 were not afraid to say they were tortured. More significant is the fact that post-2003 claims of torture in the jihadist literature are much less detailed than those from the late 1990s. In fact, many Islamist detainees may even have been treated better than the average inmate, precisely to prevent the former’s radicalization. This author interviewed a liberal Saudi dissident previously detained in the same prison wing as a number AQAP militants in 2006 who lamented what he saw as the preferential treatment of jihadi detainees.

<sup>47</sup> James Sturcke, “Come on in ... the Bread and Water is Fine,” *Guardian*, 15 December 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Boucek, *Saudi Arabia’s “Soft” Counterterrorism Strategy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

domestic rebellion in Saudi political culture to delegitimize the militants in the eyes of the population. The media used every available opportunity to highlight and magnify the effect of the violence on Muslim life and property, thereby undermining the militants' message that their jihad focused on Westerners. The authorities also spread disinformation about the militants' alleged intentions to kill Muslim civilians and about their alleged desecration of mosques and the Qur'an.<sup>49</sup> This information strategy caused great frustration within AQAP, which struggled to rid itself of the revolutionary image and get its anti-American message across.

The government propaganda campaign exacerbated a crucial latent problem facing AQAP, namely the lack of public support – even in the Islamist community – for a violent campaign on Saudi soil. The East Riyadh operation was widely rejected in Saudi society as a whole, including in conservative Islamist circles. Newspapers were full of editorials and op-eds condemning the attacks.<sup>50</sup> The entire religious establishment – including the heavyweight Sahwist clerics – decried the bombings.<sup>51</sup> Those who did not condemn it cited conspiracy theories exonerating the jihadist community. However, all such doubts disappeared with the Muhayya bombing in November 2003. The grim pictures of wounded Muslim children on the front pages of Saudi newspapers turned domestic public opinion decisively against the militants. Even militant Islamist organizations abroad – including Hamas and the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group) – criticized the violence.<sup>52</sup> From then on, the broad consensus in the Kingdom was that the militants were terrorists – or a “misguided sect” [*fi'a dhalla*], as they were called in official media – who posed a great threat to Saudi society. AQAP's increasing use of violence against security forces from December 2003 onward only made matters worse.

A chronic legitimacy deficit created a hostile operational environment. The number of sympathizers prepared to extend assistance to militants decreased

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<sup>49</sup> “Official: Saudis Foil Terror Attack on Pilgrims,” *Reuters*, 4 November 2003; P. K. Abdul Ghafour, “Cell Was Targeting Muslims,” *Arab News*, 5 November 2003. Sometimes the reports bordered on the nonsensical, such as the claim that the militants raided in Mecca on 15 June 2003 had booby-trapped copies of the Qur'an; see Muhammad Alkhereiji, “Abdullah Tells Citizens to Report Suspects,” *Arab News*, 22 June 2003.

<sup>50</sup> See “The Enemy Within [Editorial],” *Arab News*, 14 May 2003 and Raid Qusti, “Cleaning Up Our Own Backyard,” *Arab News*, 21 May 2003.

<sup>51</sup> See Salman al-Awda, “*al-Tajjirat wa tada'iyatuhu* [The Bombings and their Falterings],” (www.islamtoday.net, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> “Hamas Condemns Riyadh Bombing as Harmful to Islam,” *Reuters*, 13 November 2003 and Karam Zuhdi, ed., *Tajjirat al-riyadh: al-ahkam wa'l-athar* [The Riyadh Bombings: Rulings and Effects] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turath al-Islami, 2003).

while the number of people willing to report suspicious behavior to the police increased. With eyes and ears everywhere around them, the militants' mobility was restricted and their access to money and hideouts was limited. In October 2003, a *Sawt al-Jihad* editorial noted that "the number of those who give good advice has become smaller, and the mujahidin have become strangers among their families, relatives, and friends; the mujahidin can rarely find helpers in doing good, and do not find support along the path except from those whom God has spared."<sup>53</sup>

More significantly, AQAP experienced serious recruitment problems once the campaign was launched. Numerous articles in *Sawt al-Jihad* lamented the lack of a response to the call for jihad and called on acquaintances of the militants to join. 'Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin appealed to "those who trained with [him] in Afghanistan," while Isa al-Awshan called on his old friends from the religious summer camps.<sup>54</sup> Others aimed to mobilize specific communities.<sup>55</sup> And AQAP's effort to enlist the support of women – a relatively unusual initiative for a jihadist group – was indicative of the desperation felt within the organization.<sup>56</sup>

Another symptom of AQAP's legitimacy deficit was a constant effort to engage in debate with more mainstream Islamist figures. The mid-2003 imprisonment of radical sheikhs such as Nasir al-Fahd had deprived AQAP of a crucial legitimizing resource. The people who served as AQAP ideologues during the campaign, such as Faris al-Zahrani and 'Abdallah al-Rushud, were obscure and intellectually mediocre figures who commanded minimal respect and influence in the wider Islamist community. This was a serious disadvantage in the Saudi arena where political legitimacy is intimately tied to scholarly credibility. Realizing that they would need the support of more influential clerics, al-Zahrani and other AQAP ideologues wrote a number of open letters to the *ulama* as well as personal letters to Sahwist figures such as Safar al-Hawali.<sup>57</sup> These initiatives

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<sup>53</sup> *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>54</sup> "liqa' ma' ahad al-matlubin al-19 (2)," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 2 (2003), 27; Isa bin Sa'd Al 'Awshan, "risala maftuha ila shabab al-marakiz al-sayfiyya [Open Letter to the Youth of the Summer Camps]," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 19 (2004).

<sup>55</sup> See Fahd bin Farraj al-Juwayr al-Farraj, "ya ahl al-zulfi," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 18 (2004); Ra'id bin 'Abdallah al-Bahlal, "ya ahl al-zulfi...ayna ghayratukum? [Oh people of Zulfi... Where are the Rest of You?]," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 27 (2004); Muhammad al-Salim, "ya ahl kuwayt! [People of Kuwait!]," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 13 (2004).

<sup>56</sup> See Muna bint Salih al-Sharqawi, "ya nisa' dawrukun - fa-qad nama al-rijal [Women, it's Your Turn, for the Men have Slept]," (www.qa3edoon.com, 2004). AQAP also tried launching a jihadist magazine for women, *al-Khansa*, but for unknown reasons it only appeared once.

<sup>57</sup> See 'Abdallah al-Najdi, "risala ila al-'ulama wa'l-du'at [Letter to the Scholars and the Preachers]," (www.qa3edoon.com, 2004); 'Abdallah al-Rushud, "talab munazara ma' al-shaykh nasir al-'umar [Request

failed, because it was inconceivable for mainstream Islamists to support AQAP.<sup>58</sup> The old Sahwist figures had never espoused violent methods and had moved closer to the regime after their release in the late 1990s.<sup>59</sup>

As often happens in clandestine organizations, AQAP responded to political adversity with denial and introversion. The militants dismissed all news reports that contradicted their worldview – such as reports of Muslim casualties – as fabrications. Their own accounts of attacks and shootouts, published in *Sawt al-Jihad*, became increasingly exaggerated and unconvincing. To maintain the illusion of success, AQAP cell leaders actively prevented their followers from accessing mainstream media or contacting friends and family.<sup>60</sup> As a result, AQAP cells became completely disconnected from the social and political setting in which they operated. Unable to understand the political repercussions of their violence, they undertook operations that further isolated them. They thus became caught in a vicious circle that drove them deeper and deeper underground.

A third key reason for the failure of the AQAP campaign was the parallel jihad in Iraq, which accentuated the split between the “classical” and the “global” currents of the Saudi jihadist movement. Since resources for violent Islamist activism were scarce in Saudi Arabia after 9/11 and May 2003, classical and global jihadists quickly found themselves in a state of competition over recruits and money. This drove the two camps into a heated ideological debate over whether it was best for Saudis to fight in Iraq or in Saudi Arabia.

The controversy emerged almost immediately after the May 2003 bombings, when critics suggested that AQAP go to Iraq if they really wanted to fight the Crusaders.<sup>61</sup> In the first issue of *Sawt al-Jihad* in October 2003, ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin felt obliged to explain why he had not gone to Iraq.<sup>62</sup> The controversy

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for Debate with Sheikh Nasir al-Umar],” (www.qa3edoon.com, 2004); and Faris al-Zahrani, “*talab munazara ma’ safar al-hawali* [Request for Debate with Safar al-Hawali],” (www.qa3edoon.com, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> In June 2004, Faris al-Zahrani invited Safar al-Hawali to a theological debate. When al-Zahrani realised that al-Hawali’s only motivation for speaking to him was to negotiate a surrender, he reacted with anger; see Faris al-Zahrani, “*bayan hawla al-da’awa al-kadhiba min safar al-hawali wa ashbahih* [Statement Regarding the False Claims by Safar al-Hawali and his ilk],” (www.tawhid.ws, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> For more on the cooptation of the Sahwa, see for example Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Toby Jones, “The Clerics, the Sahwa and the Saudi State,” *Strategic Insights* 4, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>60</sup> P. K. Abdul Ghafour, “Al-Qaeda Controls Young Operatives by Torture Threats,” *Arab News*, 23 September 2004.

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. ‘Abdallah al-Rashid, *intiqad al-i’tirad ‘ala taffirat al-riyadh* [Criticism of the Objection to the Riyadh Bombings] (www.qa3edoon.com, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> “*liqa’ ma’ ahad al-matlubin al-19* (1),” *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 1 (2003).

escalated further in December 2003, when the Chechnya-based Saudi classical jihadist ideologue Abu Umar al-Sayf released an audio recording in which he publicly criticized AQAP and called on Saudis to fight in Iraq instead.<sup>63</sup> Al-Sayf and other voices argued that the violence in Saudi Arabia diverted attention and resources away from the jihad in Iraq. AQAP countered with articles in *Sawt al-Jihad* stating that the jihad in Saudi Arabia was not at all incompatible with the jihad in Iraq and that Saudis should fight the crusaders close to home, where they would have a stronger impact.<sup>64</sup>

The underlying reason for the split was lack of resources. AQAP was experiencing recruitment and fundraising problems as it watched the increasing flow of Saudi recruits and donations to Iraq. The classical jihadists, on their part, felt that the AQAP campaign was staining the reputation of all jihadis, while drawing unnecessary police attention to recruitment networks for Iraq.

The ideological conflict between classical and global jihadists manifested itself in a de facto organizational separation between the two parts of the Saudi jihadist community. People involved in recruitment and fundraising for Iraq seem to have held AQAP at arm's length for fear of attracting police attention. For its part, AQAP had little to gain from interacting with activists who were sending recruits and money out of the country. The split in the Saudi jihadist movement greatly undermined support for and recruitment to AQAP. Aspiring Saudi jihadists keen on fighting in defense of the Islamic nation saw Iraq as a vastly more attractive and legitimate battleground than the streets of Riyadh and Mecca. No Saudi donor would fund weapons that would be used literally outside his doorstep when he could support the mujahidin in Iraq instead. The political victory of the "Khattabists" over the "Bin Ladinists" manifested itself very clearly in the outcome of their recruitment efforts. While AQAP only recruited a small number of relatives and acquaintances, the classical jihadists mobilized an entire new generation of Saudi volunteers to Iraq.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> "Al-Qa'ida Leader Calls for Attacks on Americans in Iraq Rather Than on the Saudi Government in Saudi Arabia," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, no. 635 (2003).

<sup>64</sup> See Muhammad al-Salim, "*la tadhhabu ila al-'iraq!* [Don't go to Iraq!]," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 7 (2003) and Muhammad al-Salim, "*labayka ya 'iraq* [Woe to you, Iraq]," *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 11 (2004).

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Backgrounds and Recruitment Patterns," (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment [FFI/Report], 2007).



## **Conclusion: The Failure of Jihad and the Second Iteration of AQAP**

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By 2008, it was clear that the jihad in Saudi Arabia had failed. Al-Qa'ida had failed to mobilize the population and it had suffered outright military defeat. The militants had been politically isolated, not only from the mainstream Islamist opposition (the remnants of the Sahwa) but also from the community of classical jihadists. AQAP had not succeeded in establishing a diaspora leadership, although a few activists escaped to Yemen. The central al-Qa'ida organization in the Afghan-Pakistani tribal areas seemed to care less about the Saudi battlefield, at least judging from the near-absence of references to Saudi Arabia in their numerous statements. AQAP had virtually no Internet presence and the overall level of Saudi activity on the jihadi Internet had decreased significantly since the peak in 2004 to 2005. Perhaps the only positive thing on AQAP's scoresheet is that the Islamic quality of the struggle was not diluted by extensive criminal activity, as had been the case in Algeria and elsewhere.

In summary, the Saudi jihad failed because there never was enough popular support for it. Bin Ladin had overestimated popular resentment to the U.S. military presence and underestimated the general public's aversion to domestic unrest. The violence in 2003 and 2004 was the exception that proved the rule. AQAP represented an alien element on the Saudi Islamist scene, for most of its militants had gone through the violent socialization processes of al-Qa'ida's Afghan training camps. The launch of the campaign in 2003 was the result of a momentary discrepancy between, on the one hand, the very high organizational capability of the 2002 returnees from Afghanistan, and on the other hand the weakness of the Saudi intelligence apparatus. That gap has since been closed, and countrywide militant activism is currently more difficult than ever before.

Another significant challenge facing future mujahidin in Saudi Arabia is the fact that the original *casus belli* – the U.S. military presence – is no longer as powerful a grievance as it was in the early and mid-1990s. That military presence has been scaled down significantly in real terms, through a process of troop reduction that started, rather ironically, shortly before the outbreak of the AQAP campaign.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the U.S. "occupation" of the Arabian Peninsula has been eclipsed by real occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, making the former a less potent symbol of Muslim suffering at the hands of non-Muslims.

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<sup>66</sup> Eric Schmitt, "U.S. To Withdraw All Combat Units From Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, 30 April 2003.

Although the jihad in Saudi Arabia failed, the jihad on the Arabian Peninsula is not over. In 2006, just as the Saudi AQAP died out as an organization, the Yemeni branch of al-Qa'ida rose to prominence following a February 2006 jailbreak by twenty-three experienced al-Qa'ida militants.<sup>67</sup> This second generation of Yemeni al-Qa'ida fighters – the first generation had been largely suppressed in 2003 – grew larger and more active in 2007 and 2008, launching several high-profile attacks against police and foreign targets, including the U.S. embassy in Sanaa in September 2008.<sup>68</sup> In 2008, it began publishing a magazine, *Sada al-Malahim*, as well as video productions signed the “Malahim Foundation for Media Production.” In February 2009, the militants declared a merger with the alleged remnants of Saudi AQAP and took the latter’s name. Later in the year, the group launched a number of daring operations outside Yemen, including an assassination attempt on the Saudi deputy interior minister in Jidda in August, and the attempted attack on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day.

The rise of AQAP in Yemen in 2009 was interpreted by many observers as a sign that the Saudi AQAP had survived and that victory against it had been declared prematurely. Here was a group with the same name, the same modus operandi and roughly the same ideological discourse as the group that had shaken the Kingdom in 2003 and 2004. However, on closer inspection, it appears there is little if any continuity of personnel between the Yemeni AQAP of 2009 and its Saudi predecessor. The handful of Saudis who joined the Yemeni branch of al-Qa'ida between 2006 and 2009 were either former Guantanamo detainees or latecomers to the Saudi jihad. For example, Said al-Shihri and Muhammad al-Awfi, the two Saudis who claimed to represent Saudi AQAP in the January 2009 merger, were detained at Guantanamo from 2002 to 2007. In fact, at this point, it appears likely that no known members of the current Yemeni AQAP fought with the Saudi AQAP during the latter’s heyday.<sup>69</sup> Some such individuals might exist, but they are unlikely to be numerous enough to constitute a major element of organizational continuity. It is quite clear that the Yemeni AQAP is a distinct organization from its historical Saudi namesake.

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<sup>67</sup> Gregory Johnsen, “Al-Qaeda in Yemen Reorganizes under Nasir al-Wahayshi,” *Jamestown Terrorism Focus* 5, no. 11 (2008)

<sup>68</sup> Michael Knights, “Jihadist Paradise: Yemen’s Terrorist Threat Re-emerges,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 20, no. 6 (2008); Gregory Johnsen, “Yemen’s Two Al-Qaedas,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 21 August 2008; Gregory Johnsen, “Assessing the Strength of al-Qa’ida in Yemen,” *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 10, 10-11

<sup>69</sup> This assessment was confirmed by Gregory Johnsen, a prominent specialist on Yemen’s AQAP; email correspondence, 8 January 2010.

This is not a trivial point. At stake is the legacy of the Saudi AQAP: was it crushed or did it simply withdraw to Yemen? The available evidence suggests the former. By adopting the name AQAP in 2009, Yemeni militants sought to create an impression of continuity where there was none. It was an attempt to gloss over the very real defeat suffered by al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia in the mid-2000s. Judging by the media coverage following the 2009 Detroit incident, this public-relations ploy largely succeeded.

But we must understand the Yemeni group on its own terms. We should of course recognize the similarities between the two groups and the fact that Yemeni AQAP seeks to emulate its Saudi predecessor. However, we should not assume that the aims and preferences of Yemeni AQAP are identical to those of Saudi AQAP, nor should we assume that the constraints of the Yemeni context are the same as in Saudi Arabia. It seems, for example, that the Yemeni AQAP can afford a somewhat more explicit revolutionary rhetoric and more attacks on regime targets without suffering the same backlash the Saudi AQAP faced. This is presumably because there is more popular discontent with the regime in Yemen than in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, anti-Western declarations, continued attacks on tourists in Yemen, and the Northwest Airlines incident suggest that Yemeni AQAP is sensitive to the accusation that it is killing more Muslims than infidels.

Another major difference between the two contexts is that tribal identities seem much more politically consequential in Yemen than in Saudi Arabia. While there does not seem to have been a strong tribal dimension in Saudi jihadism, Yemeni AQAP's consolidation has depended upon the group's links with tribes such as the Abida in the Ma'rib region. Last but not least is the enormous difference in coercive power between the two states. Unfortunately, the weakness of the Yemeni state and its security apparatus means the current AQAP faces considerably better prospects for survival than its Saudi predecessor.