

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Introduction

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), described by the U.S. government as "the most active and dangerous" branch of Al Qaeda, is the terrorist organization's wing in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The growth of AQAP has led American officials to indicate that Yemen could become Al Qaeda's next operational and training hub for the group's militants from around the world.



Formed in early 2009, AQAP has attempted to carry out multiple attacks against the United States, including at least three failed attacks involving U.S.-bound aviation, most recently in 2012. Not limited to foreign targets, AQAP has also plotted attacks against regional leadership, including a failed assassination attempt on a Saudi prince serving as Deputy Minister of the Interior. These plots, though unsuccessful, have garnered the group substantial media attention and a reputation as one of the gravest terrorist threats.

A key component of AQAP's operational strategy entails reaching out to English-speaking audiences with its messages and propaganda in order to recruit new members. This material encourages Western audiences to adopt its ideology and carry out attacks against Western interests in the Arabian Peninsula and abroad.

The driving forces behind AQAP's English-language propaganda machine were Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric, and Samir Khan, an American blogger and propagandist, both of whom were killed in a September 30, 2011 drone strike.

The U.S. designated AQAP as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in January 2010 and has pursued a drone campaign against AQAP while providing assistance to the Yemeni military in its efforts to combat the group.

Background

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in January 2009, when the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian branches of Al Qaeda merged under the leadership of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who had previously served as Osama bin Laden's personal secretary. Al-Wuhayshi escaped from a Yemeni prison in February 2006, along with several other militants who were sentenced for the 2000 USS Cole bombing in Yemen that killed 17 American sailors.

The group has sought to overthrow the Yemeni government and Saudi monarchy and impose its strict interpretation of Islamic law throughout the Arabian Peninsula. AQAP took advantage of the instability in Yemen in the wake of popular protests against the government during 2011 and 2012, and seized a

considerable amount of territory in the south of the country, imposing its rule. However in the spring of 2012, Yemeni forces mounted a counter-offensive, retaking many of the key towns that AQAP had held for over a year.

Reports indicate that hundreds of Somali militants belonging to [Al Shabaab](#), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that formally joined Al Qaeda in 2012 and that seeks to overthrow the Somali government, have traveled to Yemen to assist AQAP in its fight against the Yemeni government and to carry out terrorist attacks. Al Shabaab had vowed to send hundreds of militants to Yemen to "fight the enemy of Allah." The arrest of Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, an Al Shabaab operative with ties to AQAP – reportedly as he was traveling between Yemen and Somalia – further highlights the links between the two Al Qaeda affiliates.

AQAP leaders frequently issue statements threatening American interests. In an audio recording released in February 2010, for example, AQAP second-in-command Sufyan al-Azdi al-Shahri called for attacks "everywhere" against U.S. interests. "American and Crusader interests are everywhere and their agents are moving everywhere," al-Shahri said. "Attack them and eliminate as many enemies as you can."

AQAP also urges its followers to attack Western interests in its online Arabic-language magazine called *Sada al-Malahim* (Arabic for "the Echo of Epic Battles"). In the October 2009 issue, for example, al-Wuhayshi called on his followers to use explosives "in the airports of the Western Crusader countries that have taken part in the war against the Muslims, or in their planes, on their residential blocks, or in their metros."

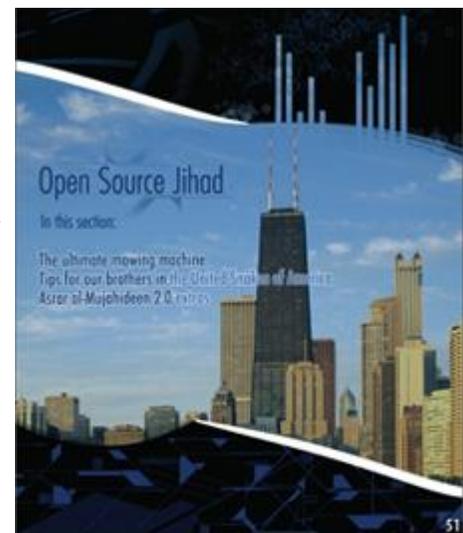
Targeting the U.S.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's early attempts to target American interests were limited to the Arabian Peninsula. Attacks such as the September 2008 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, Yemen's capital city, in which 13 Yemeni police and civilians were killed, illustrated this effort. Several months earlier, AQAP claimed responsibility for a failed mortar attack that accidentally hit a nearby school instead of the U.S. Embassy, killing a security guard and a schoolgirl and wounding 19 others.

Beginning in 2009, AQAP expanded its area of operations beyond the Peninsula, carrying out three unsuccessful attacks involving U.S.-bound aviation. Its most recent attempt—a May 2012 plot to detonate a bomb aboard a U.S. bound airliner that was thwarted by authorities— demonstrates that the group remains focused on carrying out terror attacks against U.S. targets.

The May 2012 bomber selected by AQAP to carry out the plot was in fact an agent who had infiltrated the organization. Although his identity has not been disclosed, he is reported to be a British national handled by Saudi intelligence. The agent delivered the bomb to authorities and also provided information that led to a drone strike in which Fahd al-Quso, an external operations commander, was killed.

AQAP had previously claimed responsibility for sending **explosive-laden packages on U.S.-bound cargo flights** in October 2010. The parcels, which consisted of manipulated ink toner cartridges and were discovered in Britain and in the United Arab Emirates en route to the U.S., were addressed to Chicago-area synagogues.



Article from the October 2010 issue of AQAP's English-language magazine, depicting the Chicago skyline and encouraging terror attacks on U.S. soil

AQAP first targeted American aviation in the [attempted Christmas Day bombing](#) of a Detroit-bound passenger plane from Europe in 2009. Nigerian citizen Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who unsuccessfully attempted to set off explosives hidden in his underwear, was arrested when the plane landed. In a video released days after the bombing attempt, AQAP not only claimed responsibility for the plot but, addressing the American people, further threatened to "come for you to slaughter, and we have prepared for you men who love death like you love life."

Federal authorities have implicated AQAP bomb-maker Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri in all three attacks. A similar device to the Christmas Day bomb was used by Al-Asiri's younger brother in an attempt to assassinate a member of Saudi Arabia's royal family who served as Deputy Minister of the Interior in August 2009.

In addition to actual plots targeting U.S. interests, AQAP has produced various online materials targeting American and other Western audiences for recruitment. The [inaugural issue of *Inspire*](#), Al Qaeda's first-ever English-language magazine which was released in July 2010, called for followers to "destroy" America and provided detailed instructions on using household materials to create explosives. In the magazine's feature article, [Anwar al-Awlaki](#), a U.S.-born Muslim cleric who was an AQAP ideologue and commander until his death in a September 2011 drone strike, called for attacks against all those who have slandered the Prophet Muhammad, including all Western targets.

In addition to his role as a leading AQAP ideologue, Al-Awlaki also served as the group's commander for external operations, directing the attempted attacks against the United States. He also communicated with extremists within the United States, including Nidal Malik Hasan, the alleged gunman in the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and Barry Bujol, Jr, a Texas resident indicted in 2010 for attempting to provide financial support and other goods to AQAP, while serving as an inspiration to other American-born terrorists, such as [Zachary Chesser](#) and [Najibullah Zazi](#), through his recorded sermons and online presence.

AQAP has issued eight more issues of *Inspire* magazine since its first. The magazine was believed to be produced primarily by [Samir Khan](#), an American known for distributing terrorist propaganda material online, who moved to Yemen in 2009 and was killed in the same drone strike as Muslim ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki. The deaths of Khan and al-Awlaki fueled speculation that AQAP had ceased publication of the magazine. However, in May 2012, [issues eight and nine were released on the same day](#), demonstrating AQAP's commitment to *Inspire's* continued publication. Inside the ninth issue, the Editor vowed that the magazine "is here to stay."

The magazine continues to provide motivation and justification for carrying out attacks as well as practical advice on mixing explosives and weapons handling, all the while encouraging Muslim readers to follow its ideology. Following the release of issues eight and nine, AQAP temporarily increased its English-language efforts, releasing a [tribute to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden](#) near the anniversary of his death, as well as [purported message from Khan to potential fighters](#) about what to expect in Yemen moving forward.



Front cover of the inaugural issue of *Inspire*

Anti-Semitic & Extreme Anti-Israel Messages

The October 2010 terror plot to send explosive-laden packages on U.S.-bound cargo flights brought to light the threat to American Jewish institutions posed by AQAP. Addressing the explosive-laden parcels to Chicago-area synagogues also underscored AQAP's anti-Semitic ideology.

Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, as well as Al Qaeda's agenda of eliminating the state of Israel, permeate *Inspire*, AQAP's English-language magazine. AQAP's focus on Israel is evident in issues eight and nine of *Inspire* magazine, released in May 2012. Articles in the magazines compare events in Syria's ongoing internal unrest, including violence against civilians leading to more than 15,000 deaths, to "the Jewish treatment of the Palestinians;" attack Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by comparing him to Satan; and claim that "they (the Jews) have the audacity to distort the word of Allah [parenthesis in the original]."

They further warn that "Israel Can't Hide" and call for attacks against Israeli targets, as well as "Zionist and Zionist-friendly crusader media" and "places where Jews are gathered, their leading personalities and institutions in Europe."

The same anti-Semitic and anti-Israel tropes were found in a bin Laden tribute released by AQAP later in May 2012, around the first anniversary of his death. The tribute consisted of a selection of quotes from the Al Qaeda leader largely focused on Jews and Israel and how they, along with America, are at war with Islam and the Palestinians.

An editor's note in the second issue of *Inspire*, released in October 2010, states the group's slogan: "Here we start, and in Jerusalem we meet." The editor also warned that AQAP will "not lay down their arms until they free this land from the tyrants and march on to Jerusalem. That is when America and its Jewish masters would realize the true danger of AQAP." Also featured in the issue were several statements from various Al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki, threatening the existence of Israel and urging readers to launch attacks against the Jewish state.

An article in the inaugural issue of *Inspire*, released in July 2010, called for Muslims to divest from Israel and "cut aid to the Zionist Crusade and kill those of the Crusaders whom we find in our land." The article also urges followers to "destroy the Western interests until Europe and America stop their support of the Jews." As another tactic, followers can attack Israel by holding demonstrations, "followed by explosions and civil disobedience by military rage."

Previous statements released by AQAP leaders echo the anti-Semitic and anti-Israel themes promulgated throughout *Inspire*. In an audio recording released August 2010, for example, AQAP second-in-command Sufyan al-Azdi al-Shahri urged followers to prepare for a future war in the Middle East that will pit "the Jews against Iran." In this scenario, according to al-Shahri, Iran will blame Saudi Arabia for helping Israel and attempt to seize Mecca and Medina while Israel will attempt to establish "the greater state of Israel" in the Levant.

Al-Shehri then proposed ways his followers can exploit the conflict and urged them to "carry your weapons against Israel." "So, any of you who is a pilot should search of martyrdom above the skies of Palestine," al-Shahri said, "and any of you who work in the navy should point his weapon against the Jews there and receive the honor of martyrdom for the cause of Allah."

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to detonate explosives aboard a Detroit-bound passenger plane on Christmas Day in 2009, issued similar statements vilifying Israel in an AQAP video released in April 2010. In the video, Abdulmutallab justified Al Qaeda's actions against Jews and Christians. "Brotherhood of Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula have [*sic*] the right to wage Jihad," he said, "because the enemy is in your land with their armies, the Jews and the Christians and their agents." Abdulmutallab and other apparent AQAP fighters are also shown in the video firing automatic weapons at targets bearing the Jewish star, the British Union Jack, and the letters "UN."

At his sentencing in February 2012, Abdulmutallab threatened that terror attacks would continue "until the Jews are driven out of Palestine." He had previously admitted that he planned the attack in retaliation for U.S. support of Israel and in retaliation of the killing of innocent and civilian Muslim populations in Palestine, especially in the blockage of Gaza" and "in retaliation for... Israel [*sic*] massacres of innocent Palestinians."

Anti-Israel statements like those promulgated by Abdulmutallab were previously propagated through a variety of AQAP statements and publications. In a series of statements released in January 2009, AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi stated that once AQAP eliminates "the occupiers' profanity and their treacherous agents" from the Arabian Peninsula, his group will "march towards our brothers in Gaza and Palestine." He also threatened to attack Arab countries that prevented the mujahideen from crossing the border into Israel in order to attack the Jewish state. In the January 2009 issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, AQAP's online magazine, al-Wuhayshi expressed similar animosity toward Israel, saying that his group would train and send militants to "liberate Palestine."



Logo of Al Malahim, the media wing of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

In another statement released in February 2010, AQAP's third-in-command, Qassim al-Raimi, expressed a desire to support those in the Palestinian territories, who know the "wretchedness, fear and cowardice of the Jews." He said, "I ask Allah to make it easy for us to come to your aid."