

# **Nominating a New Leader for al-Qaeda and its Impact on the Strategic Relationship with Iran**

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# Nominating a New Leader for al-Qaeda and its Impact on the Strategic Relationship with Iran

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## Abstract

With the recent elimination of Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri at the end of July 2022 and the rise of its new leader, Sheik Saif Al-Adel, Al-Qaeda is now in a position to strengthen its ties with Iran further. While it may seem odd that a Shiite country and a Sunni organization cooperate, the fact of having a common enemy, the US, and Israel, makes this alliance, not just a thought exercise.

This cooperation is far from new, as Al-Qaeda members visited and met with IRGC operatives and Iran proxies, like Hezbollah, to be advised on training, tactics, and security. The knowledge acquired was used in the 1998 African US Embassies attack, a modus-operandi that closely resembled the 1983 Beirut Barracks bombing by Hezbollah. The cooperation did not stop there; there is also evidence of support, more profound than just sharing knowledge, for the 1996 Khubar Towers in the KSA, where the US intelligence community believes that Bin Laden was involved and that Iran provided logistical and funding assistance. These are just examples of a deeper interaction between Iran and Al-Qaeda that can only increase in the future.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, Iran, IRGC, Jihad

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## Introduction

Iran and al-Qaeda have a complex relationship that has been characterized by disdain and suspicion alongside cooperation and mutual assistance. Even though Shiite Iran and Sunni I-Qaeda have different ideologies and agendas, both prefer to focus on promoting mutual interests, primarily fighting US troops in the middle east, Israel, and KSA. Not for nothing, a senior al-Qaeda leader wrote that Iran desires to take over the Islamic world, but it is willing to be flexible and cooperate with al-Qaeda to promote its goals "any person who desires to hit America Iran is willing to support him with money weapons and any other means however in a manner that will not connect them directly to the act...! [...] they [the Iranians] are afraid the US will have any proof [against them], and therefore they go to great length to leave no trace of their activity"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "19-page document", (in Arabic). <https://bit.ly/3AWEJij>. The above document has been found in Osama Bin Laden letter collection in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The identity of the author is unknown however it is likely a senior

Since the 9/11 attacks, Iran became a central operations theater for senior al-Qaeda leaders to plan terror attacks, recruit fighters, raise funds, and provide logistic support. **Mike Pompeo**, the former US Secretary of State, announced in January 2021 that al-Qaeda turned Iran into its “new mother base” and accused Iran of harboring and providing logistic support to senior al-Qaeda leaders. The elimination of Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri at the end of July 2022 and the passing of the leadership baton likely to Sheikh **Saif al-Adel**, who has strong ties with the Irani regime, may strengthen the al-Qaeda-Iran cooperation.

### The Genesis of the Iran – al-Qaeda Relationship

The ties between Iran and al-Qaeda are not new and started in the early 1990s. **Hasan al-Tourabi**, the Muslim Brotherhood’s spiritual leader in Sudan, wanted to form a united Sunni-Shiite bloc against the west and imperialists through cultivating the ties among Sunni and Shiite terrorist organizations such as PIJ, Hezbollah, and more. As part of promoting said vision, Tourabi brokered between al-Qaeda operatives who had found refuge in Sudan and IRGC. At the end of 1991 Tourabi’s efforts bore fruit in the form of an informal agreement per which Iran agreed to provide al-Qaeda tactical assistance in perpetrating attacks against the US and Israel. Shortly thereafter, senior al-Qaeda members from its operations division, traveled to Iran to gain explosives expertise<sup>2</sup>.

In 1993, another al-Qaeda delegation which included Saif al-Adel traveled to southern Lebanon to train with Hezbollah and acquire knowledge in security, intelligence and explosives<sup>3</sup>. Osama Bin Laden himself was impressed with Hezbollah’s use of truck bombs in the 1983 attack on the US Marines base in Beirut and it is evident from the al-Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998<sup>4</sup> that he adopted this modus operandi.

Former al-Qaeda members testified as to the connections al-Qaeda’s leadership cultivated with Hezbollah. **Ali Muhammad**, a former al-Qaeda member, testified that **Imad Mourniyah**, Hezbollah’s military chief, met with Osama Bin Laden in the early

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al-Qaeda member that oversaw the organization’s operations. The letter first saw light in Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “CIA releases massive trove of Osama bin Laden’s files”, FDD’s Long War Journal, Nov 1, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/analysis-cia-releases-massive-trove-of-osama-bin-ladens-files.php>

- 2 “The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Report)”, July 22, 2004, p. 61. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>; Paul Hastert, “Al Qaeda and Iran: Friends or Foes, or Somewhere”, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Issue 30, 2007, pp. 327–336; Thomas Jocelyn, “DC court: Iran Showed al Qaeda how to Bomb Embassies”, FDD’s Long War Journal, Dec 5, 2011. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/dc\\_court\\_iran\\_showed.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/dc_court_iran_showed.php)
- 3 Thomas Joscelyn, “The Al Qaeda-Iran Connection”, FDD’s Long War Journal, Aug 8, 2018. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/08/08/the-al-qaeda-iran-connection/>
- 4 “The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Report)”, July 22, 2004, p. 61. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>; Paul Hastert, “Al Qaeda and Iran: Friends or Foes, or Somewhere”, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Issue 30, 2007, pp. 327–336; Thomas Jocelyn, “DC court: Iran Showed al Qaeda how to Bomb Embassies”, FDD’s Long War Journal, Dec 5, 2011. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/dc\\_court\\_iran\\_showed.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/dc_court_iran_showed.php)

1990s to discuss inter organizational cooperation. The following is his testimony on the nature of the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah and al-Qaeda:

“I was aware of certain negotiations between al-Qaeda and the Islamic Jihad [Egyptian faction] on the one hand and Hezbollah and Iran on the other hand. I arranged the security measures for the Sudan meeting between Mourniyah and Bin Laden. Hezbollah provided explosives’ training for al-Qaeda and the Islamic Jihad. Iran provided weapons to the Islamic Jihad. Hezbollah assisted Iran and provided rock resembling explosives”<sup>5</sup>.

Even after al-Qaeda members were expelled from Sudan in 1996 Iran continued to assist them. For example, it provided them with safe passage in its territory on their way to Afghanistan. **Mustafa Hamid**, an al-Qaeda member and **Saif al-Adel’s** in-law, was the middlemen who brokered this arrangement between Iran and Osama Bin Laden<sup>6</sup>.

In June 1996, Iran assisted al-Qaeda once more, likely by providing logistic assistance and funding for a terror attack on a US military residential compound in Khubar Towers in Saud Arabia. The attack claimed the lives of 19 soldiers and hundreds injured. A terrorist organization named Saudi Hezbollah claimed responsibility however, the American intelligence assessed that there was a high probability that the Iranians and Bin Laden were involved in this attack<sup>7</sup>.

### Iran as a Safe Harbor for al-Qaeda After the US Invasion of Afghanistan

The Us invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 led many al-Qaeda members and other jihadists to flee the country, mostly to Pakistan and Iran. Only a few remained behind to fight the Americans. In light of the pressure the US government applied to Pakistan to arrest or expel al-Qaeda members from the country, many fled and found refuge in Iran. In an interview to Al-Jazeera, **Abu Hafs al-Mawritani**, the former head of the Shura Council of al-Qaeda, said that some senior members (including Shura Council members) and their families found refuge in Zahedan and Baluchistan. Per him the arrival of the last of them was made possible thanks to his negotiations with the Iranians<sup>8</sup>. The aforementioned **Mustafa Hamid** was another prominent broker between the Iranians and Osama Bin Laden and managed to get the Iranian approval to harbor al-Qaeda families. **Saad al-Din**, Bin Laden’s son, also had an open channel with the

5 “Consolidated Amended Complaint as to the Republic of the Sudan”, United States District Court Southern District of New York, Nov 2020. [https://www.motleyrice.com/sites/default/files/documents/AT\\_HR/9-11/9-11\\_time-line/2020-11-20%20-%20Docket%20%23%206539%20-%20NOTICE%20of%20Plaintiffs%27%20Consolidated%20Amended%20Complaint%20as%20to%20The%20Republic%20of%20The%20Sudan%20filed%20by%20PEC.pdf](https://www.motleyrice.com/sites/default/files/documents/AT_HR/9-11/9-11_time-line/2020-11-20%20-%20Docket%20%23%206539%20-%20NOTICE%20of%20Plaintiffs%27%20Consolidated%20Amended%20Complaint%20as%20to%20The%20Republic%20of%20The%20Sudan%20filed%20by%20PEC.pdf)

6 Bill Roggio, “US sanctions senior al Qaeda members operating in Iran”, FDD’s Long War Journal, Jan 16, 2009. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/01/us\\_sanctions\\_senior.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/01/us_sanctions_senior.php)

7 Abdullah F. Alrebh, “Hezbollah Al-Hejaz: A Saudi Shi’a Group Cloaked in Mystery”, MEI, Jun 27, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2022-06/Hezbollah%20Al-Hejaz%20-%20A%20Saudi%20Shi%E2%80%99a%20Group%20Cloaked%20in%20Mystery.pdf>

8 “Abu Hafs al-Mawritani. September 11 Attacks – Second Part” (in Arabic), al-Jazeera, Oct 23, 2012. <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2012/10/23/ج-ر-بم-تسب-11-ت-ام-ج-د-ي-ن-ا-ت-ي-ر-و-م-ل-ا-ح-ص-ف-ح-و-ب-ا>

Iranians and got the Iranian approval to harbor Bin Laden's family<sup>9</sup>.

Bin Laden's letter collection captured by the Navy Seals during their 2011 raid on Bin Laden's safe house in Abbottabad, shed light on al-Qaeda members' wave of immigration to Iran following the US invasion to Afghanistan. A senior al-Qaeda member whose letter was found among Bin Laden's documents, wrote that he fled from Afghanistan to Waziristan and from there to Karachi (Pakistan) where he stayed for three months. In 2002 he entered Iran after he had received a visa from the Iranian consulate in Pakistan. Per him, some al-Qaeda members entered Iran legally and some illegally<sup>10</sup>.

### **The Iranian Attitude to al-Qaeda Members Staying in Iran**

During 2002, Iran's friendly attitude towards al-Qaeda and other jihadists that found refuge on its soil took a turn. Iran decided to arrest many of them and put some of them under a house arrest, in hotels or in spacious jails with privileges such as studying, family visits and more. To explain the sudden change of attitude, a senior al-Qaeda member said that the Iranians got anxious after the US had found out that the Iranian regime was harboring al-Qaeda. The Iranian intelligence was angry at al-Qaeda and protested the violation of the personal security protocol they dictated (e.g., prohibition to use cell phones to prevent the western security services from finding out Iran was assisting them). Further, the Iranians decided to assist al-Qaeda members and other jihadists to leave Iran, either to their home countries or a third country such as Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Malesia and Turkey. Only a handful of al-Qaeda members reached Europe with an Iranian assistance. The Iranians even assisted **Sheikh Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi** that later formed al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, to immigrate to Iraq. That senior al-Qaeda member even exposed that Iran offered to financially support some al-Qaeda members of Saudi descent and have them train under Hezbollah in Lebanon in return for perpetrating attacks against US targets in KSA and the Gulf<sup>11</sup>. **Sheikh Atiyyat Allah**, a senior al-Qaeda member, said that al-Qaeda members that were supposed to leave Iran have been requested to provide the Iranians with fingerprints and a facial photo for identification. The Iranians allowed most al-Qaeda members of Saudi, Kuwaiti or other Gulf countries descent to leave Iran, often with the assistance of the Saud embassy in Tehran<sup>12</sup>.

In 2003 close to the US invasion to Iraq, Iran's negative attitude towards al-Qaeda members in Iran worsened. Per a senior al-Qaeda member, Irani intelligence raided their homes and incarcerated them. The fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, the increased terrorist activity against the Shiite population in Iraq by the local al-Qaeda

9 "Treasury targets Iran's 'secret deal' with al-Qaeda", Long War Journal, 28.7.2011. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/07/treasury\\_targets\\_ira\\_1.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/07/treasury_targets_ira_1.php)

10 "19-page document", (in Arabic). <https://bit.ly/3AWEJij>

11 Ibid

12 Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2022, p.46.

affiliate (led by the aforementioned Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi), and the concerns of an American retaliation for the assistance to al-Qaeda, were among the reasons that led this worsening attitude. The Iranian regime decided to hold them and their families as bargaining chips to protect Shiite and Irani interests<sup>13</sup>.

**Saad al-Din**, one of Bin Laden's sons who fled Iran in 2008 reported the bad conditions in the prisons where al-Qaeda members have been held, the diseases they suffered from for lack of medical care and the "psychological torture" by the Irani regime. Per him, the above led some al-Qaeda members to start hunger strikes or confront their jailers to change the above conditions<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Problematic "Marriage" of al-Qaeda and Iran**

Bin Laden's letter collection shows that him and his deputies didn't trust the Iranians due to their concerns that the Iranian will use al-Qaeda family members living in Iran and leverage on the organization<sup>15</sup>. Per them, a provocative action against Iraq could endanger the lives of the above family members and therefore they walked on eggshells not to hurt Iran. In light of the above it is obvious why Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy sent a reprimanding letter to al-Zarqawi and demanded the latter would stop his attacks on the Iraqi Shiite population. Al-Zawahiri stressed that such attacks damaged al-Qaeda's interests more than it benefited them, especially in light of the fact that Iran held captive hundreds of al-Qaeda members, some of them at leadership level. Al-Zawahiri also cautioned al-Zarqawi that the media effect his attacks carried might cause Iran to retaliate against al-Qaeda. Per al-Zawahiri it was best to focus on attacking the mutual enemy, the US<sup>16</sup>.

That said, al-Qaeda's leadership chose to violate the status quo with Iran a handful of times to lead to change on the Iranian policy towards its members in Iran. **Saad al-Din's** 2008 escape and the detailed letter he sent his father about the disgraceful manner the Iranians treated al-Qaeda members was the catalyst that led al-Qaeda to change its policy towards Iran. Among the manifestations of that change were a fiercer rhetoric against Iran and accusing it of cooperating with the US in the latter war with the mujahidin, and by kidnapping Iranian diplomats (November 2008, in Peshawar, Pakistan)<sup>17</sup>.

At the end of 2009 Iran gradually started to release some of its al-Qaeda detainees.

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13 "19-page document", (in Arabic). <https://bit.ly/3AWEJij>

14 Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2022, p.49, pp. 219-

15 A September 2010 letter from Bin Laden to his son Hamza where he said the Iranians could not be relied upon: Thomas Joscelyn, "CIA releases video of Hamza bin Laden's wedding", *FDD's Long War Journal*, Nov 1, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/cia-releases-video-of-hamza-bin-ladens-wedding.php>

16 "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi", CTC, Oct 2005. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>

17 Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2022, p.234.



Sheikh Atiyyat Allah, a senior al-Qaeda leader assessed that al-Qaeda's stronger rhetoric against Iran led the latter to improve its attitude towards al-Qaeda members in Iran. Per Lahoud, this was an inaccurate assessment, inter alia because Iran had started to release al-Qaeda detainees even before the Iranian diplomat was released in March 2010. Per Lahoud, the protest in jail and the confrontation with the prison guards led to the change in the Iranian policy<sup>18</sup>.

In 2010, Iran continued to release most of its al-Qaeda detainees including Bin Laden's family members, among them Hamza, but kept the senior leadership members. The change in the Irani position was made possible thanks to Bin Laden's daughter **Iman**, who, after she fled and found refuge in the Saudi embassy for a few months before immigrating to Syria, publicly exposed the reality of the al-Qaeda detainees' lives<sup>19</sup>.

Even after Bin Laden's elimination in 2011 Iran kept a few al-Qaeda members under house arrest but provided them with a comfortable living environment and appropriate equipment that allowed them to assist their comrades to operate in various theaters. In 2013, al-Qaeda kidnapped, again, an Iranian diplomat, in Sanaa, Yemen, this time to force the Iranians to release their senior leadership. In 2015, Iran released Sheikh **Saif al-Adel** and Sheikh **Abu Khayr al-Masri** (al-Zawahiri's deputy) in return for the Iranian diplomat<sup>20</sup>.

### Iran as a Base of Operations for al-Qaeda

The US Dept. of State has pointed out several times to a confidential agreement between Iran and al-Qaeda members on its soil, allowing the latter to operate on Irani territory, whether they were under house arrest or travelling through the country to recruit fighters and raise funds and logistic support for the organization. For example, **Izz al-Din Abd al-Aziz Khalil**, a senior al-Qaeda member, received in 2005 a permit to move freely throughout Iran to recruit fighters and raise funds<sup>21</sup>. Further, al-Qaeda senior members Saif al-Adel and Saad al-Din planned while in Iran, terror attacks outside of Iran such as the attack on foreigner residential compound in KSA (May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013) and the attack on a Jewish synagogue in Tunisia in 2002<sup>22</sup>.

Further, al-Qaeda still operates within Iran pursuant to an Irani permit. In October 2012 the US Dept. of State exposed **Muhsin al-Fadli**, a senior al-Qaeda member, as a person involved in al-Qaeda's operational activity and leading the al-Qaeda network in Iran after the baton was passed down to him from his predecessor **Yasin al-Suri**, another

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18 Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2022, p.234.

19 Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2022, p.235-240.

20 Adam Gilman, "Top al-Qaeda operatives freed in prisoner swap with Iran", *Washington Post*, Sep 18, 2015.

21 "Treasury targets Iran's 'secret deal' with al-Qaeda", *Long War Journal*, 28.7.2011. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/07/treasury\\_targets\\_ira\\_1.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/07/treasury_targets_ira_1.php)

22 Thomas Joscelyn, "Osama bin Laden's spokesman freed by Iran", *FDD's Long War Journal*, Sep 28, 2010. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/09/osama\\_bin\\_ladens\\_spo.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/09/osama_bin_ladens_spo.php)



senior member in charge of al-Qaeda's fund-raising apparatus in Iran<sup>23</sup>. In July 2016 the US Dept. of State published the names of three other senior al-Qaeda members operating in Iran: **Faisal Jassim Muhammad al-Amri al-Khalidi**, **Yisra Muhammad Ibrahim Bayumi** and **Abu Bakr Muhammad Ghumayn** as handling al-Qaeda's financial and logistic support to the organization in Iran<sup>24</sup>. In August 2020 another reminder as to the presence of al-Qaeda on Iranian soil was when the New York Times reported the elimination of **Abu Muhammad al-Masri** in Tehran, allegedly by Mossad agents<sup>25</sup>. In September 2022 a photograph of three senior al-Qaeda members walking around Tehran (likely taken in 2015) was floating around on the web<sup>26</sup>.



Right to left: Abu Khir al-Masri, Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Saif al-Adel in Tehran circa 2015

### **The Ramifications of al-Qaeda's New Leadership Nomination on the Relationship with Iran**

As of the date of this document it has not yet been determined who will succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri as the leader of al-Qaeda. Per various assessments there are four

23 "Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qa'ida Network", United States Department of the Treasury, Oct 18, 2012. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1741>

24 "Counter Terrorism Designations", United States Department of the Treasury, July 20, 2016. <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20160720>

25 Adam Goldman and others, "Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran", The New York Times, Nov 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/world/middleeast/al-masri-abdullah-qaeda-dead.html>

26 Bill Roggio, "Rare photo surfaces of top Al Qaeda leaders inside Iran", FDD's Long War Journal, Sep 2, 2022. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/09/02/rare-photo-surfaces-of-top-al-qaeda-leaders-inside-iran/>

frontrunners: Saif al-Adel, Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Anabi and Ahmad Umar.

**Saif al-Adel** – per intelligence elements analyses there is a high likelihood that al-Adel will become al-Qaeda’s new leader. He is considered in al-Qaeda circles as a leading military strategist and has a wealth of knowledge as well as a long operational experience. As noted, al-Adel was the one who planned the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and over the years was promoted to lead al-Qaeda’s military wing. He is considered an important decision maker in al-Qaeda’s Shura council and enjoys high reputation not just because of his experience but also due to his daughter’s marriage to Hamza Bin Laden.

Al-Adel began his career as counter-terrorism officer in the Egyptian army. He partook in the 1973 October War against Israel. In 1987 he was arrested by the Egyptian authorities on suspicion that he was involved in an assassination attempt on an Egyptian minister. The arrest and humiliation that followed led him to leave the military and immigrate to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. Down the road he joined the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (led by al-Zawahiri) that became a part of al-Qaeda in the 1990s.

Al-Adel had strong ties for many years with the Iranians and Hezbollah. In the early 1990s he travelled to Lebanon and Iran to learn and gain knowledge on warfare, explosives devices assembly and more. Following an informal agreement him and his friends struck with Iran and Sudan after the 9/11 attacks he found refuge in Iran and assisted the safe passage of several al-Qaeda Arab members to Iran. Over the years he rose through the ranks and maintained his good relations with the Iranians. His in-law Mustafa Hamide, a former al-Qaeda member also enjoys good relationship with the Iranians<sup>27</sup>.

**Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi** – western intelligence assesses that al-Maghrebi also has a good chance to win al-Qaeda’s leader position, inter alia, due to his familial relationship to al-Zawahiri (married to al-Zawahiri’s daughter). He now leads al-Qaeda’s propaganda array. Al-Maghrebi was born and raised in Marrakesh, Morocco. In 1996 he immigrated to Cologne, Germany, to study computer science and in 1999 he immigrated to Afghanistan to train in al-Farouq camp near Kandahar. One of al-Qaeda’s senior members spotted his computer skills and integrated him into al-Qaeda’s propaganda array. After 9/11 attacks he fled from Afghanistan and found refuge in Iran. In 2003 he immigrated to Pakistan, likely to live close to his father-in-law. While in Pakistan he developed the technical aspect of al-Qaeda’s propaganda array<sup>28</sup>. As of 2012 he has been serving as al-Qaeda’s “general manager” in Afghanistan and Pakistan but had

27 For a detailed report on the relationship al-Adel and the Iranian regime have, see: Ali Soufan, “Al-Qa’ida’s Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-Adl”, CTC, Vol. 14, Issue 2, Feb 2021, pp. 1-21. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CTC-SENTINEL-022021.pdf>

28 Rohan Gunaratna & Anders Nielsen, “Al Qaeda in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan and Beyond”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31:9, 2008, p. 794.

to move to Iran due to the increase of the allied forces counter-terrorism activity. In Iran he keeps overseeing al-Qaeda's global operations and coordinating between the organization's leadership and its affiliates around the world<sup>29</sup>.

**Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Anabi** – al-Anabi serves as AQIM's leader since November 2020. He was born in Algeria in February 1969. After he graduated his economics degree, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood in Algeria "The Islamic Salvation Front" (FIS). 1998 he was one of the founders of the Salafi Group for Dawah and Fighting (GSPC) that later became al-Qaeda's affiliate in north Africa<sup>30</sup>.

**Ahmad Umar Abu Ubaida** – Ubaida serves as al-Shabab al-Mujahidin's leader which is al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia. He was born in Kismayo, Somalia, in 1972. Of the scarce information on him it is known that he joined al-Shabab in 2006<sup>31</sup>.

It seems that either **Saif al-Adel** or **Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi** have higher chances of succeeding al-Zawahiri as al-Qaeda's leader than the other candidates. They both reside in Iran and enjoy Iranian patronage that provides them with freedom of operations and ability to strengthen al-Qaeda in its various theaters of operations. Their personal relationship with the Iranian regime is instrumental as it allows for a deeper cooperation with the Iranian regime. The other two candidates are based in remote locations and don't enjoy the personal relationship al-Adel and al-Maghrebi have with the Iranians and therefore likely to preserve al-Qaeda's organizational theme that focuses on fighting the common enemy, the US.

It should be noted, on the organizational level many Iranian and al-Qaeda interests overlap, especially with regard to the US, but in the middle east, central Asia and Africa their interests clash as both parties work to expand their sphere of influence via local proxy organizations which causes pro-Iranian militias to clash with al-Qaeda's affiliates on the ground. That said and given the background of the "limping" nuclear talks between Iran and the US (whether they will conclude with an agreement or not), Iran is likely to renew its global terrorism activity and using al-Qaeda to do its bidding to maintain deniability. Under al-Adel or al-Maghrebi al-Qaeda may use the infrastructure it built in Iran to launch, with an Iranian support, attacks on foreign forces around the middle east and even attack Israeli targets. Despite the paradoxical relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda, their common interests and the benefit of cooperating against common enemies dictate, at the end of the day, the nature of this relationship.

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29 "Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi", Rewards for Justice, <https://rewards-forjustice.net/rewards/abd-al-rahman-al-maghrebi/>

30 "Rewards for Justice – Reward Offer for Information on Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi", Rewards for Justice, <https://www.state.gov/rewards-for-justice-reward-offer-for-information-on-abu-ubaydah-yusuf-al-anabi/>

31 "Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah", Counter Extremism Project. <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/ahmed-umar-abu-ubaidah>



Right to left: Saif al-Adel, Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Anabi and Ahmad Umar