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Abstract

Since 9/11 attacks Iran became a safe haven for senior al-Qaeda members as well as a hub for terror activity planning, fund raising, recruiting and more, especially for Sheikh Saif al-Adel, al-Qaeda's current leader. Al-Adel, that apparently rose to power after the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022, cultivated very good relationship with IRGC and was likely able to enlist their assistance in executing his policy. This cooperation may project on al-Qaeda's policy as well as its active involvement together with Iran or one of its proxies in perpetrating future terrorist activity against Israel or Israeli and Jewish targets overseas.

This document wishes to examine al-Adel's characteristics, the challenges he is facing and the ramifications of his appointment as the leader of al-Qaeda in connection to Israel. This document relies on Arab sources and interviews with Israeli experts, some of whom are ex security services.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, IRGC, Al-Adel, Iran

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Al-Adel's Characteristics

Al-Adel was born in Egypt. Upon his high school graduation, he enrolled in Business Administration studies (bachelor's degree) at the University of Cairo. After his graduation, he enlisted the Egyptian army and served as a paratrooper. After his discharge he went to KSA to look for a job but didn't stay there long and emigrated to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. During his stay in Afghanistan, he met Osama Bin Laden and joined al-Qaeda.

In 1989, after the war in Afghanistan, al-Adel rose through al-Qaeda's ranks and became in charge of Farouq training camp in Afghanistan. Here, he trained the recruits on assassination and kidnapping and even oversaw the curriculum on explosive charges assembly, intelligence gathering and thwarting. In 1991, he was promoted to Bin Laden's inner circle. In 1992 he married Asmaa, Mustafa Hamid AKA Abu Walid al-Maqdisi's daughter, one of the first Arab fighters in Afghanistan, a former al-Qaeda member that later became a bull horn for the Iranian regime and currently resides in Iran. In 1993, on the backdrop of the establishment of the strategic and tactical relationship among

Iran, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda, brokered by Hasan al-Turabi, al-Adel, as well as other al-Qaeda members, traveled to southern Lebanon to train with Hezbollah. There he learned intelligence gathering, information security, and the use of explosives¹. Since then, he was in charge of the Iran-al-Qaeda (then budding) relationship. Al-Adel was involved in the attacks on US forces in Somalia in 1993; in planning the attacks on US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-a-Salam in 1998; and in planning the suicide attack on the American destroyer in 2000. For the above, the US offered a prize of \$5,000,000 on his head that was later doubled. In the late 1990s, he was appointed as the head of Bin Laden's personal security unit. Al-Adel also maintained ties with Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, the former al-Qaeda founder in Iraq, that later became IS. Al-Adel convinced Bin Laden to provide resources to build Bakhrat training camp in Afghanistan in 1999.

After 9/11 attacks, many of al-Qaeda's leadership had to flee Afghanistan and seek refuge in Pakistan or Iran. Al-Adel fled to Iran, and it seems he lived there until the end of 2022. In June 2023, the UN Security Council reported that al-Adel returned to Afghanistan at the end of November 2022 in following the Taliban retaking the country. That said, US intelligence sources argue that as of 2023 he is still in Iran.²

Despite strong evidence to the contrary, Iran denies that senior al-Qaeda members reside in its territory. In August 2020, Abu Muhammad Abu al-Masri, a senior al-Qaeda member, was assassinated in Tehran. Be that as it may, it seems that as part of its efforts to influence the organization, Iran wishes to keep al-Qaeda's leadership close.

In April 2003, al-Qaeda members, including al-Adel, were put under house arrest due to Irani concerns that its image would be tarnished if it came to light that al-Qaeda members reside in Iran and use its territory as a base to plan attacks on the west as well as other countries such as KSA. Al-Adel was released from his house arrest only in 2010, after he arrived at a deal with al-Qaeda leadership to free an Iranian diplomat kidnapped by al-Qaeda to release their members from said house arrest. Since then, al-Adel travelled freely in Iran and even travelled between Pakistan and Iran³. In 2015 AQAP negotiated with Iran to release al-Qaeda members and let them leave Iran. Despite the above al-Adel chose to stay in Iran and even enjoyed freedom of movement⁴. His decision attests to the quality and nature of his relationship with the Irani regime and a desire to use Iran's assistance as a platform to promote the common interests for Iran and al-Qaeda such as removing the US military presence from the middle east.

1 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/>

2 Department Press Briefing – February 15, 2023", US Department of State, Feb 15, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departement-press-briefing-february-15-2023/>

3 For a detailed autobiography on Saif al-Adel see Ali Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl", Sentinel CTC, Feb 2021, Vol 14, Issue 2, pp.1-20. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CTC-SENTINEL-022021.pdf>

4 Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda's "De Facto" Leader is Protected by Iran", GW Program on Extremism, Feb 16, 2023.



Left to right: Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Abu al-Khir al-Masri (Tehran, 2015)

Adib Anwar, a jihadist organizations expert and a former al-Nusra Front (a former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria) member, says that under al-Adel al-Qaeda's leadership changed its attitude towards Iran. If in the past it was perceived as an enemy, then today they are willing to cooperate with Iran due to realistic point of view and the inclination of some leadership members to reconcile with Iran. Per him, another reason is connected to Abu Walid al-Masri (al-Adel's father-in-law) that enjoys a significant Irani support⁵. The latter has been calling for years to normalize the Iran-al-Qaeda relationship and the formation of a unified Islamic force that will work to destroy Israel and expel the US and its allies from the middle east.

Cementing al-Adel's Position in Yemen

Al-Adel's rise to leadership looks like an opportunity for Iran to strengthen its influence on the organization and enlist it to promote its interests. A manifestation of the above has been observed in the Yemeni theater. For the past 18 months there have been no clashes between al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen and the Houthi and more than that one can point out to several agreements between these parties such as a prisoner exchange, cooperation on gun running and smuggling activists across the border, several al-Qaeda members reside on Houthi territory and more. The reason for the above comes from al-Qaeda's isolation as well as the Irani influence on al-Adel.

Al-Adel's influence on al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen started when al-Zawahiri led al-Qaeda. In 2016, al-Adel sent his son Khaled (AKA Ibn al-Madani) to Yemen to strengthen his position within the affiliate but also to cultivate the ties between the affiliate and Iran⁶. With time, Ibn al-Madani won the trust of the affiliate's leaders, especially that of Ibrahim al-Bana, the head of security, and managed to gather a circle of supporters. It

5 Ahmad Sultan, "Following al-Qahtani crisis. Al-Qaeda ignores its relationship with Iran and calls for dissent from Al-Julani's HTS" (in Arabic), Akhbar al-Aan. August 22, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/08/22/دعوى بيها ان عرق اقوشن الل وعديو ناري اب-هتقال عمل هاجتي-دع اقل-الين الوجل او-ين اطح قول-اقمزأ>

6 Ahmad Sultan, "Ibn al-Madani: The Clandestine Role of Saif al-Adel's Offspring in Yemen", (Arabic), Akhbar al-Aan, May 23rd, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/03/14/اف-يس-ل-جن-ل-يف-خ-ال-رودل-الين-دم-ال-ن-ب-ا/نم-يل-ال-يف-ل-د-ع-ل>

should be noted that Sheiks Qasem al-Rimi, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen, killed in 2018, kept al-Madani's identity confidential⁷.

With the elimination of al-Zawahiri al-Adel's way to control the Yemeni affiliate opened up through:

- His son's Khaled growing influence within the affiliate and Khaled being a safe and reliable channel to pass messages instructions and guidance.
- Reorganization within the affiliate and appointments of members close to al-Adel to key positions.
- Direct influence on Khaled al-Batrafi, the affiliate's leader.
- Adopting the approach that the confrontation with the west should take priority over the one with Iran and its proxies.

Al-Adel also wishes to reorganize AQAP. Based on two senior jihadi sources quoted by the UAE news portal Akhbar al-Aan, al-Adel focuses on three vectors to achieve the above goal.

- Curbing al-Btrafi's authority on the Yemeni affiliate while encouraging the internal opposition to al-Batrafi within the affiliate and the criticism regarding his management skills, especially in light of the loss of many senior members.
- Reorganization of the military, propaganda, and religious apparatuses in light of the elimination of a series of senior members of the Yemeni affiliate, and electing new members based on understandings arrived at among them and al-Qaeda leadership, especially Saad al-Aulaqi, aimed at the goal of appointing Ibn al-Madani (al-Adel's son) as AQAP's leader.
- Reorganization of the Shura council of the Yemeni affiliate to be led by Ibrahim al-Bana, a member close to Ibn al-Madani⁸.

Jihadi Salafi Criticism on the Iran-al-Qaeda Ties

The trend of strengthening ties between al-Qaeda and Iran didn't go unnoticed by jihadi Salafists and attracted scathing critique. In August 2022 Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a senior member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, posted a call to al-Qaeda affiliates, especially the on in Yemen, to sever ties with al-Qaeda leadership and even dismantle the organization due to the Iranian influence on al-Qaeda and that the Yemeni affiliate

7 Atsem Ta al-Sabri, "Saif al-Adel's Spy Who Penetrated al-Qaeda in Yemen", (Arabic), Akhbar al-Aan, May 3rd, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/05/03/نمىل-ايف-قدع اقل-اقرت خا-يذال-لدع-الفيس-سوس ا-س>

8 "The Dagger of Betrayal (1): How Saif al-Adel Paves the Way to Appoint His Son As the Leader of Al-Qaeda's Yemeni Affiliate", Akhbar al-Aan, May 1st, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/05/10/نمىل-ايف-قدع اقل-اقرت خا-يذال-لدع-الفيس-سوس ا-س>

could spend more time fighting the Houthi and other Iranian proxies in the region and to gain wider support by the Yemenite people⁹.

In July 2023 he pointed to the warming relationship between the Yemenite affiliate and IRGC on the heels of al-Adel's ascend to power and expressed concern on how the Yemenite allow al-Qaeda (the Yemenite affiliate) to disguise the Irani activity in Yemen. He accused Khaled al-Batrafi, the leader of the Yemenite affiliate, of destroying Yemen and promoting Iranian interests¹⁰.

Al-Adel's presence in Iran also attracts scathing criticism. Al-Qahtani clarified multiple times that al-Adel's continued presence in Iran hurts and weakens al-Qaeda because of the Irani influence on al-Adel's and his colleagues decision making process. In May 2023 he said that al-Adel should be viewed as a prisoner in Iran, a person who is unable to communicate with al-Qaeda affiliates, hand down commands and is not updated on the state of affairs in the various jihadi theaters. He even accused al-Adel of hurting the Syrian theater, among other, by leveraging his influence on Huras al-Din, the al-Qaeda Syrian affiliate, to attack activists of other jihadi movements¹¹.

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdasi, a prominent Salafi cleric, voiced an indirect criticism on electing an al-Qaeda leader that resides in Iran. Per him, al-Qaeda leader should take office only if he resides in Yemen or Afghanistan. Further he said that there was no way that al-Qaeda will appoint a leader that resides in Iran and therefore one should not rely on false reports from the west about the appointment of al-Adel as al-Qaeda's leader¹².

Lately there are also signs of the existence of an internal opposition within al-Qaeda that oppose al-Adel's leadership due to his ties with Iran. Per the UAE web site Akhbar al-Aan, Sheikh Hamza al-Ghamadi, a senior and veteran al-Qaeda leadership member, is vocal in his criticism about this issue¹³.

In light of the above internal and external criticism one can understand why al-Qaeda delays announcing al-Adel as its new leader. First, such an announcement might hurt their popular base of support due to that base perception of the Irani regime as one that has the blood of many Sunnis on its hands and because of the concerns about the Irani influence on al-Qaeda's leadership, part of which resides in Iran. Second, concerns about a rift and splitting the organization.

9 "Al-Qahtani's new message focuses entirely on Saif al-Adl and Iran..but why?", Akhbar al-Aan, May 22, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/05/22/لدى-الغفيسي-يلع-م-الك-ل-كش-ب-ز-كفرت-تدي-جل-ال-ين-اطح-ق-ال-ال-اسر-؟-ادام-ن-ك-ن-ار-ي-او>

10 "Maysara Ebn Ali Alzobedi", @EAlzobedi, July 21, 2023. <https://twitter.com/EAlzobedi/status/1682149714433568769>

11 "Al-Qahtani's new message focuses entirely on Saif al-Adl and Iran..but why?", Akhbar al-Aan, May 22, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/05/22/لدى-الغفيسي-يلع-م-الك-ل-كش-ب-ز-كفرت-تدي-جل-ال-ين-اطح-ق-ال-ال-اسر-؟-ادام-ن-ك-ن-ار-ي-او>

12 Ibid.

13 "An al-Adel Competitor or His Alternate Emir? Meet Hamza al-Ghamadi the Hidden Leader of al-Qaeda" (Arabic), Akhbar al-Aan, September 4th, 2023. <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/special-reports/2023/09/04/فيس-س-فان-م-؟-ان-ب-ت-س-ال-ال-هر-يم-ام-ال-د-ع-ال-ف-خ-ال-ال-ع-اق-ال-ال-ي-دا-ي-ق-ي-دم-غ-ال-ق-م-ح-ى-ل-ع-غ-ر-ع-ت-؟-ان-ب-ت-س-ال-ال-هر-يم-ام-ال-د-ع-ال>

The Ramification of the Iran - al-Adel Led al-Qaeda Alliance on Israel

The Iran – al-Qaeda alliance is not new. It started in the early 1990s. For example, Iran assisted al-Qaeda to perpetrate terror attacks on US forces in KSA and Afghanistan. Lately though, there have been signs of an Iranian – al-Qaeda cooperation to perpetrate attacks on Israeli targets overseas. For example, in November 2022 Georgian security forces reported that they had thwarted an attempt on an Israeli businessman's life by a terrorist cell led by IRGC's Unit 400 member which had members that are Pakistani al-Qaeda members¹⁴. This cooperation is credited to a large degree to the close ties al-Adel cultivated with IRGC and the Irani regime for three decades and now with him as the leader of al-Qaeda the likelihood of an increased cooperation is higher.

The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) interviewed several research fellows with the appropriate security background regarding the threats to Israel as a result of the above alliance. They all agree that al-Qaeda has become an Irani tool to promote the Irani agenda and may assist Iran in case of a multiple theater campaign against Israel.

- 1. Amnon Sufrin**, former head of the Intelligence Division at Mossad agrees that Iran has a significant influence on al-Adel if only by the virtue of his residency in Tehran "yet al-Qaeda's DNA was fighting foreigners (mostly Christians) and less so with Israelis, even though al-Zawahiri, at the time, told the "bird" fable where he described a big bird that has one wing in Europe and another in the middle east but its heart is in Jerusalem. We always assessed that at a certain point in time al-Qaeda will start attacking Israel (more overseas and less in Israel) as it has lower capabilities within Israel or around it than overseas". In case of a multiple theater campaign, Sufrin says that "since Iran acts to formulate the configuration of the multiple theater campaign, al-Qaeda under al-Adel may fit in in terms of planning attacks on Israeli targets overseas to increase chaos and of course on the rhetorical level, I don't see the organization fitting into operations on Israeli territory due to lack of infrastructure. I don't think the Iranians will try to change al-Qaeda's DNA; it can help them contend with the west in case of an escalation by perpetrating attacks on sensitive western targets as an Iranian proxy."
- 2. Dr. Ely Karmon**, a senior ICT researcher thinks that Iran doesn't have a significant ideological influence on al-Adel but in light of his prolonged residency in Iran it is likely that he is in touch with Irani intelligence elements and "one can assume that the Iranians may require al-Adel to perform certain tasks and it is likely that he will cooperate on the operational level. There is also the possibility that Iran will use al-Qaeda to perpetrate attacks overseas. Moreover, they both have an interest to hurt the US, there is a meeting of minds on certain points that enable continued cooperation. Karmon assesses that the ties with Iran started in the 1990s when al-Qaeda was still in

¹⁴ Lazar Berman, "Iran's Quds Force tried to kill Israeli businessman in Georgia, Jerusalem says", The Times of Israel, Nov 15, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-says-irans-quds-force-tried-to-kill-israeli-businessman-in-georgia/>

Sudan”.

- 3. Dr. Meir Javedanfar**, an Iran expert, and an ICT fellow, mentions that Iran continues to allow al-Qaeda members to reside in Iran out of its interest to charge a price that will assist with promoting its agenda such as attacking US targets. Per him, Iran invests in al-Qaeda out of a long-term view to turn it into a tool or an influence channel on various power players in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. As to Israel, Iran may use al-Qaeda against Israeli targets.

- 4. Dr. Micki Segal (Lt. Col.) (Res.)**, an Iran expert and an ICT fellow, mentions that “Shiite Iran has a history of maintaining interest-based relationship with various Sunni around the world. A glaring example is its relationship with Hamas. These ties are mostly on the level of the operational intelligence, through IRGC’s Quds Force and or the Intelligence Office (MOIS). It helps Iran maintain confidentiality, opacity, and deniability as to its involvement in terror attacks or subversive activity”. Per him, IRGC and MOIS sometimes operate independently of the Iranian Foreign Affairs office, the reason being that both report directly to Iran’s supreme leader who has a strong interest in exporting the Islamic revolution. Moreover, some conservative elements in Iran might have their own reasons for having ties with al-Qaeda separately from Iran’s official policy. That can include an interest to undermine more moderate political elements inside Iran or pursuing subversive/terrorist agenda in regional focal points”. Segal adds that “Iran sees al-Qaeda an asset in its struggle against the US and its rivals in the region. Hosting and supporting al-Qaeda can serve as a means to Iran to maintain influence and balance vs. regional Sunni powers, especially KSA. Common interests against common enemies overcome deep religious differences in certain cases”. As far as Israel, Segal mentions that “in the past al-Qaeda was responsible for attacks on various Israeli targets overseas. Yet, inside Israel its presence and activity are limited. One should consider that Iran, after having failed to perpetrate successful attacks against Israelis overseas, as a revenge for specific events might try to do it via al-Qaeda as part of an escalation scenario (e.g., attacking nuclear plants or responding to wide scale Israeli attack in Lebanon). The established infrastructure al-Qaeda has in some countries in the region is a resource that Iran might carefully utilize to that end”.

Al-Qaeda’s Leadership and the War in Gaza

The Hamas massacre of October 7th, 2023 forced Israel into a no-other-choice war to eliminate Hamas and end its sovereignty over Gaza. On the backdrop of the war, al-Qaeda started to disseminate belligerent messages against Israel calling Muslims to attack Israeli and Jewish targets around the world and also hurt interests of Israeli allies, either in the west or the Arab countries who have normalized their relationships with Israel.

On October 17th, 2023, al-Sahhab media outlet, al-Qaeda’s official bullhorn, posted a statement in support of Hamas and condemnation to Israel and stressed al-Qaeda’s commitment to stand with the Palestinians. In the statement they al-Qaeda’s leadership

called Muslims around the world to join the jihadi effort against Israel while providing support through weapons, funding, propaganda and more. Moreover, al-Qaeda called Muslims to join an all-out war against Christian, Jewish and Israeli targets while stressing that the Muslims in the countries neighboring Israel has a key role in the success of the campaign against Israel and the liberation of al-Aqsa. Al-Qaeda leadership sent the following messages:

- A call to Bedouin tribes in the Sinai to reach the border with Gaza, break the Egyptian siege and support the Palestinian fighters with food, weapons, and funds.
- A call to the tribes in Jordan to stand with their Palestinian brothers and partake in the Jihad to liberate al-Aqsa.
- A call to the Muslims in Syria to start a conflict in the Golan Heights
- A call to the Muslims in Lebanon to arm themselves and fight.
- A call to Muslims in the countries that have peace agreements with Israel, such UAE, Morocco, Bahrain as well other countries planning on normalizing their relationship, such as KSA, to start attacking the Zionists. Per them, the terror attack in Alexandria, wherein an Egyptian police officer murdered Israeli tourists should serve a role model.
- A call to jihadi fighters on all fronts to assist the Palestinians with their war against Israel.¹⁵

Summary and Conclusions

It seems that under Saif al-Adel the ties between Iran and al-Qaeda are strengthening. This helps cementing the Irani influence, especially in Yemen. If previously, AQAP persistently fought Houthi, Iran's proxies, then today there is a sort of truce between them. Moreover, in case of a multiple theater escalation against Israel, an escalation on Israel's northern border or a US/Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear sites, the latter might incorporate al-Qaeda into perpetrating attacks on Western, Jewish, and Israeli targets overseas to increase chaos and deter. As to the war in Gaza, al-Qaeda leadership leverages the unrest in the Muslim world to promote its global stature and promote its anti-west agenda as manifested in Sheikh Khaled al-Batrafi (AQAP's leader) October 29th, 2023, call to Muslims to embark on terror attacks against US, UK, Israeli and Jewish targets around the world¹⁶. At this time, al-Qaeda is facing difficulties in perpetrating attacks inside Israel due to recruitment challenges, lack of support and good intelligence work by Israel. That said, the strengthening ties with Iran can increase both parties' capabilities to perpetrate terror attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets around the world.

¹⁵ RocketChat, Oct 17, 2023.

¹⁶ Khaled Amar al-Batrafi, "Questions and Reponses Regarding Operation Sufa al-Aqsa and its Ramifications", (Arabic), al-Malakhem, October 29th, 2023