

Research paper | Nov. 2024

The Secret Weapon:

# The Role of Electronic Espionage in Counterterrorism in Yemen

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## Introduction

Terrorism is one of the most prominent challenges facing the international community in the 21st century as the world has witnessed a transformation in the forms of conflict in a way that makes cyberspace a new arena of the cold war between countries and extremist groups.

In this regard, electronic hacking operations serve as a pivotal counterterrorism tool. This is especially related to the emergence of extremist groups, such as the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS, which use modern technology to plan their operations and recruit new elements.

The paper aims to explore the operations carried out by the United States to infiltrate the AQAP, with a focus on electronic loopholes.

It also discusses the mechanisms and tools on which the US relies in this type of operation as well as their effect on the AQAP. Moreover, the study assesses this counterterrorism strategy and its impact on cyber information.

On the other hand, the paper analyzes the countermeasures taken by AQAP to protect itself from these attacks and how they have evolved over time.

It is worth mentioning that the electronic penetration operations have become a double-edged weapon used by influential counterterrorism forces. On the other hand, terrorist groups exploit them to launch counter attacks.

## The Beginning of Relying on Technology

After the US' war in Afghanistan, Washington began a new war against jihadist organizations that has depended on low-cost drones. However, these drones require accurate information to successfully carry out their tasks. They can't operate without this information. It is here that electronic penetration (known also as hacking) plays its role that sometimes requires a human mediator between the target and the weapon.

In his book 'Obama's Wars'<sup>1</sup>, American journalist Bob Woodward said: "Drones are blind without human mediation." He describes those mediators as being "persons recruited by Washington to betray their countries". Their mission is limited to planting an electronic chip in the belongings or properties of targeted persons in a way that allows drones to accurately identify their locations.

Although the AQAP considered drones as evidence of military failure, not technological sophistication, this tool has proved much effective in the field. Most AQAP commanders of the first and second ranks were killed in drone raids. However, the missiles planted on these drones are the last part of a complicated process based on cyber hacking.<sup>2</sup>

## Electronic Chips

In 2002, the US began using electronic chips to track the Al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen. The elimination of Abu Ali Al-Harithi, a former bodyguard of Osama bin Laden, in November 2002 was the first instance of an American operation relying on this technology to kill a top Al-Qaeda commander in Yemen.<sup>3</sup> The AQAP formed in January 2009 with the merger of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al-Qaeda.

A former jihadi told 'South24 Center': "The chip was planted in Al-Harithi's car while it was in the capital of Marib before targeting him in a desert there."

The former jihadi added that "Al-Harithi and his companions heard the sound of the drone before the bombing. This pushed him to throw a wireless communication device out of the SUV window, believing that the surveillance had been done through it. However, the targeting operation was carried out through the chip planted in his car."

Al-Harithi was targeted by the US as he was suspected to have had a major role in the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Aden that killed 17 US sailors.

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<sup>1</sup> Page 23 of the translated Arabic version of the book

<sup>2</sup> Issue 11 of the Inspire Magazine, issued by the AQAP's media outlet "Al-Malahem"

<sup>3</sup> Yemen officially admits participating in killing Al-Harithi and his companions ([aljazeera.net](http://aljazeera.net))

According to the former jihadi, the Al-Qaeda in Yemen did not possess the security measures needed to confront such a type of targeting. However, these operations weren't widely carried out at that time, he added. Moreover, they were heavily rejected by the Yemeni opposition that accused the then President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his regime of compromising national sovereignty.

For its part, the Saleh regime denied that Washington had carried out any anti-Al-Qaeda operations inside Yemen. According to leaked WikiLeaks documents, Ali Saleh told then US General David Petraeus commenting on the US' missile strike on Al-Maajalah in Abyan in December 2009 that killed 41 people, mostly women and children: "We will continue saying that these missiles are launched by us not yours".<sup>4</sup>

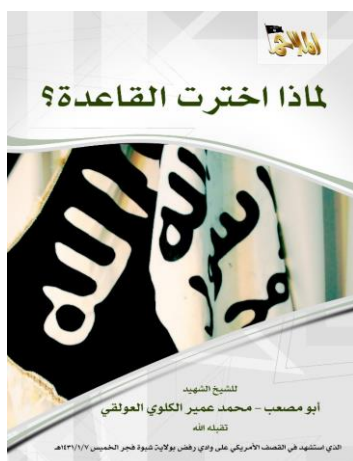


Photo 1: The cover of the booklet authored by AQAP leader Mohammed Omair Al-Kalawi who was killed in a US bombing in 2009 (By 'South24 Center')

In 2022, 20 years after Al-Harithi's assassination, the AQAP announced the arrest and execution of one of its members who facilitated in hunting him. This was mentioned in the video 'Harvest of Spies' released by the AQAP which included detailed confessions about this operation.<sup>5</sup>

After the US bombing of the village of Al-Maajalah which killed dozens of nomads affiliated with the Bakazm tribe, groups of AQAP members publicly participated in their funeral for the first time. Their participation wasn't limited to attendance as the then AQAP leader Mohammed Omair Al-Kalawi delivered a speech in which he threatened to target the United States. Al-Kalawi is the author of the booklet titled 'Why did I Choose Al-Qaeda?'<sup>6</sup>

An exclusive source told 'South24 Center' that,<sup>7</sup> Al-Kalawi received a Kalashnikov as gift after delivering his speech at the funeral. However, he was killed along with some companions in a US bombing strike the same day before he could even use the weapon. It was revealed that a human mediator had planted an electronic chip inside the Kalashnikov before giving it to the AQAP leader. This facilitated in targeting them later that day.

## Precautionary Measures

After the assassination of Al-Harithi and Al-Kalawi, the AQAP took precautionary moves to protect itself from infiltration and targeting.

<sup>4</sup> Yemen: Wikileaks US Diplomatic Leaks Break the Back of the Authority While the Opposition Uses them to Distort the Image of the Regime ([alquds.co.uk](http://alquds.co.uk))

<sup>5</sup> The AQAP executes one of its members for charges of participating in assassinating a senior leader in the organization ([alarabiya.net](http://alarabiya.net))

<sup>6</sup> The AQAP spreads in South Yemen, vows revenge ([alarabiya.net](http://alarabiya.net))

<sup>7</sup> An exclusive source interviewed by "South24 Center".

According to an AQAP defector, the organization issued instructions prohibiting its elements from stopping in any areas that have human gatherings, in fear of someone planting chips inside their cars. Moreover, the new measures ordered replacing of the cars of senior leaders. This is in addition to keeping the car being used at a distance from AQAP elements and for leaders to check them. The defected leader said that the checking process is carried out in a primitive way by passing the camera over the car parts in the darkness. The organization believes that blue or green light emits from the chip when the camera is pointed at the car's parts in the darkness.

The defected leader added that the AQAP issued instructions prohibiting the presence of its elements and commanders among citizens even in areas which aren't controlled by the central government. This is in addition to banning accepting of any gifts, even from the closest relatives.

He added that days ahead of the US operations in July 2015 in which the AQAP's singer and song writer 'Abu Hajar' was killed in Mukalla, Hadramout, the US intelligence recruited a person whose sister had married a leader of the organization. There were no doubts around that person as he had close ties with the leader who was subsequently killed in the same raid after a chip was planted in some of his personal belongings.

Despite the security measures, the AQAP lost senior leaders later through operations that adopted the same method like in the case of Anwar Al-Awlaki.



*Photo 2: Covering the face is one of the measures adopted by the AQAP to hide the identities of its members and leaders (A photo received by 'South24 Center').*

## Targeting Anwar Al-Awlaki and Samir Khan

In 2011, US intelligence was able to successfully target the two senior AQAP leaders, Anwar Al-Awlaki (American of Yemeni origin) and Samir Khan (American of Pakistani origin) after tracking them for years.<sup>8</sup> Al-Awlaki had founded the group's English magazine 'Inspire' addressing the Western audience. The magazine was considered responsible for inciting terrorist attacks, including the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris in 2015, according to confessions by their perpetrators.

His easygoing style, his colloquial use of English, and the accessible content of his lectures made Al-Awlaki popular with diverse audiences. Though Al-Awlaki was active as a fully-fledged Al-Qaeda ideologue for three years, from 2008 to 2011, he emerged as the second-most charismatic Al-Qaeda leader after Osama bin Laden. Awlaki was directly linked to multiple terrorism plots in the US and UK, including an attempt in December 2009 to blow up a jetliner bound for Detroit, and the Fort Hood shooting of November 2009 in which 13 people were killed and 30 others injured.

Therefore, Al-Awlaki was an important target for Washington due to his close ties with the AQAP.

Before the operation in which he was killed in Jawf governorate Al-Awlaki had survived a previous targeting operation in Shabwa. According to an exclusive source, an American raid targeted Al-Awlaki's car. However, he survived as his car had been replaced by another one in which some lower rung AQAP elements were killed in the raid. This indicates that changing vehicles may be an effective security measure sometimes.

There have been conflicting accounts about the September 30, 2011, Jawf operation. However, the common fact is that an infiltration process facilitated reaching the location of Al-Awlaki. Some information indicated that the Saleh regime contributed to this operation to woo the US. At that time, Saleh was receiving medical treatment in Saudi Arabia after an assassination attempt on him in the Dar Al-Reasah Mosque in Sanaa in June 2011. It was claimed that Saleh sought to return to the political scene by delivering intelligence information about Al-Awlaki. One week prior to the operation, Saleh had met US officials in Riyadh.<sup>9</sup>

As for the targeting operation, sources close to the AQAP told 'South24 Center' that the raid was carried out in the Jawf desert where Al-Awlaki and Samir Khan were shooting propaganda materials. The sources stressed that the bodies of Al-Awlaki and Khan were totally burnt and that nothing remained of their belongings except for a 'Jambiya' (a Yemeni dagger) and part of a laptop.

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<sup>8</sup> Washington and Sanaa confirm the killing of Anwar Al-Awlaki([BBC News Arabic](#))

<sup>9</sup> The brother of AQAP leader Anwar Al-Awlaki revealed the involvement of former Yemeni President in his assassination([almasdaronline.com](#))

What was revealed by Morten Storm, a radical Islamist-turned-Danish agent, about his role in the operation was remarkable. He disclosed that he facilitated the US intelligence's efforts to target Al-Awlaki by giving him a "flash drive" that contained religious material and had an electronic espionage chip planted inside it. When he was 19, Storm converted to Islam. He joined Salafist centers and the AQAP, changing his name to "Murad". He became friends with Al-Awlaki. In 2006, he became disenchanted with militant Islam. He later announced that he had reverted to 'Christianity' and revealed his role in the elimination of Al-Awlaki.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the party that had facilitated in finding Al-Awlaki's location, whether it was the Yemeni Saleh or the Danish Murad, the operation was certainly carried out through complicated electronic penetration which led ultimately to eliminating the target.

## Tracking the Internet

In 2013, AQAP announced the death of its then Deputy Leader Saeed Al-Shahri, who was known as 'Abu Sufyan Al-Azdi', in a US drone bombing operation. Later, in its video 'The Path of Jihad 2', the organization revealed details about the death of Al-Shahri. It said that Al-Shahri had been unsuccessfully targeted three times previously, but was killed in the fourth attempt.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Shahri had lost an eye during the previous operations and his health condition had deteriorated. He wasn't able to abide by the strict security measures like before, according to exclusive sources who spoke to 'South24 Center'.

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<sup>10</sup> How the Danish Agent Handed the Head of Anwar Al-Awlaki to the US Intelligence?([almasdaronline.com](http://almasdaronline.com))

<sup>11</sup> The AQAP releases a video that documents the killing of its Saudi Emir Saeed Al-Shahri([anaween.com](http://anaween.com))





Photo 3: 'Madad' newsletter that was issued by the AQAP said that the drone attacks against the organization had failed (By 'South24 Center')

The sources added that Al-Shahri, whose movements had been restricted due to his injury, intensified his use of the internet and participated in some jihadi forums using pseudonyms. These online activities facilitated in tracking and determining his location by the US intelligence. This ultimately led to assassinating him.

The sources disclosed that Al-Shahri was aware that abandoning security measures would endanger him. However, he didn't largely care about that because he was exhausted by his injury.

Moreover, the sources pointed out that Al-Shahri wasn't the only one to be targeted due to his use of the internet as many AQAP leaders and elements faced the same fate, including leader Jamil Al-Anbari who was killed by an airstrike in Abyan in 2010.<sup>12</sup>

It is remarkable that most drone targeting operations against AQAP elements and leaders were carried out after security breaches, whether through human mediators and planting electronic chips or by tracking

their internet and communication activities.

## Infiltrating the Ranks

In 2011, the AQAP exploited the turmoil and protests that erupted in Sanaa and other Yemeni cities to demand the departure of the Saleh regime, and was able to control large parts of Abyan and Shabwa.<sup>13</sup>

Despite its several gains achieved by this control, the AQAP's public appearance made it more vulnerable to security breaches. Its call for "all Muslims" to join its ranks, by the then AQAP military leader Qassem Al-Raymi in a video speech, was one of the reasons that increased its vulnerability to infiltration.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> They were killed in the airstrike in Abyan. A security source confirms what was exclusively published by (Marib Press) about the killing of two AQAP leaders.

<sup>13</sup> The AQAP controls the Zinjibar Base in South Yemen,(Radiosawa)

<sup>14</sup> A video speech by "Qassem Al-Raymi" entitled "One Nation" followed by the author at that time.

During that period, the AQAP lost many of its elements and leaders in US drone raids in addition to the confrontations with the government forces with the latter intensifying their efforts to regain control over the two governorates.

The aforementioned video message by the AQAP helped its rivals to penetrate its ranks by sending espionage cells disguised in the form of new recruits. This largely resembles what has recently happened with the Lebanese Hezbollah. An Israeli security infiltration operation targeted wireless communication devices affiliated to the Hezbollah. This later led to assassinating its senior leaders. These breaches started after the expansion of Hezbollah activities to Syria to support the Bashar Al-Assad regime, according to the British newspaper 'The Times'.<sup>15</sup>

In 2012, the AQAP announced the detection of an espionage cell recruited by American and Saudi intelligence agencies. To terrorize people in the areas under its control, the AQAP executed the members of these cells in public places in the cities of Azzan, in Shabwa, and Jaar in Abyan.<sup>16</sup>

Although the organization believed that it had made a big security achievement by detecting the cell and executing its members, a bigger and more dangerous cell penetrated its ranks and operated inside the AQAP for subsequent years and managed to reach senior positions.



*Photo 4 : The moments before an AQAP member is executed over espionage accusations in 2012 (An archive photo obtained by 'South24 Center').*

<sup>15</sup> How Israeli spies penetrated Hezbollah, (ft.com)

<sup>16</sup> The AQAP executes two of its elements on charges of espionage (elaph.com)

## Long-term Infiltration

The AQAP has been susceptible to varying kinds of long-term intelligence penetration. This included planting elements within the organization with an aim not limited to assassinating its leaders but to monitor it internally and probably direct it. These persons joined the AQAP as members and were promoted to leadership positions. This allowed using them when needed to facilitate targeting some leaders.

In a video released by the AQAP titled 'Demolition of Espionage', the organization disclosed the names of some members who had worked within its ranks for years before being detected. It pointed out the roles played by these elements, including what it called "spreading fear". The AQAP gave an example of that when it withdrew from Mukalla, the capital city of Hadramout in 2016. According to the video, these cells contributed to destabilizing the organization's confidence of achieving victory. This led to taking the decision to withdraw.<sup>17</sup>

The role played by these espionage cells emerged after the AQAP's withdrawal from Mukalla as the intelligence managed to determine the location of large amounts of AQAP funds and target them. This dealt a major blow to the organization. This operation underscored the effectiveness of these cells in collecting sensitive information about the organization and delivering effective preemptive strikes.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the difficulties regarding detecting the presence of these cells due to the depth of their penetration, the AQAP was able to dismantle one of them. A former jihadi told 'South24 Center' that this achievement could have been a result of external information as the detection of a mole who has achieved a high leadership security position that requires building high level of trust is very difficult without external help.

The former jihadi explained that such cells constitute a genuine threat to the organization as they work to undermine the confidence among its members and deliver painful blows to its ability to advance.

There is no doubt that the public appearance of the AQAP during 2011 and 2012 is considered, from a military perspective, a strategic mistake that facilitated the task of the US intelligence to penetrate the organization and deliver severe blows against it. Moreover, this development helped disclose the AQAP's existence and approaches in a way that allowed the building of local and international coalitions to counter it.

These facts underscore the importance of the intelligence battle in confronting terrorist organizations. This battle goes far beyond the traditional military operations.

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<sup>17</sup>The AQAP Stealthily Executed him. Who Is Abu Turab Al-Sudanni?(akhbaralaan.net).

<sup>18</sup>The video released by the AQAP entitled "The Demolition of Espionage".



*Photo 5: An AQAP element in Azzan, Shabwa, in 2013 wearing a mask to cover his face (A photo obtained by 'South24 Center')*

## New Exposure

During 2014, 2015, and 2016, the AQAP lost most of its first-rank leaders, foremost of whom was Nasser Al-Wuhayshi, in US drone attacks. The Yemen branch of Al-Qaeda didn't ever lose such a number of senior leaders like what happened during these years. It is remarkable that this happened despite the ongoing war in Yemen amid the deterioration of security and military institutions which means the lack of internal cooperation in the field of counterterrorism. So, how did that happen?

It can be said that the AQAP facilitated the mission for US intelligence when it decided initially to be part of the anti-Houthi military operations. The organization admitted, according to its former leader Qassem Al-Raymi and its field commander Jalal Balaidi, that it participated in some battle fronts against the Houthis along with the Muslim Brotherhood (the Islah Party) and the Salafists.<sup>19</sup>

Such a participation enabled the US mission to monitor and track its moves through an espionage cell that was planted within the AQAP with a possible Saudi contribution. By providing valuable information about the AQAP leaders, Riyadh sought to respond to the Western media campaign that attempted to impact the US stance toward the 'Operation

<sup>19</sup> Al-Qaeda's Shifting Alliances During the Yemen War ([sanaacenter.org](http://sanaacenter.org))

Decisive Storm' in Yemen by stressing that this would be at the expense of counterterrorism efforts.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, sources told 'South24 Center' that "the Saudi penetration of the AQAP was much earlier than its anti-Houthi operation in Yemen, and that the aim behind it was to infiltrate its ranks to know its plans, especially the level of the transcontinental operations. This was evident in the confessions included in the aforementioned video 'The Demolition of Espionage' which pointed to operations at that period." Despite the confessions belonging to former espionage cells, this doesn't negate, according to the sources, that the AQAP's participation in the anti-Houthi fronts was used to penetrate it.<sup>21</sup>

**Table (1) shows the senior AQAP members who were killed in US drone attacks in 2015 and 2016 ('South24 Center'):**

Name	position	Year
Nasser Al-Wuhayshi	leader	2015
Nasser Al-Ansi	Second military commander	2015
Ibrahim Al-Rubaysh	Advocacy official	2015
Mamoun Hatem	Senior advocacy official	2015
Harith Al-Nadhari	Sharia official	2015
Abu Hajar Al-Hadrami	Singer	2015
Mohammed Saleh Al-Orabi	Senior security leader	2015
Jalal Al-Marakshi	First field commander	2016
Saleh Abdulmoghni	Senior Sharia official	2016
Mohammed Ayed Al-Harazi	Senior leader	2016
Abu Khaled Al-Sanaani	Senior Leader	2016
Abu Khatab Al-Awlaki	AQAP emir in Shabwa	2017
Abu Hamza Al-Eibi	AQAP security chief in Al-Bayda	2016

<sup>20</sup> Is Yemen's AQAP no longer a transcontinental threat?([South24 Center](#))

<sup>21</sup>Exclusive sources interviewed by "South24 Center"

*Note: These AQAP leaders weren't alone when they were targeted by US drones. They were killed along with some low-ranking leaders. Moreover, the aforementioned names are among the most prominent leaders eliminated, and it is not a comprehensive list of all AQAP leaders who were killed during that period.*

## Countermeasures

Following a wave of heavy losses incurred by the AQAP, the latter launched in 2017 a series of confession videos entitled 'The Demolition of Espionage'. These revealed dismantling of a wide-scale espionage cell. According to the videos, the cell was responsible for the assassinations of a large number of AQAP leaders over the past years which caused a big shock within its ranks.<sup>22</sup>



After the detection of the cell and arrest of its members, the AQAP adopted unprecedented security measures, including conducting internal arrests, and the interrogation and torture of suspects. These measures created a state of doubt and mistrust among the AQAP elements.

Photo 6: Saleh Al-Jamli, a member of an espionage cell (Issued by the AQAP in 'The Demolition of Espionage')

As for the precautions, the organization prohibited the use of mobile and tablet devices in addition to imposing a strict ban on using the internet.<sup>23</sup> These measures denote the pivotal role played by technology that has enabled the US to notch up big achievements in its war against the organization.

The precautionary measures adopted by the AQAP have witnessed ongoing developments due to the sophisticated hacking tools used by Washington and its allies. However, the organization has maintained some fixed steps that can be summarized as below:

- Using non-smart phones only when necessary

<sup>22</sup> The AQAP Stealthily Executed him..Who Is Abu Turab Al-Sudanni?(akhbaralaan.net).

<sup>23</sup> Al-Malahim Foundation: How does AQAP's Media Communicate Inside Yemen? (South24 Center)

- Turning off mobile phones and removing the SIM card while on the move.
- Dividing phone numbers into “burnt” ones for wide use and “clean” ones which can be used only by the leader.
- Avoiding stopping or slowing the speed of vehicles while driving to escape drones.
- Replacing cars with other ones at the first opportunity after stopping anywhere to avoid planting of chips.
- Using cars that don’t draw attention while transporting leaders.
- Using nicknames and pseudonyms instead of the real names.
- Using non-smart old versions of mobile phones.
- Using the ‘Jihadist Security’ which is an encrypted application used for internal and external messaging with a limited scope.<sup>24</sup>

## The US Tools for Infiltrating AQAP

The US used sophisticated espionage programs to intercept AQAP’s encrypted applications and track the movements of its leaders. It was able to thwart AQAP’s operations after intercepting messages between AQAP Leader Nasser Al-Wuhayshi and the organization’s general leadership led by Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

According to American media reports, the interception of these messages led to a decision by Washington to close about 20 embassies and consulates in the Middle East and Africa in 2013. ‘The New York Times’ cited US officials as saying that the then Obama administration decided to close 19 diplomatic missions for a week after intercepting communications in which Al-Zawahiri directed Al-Wuhayshi to carry out an attack at that time.

Accordingly, 25 US embassies and consulates were closed in the region, 19 of which remained closed for a longer time as a precautionary measure.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the United States has used a complicated mix of human resources and technology to penetrate the AQAP for achieving several intelligence and military goals.

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<sup>24</sup> Information gathered by “South24 Center” from several sources.

<sup>25</sup> US media: Washington issued the security warning after intercepting a message sent by Al-Zawahiri(aleqt.com)

**Table (2) shows the most prominent Human and Technological resources used by Washington to infiltrate AQAP:**

Category	Method	Description
Human resources	Double agents	Persons pretending affiliation with the AQAP to provide them with false and misleading information
Human resources	Informants	Persons providing intelligence information about the organization in return for rewards or protection
Human resources	Kidnapping and interrogation	Arresting and interrogating AQAP members to extract valuable information
Technology	Electronic espionage	Monitoring the organization's electronic communications (email, phone calls, instant messages)
Technology	Drones	Using drones to monitor the organization's movements and collect intelligence information
Technology	Satellites	Using satellites to capture high-accuracy photos of the areas where the AQAP elements are located
Technology	Computer applications	Using specialized information to analyze data and information collected.
Integration between human resources and technology	Comprehensive integration	Using human resources to carry out intelligence operations with the support of technology in collecting and analyzing information

## Between Hezbollah and AQAP

Israel's recent penetration of Hezbollah's pager devices and the US' infiltration of the AQAP have many commonalities at the level of intelligence operations and the strategic impact. This is despite the differences in terms of actors and circumstances. The most prominent commonalities are as below:



**1. The Strategic Goal:**

- Destroying the organization's infrastructure was the main goal in both cases, in addition to hindering their operation and communication capabilities.
- Weakening the leadership: Both operations sought to target the top-level leadership in the organizations in a way that would destabilize them and undermine their decision-making ability.
- Gathering intelligence information: These operations were used to gather a huge amount of intelligence information about the structure of the organizations, their relationships, and their future plans.

**2. The Methods Used:**

- Technology: Both operations relied on the latest technology such as encryption, eavesdropping, and electronic hacking.
- Double agents: The double agents probably played a role in penetrating the ranks of the organizations and providing valuable information to the intelligence agencies.
- Complicated operations: These operations require accurate planning and high coordination among different relevant bodies.

**3. The Impact on the Organization:**

- Mistrust: These breaches have created an atmosphere of doubt and mistrust within the two organizations to weaken the ties among their members.
- Making communications difficult: These infiltration operations have hindered the ability of the two organizations to make safe communications, by using various ways. This has negatively impacted their ability to carry out operations.

**4. Strategic Dimensions:**

- Intelligence competition: These two cases reflect the sharp competition in intelligence gathering among countries and the importance of acquiring intelligence information on the conflicts of this era.
- The unconventional war: These operations are part of the unconventional war witnessed in the region which depends on non-traditional methods, including cyber and psychological warfare.
- Impacting the regional balance: These operations can impact regional balances and the influential forces in the region.

It can be said that these two cases have several commonalities as they highlight the importance of intelligence gathering in modern conflicts and how these operations can constitute a turning point in their paths. This is despite the casualties resulting from these operations in the form of collateral damage, including of innocent civilians. This is like what happened in the US raids

that targeted Al-Maajalah in 2009, killing 14 alleged AQAP elements but also killed 41 innocent victims.<sup>26</sup>

## Results and Recommendations

The infiltration operations<sup>27</sup> carried out by the US against the AQAP are one of the most important factors that have impacted the organization's ability to recruit youth. These included wide-scale intelligence gathering, assassination of AQAP leaders, and direct military operations. This has created an environment of suspicion against recruiting new people, leading to the decline of AQAP's influence among the youth. This has come simultaneously with the establishment of local security forces that include tribal people and residents as part of the structure of the Southern forces in South Yemen.

Furthermore, the ongoing assassination operations against AQAP leaders have destabilized the confidence in the organization's leadership, making the youth doubt its ability to achieve its goals. The infiltration operations have spread fear and doubt among the AQAP elements and pushed many of them to abandon it for fear of spies. The US operations have limited its movement and recruitment.

Additionally, interception of its communications has hindered the AQAP's ability to contact its members or recruit youth. The US operations also made it harder for the organization to promote its ideology which has in turn decreased the level of its attractiveness.

Although this strategy has largely weakened the AQAP, it doesn't mean that it is enough to root out the organization or end its impact in Yemen. It is still active in some rugged areas between Abyan and Shabwa. The organization takes Wadi Abidah in Marib<sup>28</sup> in North Yemen as well as Wadi Hadramout as its main strongholds. This makes cooperation with local forces a strategic necessity to quell the AQAP's threat at the local and international levels.

There is no doubt that relevant parties face difficulties in obtaining accurate and reliable information about the organization, due to the nature of its secret operations. Moreover, the AQAP is undergoing fast structural and leadership changes in a way that makes tracking it more difficult. Additionally, the political and security environment in Yemen complicates the counterterrorism operations and provides safe havens to the organization.

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<sup>26</sup> The Maajalah Massacre: A War Crime Engraved in the History of South Yemen YouTube

<sup>27</sup> Many details about the US penetration operations against the AQAP remain classified making it difficult to fully assess them.

<sup>28</sup> Wadi Abidah: The AQAP's Black Box in Yemen (south24.org)

Penetrating the AQAP requires an integrated effort between intelligence, military, and security efforts. The countries interested in counterterrorism should collectively work to develop effective strategies to combat this organization.

Being aware of the AQAP's security measures can be exploited to develop mechanisms to infiltrate it. Understanding these measures is considered a decisive counterterrorism move through which more effective strategies can be developed to confront the organization.

## Conclusion

After the in-depth exploration of how the US intelligence infiltrates the AQAP electronically as well as the mechanisms and tools used by the CIA in this regard, the paper came to the following fundamental conclusions:

**The Digital Shadow War:** The paper highlights a fierce hidden war in which the most powerful intelligence agencies in the world use the latest technologies to spy on their enemies. The study reveals also the importance of the digital field as a new arena of the conflict in which the destinies and approaches of the countries are determined.

**The AQAP vs Technology:** Like other groups designated in the terrorist lists, the AQAP faces many challenges to tackle the advanced technologies of major states. The organization, which relies on traditional methods, faces the challenge of having to confront intelligence agencies that have a huge arsenal of sophisticated digital tools, especially with the big progress in the field of artificial intelligence.

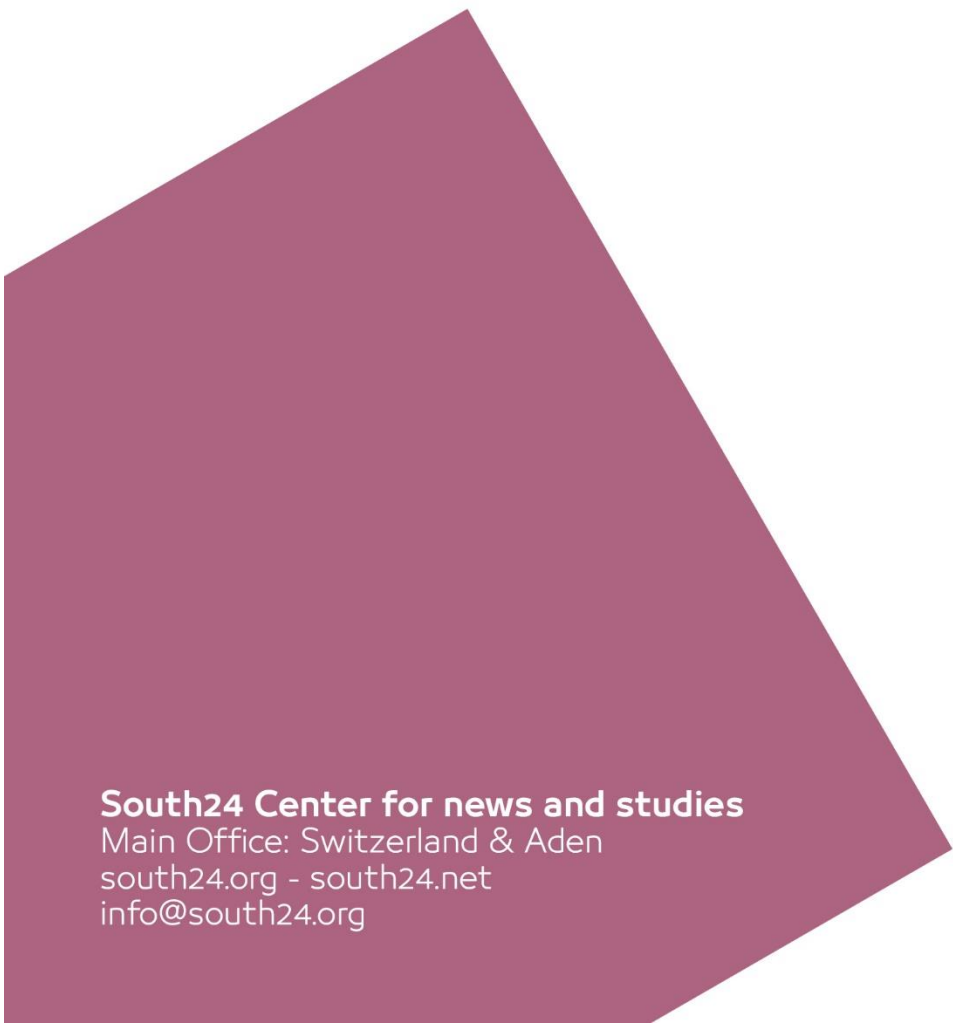
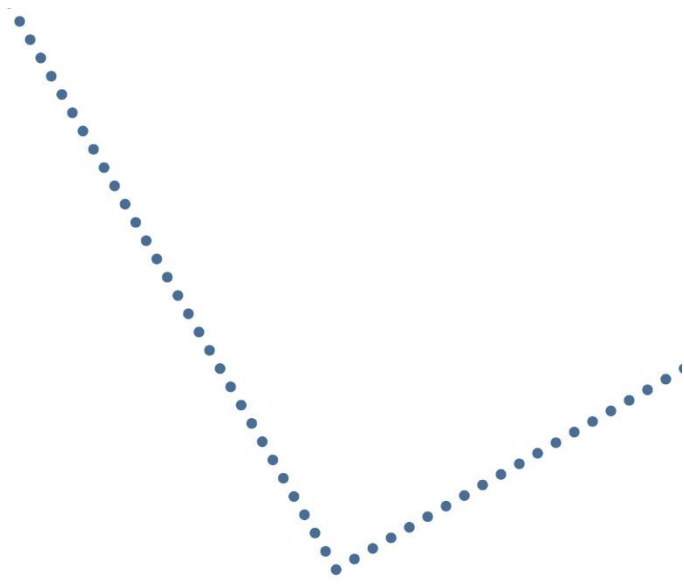
**The Countermeasures are a double-edged weapon:** Despite the AQAP's efforts to secure its communications and data, these measures are often a double-edged weapon. The strong encryption may hinder the work of the AQAP members. The repeated change of digital identities may lead to mistrust among the members.

**Delicate Balance:** Counterterrorism requires a delicate balance between protecting national security and respecting the individual freedoms. While spying on the terrorist organizations is necessary, it should happen in keeping with respect for international law and human rights.

**Ongoing Threat:** Despite the huge technological progress achieved by the intelligence agencies, the terrorist organizations still constitute a real threat to global security. Confronting this threat requires combining international efforts and developing comprehensive security strategies that take into consideration the accelerated development of technology.

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