

Examining Saudi Arabia's 85 Most Wanted List

By Christopher Boucek

IN FEBRUARY 2009, the Saudi government released a new list of 85 most wanted terrorism suspects. All of the individuals on the list are suspected of being outside the country's borders. The publication of the list followed the January release of an al-Qa`ida video featuring Saudi returnees from Guantanamo Bay who are now operating out of Yemen. The video was the first public confirmation that former Saudi Guantanamo detainees had returned to militancy and fled the kingdom.

This article seeks to place the list in context and provide a brief overview of the suspects, including travel patterns, suspected current whereabouts, and details of the charges against them. It is based on discussions with Saudi officials and a review of Saudi documents detailing the allegations and charges against the 85 individuals.¹

Release of the List

In late January 2009, news broke that two Saudi returnees from Guantanamo Bay had surfaced in Yemen and assumed leadership positions with the newly formed al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The returnees were identified as Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372) and Mohammed al-Aufi (#73 and ISN 333).² The news was compounded by the fact that the two were also graduates of Saudi rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returnees from Guantanamo Bay.³ Al-Shahri and

1 The author's discussions with Saudi officials occurred in February and March 2009 in Saudi Arabia. Most of the officials were from the Interior Ministry. Much of the information, however, was discovered after studying the 85 most wanted list in addition to the accompanying dossiers on the suspects written by the Saudi government.

2 Individuals are identified in this article by their number on the list of 85 as issued by the Saudi government. Returnees from Guantanamo Bay are also identified by their Internment Serial Number (ISN). Transliterations are based on the official government list as published in English by the Saudi Press Agency. The numbers and English spellings differ from the Interpol list.

3 Robert Worth, "Freed by the US, Saudi Becomes al Qaeda Chief," *New York Times*, January 23, 2009; Caryle Murphy, "Ex-Guantanamo Inmates Return to Militancy in Yemen," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 27,

al-Aufi appeared in a video alongside al-Qa`ida in Yemen commander Nasir al-Wahayshi and deputy commander Qasim al-Raymi announcing the formation of AQAP, a product of the merger of the Yemeni and Saudi al-Qa`ida affiliates.⁴ In addition, the statements in the video focused on the war in Gaza and criticism of Arab leaders, including Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Hizb Allah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and Saudi Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Na'if bin `Abd al-`Aziz. Al-Shahri and al-Aufi both spoke about Guantanamo, accusing regional governments of cooperating with the U.S. government by sending interrogators to the U.S. detention facility to extract confessions later used against detainees. Al-Shahri discussed prison conditions in Saudi Arabia, while al-Aufi railed against the Saudi care program, mentioning by name Prince Muhammad bin Na'if⁵ and Dr. Turki al-Atyan.⁶ Publicity generated by the video focused attention on the relative "success rate" of Saudi efforts to reintegrate returnees from Guantanamo Bay.⁷

Shortly after this news, on February 2, 2009 Saudi authorities released a new list of 85 most wanted terrorism suspects.⁸ The list of 85 persons—83 Saudi nationals and two Yemeni nationals—included only suspects who were located outside the country. It is unclear why the two Yemenis—al-Wahayshi and al-Raimi⁹—were included in a list of suspects that the kingdom

2009.

4 The video was likely produced on or around January 12, 2009.

5 Prince Muhammad bin Na'if bin `Abd al-`Aziz is the assistant minister of interior for security affairs, the overall official responsible for the Saudi rehabilitation program.

6 Dr. Turki al-Atyan is the head of the Psychological and Social Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee, which runs the rehabilitation program.

7 Initial returnees from Guantanamo went through a different process than later returnees. For more information, see Christopher Boucek, "After Guantanamo: How Effective are Rehabilitation Programmes in the Muslim World?" Royal United Services Institute, February 10, 2009.

8 The Saudi government had previously issued two other most wanted lists, with the last being issued in June 2005 that included 36 suspects.

9 Among the charges against the two Yemenis, al-Raimi is charged with plotting to assassinate the U.S. ambassador in Yemen.

wanted repatriated to face Saudi justice. According to Saudi sources, the two Yemenis were not on the original list, while Yemeni officials have noted that they were added at the last minute.¹⁰

The list of 85 was provided to Interpol, which in turn issued an Orange Notice requesting information about the suspects. It was not until March 25, 2009 that a Red Notice was issued for 81 suspects. Red Notices can act in part as an international arrest warrant, and it indicated the kingdom's desire to extradite the 81 suspects. It is not clear what accounts for the differences in the two lists. It is possible that the 81 figure excludes the two Yemenis and two Saudis, the latter of whom have already been repatriated to Saudi Arabia since the issuance of the original list.¹¹

Missing Guantanamo Returnees

Included on the list of 85 were 11 Saudi nationals who had returned from Guantanamo Bay and are now believed to be in Yemen. Prior to the release of the list, it was understood that the Saudi government was unable to locate several returnees who had passed through rehabilitation. The disappearance of the 11 returnees was well-coordinated in advance and they traveled to Yemen in several groups.¹² The flight of the Saudi returnees was allegedly coordinated with other non-Saudi former Guantanamo detainees who have been repatriated to other countries, indicating that returnees have maintained ties from Guantanamo.¹³ Since the first returnees

10 Their inclusion on the list is odd in light of Article 44 of the Yemeni constitution that prohibits the extradition of Yemeni nationals. This has previously contributed to difficulty in the cases of Jamal al-Badawi and Jabir al-Banna.

11 On April 8, 2009, Agence France-Presse reported that three of the 85 had been repatriated to Saudi Arabia, although no names were provided. The two Saudis known to have been repatriated are al-Aufi (#73 and ISN 333) and Abdullah Abdul Rahman Mohammed al-Harbi (#43). Fahd Rikad Sameer al-Ruwaili (#61) is believed to have surrendered to Yemeni authorities. The author has not seen a copy of the Red Notice list.

12 At least one group was delivered into Yemen by Saudi criminal smugglers unconnected to al-Qa`ida who have since been arrested by Saudi authorities. It has been claimed that others traveled disguised as women. See Huda al-Saleh, "Saudi Most Wanted Suspects Used Disguises to Flee Country," *Sharq al-Awsat*, February 11, 2009.

13 Personal interview, senior Saudi official, February

were repatriated to the kingdom in 2003, the Saudi government has been able to exert significant social control over returnees by explaining that their continued good behavior would facilitate the return of the remaining Saudis held at Guantanamo. The 11 Saudis fled once it became clear that the roughly 13 remaining Saudi nationals at Guantanamo Bay would not be released from U.S. custody.

Several weeks before the list's public release, Ministry of Interior officials visited the families of the 83 Saudi suspects and urged them to help facilitate the return of their loved ones. Families were informed that their relative's name would appear on a list of individuals wanted in connection with terrorism and security offenses. The families were encouraged to facilitate their relatives' return in exchange for leniency. The use of family pressure is common in Saudi reintegration programs, often producing results. On this occasion, however, none of the 83 Saudis availed themselves of the opportunity.¹⁴

Saudi Most Wanted Suspects

When the list was released, authorities provided little information about the suspects or for what they were wanted. According to senior Saudi security officials, everyone on the list is alleged to have either participated or plotted to participate in attacks against Saudi targets, both within the kingdom and abroad. The charges against the suspects include allegations of al-Qa`ida fundraising, recruitment, communication and travel facilitation, and document forgery. The list includes one sub-group charged with seeking to attack Saudi oil facilities and assassinate government officials,¹⁵

2009.

14 Al-Aufi was repatriated to Saudi Arabia in mid-February. After his appearance in Yemen, his family was visited by a senior Saudi official who informed them they would be taken care of—financially and otherwise—in his absence. His wife and brother then began to pressure him to return to the kingdom. Before he returned, he was in touch with staff from the Care Center who facilitated his return. After first going to prison, he and his family are allegedly resident in a rehabilitation facility. It is also thought that Saudi government funds to Yemeni tribes helped close off al-Aufi's (and others) options.

15 Similar charges have been alleged in the past by the Ministry of Interior. Following arrests in summer 2008 and spring 2007, it was alleged that plots targeting oil

while another sub-group is alleged to be connected with a cell in Yemen led by the late-Hamza al-Q`uyati. Those charged with targeting oil or "vital facilities"—a term frequently used to describe hydrocarbon infrastructure—includes Ibrahim Hassan Tali Assiri (#1), Salah Abdullah Saleh al-Qaraawi (#34), Abdullah Hassan Tali Assiri (#40), Obaid Abdul Rahman Abdullah al-Otaibi (#50), Mohammed Abdul Rahman Suleiman al-Rashid (#71), Naif Mohammed Saeed al-Kodari al-Qahtani (#81), and Waleed Ali Mishafi al-Mishafi Assiri (#83). Several on the list are accused of belonging to a cell in Iran led by Saleh al-Qaraawi (#34), the alleged leader of an al-Qa`ida group in Iran.¹⁶

Statistics on Alleged Locations of Suspects

The suspects on the list are believed to be in several countries. Privately, Saudi officials have expressed confidence in knowing where most of them are located. Most are believed to either be in Yemen or Iran and the Afghan-Pakistan region. The documents state that 26 of the 85 are thought to be in Yemen (including the 11 Guantanamo returnees¹⁷), while eight are identified as being in Iran. According to Saudi documents, a further 27 are listed as last being in Iran, Pakistan, or Afghanistan.¹⁸ A breakdown of the locations of others on the list includes 14 in Iraq, two in Lebanon, two in Syria, one moving between Syria and Lebanon, and one moving between Syria and Yemen. The whereabouts of four suspects are unknown. Most of the 85 last left Saudi Arabia for other Gulf states, including 22 through the United Arab Emirates and 15 via Bahrain.¹⁹ Many others are believed to have transited through Yemen.

facilities, senior officials, security installations, and anti-extremist clerics had been foiled.

16 The allegations of an al-Qa`ida group located in Iran are made in dossiers on the suspects that were part of the 85 most wanted list. Saudi officials have also spoke about this group in Iran in numerous press reports, one of which is: Turki al-Suhail, "Saudi Arabia: Al-Qaeda Using Iran as Base of Operations," *Sharq al-Awsat*, February 5, 2009.

17 Al-Aufi's return to Saudi Arabia leaves 10 Guantanamo returnees believed to be in Yemen.

18 A senior Saudi security official told the author in February 2009 that roughly 35 of the 85 are in Iran, protected by elements of the Iranian government who facilitate the Saudis' movement and transit in official vehicles.

19 No travel data is available for 14 of the 85.

Social and Family Connections

Examination of the list reveals a number of family and social connections among the suspects.²⁰ Family and social connections are useful in understanding the list; it helps place in perspective that these are not merely 85 unconnected individuals, but rather a group of people connected by a series of social networks.

Ibrahim Hassan Tali Assiri (#1) appears to be the brother of Abdullah Hassan Tali Assiri (#40). Abdullah Farraj Mohammed Hamoud al-Juweir (#46) is the brother of Fahd al-Juweir, who was killed by Saudi security several days after the February 2006 Abqaiq oil facility attack.²¹ Fahd allegedly led the attack against the massive Abqaiq facility and was #2 on the list of 36 most wanted released by Saudi Arabia in June 2005. Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (#49) is the brother of two Guantanamo returnees, Abdulhadi (ISN 231, repatriated September 2007) and Abdulrazaq (ISN 067, believed repatriated September 2007). A fourth al-Sharikh brother was killed in Chechnya sometime around 2000.²² Guantanamo returnee Adnan Mohammed Ali al-Sayegh (#55 and ISN 105) fled to Yemen with fellow returnee Othman Ahmad Othman al-Omeira al-Ghamdi (#53 and ISN 184) in January 2009.²³ Moreover, al-Sayegh is married to al-Ghamdi's sister. Yousef Mohammed Mubarak al-Jubairi al-Shahri (#85 and ISN 114) is the brother of Saad al-Shahri (#34 on the June 2005 list of 36 most wanted), and is married to the sister of Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372). In a further family connection, Abdul Ilah Mustafa Mohammed al-Jubeiri al-Shahri (#38) is believed to be a cousin of Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372).

Who's Who on the List

The list includes individuals charged with being involved in a number of

20 These connections are drawn from regional press reports, the author's discussions and consultations, and the author's examination of the list.

21 Stephen Ulph, "Al-Qaeda Leader al-Juweir's Testament and Warnings in Saudi Arabia," *Terrorism Focus* 3:11 (2006).

22 See "Summarized Sworn Detainee Statement," ISN 067, undated.

23 Mansour al-Shahri and Khaled A-Shalahi, "Names Keep Climbing on Infamous Terror List," *Saudi Gazette*, February 7, 2009.

serious plots and ongoing operations.²⁴ In addition, several high level facilitators are also included, as are alleged bomb makers and trainers from camps in Afghanistan and other locales.

Ahmad Ibrahim Mohammed al-Tuweijiri (#5) is charged with belonging to Asbat al-Ansar, a Sunni extremist group based in the `Ayn al-Hilwa refugee camp near Sidon in southern Lebanon. It is alleged that he left Saudi Arabia for Syria in August 2004 and is believed to currently be in Lebanon. Al-Tuweijiri is also accused of being linked to an unspecified bombing in Beirut in 2004. According to the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Asbat al-Ansar has no formal organizational ties to al-Qa`ida, although Saudi documents charge that al-Tuweijiri oversees al-Qa`ida finances in Lebanon and has funded groups in Bekaa and in the Badawi refugee camp in northern Lebanon. Saudi authorities also charge that al-Tuweijiri worked as an organizer with the late Iraqi insurgent leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi.

Little is known about Badr Saud Owaid al-Aufi al-Harbi (#15). His present whereabouts are unknown, and it is charged that he participated in the production of the online journal *Sawt al-Jihad*. According to Saudi documents, he left Saudi Arabia for Bahrain on September 21, 2001, one day before Said al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372) also left for Bahrain.²⁵ Badr Saud Owaid al-Aufi al-Harbi is likely a cousin of Mohammed Otaik Owaid al-Aufi al-Harbi (#73), as well as being related to Saleh al-Aufi.²⁶

Khaled Ibrahim Ahmad al-Sunbul al-Assiri (#25) left Saudi Arabia for Bahrain on February 24, 2000, and Saudi documents allege that he intends

to return to the kingdom on a forged non-Saudi passport to commit terrorist acts. He is currently believed to be operating between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Similarly, Rayed Abdullah Salim al-Zahiri al-Harbi (#29) is also accused of intending to return to Saudi Arabia. Al-Harbi is currently in Yemen and does not possess a Saudi passport. He is charged with planning to help support attacks inside the kingdom, specifically with a plan to secure a safe house in Qassim.

Sultan Radi Sumeilil al-Otaibi (#32) left Saudi Arabia for Syria on October 9, 2006 using a fraudulent passport he obtained with his brother's ID.²⁷ Two other suspects left Saudi Arabia within days of al-Otaibi's departure: Abdullah Mohammed Abdullah al-Ayed (#47) to the UAE and Obaid Mubarak Obaid al-Kufeil (#51) to Bahrain, who then ventured on to Syria and Lebanon. It has been asserted that both al-Otaibi and al-Ayed are deceased, although this remains unclear.²⁸ Al-Ayed, said to be in Iran and allegedly connected to al-Qaraawi, is wanted in connection with the April 2007 decapitation of Saudi Arabian General Intelligence Department Colonel Nasir al-Othmani in Buraydah.²⁹ Al-Kufeil has been linked to al-Qa`ida and is charged with fighting in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon. Saudi documents claim he was last moving between Syria and Lebanon.

Saleh Abdullah Saleh al-Qaraawi (#34) has been charged by Saudi officials with leading an al-Qa`ida cell in Iran. Press reports, quoting Saudi sources, have claimed that some 100 other militants are in Iran with him.³⁰ Al-Qaraawi

is married to a daughter of Khalil al-Hakaymah, an alleged al-Qa`ida media coordinator formerly affiliated with Egyptian Jama`a al-Islamiyya. Saudi documents charge him with holding a senior position with al-Qa`ida, of having a relationship with al-Zarqawi, and having helped escapees from al-Malaz prison in Saudi Arabia.³¹ He is also accused of having trained in explosives and targeting vital facilities in Saudi Arabia.

Others on the list include Mohammed Abdullah Hassan abul-Khair (#72), accused of being a former bodyguard for Usama bin Ladin. He is also believed to have married one of Bin Ladin's daughters. Saudi authorities charge that abul-Khair had links to accused 9/11 conspirator Ramzi bin al-Shibh. Azzam Abdullah Zureik al-Maulid al-Subhi (#56) is accused of working at an Afghan training camp and of linkages to Abdel Aziz Migrin and Sayf al-Adl.³² Fahad Rikad Sameer al-Ruwaili (#61), who possibly turned himself in to authorities, is charged with recruiting fighters for Iraq and of working in camps along the Syrian-Iraqi border. One of the more interesting suspects is Naif Mohammed Saeed al-Kodari al-Qahtani. In the most recent issue of *Sada al-Malahim*³³ released in March 2009, he penned an article about the list of the 85 most wanted. Saudi authorities charge that he has funded attacks in Yemen. These include the Marib bombing in July 2007, the July 2008 attack on a Sayyun security building, and a series of other attacks against oil facilities and foreigners in Yemen.

Conclusion

The Saudi list of 85 most wanted suspects includes a number of dangerous individuals. The timing of the list's public release is obviously in response to a jihadist video featuring al-Shahri (#31 and ISN 372) and al-Aufi (#73 and ISN 333). The list was likely an effort

²⁴ The details in this section are drawn from Saudi documents outlining the charges against the 85 suspects.

²⁵ Al-Shahri is alleged to have traveled through Iran to Afghanistan, before being apprehended and transferred to the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. See Evan Kohlmann, "The Eleven: Saudi Guantanamo Veterans Returning to the Fight," NEFA Foundation, February 2009.

²⁶ On August 18, 2005, Saudi police gunned down al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia commander Saleh al-Aufi in Medina. See Roger Harrison and Javid Hassan, "Al-Qaeda Chief in Kingdom Killed," *Arab News*, August 19, 2005. Thanks to Thomas Hegghammer for bringing to the author's attention the connection with Saleh al-Aufi.

²⁷ At least four of the 85 left Saudi Arabia with fake passports. Three of the four used their brother's ID to obtain fake passports in their sibling's name.

²⁸ "Al-Qaeda Says Two of Saudi's 85 'Most Wanted' Already Dead," NEFA Foundation, February 2009. This report claims that al-Otaibi was killed in Baghdad in January 2007, although Saudi documents claim he is presently in Yemen. Al-Ayed was also profiled by NEFA as deceased in early 2008 based on his appearance in an Afghan martyrdom video.

²⁹ Samir al-Saadi, "Terrorists Likely Killed Officer," *Arab News*, April 16, 2007; "Security Officer Decapitated in Saudi Arabia," *Terrorism Focus* 4:11 (2007).

³⁰ Turki al-Suhail, "Saudi Arabia: Al-Qaeda Using Iran as Base of Operations," *Sharq al-Awsat*, February 5, 2009.

³¹ "Terror Suspects 'Flee Saudi Jail,'" BBC News, July 8, 2006.

³² Abdel Aziz Migrin led al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia until he was killed in a shootout with Saudi police in June 2004. See Raid Qusti, "Abductors Behead Johnson," *Arab News*, June 19, 2004. Sayf al-Adl is a senior member of al-Qa`ida wanted by the U.S. government in connection with the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings.

³³ *Sada al-Malahim* is an online jihadist publication produced in Yemen.

to draw attention to the situations in Yemen and Iran, in an attempt to boost both cooperation and international regional coordination.³⁴ The flight of 11 Guantanamo returnees to Yemen highlights the difficulties in repatriating Guantanamo detainees. It is also clear that the manner in which detainees have been held has resulted in former inmates maintaining contact over time and space. It is all but guaranteed that there will be recidivists among former Guantanamo detainees.

Most importantly, the list highlights the risk posed by the reconstitution of al-Qa`ida in undergoverned regions of Yemen. All of the Guantanamo returnees who fled Saudi Arabia went to Yemen, and there are additional militants who traveled with them. There is a real fear that the newly formed AQAP is taking advantage of conditions in Yemen to prepare for attacks in Saudi Arabia. The recent arrests of 11 Saudis near the Yemen border with an alleged 35 suicide vests underscores this perception.³⁵ Al-Qa`ida currently has significant growth opportunities in Yemen, with potentially dangerous implications for security in Saudi Arabia.

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34 The list can also be viewed as a way to pressure these governments; to encourage Yemen to be more proactive on issues of concern to Riyadh; and to re-raise Saudi concerns about Iranian behavior in the region.

35 None of the Saudis arrested on April 8 were included on the list of 85. For more information, see "Questions about AQAP's Return as Saudi Arrests Point to Ambitious Jihadist Plans," *Gulf States Newsletter* 33:851 (2009): pp. 7-8.