



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

at West Point



# ***A False Foundation?***

*AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen*

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al-Jawf

Marib

Shabwah

HARMONY PROGRAM

A False Foundation?  
AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen

*Edited by: Gabriel Koehler-Derrick*

THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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*The views expressed in this report are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the Combating Terrorism Center, the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.*

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Gabriel Koehler-Derrick  
West Point, NY  
September 2011

**List of Acronyms:**

AQAM: al-Qa`ida and Associated Movements

AQLY: al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen

AQAP: al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

AQSAP: al-Qa`ida in the Southern Arabian Peninsula

AQAP—SBY: al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula—Soldier's Brigade of Yemen

AQY: al-Qa`ida in Yemen

AAA: Army of Aden Abyan

GPC: General People's Congress

IJY: Islamic Jihad in Yemen

PDRY: People's Democratic Republic of Yemen

PSO: Political Security Organization

YAR: Yemen Arab Republic

YSP: Yemeni Socialist Party

## A Note on Transliteration:

While there is no single format for transliterating Arabic words into English, this report uses the following system for transliterating the titles of all books, articles and media referenced. Proper names for people and places use the accepted English standard wherever one exists. For lesser known locations and for large tribal confederations, the Arabic name and transliteration are used.

ع´	د d	ض d	ك k
ب b	ذ dh	ط t	ل l
ت t	ر r	ظ z	م m
ث th	ز z	ع`	ن n
ج j	س s	غ gh	ه h
ح h	ش sh	ف f	و w
خ kh	ص s	ق q	ى y

## Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): Significant Events

02/03/2006	Twenty-three men, including future leaders of AQAP, escape prison in Sana`a
09/15/2006	Al- Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen (AQLY) attacks oil facilities
10/13/2006	AQLY issues first media statement claiming September Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attacks
06/20/2007	Qasim al-Raymi names second escapee Nasir al-Wahayshi AQLY amir
07/02/2007	Eight Spanish tourists killed in suicide bombing outside Madina Marib
01/13/2008	AQLY releases first issue of online journal <i>Sada al-Malahim</i>
01/18/2008	Two Belgian tourists killed in a shooting in Hadramawt
02/25/2008	Escapee Hamza al-Qu`ayti's Soldier's Brigade claims shooting
03/13/2008	AQLY is renamed al-Qa`ida in the Southern Arabian Peninsula (AQSAP)
08/11/2008	Hamza al-Qu`ayti is killed in security raid, ending the Soldier's Brigade
09/17/2008	Live shooters and VBIEDs attack U.S. Embassy in Sana`a, killing sixteen Yemenis
11/27/2008	AQC deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri calls al-Wahayshi "the best of brothers"
01/23/2009	AQSAP formally adopts banner al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)
03/16/2009	Four South Korean tourists killed in suicide bombing in Hadramawt
03/18/2009	South Korean delegation sent to investigate blast is targeted in Sana`a
05/15/2009	Al-Wahayshi issues tape defending right of southerners to protest
08/27/2009	AQAP launches suicide attack against Saudi counterterror chief in Jeddah
12/17/2009	U.S. and Yemeni forces launch morning raids in Abyan, Arhab and Sana`a
12/24/2009	Air strike allegedly causes high collateral damage in Shabwah
12/25/2009	Flight 253 bombing attempt over Detroit
01/19/2010	U.S. designates AQAP a Foreign Terrorist Organization
04/26/2010	Suicide bombing targets U.K. ambassador's convoy in Sana`a
05/16/2010	AQAP issues tape pledging to defend online cleric Anwar al-`Awlaqi
05/22/2010	Al-`Awlaqi releases first video in conjunction with AQAP
05/25/2010	U.S. air strike mistakenly kills Marib deputy governor Jabir al-Shabwani
07/12/2010	First issue of AQAP English-language magazine <i>Inspire</i> is released
10/06/2010	UK Embassy convoy attacked by rocket-propelled grenades in Sana`a
10/29/2010	Explosives addressed to synagogues in Chicago are traced to AQAP
11/24/2010	AQAP strikes Huthi procession killing patriarch Badr al-Din al-Huthi
11/26/2010	AQAP suicide bombing targeting Huthis kills more than forty in Sa`da
12/30/2010	AQAP claims forty-nine attacks in three months, including thirty-six in Abyan
03/29/2011	Online reports of Islamic Emirate in Abyan surface but are later dispelled
05/28/2011	Local dailies report Islamist militants drive security forces from Zinjibar

## KEY AQAP PERSONALITIES

Name (English)	Name (Arabic)	Kunya	Position
Al-`Abab, `Adil bin `Abdullah bin Thabit	عادل بن عبد الله بن ثابت العباب	Abu al-Zubayr	Religious Leader
Abdulmuttallab, `Umar Faruq `Abdullah	عمر فاروق عبد المطلب	Umar al-Farouq al-Nijiri	Failed Suicide Bomber Flight 253
Al-`Anbari, Jamil bin Nasir	جميل بن ناصر العنبري	Abu Sabir al-Abyani	Abyan Amir; Killed '10
`Asiri, Ibrahim Hasan Tal`a	إبراهيم حسن طالع عسيري	Abu Salih	Senior Bomb maker
Al-Harbi, Muhammad `Atiq `Awayd al-`Awfi	محمد عتيق عويض العوفي الحربي	Abu al-Harith	Defected '09
Al-`Awlaqi, Anwar Nasir Abdullah	انور ناصر عبدالله العولقي	Abu `Atiq	U.S. Yemeni Citizen; Cleric; Killed '11
Al-`Awlaqi, Muhammad Ahmad bin Salih `Umayr al-Kalawi	محمد أحمد بن صالح عمير الكلوي العولقي	Abu Musa`ab	Speaker Abyan Rally; Killed '09
Al-`Awlaqi, Muhammad Ibn Salih al-Kazimi	محمد ابن صالح الكازمي العولقي	Abu Salih	Wanted Militant; Killed 2009
Duha, `Ali bin `Ali Nasir	علي بن علي ناصر دوحة	None/ Unknown	Maribi; Killed 2007
Jamil, `Ali bin Sa`id bin	علي بن سعيد بن جميل	None/ Unknown	Maribi; Alleged AQ Commander
Jaradan, `Abd al-Aziz Sa`id Muhammad	عبد العزيز سعيد محمد جردان	None/ Unknown	Maribi; Killed '07
Jaradan, Najj bin `Ali bin Salih	ناجي بن علي بن صالح جردان	None/ Unknown	Maribi; Killed '07
Khan, Samir	سمير خان	None/ Unknown	U.S. Citizen; Editor of <i>Inspire</i> ; Killed '11
Abd al-Rahman, Lutf Muhammad Bahr Abu	لطف محمد بحر أبو عبد الرحمن	Abu `Abd al-Rahman	Lead in '08 U.S. Embassy Attack
Ba-Yasin, `Abdullah Ahmad `Abdullah	عبدالله أحمد عبدالله با ياسين	Abu `Abd al-Rahman	Hadrami Shaykh; Killed '10
Al-Muhashami, `Amer bin Hasan Salih Haraydan	عامر بن حسن صالح حريدان المهشمي	None/ Unknown	Jawfi; Killed '07

Al-Qahtani, Nayif bin Muhammad bin Sa`id al- Kudri	نايف بن محمد بن سعيد الكودري القحطاني	Abu Hamam	Malahim Founder; Killed 2009
Al-Qu`ayti, Hamza Salim `Umar	حمزة سالم عمر القعيطي	Abu Samir	Escapee; SBY Leader; Killed '08
Al-Qus`a, Fahd Mohammed Ahmad	فهد محمد احمد القصع	Abu Hathifa al- `Adani	Jailed for link to USS <i>Cole</i>
Al-Rubaysh, Ibrahim Ibn Sulayman Muhammad	إبراهيم ابن سليمان محمد الربيش	Abu Muhammad	Religious Leader
Al-Rabay`i, Fawaz Yahya Hasan	فواز يحيى حسن الربيعي	Furqan al-Tajiki	Escapee; Killed 2006
Al-Raymi, Qasim Yahya Mahdi	قاسم يحيى مهدي الريمي	Abu Hurayra al- Sana`ani	Escapee; Senior Military Leader
Al-Shabwani, `A`yd Salih Jabir	عائض صالح جابر الشبواني	Abu Salih	Maribi; Role in '09 Battle of Marib
Al-Shihri, Sa`id `Ali Jabir al- Khatim	سعيد علي جابر الخاتم الشهري	Abu Sufyan al- Azdi	Gitmo Inmate; Senior Deputy
Al-`Umda, Muhammad Sa`id Ali Hasan	محمد سعيد علي حسن العمدة	Gharib al- Ta`izzi	Escapee; Military Commander
Al-Wahayshi, Nasir `Abd al- Kareem `Abdullah	ناصر عبد الكريم عبدالله الوحيشي	Abu Basir	Escapee; Overall Leader or Amir



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Events in Yemen are moving at a rapid pace. Economic, environmental and political crises that have long limited Yemen's attempts at developing a strong centralized state now threaten to overwhelm the country. Protest movements similar to those that pushed out autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt have plunged Yemen into deeper instability, and multiple competing factions are currently fighting for control of the government. Reports of rising Islamist militancy and a stream of terror attacks by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have raised fears that soon large parts of the country may be overrun by jihadists intent on striking the United States.

Efforts to understand and evaluate appropriate policy responses to the multiple crises unfolding in Yemen have often met with a major challenge: the seemingly intractable nature of the terrorist threat against the U.S. homeland given Yemen's weak central government and growing instability. In this highly permissive environment there seem to be few practical solutions to degrade, much less eliminate, the capability of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula to strike the United States.

Much of the scholarship and reporting on the group largely supports this view. Yemen's multiple sources of instability are often treated as interrelated with AQAP's success, tying weak state capacity, corruption, powerful tribes and limited political freedoms with the rising appeal of jihadist violence. While an emphasis on the causes rather than consequences of the country's many challenges is indeed critical for shaping U.S. policy in the country, analysis driven by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's external plots against the United States too often conflates defeating AQAP with solving Yemen's structural, political, and security crises. This approach causes authors familiar with Yemen's crises to prioritize long-term solutions to combat the group—often arguing that economic aid, political and social reform, and various types of tribal engagement are the only ways to reduce the conditions that produce AQAP fighters.

This report attempts to disaggregate the threat posed by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula from the sources of instability surrounding it by exploring the group's strategy, tactics and objectives from the Yemeni perspective. This shift in analytical lens, from the global threat to the local context, is essential for understanding how the country's most prominent violent jihadist group has managed to persist for nearly five years. Only by examining the actions of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula from the local perspective is it possible to discern the constraints and opportunities shaping the group's ambitions both inside and outside Yemen.

The reported deaths of Anwar al-`Awlaqi and Samir Khan on September 30, 2011, while a tactical victory for U.S. counterterrorism efforts, are unlikely to impact AQAP's operations in Yemen or its desire to attack the interests of the United States. While justifiably the focus of counterterrorism experts concerned with homeland security, al-`Awlaqi and Khan were far less relevant players in explaining the resiliency of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, too often the attention and focus on AQAP's English-speaking members came at the expense of a deeper understanding of the group's local strategy and operations, the central focus of this report. While it is too soon to tell whether either al-`Awlaqi or Khan will be replaced by other English speaking propagandists, policymakers will need to carefully consider the repercussions of their deaths from a broader strategic perspective, one that looks beyond imminent threats against the U.S. homeland and includes AQAP's operations in Yemen.

This study specifically focuses on events and actors in Yemen's eastern governorates, often described as Yemen's most tribal and an epicenter of AQAP activity. This discussion of the tribes of Marib and al-Jawf is the result of twelve months of research conducted in Yemen by the author, including fieldwork in the governorate of Marib. His network of contacts and dozens of interviews with tribal leaders and tribesmen suggest that although tribes have long been cited as a primary resiliency mechanism for AQAP, the group enjoys no formal alliance with tribes in either Marib or al-Jawf. Likewise, there is ample evidence to suggest that, contrary to popular analysis, the group's strength and durability does not stem from Yemen's tribes.

By prioritizing local dynamics, it is also possible to examine al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula relative to its jihadist antecedents in Yemen. This comparison challenges the notion that Yemen's "weak state" is incapable of defeating jihadist groups. The government of `Ali `Abdullah Salih effectively diminished three predecessor jihadist groups through a combination of cooption and coercion, successfully integrating and repressing members of Islamic Jihad in Yemen, the Aden-Abyan Army, and nascent al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Refocusing attention on AQAP and its local operations also makes it clear that the group is unusual in both intent and capability from those groups that preceded it in Yemen. While hatred for the Salih regime has certainly assisted the group's mobilization efforts, AQAP has devised a strategy that is distinct from its Yemeni predecessors. AQAP's current leadership has largely resisted sectarian attacks, successfully made enormous efforts to avoid any Yemeni civilian casualties and not engaged in direct confrontation with either other substate actors or President Salih himself. In all aspects of AQAP's operations, the group's current leadership has demonstrated uncommon strategic discipline and an ambitious capability to expand its operations beyond Yemen's borders, first to Saudi Arabia and most recently to the United States.

Not only does a comparative approach to previous Yemeni jihadist organizations help contextualize the effect of political conditions on AQAP's operations today, it also identifies a central weakness common to other al-Qa`ida affiliates and transnational jihadists. Simultaneously balancing local, regional and global agendas is an incredibly difficult task for jihadists. The self-defeating excesses of jihadists, from those in Algeria to Afghanistan, suggest that a jihad justified in individualized terms is highly vulnerable to fracturing along ideological lines. Furthermore, rarely do constituents of differing interpretations of jihad align neatly. Those interested in nationalist or parochial concerns often have little interest in pursuing transnational religious violence, while the international ambitions of globally oriented jihadists frequently alienate them from broad-based local support. Even al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's unusually skilled leaders have been unable to resolve this intractable challenge, limiting the coherence of the group's narrative and the efficacy of its operations.

This ambitious three-front approach to jihad, particularly AQAP's demonstrated capacity to attack the United States, is often cited as justification for characterizing the group as the al-Qa`ida affiliate most threatening to the U.S. homeland. However, this assessment suggests more about the relative strength of al-Qa`ida and Associated Movements than AQAP's capabilities and structure in Yemen. While impressive, balancing represents al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's greatest weakness because it constantly necessitates a high degree of strategic control from the group's indigenous leadership.

To date, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has largely avoided serious mistakes thanks to the guidance of a small group of Yemeni leaders. From its inception—then under the banner al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen (AQLY), AQAP has endured for nearly five years by maintaining rigid organizational discipline; crafting a consistent and highly nuanced discourse; and avoiding military or outreach efforts likely to spark a public backlash. AQAP's unusually capable strategic decision making reveals that the group's greatest asset is also its most glaring vulnerability. The most direct way to reduce the group's viability in Yemen, while simultaneously limiting its capacity to attack the United States at home, lies in removing those Yemeni leaders responsible for the group's operational coherence: Nasir `Abd al-Kareem `Abdullah al-Wahayshi, Qasim Yahya Mahdi al-Raymi, Muhammad Sa`id Ali Hasan al-'Umda and `Adil bin `Abdullah bin Thabit al-`Abab.

This suggestion appears counterintuitive, especially given the importance often attributed to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's high-profile foreign members. The jihadist ideologue Anwar al-`Awlaqi, the propagandist Samir Khan, the bomb maker Ibrahim `Asiri and numerous Saudis who joined the group in 2008 and 2009 have attracted considerable attention from U.S. media and policymakers. Yet the addition

of these prominent foreigners reflects AQAP's successes far more than it accounts for them. Killing Samir Khan, Anwar al-`Awlaqi or Ibrahim `Asiri might reduce the threat to the United States in the short term but will do little to address the resilience and strength of AQAP, which has long excelled at attracting foreign talent. From its first attack in 2006, the group has proven itself adept at fitting local grievances into a global narrative that justifies taking action against U.S. interests both inside and outside Yemen. Newer members from abroad may certainly extend the group's reach, but they hardly strengthen AQAP's durability inside Yemen.

Analysis of AQAP's history and center of gravity suggests that a refocus on the group's local capabilities is especially appropriate as Yemen faces mounting instability. If local dynamics are not sufficiently weighed in this crucial period, the United States runs the risk of miscalculating the efficacy of military action, inflaming anti-American sentiment and potentially giving AQAP the opportunity to overcome the triple bind that has curtailed the organization to date. Rather than poverty, political repression or even civil war, only U.S. military intervention in Yemen has the potential to unite the otherwise competing local, regional and global agendas that constitute AQAP's central challenges.

Successfully navigating the current policy debate is particularly important given Yemen's highly dynamic political environment. While the political unrest currently destabilizing Yemen has given AQAP more operational space in certain parts of the country, it has also created opportunities for other opposition actors, virtually all of whom enjoy far more public support than al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. These groups function as natural competitors to AQAP, not as allies. As broad-based political movements, their successful inclusion in the political process stands to further marginalize the relevancy of AQAP's message, which claims that change can come only through jihad. While it is true that neither a more representative Yemeni government nor the potential departure of President Salih will have any significant impact on the ability of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula to strike the United States in the short term, a more accountable and transparent Yemeni government presents a serious strategic challenge to the group's long-term survival.

But mistakes in the application of force, unrealistic U.S. expectations or misallocated resources risk derailing al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's decline in Yemen. Such errors are far more probable if counterterrorism policy is based solely on a perception of U.S. vulnerability rather than a more complete assessment of the challenges and limitations the group faces in Yemen. By refocusing the emphasis on al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's operations in Yemen, this paper hopes to contribute to a more informed policy debate that takes into better account AQAP's sources of strength, resiliency and organizational weaknesses.

## INTRODUCTION

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The escape of nearly two dozen men from a Yemeni prison in the spring of 2006 drew little attention in Washington, which was already preoccupied with ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet in just four years, several of these escapees would build an al-Qa`ida affiliate in Yemen with few equals, launching the first and second attacks on U.S. territory by al-Qa`ida and Associated Movements (AQAM) since 11 September, targeting a senior member of the Saudi royal family for the first time in the Kingdom's history and developing the most active media wing of any al-Qa`ida branch—including al-Qa`ida Central.<sup>1</sup>

The operational tempo and achievements of this group, renamed al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in January 2009, catapulted it past at least four al-Qa`ida regional affiliates and a variety of Islamist militant groups operating from the North Caucasus to Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> By late 2010, White House officials publicly acknowledged that the group represented the most immediate threat to the U.S. homeland of any al-Qa`ida affiliate, displacing dangers posed by longstanding terrorist sanctuaries in South Asia and North Africa.<sup>3</sup>

As policymakers turned their attention to Yemen, a common picture of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula began to emerge. Authors frequently emphasized the country's abysmal political conditions to explain both the rise of AQAP and the intractability of the threat posed by the group to the United States. According to this perspective, al-Qa`ida and Affiliated Movements have long enjoyed favorable positioning in Yemen, where a deeply conservative and tribalized society, decades of high unemployment, endemic corruption and few public services have created a situation ripe for

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<sup>1</sup> Although Faisal bin Musa`id bin Abdul-Aziz, the nephew of King Abdul Aziz, assassinated his uncle in 1975, the motives for the assassination have never been clear. Al-Qa`ida Central refers not to any of the various regional groups claiming association with al-Qa`ida, but to the founding organization itself, whose members are thought to reside primarily in Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> The current group known as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula was officially founded on 23 January 2009, but this date is misleading. The group's origins truly begin with the 2006 prison break, which freed at least five members of the group's core leadership who have continued to play a dominant role in the organization despite a bewildering series of name changes. These include: al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen (AQLY), 2006–2007; al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula—Land of Yemen (AQAP—LY), 2008; al-Qa`ida in the Southern Arabian Peninsula (AQSAP), 2008; and finally al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), 2009 to the present day. For the purpose of legibility this report refers to all permutations of the group after 2006 as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP.

<sup>3</sup> For the White House assessment, see: Cameron W. Barr, "Obama's Depiction of al-Qaeda Differs from Aides'," *Washington Post*, 1 September 2010.

exploitation by jihadists.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, AQAP's founding leadership simply took advantage of the country's highly permissive environment, establishing a terrorist affiliate in the country's lawless hinterlands east of Sana'a. In these remote regions, the group was able to rapidly expand its influence among Yemen's poorly integrated tribes, using a combination of marriage, coercion, bribery and public services.<sup>5</sup> By 2009, discussion of al-Qa`ida in Yemen largely took the claim that the group enjoyed tribal "safe haven" as a given, advancing the idea that the tribes of `Abeeda, Jid`an, Murad, Dhu Husayn, Bal Harith and al-`Awaliq represented the group's "chief constituents." Less than a year later, these constituents were described as the key center of gravity for a group "shielded by tribal alliances and codes in religiously conservative communities that do not tolerate outside interference, even from the government."<sup>6</sup>

While compelling, this approach is incomplete for two reasons. First, it attributes agency to the environment and neglects the organizational dynamics essential for understanding AQAP's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Second, it conflates combating AQAP's threat to the U.S. homeland with addressing Yemen's numerous political, economic and environmental challenges. "A False Foundation" shifts the focus to AQAP, paying particular attention to the group's tactics, objectives and strategy from the Yemeni perspective. This shift in focus, from the global threat to the local context, facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how political conditions enable and inhibit the group's operations. Given the quickly changing political environment in Yemen, a reexamination of AQAP and U.S. attempts to counter the group is particularly timely. Failing to correctly diagnose the threat posed by AQAP and its sources of strength and resiliency risks focusing U.S. assets on the wrong places, targeting false vulnerabilities and creating unrealistic expectations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Explanations of poverty and tribalism are cited at length below. For the importance of existing al-Qa`ida infrastructure, see: Michael Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, Carnegie Council, 8 February 2011; Fawaz Gerges, "How Serious of a Threat Does al-Qaeda Represent to the West and Yemen?" (speech, SAIS Bologna: 29 November 2010); Daniel Benjamin, "Keynote Speech" (speech, Jamestown Foundation Yemen Conference, Washington, DC: 15 April 2010) 2.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Makovsky, Misztal Blaise and Jonathan Ruhe, "Fragility and Extremism in Yemen," Bipartisan Policy Center, January 2011, 49; Charles Levinson and Margaret Coker, "Al Qaeda's Deep Tribal Ties Make Yemen a Terror Hub," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 January 2010; Robert Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan?" *New York Times Magazine*, 11 July 2010, MM30; Iona Craig, "Tribal Traditions in Yemen," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, 20 December 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, "Yemen's Internal Divide Complicates U.S. Efforts Against al-Qa`ida, Analysts Say," *Washington Post*, 8 January 2010; Barak Barfi, "Yemen on the Brink," (New America Foundation, January 2010), 8; Sarah Phillips, "Al-Qa`ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen," (Lowy Institute, November 2009), 8; Tom Coghlan, "Freed Guantanamo Inmates are Heading For Yemen to Join al-Qa`ida Fight," *The Times*, 5 January 2010; Transcript, "Years After Attack on USS Cole, Focus Back on Yemen," *PBS Newshour*, 4 January 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Given that a \$1.2 billion U.S. aid package to Yemen was under consideration for the country at least through fall 2010, the importance for getting such an effort right is enormous. See: Eric Schmitt and Scott Shane, "Aid to Fight Qaeda in Yemen Divides U.S. Officials," *New York Times*, 16 September 2010, A6.

The study is divided into four sections. In each chapter, the group's tactics, operations and strategy are discussed from differing local vantage points. Chapter One establishes a historical framework for better understanding the rise of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula by examining AQAP's jihadist antecedents in Yemen. This historical review suggests that Yemen is far from a haven for jihad. While jihadist strategists and scholars have long highlighted Yemen's geostrategic location, proximity to Saudi Arabia, rural population and mountain ranges as features that make the country an ideal base for operations, Yemen's "weak state" proved itself more than capable of blunting AQAP's jihadist predecessors. AQAP seems to have learned from the mistakes of its predecessors. Operationally, AQAP's targets, tactics, personnel and objectives are vastly different from its jihadist antecedents in Yemen. Neither Islamic Jihad in Yemen (IJY), the Army of Aden Abyan (AAA) or al-Qa`ida in Yemen (AQY), matched the reach or sophistication of AQAP's post-2006 iterations.<sup>8</sup> The chapter continues with an examination of AQAP's current strategy and objectives. Tensions between lines of operation and shifts in targets, methods and leadership are discussed in detail. This comparative approach reveals that AQAP is aware of the difficulties imposed by the Yemeni political environment and has devised a strategy that is notably different from its Yemeni predecessors in an attempt to avoid defeat.

Chapter Two describes the terrain, politics and significant actors in the tribal regions most often characterized as AQAP strongholds. The author's extensive field research suggests that AQAP is not a tribal organization in the sense that most perceive it to be. Marib and al-Jawf, the two governorates long considered Yemen's most lawless and "tribal," have no connection to the group's leadership or a disproportionate number of the group's members.<sup>9</sup> Instead, AQAP commanders and low-ranking fighters appear far more an urban than a rural phenomenon. The individuals most frequently cited in AQAP media releases hail from poor neighborhoods in or near Sana`a, Ta`izz, Hadramawt, Hudayda and various cities within Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup> Though personal relationships between AQAP members and tribesmen have been documented, this report, informed by extensive primary sources and twelve months of fieldwork, finds no evidence of formal tribal sanctuary or broad popular backing for AQAP in any of the three governorates long thought to represent the group's center of gravity.

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<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this will be discussed in Chapter One. It should be noted that political context and access to media certainly influenced the scope and messaging of these different groups, while government intervention ended each of the predecessors of AQAP relatively early in their respective trajectories. This report's emphasis on AQAP's internal dynamics does not mean that political context should be discounted. Widespread alienation from the central government has indeed played a role in shaping an opposition landscape within which AQAP is only a single actor. This author owes this latter point to Laurent Bonnefoy, personal communication, June 2011.

<sup>9</sup> A similar argument could be made for Shabwah, but that governorate was not the central focus of the author's fieldwork.

<sup>10</sup> Though Hadramawt is the least developed of the four, it does not suffer the same level of poverty as Yemen's traditional "hinterlands" in its north and east. Hadramawt's capital of Mukalla remains one of the country's most cosmopolitan and vibrant cities.



Chapter Three addresses AQAP's tribal outreach in each governorate, focusing on the group's efforts to develop influence among tribes in Marib, al-Jawf and to a lesser degree Shabwah. A focus on al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's operations in the tribal regions helps shed light on the group's rise to prominence and resiliency. This chapter demonstrates that AQAP enjoys a strong core leadership, strategic discipline and the rare ability to balance local, regional and international interests. Its leaders have adopted a clear set of objectives and pursued them with great skill. The organization has meticulously avoided attacks on Yemeni civilians, instead projecting itself as a protective force dedicated to fighting government corruption and repressive security raids. Nor has AQAP yet attempted to displace customary forms of governance. Quite the opposite, AQAP has applied violence instrumentally, maintaining a minimum operational tempo in order to preserve the group's relevance while imposing few of the burdens on the local population normally associated with jihadist groups elsewhere. Such strategic restraint is reinforced by a grievance narrative in which AQAP blurs longstanding local discontent with transnational aims. An examination of AQAP in the local context reveals that factors internal to the group, rather than the limitations of the Yemeni state, best explain AQAP's uncommon resilience and reach.

Still, AQAP's single most impressive achievement remains the successful balancing of local, regional and global operations. This balancing of agendas frequently in direct tension with one another reveals that AQAP's greatest strategic achievement is simultaneously its greatest operational vulnerability. Jihadist groups associated with al-Qa`ida have long suffered from the difficulties of co-opting local concerns within al-Qa`ida's broader framework of global jihad. Maintaining authenticity in the first while articulating global aspirations in the second requires a leadership capable of inspiring multiple audiences while projecting what are often contradictory messages and conflicting priorities.<sup>11</sup> Those that stray too far from the center risk alienating one source of support at the expense of another—either losing a minimum threshold of local backing or sacrificing the reach necessary for international terrorism. Because modern jihad is justified in explicitly individualized terms that are highly conducive to fracturing along ideological lines, these tensions represent an enormous challenge.<sup>12</sup> Chapter Four discusses the strategic challenges inherent to AQAP's "triple bind" and draws out implications for U.S. policymaking in detail.

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<sup>11</sup> The difficulty of this balancing is discussed in an ideological context by Vahid Brown in his article "Al-Qa`ida's Double Bind" in the edited volume *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa`ida and its Periphery* (Combating Terrorism Center, 2010). See pages 80–82 for the most relevant section on Yemen. Bryce Loidolt also discusses the importance of balancing between global and local agendas in "Managing the Global and the Local: the Dual Agendas of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34: 2, 102–123.

<sup>12</sup> This challenge is discussed in great detail by Nelly Lahoud in her book *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

This report's emphasis on local context and perspectives stems from three sets of data gathered during the author's research in Yemen from fall 2008 to fall 2009. Fieldwork completed in Marib in fall 2009 supplies the bulk of the primary material used to explain collective decision making and the provision of safe haven by tribes in Marib and al-Jawf governorates. More than one hundred interviews with tribesmen and shaykhs from both regions conducted between April and October 2009 serve as the basis for identifying the structure of Yemen's eastern tribes and the methods used by AQAP to influence their behavior. Interviews with journalists and development, government and private security officials in Sana`a from October 2008 to September 2009 offer secondary perspectives on outreach efforts to the tribes in Marib and al-Jawf, and have been supplemented by interviews with three of the previous four U.S. ambassadors to Yemen. Media produced by AQAP and a variety of antecedent groups in Yemen provide a final source of material for analyzing al-Qa`ida's strategy and objectives.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### AL-QA`IDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: PREDECESSORS, OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY

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Yemen has long suffered from internal divisions and powerful substate actors that combine to constrain the influence of the central state. Despite hopes that the unification of the former socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1990 would produce a strong centralized government, Yemen remains rural, poor, well armed and tribal. Hostility toward U.S. foreign policy runs high throughout most of the country, and the regime of President `Ali `Abdullah Salih has rarely enjoyed uncontested authority outside of major cities. Large numbers of veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War are alleged to have resettled in parts of southern Yemen in the early 1990s, many of whom constitute a strong presence in both the political opposition and the ruling party. Calls from abroad for jihad, which began after unification to force out former members of the socialist government, have continued to the present day and are a serious source of instability.

These events seem to suggest that Yemen was and remains fertile ground for jihadists. However, a brief history of jihadist groups shows that they have confronted considerable challenges in simply enduring, much less prospering, in Yemen. Despite consensus in the West and numerous works by jihadist strategists on Yemen's suitability for jihad, contemporary jihadists have not found a natural home in Yemen. This has proved to be especially true for al-Qa`ida. In fact al-Qa`ida enjoyed little enduring operational presence in the country until the emergence of a group named al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), formed after a prison break in 2006.

This chapter provides a framework for understanding AQAP within a brief history of contemporary Yemeni jihadist groups. This section begins by briefly presenting three different perspectives on Yemen's suitability for jihad before discussing the rapid evolution and demise of AQAP's local jihadist antecedents. The second half of the chapter discusses al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's strategy, tactics and objectives in detail, with a particular emphasis on the aspects of the organization that distinguish AQAP from its failed predecessors.

## MODERN JIHAD IN YEMEN

Modern Yemen has long played a significant role in the maturation of a range of advocates for global jihad.<sup>13</sup> Yemen's rural population, rugged terrain, geostrategic location, proximity to Saudi Arabia and famously independent tribes have all been cited by prominent jihadists as factors that make the country ripe for jihad. Since at least the 1980s, Yemen has been one of the countries identified by jihadist strategists as a promising location for religious revolution. Foremost among them, Osama bin Laden reportedly cited his efforts to oust the Yemen Socialist Party from southern Yemen in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the very genesis of al-Qa`ida, suggesting that the group was the product of an idea that "germinated ten years ago in the earth of Yemen."<sup>14</sup> By late 1996, Bin Laden conceded that were he to lose his base in Afghanistan, Yemen alone held the best prospect for rebuilding the group. In an interview with the London daily *al-Quds al-Arabi*, he explained:

I can never return to Sudan. Not because I am not interested in Sudan, but because the mountains are our natural place. . . . Iraq is not on the cards. The choice is between Afghanistan and Yemen. Yemen's topography is mountainous, and its people are tribal, armed, and allow one to breathe clear air unblemished with humiliation.<sup>15</sup>

A short time later, Bin Laden reportedly sent an envoy to Yemen in hopes of securing a sanctuary for his group in what was almost certainly Sa`da governorate's Kitaf wa al-Buq'a district.<sup>16</sup> In a three-hour meeting with nearly two dozen shaykhs, Bin Laden's representatives explained his interest in relocating al-Qa`ida to the mountains near Yemen's northern border with Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Some 1,500 years ago, the Prophet Muhammad declared, "Two religions shall not coexist in the Arabian Peninsula," before urging his followers to "expel the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula." A similar hadith foretold the rise of 12,000 defenders of Islam from the mountains of Abyan, while another encouraged those in crisis to flee to Yemen.

<sup>14</sup> J. Burke, *Al-Qa`ida: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 128. As is commonly reported in Western media, Bin Laden's father, Muhammad bin 'Awad, hailed from Yemen's eastern Hadramawt governorate

<sup>15</sup> 'Abd al-Bari 'Atwan, "Al-Quds al-Arabi," 27 November 1996, quoted in "Compilation of Osama bin Laden Statements: 1994–January 2004," (FBIS Report, January 2004), 28

<sup>16</sup> Several different dates for the meeting exist. Peter Bergen maintains the gathering occurred in early 1997, while the newspaper *Mideast Mirror* claims the meeting took place in January 1998. See: Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 175–6; "Bin-Laden planning to relocate to Yemen," *Mideast Mirror*, 9 March 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad bin Hamad bin Shaje', then senior shaykh of the Wa'ilah macro-tribe, was one of the shaykhs in attendance. Shaje's connection is fascinating given Wa'ilah's history of controlling smuggling routes cutting through Sa`da's border with Saudi Arabia. Given its unusually close relations with Riyadh,

Just two years earlier a second militant had arrived at a similar conclusion. A letter likely authored by Hasan al-Tajiki to al-Qa`ida Central's Africa Corp in May 1994 concluded that a Yemen beset by ineffectual governance and internal conflict represented the vulnerable "flank" of the Arabian Peninsula. Such a fragile state, according to al-Tajiki, placed jihadist movements in an especially strong position to threaten Western economies by targeting Saudi Arabian oil reserves to the north and critical shipping lanes to the south.<sup>18</sup>

This interest in Yemen was shared by one of the most prominent recent strategists of jihad, the Syrian Abu Mus`ab al-Suri. An ardent supporter of waging resistance within Yemen's borders, al-Suri authored two documents that focus on Yemen's suitability for jihad. The first, written in 1999, is among the clearest early justifications for opening an active front in the country.<sup>19</sup> Describing Yemen, al-Suri writes:

The adherence to ethnic and tribal systems . . . the people's military steadfastness, the rooting of the spirit of jihad, the stockpile of weapons, the spirit of obedience to leaders, the non-entering of corruption of the civilization of most of the people of the region, poverty among the general population, and other characteristics make this demography a suitable human bloc for jihad.<sup>20</sup>

Six years later, al-Suri issued a similar appeal for jihad in Yemen. In the 1,600-page *Call for Global Islamic Resistance*, the Syrian devotes a full chapter to the modern history of Islamist revolution in Yemen, arguing that "Yemen was the most ready for jihad among countries in the Arab World. . . ."<sup>21</sup>

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the tribe has long been a familiar scapegoat in Sana`a. Therefore it is not terribly surprising that it would again draw allegations of links with the latest iteration of al-Qa`ida in Yemen (AQAP) nearly twelve years later.

<sup>18</sup> His assessment is ironic given that the recipients of his letter, al-Qa`ida's cells in East Africa, were nearing the end of a maddeningly difficult effort at establishing an al-Qa`ida presence in precisely this type of environment in Somalia, Somaliland and the Ogaden. For further discussion of al-Qa`ida's East Africa Corps, see: "Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007. For the quote in the text, see: "The Five Letters to the African Corps," (Document #: AFGP-2002-600053, CTC Harmony Database), 16.

<sup>19</sup> In the more frequently cited of the two, al-Suri notes that Yemen's size, large population, mountainous terrain, abundance of small arms—of which he claims Yemen has some 70 million—long land and sea borders and acute underdevelopment all advantage successfully inciting jihad from within the country. See: Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, "Masuliyat Ahil al-Yemen Tejah Muqadasat al-Muslimin wa Tharawatihim," *Markez al-Ghurba' lil-Dirasat al-Islamiyah*, 1999, 12–14, <http://www.almaqdes.net/r?i=wksgfnyz>.

<sup>20</sup> Abu Mus`ab Al-Suri, "al-Muslimoun fi Wasat Asiya wa Ma'rakat al-Islam al-Muqbila," *Markez al-Ghurba' lil-Dirasat al-Islamiyah*, November 1999, 21 (accessed from Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Database, AFGP-2002-002871).

<sup>21</sup> Al-Suri, *D'awat al-Muqawima al-Islamiya al-'Alamiya*, 2005, 773.

A history of jihadist movements in Yemen seems to justify al-Qa`ida's long-standing focus on the country. From 1990 to 2003, the leaders of Yemen's three primary Islamic militant groups all claimed ties to Bin Laden in Afghanistan. The most recent iteration of al-Qa`ida in Yemen, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, has reinforced this narrative of continuous al-Qa`ida presence in the country. The group commonly dedicates military operations to those killed in previous jihadist groups, exploiting footage of captured leaders taken more than a decade ago and spending considerable energy linking recently killed members to al-Qa`ida Central. A July 2010 article authored by AQAP's current amir, Nasir al-Wahayshi, best demonstrates this emphasis on connecting the group to its predecessors in the peninsula.<sup>22</sup> Bin Laden's former personal secretary articulates a shared legacy of Islamic militancy that assimilates the group with a variety of disparate individuals and movements in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Al-Wahayshi explains:

Since 1990 when the Americans occupied the land of revelation, the youth of the Peninsula of Islam are defending their religion, their holy places and their land, from which, their Messenger, peace be upon him, ordered [his followers] to expel the unbelievers. They have executed a few operations against the Americans in and out of the Arabian Peninsula. The most famous are the Ulaya, al-Khobar, East Riyadh, USS Cole, Limburg, and the assassination of US soldiers in the island of Faylakah in Kuwait. The leaders of al-Qa`ida such as Shaykh al-Battar Yusuf al-Uyairi, `Abdul `Aziz al-Miqrin, and Shaykh Abu `Ali al-Harithi and others led this war against the Americans in and outside of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>23</sup>

Taken with the writings of Bin Laden, al-Suri and al-Tajiki, al-Wahayshi's communiqué articulates a linear conception of Islamic militancy in the region, with each movement an extension of the other, culminating in the January 2009 founding of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Yet there is good reason to question this hagiography of jihadism in Yemen. Beginning with Islamic Jihad in Yemen (1990–1994), the Army of Aden Abyan (1994–1998), and al-Qa`ida in Yemen (1998–2003), distinct leadership, aims and strategies separate the groups far more than unite them. A violent interpretation of Salafism certainly played a role in all of these movements, but both Islamic Jihad in Yemen and the Army of Aden Abyan demonstrated few of the global aspirations or the operational capacity of the post-2006 iterations of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Al-Wahayshi is also referred to by his kunya, Abu Basir, in many of his media releases.

<sup>23</sup> A colleague rightly pointed out that al-Wahayshi does not reference the AAA or IJY. Though Islamic Jihad in Yemen has not played a role in al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's messaging efforts, an AQAP video released in February 2010 did feature the leader of the Islamic Army of Aden Abyan. For the quotation, see: Nasir Al-Wahayshi, "Interview with Shaykh Abu Basir," *Inspire* 1 (12 July 2010), 13.

<sup>24</sup> The latter three, Al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen, Southern Arabian Peninsula, and Arabian Peninsula, are best considered a single group rather than distinct movements. Demographic and strategic shifts certainly occurred during each phase, but the core leaders, narrative and general aims remained the same.

While early manifestations of al-Qa`ida from 1998 to 2003 did employ violence in a fundamentally new way, these cells hardly articulated a clear narrative or enjoyed coherence of action.<sup>25</sup> These failures, taken with Islamic Jihad in Yemen's move toward political accommodation and the AAA's collapse at the hands of state security forces, suggest that jihadist movements are hardly predisposed for success in Yemen.<sup>26</sup>

#### *ISLAMIC JIHAD IN YEMEN (1990–1994)*

Islamic Jihad in Yemen (*al-Jihad al-Islami fil-Yemen*) (IJY) emerged in the wake of the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in December 1991. Moscow's defeat saw thousands of Yemenis return to a country divided by a Soviet ally and socialist regime, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. These Yemenis were joined by smaller numbers of Arab veterans of the Afghan War who were denied reentry to their home countries by governments concerned about resettling battle-hardened fighters fresh from the experience of Islamist revolution abroad. The majority of both groups integrated into Yemeni society with little incident. A small minority, however, returned from Afghanistan committed to violent regime change throughout the Arab world. For many, the conditions for jihad seemed strongest at home. Yemeni veterans of the Afghan campaign quickly joined a disparate mix of royalist, Wahhabi, tribal and disaffected southern elements united by their disdain for southern Yemen's socialist regime.

One of these veterans was Osama bin Laden, who by the late 1980s had reportedly expanded his support for toppling the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. According to Noman Benotman, one of the Saudi's colleagues and a later head of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Bin Laden began spending "a lot of money [on the jihad in Yemen] in '88, '89, '90," diverting resources, arms and recruits from Afghanistan to southern Yemen.<sup>27</sup> A second associate of Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri offered a similar assessment during this period. According to Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, by

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The changes in name are exactly that. They do not possess the clear organizational boundaries dividing Islamic Jihad in Yemen, the Army of Aden Abyan or al-Qa`ida in Yemen (1998–2003).

<sup>25</sup> By still another metric, all three lacked a degree of institutionalization often cited by scholars as a necessary component of durable terrorist organizations. Austin Long, "Assessing the Success of Leadership Targeting," *CTC Sentinel* 3 (1 November 2010), 11–12.

<sup>26</sup> Success in a maximalist sense. Though the collapse of the Army of Aden Abyan and later al-Qa`ida in Yemen could scarcely be justified in terms of either group's accomplishing their respective goals, the political integration of Islamic Jihad in Yemen could arguably be understood as a form of "success." Political accommodation may have represented an acceptable outcome for those in search of influence or employment, but Islamic Jihad in Yemen did not accomplish its formal goal of driving socialism from Yemen's borders. In this strategic sense, accommodation was not a success.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 109.

1990 Bin Laden was “changing his goals and plans, from the Afghan jihad to throwing his weight into the jihad in southern Yemen . . .”<sup>28</sup>

From an apartment in Jeddah, Bin Laden provided financial support to Arab Afghans in hopes of driving the socialist regime from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>29</sup> Between 1989 and 1990, a wealthy heir to the former sultanate of Abyan named Tariq bin Nasir bin `Abdullah al-Fadli would emerge as an apparent leader of a number of these Afghan veterans, forming a loose coalition with other Islamists, southerners and tribesmen opposed to socialist rule.

The unification of the southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and the northern Yemen Arab Republic in May 1990 brought the prospect of a Yemen free from socialism within the reach of Bin Laden and al-Fadli; however, the merger would fail to meet expectations. The hurried union of north and south left many YSP leaders in control of senior posts in the Republic of Yemen, while a draft constitution in May of the following year failed to deliver on the promise of an Islamic state. In late 1992, members of Islamic Jihad in Yemen, a group allegedly headed by Tariq al-Fadli, were accused of organizing the December bombings of the Gold Mohur and Mövenpick hotels in Aden.<sup>30</sup> In the wake of the bombing, attacks against Marxist officials in southern Yemen increased in frequency in the run-up to parliamentary elections. The assassination campaign coincided with an influx of weapons shipments sent by Bin Laden from Sudan to Yemen.<sup>31</sup> According to the testimony of a former member of al-Qa`ida, at least four crates of arms and explosives were shipped from Khartoum in 1993 in order to “give our brothers in south Yemen some weapons to help them to fight the Communists.”<sup>32</sup>

By the elections of 27 April 1993, more than 150 Politburo officials and supporters were dead—with many political observers blaming Islamic Jihad in Yemen for the violence.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Also known as Dr. Fadl, al-Sharif is regarded as one of the founders of modern jihad. Years earlier, al-Sharif founded the same Egyptian Islamic Jihad that would flee to Yemen in the mid-1990s. For his remarks, see: Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, “Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World,” December 2007,

[http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP178507#\\_ednref4](http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP178507#_ednref4).

<sup>29</sup> There is no evidence that Bin Laden aimed to destabilize either the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) or later the unified Republic of Yemen during this period.

<sup>30</sup> The attacks were not well executed. Just one of the three explosives detonated. Though an Austrian national was killed in the blast, the intended targets of the strike—U.S. Marines stationed in Aden for UN Operation Restore Hope in Mogadishu—were not present in the hotels during the bombing.

<sup>31</sup> Burke (2003), 133.

<sup>32</sup> *United States of America v. Osama Bin Laden, et al.*, New York, NY, 6 February 2001, 336, 337.

<sup>33</sup> Political rivals, northerners hostile to southern influence, Islamists opposed to secularism and



Some three months later, the vice president and YSP leader, Ali Salim al-Bayd, withdrew from the unity government. By February 1994, leaders from the government and the south were unable to maintain a peace treaty signed days earlier, and on 5 May periodic clashes spiraled into civil war. Within weeks, hundreds of Arab Afghans, unaffiliated Islamists, tribesmen and angry southerners joined al-Fadli in fighting alongside General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar's First Armored Division and Staff Brigadier Muhammad Ahmad Ismail. A mix of northern soldiers, civilian partisans and al-Fadli's Islamic Jihad overtook Aden on 4 July, sending southern leaders fleeing to neighboring Djibouti and Oman. Three days later, the civil war formally ended.

### **Civil War and Political Accommodation**

The defeat of Yemen's socialists would again fail to meet jihadist expectations. Writing just seven days after the end of the war, Bin Laden concluded that the fall of the PDRY was "clear evidence for a rejection of all secular and atheist regimes across the region. We envision a new beginning in the implementation of the Prophet's will of expelling all the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula, no matter what color or shape."<sup>34</sup> With the end to a "dark age in the history of Yemen," Bin Laden hoped the victory would trigger the overthrow of aging dictators and monarchies across the Arab world. It did not.<sup>35</sup> After boycotting elections in 1997, the Socialist Party would return to the Yemeni parliament in 2003 and remains a fixture in the country's politics today.

The aftermath of the civil war brought about the end of the IJY as a semiorganized jihadist movement. Two of the group's leaders, al-Fadli and Jamal al-Nahdi—both of whom allegedly played roles in the 1992 Aden hotel bombings—were appointed to positions in government in exchange for disbanding IJY and ending their support for

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Southerners discontent with two decades of socialist rule all converged to attack YSP candidates. In the fall of 1993, intelligence analysts at the U.S. Department of State concluded that Islamic Jihad in Yemen had also dramatically expanded its regional influence, reporting that IJY's camps were filled with Islamists from numerous countries, particularly Libya and Somalia. For a tally of YSP deaths, see: George Joffe, "Yemen—Reasons for Conflict," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, August 1994, 371; For the State Department memo, see: "The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous," *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Weekend Edition* (21–22 August 1993), 3–5.

<sup>34</sup> Osama Bin Laden, "The Banishment of Communism from the Arabian Peninsula: The Episode and the Proof," *The Committee for Advice and Reform* (11 July 1994), 9–10 (CTC Harmony Database. Document #: AFGP-2002-003345).

<sup>35</sup> Worse, according to Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, Yemen's religious clerics would fail to answer Bin Laden's calls for continued jihad. Al-Suri (2005), *D'awa al-Muqawwima al-Islamiya al-'Alimiya*, 774.

militancy.<sup>36</sup> The move was not well received by some segments of the organization, and a mix of IJY, local and foreign Islamists, unhappy southerners and northern tribesmen set about administering Islamic government in parts of southern Yemen.<sup>37</sup> Negotiations with Sana`a over ending IJY's activities broke down over demands for military employment and the application of shari`a in Aden. In a matter of days IJY fighters seized a security outpost in Aden's Crater City in July of 1994. The uprising was put down quickly, and by the end of that month twelve members of IJY were reportedly dead, the rest either arrested or hiding in Abyan and several governorates east of Sana`a. It would be in Abyan that dozens of these men would coalesce around another veteran of the Afghan war to form a new group, the Army of Aden Abyan (AAA).

Despite its connection to the AAA, Islamic Jihad in Yemen's influence should not be exaggerated. Operating from areas in Abyan, Shabwah, Hadramawt and the Yafa'e mountains, IJY had by 1991 formed around several blocs of locals, northerners and small numbers of foreign fighters. They were joined by an awkward union of indigenous movements opposed to the Yemen Socialist Party, the largest of which were current and exiled southern Yemenis intent on reclaiming property and businesses lost to the communist regime. While Islamists constituted the bulk of IJY, they trained and fought alongside both moderate republicans and independent tribesmen, the former seeking a unified and semisecular state, the latter a limited and compliant southern government. Neither aim fit terribly well with calls for installing Islamic governance throughout the country.

Because of these inconsistencies, IJY appears to have functioned fluidly at best, at once representing an ill-defined coalition, a prophesied Islamic army and a tool of political expedience.<sup>38</sup> By 1993, IJY more closely resembled a series of social movements, united

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<sup>36</sup> Al-Fadli was appointed to the higher chamber of parliament (*Majlis al-Shura*), while al-Nahdi was placed on the permanent committee of the ruling General People's Congress.

<sup>37</sup> According to Western media, the groups opened prisons in Aden and Hadramawt's Mukalla, freeing IJY fighters and criminals in equal measure. Within weeks, symbols of secularism, "polytheism" and Christianity were targeted with increasing frequency. IJY members and loose affiliates prohibited the celebration of Christmas, attacked Catholic churches and destroyed Aden's Sira brewery. Sufi shrines were attacked as well, and reports surfaced of IJY members and others publicly beating those accused of religious impropriety. See: "Yemen: Coping with Terrorism and Violence in a Fragile State," *International Crisis Group* (8 January 2003), 12; Karl Vick, "Cole Attack Rooted in Afghan War," *Washington Post*, 3 December 2001; Samir Ghattas, "Defeat of Socialists Opens Way for Muslim Fundamentalists," *The Associated Press*, 28 July 1994; "'Armed fundamentalists' reportedly attack Aden Catholic church," *Agence France-Presse*, 23 July 1994; "Moslems Topple Marxist Statue in Aden," *Agence France-Presse*, 23 July 1994; "Arab Veterans of Afghanistan War Lead New Islamic War," *Compass Newswire*, 28 October 28.

<sup>38</sup> More expansionist interpretations posit that the group represented al-Qa`ida's first regional affiliate. The author is not aware of open source evidence that sufficiently substantiates such claims.

only in their shared antipathy toward the Yemen Socialist Party.<sup>39</sup> Far from enjoying the organizational coherence of the country's later jihadist groups, IJY failed to display the developed command structure, media capability and ambition that distinguishes al-Qa`ida in Yemen's post-2006 iterations. No clear political or military structure was ever articulated by IJY's leadership, and its operations were characterized by no uniformity of action or messaging. Even relative to its peers, IJY did not compare especially favorably to other movements advocating jihad during the same period.<sup>40</sup> The group did not target the central government or Western interests, and despite allegations of support from Bin Laden, it exhibited no appetite for carrying jihad beyond Yemen's borders.<sup>41</sup>

#### *ARMY OF ADEN ABYAN (1994–1998)*

The loss of Crater City was a turning point for many IJY members. With Tariq al-Fadli's and Jamal al-Nahdi's renunciation of the group, the prospect for implementing shari`a or securing land and employment guarantees from Sana`a appeared dim. The central government deported thousands of foreign Arab Afghans in 1995 and 1996, and although President Salih reportedly offered others in IJY civilian posts in government, many resisted.<sup>42</sup> Among them was Zain al-Abidin Abubakr al-Mihdar of western Shabwah's Wadi Markha.<sup>43</sup> A veteran of the Afghan war, al-Mihdar quickly emerged as a spokesman for what remained of IJY. The date he officially formed the Army of Aden Abyan (*Jaysh Aden Abyan* or AAA) is disputed, but sometime around 1994 al-Mihdar relocated to Abyan governorate in search of a sanctuary to rebuild IJY.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Whitaker offers an especially helpful description of the group, claiming it, "merely provided a moral cloak for what were essentially parochial interests and personal grievances." Brian Whitaker, "Yemen and Osama bin Laden," *Yemen Gateway*, August 1998.

<sup>40</sup> For example, both Jalaludin Haqqani and Maktab al-Khidmat of Afghanistan and Pakistan boasted media and outreach wings far more developed than any Yemeni group until at least 2007. The printed and video material of the former's *Manba' al-Jihad* from 1989 to 1993 displays an organizational capacity that IJY in no way approximated. Conversation with specialist on early Afghan jihadist movements, Washington DC, February 2011.

<sup>41</sup> This excludes the 29 December 1992 bombings of hotels in Aden. Although al-Fadli and al-Nahdi were accused of playing some role in the attack, IJY's involvement in the attack remains unclear.

<sup>42</sup> Sana`a claimed to have had expelled as many as 14,000 "foreigners" from summer 1995 to summer 1996. See: "Yemen Ejected 14,000 Foreigners in Past Year: Interior Minister," Agence France Presse, 8 July 1996.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Mihdar was also known by his kunya, Abu al-Hasan. Wadi Markha is an *'uzala*, a small group of villages, near the border between the districts of Markha al-Sufila and Markha al-'Ulia. Mihdar's place of origin is according statements he made during his trial in early 1999. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37oSZZQmW0c>.

<sup>44</sup> Though precise dates are contested, before his arrest in 2005, Abu Mus`ab al-Suri dates the formal origin of AAA to late 1997, slightly before al-Mihdar's move to Huttat. For al-Suri's chronology, see: al-Suri (2005), 778.

With the help of Abu Hamza al-Misri, an Egyptian who would rise to notoriety years later in London, al-Mihdar had by 1995 reportedly established a training camp in Abyan, surrounding himself with a combination of southerners unhappy with the slow pace of unification, former IJY members and unaffiliated Arab Afghans. At approximately this time, al-Misri reportedly set about funding the newly formed AAA from London through his Finsbury Park Mosque and group Ansar al-Shari`a.<sup>45</sup>

In early March 1998, the AAA established a training camp in the Huttat Mountains, a series of peaks running from the tip of Abyan's capital, Zinjibar, and spilling into neighboring Khanfar and Sirar districts.<sup>46</sup> The move apparently irritated local farmers, who notified the authorities in April of a makeshift facility used by foreign Arabs to train Yemenis in small arms.<sup>47</sup> One month later, Sana`a launched an assault on the base, using artillery, helicopter gunships and ground troops.<sup>48</sup> The raid failed, provoking the AAA's first public statement several days later.<sup>49</sup> The letter was followed in August by a second declaration, this one sent directly to the Agence France-Presse calling for "total war" on U.S. interests in Yemen and pledging the group's support for Osama bin Laden.<sup>50</sup>

The statement signaled an abrupt end to months of private negotiation between al-Mihdar and the Yemeni government. In November 1998, al-Mihdar issued Sana`a a list of more than two dozen demands, among them basic services and water for surrounding villagers and political asylum for Arab veterans of the Afghan war now living in Yemen, including those in Huttat.<sup>51</sup> The offer was rejected, and the stalemate between the AAA and the government continued through the winter. In early December of that year, Bin Laden allegedly sent a representative to Abyan to help broker a deal with Sana`a, and in a matter of days both sides tentatively agreed

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<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that this group has no relation to a later jihadist group that emerged in spring 2011 using the same name in Abyan governorate.

<sup>46</sup> While not the focus of the author's primary research, media reports place Huttat roughly twenty to thirty kilometers northeast of Ja`ar, the capital of Khanfar. Huttat would serve as a purported sanctuary for militants for the better part of the next decade. The group was also linked to training camps nearer to al-Mihdar's home, allegedly providing weapons training in Shabwa's Markha al-Sufila, Markha al-U`lia and Habban districts, and possibly in central Abyan's al-Wadhi'a district.

<sup>47</sup> "Abu Hamza and The Islamic Army: Confession Statements Attributed to the Defendants," (translation posted on al-bab.com and taken from the Yemeni Army newspaper *26 September*, 28 January 1999, 4 February 1999).

<sup>48</sup> "Security Incidents in Yemen, 1998," al-bab.com.

<sup>49</sup> "Abu Hamza and The Islamic Army: Abu al-Hassan and the Islamic Army of Aden-Abyan," al-bab.com, January 1999.

<sup>50</sup> Whitaker (1998).

<sup>51</sup> Brian Whitaker, "Kidnappers Were to Join Yemen Military," *Guardian*, 6 January 1999.

to a plan that would see the AAA withdraw from Huttat presumably in exchange for employment, land and guarantees of amnesty.<sup>52</sup>

The cease-fire was not a durable one. Clashes between Aden Abyan fighters and government troops began in mid-December. Within one week of the fighting, six British nationals were arrested in hotels across Aden. One of the young men was the stepson of AAA's London spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Misri, while several more were active in al-Misri's Finsbury mosque. The men were charged with possession of explosives, rocket-propelled grenades, communications equipment and propaganda from Ansar al-Shari'a.

Though they would later deny any wrongdoing, the men initially confessed that they were sent by al-Misri to join al-Mihdar in AAA training camps. By the time of their capture, most were accused of preparing for attacks on Western hotels and tourist sites in Aden. The arrests sparked an immediate reaction from al-Mihdar. Though his intentions have never been adequately explained, al-Mihdar left his home in Shabwah for Aden upon hearing news of the raids. During his trip, he and nearly two dozen others kidnapped a convoy of sixteen tourists traveling to Aden from neighboring al-Bayda. It is unclear whether al-Mihdar planned on pressing Sana'a for an expat-for-prisoner release or intended on killing the Westerners in retaliation for the arrests of the young men.<sup>53</sup> Whatever al-Mihdar's aim, negotiation between the AAA and the Salih administration over a prisoner release broke down almost immediately. Within twenty four hours, two hundred Yemeni police and soldiers surrounded al-Mihdar and the remaining kidnapers in Abyan's Mudiyah district.<sup>54</sup> A firefight ensued and four Western hostages were killed.<sup>55</sup> Al-Mihdar and two other Yemenis were arrested, and three others associated with AAA were killed.

## Decline and Implications

The Mudiyah raid was a debilitating blow to the group. Although several of the kidnapers escaped the battle, Abu Hamza al-Misri's son and three other British expats

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Given that the abduction appears to have been unplanned, it was most likely the former rather than the latter. Al-Suri argues as much in the *Call For Islamic Resistance*. See: Al-Suri (2005), 779.

<sup>54</sup> Khalid Al-Hammadi, "Al-Yemen: Dhabah 4 Rha'in Britaniin," *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 30 December 1998.

<sup>55</sup> Sana'a maintained that Yemeni security forces only attempted a rescue once al-Mihdar began executing the tourists. Others, including hostages themselves, deny the claim, arguing instead that soldiers were first to fire.

with ties to the Finsbury Park Mosque were arrested in Abyan shortly thereafter. By late January, very little of the formal organization remained, and what appeared to be one of the country's most zealous leaders of jihad was awaiting trial on charges of murder. Ten months later, the twenty-eight-year-old al-Mihdar was executed by a firing squad in Sana'a.<sup>56</sup> Several individuals would claim nominal control of the group over the subsequent decade, but none would match the ambition or reach of al-Mihdar and al-Misri.<sup>57</sup>

Quite different from earlier movements in Yemen, the jihadist organization developed by Zain al-Mihdar and Abu Hamza al-Misri was remarkably internationalist. The AAA's strategic communications leveraged information technology and Western media surprisingly well. From August 1998 to August 1999, the AAA released at least eleven statements, most faxed from al-Misri's Finsbury mosque in London and revolving around a consistent set of demands.<sup>58</sup> Though less developed than jihadist messaging elsewhere, the declarations portrayed a coherent narrative for justifying jihad noticeably absent from Tariq al-Fadli's IJY.

Yet it was the AAA's connection of local grievances to a broader discourse of Western expansion and Muslim humiliation that would provide the clearest template for future al-Qa`ida affiliated groups in Yemen, particularly AQAP. This narrative was strengthened by a series of theological justifications for the group's aims frequently cited by jihadists in Yemen more than a decade later. Both the AAA and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula repeatedly quote several *hadiths* demanding the expulsion of polytheism from the Arabian Peninsula and presaging the emergence of an army of twelve thousand soldiers of Islam from Abyan.<sup>59</sup> These two sayings of the Prophet were used repeatedly by al-Misri and al-Mihdar to legitimize the expulsion of Western

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<sup>56</sup> To his credit, al-Mihdar worked to fully exploit the propaganda value of the trial. During the proceedings, he reportedly proclaimed, "I did everything in the name of God so I am sorry for nothing . . . I am very famous now, but let everyone know I only gave orders to kill the men, not the women. . . . My pistol jammed. If I could have shot more I would have done so." Al-Masri used the attention as well, warning, "If negotiations [to free Hassan] fail, all foreigners in Yemen from Western ambassadors, experts and doctors to tourists have to leave Yemen. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army will not kidnap them but will kill them." See: [http://www.adl.org/Terror/focus/17\\_focus\\_a3.asp](http://www.adl.org/Terror/focus/17_focus_a3.asp); <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/hamza/day.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Among them, Khalid al-Nabi and Abu al-Mohsin Hatem Mohsin bin Fareed.

<sup>58</sup> The statements begin in August 1996 and run through August 1999. Given their weak credibility, AAA claims of responsibility for the *Cole* and Limburg bombings in 2000 and 2002 are not included in the total.

<sup>59</sup> The hadith often quoted by the AAA, al-Qa`ida Central and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula of the 12,000 soldiers rising from Aden Abyan is as follows: "*Yakhruj min 'Adan Abyan ithman 'ashr alf yansuroun Allah wa rasulahu hum khayr ma bayni wa baynhum.*" "Twelve thousand [fighters] will come from Aden-Abyan bringing victory to God and his prophet, goodness [is shared] between myself and them."

interests from the country, and by 1999, the overthrow of President `Ali `Abdullah Salih. This latter objective represents a significant milestone as well. Al-Misri's demand predated the next call by jihadists for Salih's removal by nearly four years—a demand that is a touchstone of current AQAP communications today.<sup>60</sup>

While portraying broader ambitions than IJY and an impressive messaging wing, the Army of Aden Abyan can scarcely be considered a success. It failed to launch to a single attack against Western or Yemeni targets. Zain al-Abidin al-Mihdar's legacy was one of ambition and charisma rather than any tangible accomplishment. The native of Shabwah appeared in no visual or audio media and until his trial in 1999, and was certainly not a central figure in Yemen's political or religious landscape. Less than eight months after its founding media release, the Army of Aden Abyan was all but defeated, its Yemeni leadership captured or dead and whatever remained of its followers in disarray.

#### *AL-QA`IDA IN YEMEN (1998–2003)*

With Bin Laden focusing his energy on cultivating ties with the Taliban in Afghanistan and developing a media presence abroad, Yemen seemed a secondary priority for al-Qa`ida for much of the mid-1990s. This appeared to change in late 1998, when another Saudi veteran of the Afghan war, `Abd al-Rahim Husayn Muhammad `Ali al-Nashiri reportedly approached Bin Laden with a proposal for an attack on U.S. forces. While staying with relatives in Yemen two years earlier, al-Nashiri noticed unguarded U.S. warships docked in the port of Aden.<sup>61</sup> Now, after assuming command of al-Qa`ida's regional operations in the Persian Gulf and East Africa, al-Nashiri proposed the most high-profile strike against U.S. military targets in the Middle East to date. From Afghanistan, Bin Laden agreed to fund the operation, leaving al-Nashiri responsible for its planning and execution.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Osama bin Laden, "Message to Our Brothers in Iraq," 11 February 2003 (Taken from *FBIS Report*, January 2004, 251).

<sup>61</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," (22 July 2004), 152.

<sup>62</sup> Bin Laden reportedly had no role in selecting the team members, target, explosives or the date of the attack. This hands-off approach appeared to be characteristic of Bin Laden's involvement in early al-Qa`ida operations. Egyptian Islamic Jihad members stationed in Yemen in the late 1990s derisively referred to Bin Laden as the "contractor." See: Alan Cullison and Andrew Higgins, "Terrorist's Odyssey," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 2002.

## USS *Cole* Bombing

Despite several early missteps, al-Nashiri's plan was executed on the morning of 12 October 2000.<sup>63</sup> According to media reports, Hasan al-Khamri of Shabwah and Ibrahim al-Thawar of Sana'a approached the destroyer in a small skiff, briefly saluted the crew of the USS *Cole* and detonated several hundred pounds of C-4 plastic explosives. The force of the blast was enormous, claiming the lives of seventeen U.S. servicemen, nearly sinking the ship, and reportedly costing the Yemeni government more than \$1.5 billion in lost tourist and shipping revenue.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the operation appears to have been more an example of opportunism than a sign of an enduring al-Qa`ida presence in Yemen. Of the men later implicated in the bombing, few held leadership positions in AQY in the years after the attack.<sup>65</sup> `Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri and Walid Muhammad Salih bin Rashid bin `Attash—both accused of plotting and facilitating the bombing—were more closely tied with al-Qa`ida Central's regional and U.S. operations than with creating or supporting permanent cells in Yemen.<sup>66</sup> The young cameraman who overslept the morning he was to film the attack, Fahd Mohammed Ahmad al-Qus'a, played no role in AQY's operations in 2002 or in al-Qa`ida's reemergence in Yemen in 2006.<sup>67</sup> Neither did the suicide bombers Hasan al-Khamri and Ibrahim al-Thawar hold any connection to the men who would lead al-Qa`ida in Yemen in subsequent years. Only the local cell's leader, Jamal Muhammad Ahmad `Ali al-Badawi, had a role in both the *Cole* plot and subsequent attacks in Yemen—though there is no evidence that he maintained a position in al-Qa`ida following the prison break of 2006.

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<sup>63</sup> The aborted attack against the USS *Sullivans* stands out as the largest of these failures. In January 2000, local fishermen discovered and inadvertently destroyed a \$10,000 skiff that members of an al-Qa`ida cell had loaded with explosives in preparation for the strike. See: Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Random House, 2006), 339.

<sup>64</sup> Wright (2006), 361; Howard Schneider "Yemen, a Risk and an Opportunity; Campaign Against Terrorists May Help Government Assert Control Over Armed Tribes," *Washington Post*, 2 January 2002.

<sup>65</sup> The number of individuals dubbed "masterminds" of the *Cole* attack has at times pushed the limits of credulity. Nevertheless, the only individual linked to the incident who would later hold something resembling a leadership position in AQY is Abu `Ali al-Harithi. Yet al-Harithi was neither accused of plotting the strike (al-Nashiri) nor playing a lead role in carrying it out (al-Badawi).

<sup>66</sup> Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal is not included in this list. Although he is often cited as playing a logistics role in the *Cole* blast, and by most accounts did assume a top fundraising position for the group from 2001 to 2003, there is no open source evidence he had any influence in al-Qa`ida's Yemen activities from 1998 to 2000.

<sup>67</sup> His role by late 2009 is less clear. Al-Qus'a's farm was later targeted in U.S. airstrikes in Shabwah.



## Qa'id Salim Talib Sinan al-Harithi

The USS *Cole* bombing would be of enormous consequence for al-Qa`ida in Yemen. This was especially true for Qa'id Salim Talib Sinyan al-Harithi of upper Shabwah.<sup>68</sup> According to a biography posted on Islamist forums after his death, as a young man the member of the Bal Harith tribe relocated north to Marib in the *`uzala*<sup>69</sup> of Wadi `Abeeda after the PDRY's socialist regime grew increasingly hostile toward tribal custom and identity in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>70</sup> More than a decade later, like al-Nashiri, al-Harithi traveled to Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan War, where he first met Osama bin Laden. As the fighting subsided, al-Harithi returned to his family's farm in the Shabwah's Wadi Bayhan, a valley stretching from upper Bayhan to lower 'Usaylan.

With Bin Laden's assistance, al-Harithi set about helping to establish training camps in Shabwah, Marib and Sa`da to prepare for attacks against the Yemen Socialist Party in the early 1990s. At around this time, he also began traveling frequently to Khartoum to visit Bin Laden. According to the online biography, during one of these visits he and a second Yemeni, Abu Ghazwan al-Hadrami, fought off several men sent to assassinate Bin Laden in his home.<sup>71</sup> By 1994, al-Harithi returned to Yemen to fight in the country's civil war, leaving soon afterward for the United Arab Emirates. In 1997, he was arrested in the UAE under uncertain circumstances, eventually gaining his release three months later and fleeing to Afghanistan. There, he allegedly received instructions from Bin Laden to begin attacks in Yemen, returning to the country sometime before 2000. Though his role in the *Cole* attack would be questioned in the years afterward, by fall 2001, Washington identified al-Harithi as the most senior al-Qa`ida commander in Yemen.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Al-Harithi is frequently referred to by the alias or *kunya* "Abu Ali." To avoid confusion, this report generally does not use kunyas of al-Qa`ida leaders in the text. However, because al-Harithi is most commonly referred to by his kunya, Abu Ali or the longer Abu `Ali al-Harithi, the three names are used interchangeably in this report.

<sup>69</sup> *`Uzala* refers to a small group of villages, smaller than a *mudiriyah* (district) and larger than a *qariyah* (village).

<sup>70</sup> Arabic media accounts, particularly a Yemeni report the day after his death, broadly conform to the details of al-Harithi's travels and history. For the martyrdom biography, see: "Min Siyar Shuhada' al-Yemen," *muslm.net*, 14 February 2007, <http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=208626>; for the strongest media account of Harithi's background, see: "Rajul al-Qa`ida al-Awal: Abu Ali al-Harithi," 26 September, 7 February 2002, <http://www.26sep.net/newsweekprint.php?lng=arabic&sid=1808>.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Harithi was reportedly wounded in his leg during the firefight. Though a date is not provided in the biography, it is quite likely that the incident occurred in the assassination attempt on Bin Laden in late August 1993. This same injury to al-Harithi's leg would be used to identify the native of Shabwah after his death in November 2002.

<sup>72</sup> Patrick Tyler, "Yemen, an Uneasy Ally, Proves Adept at Playing Off Old Rivals," *New York Times*, 19 December 2002, A18.

## Foundation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen: *M/V Limburg* Bombing

Despite U.S. concerns, al-Harithi and a growing number of men who would later constitute the most recent iterations of al-Qa`ida in Yemen did not mount serious efforts to exploit the *Cole* bombing. No follow-up attack or propaganda effort was made for much of the next year. In December 2001, the group briefly emerged, albeit indirectly, in botched counterterrorism raids in Shabwah's Beyhan and Marib's Hasun al-Jalal districts targeting al-Harithi and an alleged al-Qa`ida financial officer named Muhammad Hamdi Muhammad Sadiq al-Ahdal.<sup>73</sup> Not until October 2002 did the group attempt a second high-profile military operation, again bearing the imprint of the Saudi `Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri.

The 6 October suicide bombing of the French tanker *M/V Limburg* was not a well-executed sequel to the *Cole* blast of two years earlier. The attack, near the port of Mukalla, was a failure in tactical terms, proving far weaker than its predecessor. However, from an organizational standpoint, the October bombing represented a clear turning point in the early development of a truly indigenous al-Qa`ida affiliate in Yemen.

With the alleged endorsement of Bin Laden and the support by funding from al-Nashiri, a group of young Yemenis traveled to Hadramawt's capital in preparation for the strike.<sup>74</sup> Several of these men were fresh from time spent in Afghanistan in the days following 9/11 and would later escape prison in 2006 to help form al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Despite what may have been rushed implementation, both the quality and commitment of those responsible for carrying out the failed *Limburg* blast ironically proved considerably stronger than those of *Cole* cell.

Fawaz Yahya Hasan al-Rabay`i is the perhaps the best example of this evolution.<sup>75</sup> After spending 2000 and most of 2001 in Afghanistan, possibly training with Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, al-Rubay`i returned to Yemen and assumed a leadership role in the Mukalla cell. In the months after the *Limburg* attack, he and his brother Abu Bakr organized a second group, ambushing a Hunt Oil helicopter in Sana`a using RPG and small arms fire in November 2002.<sup>76</sup> Later that year, the men reportedly began planning

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<sup>73</sup> Al-Ahdal was frequently referred to by his kunya, Abu `Asam al-Makki

<sup>74</sup> "9/11 Commission Report," 153.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Rubay`i was also known by the kunya Furqan al-Tajiki.

<sup>76</sup> According to a senior Hunt security official, the attack was not a sophisticated operation. The member

the assassination of U.S. ambassador Edmund Hull, though the plot was ultimately aborted after the cell was broken up.<sup>77</sup> Nearly three years after his arrest in March 2003, al-Rubay`i would escape from Sana`a's Political Security Organization (PSO) prison and allegedly help oversee training for AQAP's first formal attack, the dual suicide bombings of oil facilities under the banner of the newly named al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen (*Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi `Ard al-Yemen*).<sup>78</sup>

In addition to al-Rubay`i, several members of the *Limburg* cell would maintain central roles in al-Qa`ida's reformation after the prison break of 2006. This is a clear distinction from those involved in the *Cole* bombing. Though al-Nashiri and `Attash held leadership roles in AQC's overseas operations, neither appeared to enjoy considerable influence over al-Qa`ida's presence in Yemen from 2000 to 2003. Conversely, of the dozens of individuals charged with belonging to Fawaz al-Rabay`i's cells of 2002, a number emerged in key positions in subsequent iterations of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Before rising to hold AQAP's current military command, Qasim Yahya Mahdi al-Raymi was arrested in November 2002 and later convicted for his involvement in plots—several connected with al-Rubay`i—against Western embassies in Sana`a.<sup>79</sup> Along with twenty-two others, al-Raymi escaped PSO prison in spring 2006, also allegedly assisting in attacks on oil facilities Marib and Hadramawt in September of that year. In late June 2007, al-Raymi would release AQAP's first audio tape, declaring the thirty-year-old prison escapee Nasir `Abd al-Kareem `Abdullah al-Wahayshi the leader of al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen.<sup>80</sup>

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of the cell selected and presumably trained to shoot the group's RPGs overslept the morning of the mission. He was replaced by an inexperienced shooter who failed to hit the helicopter in the ambush. As they fled the attack, one of the men accidentally shot a colleague in the foot, prompting the injured man to throw his bloody shoe out the window and into the street. The cell member was taken to a hospital, where security forces eventually arrived and matched the shoe with the injured man, and promptly arrested him. Author's interview, Sana`a, 20 August 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Though al-Rubay`i was also convicted of overseeing a bombing of the Civil Aviations building in Sana`a in April 2002, the operation does not appear to match the Saudi's target preference or previous tactics. The bombing was claimed by the somewhat dubious *Mut`atifoun m'a Tanzim al-Qa`ida*, or "Sympathizers of al-Qa`ida." The author is aware of no conclusive evidence tying al-Rubay`i to the attack.

<sup>78</sup> Al-Rubay`i would be killed in a shoot-out at security checkpoint near the border of Abyan in October 2006.

<sup>79</sup> A central figure in AQAP's development some four years after his arrest, al-Raymi often published under the kunya Abu Hareera al-Sana`ani.

<sup>80</sup> In addition to al-Raymi, the current AQAP member Muhammad Sa`id Ali Hasan al-`Umda was also convicted of involvement in the *Limburg* attack before escaping prison in 2006. In the years that followed the prison escape, al-`Umda contributed frequently to al-Qa`ida in Yemen's digital journal. As of November 2008, the native of Ta`izz was given the title of a military commander in the group's media releases. Hizam Salih `Ali Mujali and his brother Arif Salih were both arrested and convicted for participating in the *Limburg* and Hunt Oil helicopter attacks. They too escaped prison in 2006, and after surrendering to authorities later that year may have reemerged in some fashion with the group in 2009, when the former was detained and latter escaped in a counterterrorism raid in Arhab on 17 December. Fawaz's brother Abu Bakr al-Rabay`i (also jailed after the *Limburg* and Hunt attacks and a prison escapee)

## Drone Strike and al-Qa`ida's Decline (2002–2006)

Less than a month after the October 2002 *Limburg* bombing, Qa'id Salim Talib Sinyan al-Harithi was killed by a U.S. drone attack in the al-Naqa'a region of southern Marib. Although his value as an operational leader would be disputed by both jihadists and intelligence officials for some time, the death of the forty-seven-year-old would mark a defining moment in AQY's early history.<sup>81</sup> The 4 November missile strike began one of al-Qa`ida's darkest periods in Yemen, and dozens of the group's followers were detained in late 2002 and 2003. In twelve months, Arab and Western security services arrested nearly all of al-Qa`ida Central's regional leaders in the Peninsula, while Yemeni authorities broke up al-Rubay`i's *Limburg* and Hunt Oil cells and arrested al-Harithi's alleged successor.<sup>82</sup> These arrests proved fatal to the nascent organization, which had yet to develop the robust institutions or internal security necessary to survive the loss of key leaders.

Though the *Cole* and *Limburg* attacks were indeed sensational, the effect of al-Qa`ida in Yemen was fleeting. AQY was not especially active, did not establish durable ties within Yemen and failed to articulate a common vision or ideology. Nearly three years would pass before another group would take its place and again raise al-Qa`ida's banner in Yemen. Yet the emergence of this new indigenous al-Qa`ida affiliate in Yemen in 2006 has little in common with al-Qa`ida's experience in the country from 1998 to 2003. The AQY of al-Nashiri, 'Attash and al-Harithi is best understood as a network of foreign leaders abroad and local operatives at home who organized around discrete military plots rather than a permanent or institutionalized terrorist organization.

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was alleged to serve as a recruiter for the suicide attacks of September 2006, while `Umar Sayd Hasan was convicted for taking part in the *Limburg* attack in 2005 and escaped with Fawaz al-Rabay`i in spring 2006. Seven months later, Hasan was among four suicide bombers used in AQAP's attacks against oil facilities in central and eastern Yemen.

<sup>81</sup> Al-Harithi's role as an operations leader has been disputed by a range of actors, with both former associates of al-Qa`ida and U.S. and Yemeni intelligence officials familiar with the group claiming his influence as a respected tribesman far outweighed his formal authority as an AQY commander. Phone interview, 29 July 2008; author interview, Sana`a, 2 May 2009; "Bin Ladin's Former 'Bodyguard' Interviewed on Al-Qa`ida Strategies" (FBIS Translation from *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 3 August 2004).

<sup>82</sup> Likewise, several of the men who would later rise to the fore of AQAP, including Nasir al-Wahayshi and Hamza al-Qu'ayti, were also extradited to the country during this period. Within Yemen, among the most important of the arrests were: Ahmad al-Hada arrest on 14 February 2002 and Samir Ahmad al-Hada killed on 14 February 2002; Yahya Salih al-Mujalli killed in September 2002; `Abd al-Rahim Husayn Muhammad Ali Nashiri on 1–3 November 2002 in the UAE; Qasim Yahya Mahdi al-Raymi arrested on 18–20 November 2002; Fawaz al-Rabay`i and Hizam Salih `Ali Mujali arrested on 28 February 2003; Abdullah Ahmad al-Raymi arrested on 20 July 2003 in Qatar; Muhammad al-Ahdal arrested in November 2003; Nasir `Abd al-Kareem `Abdullah al-Wahayshi extradited from Iran to Yemen in November 2003; Ghalib al-Zaydi arrested in December 2003; Hamza Salim `Umar al-Qu`ayti extradited from Saudi to Yemen in 2003; and Arif Salih `Ali Mujli arrested on an undisclosed date between 2002 and 2004.

The morning of 3 February 2006, nearly two dozen men crawled through a tunnel running from the basement of Sana`a's Political Security Organization's prison to a neighboring mosque in the capital. The escape would prove a pivotal moment in the rise of Yemen's first durable al-Qa`ida presence. Just seven months later, a group calling itself al-Qa`ida in the Land of the Yemen launched synchronized vehicle-borne suicide attacks against Western oil facilities in Marib and Hadramawt governorates.

The leaders, recruiters and trainers for the attacks were almost entirely members of the prison escape. Nasir al-Wahayshi, Qasim al-Raymi, Fawaz al-Rabay`i and Abu Bakr al-Rabay`i, Hamza Salim `Umar al-Qu`ayti and Muhammad Sa`id Ali Hasan al-`Umda were all implicated in organizing the attacks, while Shafeeq Ahmad Zayd and `Umar bin Sa`id Jarallah, also escapees and each of northwestern Hudayda, served as suicide bombers.<sup>83</sup>

The complexity of the bombings proved an early indication of AQAP's departure from Islamic Jihad in Yemen and the Army of Aden Abyan. In a strategy that seemed a precursor to the multiphased U.S. Embassy attack in September 2008, Zayd and Jarallah led two teams with distinct operational roles. Each cell sent an initial truck to blast a gap in the oil refinery's perimeter fencing at almost precisely the same time. The first vehicle was followed by a second team tasked with breaching the fence and detonating an explosive of low-grade ammonium nitrate fuel oil and liquid petroleum gas near each facility's oil storage tanks.

Though both vehicles failed to reach their targets, the attacks demonstrated a tactical ambition not seen since the *Limburg* bombing of late 2002. The operation and dual propaganda videos issued in November of the next year were the first in a series of attacks and media releases that would propel this most recent branch of al-Qa`ida in Yemen to the forefront of Western security concerns.<sup>84</sup> The group would soon

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<sup>83</sup> The second of the two bombings was dedicated to the memory of Abu `Ali al-Harithi.

<sup>84</sup> The video release was titled *Ghazwa Badr al-Yemen* ("The Battle of Badr, Yemen") and posted on Internet forums on 7 November 2007. It followed a written statement of much the same theme released November 2006, claiming that al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen pledged its support for Osama bin Laden and promised to avenge the death of Abu `Ali al-Harithi. Strangely, a second and less polished video of the Hadrami cell used in the attack was also released in 2007 by the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, a group that would gain prominence in a spate of attacks in 2008. For the AQY video and statement, see: "Ghazwat Badr al-Yemen al-Wasaya," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi `Ard al-Yemen*, 7 November 2007; "Ghazwat Badr

demonstrate itself to be the most resilient and ambitious jihadist organization in Yemen's recent history.

## LOCAL CAPABILITIES: GLOBAL TARGETS

The September attacks against foreign oil companies were followed by the assassination of a local police chief in April and the release of an audio tape formally appointing Nasir al-Wahayshi to the head of al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen in June 2007.<sup>85</sup> Two weeks later, the group mounted a second suicide operation, this time killing eight Spanish tourists near Madina Marib in early July. This bombing in Wadi `Abeeda remains one of the few AQAP attacks prepared and executed from the tribal governorate of Marib. For this reason, the details of the plot are worth discussing in details as they offer some insight into AQAP's operational capabilities in the regions where it is believed to possess the greatest influence and freedom of movement.

According to media reports, the twenty-one-year-old Muhammad `Abdu Sa`ad Ahmad Raheeqa of the central governorate of Rayma was recruited by a member of al-Qa`ida while residing in the Musaik neighborhood of Sana`a. Raheeqa was taken several miles outside of Madina Marib and given refuge in what was almost certainly al-Rashid Manif, a series of villages home to several branches of the `Abeeda macro-tribe. Once there, at least two members of `Abeeda's al-Hutayk micro-tribe, `Ali bin `Ali Nasir Duha and Naji bin `Ali bin Salih Jaradan, provided shelter for Raheeqa as he prepared for the attack. On the afternoon of 2 July, Raheeqa drove an SUV filled with oxygen cylinders and explosives into the rear vehicle of a tourist convoy returning from a nearby archeological site. The attack killed seven Spaniards and critically injured another. Nearly nine months later, an al-Qa`ida video release dedicated the bombing to the death of Fawaz al-Rabay`i, who had been killed in a shoot-out with Yemeni security forces in November of the previous year.<sup>86</sup>

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al-Yemen," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi `Ard al-Yemen*, 13 October 2006. For the YSB film, see: "'Amaliyat al-Qa'id al-Shahid – Fawaz al-Rabay`i" *al-Qism al-I'alami li Kata'ib Jund al-Yemen*, 2007.

<sup>85</sup> The audiotape was recorded by al-Wahayshi's deputy commander, Qasim al-Raymi, under the kunya Abu Hurayra al-Sana`ani. He announces al-Wahayshi's appointment at roughly 5:00 into the release. See: "Akhy al-Qa'id Abu Yahya Qasim `Aami, 'Udhu Majlis al-Shura," *al-Qism al-I'alami li-Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi `Ard al-Yemen*, 22 June 2007.

<sup>86</sup> "'Amaliyat al-Qa'id al-Shahid Fawaz al-Rabay`i," *al-Qism al-I'alami li-Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Yemen*, 31 March 2008.

Though the operation occurred in Wadi `Abeeda and apparently was prepared in al-Rashid Manif, at no point did the operatives enjoy anything resembling formal tribal sanctuary from the `Abeeda macro- or the Hutayk micro-tribes. Raheeqa was privately hosted by two young men in their home village, both of whom later would be turned over to authorities by fellow tribesmen. The bombing was notable not because AQAP enjoyed a safe haven in Marib, but rather because it occurred conspicuously without popular backing in al-Rashid Manif. As will be discussed in the following chapter, winning formal tribal safe haven is an extremely difficult process. Though clear mechanisms do exist for gaining sanctuary in Marib and al-Jawf, collective protection is not won quickly or quietly. AQAP's ability—or even interest—in operating from within such a context is questionable at best.

### **Soldier's Brigade of Yemen (2006–2008)**

Six months after the Marib attack, a group calling itself al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula—Soldier's Brigade of Yemen (*Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazira al-'Arab – Kita'ib Jund al-Yemen* or AQAP-SBY) ambushed a tourist caravan in the country's eastern Hadramawt governorate, killing three Belgians and wounding four others.<sup>87</sup> The attack ignited a period of unusually high operational tempo. Over the subsequent eight months, the SBY would launch at least sixteen attacks either directly claimed by the group or matching its tactics and geographic disposition. As with AQAP, the Soldier's Brigade was led by a member of the 2006 prison escape, the thirty-nine-year-old Hamza Salim `Umar al-Qu`ayti from of Hadramawt's Mukalla district.<sup>88</sup> Although his ties to AQAP were at times disputed, al-Qu`ayti's cell emerged as Yemen's most active terrorist group until his death in fall 2008.<sup>89</sup> As Nasir al-Wahayshi and Qasim al-Raymi would refrain from publicly claiming military operations for more than fourteen months, presumably developing their group's operational capacity, al-Qu`ayti's SBY generated a

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<sup>87</sup> According to an earlier video release, the SBY's founding should be perhaps dated as early as the September 2006 bombing of oil facilities in Marib and Hadramawt. Both of the martyrdom statements in the film are given in front a flag reading *Kita'ib Jund al-Yemen*. Both the flag and in the group's written statements in 2008, the Brigade claimed the full name, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula—Soldier's Brigade of Yemen, doing so nearly a year before Nasir al-Wahayshi's parent group would formally adopt the name. See: "'Amiliyat al-Qa'id al-Shahid – Fawaz al- Rabay`i," *Al-Qism al-I'alami li Kata'ib Jund al-Yemen*, 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Qu`ayti was also known by the kunya Abu Samir.

<sup>89</sup> Several Yemeni analysts conjectured that at some point after their prison escapes, al-Qu`ayti had split from al-Wahayshi's al-Qa`ida in Yemen and was operating the SBY independently. No definitive evidence has emerged to substantiate this claim. Though the group's methods seem distinct from al-Qa`ida in Yemen's, the Soldier's Brigade did release the martyrdom videos of the suicide bombers killed in the fall 2006 attacks on Yemeni oil facilities, a bombing also claimed by al-Wahayshi's AQY. The claims of al-Qu`ayti's split are according to author's interview, Sana`a, 31 October 2008.

near constant stream of simple attacks and online propaganda.

The bulk of the group's attacks relied on small arms and mortar fire, almost evenly divided between targeting local security services—the Central Security Organization and Political Security Organization in particular—and Western embassies, tourists and oil facilities based in Sana`a and Hadramawt.<sup>90</sup> The group's media operations were nearly as frenetic. From 25 February to 19 August, SBY released no fewer than thirteen statements, most focusing on themes familiar to broader al-Qa`ida in Yemen propaganda. These releases, complete with the group's own logo, distinct from that used by AQAP's main publication, *Sada al-Malahim*, were typically a combination of after-action reports and calls to jihad.

The group's operations came to an abrupt halt in fall 2008. On 11 August, the eight-month rise of the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen ended in the death of Hamza al-Qu`ayti and four others in a counterterrorism raid targeting a home in Hadramawt's Tarim district. Despite a rapid operational tempo, the Soldier's Brigade hardly resembled an evolution of al-Qa`ida tactics and target preferences in Yemen. The SBY's media productions were far less polished than AQAP releases during the same period, and the group's frequent use of small arms and poor-quality mortar fire rarely succeeded.<sup>91</sup> Of the attacks that targeted oil installations and Western embassies, none incurred casualties or damaged property. Neither did the Soldier's Brigade approximate the complexity of either the *Cole* or *Limburg* attacks or the al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi led strikes of 2008–2011.<sup>92</sup> Instead, the group's military and media efforts appeared most similar to the short-lived *Muta'atifun ma'a Tanzim al-Qa`ida* (Sympathizers of al-Qa`ida) of 2002, a group that conducted at least eight poorly executed bombings of government facilities, each time demanding the release of prisoners it claimed were unjustly held on suspicion of terrorism.

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<sup>90</sup> The count is according to the author, and is based on the SBY's media statements and attacks matching the group's tactics and geographic presence. The outlier among the targets listed above remains the SBY's apparent mortar attack on the Presidential Palace in Sana`a in May 2008.

<sup>91</sup> The apparent role of the Soldier's Brigade in two VBIED attacks are exceptions. Because they fall precisely at the point where the SBY ended and AQY began, it is difficult to assess responsibility for these attacks. As an illustration of the SBY's difficulties locating properly functioning artillery fire, the group's shelling of a compound for Hunt Oil employees in Sana`a on 6 April 2008 and Safir oil refinery in Marib on 25 June 2008 both failed due to the malfunction of the Brigade's mortar shells. This is according to a tour of the Hunt site and author interview, private security official, Sana`a, July 2009.

<sup>92</sup> A VBIED attack against a police camp in Hadramawt's Sayoun on 25 July 2008 appears closest to an outlier among operations claimed by the Soldier's Brigade. However, even in the Sayoun case, the bomber was unable to breach a lightly defended perimeter, instead detonating his explosives at a small guardhouse.



## Attacks on Western Interests in Yemen: Audience and Objectives

Though the attacks on tourists and oil infrastructure appear as early indicators of AQAP's commitment to strike the United States, bloodying the West was not the central concern of either campaign. Even poorly executed VBIED and mortar fire attacks served at least two local rather than international objectives: isolating Sana'a while communicating the group's relevance to jihadists elsewhere. Rather than merely killing Westerners or disrupting oil flows, attacks on expatriates and petroleum facilities imposed economic pressure on a beleaguered central government already starved of foreign investment and tourist revenue. The strikes also increased travel restrictions on Western embassy personnel. By fall 2009, every one of Yemen's governorates outside the capital was off-limits for U.S. diplomats, excluding the small island of Socotra. The failing security situation severely constrained U.S. visibility of developments outside the capital—particularly the remote eastern provinces presumed to host AQAP. More important, travel restrictions effectively ceded the communications battle to AQAP, robbing Washington of the ability to project a competing image of the United States to rural communities, whose residents had little chance of actually meeting an American.

Attempts at isolating the central government while narrowing the range of movement of Western diplomats also served AQAP in practical terms. A constrained U.S. and Yemeni presence presented the group with a permissive environment through which it could expand influence within the country, target the Saudi government and assume an increased operational presence abroad. Despite frequent claims that al-Qa`ida thrives in failed and ungoverned states, it is hardly clear that a collapsing Yemen would benefit AQAP. Nor is there compelling evidence that the group, in this early period, actively sought the overthrow of President `Ali `Abdullah Salih or instability on a scale that would threaten the group's operations.<sup>93</sup> Like the Army of Aden Abyan before it, AQAP repeatedly demanded the expulsion of all non-Muslim interests from the Arabian Peninsula and the application of Islamic law. Until at least the spring of 2007, AQAP media suggested that President Salih was capable of meeting both demands.<sup>94</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>93</sup> U.S. intelligence officials have privately claimed al-Qa`ida sought to assassinate the president on several occasions, attempting to down Salih's personal plane twice in 2009 as he was scheduled to travel to Aden and Kuwait. Likewise, rumors of an elderly woman happening upon a stockpile of Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) in a cemetery near Hadiqa al-Thawra and Sana'a airport spread throughout the capital's diplomatic community in late 2009. Media reports claim that some mix of the two were key in convincing Salih to accept a larger U.S. counterterrorism role in the country. The cemetery anecdote is according to phone interview, 20 February 2010.

<sup>94</sup> It bears some note that the first objective, expelling polytheism from the peninsula, was far from innovative. Bin Laden stated a similar goal in his August 1996 fatwa, *Declaration of Jihad Against American Occupying The Land of the Two Holy Places*. Though it appears too commonly in AQAP media to list each reference here, for several of the more prominent examples, see: "Akhrijū al-Mushrikin min Jazīrat al-

the group's first official release on 13 October 2006 called on the president to renounce secularism and end ties with the United States.<sup>95</sup> It was only after Salih failed to do either that AQAP's statements grew less conciliatory. By Qasim al-Raymi's first audio statement in June 2007, the group's rhetoric left little space for compromise with the Salih regime.<sup>96</sup>

## Local Legitimacy and Global Appeal

In seeking a Yemen permissive for terrorism, AQAP has worked to position itself as the foremost *legitimate* means for expressing discontent with the political status quo. This distinction is significant as there are numerous Yemeni opposition groups struggling against the Salih regime. Justifying a campaign based merely on hostility toward the government in Sana'a hardly distinguishes AQAP in a political landscape with no shortage of armed resistance movements. By 2007, AQAP faced two larger and quite different competitors: a long-running Zaydi insurgency to the north and a growing secessionist movement in the south. In order to contend with these better established rivals who enjoy broad-based support, AQAP has carefully crafted a discourse in which it alone can defend the interests and integrity of ordinary Yemenis.

This is a role that the group has vigorously sought to preserve. To date, AQAP continues to display an impressive talent for assimilating broadly popular grievances into a single narrative in which jihad remains the only solution to the country's multiple crises. Since 2006, the group's media efforts have worked to exploit popular sentiment over a variety of injustices, among them: corruption; the absence of public services and political reform; slow delivery of aid following natural disasters; government disinformation; unequal distribution of profits from natural resources; unlawful detention of civilians; heavy-handed and imprecise counterterrorism raids; escalating security ties with the United States; and calls for secession.

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'Arab," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 29 March 2009; Hammam bin Abdullah, "Al-Hukm bi-ghayir ma Anzal Allah," *Sada al-Malahim* (10), 11; `Adil al-`Abab, "Haqiqat al-Hukkam," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 8 November 2009; Nasir al-Wahayshi, "Nahwa Hayat Karima," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 23 February 2010.

<sup>95</sup> "Ghazwat Badr al-Yemen, Raqam al-Biyan 1," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi 'Ard al-Yemen*, 3.

<sup>96</sup> "Akhy al-Qa'id Abu Yahya Qasim 'Aami, 'Udhu Majlis al-Shoura," *al-Qisim al-I'alami li-Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi 'Ard al-Yemen*, 22 June 2007.

Taken with al-Qa`ida's broader narrative, the result is a government in Sana`a concerned with maintaining power at the expense of its people. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula alleges that the Salih regime neither represents the interests of its constituents nor adheres to Islam, effectively forfeiting its right to power. This dual failure is often interpreted through a narrow understanding of *al-wala wa al-bara* (association and dissociation).<sup>97</sup> Where *al-wala* mandates that Muslims support those that resist secularism and rule according to shari`a, al-Qa`ida argues that *al-bara* demands Yemenis withdraw their allegiance from the "apostate" government in Sana`a and transfer their loyalty to more legitimate leaders.<sup>98</sup> AQAP further emphasizes that legitimate governance cannot lie in the bankrupt ideologies of the West. Media releases in *Sada al-Malahim* frequently affirm that Yemen's experiments with democracy and socialism have shown each to be inadequate, leaving a return to shari`a achieved through jihad the country's only choice.<sup>99</sup> In a May 2008 article in *Sada al-Malahim*, an author writing under the *kunya* (nom du guerre) Muntasir explains:

People have become fed-up with socialism and democracy, and now their sons want the pious from the faithful mujahideen that advance the benefit of the country over their own benefit, and will dedicate their lives so that their nation may live. . . . The Mujahideen are capable of being the only alternative, and in their hands is the solution for all these transgressions. If the [Yemeni] people stand with them, they will arrive [at the desired Yemeni state] by the shortest path. . .<sup>100</sup>

AQAP's claim to represent the vanguard of such a transition is reinforced by efforts to distinguish itself from both the central government and from other Salafist groups that have joined the political process. While Sana`a is accused of incompetence and perfidy, *Sada al-Malahim* portrays AQAP's members as pillars of selflessness and piety. AQAP martyrdom biographies describe men alienated by the vices of Yemeni society and deeply moved by the suffering of Muslims in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. Their search for Islam generally leads them either in one of two directions, withdrawal from Yemeni society — often in pursuit of religious instruction or al-Qa`ida training — or

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<sup>97</sup> For an overview of the principle, see: Muhammad Qahtani, *al-Wala wa al-Bara* (MA Thesis, Umm al-Qorah University, 1981); for a discussion of al-Wala's role in jihadist ideology, see: Nelly Lahoud "The Strengths and Weaknesses of Jihadist Ideology," *CTC Sentinel* 3:10 (October 2010), 2.

<sup>98</sup> AQAP's clearest explanation of *al-Bara* remains `Abdullah, "Al-Khurouj `Ala`Ali `Abdullah Salih min Awjab ma Qararahu al-Salaf al-Salih," *Sada al-Malahim*, 3 (15 May 2008), 7–10. For other AQAP references, see: al-Hi'a al-Shar'ia, "Khasa'is Jazirat al-Arab," *Sada al-Malahim* (8), 10; Muhammad bin Abd al-Qadir al-Murshidi, *Kashif Shabhat al-Diymacратиin wa Kasir Tawaghat al-Yemen*, Mu'asasat al-Malahim lil-Intaj al-'alami, April 2009, 144.

<sup>99</sup> Nasir al-Wahayshi, Nasir, "Nahwa Hayat Karima," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 23 February 2010; Interview of Nasir Al-Wahayshi, *Inspire*, Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula 1, (12 July 2010), 13–17.

<sup>100</sup> Muntasir, "Hashashat al-Idarah wa Fuqdan al-Saytarah," *Sada al-Malahim*, 3 (15 May 2008), 10.

leaving Yemen to defend fellow Muslims from foreign occupiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Personal narratives often highlight similar themes. Media releases present AQAP's fighters as fearless in battle, reaching martyrdom only after refusing to retreat from the superior fire of U.S. or Yemeni forces. Member biographies often link the men to paradigmatic moments in AQAM history, relaying anecdotes of training in Afghanistan's al-Farouq camp, clashes with the Northern Alliance and participation in the battle of Tora Bora.<sup>101</sup> The group has emphasized its ties to Bin Laden as well, pledging loyalty to the Saudi in its first military operation of September 2006 and frequently reiterating its support for al-Qa`ida Central.<sup>102</sup>

Efforts to preserve strict messaging discipline were apparent from the group's second official statement in June 2007, a twenty-one-minute audio release by Qasim al-Raymi in which he fiercely denied rumors that the group was holding negotiations with the central government.<sup>103</sup> AQAP has grown no less aware of the importance of maintaining control of its brand in the four years since. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has repeatedly denied responsibility for terrorist attacks and has rejected interviews given by Yemenis purporting to speak for the group.<sup>104</sup> The group's repudiation of one such incident, an attack against a sports club in Aden, illustrates how deeply the group recognizes the importance of managing perceptions in order to sustain legitimacy. The statement reads:

The mujahideen target criminals from America, Crusaders, and henchmen from security forces and intelligence officials responsible for shedding blood of women

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<sup>101</sup> The group's Shuhada' al-Jazeera ("Martyrs of the Peninsula") series is probably the best example of this type of discourse.

<sup>102</sup> The claims are not corroborated by information in the open source literature. The nature of AQAP's relationship with senior leaders in AQC is a topic of much debate, and authors are divided on exactly what role, if any, AQC plays in the group's operations and strategic orientation. For the 2006 statement, see: *Al-Qism al-I'alami li-Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi 'Ard al-Yemen*, 13 October 2006; for AQAP's congratulations to al-Qa`ida Central following the December 2009 Flight 253 attempt, see: Sa'id Shihri, "Rad al-'Udwan al-Salibi," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 8 February 2010, 0:30-0:72.

<sup>103</sup> *Al-Qism al-I'alami li-Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi 'Ard al-Yemen*, 22 June 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Saif Muhammad, "Bayan Nafi," *Sada al-Malahim*, 2 (10 March 2008), 8; "Ma'rakat Marib," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 8 September 2009; "Bayan Tawdihi li-Ummat al-Islam `an Iftira'at al-Sa`ud," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, Raqm al-Bayan 20, 11 November 2010; "Bayan Nafi al-'Alaqa bi-Tafjir Nadi al-Wahda al-Riyadi bi-'Aden," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, Raqm al-Bayan 27, 14 October 2010; "Bayan Bish'an Qatl al-Nisa' wa Tadmira al-Buyut wa al-Masajid bi-Wadi `Abeeda," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, Raqm al-Bayan 15, 11 June 2010.

and children in Aden, Mu`ajalla [Abyan], al-Dal'a, Lahj, Lawdar, Marib, Ta`izz, and Shabwah. . . . The mujahideen are regulated by the principles of shari`a, and strike according to fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence] and shari`a. [The mujahideen] do not fight and do not kill unless permitted by shari`a. We differentiate between who is permitted to be killed and who is not permitted to be killed. . . . Mujahideen are pursuers of righteousness, and their morals are honest, and therefore we adopt responsibility for [only] the operations that we carried out. We remind our Muslim brothers and different media to investigate the truthfulness of operations attributed to the mujahideen.<sup>105</sup>

In seeking to preserve its legitimacy, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has positioned itself not as an organization distinct from, but rather a reflection of the local population and the global community of subjugated Muslims. The group's reaction following fighting in Abyan in August and a video released by Anwar al-`Awlaqi in June of last year reaffirm this message. In the first, AQAP claimed that clashes between sons of Abyan and local soldiers in Souq Lawdar prompted the group's fighters to rush to the market in support of local villagers.<sup>106</sup> An English version released a month later in *Inspire* magazine described the event in starker terms, alleging that two civilians assaulted soldiers in the market without provocation and in view of dozens of spectators.<sup>107</sup> According to the account, the crowds failed to stop the men because "the government has no respect among the people and that is why such an incident passed in front of the public . . ."<sup>108</sup> Anwar al-`Awlaqi's comments regarding the Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hasan employ a similar logic. In the 19 July *Message to the American People*, al-`Awlaqi argued, "Nidal Hasan was not recruited by al-Qaeda. Nidal Hasan was recruited by American crimes, and this is what America refuses to admit. America refuses to admit that its foreign policies are the reason behind a man like Nidal Hasan . . ."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> The approach was reinforced in a February 2011 video release by the group as well. The second film in the *Masar` al-Khuna* ("Fighter of Traitors") series featured footage of an improvised explosives device attack ultimately aborted by AQAP after civilians passed too near the police vehicle targeted in the blast. For *al-Khouna*, see: "Masar` al-Khuna 2," *Muasasa al-Malahim*, 2 February 2011; for the passage from the text, see: *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, Raqm al-Bayan 27, 14 October 2010.

<sup>106</sup> "Bayan al-Difa'a 'an al-Muslimin fi Lawdar," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, Raqm al-Bayan 20, 28 August 2010.

<sup>107</sup> The roles of *Inspire* founder Samir Khan and Anwar al-`Awlaqi within AQAP remain shrouded in controversy. While there is no denying the importance of *Inspire* as a prominent English-language recruiting and radicalization tool, there is nothing in the open source literature to suggest what formal role Samir Khan plays within AQAP. The case of al-`Awlaqi is discussed in more detail later in this report but also remains subject to debate.

<sup>108</sup> "Letter From the Editor," *Inspire*, Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, 2 (Fall 2010), 4.

<sup>109</sup> Anwar al-`Awlaqi, "Message to the American People," *Global Islamic Media Front*, 19 July 2010, 6:55.

The three releases project a vision of the group not as an elite vanguard but rather an extension of the Yemeni people. *Inspire's* comments regarding Lawdar and al-`Awlaqi's concerning Hasan both portray a highly decentralized AQAP, one merely reflecting the will of ordinary Yemenis rather than a strategic transnational jihadist organization. According to the group's narrative, an AQAP indistinguishable from millions of ordinary Yemenis unhappy with Sana`a and hostile toward the West offers no physical target for the United States to attack. High value kill-or-capture missions aimed at dismantling a group that represents the broad grievances of an entire country cannot succeed. Amir Nasir al-Wahayshi argued as much in a May audio release, declaring, "It is not a war of individuals or leaders as you [America] try to portray. It is a war of an oppressed nation against its nation of oppressors."<sup>110</sup>

While compelling, this picture of AQAP is misleading. Despite the group's idealized self-perception, there is no evidence that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula commands the broad support it claims in its messaging. Its fighters number in the low hundreds, and few Yemenis associate the group's military operations with redressing local grievances. More significant, AQAP is the antithesis of the organic social movement it purports to be. The group's development owes more to the careful management of its unique leadership, all of whom gained considerable experience practicing jihad abroad—many allegedly under senior al-Qa`ida commanders. Their guidance in directing a hierarchical organization fiercely protective of its brand and highly selective in claiming military operations does little to reinforce the image of a spontaneous popular movement. The group's more recent expansion outside Yemen further complicates this narrative, raising serious questions about AQAP's local character and focus.

## **SAUDI ARABIA: PUSH TOWARD REGIONAL AIMS?**

Barely more than a month after the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen ended with the death of Hamza al-Qu`ayti, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula launched one of its most complicated attacks to date. The 17 September 2008 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana`a, a multistaged assault led by Latf Muhammad Bahr Abu Abd al-Rahman and six of his students from the al-Furqan Mosque in the port city of Hudayda, stands out as perhaps the best example of AQAP's evolving capabilities and ambitions. While the attack failed to breach the Embassy's perimeter, the strike—again dedicated to the memory of Abu `Ali al-Harithi—was a dramatic leap in planning and tactical sophistication by al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi's still-maturing organization.

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<sup>110</sup> Nasir Al-Wahayshi, "Nusrat lil-Shaykh Anwar al-`Awlaqi," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 16 May 2010, 4:30.

The attack's tactical complexity was matched by a similar demonstration of the group's sharply improved capacity for messaging. In the sixth issue of their publication *Sada al-Malahim*, AQAP continued its efforts to justify Yemen's relevance to potential supporters otherwise drawn to the higher-profile conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the release, the group contends, "there is no difference between the American Embassy in Kabul and Baghdad or Riyadh and Sana`a, and similarly martyrdom in Afghanistan and Iraq is the same as in Sana`a and Riyadh . . ." <sup>111</sup> The explanation was followed shortly thereafter by a second written by a Saudi member of the group, Nayif bin Muhammad bin Sa`id al-Kudri al-Qahtani, comparing in detail the timing, military planning and strategic purpose of the Sana`a attack with a bombing in Riyadh carried out by al-Qa`ida Central's affiliate in Saudi Arabia some five years earlier. <sup>112</sup>

The inference of al-Qahtani's message was clear. According to the comparison, al-Qa`ida in Yemen was a movement for which political boundaries were irrelevant. With al-Wahayshi as its leader, the group represented the continuation of a fight to expel polytheism and implement Islamic law throughout the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula. The message fit nicely with al-Qahtani's earlier efforts to justify the international relevance of the Yemen theater in the first issue of *Sada al-Malahim* in January 2008. Several months later, al-Qahtani called for Saudi jihadists to join him in Yemen, arguing that with their experience and funding al-Qa`ida in the Southern Arabian Peninsula could finally liberate the Kingdom from the royal family. Al-Qahtani followed the appeal with his November assessment of the U.S. Embassy attacks in Sana`a and Riyadh, concluding, "The sanctity of the Arabian Peninsula is one, its land is one, therefore Riyadh [is] Sana`a, and Sana`a is Riyadh." <sup>113</sup>

On 23 January 2009, the group's ambitions to conduct operations against Saudi Arabia was formalized in the Internet release *Min Huna Nabda . . . wa fi al-Aqsa Naltaqi* (From Here We Begin and in Jerusalem We Will Meet). The nineteen-minute video featured Nasir al-Wahayshi and his newly appointed military commander, Qasim al-Raymi, sitting alongside Sa`id `Ali Jabir al-Khathim al-Shihri and Muhammad `Atiq `Awayd al-`Awfi al-Harbi, both Saudis and former inmates of Guantanamo Bay prison. <sup>114</sup> Though little in the video's narrative was especially noteworthy, the high production quality of the film — al-Wahayshi's first public appearance — and the addition of al-Shihri and al-

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<sup>111</sup> "Ghazwat al-Furqan," *Sada al-Malahim*, 6 (9 November 2008), 16.

<sup>112</sup> Abu Hamam al-Qahtani, "Badr al-Riyadh wa Badr Sana`a," *Sada al-Malahim*, 6 (9 November 2008), 25.

<sup>113</sup> Later that month, al-Qa`ida Central deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri made his first public mention of al-Wahayshi, saying in an interview posted online that he respected Abu Basir and the mujahideen fighting under him. For the Zawahiri reference, see: Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Al-Azhar `Arin al-Aswad," *Al-Sahab al-Intaj al-I`alami*, October 2008, 75:00; for al-Qahtani's quotation, see: *al-Malahim* (6), 25.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Shihri was named al-Wahayshi's senior deputy, while al-`Awfi was named field commander.

Harbi in key leadership positions was an enormous recruiting victory for AQAP. With both men taking visible roles in the group's outreach if not its military strategy, AQAP could now appeal to young Saudis with a degree of authenticity that its Yemeni leaders lacked.

### **Official Merger: al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula**

Now formally known as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (*Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*) (AQAP), al-Wahayshi's organization began its most active media campaign in the group's history, punctuated by six major attacks on government personnel and foreign civilians over an eleven-month period. The military campaign began with two high-profile suicide bombings in spring 2009, the latter attack carried out just two days after the first. On 16 March, an eighteen-year-old from Yemen's central Ta`izz governorate detonated a bomb as he posed for pictures with tourists overlooking the Hadramawt city of Shibam. The blast killed four South Korean nationals and, according to an Internet statement issued by AQAP in the wake of attack, was in retaliation for the death of Hamza al-Qu`ayti and `Abdullah Salih `Ali Battis in a counterterrorism raid on the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen the previous August.<sup>115</sup>

Two days later, a South Korean delegation sent to investigate the bombing was targeted. On the morning of 18 March, a young Sana`ani threw himself and a booby-trapped cassette player at a convoy of vehicles as the delegation returned to the Sana`a airport.<sup>116</sup> Though the attempt failed to kill any of the passengers, the bombing was quickly claimed by AQAP. In the statement, the group censured religious leaders who criticized the attack while "the government of Al-Aswad al-'Ansi [an epithet comparing President Salih with a false Yemeni prophet of the 7th century] has already spilled the blood of many Muslims with air raids and the military advance with tanks in Sana`a, 'Amran, Marib, Jawf, Dhal'a, Abyan, and Shabwah . . ."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> According to AQAP, South Korea's support for the Global War on Terrorism represented a second motivation for the attack, and one specific to the tourists targeted. See: *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 29 March 2009.

<sup>116</sup> The group apparently recorded the construction of the bomb in the period preceding the attack, releasing footage of the rigged cassette player in June. See: "Fazto wa Rab al-K'aba," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 26 June 2009.

<sup>117</sup> "Akhriju al-Mushrikin min Jazirat al-`Arab," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 10 April 2009.



## Why Muhammad bin Nayif?

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's high operational tempo within Yemen occurred precisely as it worked to expand its reach outside of the country. In August 2009 AQAP rigged the younger brother of the group's top bomb maker, Ibrahim `Asiri, with explosives as he prepared to return to Saudi Arabia for a meeting with the Kingdom's counterterrorism chief, Muhammad bin Nayif. Once in Jeddah, `Abdullah Hasan Tali' `Asiri explained to Bin Nayif that he wished to defect from AQAP if the Saudi government could guarantee the safety of his family. To prove his position in the group, `Asiri then reportedly contacted a member of al-Qa`ida in Yemen who was also considering returning to the Kingdom. As he passed the mobile phone to Bin Nayif, explosives on or inside `Asiri were remotely detonated, instantly killing the twenty-three-year-old and lightly wounding Bin Nayif.

While the `Asiri operation ultimately failed, the bombing marked a critical stage in AQAP's attempt to regionally assert itself. The attack portrayed impressive ingenuity in circumventing security measures, and perhaps more important, demonstrated AQAP's ability to exploit earlier losses to the group's advantage. The defection the previous spring of one of the two Saudis featured in AQAP's founding video release was an embarrassing setback for the group. In operational terms, Muhammad `Atiq `Awayd al-`Awfi's return to Saudi Arabia jeopardized the security of AQAP leaders and the success of any future attacks of which the Saudi had knowledge. For a group so meticulous in crafting a winning narrative, al-`Awfi's defection projected an image of a group lacking strong leadership and unable to exert control over its members.

Yet the attack against Muhammad bin Nayif narrowly missed transforming a tactical failure into strategic success. The counterterrorism chief's history of persuading militants to surrender themselves to the royal family was well known by jihadists throughout the peninsula. AQAP no doubt calculated that they could gain access to Bin Nayif by baiting him with the prospect of another defector. Had `Asiri's explosives been better placed, the blast would have been the first assassination by a jihadist group of a senior member of the royal family in Saudi Arabia's history.

Though al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's capacity to strike outside Yemen was new, its interest in Saudi Arabia was not. In the spring of 2008, the group articulated its desire

to topple the government of al-Saud in an issue of *Sada al-Malahim*.<sup>118</sup> These threats grew more frequent as Saudi jihadists facing tremendous pressure in the Kingdom fled to Yemen, several assuming leadership roles in AQAP.<sup>119</sup> By 2010, calls to attack the Saudi royal family and overthrow the Kingdom's government were easily the most common objective articulated by four prominent Saudi members of AQAP.<sup>120</sup>

As inside Yemen, AQAP's leaders portrayed the group as a bulwark against government predation and secularism inside the Kingdom. AQAP media alleged that Riyadh had turned against its people by facilitating a U.S.-led war against Islam, abusing innocent detainees, harassing the wives of accused militants and tacitly encouraging Shi'a attacks against Sunnis on the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>121</sup> AQAP members challenged Saudi soldiers as well, calling them to "[o]penly declare your disobedience to the commands of the apostates [al-Saud] and do not direct your weapons at Muslims who have rebelled against the apostates . . ."<sup>122</sup>

The Muhammad bin Nayif bombing marked a shift in strategy as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula rekindled a campaign to attack the Saud regime. While removing a longstanding rival like Bin Nayif would have assuredly benefited the group, the operation's significance was not strictly instrumental. Saudi Arabia's monarchy remained a well-protected target of immense symbolic importance. The August attack was the first suicide bombing in the Kingdom since 2006. It represented the first strike executed outside the country by any iteration of al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Despite tactically failing, the strike proved AQAP's capability to penetrate one of the best-defended monarchies in the world. More important, the operation and media releases that followed demonstrated in action what the group had attempted for two years to convey in rhetoric. `Asiri's bombing helped take traditionally local grievances long separated by district, governorate and national boundaries, and channel them into a single narrative of illegitimate governance and Western expansion throughout the Peninsula.

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<sup>118</sup> "*Bira'*," *Sada al-Malahim*, 2 (15 May 2008), 3.

<sup>119</sup> For the definitive history of the Saudi regime's campaign against this group, see: Thomas Hegghammer "*Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*" (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 199–217.

<sup>120</sup> Sai'd al-Shihri, Muhammad al-Qahtani, Ibrahim al-Rabaysh and Muhammad bin `Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid.

<sup>121</sup> *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, Raqm al-Bayan 20, 11 November 2010; "The Chaste of Buraydah in the Prisons of the Tyrants," *Qa`idat al-Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula*, Statement #11 (14 April 2010).

<sup>122</sup> Sai'd al-Shihri, "Ma`an Likhal' al-Sa`ud," *Mu`asat al-Malahim*, 18 November 2010.

## FLIGHT 253 AND PARCEL PLOT: AQAP AND THE WEST

As the group's ambitions expanded to Jeddah, twenty-three-year-old `Umar Faruq `Abdullah Abdulmutallab withdrew from an Arabic-language school in Sana`a. By early November, the Nigerian was thought to be in a safe house in Shabwah receiving basic explosives training. As Abdulmutallab was prepared for the group's highest-profile attack to date, AQAP simultaneously mounted the first among a series of well-executed assassinations of local security commanders in southern Yemen that would continue into 2011.<sup>123</sup>

In early December, Abdulmutallab departed Sana`a for Dubai. His contact with AQAP coincided with the beginning of a new period of counterterrorism operations against AQAP in Yemen. At least five U.S. and Yemeni raids or missile strikes on AQAP targets occurred between 17 December and 24 December, though none would kill or capture a senior AQAP leader.<sup>124</sup> On Christmas day, Abdulmutallab attempted to ignite an explosive mixture of pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) and triacetone triperoxide (TATP) while on a Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit. Within hours of the failed bombing, federal investigators had traced the attempt back to Yemen.

AQAP capably exploited the attention that followed. Despite the losses of several local leaders, AQAP not only survived the mounting counterterrorism pressure but thrived. In the twelve months following Abdulmutallab's attempted bombing, AQAP would sharply expand both its foreign profile and its domestic reach. In mid-January, a native of Arkansas then on trial for the death of a U.S. soldier and the attempted murder of another claimed to be fighting for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>125</sup> Four days later, a spokesman from Somalia's Harakat al-Shabaab announced that the group had begun sending and receiving fighters from Yemen, providing the first hint of AQAP's further regional ambitions in the Horn of Africa through organizational and operational

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<sup>123</sup> This does not imply that AQAP had previously abstained from targeting commanders elsewhere. Quite the opposite: the group was successful in assassinating key security and intelligence officials in Marib as early as spring 2007, while al-Qu`ayti's Soldier's Brigade of Yemen launched a number of attacks on local military forces in Hadramawt and Aden in 2008. Yet the former was localized largely in Marib, while the latter did not display the expertise or effectiveness of the AQAP campaign starting in late 2009.

<sup>124</sup> The closest presumably was the death of Nayif al-Qahtani, founder and chief editor of *Sada al-Malahim*, in the 17 December air strike on Abyan's al-Ma'ajala village. Though his loss was undeniably an enormous blow to the group's written media efforts, al-Qahtani's operational or leadership role in the group has not been demonstrated in the open source literature.

<sup>125</sup> Abdul Hakim Muhammad, *To Judge Wright Jr*, personal correspondence, 12 January 2010. See: <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/us/20100210-convert-letter.pdf>.

linkages with al-Shabaab.<sup>126</sup> Soon thereafter AQAP was formally designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).<sup>127</sup>

Al-Qa`ida's leadership was quick to recognize this growing star among its affiliated organizations. In February 2009, four months after Ayman al-Zawahiri's first public recognition of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, Abu Yahya al-Libi released the first of two statements devoted exclusively to Yemen.<sup>128</sup> Al-Libi's statements, "We are Not Huthis . . . Nor Are We Like Them" and "The Government of Yemen to America: We Will Risk Our [Neck] So That You Do Not Risk Yours," coincided with alarming reports of foreigners traveling to Yemen in hopes of waging jihad.<sup>129</sup> That spring, the New Jersey-born Sharif Mobley was arrested in Sana`a on suspicion of aiding AQAP, little more than a month before AQAP released footage laying to rest any doubts over the group's role in the December 2009 attempted airline bombing.<sup>130</sup> In a video released to jihadist forums that spring, Abdulmutallab could be seen holding a rifle and later delivering a martyrdom statement seated in front of a familiar al-Qa`ida flag.<sup>131</sup> In June, reports surfaced that some forty-two foreigners had been arrested in Sana`a, among them a dozen American students allegedly linked to terrorism.<sup>132</sup> The rapid succession of plots raised fears in Washington that, no longer satisfied with plots inside Yemen, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula had reoriented the group's operations toward the West.<sup>133</sup>

## Old Interests and New Capabilities

While Washington's alarm was warranted, AQAP's operational reach outside the Arabian Peninsula remains a relatively new phenomenon. Few studies of the group have discussed the implications of this global shift for a group that had until, very recently, been focused on local and regional operations. Though AQAP's ability to

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<sup>126</sup> Martin Plaut, "Somalia and Yemen 'Swapping Militants,'" *BBC News*, 17 January 2010. [The indictment of Ahmed Warsame documents further alleged ties between the two groups.](#)

<sup>127</sup> "US Designates Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula Terrorist Group," AFP, 19 January 2010.

<sup>128</sup> Al-Zawahiri's October 2008 reference to al-Wahayshi remains AQC's first mention of the group. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Al-Azhar 'Arin al-Aswad," *Al-Sahab lil-Intaj al-I'alami*, October 2008, 75:00

<sup>129</sup> Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Lasna Huthin . . . La tad'I al-Jith'a wa Tubsir al-Qitha," *Markez al-Fajr lil-'Alam*, 5 February 2010; Al-Libi, "Hakoumat al-Yemen li-Amrika . . . Nahri Doun Nahruk," *Markez al-Fajr lil-'Alam*, 22 February 2010.

<sup>130</sup> For Mobley, see: Scott Shane, "Arrest Stokes Concerns About Radicalized Muslims," *New York Times*, 13 March 2010, A4.

<sup>131</sup> "Amrika wa al-Fakh al-Akhir," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 28 May 2010, 49:00.

<sup>132</sup> Eric Schmitt, "12 Americans Detained in Yemen," *New York Times*, 8 June 2010, A11.

<sup>133</sup> The accuracy of such fears will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

out-recruit rivals for the foreign talent and resources necessary to mount attacks abroad is a recent development, its meticulous focus on outreach is not. This campaign, which began no later than January 2008, was clearly aimed at attracting international support in a landscape already crowded with recruiting appeals for would-be jihadists from East Africa to Central Asia. AQAP's first issue of *Sada al-Malahim* sought to frame Yemen's strategic importance within a framework of transnational jihad. The release offered a clear recruiting pitch to potential supporters who historically had little incentive to relocate to Yemen in order to attack Western interests. Much of the justification was made by the journal's founder, Nayif bin Muhammad al-Qahtani. In an interview al-Qahtani provided a series of religious and military explanations for waging jihad from Yemen against the United States and illegitimate Arab regimes. This would be a theme that AQAP would return to frequently as it worked to establish Yemen's relevance among more-popular destinations for jihad. When asked why he chose Yemen rather than Afghanistan or Iraq, al-Qahtani explained:

My choice was based on two reasons, the first and most important is a religious reason, as the Almighty said "Fight the unbelievers who are near to you, and let them find harshness in you," and to execute the commandment of the messenger of God, who said "expel the polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula" and to liberate al-Qibla of Muslims and the mosque of Mustafa and to cleanse the land of the peninsula . . . from the filth of the polytheists and apostates. The second reason is a military reason. If the interests of the enemy in the Arabian Peninsula were hit and the funding from oil was stopped and the oil refineries were destroyed, the enemy would collapse, and it would not only withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, but it would completely collapse. If it were to be hit from various locations, it would withdraw humiliated from the land of Muslims . . .<sup>134</sup>

Until December 2009, efforts at prompting such a withdrawal focused primarily on Western interests inside Yemen. AQAP attacked both soft and hard targets, displaying no clear tactical pattern or target set. Among the group's twelve military operations against Western interests in the three years following the prison break of February 2006, oil facilities, tourists, embassies and government personnel constituted the bulk of AQAP's targets.<sup>135</sup> The complexity of the strikes varied dramatically, ranging from small arms attacks against tourists to blended VBIED and active shooter attacks against fortified embassies. Nearly every attack failed tactically. However, in strategic terms, the operations proved more than effective in advancing the group's aims.

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<sup>134</sup> Abu Hamam al-Qahtani, "Liqa' M'a Ahad al-Matlubin," *Sada al-Malahim* 1 (13 January 2008), 7–8.

<sup>135</sup> The time period begins with the Marib-Hadramawt oil bombings of September 2006 and ends with the attempted bombing of Flight 253 of December 2009.

Though efforts to tie AQAP to a broader discourse of Muslim suffering in Palestine and jihadists in Iraq and Somalia broadened the group's appeal in principle, there is little evidence suggesting it drew significant talent from outside the Arabian Peninsula. This changed abruptly on Christmas Day 2009 with the attempted bombing of Flight 253. Unlike its domestic efforts, much of AQAP's shift toward targeting Western interests outside Yemen has been documented in a parallel English-language journal titled *Inspire*.

Since its release in July 2010, the magazine has elicited widely divergent reactions among terrorism experts. While many claim *Inspire* represents a milestone in AQAM recruitment in the West, others question its resonance to any but the most juvenile enthusiasts of jihad.<sup>136</sup> Regardless of the magazine's broader significance, *Inspire* is indeed qualitatively different from *Sada al-Malahim*. Though its graphics are well produced, it evokes a tone distinct from the group's Arabic-language media. Several "counter-culture ads" and a similar "Come to Jihad" section reflect the youth of the publication's author, the twenty-four-year-old U.S. citizen Samir Khan.<sup>137</sup> Yet despite its flaws, the magazine is quite clear in laying out the group's strategy in the United States and Europe. *Inspire's* account of the foiled parcel bombings of October 2010, titled "Operation Hemorrhage," describes the operation as the first in a series of low-cost attacks on Western aviation and transportation infrastructure. In such a war of "1,000 cuts," effectiveness is measured not in numbers of casualties but in the political and economic costs incurred by ever-increasing U.S. security measures.<sup>138</sup> The approach is not new. AQAM leaders have called for a variety of forms of economic jihad against the West for the better part of a decade. Yet this strategy is articulated by Khan in direct and idiomatic English. The third issue of *Inspire* argues that the attacks:

force upon the West two choices: You either spend billions of dollars to inspect each and every package in the world or you do nothing and we keep trying again.

Two Nokia mobiles, \$150 each, two HP printers, \$300 each, plus shipping, transportation and other miscellaneous expenses add up to a total bill of \$4,200. That is all what [sic] Operation Hemorrhage cost us. In terms of time it took us three months to plan and execute the operation from beginning to end. On the

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<sup>136</sup> For one of the more concerned assessments of *Inspire's* significance, see: Jarret Brachman, "Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland: AQAP," *Testimony Before the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives*, 2 March 2011. For a far more skeptical assessment of *Inspire* see Thomas Hegghammer, "Un-Inspired," *Jihadica* blog, 6 July 2010, <http://www.jihadica.com/un-inspired/>.

<sup>137</sup> *Inspire*, Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, volume 1 (12 July 2010), 18; *Inspire*, Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, volume 2 (25 September 2010), 22, 41.

<sup>138</sup> *Inspire*, Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, volume 3 (2 November 2010), 3, 7, 15; *Inspire* (volume 1), 15.

other hand this supposedly “foiled plot”, as some of our enemies would like to call [it], will without a doubt cost America and other Western countries billions of dollars in new security measures. That is what we call leverage.<sup>139</sup>

AQAP’s Western strategy advances a second aim distinct from the group’s objectives in Yemen. Both *Inspire* and Anwar al-`Awlaqi call for aspiring jihadists in the United States and United Kingdom to practice the type of leaderless jihad made famous by a mix of strategists of jihad and scholars of terrorism.<sup>140</sup> Would-be jihadists in the West are encouraged to wage a self-directed jihad from within their own communities without seeking guidance or military training abroad.<sup>141</sup> Khan counsels readers to use common household products to produce mass-casualty attacks—some stretching the limits of credulity. The journal’s “Open Source Jihad” section is most explicit, inciting Westerners to build bombs using household products and affix sharpened objects to vehicles to create “the ultimate mowing machine.”<sup>142</sup>

## LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL BALANCING: YEAR OF THE ASSASSINATION

Despite an impressive media wing and operational tempo against foreign targets, AQAP’s sharpest gains of 2010 came domestically. In contrast to the successes of its global campaign, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula arguably benefitted most during this period from mistakes made locally in combating the group. Anger over collateral damage following January air strikes targeting a twenty-five-year-old suspected al-Qa`ida member, `A`yd Salih Jabir al-Shabwani of the `Abeeda macro-tribe, escalated five months later when U.S. missiles killed Marib’s deputy governor, also of Al Shabwan.<sup>143</sup> The counterterrorism strikes were gifts to an AQAP narrative that cited the casualties as further evidence of the illegitimacy of the Salih administration. As with U.S. air raids the previous year, AQAP’s messaging exploited the collateral damage in nearly each of its online statements, alleging that Sana`a supported U.S. forces in targeting innocent civilians.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Inspire* (volume 3), 7, 15.

<sup>140</sup> Marc Sagemen, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, *D`awat al-Muqawwima al-Islamia al-`Alamia*, 2004; Abu Bakr Naji, *Idarat al-Tawahish*, 2005.

<sup>141</sup> *Inspire* (volume 2), 20–22, 24; *Inspire* (volume 1), 17.

<sup>142</sup> *Inspire* (volume 1), 31; *Inspire* (volume 2), 54, 57.

<sup>143</sup> Both cases will be discussed at length in Chapter Three.

<sup>144</sup> According to al-`Awlaqi, the attacks “accomplish[ed] in days what would have taken them [AQAP] the work of years.” See: Anwar al-`Awlaqi, 19 July 2010.

This media effort fit well with parallel military operations in parts of southern and central Yemen. By spring 2010, AQAP had launched a spate of ambushes and targeted assassinations against security forces in Abyan, Hadramawt, Shabwah, Marib, Lahj and Aden. Unlike the strategies employed by the Army of Aden Abyan (1994–1998), al-Qa`ida in Yemen (1998–2003) and the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen (2008), attacks on Western targets played no role in the campaign.<sup>145</sup> Instead, AQAP targeted senior security personnel outside Sana`a, killing or kidnapping at least three senior officials in the fall and apparently circulating a list of fifty-four security personnel targeted for assassination in Abyan's Zinjibar in early September.<sup>146</sup> The killings marked an uptick in the use of insurgent tactics in Abyan. Excluding strikes on hardened facilities in Aden on 19 June and Abyan on 16 July, AQAP repeatedly ambushed lightly defended security convoys and military checkpoints throughout the south, claiming forty-nine attacks by late 2010.<sup>147</sup> It closed the year in dramatic fashion, launching dual vehicle-borne suicide operations against members of the Shi`a Huthi insurgency near the village of Fursha in al-Jawf's western al-Matun district on 24 November and days later in Sa`da.<sup>148</sup> The attacks pushed AQAP's profile still higher, demonstrating a military capability not seen since fall 2008 while raising fears of the possibility of sectarian war in Yemen.

## Insurgency and Sectarian Conflict

An escalation in insurgent attacks and sectarian violence would seem to indicate a

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<sup>145</sup> The AAA is included here with some hesitation. Though it did not attempt military operations against Western targets, by most accounts it was preparing to do so.

<sup>146</sup> Though the assassinations will be described in further detail in Chapter Three, the group accepted responsibility for the murders of the deputy director of political security in Lahj on 16 August, the death of deputy director of intelligence for Marib ten days later and the kidnapping of the PSO's deputy director for Sa`da on 27 August. Several other attempts could be included here, but are not. The 9 July attempted assassination of the head of security for Marib's northwestern Madghal district may be reasonably linked to AQAP. Yet as with the successful assassination of Brigadier General Muhammad Salih al-Shayif in Marib on 5 June, an attack that AQAP officially denied six days later, the group claims neither a monopoly over capability nor the intent to attack security forces in the country. Therefore the list above only cites operations claimed by the group. For AQAP's accounts of the assassinations, see: "Biyān Ightiyāl Na'ib Mudir al-Baḥth fi Waliya Marib," *Tanzim AQAP al-Jihad fi Jazīra al-'Arab*, 29 August 2010; "Biyān Asr Naib Mudir al-Amn al-Siyasi bi-Sa`da," *Tanzim Al-Qa`ida al-Jihad fi Jazīra al-'Arab*, 20 September 2010; "Biyān tabani `Amaliyat fi Wilaya Lahj," *Tanzim Al-Qa`ida al-Jihad fi Jazīra al-'Arab*, 22 September 2010; "Masar` al-Khuna 2," *Muasasa al-Malahim*, 2 February 2011; "Biyān Bishan Qatl al-Nisa' wa Tadmīr al-Buyut wa al-Masijid bi-Wadi `Abeeda," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazīra al-'Arab*, Raqm al-Biyān 15, 11 June 2010. For the assassination list in Abyan, see: "Qa'ima bi-Isma' al-Matlubayn min Rijal al-Amn li-Day Tanzim al-Qa`ida," *Tanzim al-Qa`ida fi Jazīra al-'Arab*, 10 September 2010.

<sup>147</sup> The count begins on 15 July and ends on 22 October. See: "Taqrir Ikhbari," *Sada al-Malahim*, 15 (30 December 2010), 38.

<sup>148</sup> The first attack killed the movement's patriarch, Badr al-Din al-Huthi.



shift in al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's strategic aims in Yemen. However, there is no conclusive evidence to date that suggests that AQAP seeks a collapsed state, the responsibility of governing or widespread interreligious violence. As has been convincingly argued elsewhere, al-Qa`ida's East Africa Corps suffered enormously from the chaos of state failure in Somalia nearly two decades earlier.<sup>149</sup> Particularly given intensifying Western and regional counterterrorism pressure, the costs of preserving AQAP's operational security within the anarchy of a Yemeni civil war would appear prohibitively high. Further, there is little reason to believe that AQAP currently enjoys the popular support or military capability to seize and administer territory in Yemen.<sup>150</sup>

Nevertheless, 2010 did see a spike in the use of guerilla attacks on local security forces, punctuated by AQAP's launch of Eliminate Evil Operations in July 2010. Although it best resembles a campaign of targeted assassinations and small unit ambushes, AQAP statements frame the attacks as a sort of anticorruption campaign. The approach is reinforced by a connected theme frequently repeated in the group's messaging. AQAP remains at its core a movement intended to defend Muslims from at least four adversaries: the Yemeni government; the royal family of al-Saud; the United States and its allies; and Huthi militants and their Shi`a sponsors.

AQAP has devoted perhaps the largest share of its media efforts since 2006 to the first of these, trying repeatedly to discredit and dislocate the government from the Yemeni people. Given that it has yet to provide social services or governance in any meaningful way—an issue detailed at length in subsequent chapters—the group has pursued a campaign against Yemeni security forces primarily through military means. Yet only recently has the conflict turned especially bloody. AQAP claimed approximately sixteen targeted assassinations of mid- and senior-level security officials from April 2007 to October 2010.<sup>151</sup> These killings reinforced a more prominent effort to delegitimize the country's armed forces, often calling personnel to abandon their posts or tacitly support AQAP. The group's argument to Yemeni soldiers is simple: *You are poorly equipped and*

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<sup>149</sup> "Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (2007), 9–29.

<sup>150</sup> Whether this remains a longer-term goal of the group is certainly worthy of discussion. A recent statement by AQAP's senior religious authority `Adil al-`Abab seems to suggest that the group may perceive itself as becoming more of an insurgent like force. See "Online Question and Answer Session," translated by ICSR, <http://icsr.info/news/translation-of-al-qaeda-sheikhs-online-lecture>.

<sup>151</sup> An important distinction must be made in this count. Though the group often assumes responsibility for attacks on officers and senior commanders in Yemen's security forces, it less frequently provides details of those they killed. Because the criteria here is "targeted assassinations" of specific individuals, the list above only includes the killing, abduction or attempted assassination of security officials specified by name or title in AQAP messaging. The remaining strikes against unspecified military officers are included in the subsequent tally of ambushes against security forces generally.

*compensated. The people you defend do not respect you, and you are led by a central government engaged in a war against Islam. Continuing to serve a leadership compliant to Washington renders you little more than agents of U.S. interests, and therefore, like Western civilians, you are legitimate targets for violence.*<sup>152</sup>

Beyond the brief exception of the actions of the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen discussed earlier, such threats against security forces were not regularly acted upon until the middle of 2010. In the latter half of that year alone AQAP claimed responsibility for more than two dozen attacks on local military, police and intelligence units primarily in Abyan, Hadramawt, Shabwah, Aden, Lahj and Marib. The nature and frequency of the engagements were unique in the context of violent jihadist movements in Yemen.<sup>153</sup> Not since the early 1990s, if at all, had a group sustained a campaign in which Yemen's security forces were the primary target.

Interestingly, AQAP's media products moved nearer to those of contemporary insurgent groups as well, resembling the short after-action reports of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Islamic Army of Iraq and Ansar al-Islam among others.<sup>154</sup> The operations were marked by frequent ambushes carried out by small units of uneven discipline at best.<sup>155</sup> Yet their threshold for success was not high. By merely targeting poorly defended outposts manned by small numbers of inexperienced soldiers, the group worked to spread a sense of insecurity and erode what little confidence in the central government remained throughout much of the country's south.

Were the insurgency to escalate, the violence against security forces would represent a key factor in AQAP's development inside Yemen. However, given that the violence until 2011 remained at a relatively low level, its effect on either AQAP recruitment or the central government should not be overstated. Unlike classic insurgencies elsewhere,

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<sup>152</sup> AQAP commonly offers the men several alternatives for avoiding such a fate, encouraging them to defect from security services, serve as informants or simply to refuse to attack mujahideen.

<sup>153</sup> Two observations are worth mentioning. First, it is reasonable to assume that rising southern anger over government inequity played a role in this violence. Small arms attacks seem to reflect a willingness to exploit Yemenis already mobilized against Sana'a rather than a fundamental shift in AQAP aims. Second, the Salih government's more direct confrontation of militants in the wake of U.S. pressure in 2009 almost assuredly encouraged attacks on state forces in a way that Islamic Jihad did not two decades earlier. The author owes these points to Laurent Bonnefoy.

<sup>154</sup> See for example: "Bayan 'Amaliyat Nafi al-Khabth," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, 30 August 2010.

<sup>155</sup> To be fair, AQAP did release footage of fighters occasionally boasting RPGs, and mention a DshK anti-aircraft gun in a statement in August 2010. See: "Rid'a al-'Udwan," *Mu'asat al-Malahim*, 11 November 2010; *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, 26 August 2010.

attacks against isolated checkpoints or exposed military convoys are not especially strong tools for undermining confidence in the government in rural Yemen. Local communities have rarely relied on corrupt and poorly equipped police and military units to provide security. AQAP attacks on security outposts are of little consequence in rural Yemen, where security and services have long been provided through traditional mechanisms.<sup>156</sup>

Drawing too close a connection between the attacks and local perceptions of government control is also problematic. Yemenis do not have to look far for signs of instability. The seven-year Huthi insurgency in the north; escalating protests in the center and south; and high-profile AQAP attacks in the capital provide more than an adequate number of indicators from which to gauge Sana`a's authority. Given these multiple sources of instability, AQAP raids against remote checkpoints are not convincing indicators of either AQAP strength or government weakness.

The retreat of security forces from Yemen's Abyan governorate is only the latest evidence of such a contradiction. Though the apparent fall of Ja`ar and Zinjibar is often considered evidence of AQAP's expansion into Yemen's "ungoverned" territories, the group has yet to convincingly prove its role in the fighting. Nor has al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula allayed confusion over the rise of Ansar al-Shari`a, a poorly defined collection of Islamists that has been alleged to have overtaken parts of Abyan in spring and summer 2011. Both developments hardly come without risk for AQAP. Much like the choices forced upon the group with the emergence of the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen in 2008, any move toward insurgency will require AQAP to do more to discipline swelling numbers of those who claim its name while meeting the demands of new — and likely skeptical — constituents. Doing either, particularly governing or maintaining a permanent presence in Abyan's communities, will not be easy given the pace of U.S. and Yemeni air strikes pounding the governorate in the summer of 2011.

Yet failing to take a leading role in the country's most visible jihadist battlefield is far from an appealing option. Allowing those in Abyan to move to the forefront of jihad in Yemen while at same time claiming some connection to a broader al-Qa`ida risks encouraging perceptions that AQAP is either slow, disorganized or weak. None advantages the group. The growth of sympathetic movements certainly bolsters al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's presence in Yemen. Yet the rise of jihadists who display none of the characteristics that have sustained AQAP's resilience does not. An

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<sup>156</sup> Were AQAP to target schools, health clinics, civic leaders or Yemeni civilians, the dynamics would of course be very different.

Ansar al-Shari`a accused of kidnapping children, beheading civil leaders and imposing Taliban-like shows of justice does not strengthen the integrity of the AQAP brand.<sup>157</sup> Regardless of the veracity of the claims—few of which have been definitively proven—a nominal al-Qa`ida ally that is thus far incapable of matching its sponsor's skill for messaging or disciplined use of violence dilutes the integrity of perhaps AQAP's most valued asset, the credibility of its name.

This is not to imply that AQAP either lacks a hand or an interest in the instability shaking southern Yemen. AQAP may indeed attempt something near a classic insurgency and governance project in Abyan. Yet the burden of proof remains with the group to demonstrate its role in the events taking place in the governorate. Thus far, little in the open source indicates that AQAP is playing the central role in the conflicts.<sup>158</sup> Until it proves the nature of its relationship in directing, co-opting or perhaps struggling to catch up with the events overtaking Ja`ar and Zinjibar, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula should not be presumed to be leading the insurgencies in either city.

## In Defense of Sunnis

The twin attacks against Huthi processions in December 2010 are difficult to contextualize because they seem to be a major departure from AQAP's operational model, which prioritizes strategic restraint and discipline. Over the last twelve months, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has grown more aggressive in threatening supporters of Shabaab al-Mu`minin, a Zaydi insurgent movement commonly called the Huthis or *al-Huthiin*. AQAP's statements dubiously weave fiver Huthis into a broader narrative of twelver Shi`a expansionism throughout the Middle East and accuse the movement (improbably) of ties to both Tehran and Washington.<sup>159</sup> The narrative places

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<sup>157</sup> In addition to the allegations made above, Ansar al-Shari`a also stood accused of falling prey to the type of internecine fighting staining the jihadist experiences of Algeria and Afghanistan in the 1990s and more recently in Iraq. For mentions of the allegations in the text, see: "Al-Qa`ida Tahtajiz 100 Shab min Abna' Zinjibar Mabna Tastahadifaha al-Ta'irat al-Harbaya," *Aden Online*, 14 August 2011, <http://aden-online.net/news/779.htm>; "Atihamat lil-Qa`ida bi-Dhabh Za'im `Asha'ir fi Abyan," *Ghad Net*, 1 August 2011, <http://adenalghad.net/print/news/3136.htm>; "Ajl: (Ansar al-Shari`a) Yaqta`aun Yad Muwatan bi-Tuhama al-Sarqa fi Zinjibar," *Aden Online*, 28 July 2011, <http://aden-online.net/news/228.htm>.

<sup>158</sup> AQAP's media releases do not convincingly stake the group's claim in the events of Abyan. Nor do the types of violence and political behavior closely resemble previous AQAP activities. The complex explosives, glossy media products and focus on Western targets, long calling cards of AQAP's use of violence, remain absent in Ja`ar and Zinjibar.

<sup>159</sup> AQAP's narrative routinely connects the Zaydi movement to the threats posed by Shi`a in eastern

AQAP squarely between the insurgents and the country's Sunnis, arguing that AQAP represents the only capable and legitimate force protecting Yemen's Shafi'i majority.<sup>160</sup>

AQAP first articulated this role in a short article in spring 2010, asserting that it "formed the first line of defense" against Huthi extremists.<sup>161</sup> It was followed nine months later by the dual suicide bombings of Huthi religious processions in al-Jawf and Sa'da. Both attacks were claimed by AQAP under the banner "Operations in Defense of Ahl al-Sunnah."<sup>162</sup> The first justified the 24 November bombing by affirming that AQAP intervened only after the Yemeni and Saudi governments failed to protect innocent Sunnis from Huthi repression. It continued with a call to Yemen's Sunnis to join al-Qa'ida brigades dedicated to defending the honor of the Prophet against Shi'a violence, before closing with a warning that the Huthis were now "legitimate targets for us." An AQAP video released in March 2011 offered a more specific justification for the attacks, claiming Huthis forcefully entered villages in al-Jawf, indoctrinated local children against their will and expelled tribesmen who failed to support the group.<sup>163</sup>

The strikes can be read a variety of ways, but interviews with tribesmen in al-Jawf and Marib suggest that mundane concerns of logistics rather than ideology may best explain the attacks.<sup>164</sup> Beginning in 2007, Huthi fighters moved east from Sa'da into the mountains of al-Jawf's al-Mutama, al-Zahir and al-Matun districts.<sup>165</sup> Three years later, Huthis held the strategic high ground and controlled makeshift checkpoints in parts of each of these districts, including along the single paved road directly connecting Shabwah, Marib and al-Jawf with Saudi Arabia.<sup>166</sup> Though the group's alleged expansion in Marib is significantly more limited, reports surfaced in April and October 2010 of shaykhs from Sirwah's Jahn meeting with Abd al-Malik Huthi in Sa'da.<sup>167</sup> Details of the gathering were widely disputed, as was the authority of those

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Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. See: *Inspire* (volume 2), 44; `Adil al-`Abab, "Online Question and Answer Session," translated by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization.

<sup>160</sup> The Shafi'i *madhhab* is one of four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The other three are Hanafi, Hanbali and Maliki.

<sup>161</sup> Abu al-Bura' al-Sana`ani, "Huthiin Rawafidh bi-Qina'a Zaydi," *Sada al-Malahim* (14 February 2010), 21.

<sup>162</sup> "Bayan 'an 'Amiliyat al-Difa'a 'an Ahl al-Sunah," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 26 November 2010; "Bushra lil-Mu'minin Deman Silsilat Amaliyat al-Difa'a 'an Ahl al-Sunnah," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 28 November 2010.

<sup>163</sup> "Nusertum Ahl al-Sunnah," *Mu'asat al-Malahim*, 25 March 2011.

<sup>164</sup> A second theory posits that rising sectarian animosity, particularly with increasing number of Saudi members, sparked the attack.

<sup>165</sup> Clashes between Dhu Husayn's al-Shawlan sub-tribe and Huthis in al-Matun started in May of that year. Multiple author interviews with member of al-Shawlan in Yemen in winter 2009.

<sup>166</sup> The road winds through Harf Sufyan before moving north to Sa'da and into Saudi Arabia.

<sup>167</sup> "Mashayikh min Marib Yu'alinin walai'hem lil-Huthi fi Dhahyan baynahum Mustashar al-Dakhiliya,"

that attended, but the existence of the meetings themselves was supported by contacts in both governorates.<sup>168</sup>

Huthi operational expansion southeast does appear to have hurt AQAP's operations. In September, AQAP claimed Huthis kidnapped two of its members at a checkpoint in al-Jawf, eventually delivering them to the deputy director of political security in Sa`da.<sup>169</sup> In response, AQAP abducted the same PSO chief, demanding that Sana`a release its members Husayn al-Tays and Mashur al-Ahdal within forty-eight hours. Tribesmen in al-Jawf and Marib echoed much of the available open source reporting, affirming that the Huthis enjoyed a far larger presence than AQAP in each region by late 2010 and early 2011.

Taken together, Huthi consolidation in western al-Jawf and nascent presence in northwest Marib may pose serious logistical problems for AQAP, which depends on reliable passage across Yemen's northern border into Saudi Arabia. Whether tactical relations between the two groups soured or Huthi expansion simply reduced the number of available smuggling routes into the Kingdom is unclear. Yet the clashes between supporters did occur in al-Jawf and Sa`da. Coupled with Huthi expansion and AQAP's apparent retreat south, both suggest that an attempt at preserving al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's freedom of movement may explain the November bombings.

Huthi expansion southeast also represents a fundamental strategic threat to AQAP. Though peaceful protesters, southern secessionists, Huthis and a host of opposition parties share an antipathy toward the central government, all compete with AQAP to present themselves as the most credible platform for political change in Yemen. As its competitors grow in power and influence, AQAP will struggle to maintain its dwindling relevance. With Huthis gaining territory, AQAP ceding it and protestors claiming more support than either group, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula could

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*Naba Nyuz*, 5 October 2010, <http://www.nabanews.net/2009/print29664.html>;  
"Yatabarahu Muraqiboun al-Tatawur al-Akhtar Mundhu Indila'a al-Harb fi Muhafadat Sa`da," *Al-Hadath al-Yemenia*, 3 October 2010, <http://www.alhadath-yemen.com/news9579.html>.

<sup>168</sup> Allegations of support for Huthis are not an uncommon political tactic in Yemen. Unsources news reports describing the relations of Maribi shaykhs with Huthi leaders therefore must be taken with considerable skepticism, especially given that the reports claimed the shaykhs pledged *bayat* to `Abd al-Malik. Contacts in Jahm maintained this was unlikely, and that those who attended did so only in their capacity as individuals and not as representatives for villages or tribal units. Conclusion according to phone interviews with Jahmi colleague, February 2010.

<sup>169</sup> "Bayan Asr Naib Mudir al-Amn al-Siyasi bi-Sa`da," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, 20 September 2010.

easily perceive itself as falling to a distant third among those seeking to exploit popular discontent in the country. Among al-Qa`ida's potential rivals, targeting Huthis entails far fewer risks than targeting civilians or members of the political opposition. The attacks represent a relatively low-cost method for buying domestic credibility in Yemen while drawing support outside it, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where anti-Shi`a rhetoric resonates strongly.

### **The Rise of Sectarian Violence?**

Despite sharpening sectarian rhetoric, AQAP does not have a compelling interest in sparking civil war in Yemen. An illegitimate central government constrained by lagging foreign investment and unpopular U.S. military intervention has provided a permissive environment for the group for over five years. There is also good reason to question whether AQAP is capable of inciting the type of sectarian conflict witnessed in Baghdad from 2006 to 2008. Yemen is not Iraq. It does not claim a similar history of intrareligious antagonism, existing foreign military occupation or insurgency. Most important, sect remains, for most Yemenis, a lower-order identifier than regional, tribal or political affiliation.

Nor do more limited aims against Huthis seem promising for AQAP.<sup>170</sup> The Huthi movement can credibly claim the strongest war fighting skills of any substate group on the Arabian Peninsula. Its mastery of terrain, artillery and small unit tactics is the product of seven-plus years of insurgency. Those who have endured extended bombing campaigns represent some of the most battle-tested fighters in the region. Though AQAP has demonstrated a far more ambitious reach than the Huthis, the group is unlikely to defeat skilled Huthi insurgents defending familiar territory along the mountains of southern Sa`da. The limited footage available of AQAP ground raids does not suggest that the group is capable of matching the Huthis in ground combat.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> This is not to say that attacking Huthis would not be desirable. Expelling Huthis from northern and central Yemen would serve as both an objective and a strategy, at once ridding the southern peninsula of apparent Shi`a influence while expanding AQAP's claim as *the* preferred armed religious opposition to the Salih government.

<sup>171</sup> The disposition of Huthi forces makes opening an active front against the group now even less sensible as wresting Sa`da from the movement does not seem realistic. AQAP could perhaps take parts of western al-Jawf, but would likely lose a pitched contest in Harf Sufyan. Even in such an optimistic scenario, AQAP would presumably sacrifice a sizable number of fighters—perhaps more than in a comparable operation against state security services—while gaining little territory in return. Confronting the movement carries with it the danger of relieving military pressure on Sana`a as well.

## CONCLUSION

Whatever their actual motives, the attacks against the Huthis are an instructive example of one of AQAP's greatest skills—grafting grievances popular throughout Yemen onto a core narrative of global jihad. This chapter has focused largely on the internal factors that have allowed the group to do so, distinguishing al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula not only from its jihadist antecedents but also from other opposition movements in Yemen. As should be clear from this discussion of the group's objectives and strategy, AQAP is an unusually dynamic group. Though its use of violence against Western civilians and infrastructure differentiates AQAP from other armed opposition movements in Yemen, its ability to balance distinct audiences, military capabilities and, increasingly, organizational structures truly distinguishes it from other jihadist groups in Yemen's recent past. By 2010, AQAP had proven itself capable of simultaneously reaching U.S. territory; employing terrorism against Western interests inside and outside Yemen; and launching insurgent attacks throughout the country. While the group's failure to concentrate exclusively on a single objective may signal an absence of focus—a flaw also present in the group's inconsistent military targets and tactics—AQAP's aptitude for balancing the requirements of often competing aims is precisely what distinguishes it from its jihadist antecedents in Yemen.

The next chapters will describe the social and political landscape in two of the country's governorates traditionally considered most closely tied to AQAP and its predecessor organizations. Though few studies of the group fail to emphasize al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's so-called sanctuary in the tribal hinterlands of eastern Yemen, detailed accounts of these governorates and the traditional social structures found there are rare. The following chapters are informed by extensive fieldwork on tribal custom and AQAP's outreach efforts in Marib and al-Jawf. Chapter Two will address the tribes and social mechanisms in each governorate, and Chapter Three will assess AQAP's efforts at developing its influence in both areas.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> While Chapter Two will be of particular interest to those concerned with the disposition of political influence and methods of collective behavior in these governorates, the editor understands this level of detail is not essential for every reader. Those less interested in the organizational details of the tribes of Marib and al-Jawf may prefer skipping directly to Chapter Three.



## CHAPTER TWO: MARIB AND AL-JAWF

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Knowledge of al-Qa`ida's presence east of Sana`a has long been limited by a challenging research environment. Marib and al-Jawf are remote, sparsely populated and poorly developed governorates with little exposure to foreigners. Outsiders, including Yemenis from other regions, are rarely given access without local sponsorship. The central government has traditionally exploited these regions for its own political interests, almost completely barring foreign engagement in the areas while readily citing any occasional presence as a driver of terrorist violence in the country.

Western understanding of both governorates has suffered as a result. Notions of how political influence is distributed and collective decisions are made among the tribes of Marib and al-Jawf remain based largely on U.S. experiences with Tribal Engagement elsewhere, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Likewise, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's efforts at building support in rural communities are heavily informed by perceptions of AQAM outreach to tribes in Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia. Before al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's experience with Tribal Engagement can be distinguished from these cases, a basic understanding of the political, social and cultural landscape in each governorate is essential.<sup>173</sup> This chapter discusses the principal actors and modes of tribal identity in Marib and al-Jawf. It pays particular attention to tribal hierarchy, authority and customary law, and closes with an explanation of tribal sanctuary and the role of shaykhs in both governorates.

While Yemen is often referred to as a tribal country beset by disorderly clans, this misconstrues the complexities of both the country and its people.<sup>174</sup> While three-quarters of Yemen's population do claim some type of tribal affiliation, in few places is there a uniform understanding of what tribal affiliation actually means.<sup>175</sup> Rarely does tribal

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<sup>173</sup> For the purposes of this study, Tribal Engagement implies an effort made by a foreign party to gain access to or shape the environment of a tribal community. Foreign in this context does not refer to citizenship, but to a marker distinguishing in-group from out-group members. Therefore, not only is the Yemeni government treated here as foreign actor, but in the context of balanced opposition discussed below, local tribesmen from neighboring micro-, sub- and macro-tribes represent "foreign" parties as well.

<sup>174</sup> Among even specialists of the subject, the term "tribe" is notoriously vague. Here, a tribe can be sufficiently defined as a group of a perceived shared lineage and originally organized around competition for scarce resources. For two of the most influential studies of tribes, see: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), 5, 122–124, 137, 240–248; Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (ACLS Humanities E Book, 2008), 43, 92.

<sup>175</sup> Yemen's last official census placed the population at 23.7 million. Three percent population growth

identity enjoy a monopoly in the decision making of most Yemenis, and tribal affiliation remains only one component of Yemeni identity. Familial ties, regionalism, political affiliation, class and religion all compete for dominance in influencing behavior. The salience of tribal identity—let alone tribal cohesion or tribal norms—also varies significantly with geography and over time. Tribes in rural Tihama are vastly different than in urban Ta`izz, and both bear little resemblance to the social structures of rural communities east of Sana`a.

Yemen's best-armed, most autonomous and arguably most cohesive tribes reside in two-thirds of what is often referred to as *Muthalith al-Sharr* (triangle of evil),<sup>176</sup> a stretch of desert running south from al-Jawf through Marib and into the Shabwah governorate.<sup>177</sup> To the detriment of policymaking and tribesmen alike, Marib and al-Jawf in particular have long been caricatured as ungoverned spaces readily exploited by Islamic extremists. For the better part of a decade the central government has reflexively pointed to both regions when assigning blame for alleged al-Qa`ida attacks. Not surprisingly, both Marib and al-Jawf emerged as U.S. defense and development priorities early in 2001. Eight years later, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula began its own highly visible Tribal Engagement efforts, launching a strategic messaging campaign targeting the tribes of Marib and to a lesser degree, those of al-Jawf. Yet despite more than a decade of intermittent efforts to counter a potential safe haven in Marib and al-Jawf, very little scholarship has addressed the regions themselves. A short overview of the actors, institutions and mechanisms governing each area is therefore necessary before discussing the substance and impact of AQAP's Tribal Engagement efforts, the subject of Chapter 3.

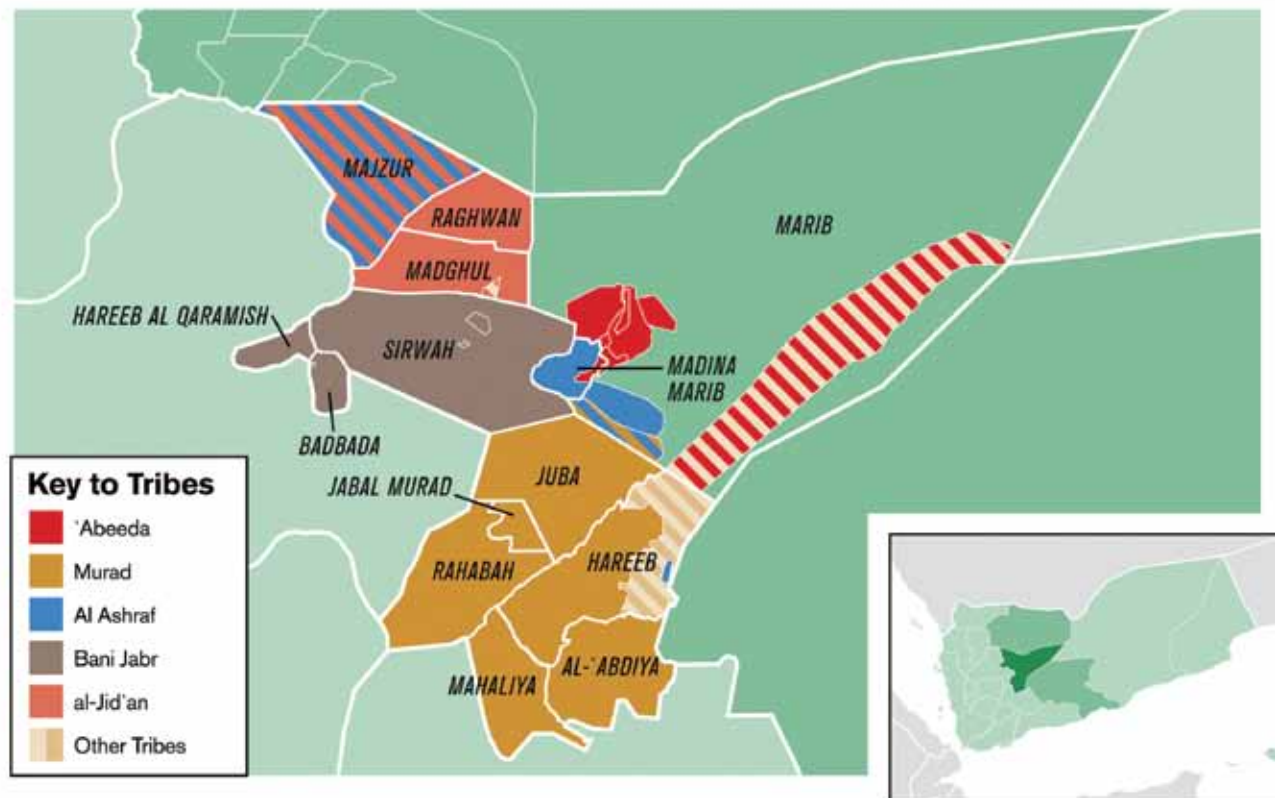
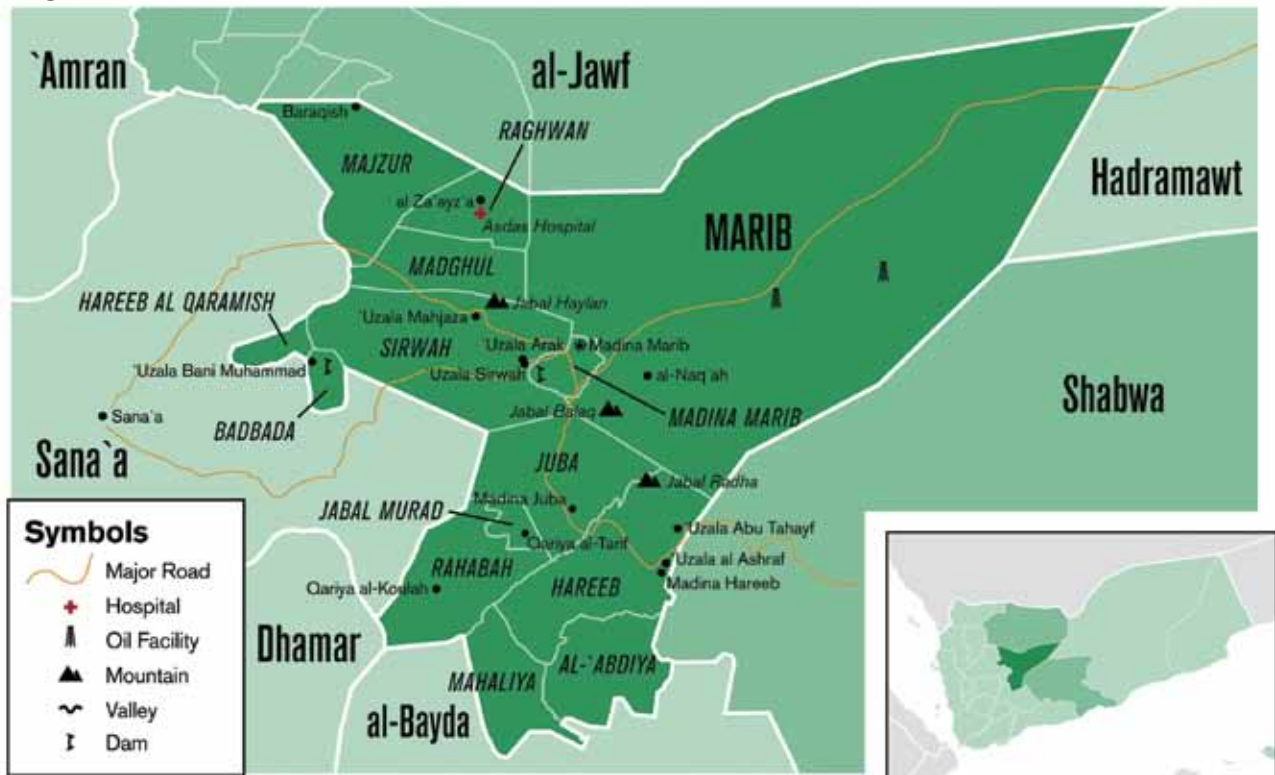
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over the six years following the 2005 survey puts the country's population nearer to 28 million today.

<sup>176</sup> Geographically, the governorates actually do not form a triangle. The use of *Muthalith al-Sharr* does not imply that the regions are actually centers of crime or criminal behavior, only that among many circles in government they are perceived of as such. According to conversations with Yemeni members of a prominent NGO in Sana`a; online forum postings citing both *Muthalith al-Sharr* and *Muthalith al-Mawt* (triangle of death); and President Salih's indirect reference to the term by calling the regions a triangle of virtue, not evil. See: Author interview, Sana`a, 15 November 2008; "Muthalith al-Mawt (al-Jawf, Marib, Shabwah)!", Muntada Shabwah Net, 15 December 2006; "al-Takhreeb Tasbab fi Tadmeeer Sa`da, wa Al'an Intiqal al-Sharr ila al-Jawf," *Marib Press*, 3 February 2009.

<sup>177</sup> This is for a variety of reasons, among them the locations of energy resources and smuggling routes, lack of development and political integration, sparse demography, harsh terrain and foreign interference by Yemen's Arab neighbors—both in conflict (1962–1970, 1994) and in peace. Also, while several governorates run a close second to Marib and al-Jawf, most notably Shabwah, Hadramawt and Abyan, the imposition of foreign administrators and repression under British and socialist rule disrupted tribal authority in each of the governorates in a way that did not occur in Marib and al-Jawf. This is not to say *tribes* or *tribal coherence* are absent in any of the southern regions. Nor does it imply that that Tribal Engagement, especially that of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, has ignored these areas. It only suggests that the governorates' tribes share different pre- and post unification histories and suffer from different local grievances than those in Marib and al-Jawf. As such, Shabwah, Hadramawt and Abyan all require distinct case studies of their own and fall outside of the scope of this project.

Figure 2.1



Tribal and Administrative Map of Marib

Source: Author

## MARIB GOVERNORATE (محافظة مأرب)

Though just seventy miles east of the capital, Marib remains perhaps second only to al-Jawf as the most isolated and least developed governorate in the country.<sup>178</sup> Its population of 238,000—some two-thirds of whom are under the age of thirty—is removed from Sana`a by a three-hour drive along the single asphalt road linking Marib with the capital.<sup>179</sup> The governorate's fourteen districts span from Majzur in the northwest to Mahalia in the south and Marib (district) to the east, all possessing markedly different terrain and forms of economic subsistence. A series of volcanoes dots the governorate's border with Sana`a's northeastern Nihm district before breaking into plateaus and valleys covering most of Marib's central and western territory. A majority of its population is dispersed in small villages scattered throughout these mountains and waddis (valleys), with the remainder localized around semiurban population centers in Marib City and Harib. Over half of Marib's territory is claimed in a single and sparsely populated district of the same name east of the capital city, Madina Marib. It is in this vast swath of desert in Marib district that the governorate built its reputation as the preferred destination of smugglers, criminals and jihadis.

By almost every criterion, Marib is among the poorest regions in all of the Middle East. It falls behind Yemen's national averages in literacy (47 percent), rural health care (4 percent), and electricity (38 percent).<sup>180</sup> In 2001, official unemployment was estimated at 24 percent.<sup>181</sup> However, most who live or have spent considerable time in the governorate project the number of underemployed to be at least double this amount. Of those searching for work, few economic opportunities exist beyond government and military employment. A combination of drought and arid land makes farming largely untenable in most of the governorate outside of Madina Marib, Wadi `Abeeda and Harib.<sup>182</sup> Despite these troubling indicators, Marib does not lack natural resources or economic potential. The country's largest oil field and first foreign drilling site are

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<sup>178</sup> By car, the route is considerably longer at 116 miles.

<sup>179</sup> As of fall 2009, at least eighteen military checkpoints dotted the road connecting Marib to the capital. Checkpoints according to the author's personal travel. Population data according to 2004 census results. See: "Nabtha 'an Muhafaza Marib" on the website *al-Dalil al-Shamil ila al-Yemen*, <http://www.yemenna.com/index.php?go=guide&op=show&link=mareb>; Sha'if Sharif al-Hakimi, "al-Taqrir al-Niha'I Hawl B'adh al-Mu'asharat al-Sukaniya li-Muhafazat (M'arib, al-Jawf, Shabwah)," *Idarat al-Niza'at bil-M'ahad al-Dimoqrati al-Watani* (2008), 11.

<sup>180</sup> As with the unemployment number cited in the text, most concede that accurate figures for these development indicators would be far lower than those provided here. Unfortunately, no such data currently exists. See: al-Hakimi (2008), 18, 20.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>182</sup> For example, the highland village in central Marib in which the author conducted his primary research was, in 2009, suffering through its eleventh consecutive year of drought.

located in the governorate's eastern desert near Shabwah.<sup>183</sup> Many of Yemen's richest archeological sites, including the ruins of the storied Sheba dynasty, are found in and around Wadi `Abeeda. However, poor infrastructure and security concerns have curbed foreign investment and tourism.

To date, Sana`a has been unable to overcome these challenges. The central government boasts virtually no presence in Marib beyond makeshift security outposts scattered throughout the governorate. Military bases are present in small numbers around population centers and key terrain features, and almost nonexistent outside of them. The governorate's single appellate court (*mahkamat al-isti'nafiyah*) in the capital city and three primary courts (*al-mahakim al-ibtida'iyah*) in Madina Marib, Jouba and Harib are woefully underequipped to address the legal issues of its citizens. In the district of Jabal Murad, its estimated 10,000 residents lack a single paved road and have yet to receive state-provided electricity.<sup>184</sup> Health services are almost nonexistent. No hospital exists in Jabal Murad, and in at least one *`uzala*—comprised of several hundred villagers—the sole medical clinic as of 2009 was dilapidated, without supplies and staffed by a single local resident with no medical training.<sup>185</sup>

Technology has penetrated the governorate unevenly. In the urban centers of Madina Marib and Harib, Internet cafés line streets much as they do in Sana`a and Aden. Yet in rural communities no similar communications infrastructure exists. In a village of some seventy homes in central Marib, two had satellite dishes and only one had Internet access.<sup>186</sup> Marib's education system is even more troubling. Most rural villages have just a primary school, responsible for as many as fifty students and frequently taught by a single teacher—usually selected from among local families and without formal training.<sup>187</sup> Secondary schools are less common, but do draw qualified instructors from Yemen's southern and traditionally better educated governorates. Retaining both teachers and students has proven a challenge. Cultural differences and severe working

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<sup>183</sup> The Safir facility was launched by then-vice president George H. W. Bush in 1986 by the Texas-based Hunt Oil Company, which built a pipeline stretching west through the Marib and Sirwah districts to Hudayda's northwestern Ras Issa Refinery and Terminal. Block 18 was transferred from Hunt to the Yemeni Safir Petroleum Exploration Company in 2005.

<sup>184</sup> Population estimate according to "Madiria Jabal Murad" on the website *al-Dalil al-Shamil ila al-Yemen*, [http://www.yemenna.com/index.php?go=guide&op=show\\_dir&ide=254](http://www.yemenna.com/index.php?go=guide&op=show_dir&ide=254).

<sup>185</sup> According to author's fieldwork in Marib, September through October 2009.

<sup>186</sup> Interestingly, the same village was apparently once capable of receiving foreign radio broadcasts. In interviews, villagers recalled with fondness listening to BBC Arabic and Sound of London. Yet this appears more a result of their position atop one of Marib's highest peaks rather than the governorate's communications capacity, as no one interviewed in Marib's lowlands possessed similar media access. Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

conditions have encouraged high rates of desertion among non-Maribi instructors, while an absence of both teachers and facilities forced students in some cases to walk several hours to and from the nearest secondary school.<sup>188</sup>

Despite settling at the bottom of virtually all of Yemen's development indicators, Marib is not entirely without the presence of the central government. Local tribesmen frequently boasted that more Yemeni generals were deployed to the governorate than existed districts.<sup>189</sup> Yet beyond a military presence, there are no reminders of Sana'a in the villages of Marib's western mountains and eastern desert. Perceptions of foreign actors in the governorate are complicated. Westerners were sporadically allowed to travel to Marib under the supervision of tourist guides until 2007, but few risked the trip. After attacks on foreigners in July of that year and again in January 2008, the governorate has been off-limits to civilians and almost all U.S. government personnel. USAID has managed to project a limited presence through building and refurbishing more than a dozen health clinics and schools over the past decade, but with the exception of several contentious visits by the U.S. ambassador to Sana'a from 2002 to 2004, the aid has been delivered with little to no American involvement in the community.<sup>190</sup>

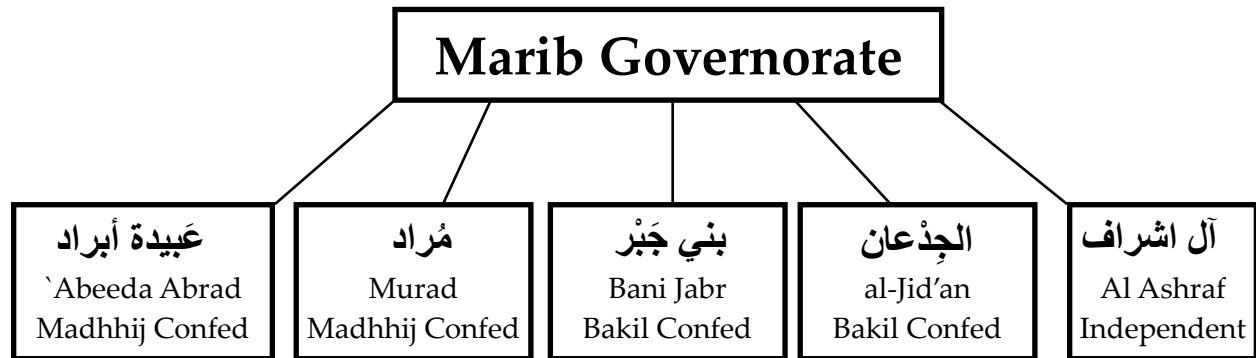
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<sup>188</sup> Students interviewed in central Marib also criticized the arrangement. According to the teenagers, teachers from Ibb, Aden and Ta'izz frequently banned the boys from wearing the traditional *mawa'iz* (saronglike garment) in class, a practice less common in southern Yemen. The same students spent roughly an hour walking down a series of plateaus to the nearest school several villages away, and almost two hours returning each day. Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> The men claimed anywhere from sixteen to eighteen generals were stationed in Marib in 2009.

<sup>190</sup> As some indication, roughly three-quarters of the tribesmen and shaykhs interviewed for this project had not spoken with an American, and the village in central Marib where much of the following research was conducted had not been visited by a foreigner of any nationality in the previous twenty-three years

Figure 2.2



*Major Tribes of Marib*<sup>191</sup>

Source: Author

The governorate's fourteen districts are composed of five major non-nomadic tribes: Al Ashraf, al-Jid'an, Bani Jabr, Murad and `Abeeda Abrad.<sup>192</sup> Each is divided among a variation of sections, often called fifths (*akhmas*), separating macro-, micro-, sub- and familial units.<sup>193</sup> Though most reside within generally accepted territorial boundaries, the nearly half dozen macro-tribes are remarkably diverse. They are both old and young; some have resided in Marib for nearly two millennia while others have relocated to the governorate recently. Most are of the Shafi'i *Madhhab*, or school of Islamic jurisprudence, though two who traditionally enjoy strong political and military ties with Sana'a are Zaydi. With the exception of Al Ashraf, the governorate's major tribes claim affiliation to Yemen's Madhhij and Bakil Tribal Confederations.<sup>194</sup> Members of

<sup>191</sup> While the major tribes in each governorate are transliterated into English at the beginning of each chapter, the individual diagrams of each tribe in the Appendix are left in Arabic. This is because there is no agreed-upon transliteration of their names in English, and experts frequently disagree on the proper spelling of tribal names. To avoid confusion or misidentification, the names of macro-, micro-, and sub-tribes are left in their original Arabic. Any misspellings or errors in the ordering of tribal sections are the author's alone. Lastly, the tribal lineages presented in the appendix are not intended to be comprehensive. More comprehensive tables will be supplied in forthcoming work by the author.

<sup>192</sup> Al Ashraf leads this assessment for no reason other than it is a majority in Marib's northwestern most district. Subsequent tribes will be detailed as the focus moves first south and then east. There is no significance to this arrangement other than geographic disposition. Additionally, the five cited above in no way constitute the entire spectrum of tribal identity in Marib. A number of smaller macro-tribes also reside within the governorate, most located in the southern Harib district, among them: al-Abu Tahayf, al-'Awadh, al-Ghanim, al-'Aqil, al-Musalima, Bani Qays and al-Aslam.

<sup>193</sup> The hierarchy implied in their arrangement was considerably less clear in practice. See: Dresch (1990), 106–107; Weir, 54, 67–79, 91–92.

<sup>194</sup> Here, the term "confederation" refers to loose coalitions of macro-tribes. Of Yemen's three, Hashid has traditionally been the most politically integrated and perhaps organizationally coherent. Nevertheless, tribal confederations in Yemen should not be confused with constituencies enjoying common policies or even shared interests. All the fissiparous tendencies present within individual tribal units are intensified in Yemen's confederations. For a very short description of Hashid and Bakil, see: Paul Dresch, "The Position of Shaykhs Among the Northern Tribes of Yemen," *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (March 1984), 33–34.

Marib's major tribes are prominent in both the opposition political party al-Islah and the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) of President Salih, and each tribe enjoys varied relations with Sana'a.<sup>195</sup>

### **Al Ashraf<sup>196</sup>**

Al Ashraf populates most of Marib's northwestern Majzur district, sharing several villages with the Jama'an branch of the Jid'an macro-tribe, as well as residing in parts of Madina Marib and Harib. The tribe is perhaps the most unique of Marib's social-kinship groups. In a Sunni majority governorate, its members are both Zaydi Shi'a and *sayyids*, religious scholars who claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>197</sup> Despite maintaining a degree of independence from the tribal institutions within which they live—a point Maribis mentioned frequently in highlighting the nontribal nature of the group—Al Ashraf nonetheless maintains many of the structural characteristics of a conventional tribal unit.<sup>198</sup> Al Ashraf is divided among sections, micro-tribes and family lineages in Majzur (al-Salih, al-Jarfel), Marib City (al-Zayd, al-Amir) and Harib (al-Ahmad), and is represented by prominent individuals accorded the responsibility and titles of tribal shaykhs.<sup>199</sup>

### **Al-Jid'an<sup>200</sup>**

Southeast of Majzur, Bakil's Jid'an macro-tribe controls the two adjoining districts of Raghwan and most of Madghal.<sup>201</sup> In part due to the contributions of its Ku'alan micro-

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<sup>195</sup> The following overview is based on the author's interviews with members of each of Marib and al-Jawf's major tribes from October 2008 through October 2009, and complemented by al-Muqhafi (2002) *Mu'ajam al-Buldan wa al-Qabail al-Yemenia* and a variety of Arabic-language online forums dedicated to each governorate, and in some cases, each macro-tribe.

<sup>196</sup> See Appendix, pg. 2, for tribal tree.

<sup>197</sup> Zaydism is distinct from the twelver Shi'a of Iran. For a detailed description of the main differences and history of the Zaydis, see W. Madelung, "Zaydiyya," *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2011), Brill Online.

<sup>198</sup> Al Ashraf is neither a member of the Bakil or Madhhij Tribal Confederations, to which the remainder of Marib and al-Jawf belong.

<sup>199</sup> The names listed in parenthesis in the text refer to subordinate units within Al Ashraf, not locations.

<sup>200</sup> See Appendix, pg. 3, for tribal tree.

<sup>201</sup> To clarify, al-Jid'an functions as one of the largest sub-tribes of Nihm immediately to its west. Yet few in al-Jid'an initially identify themselves as Nihmis rather than Jid'anis, and Nihm has no formal presence



tribe (al-Haramal; al-S`aid), Jid`an is especially well represented in Sana`a's security services. It is divided into at least three sub-tribes and a great many more micro-units and family lineages, the largest of which are al-Jam`an in Majzur district, al-Khadhir in Madghal and al-Haramal in Madghal and Raghwan.

### **Bani Jabr**<sup>202</sup>

Immediately to the south, several branches of Bakil's Bani Jabr macro-tribe populate three districts: the Jahm sub-tribe in Sirwah and Badbada, Bani Asa`id and al-Ahsoun in Badbada, and al-Qaramish sub-tribe in Harib al-Qaramish. Predominantly consisting of Shi`a Zaydis, Jahm is among the most diverse of any of Marib's tribes. The tribe spans virtually every facet of Yemen's political landscape, ranging from accused al-Qa`ida facilitators (Ghalib al-Zaydi, Salih bin Qaid T`aiman and his brother `Abdullah Muhammad), alleged Iranian proxies (Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Zaydi), senior GPC officials (Naji bin `Ali Zaydi and Mubarak al-Mushin al-Zaydi), independent activists (Ahmad bin `Ali Hisan) and renowned poets (Ahmad bin Salih al-Mani`<sup>203</sup>

### **Murad**<sup>204</sup>

Farther south, the Murad macro-tribe controls most of the lower third of the governorate. A key member of the Madhhij confederation, Murad has a tribal majority in the Jouba, Jabal Murad, Rahabah, Harib, al-'Abdia and Mahiliya districts. Along with the Kinda of present-day Saudi Arabia, Murad represents one of southern Arabia's most storied tribes. Its members are fond of recounting their tribe's early alliance with the Prophet Muhammad and conversion to Islam in 631, and their expedition north to expel Persia's Zoroastrian majority Sassanid Empire from Iraq two years later.<sup>205</sup>

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across its border in Marib. For the basis of the report, al-Jid`an will be treated as a discrete macro-tribe within Marib.

<sup>202</sup> See Appendix, pg. 4, for tribal tree.

<sup>203</sup> Ghalib al-Zaydi is not a shaykh in the traditional sense. Also, though the first two of these allegations would appear common accusations made against political opponents throughout Yemen, the author's interviews with several tribesmen close to those named above freely admit to the connections.

<sup>204</sup> See Appendix, pg. 5, for tribal tree.

<sup>205</sup> Murad's early entrance to Islam is according to author's field research, Marib, September through October 2009. Also verified in: E. J. Brill, *First Encyclopedia of Islam* (Brill Academic Publishers, 1993), 726.

Tales of Murad's military prowess were well known in the early 20th century, when 'Ali Nasir al-Qarda'i of the Walid Jamil sub-tribe famously led an effective guerilla campaign against British forces in southern Yemen.<sup>206</sup> Disfigured as a boy, al-Qarda'i headed one of Yemen's most successful insurgencies, helping to drive British soldiers from al-Bayda and Shabwah's Beyhan and 'Ataq districts with the support of Upper Yemen's Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamidaddin.<sup>207</sup> By 1947, Muradi tradition maintains that al-Qarda'i broke with the Imam and was quickly approached by republicans intent on toppling the unpopular Imamate. The following spring, al-Qarda'i and nine other tribesmen from Murad entered Sana'a under the pretense of seeking arbitration for a tribal dispute, and on 17 February 1948 the group gunned down the Imam in an ambush outside of the city.

Decades later, among Marib and al-Jawfi tribes, Murad figures prominently in the military and security services of President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih. In the country's brief civil war of 1994, Muhammad Salih Tariq of the Walid Jamil sub-tribe led one of the first units to engage in the conflict in 'Amran.<sup>208</sup> Tariq, along with an estimated two hundred Muradi tribesmen informally serving in the country's forces in Sa'da as of 2009, again took visible positions in the most recent clashes of the seven-year Huthi insurgency in northern Yemen.<sup>209</sup> Though the scale of his authority is rare, Tariq's experience is not. Interviews with members of Murad from Harib, Rahabah, Jabal Murad and Jouba indicate that low-wage employment in the Ministry of Interior and the security services represents perhaps the largest source of income for tribesmen living outside the relatively fertile agricultural land of Harib.

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<sup>206</sup> Britain entered southern Yemen in 1839, establishing the Aden Protectorate thirty-six years later. A formal Colony of Aden followed in 1937 and the short-lived Federation of South Arabia in 1962 before British forces withdrew from the country under pressure from a seething insurgency throughout much of southern Yemen five years later.

<sup>207</sup> The Imam headed an indigenous form of Zaydi rule in Upper Yemen stretching back to the 9th century. Though its authority and geographic scope fluctuated within the country and at various points during Yemen's history, at no point did the Imamate "rule" the entirety of modern Yemen.

<sup>208</sup> Tariq hailed from Walid Jamil (sub 3), al-Shajira (sub 2), al-Katheer (sub 1), Bani Shathera (micro) and al-Tariq (familial) sections of Murad. Yet in no way did Tariq's decision to lead government forces in the civil war represent a broader consensus within Murad. A number of other sections worked, and in some cases fought, with southerners against Sana'a.

<sup>209</sup> Author interview, Sana'a, 28 August 2009.

## `Abeeda Abrad<sup>210</sup>

Northeast of Murad lies `Abeeda Abrad, long a favorite of both al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and U.S. Tribal Engagement efforts.<sup>211</sup> `Abeeda is most concentrated along the semifertile farmland surrounding Madina Marib to the west and south. The tribe's location favorably positions it to influence the few geostrategic points of significance in Marib. The immense Marib Dam project of the late 1980s brought `Abeeda newfound influence through control of key subcontracts and resources. The lightly populated southwestern tip of the *Rub` al-Khali* (Empty Quarter) desert also borders the country's largest oil field and power station, providing `Abeeda a consistent form of employment and a low-cost target for articulating discontent. Finally, the vast tracks of desert to `Abeeda's northwest contain many of the smuggling routes leading through al-Jawf and into Saudi Arabia.

`Abeeda would seem well positioned to become one of Yemen's most prosperous if not influential tribes, but this has not occurred.<sup>212</sup> Though Western aid, security employment and government largesse have certainly flowed to the tribe, `Abeeda has had a volatile relationship with Sana`a.<sup>213</sup> Never a dominant tribe, `Abeeda acquired massive amounts of arms and Saudi donations after Yemeni civil wars in the 1960s and 1994. The Soviet-Afghan War also pushed `Abeeda closer to its northern neighbor, as growing ties encouraged Saudi charities to recruit young men from `Abeeda's ranks to join the fighting in Kabul.<sup>214</sup> As the conflict continued, Saudis were able to draw some of `Abeeda's most important families to the fight, including members of the `Aradah, Mo`eli, Al Shabwan and Damashqa branches.<sup>215</sup>

In December 2001, a decade of increasingly contentious relations with Sana`a peaked in a botched manhunt for Abu `Ali al-Harithi's alleged deputy, Muhammad al-Ahdal,

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<sup>210</sup> See Appendix, pg. 6, for tribal tree.

<sup>211</sup> Though formally named `Abeeda Abrad, the tribe is almost always shortened to simply `Abeeda in daily parlance.

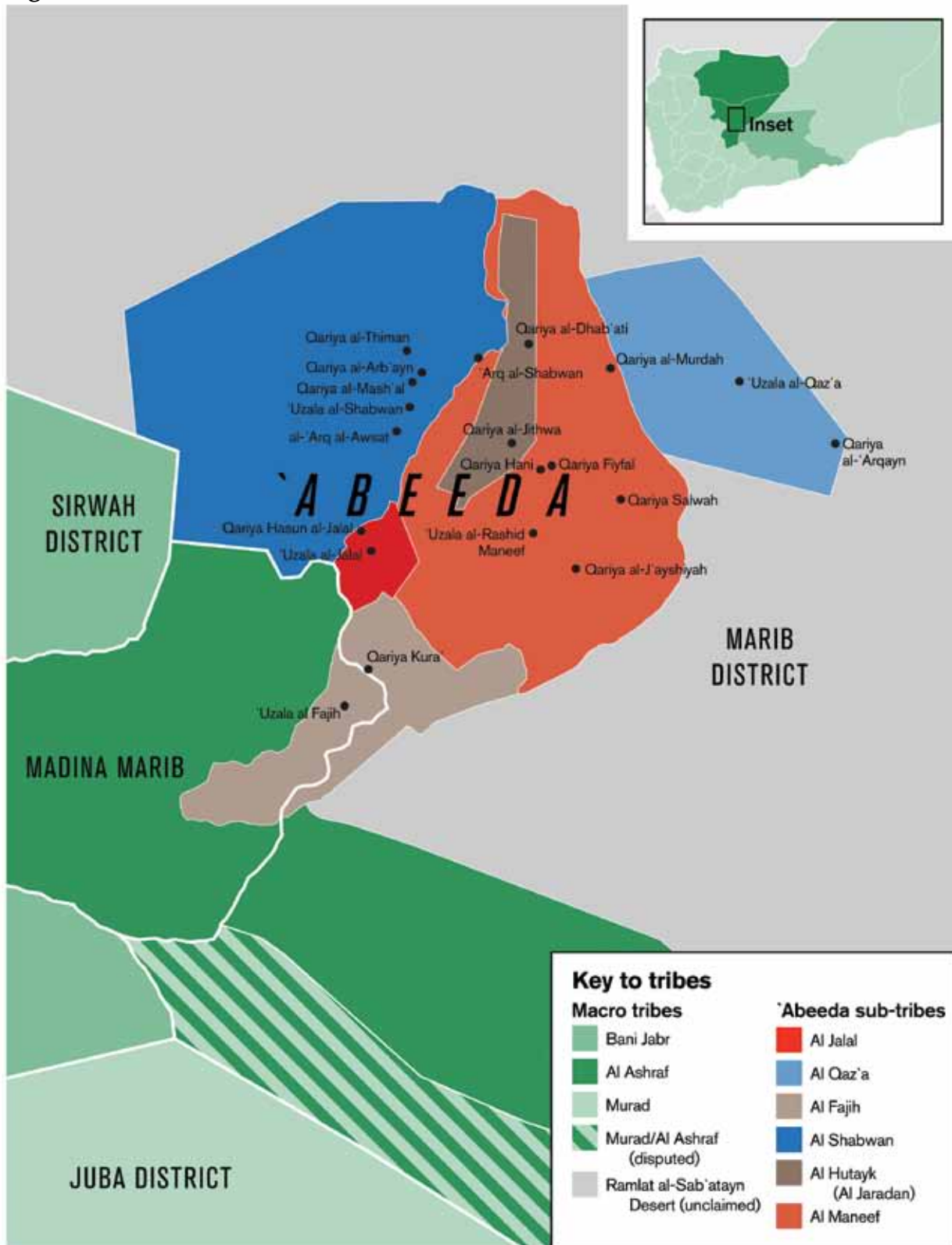
<sup>212</sup> I owe the relevance of the dam project to a Nihmi colleague. Author interview, Sana`a, 5 August and 8 August 2009.

<sup>213</sup> It should be noted that the latter two, security employment and government largesse, have largely been directed toward elites rather than villagers.

<sup>214</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 28 September 2009.

<sup>215</sup> Precise estimates of the number of `Abeeda tribesmen traveling to Afghanistan for jihad in the 1980s are not available. As with most research topics in Yemen, disaggregating rumor from fact is immensely difficult. Yet most interviewees in Marib, Nihm and al-Jawf conceded that `Abeeda did send larger numbers of young men abroad than other tribes.

Figure 2.3



Map of 'Abeeda Sub-Tribes and Surrounding Macro Tribes

Source: Author

in the village of Hasun al-Jalal.<sup>216</sup> This incident, coupled with two prominent Salafi institutes, both allegedly in the *`uzala* of al-Rashid Manif, led *`Abeeda* to be labeled by Sana`a as a principle facilitator for al-Qa`ida in Yemen. The tribe was often the first to be accused by officials in Sana`a when discussing terrorist training and plots in Yemen. Western assistance to the tribe followed, pouring in aid for education, health and vocational training into the more settled areas around Marib City in hopes of denying sanctuary to al-Qa`ida . By late 2009, *`Abeeda*'s territory was among the largest recipients of development aid in the governorate. Though the counterterrorism windfall brought with it millions in development projects, the long-term effects of the aid appear to have done little beyond enriching well-established power brokers. Ordinary *`Abeeda* tribesmen continue to complain of unfair accusations of support for terrorism; government discrimination; and few opportunities for employment beyond farming, oil security and smuggling.

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<sup>216</sup> The counterterrorism raid occurred just three weeks after President Salih traveled to Washington in search of U.S. aid. After failing to find Abu `Ali al-Harithi in his family's village near Wadi Bayhan in northern Shabwah, Yemeni troops backed by a convoy of tanks, attack helicopters and MiG fighter jets surrounded the Maribi village of Hasun al-Jalal on 18 December in search of Muhammed Hamdi al-Ahdal, thought to be an al-Qa`ida financial officer. Military officials demanded the tribe turn over al-Ahdal and presumably al-Harithi—both requested by President Bush in writing during Salih's visit to Washington. Though accounts here differ, Jalali shaykhs either refused the army's demand or maintained that the men had left the village days earlier. During the standoff, one of the parties shot first and the Yemeni Army suffered heavy casualties. Thirty-two people were reported to have died in the fighting, as many as twenty-two of them soldiers. Jalali tribesmen kidnapped nearly two dozen troops and confiscated military equipment in the aftermath of the clash. Neither al-Harithi nor al-Ahdal was captured in the firefight, and the incident was an embarrassing setback for Sana`a counterterrorism efforts.

## AL-JAWF GOVERNORATE (محافظة الجوف)

Bordering Marib to the north is the larger and still less developed al-Jawf governorate. Nearly the size of West Virginia, al-Jawf's twelve districts claim a population of as many as 500,000, though some estimates put nearly half that amount in the recently annexed district of Barat al-`Inan.<sup>217</sup> As in Marib, its residents are clustered throughout largely rural villages along a series of plains and valleys to the west, while the lightly populated *Ramlat al-Sab`atayn* desert covers the remaining three-quarters of the governorate to the east. Though two asphalt roads connecting al-Jawf to Sana`a through Barat al-`Inan and the southern capital city of Hazm have increased rural-to-urban migration and helped to establish semideveloped population centers, both cities remain largely composed of fixed tribal units.

Al-Jawf is perhaps the most isolated and impoverished of Yemen's twenty-one governorates. While Hazm is slightly nearer to Sana`a than Marib City is, a 2009 report concluded that only 4 percent of al-Jawf's residents had access to government-provided electricity, and just four registered physicians—none of them women—were responsible for a population of more than 400,000.<sup>218</sup> A Yemeni colleague who spent considerable time in the governorate implementing development projects estimated that only six of its roughly two dozen secondary schools offered courses through high school.<sup>219</sup> Government data estimates that more than twice as many families suffer from poverty in al-Jawf (31 percent) as in Marib (15 percent), 59 percent of the governorate remains illiterate, 13 percent have access to free electricity and 9 percent of families have access to a paved road.<sup>220</sup>

Yet statistics struggle to convey the scale of al-Jawf's underdevelopment. Interviews with tribesmen in southwest and eastern al-Jawf suggest that outside of the better-integrated regions of Barat al-`Inan and Hazm, development indicators are considerably

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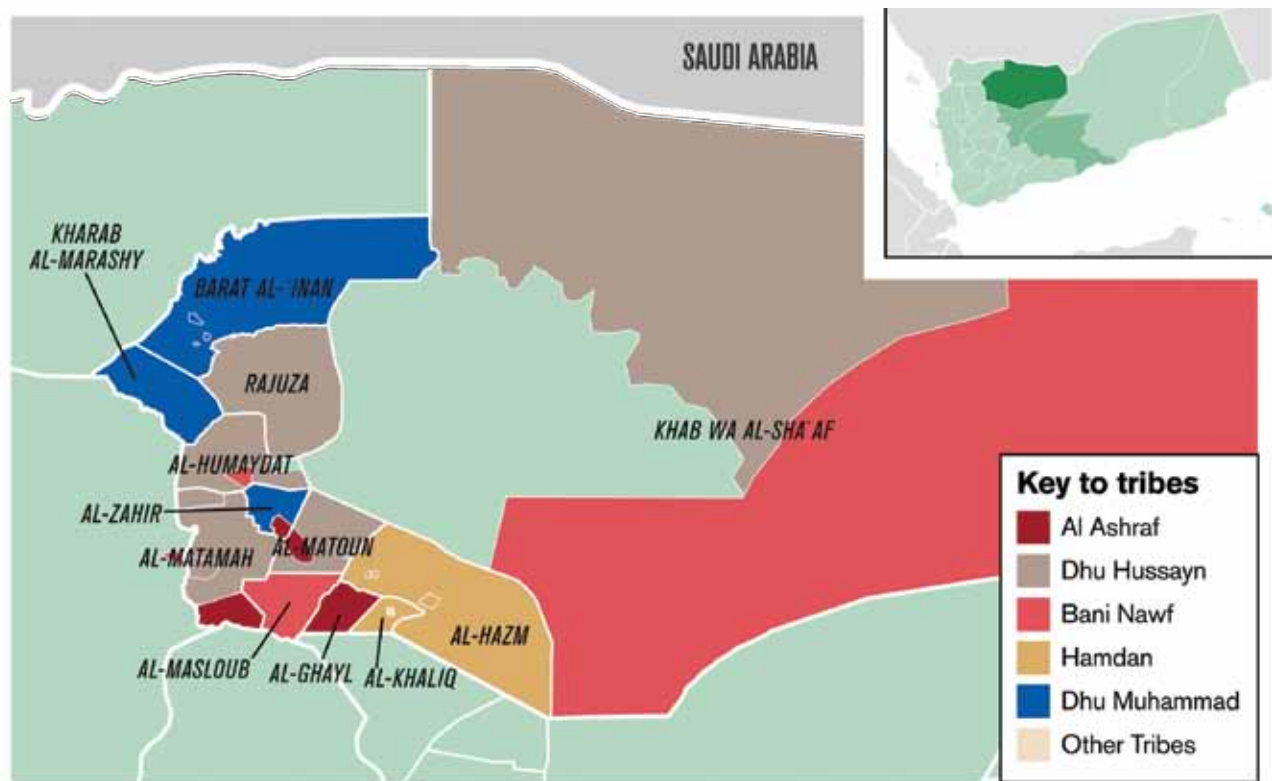
<sup>217</sup> Al-Jawf spans roughly 18,830 square miles. Barat was allocated to al-Jawf roughly a decade ago. For Barat, see: Author interview, Sana`a, 27 August 2009; for al-Jawf population data, see: <http://www.yemenna.com/index.php?go=guide&op=show&link=jaof>.

<sup>218</sup> This latter point relating to the absence of female doctors is according to a Yemeni colleague who has extensive experience running NGO programs in al-Jawf. Author interview, Sana`a, 20 May 2009. For estimates of electricity and physicians, see: Faez Makhrafi, "Jawf, Forgotten Governorate [Part One of Three]," *Saba News*, 20 August 2009, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news191906.htm>; Faez Makhrafi, "Jawf, Forgotten Governorate [Part Two of Three]," *Saba News*, 24 August 2009, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news192147.htm>.

<sup>219</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 20 May 2009.

<sup>220</sup> Sha'if Sharif al-Hakimi, "al-Taqrir al-Niha`i Hawl B`adh al-Mu`asharat al-Sukaniya li-Muhafazat (Ma`rib, al-Jawf, Shabwah)," *Idarat al-Niza`at bil-M`ahad al-Dimoqrati al-Watani* (2008), 16, 21.

Figure 2.4



Tribal and Administrative Map of al-Jawf

Source: Author

worse. In 2009, accounts suggest that state-funded electricity was provided to the Khaliq district for as many as ten and in Hazm seven hours per day, while the vastly larger Khab wa al-Sha`af district received none.<sup>221</sup> According to a senior shaykh of Hamdan, the relatively affluent Khaliq district immediately south of the Hazm still suffered from 70 percent unemployment in August 2009.<sup>222</sup> In rural villages, communications technology is limited. Though most residents have mobile telephones, several shaykhs in southwest al-Jawf placed the number of homes with satellite dishes at less than 10 percent, and none mentioned the presence of Internet access.<sup>223</sup>

Sana`a maintains dozens of checkpoints and military outposts in the governorate, as does Riyadh just across the northern border; however, Yemeni security forces have traditionally enjoyed a weaker presence in al-Jawf than in Marib. The reasons for this are not surprising. Khab wa al-Sha`af is simply much farther from Sana`a than Sirwah in Marib, and therefore instability in al-Jawf represents far less of a threat to the capital. There are also fewer national or economic interests to protect in al-Jawf than in any other governorate save perhaps al-Mahra. No foreign energy firm operates in the region—although officials in the mining industry privately concede that al-Jawf possesses sufficient mineral deposits to warrant foreign investment.<sup>224</sup> Despite claiming a population almost twice as large as Marib's, al-Jawf has only a single primary court and virtually no Western presence.<sup>225</sup> The governorate is, even in comparison to Marib, isolated from almost all signs of state influence or foreign development.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 15 August 2009; author interview, Sana`a, 12 September 2009.

<sup>222</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 30 August 2009.

<sup>223</sup> The exceptions to the limited presence of satellite dishes appear to be localized not surprisingly around the centers of districts rather than in isolated villages. For example homes in the center of al-Jawf's southwestern Mutama district in Husn Bani Sa'id are, according to a contact in the *`uzala*, nearly completely penetrated by satellite dishes. The general assessment is based on author interviews in Sana`a in August and September 2009. An approximation of Bani Sa'id is according to phone interview, 29 June 2010.

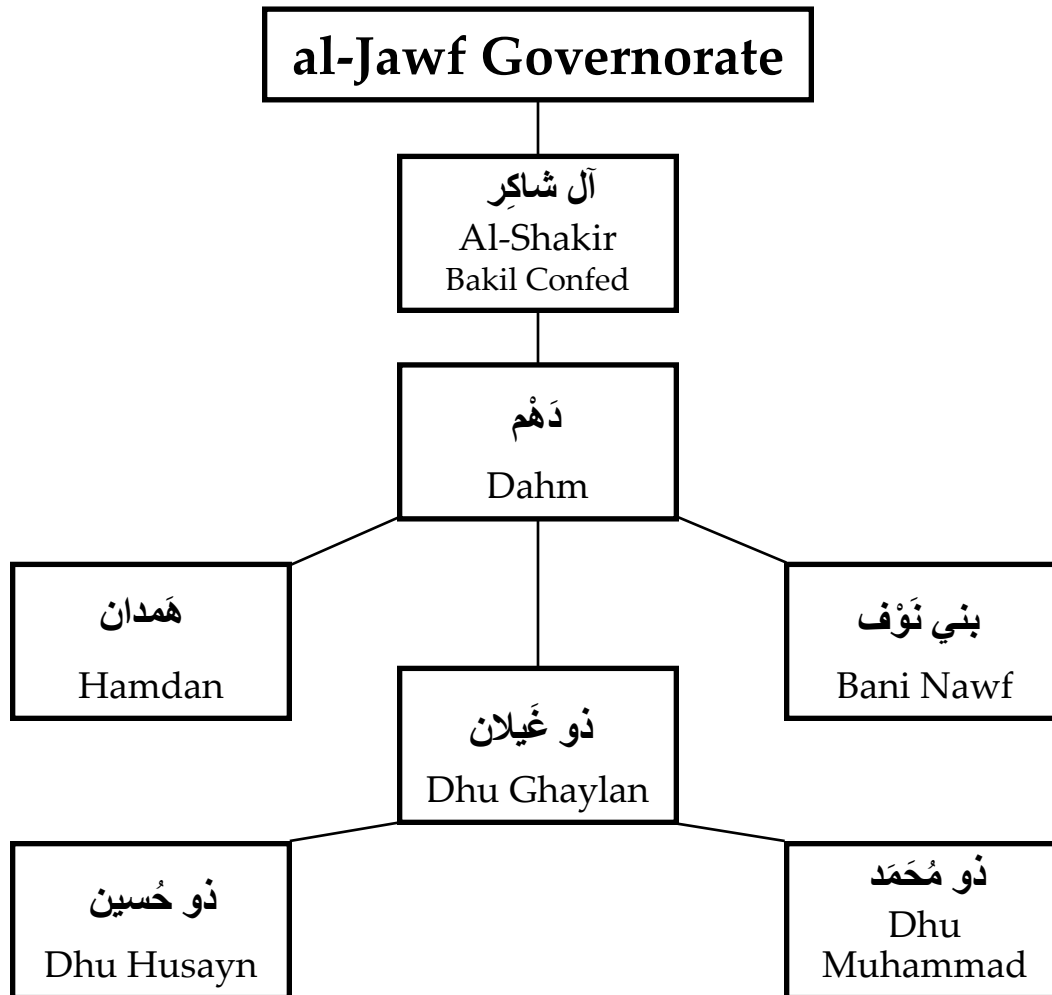
<sup>224</sup> None has been willing to risk working in the governorate due to security concerns. An Italian natural gas company was rumored to have surveyed the area in the late 1990s, but nothing came of it. Author interview with Western mining official, 20 July 2009.

<sup>225</sup> The court of first instance is located in the capital city of Hazm. No appellate court exists in the governorate. The only recent Western presence appears to have revolved around a small team of Italian archeologists charged with excavating several temples near Baraqish in 2005, and a small team from Doctors Without Borders working with internally displaced peoples on a limited basis in and around Hazm in 2009. USAID has traditionally funded health and school projects in the governorate, though instability and a lack of basic infrastructure have proven troublesome for delivering the aid.

<sup>226</sup> jawfi and Maribi tribesmen frequently noted that the kidnapping of foreigners would never become an issue in either governorate as no foreigners existed to be kidnapped northeast of Sana`a.



Figure 2.5



*Major Tribes of al-Jawf Governorate*

Source: Author

Four major non-nomadic tribes populate al-Jawf's twelve districts: Dhu Muhammad, Dhu Husayn, Bani Nawf and Hamdan.<sup>227</sup> Though each are technically subunits of the Al Shakir and Dahm lineages, none of those interviewed claimed a high affinal salience with either. Some recognized Dahm, but no participant claimed any link with Al Shakir.<sup>228</sup> As in Marib, each macro-tribe is divided into sections, ordered vertically

<sup>227</sup> Though a number of midsize tribes command authority as well. Of these, al-Muhashima located in northern Khab wa al-Sha'af near Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia and members of Al Ashraf in al-Ghail, southern al-Mutama, and southern al-Zahir, are among the most prominent. The four major tribes listed above are ordered again based on their predominant locations, starting northwest and moving southeast. There is no significance to this arrangement other than geographic disposition.

<sup>228</sup> A brief scenario is helpful for illustrating how boundaries thought to divide intratribal units overlap in al-Jawf. In conversations with shaykhs from al-Shawlan for example, they were most likely to self-identify as member of al-Shawlan. All were equally likely to explain their membership as a section of

from membership in a confederation to descent from a single familial unit. Unlike its southern neighbor, al-Jawf's primary tribes are exclusively Zaydi and from the Bakil Confederation, although their relations with Sana`a are no more uniform. Some Jawfi tribes have traditionally played larger roles in government (Hamdan) while others held closer ties to Riyadh (al-Shawlan).

### **Dhu Muhammad<sup>229</sup>**

Beginning in al-Jawf's northwestern most district, a combination of Dhu Muhammad and closely aligned al-Ma`atira constitutes the majority tribes of Barat al-`Inan's roughly 200,000 residents.<sup>230</sup> The location is an auspicious one. Al-`Inan is the largest city by population in al-Jawf and claims one of the governorate's two roads connecting it to Sana`a. With the possible exception of the capital city and district of Hazm, Barat al-`Inan is regarded as the best developed of al-Jawf's districts.<sup>231</sup> The territory of Dhu Muhammad continues south as well, encompassing the adjacent district of Kharab al-Marasha and most of al-Zahir southeast of Marasha.

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Dhu Husayn, and some acknowledged their position in the Bakil Confederation, though this depended in large part on the level of independence one sought to project. Rarely did they continue tracing their ancestry to Dahm, but none identified as a subcomponent of a macro-tribe named al-Shakir. Likewise, if one were to pass a Shawlani on the street, he would most likely self-identify primarily as member of al-Shawlan—some claiming or assuming a macro-tribe status for what remains a micro-tribe—while others would broadly claim membership in Dhu Husayn. Yet, the author met none who called himself a Dahmi or an al-Shakiri. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, each major sub-tribe in al-Jawf will be treated as a discrete macro-tribe within the Bakil Confederation.

<sup>229</sup> See Appendix, pg. 11, for tribal tree.

<sup>230</sup> Al-Ma`atira's lineage is sometimes disputed in Yemen. Members of Dhu Muhammad often claimed al-Ma`atira was a section of their own, while others argued the opposite. Al-Maqhafi and Dresch reach different conclusions regarding al-Ma`atira. Maqhafi traces the tribe through Dhu Ghaylan and Dhu Muhammad, while Dresch convincingly argues that al-Ma`atira functioned as a "sixth fifth" of Dhu Muhammad, sketching its ancestry from Shakir through Muhammad, a close relative of Dhu Ghaylan and by corollary Dhu Muhammad. For al-Maqhafi, see: Ibrahim Ahmad al-Maqhafi, *Ma`jam al-Buldan wa al-Qaba'il al-Yamaniya*, Sana`a, Yemen, Al-Juz'a al-Thani, Dar al-Kalima, 2002, 1566; For Dresch, see: Paul Dresch, *The Rules of Barat* (Sana`a, Yemen: CEFAS, 2006), 29-33.

<sup>231</sup> Spillover from a prolonged insurgency to its west has obviously dampened these advantages. In a poignant anecdote, a Barati shaykh from Dhu Muhammad explained to the author that as the Huthi conflict swelled in neighboring Sa`da and Harf Sufyan in 2009, no fewer than twelve government and Huthi checkpoints surfaced along the road linking al-Jawf with Sufyan. According to the shaykh, the situation deteriorated to the point that he was not sure whether to address the men manning the points with "*ahlan wa sahlan*" for government soldiers or "*Allahu akbar*" for Huthi fighters. Author interview, Sana`a, 30 August 2009.

## Dhu Husayn<sup>232</sup>

Bordering Dhu Muhammad's Barat al-`Inan and Kharab al-Marasha, Dhu Husayn claims the mountainous Rajouza and western al-Matun districts before extending eastward into the sparsely populated Khab wa al-Sha`af.<sup>233</sup> Although it shares a lineage with Dhu Muhammad through Dhu Ghaylan, Dhu Husayn maintains a distinct history from Dhu Muhammad. Like the `Abeeda tribe, Dhu Husayn has enjoyed cool relations with Sana`a for most of the past decade. A moderate-size tribe outnumbered by a contiguous adversary (Hamdan) and populating vast stretches of desert well suited for smuggling, it is not surprising that Dhu Husayn has forged strong relations with its wealthier neighbor to the north. Because of its relationship with Saudi Arabia and `Abeeda's alleged connection with al-Qa`ida, members of Dhu Husayn are frequently cited as initial suspects in any terrorist attack near al-Jawf.<sup>234</sup> The allegation that the tribe as a whole has sympathy for violent extremism should be treated with a great deal of caution. While members of Dhu Husayn are by reputation notoriously independent and do maintain strong connections to smuggling networks, there is little evidence to suggest that the tribe's members broadly support terrorism.

The tribe is segmented along two main lineages and dozens of subsidiary sub- and micro-sections. Two of Dhu Husayn's most prominent families hail from relatively small divisions, al-Shuf and al-Shawlan. Al-Shuf's Naji bin `Abdul-`Aziz al-Shayif of northwestern Khab wa al-Sha`af served as head of the Bakil Confederation for nearly two decades, standing as one of al-Jawf's most prominent political figures. His successor in 2010, the forty-seven-year-old Amin bin `Ali bin Muhammad al-'Ukaymi of al-Shawlan, has proven more controversial.<sup>235</sup>

Al-'Ukaymi rose quickly from al-Jawf's al-Matun district to become one of Upper Yemen's more dynamic politicians, serving as a three-term MP, a prominent member of the opposition al-Islah and a unique ally of the Saudi royal family.<sup>236</sup> He fell out of favor with Sana`a in 2001 under disputed circumstances as he attempted to either negotiate a resolution to the government's search for Abu `Ali al-Harithi or facilitate the

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<sup>232</sup> See Appendix, pg. 12, for tribal tree.

<sup>233</sup> Al Ashraf does reside in areas of al-Matun, but not in numbers similar to Dhu Husayn.

<sup>234</sup> Much of this relates to a single shaykh of the al-Shawlan micro-tribe who will be discussed below.

<sup>235</sup> Al-'Ukaymi was nominated as head of Bakil at the Confederation's conference in al-Jawf in November 2010. "Al-'Ukaymi Ra'isan wa Abu Lahum Muqararan 'Aman . . .," *al-Tagheer*, 7 November 2010, <http://www.al-tagheer.com/news23888.html>.

<sup>236</sup> Al-'Ukaymi is rumored to be tied to the Saudi royal family through marriage, though the author was not able to verify this directly.

tribesman's escape. The manhunt ultimately ended in a U.S. drone strike in southern Marib months later, but not before al-'Ukaymi was labeled a Saudi proxy and Bin Laden supporter, and summarily dismissed from a senior position in Yemen's security services. In the years since, al-'Ukaymi has remained a deeply polarizing figure, winning praise by some for helping mediate tribal disputes as far afield as central Marib and criticism by others for allegedly harboring al-Qa`ida fighters, cooperating with Huthi insurgents and brokering "a deal with the devil if it served him."<sup>237</sup>

## **Bani Nawf<sup>238</sup>**

Positioned below Dhu Husayn, Bani Nawf resides in four districts: areas of the central al-Humaydat district; a majority of southern Jawf's al-Maslub; southeast Hazm in and around the village of al-Siyal; and parts of lower Khab wa al-Sha`af stretching to the eastern border *`uzala* of al-Riyan. Riven by standing internal and external (al-Muhashima) conflicts, and claiming neither the counterterrorism significance of Dhu Husayn nor the governmental ties of Hamdan, Bani Nawf is often forgotten in discussion of al-Jawf's most significant tribal units.<sup>239</sup> This is an unfortunate omission. Bani Nawf's position along Marib's desert border places it in direct contact with many of the trafficking routes winding north from the bottom of the *Rub` al-Khali*, through lower al-Jawf and into Saudi Arabia. By fall 2009, alleged Huthi militants had pushed east into Bani Nawf's territory in southern Khab wa al-Sha`af as well.<sup>240</sup> Given both its location and relationship with a variety of belligerent substate actors—in this case the two are not independent occurrences—Bani Nawf is of particular counterinsurgency and counterterrorism significance to domestic and foreign governments alike.

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<sup>237</sup> A senior U.S. Embassy official stationed in Sana`a during the hunt for al-Harithi also echoed the criticism of al-'Ukaymi, calling the shaykh a "bad apple" whom the U.S. didn't want to reward. The claims in the text are according to interviews with members of al-Shawlan, a former senior U.S. Embassy official, Yemeni security personnel and tribesmen from Marib and al-Jawf's Hamdan tribe. Author interview, Sana`a, 2 May 2009; author interview, Sana`a, 24 September 2009; author interview, Sana`a, 27 September 2009; author interview, Sana`a, 30 August 2009; author interview, Washington, DC, 24 January 2011.

<sup>238</sup> See Appendix, pg. 13, for tribal tree.

<sup>239</sup> A colleague from Sa`da remarked that Bani Nawf was an especially disagreeable group without the benefit of a clear comparative advantage relative to other tribes. He explained that they were not renowned fighters, farmers or smugglers, though they tended toward the latter most often. The author's experiences with members of the tribe were considerably more positive. Author interview, Sana`a, 20 August 2009.

<sup>240</sup> This area of southeast al-Jawf marked what was then the easternmost point of the Huthi insurgency. A description of the events was given by a shaykh from the district. Author interview, Sana`a, 12 September 2009.

## Hamdan<sup>241</sup>

Between Bani Nawf's al-Masloub district to the west and lower Khab wa al-Sha`af to the east lies al-Jawf's most prosperous and perhaps best integrated tribe. Hamdan's estimated 40,000 adult male members are centered in al-Hazm and in neighboring al-Khaliq, both bordering northern Marib's Majzur district. As Hazm claims the governorate's administrative capital and Khaliq one of its only paved roads, it is not unexpected that Hamdan would enjoy deeper relations with Sana`a than its neighbors. The fact that Majzur is one of the few locations in the governorate where licit economies exist helps explain the closer relations to the central government enjoyed by many of Hamdan's businessmen and tribal leaders. Second to farming, government and military employment again count among Hamdan's primary sources of income—though private business is more of an opportunity in larger cities of Hazm and Khaliq's Baraqish than in the less developed mountains of al-Mutama, for example.

Yet conceiving of Hamdan as simply a proxy of Sana`a, and of its primary rival, Dhu Husayn, as merely a tool of Riyadh would be overly simplistic. As in Marib—and presumably to the irritation of the foreign parties concerned—accommodation with one government in no way precludes accommodation with another. As of 2009, one of Hamdan's most senior shaykhs and strongest advocates of the ruling General People's Congress was at the same time one of Saudi Arabia's closest associates in al-Jawf.<sup>242</sup> Nor did increased development or government penetration necessarily improve the stature or influence of the tribe generally. Tribesmen in central Marib described with some dismay the deterioration of security and social norms in Hazm over the past two decades.<sup>243</sup>

## ACTORS AND MECHANISMS

The combination of weak governmental authority and strong tribal institutions does not mean that either Marib or al-Jawf is ungoverned. Far from it, a variety of actors and norms influence collective behavior in both governorates. Of these, several are crucial for understanding authority and decision making in northeast Yemen and the operational constraints facing any external actor in either region.

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<sup>241</sup> See Appendix, pg. 14, for tribal tree.

<sup>242</sup> Far from seeming a contradiction, one shaykh interviewed for this report took great delight in contacting the author from Riyadh and Jeddah to update him on his frequent trips to the Kingdom.

<sup>243</sup> Author interviews, Marib, September through October 2009.

## Shaykhs

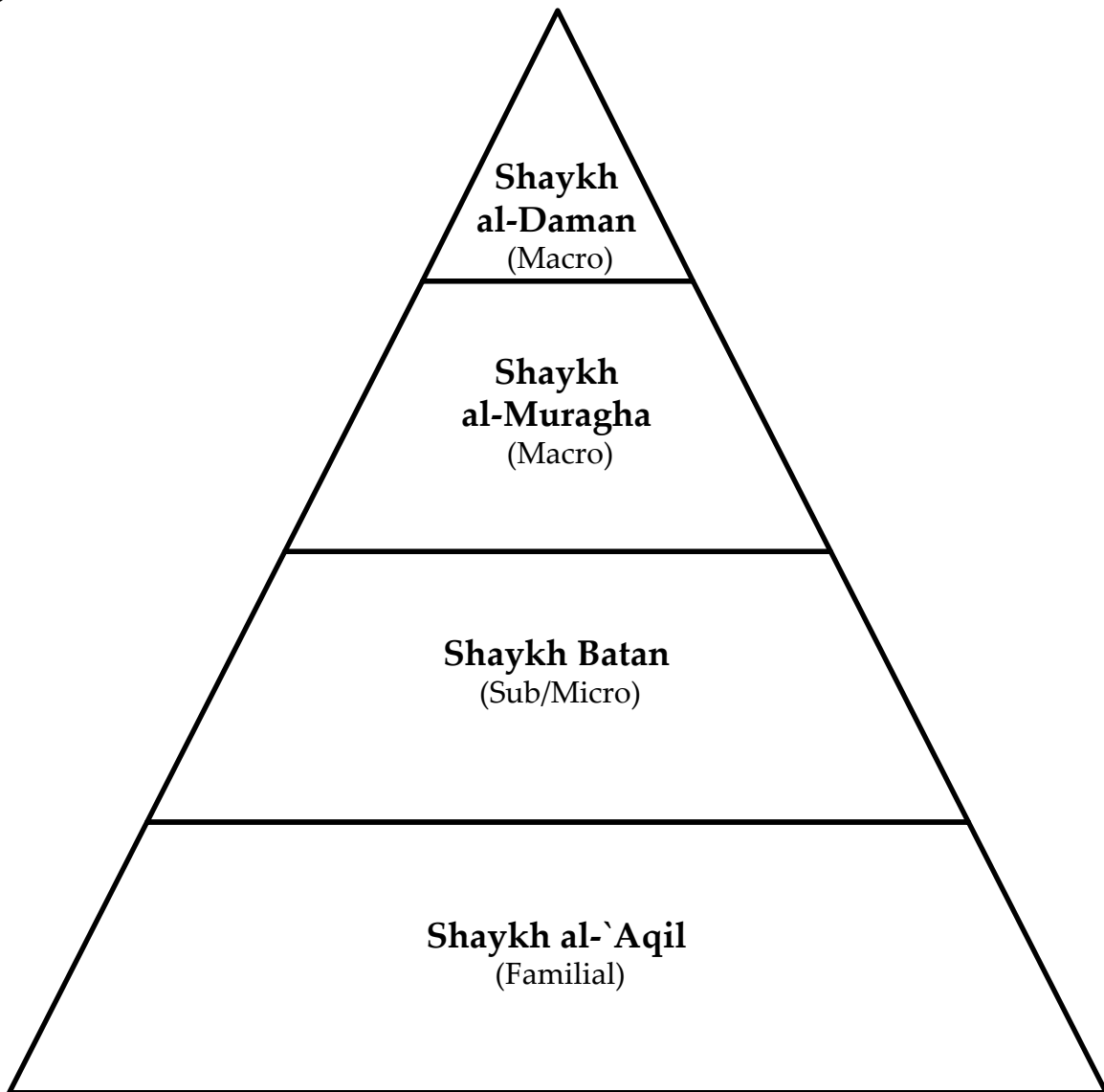
The role of tribal leaders in Marib and al-Jawf does not fit well with perceptions of clan hierarchy held by many in the West. First, the title *shaykh* itself is fraught with various interpretations, only in certain circumstances implying a formal position of tribal authority. Second, the influence and responsibilities of shaykhs are stratified across several different levels within tribal hierarchy alone. By title, *Shaykh al-Daman* (الضمان) sits atop a pyramid of descending varieties of tribal leaders.<sup>244</sup> *Al-Daman* serves as the senior representative for all of the branches of a given macro-tribe, often negotiating for the group in large external conflicts that involve multiple macro-tribes or central and foreign governments. Below *al-Daman*, *Shaykh al-Maragha* (المراغة) functions in two distinct ways. These men serve as arbiters in disputes involving multiple sections within a given macro-tribe, and in many cases act as a kind of court of last resort, issuing final decisions on appeals of previous rulings by local shaykhs.

Beneath both levels, a similar cycle is repeated again for sub- and micro-tribes. Another layer of *al-Daman* and *al-Maragha* are responsible for overseeing specific branches and local issues confined to their micro-tribes. They are distinguished from an even larger cadre of *Shaykh Batan* (بطن), who themselves sit above representatives of particular families within micro-tribes, commonly referred to as *Shaykh al-'Aqil* (العقيل). It is these latter two divisions of tribal leaders that most refer to when explaining the role of Yemeni shaykhs. In the capacity of *Shaykh al-Batan*, tribal leaders are expected to perform many of the same higher-order tasks of a macro-tribe's *al-Daman* or *al-Maragha*, issuing legal rulings for local land disputes, offering to mediate conflicts of neighboring micro-tribes and communicating village grievances to more senior shaykhs and regional government officials.

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<sup>244</sup> The following structure is based on tribes in Marib and al-Jawf. Though the broad hierarchy does apply to other governorates in upper and parts of lower Yemen, the titles assigned to shaykhs and subordinate tribal units vary.

Figure 2.6



**Tribal Hierarchy: Marib and al-Jawf**

Source: Author

Despite what would appear to be clear divisions in authority and responsibilities, in practice the role of the leaders is often far more ambiguous. The decision of a senior *Shaykh al-Daman* to voice his support for a neighboring tribe in conflict may indeed reflect a consensus among the shaykhs of his micro-tribes, but by no means does it signal a single or unified position among the often tens of thousands of tribesmen he represents. Likewise, *al-Daman* or *al-Maragha* may spend considerable time pursuing business or political interests in Sana`a or the Gulf, leaving less itinerate mid- and lower-level shaykhs to command a great deal more influence over the day-to-day events of local villages than their title would otherwise indicate.

Yet even these local leaders rarely exert anything near a formal authority over the behavior of tribesmen in Marib and Jawf.<sup>245</sup> In the few cases where shaykhs enjoy unusually high degrees of influence over the behavior of tribesmen in either governorate, they appear to do so more by force of personality—and of religious and military acclaim—than through tribal custom.<sup>246</sup> And in at least one of the two cases that the author is aware of, the authority commanded by the shaykh was anything but static; it was said to have dropped significantly after several questionable decisions regarding conflict with Huthi insurgents in western al-Jawf.<sup>247</sup>

Put another way, seldom does a shaykh impose his will upon a tribal unit in Marib or al-Jawf.<sup>248</sup> A northerner who spent many years in al-Jawf framed their limitations in wonderfully simple terms, arguing, “No shaykh can even tell a child what to do.”<sup>249</sup> The notion that shaykhs lack coercive authority was echoed repeatedly by shaykhs and tribesmen alike in interviews with the author. According to the men, tribal leaders represent rather than decide the collective preferences of their tribal units. Even in matters where shaykhs have been asked to arbitrate local disputes, their decisions are shaped by constant dialogue with the village concerned and usually a clear sense of how the ruling will be received. Shaykhs continue to participate in *qat* chews daily—a forum where contentious issues and existing disputes are frequently discussed—and interview friends and relatives of those involved in the conflict.<sup>250</sup> By maintaining their social responsibilities, tribal leaders are provided a constant barometer of local consensus and countervailing arguments. Importantly for their own political survival, the process allows the leaders to gauge the opinions of the most influential members of the village, a critical task in maintaining one’s support and averting conflict with potential competitors.<sup>251</sup> The more a shaykh’s ruling strays from both precedent and popular opinion, the greater the risk to his authority and influence.

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<sup>245</sup> For an authoritative discussion of the role and particularly limits of shaykhly influence in Upper Yemen, see: Dresch (1990), 89, 99–102, 105–106.

<sup>246</sup> The author is aware of two exceptions, one in southwestern al-Jawf and one in central Marib. Author interview, Sana`a, 6 August 2009; fieldwork, Marib, September through October 2009.

<sup>247</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 24 September 2009.

<sup>248</sup> Author interviews with residents of Marib, al-Jawf and Sa`da in Sana`a on 6 May, 6 August and 24 September 2009; fieldwork, Marib, September through October 2009; and conversations with professor Steven Caton, 2011. For a similar assessment of shaykhs in Iran for example, see: Philp Carl Salzman, *Black Tents of Baluchistan*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2000), 300–309.

<sup>249</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 6 August 2009.

<sup>250</sup> *Qat*, *Catha edulis*, is a stimulative plant that is chewed by an estimated 70 percent of Yemeni males. It has an important role in the social fabric of Yemeni society and is frequently chewed socially in small gatherings during the afternoon throughout the country. For more details on *qat* and its role in Yemeni society see, C. M. McKee, “Medical and Social Aspects of Qat in Yemen” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (London), 762–765.

<sup>251</sup> Author’s fieldwork, Marib, September through October 2009.



## Shaykhly Legitimacy: Implications for Aid and U.S. Tribal Engagement

Though uncommon, there are occasions when shaykhs deviate from tribal consensus. Separate interviews with a tribesman and a shaykh from al-Jawf's Barat al-`Inan and Maslub districts described a similar process after tribal leaders incorrectly gambled against traditional law or local consensus.<sup>252</sup> According to the men, shaykhs who have lost the respect of their villages, generally through corruption, poor judicial rulings or indifference to the population, were gradually marginalized from their positions of authority and eventually ostracized from the community writ large.<sup>253</sup> Both informants described a process not formalized by vote or collective decision, but rather a gradual shift away from the discredited shaykh to new sources of authority. Tribesmen may begin taking their disputes elsewhere, requesting arbitration from other well-respected members within the village or even from alternative shaykhs in neighboring sub-tribes.

In circumstances where a new leader is found, it would be highly unusual for a member of the village to officially renounce his tribal affiliation and seek inclusion in the branch headed by the new shaykh. Despite the move toward additional arbiters and representatives, at no point is the former shaykh under threat of violence or forced exile from his village. Instead, the role previously afforded to him by the tribal unit simply recedes. The shaykh's membership in village discussions—and thereby in village decisions—is gradually withdrawn. He is informally ostracized from the daily events that give tribal affiliation meaning. With no material benefit from remaining in the village, he generally leaves of his own accord.

The process is not a uniform one, and disagreement over an appropriate successor does occur. But those interviewed from al-Jawf described a similar series of events where once a shaykh is perceived as anything less than an invested neighbor and impartial mediator, there is little he can do to regain the respect of his tribe. If this description is correct, the process suggests that there are significant risks for shaykhs who break with convention or consensus. The custom also points to an issue often misconstrued in Western attempts at Tribal Engagement in Yemen: the legitimacy of tribal leaders. Again, interviews with tribesmen and shaykhs from Marib and al-Jawf indicated that the provision of jobs, services and money was of very little importance in building the credibility of shaykhs in either governorate. None denied that government contracts were commonly allotted to civil and tribal leaders throughout the country, but few

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<sup>252</sup> For a roughly similar account in Sa`da's Razih, see: Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 112–113.

<sup>253</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 27 July and 15 August 2009.

trickled down to mid- and lower-level shaykhs in rural villages or those without strong connections to Sana`a.<sup>254</sup> According to the men, regardless of whatever competition for winning Western aid and development projects existed, neither occurred commonly enough or were tied to the qualities desired of tribal leaders to sufficiently play a role in affecting the legitimacy of a given shaykh.<sup>255</sup>

This interpretation contradicts a number of assumptions regarding both shaykhly authority and counterterrorism policy in Yemen. First, it challenges the narrative popular among both Yemeni and American analysts that as falling oil revenues constrain the central government's ability to co-opt tribal leaders, Sana`a's authority east of the capital will decline.<sup>256</sup> Second, this model undermines one of the central tenets of U.S. Tribal Engagement in the region, that, as in Iraq, financial incentives are an adequate tool for building durable and cooperative tribal allies.<sup>257</sup> Finally, the comments reject the opinion that shaykhs are best understood as a sort of congressional representative responsible for providing services to their constituents and therefore sustain legitimacy based on services provided.<sup>258</sup>

Instead, tribesmen interviewed all cited less malleable factors essential for a shaykh's legitimacy. Beyond the shared characteristics of their fathers and male descendants, shaykhs were most commonly judged on their ability to quickly and equitably solve tribal disputes; their generosity and the strength of their rhetorical skills; and, if intertribal violence was unavoidable, their willingness to actively participate in group conflict in defense of the tribal unit.<sup>259</sup> A shaykh from southwestern al-Jawf explained the criteria in even simpler terms, saying, "If a shaykh is interested in his tribe, his tribe will be interested in him."<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Control of fictitious employment rosters, or "ghost jobs," remains a common method of patronage in the country.

<sup>255</sup> Most explained that giving money to the poorest of a village's tribesmen to buy bread, for example, or to locals seeking medical treatment in Sana`a were common practices for a shaykh, but were acts of generosity rather than obligations for maintaining influence.

<sup>256</sup> Author interview with Yemeni analyst in Sana`a, 2 May 2009.

<sup>257</sup> Aid and influence over development projects has formed the bulk of these efforts, together intended to strengthen the authority of allied shaykhs while building stronger long-term U.S. partners against Islamic extremism.

<sup>258</sup> Phone interview, 17 June 2009.

<sup>259</sup> Fieldwork, Marib, September through October 2009; author interviews, Sana`a and Khawlan, 6 May, 3 July and 15 August 2009.

<sup>260</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 15 August 2009.

Permanently living in their village or *`uzala* of origin, engaging in community events and showing concern for fellow tribesmen regardless of status were, according to the shaykh, critically important to gaining local respect. His observation was echoed by several tribesmen in separate discussions, each describing his dismay with the tendency of upwardly mobile shaykhs to assume diminished roles in their villages after relocating to the capital.<sup>261</sup> None argued that wealth or access to public services were strong methods for increasing the credibility of tribal leaders. Interestingly, even those who tried to solicit government contracts from the author readily conceded that the potential benefits had little to do with tribal legitimacy. In this sense, presuming that tribal legitimacy can be engineered through wealth and patronage misconstrues the nature of tribal leadership in eastern Yemen.<sup>262</sup>

## Social Mechanisms and Collective Behavior

Scholars of Yemen have long discussed the role customary law plays in arbitration and collective behavior. Though considerably less rigid than is often claimed, precedent in the form of *`urf al-qaba'il* (tribal law or custom) is a key factor in shaping collective behavior in much of eastern Yemen.<sup>263</sup> This is especially true of tribal sanctuary. Given the widespread assumption that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula enjoys safe haven in Yemen's least integrated tribal communities, an examination of how and under what circumstances collective protection is provided to outsiders is essential. Interviews conducted during the author's fieldwork in central Marib in fall 2009 detail the most common types of sanctuary available to those seeking refuge among tribal communities in Marib and al-Jawf.

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<sup>261</sup> This was voiced by those particularly from Sa`da, where nearly a decade of conflict—and alleged violence against tribal leaders—forced many shaykhs from their villages. Author interviews, Sana`a, 12 and 20 August 2009.

<sup>262</sup> Dresch offers one of the strongest accounts of shaykhly authority in Upper Yemen, noting that financial patronage rarely resulted in reciprocal support for tribal leaders. See: Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 101–102, 375.

<sup>263</sup> *`Urf* is not the central focus on this project. For the purpose of this analysis, tribal law can be understood as a set of procedures and norms that help govern daily life throughout much of Yemen. Though pre-Islamic, *`urf* is neither static nor by definition antithetical to Islam. Its interpretation and application vary among tribes according to history, context and the interests of those involved. In its form in the text, *`urf*'s literal translation is "custom or law of tribes," though it is also referred to as *al-`urf al-qaba'li*, or tribal custom. For seminal English-language scholarship on the subject, see: Paul Dresch (1990); Steven Caton, *Yemen Chronicle: An Anthropology of War and Mediation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Shelagh Weir (2007). For an Arabic description of *`urf*'s stipulations, see: Muhammad bin `Ali Sayad, *Al-`Urf al-Qabal'i wa Ahkamuhu fi al-Yemen wa Mada Qabiliatuhu lil-Takayuf wa al-Taqneen*, Maktabat Khalid bin al-Walid, 2007.

## Individual Sanctuary

As of 2009, two forms of tribal protection were available to visitors in Marib and al-Jawf.<sup>264</sup> The first was informal and done generally without the broader consent or sometimes even knowledge of the relevant micro-tribe. In these cases, an individual tribesman may offer to host a friend or colleague in his home for any number of reasons.<sup>265</sup> These arrangements were temporary in nature—lasting anywhere from a day to a month.<sup>266</sup> In such circumstances, notifying one's fellow tribesmen, let alone one's shaykh, was not required. Explanation of a guest's arrival may arise from casual conversation, particularly if the visitor resides in the village for a prolonged period of time, but was not a necessity. Quite the opposite, making unsolicited inquiries into the affairs of another tribesman's home was not a practice encouraged by tribal custom. Doing so risked being perceived as taking an unwelcome interest in private family affairs, a slight that if not properly justified could provoke violence.<sup>267</sup>

Still, depending on the status of the host, the nature of the village and the length of the visitor's stay, a tribesman may spread word of his guest. Doing so amounted to staking the host's reputation on the character of the visitor. If no obvious concern was raised by those involved, such an implicit pledge was usually sufficient for temporary protection by those in the village. Neither a formal tribal meeting nor a record of the arrangement was necessary for securing this type of informal sanctuary, though in some cases the guest may have been given a small personal item of a local shaykh as a symbol of the leader's protection.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the following section is based on the author's fieldwork in Marib in fall 2009. The bulk of the interviews focused on shaykhs from the Murad macro-tribe residing in three different districts. Slight variations in the terminology or order of events may exist between villages and macro-tribes, but the general process is thought to be shared by most in the governorate. Also, although the date of the research is included in the text, there is no indication that the alternatives or processes available for sanctuary have changed.

<sup>265</sup> Most frequently, the guest was simply passing through the village on route to visit friends or family elsewhere.

<sup>266</sup> This was reiterated by a shaykh in southwestern al-Jawf. Author interview, Sana`a, 15 August 2009.

<sup>267</sup> I owe this point to a tribesman from Sirwah, who explained the difficulty in confronting a fellow tribesman over the repute of his associates without the consensus of one's micro-tribe supporting him. Such an act risked instigating an intratribal conflict that could plausibly extend generations if not resolved quickly. Author interview, Sana`a, 7 August 2009.

<sup>268</sup> The shaykh's support was of course not his own in a personal sense, but simply a marker for that of the sub-tribe. According to those interviewed in Marib, a pen or glasses were common personal items offered as formal indicators of hospitality and protection. The lack of a need for a formal ruling or document stating the protection was echoed by several shaykhs in al-Jawf. Author interviews, Sana`a, 15 August and 3 September 2009.

## Collective Sanctuary: *al-Rab`a* (الربيع)

If a visitor is in fact accused of criminal behavior, seeking community approval is usually to the benefit of the sponsor and his guest. The same is true of those involved in existing tribal disputes. Without such an endorsement, the host risks losing the backing of his sub-tribe in the event that the community is pressured to surrender its new visitor. Formal protection agreements takes two forms in most if not all of central and southern Marib. The first, *al-rab`a*, assigns the visitor semipermanent membership in the tribal unit. Such a ruling is a versatile mechanism for protecting a wide range of guests, from aid agencies to those fleeing arrest or conflict.<sup>269</sup> The membership affords the protections normally given full members of the tribe, and in principle it would expire after the development project ended or the outstanding dispute was resolved.

Though the scale of the protection varies widely from that of an entire macro-tribe to a single family, the process for securing haven follows fairly consistent guidelines.<sup>270</sup> Often through a *waseet* (mediator or sponsor) already in the tribe, the visitor first communicates his request directly to the shaykh for the long-term protection of the micro-tribe. It is important to note that by doing so, the visitor is not obliged to formally renounce his current tribal affiliation. Quite the opposite: In most cases of tribal conflict, the primary goal of *al-rab`a* is the speedy return of the guest to his village of origin.<sup>271</sup> Once the shaykh agrees to hear the request for protection, the visitor and his sponsor enter the village together, walking to a public space and firing two rounds into the air.<sup>272</sup> The male representatives of each of the village's families gather around the group, and the visitor presents the tribesmen a gift generally of 10,000–50,000 rials (\$45–\$230 USD) in gratitude for considering his request.<sup>273</sup> He then states his name, village and tribal affiliation, and explains the circumstances precipitating his need for protection. While the visitor is certainly free to lie—claiming to have escaped a family

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<sup>269</sup> The custom was also used to provide defense for farmers or shepherds who sought to use unclaimed land in or around the village of the micro-tribe. In relations with businesses and development groups, securing *al-rab`a* is not a requirement. Yet for those with a history of attracting conflict or ignoring tribal custom, the relevant tribal unit may demand it.

<sup>270</sup> For the sake of clarity, the following example will use the sequence of events necessary to secure *al-rab`a* from a particular micro-tribe residing within a single village. This appears to be the most common form of protection, according to those interviewed.

<sup>271</sup> This was a point made clear to the author by a man who was nearing his eighteenth year of living in a central Maribi village under the protection of *al-rab`a*. After nearly two decades, he did not hesitate when stating his desire to return immediately to his family's home in Damar.

<sup>272</sup> As in rural Yemen generally, the action signals that those responsible for the gunshots carry an issue of urgent importance, and thus request an audience of those representing the village's families.

<sup>273</sup> The nature and importance of the gift is fascinating. It is not required, but taken as a show of gratitude for the village's willingness to consider the visitor's request. Similar to determining the price of *hashm*, settling on a sum is incumbent on the guest and is not a negotiated process.

dispute rather than to be a member of a terrorist group, for instance—lying would reflect poorly on his sponsor and would not be especially likely to succeed.<sup>274</sup>

A consultative council composed of the village's most respected members is expected to deliberate for several days after the man's formal request for sanctuary. Comparable to the role served by shaykhs in arbitrating disputes, the *majlis al-shura* (consultative council) is best perceived as a mosaic of the interests and opinions of the micro-tribe itself rather than an institution functioning in isolation. Through normal social forums such as shared meals, *qat* chews and weddings, representatives from the council discuss the merits of each course of action with those of the broader micro-tribe. The process is not unidirectional; public debate and collective action pervade nearly every step in the decision for sanctuary. Though absolute consensus among the council's members is not necessary, an agreement is typically achieved after several days of negotiation. After the deliberation is finalized, the committee's members explain their positions to the host community.

Even the slightest of majorities constitutes an initial ruling. Those in dissent are strongly encouraged to reevaluate their stance. In almost every case, this minority is eventually persuaded to support the committee's decision.<sup>275</sup> Were the group ultimately to reject the visitor's request, the money paid to the sub-tribe is returned to the guest. In such a case, the man is often offered temporary protection as a demonstration of the tribe's generosity.<sup>276</sup> If, however, the council agrees to the guest's appeal for sanctuary, his gift is accepted and divided evenly among the male representatives of the families in the village. Both the shaykh—as proxy for the micro-tribe—and the visitor sign a formal contract defining the tribe's responsibility to protect the visitor in exchange for his assurance to abstain from illicit activity or tribal provocation.<sup>277</sup> The village then provides the man a reciprocal gift of money and selects an appropriate plot of land for his stay in the community.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> This is so for at least two reasons. First, fabricating the location of one's home is difficult given the relative ease with which accents and dialects are distinguished within the country. Second, the tribe's consultative council—formal or informal—is obliged to verify the visitor's claims by contacting his shaykh and speaking with members his family.

<sup>275</sup> In extreme cases, a shaykh from a neighboring micro-tribe may meet with the *majlis* to broker an agreement. If this does not succeed and the oppositional member(s) refuses to accept the decision, a second *majlis al-shura* within the same macro-tribe will intervene and attempt to force a consensus. If this still fails, the dissenting member(s) is subject to *hukm qati`a*—banishment from the tribal unit.

<sup>276</sup> This is usually declined, given the tribe's stated unwillingness to provide the protection the visitor sought.

<sup>277</sup> In the case of either, particularly in instigating further conflict in the visitor's existing tribal dispute, the agreement is voided and the visitor is no longer welcome in the village.

<sup>278</sup> The author was not able to determine any correlation between the size of this gift and that of the

In addition to the stipulations of the written contract, the guest's behavior is also proscribed by several less explicit aspects of local custom and *`urf al-qaba'il*. In the event of group conflict with another branch within his host's macro-tribe, he is expected to participate as would any of the village's tribesmen. The same holds true for conflict with another macro-tribe entirely. If he were to kill a belligerent in intertribal fighting, the tally would accrue to his host micro-tribe and would not endanger spurring a revenge conflict between his original tribe and that of the victim.<sup>279</sup> However, in internal disputes between members of his sponsor tribe, he is explicitly banned from fighting himself.<sup>280</sup> The same is true for paying *ghurm*.<sup>281</sup> The guest is not obliged to offer a percentage of the punishment imposed on fellow tribesmen unable to pay the fine themselves.<sup>282</sup> The visitor is neither exactly a guest, nor is he completely a member of the micro-tribe. This logic follows the notion of *`asabiya* or a "balanced opposition" characterized by Arab tribes elsewhere.<sup>283</sup> Relative to external threats, the guest is accepted as a functioning member of the micro-tribe with little dispute.<sup>284</sup> Yet in the absence of such a threat, the guest remains at something of a disadvantage, denied both the responsibilities and legitimacy afforded to native members of the micro-tribe.

The contract brokered between the foreigner and tribe reflects this.<sup>285</sup> At no point is the arrangement intended to be a permanent one. Though it is not permitted to meddle in the guest's conflict without his consent, the micro-tribe does have a strong incentive to resolve the dispute as quickly as possible. The longer the outsider resides under the protection of the tribal unit, the greater the risk his dispute will entangle members of the village. The same is true for the guest's behavior. The longer a disagreement proceeds without resolution, the more likely the visitor is to be involved in unsanctioned

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first offered by the visitor at the onset of *al-rab`a*. If one does exist, it is certainly reinforces the reciprocal nature of a number of negotiated exchanges through *`urf* between victim and offender (*mada`ak* and *hashm*), and guest and host (*al-rab`a*).

<sup>279</sup> If he were not under official auspices of *al-rab`a*, in theory, this would not be the case.

<sup>280</sup> Though he is permitted to help mediate a solution.

<sup>281</sup> *Ghurm* refers to a practice of collective monetary payment during tribal arbitration of a dispute. Early in the process the offender settles on a price that he can feasibly pay in any future ruling. After the shaykh eventually reaches a decision, the male representatives of each of the families of the offender's sub-tribe divide the remaining fine evenly in a custom known as paying *ghurm*.

<sup>282</sup> He is given the option to do so, however.

<sup>283</sup> The oft-cited and poorly nuanced adage, "Me against my brother; my brother and me against my cousin; me, my brother and my cousin against the stranger," is of course the simplest interpretation of balanced opposition. Yet to be clear, it in no way remains a static or equally salient phenomenon throughout the Arab world broadly or within Yemen specifically. For the definitive work on *`asabiya*, see: Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); for more recent scholarship of balanced opposition, see: Carl Salzman, *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Humanity Books, 2008).

<sup>284</sup> Assuming he abides by the contractual obligations.

<sup>285</sup> "Foreign" in the sense of lacking membership in the community for which he has sought protection.

violence—conduct that jeopardizes the reputation of his host tribe.<sup>286</sup> The presence of non-native Yemenis, especially in rural villages, also risks damaging the perception of a tribe's coherence or "integrity."<sup>287</sup> It is therefore expected that the sub-tribe take an active interest in fostering a resolution to its guest's problems, often directly mediating between the various parties in order to broker an agreement and facilitate the return of its guest.

### Collective Sanctuary: *Qa`ida Sahb* (قاعدة صحب)

If reaching such an accord ultimately failed or the visitor requested full membership in the host community, both parties would pursue a process called *qa`ida sahb*. The steps for securing *sahb* are much the same as for *al-rab`a*, as is the price paid in the initial gift offering.<sup>288</sup> Yet in principle *sahb* is distinct from the former because it demands that the guest formally end his existing affiliation with his tribe of origin. If accepted, the host tribe would then offer full membership to the individual without precondition and, at least in theory, without any attempt to arbitrate a solution in the visitor's existing dispute.

Within sections of Marib's Murad macro-tribe, the boundaries dividing *qa`ida sahb* from *al-rab`a* have grown less apparent in practice. According to those interviewed, within the last two decades host tribes have begun increasingly accepting guests under *sahb* without requiring the applicants end their relationship with their original tribes. Because the guests now claim two tribal affiliations, the host tribe carries incentives comparable to *al-rab`a* to return the foreigners to their original villages once peace is restored. As a result, most arrangements of *qa`ida sahb* see the host micro-tribe enter into mediation with the visitor's original tribe no differently than they would under *al-rab`a*.

These developments have called into question the distinctions traditionally separating

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<sup>286</sup> Any contravention of tribal norms in this context, be it illegitimate violence in an existing conflict or unsanctioned attack on government personnel, is foremost a shame on the protecting micro-tribe. It is this tribal unit's responsibility to reach equitable settlement through either blood or financial settlement, while the original tribal unit of the visitor is left with the residual dishonor of its exiled member.

<sup>287</sup> There are of course exceptions, but this was a point reiterated by tribesmen who often took offense at the author's inquiries into presence of outsiders in their villages.

<sup>288</sup> Like *al-rab`a*, *sahb* could be requested of any unit within the tribal structure, including the macro-tribe itself.



the permanent tribal membership of *sahb* from the interim sanctuary of *rab`a*.<sup>289</sup> To reinforce the point, a midlevel Muradi shaykh estimated that some 90 percent of guests given *qa`ida* *sahb* returned to their original tribes once their existing disputes were resolved. Now with no clear distinction between the two, the less restrictive *al-rab`a* appears to have emerged as the method of choice for securing the long-term protection of a host tribe in areas of central and southern Marib. According to the tribal leader, the number of cases of *al-rab`a* within his sub-tribe has risen dramatically over the past four decades.

## CONCLUSION

What is the relevance of obscure tribal law to policymakers? Given variations across tribes and over time, why devote an entire chapter to discussing tribes and tribal law? The simple answer is that *`urf al-qaba'il* remains a crucial component of the social landscape of Yemen. Assessing whether al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is capable of achieving sanctuary in tribal communities in Marib and al-Jawf demands an understanding of the formal means available to the group in seeking support, especially safe haven. Without recognizing the tribal structures and social mechanisms of eastern Yemen, both analysts and policymakers are at a dual disadvantage. Distinguishing formal al-Qa`ida-tribal alliances from individual assistance is exceedingly difficult under the best of circumstances. Doing so without a granular understanding of local norms and tribal convention renders a difficult process nearly impossible.

Furthermore, while AQAP has spent a great deal of time and energy trying to appeal to tribal constituencies, they are not a tribal organization. As Chapter Three will discuss, assessing AQAP Tribal Engagement strategy requires distinguishing local violence and support for al-Qa`ida, between formal tribal sanctuary and individual safe houses. To understand AQAP's failures in Tribal Engagement, it is essential to be able to distinguish between tribesmen in a village shooting back at a security raid and AQAP enlisting tribal members. Without a better understanding of tribes, their social structures and methods for organizing collective action, it is nearly impossible to distinguish reality from AQAP's propaganda. This is especially crucial in the Yemeni context, where there is no shortage of motivations for violent resistance to the Yemeni state and AQAP communications efforts frequently try to merge anger at the government with support for al-Qa`ida.

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<sup>289</sup> A shaykh interviewed during the author's fieldwork in Marib estimated that roughly 30 percent of the cases he was aware of moved from *al-rab`a* to *sahb* because the host tribe could not broker a resolution.

## CHAPTER THREE: AQAP TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

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In an interview with *Sada al-Malahim* media in May 2010, Anwar al-`Awlaqi declared:

. . . the cradle for Jihad today are the tribes. In Afghanistan there are tribes. In Iraq there are tribes. In Somalia there are tribes. Even in Pakistan there are tribal areas and non tribal areas and we find that the cradle for Jihad are the tribal areas, and so is the case in Yemen.<sup>290</sup>

The remarks echoed a view of al-Qa`ida activity in Yemen that has predominated for more than a decade. Beginning with the attack on the USS *Cole*, al-Qa`ida was alleged to rely on safe havens provided by the country's best-armed and least governable tribes in the governorates of Marib and al-Jawf, and to a lesser degree in Shabwah. Virtually every account of the group includes some reference to Yemen's lawless hinterlands, some explicitly stating that tribal support for al-Qa`ida represents a "natural alliance."<sup>291</sup>

This perception of a tribal center of gravity represents the common linkage connecting most studies of al-Qa`ida Affiliated Movements in Yemen since 2000. Yet despite its popularity, this understanding of AQAP and its predecessor groups has never been adequately tested. Few authors have defined precisely what tribal alliances would mean in practice. Even fewer explain how al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has attempted to influence the behavior of tribal units, and none has identified the type of sanctuary actually secured by the group.

This chapter provides an analysis of AQAP's attempts at winning support from tribes in Marib and al-Jawf, discussing the aims, tactics and outcomes of al-Qa`ida's efforts in each governorate. According to the conclusions drawn in this chapter, in order to successfully combat al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, the United States must reassess its understanding of the group's center of gravity, which is neither tribal nor located in Marib or al-Jawf.

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<sup>290</sup> Anwar al-`Awlaqi (May 2010), 36:00.

<sup>291</sup> Abdulelah Hider Shaea, as quoted in Haley Sweetland Edwards, "Al-Qa`ida Closely Linked to Yemeni Tribes," *Aol News*, 14 January 2010.

## AQAP TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT: OBJECTIVES

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has presumably sought to mobilize tribal affiliation in Marib, al-Jawf and more recently in Shabwah for at least three reasons. First, AQAP remains a small group highly dependent on operational security. Though establishing safe houses in rural and sparsely populated regions entails risks quite different than operating in urban centers, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula routinely sought secure locations for men and matériel far from state authorities. Second, the group's evolving ties within Saudi Arabia also necessitate exploiting trafficking routes that pass through parts of Marib, al-Jawf and Sa`da. Winning reliable access to the Kingdom through accommodating smugglers, criminals and local tribesmen knowledgeable of the terrain remains necessary for AQAP movement and access to Gulf funding. Third, gaining supporters by fanning the flames of discontent with Sana`a and Washington would seem a logical strategy in all three governorates, where few tribesmen have ever met an American and anti-Salih sentiments are widespread.

Such goals distinguish AQAP from previous tribal outreach efforts by al-Qa`ida affiliates focused on seizing terrain and establishing fixed training camps in East Africa and Iraq. Since its founding in 2006, there is no open source evidence that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has emphasized the establishment of permanent training camps, much less holding territory or governing, in Marib and al-Jawf. Furthermore, the terrain in the center and east of al-Jawf and Marib makes large swaths of both governorates less than ideal for fixed training camps because the desert offers little cover from reconnaissance flights.<sup>292</sup> The presence of potentially hostile Zaydi tribes along the western mountains of al-Jawf and parts of Marib has likely complicated efforts at seizing and holding territory. Saudi Arabia's purported network of human intelligence in the governorates east of Sana`a also makes the prospect of openly recruiting in rural villages risky, as does the recent resumption of U.S. air strikes in eastern and southern Yemen. Tribesmen in both governorates repeated in interviews that such concerns over operational security had, by 2010 and 2011, effectively pushed AQAP's members far underground or out of Marib and al-Jawf entirely.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> An uptick in U.S. drone flights over Marib, al-Jawf, Shabwah and later Abyan began no later than 2009.

<sup>293</sup> Phone interviews, Washington DC, January and February 2011.

## TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT: TACTICS AND METHODS

Contrary to a growing consensus in the United States, the author's fieldwork in Marib and more than two dozen interviews with tribesmen and shaykhs from al-Jawf find no indication that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has established safe havens for its members by marrying into the tribes of Marib or al-Jawf.<sup>294</sup> None of AQAP's senior leadership claims any familial link with either of the governorates, nor have the group's media releases mentioned the marriage of its members to women from east of Sana`a.<sup>295</sup> Shaykhs and tribesmen from rural Marib and al-Jawf repeatedly expressed in interviews that by convention allowing marriage outside of the bride's micro-tribe is extremely rare, even more so outside of her macro-tribe, and is generally unheard of outside of her governorate.<sup>296</sup>

Prior to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, there is no record of probably the most prominent al-Qa`ida operative in Yemen with documented tribal ties, Abu `Ali al-Harithi, expanding al-Qa`ida's influence into his home governorate of Shabwah. A Yemeni security official privately claimed that al-Harithi chose not to recruit from his Bal Harith macro-tribe because he feared doing so would jeopardize his relations with the tribe.<sup>297</sup> There is some indication that in limited cases members of AQAP married women from the families of other members. However, the frequently cited union between Fawaz al-Rabay`i and the niece of the 2006 prison escapee Arif Salih `Ali Mujali does not appear to have been motivated by tribal concerns. Mujali hailed from a prominent family just north of the capital, and al-Rabay`i spent most of his childhood and early adulthood in Sana`a. Tribal affiliation was almost certainly not a deciding factor in connecting the two. Rumors of Nasir al-Wahayshi taking a wife in Marib's village of Fifal persisted in some circles in Yemen in 2009, but the author is aware of no conclusive evidence supporting the claim.<sup>298</sup> Similarly, although Osama bin Laden did

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<sup>294</sup> Gregory Johnsen, "The Expansion Strategy of Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula," *CTC Sentinel* (Special Issue on Yemen, January 2010), 5–6; Dan Byman, "Al-Qaeda in Yemen-New Foothold," *The Brookings Institute*, 21 January 2010.

<sup>295</sup> As explained in Chapter One, the author understands the group's senior Yemeni leadership to be comprised of the following individuals: Nasir `Abd al-Kareem `Abdullah al-Wahayshi, Qasim Yahya Mahdi al-Raymi, Muhammad Sa`id Ali Hasan al-`Umda, the religious leader `Adil bin `Abdullah bin Thabit al-`Abab and deceased mid-tier field commanders such as Jamil bin Nasir al-`Anbari (kunya Abu Sabr al-Abyani), and perhaps even Muhammad Ibn Salih al-Kazimi al-`Awlaqi (kunya Abu Salih) or Muhammad Ahmad bin Salih `Umayr al-Kalawi al-`Awlaqi (kunya Abu Mus`ab). There is no evidence to date of Saudis, North Africans or Americans marrying into the tribes of either governorate.

<sup>296</sup> This applied to women still living in their village of ancestry. Controls on maintaining marital ties within a sub-tribe were less consistent as urban migration pushed families nearer to Sana`a, Ta`izz, Ibb and Aden. Fieldwork, Marib, September through October 2009; phone interviews, February 2011.

<sup>297</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 3 May 2009.

<sup>298</sup> Scholars of AQAP have noted *Sada al-Malahim's* reference to the marriage of a prison escapee in the

take a fifth wife from the city of Ibb in 2000, neither rural sanctuary nor tribal affiliation likely played a role in the marriage.<sup>299</sup>

## Governance and Services

Nor is there an indication that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has generated local support by solving tribal disputes. This is a critical distinction from attempts at Tribal Engagement by other Yemeni actors, particularly the Huthi movement.<sup>300</sup> Though it falls outside this study, discussions with shaykhs from Sa`da and al-Jawf, and eight interviews with a former Huthi commander from July 2009 to March 2011, suggest that members of that movement used the promise of support in intertribal conflicts to win initial acceptance. Huthi leaders also served as arbiters in village disagreements in order to solidify their positions in surrounding communities. Yet in the case of AQAP, no such account exists. Fears that the group has won tribal support by filling voids in public services, health and education are not substantiated by events on the ground.

The much-discussed declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Abyan is a useful example. On 29 March 2011, online sites began reporting that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula had seized a local radio station in Abyan, announcing an al-Qa`ida Emirate in the governorate and barring women from leaving their homes.<sup>301</sup> Western news services quickly picked up the story, and by early April unnamed U.S. officials spoke to the

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magazine's tenth edition. While correct, the text does not mention a tribe or tribal affiliation in the brief note of congratulations in the inset. The author personally could not verify details of Muhammad Sa`id Ali Hasan al-'Umda's marriage, but there is no indication that it involved a woman from Marib or al-Jawf. For the reference, see: "Ila Akhina al-Qa'id – Muhammad al-'Umda," *Sada al-Malahim* 10 (5 August 2009), 20; mention of al-Wahayshi's marital ties to `Abeeda's al-Rashid Manif are according to author interviews, Sana`a, 7 August and 20 August 2009.

<sup>299</sup> Ibb remains one of Yemen's most developed and agricultural regions. Though tribes do exist, tribal coherence and affiliation are quite different in Ibb than in Marib, al-Jawf or even Shabwah.

<sup>300</sup> This is also distinct from transnational jihadists outside of Yemen, particularly al-Shabaab. In at least that group's messaging, Shabaab has released statements—often complete with photographs—emphasizing its visible role in southern Somalia's tribal communities by providing food, mediating disputes, holding tribal conferences and winning written pledges of support from shaykhs. For al-Shabaab's media, see: "Jalsah li-Wilayat Banadr al-Islamiya m'a Zu'ama' Qaba'il 'Madlud,'" *Mu'asasat al-Kata'ib lil-Intaj al-I'alami Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen*, 18 March 2011; "Wilayat Banadr al-Islamiya Tunazm Mu'tamaran lil-Islah Bayn Qabilatayn Mutanaheratayn Mudat 16 A'aman," *Mu'asasat al-Kata'ib lil-Intaj al-I'alami Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen*, 27 December 2009; "Maktab Diwan al-Zakat al-Tab'i li-Wilayat Shabila al-Wosta al-Islamiya Yuwaz'a Zakat al-An'am 'Ala Mustahiqiha," *Mu'asasat al-Kata'ib lil-Intaj al-I'alami Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen*, 25 January 2010.

<sup>301</sup> "Qa`idat al-Yemen Talen Muhafaza Abyan 'Imarah Islamiya,'" *Islam Memo*, 29 March 2011, <http://www.islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2011/03/29/120209.html>.

press about concerns over AQAP's expanding presence in Yemen's ungoverned South.<sup>302</sup>

Despite the reporting, AQAP had not in fact established any type of governing body in Abyan. Within hours after reports surfaced of the "Islamic Emirate," members of Internet forums set about verifying the authenticity of the claim. By 30 March, forum participants living in Abyan argued that the story was a fake, or at least grossly inaccurate.<sup>303</sup> Though Islamic militants have sporadically clashed with security forces in Abyan for more than fifteen years, most recently repelling the Yemeni military from Zinjibar and Ja`ar in spring 2011, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has yet to conclusively prove its role in the violence. Nor has it demonstrated that it is capable of taking, holding and administering territory. Despite AQAP's failure to issue any media claiming control of Abyan, the assumption that the group is poised to govern Yemen's tribal hinterlands persists.<sup>304</sup> As Chapter One suggests, the incentive or ability of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula to administer territory is questionable. It remains a small group with limited resources and is constrained by operational security concerns. Actually governing impoverished Yemeni communities would require providing goods and services, and in much of the country, would necessitate displacing existing forms of social organization and traditional power brokers. To date, AQAP has not attempted to do so in Marib and al-Jawf. While the group may be making inroads in the south, the burden of proof remains on AQAP to distinguish itself from other local Islamist actors, long fixtures in Abyan.

The single credible case of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's use of services to win local acceptance occurred in the summer of 2009. Fahd al-Qus'a, best known for oversleeping his duties as videographer of the USS *Cole* bombing a decade earlier, was accused of bringing more than a dozen members of al-Qa`ida to his grandfather's village of Rafd in western Shabwah. There, the men took over an abandoned school and began holding classes in religious instruction for local youth. The villagers claim to have been uncomfortable at the prospect of members of AQAP advocating global jihad to their children; however, the government had long failed to supply the school with a single teacher, and the outsiders could presumably teach the boys how to read and write. A Yemeni familiar with the village explained the decision in practical terms,

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<sup>302</sup> Eric Schmitt, "Unrest in Yemen Seen as Opening to Qaeda Branch," *New York Times*, 5 April 2011, A1.

<sup>303</sup> "'Al-Imarah al-Islamiya' . . . Hal Sam'atum Idha'at Abyan T'alen 'anha?!" al-Majlis al-Yemeni, 30 April 2011, <http://www.ye1.org/vb/showthread.php?t=579868>.

<sup>304</sup> Several weeks after the emirate incident, an AQAP leader did make a number of startling claims regarding the group's strength in Abyan. However, `Adil al-`Abab's online question and answer session warrants a good deal of skepticism. See: `Adil al-`Abab, "Ilqa' al-Souti m'a al-Shaykh Abu al-Zabir `Adil al-`Abab," *Ghurfat Manbar al-Ansar*, 19 April 2011.

telling a reporter that the tribesmen would rather have their kids get an “al-Qa`ida education than be illiterate.”<sup>305</sup>

A U.S. missile strike in late December 2009 killed five of the men along with an estimated thirty civilians.<sup>306</sup> Al-Qus`a and those that remained subsequently left the village of Rafd, and the school remained closed twelve months later. Though the case is significant, Rafd’s importance is not that it signals a broader AQAP strategy for winning tribal support. Instead, the account is notable because it is such an outlier in more than ten-plus years of potential al-Qa`ida outreach to Yemen’s tribes. No comparable efforts are known to have been made by AQAP members elsewhere in Marib or al-Jawf, and local media reports of Shabwah and Abyan make no mention of AQAP’s teaching youth in the months since. Interestingly, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has not leveraged the Rafd incident publicly by announcing similar efforts to win support through public services in Yemen’s least developed villages.

## Financial Incentives

The provision of financial incentives to either tribes or shaykhs is also uncommon. Those that may have participated in any such arrangement naturally have compelling reasons to hide their relations with AQAP. However, as described in the previous chapter, the offer of money beyond an initial symbolic gesture was viewed with contempt by many interviewees when negotiating long-term sanctuary. The author is aware of no record of any safe haven in Marib or al-Jawf being provided by a majority of a tribal unit simply in exchange for cash.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> For a strong Arabic account of the case, see: ‘Arafat Mudabish, “Manatiq al-Idtirab fi janoub al-Yemen,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 December 2010, <http://www.aawsat.com//details.asp?section=4&issueno=11709&article=600063>; for the quote, see: Robert Worth, “Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan?,” *New York Times Magazine*, 11 July 2010, MM30.

<sup>306</sup> *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 December 2010.

<sup>307</sup> As explained in Chapter Two, a majority consensus would of course be necessary for formal sanctuary to be offered. While it is plausible that individual protection by tribesmen from Marib or al-Jawf did involve some form of financial compensation, no one interviewed during the author’s fieldwork was directly involved in such a practice. A colleague from western Marib who maintained ties to AQAP’s earlier iterations and one of its current alleged tribal intermediaries argued that it was reasonable that those who provide safe houses would be reimbursed for housing and feeding members of AQAP. Author interview, Sana`a, 26 August and 6 September 2009.

## Narcotics Smuggling

The relationship between sanctuary and drug smuggling is less clearly defined. A senior shaykh of the Nihm macro-tribe bordering northwest Marib and a prominent figure in the Bakil Confederation claimed that al-Qa`ida in Yemen took as much as 80 percent of its funding from illegally transporting narcotics over the border into Saudi Arabia.<sup>308</sup> A member of northern Shabwah's Mus`abayn macro-tribe, also well connected to Sana`a, made similar allegations.<sup>309</sup>

The illicit movement of goods, vehicles, people and drugs from Yemen to Saudi Arabia certainly has continued during AQAP's post-2006 emergence. Considering that the sparsely populated border areas stretching from Sa`da through al-Jawf and into Hadramawt were controlled to varying degrees by tribes rather than the Yemeni state, it is reasonable to assume that tribesmen and shaykhs played some role in smuggling people and goods across the border. The involvement of a particular branch of Marib's `Abeeda tribe in various types of trafficking into Saudi Arabia has been an open secret for years in Marib, some even claiming coordination between a senior shaykh and government officials.<sup>310</sup>

Still, it is not clear what exactly AQAP would offer smuggling networks in compensation for siphoning off a portion of their profits. Winning the routes through violence does not seem a likely alternative either, as doing so would risk retribution from the families and tribal units of those killed. If any relationship does exist between the two, it is far more likely that it is through a sort of "honor among thieves"

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<sup>308</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 3 September 2009.

<sup>309</sup> The veracity of these claims, and particularly the degree to which they reflected media speculation of AQAP's alliances with drug traffickers, is difficult to assess. That speculation peaked in an episode of a popular Arabic television show called *Sina'at al-Mawt* (Industry of Death) in October 2009, which claimed AQAP had formed alliances with drug smugglers who travel through the Marib, Jawf and Sa`da. For the program, see: "Sina'at al-Mawt: al-Yemen al-S'aeed," Al-Arabiya, 9 October 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFvfyFj0QRQ>. The personal account is based on author's interview, Sana`a, 12 September 2009.

<sup>310</sup> This particular *fakhdh* (tribal subdivision) has had several well-publicized encounters with AQAP since 2006. A friend from central Marib described the link in historical terms, explaining that the sub-tribe raised and traded camels across the Saudi border for centuries, and that their progression to smuggling other goods both licit and illicit into the Kingdom is the natural outgrowth of such a tradition. Several other shaykhs noted that members of the sub-tribe were reputed hashish smugglers. The accusation of complicity by tribal and government leadership was made by a midlevel shaykh of another—though not adversarial—tribe in central Marib. He did not offer evidence to back the claim, and these types of assertions are not uncommon in Yemen. The comments in the text and footnote are taken from author interviews in Sana`a, 28 August and 15 September 2009.



informally reached between groups that both have an interest in illegally crossing in and out of Saudi Arabia, or perhaps a traditional business arrangement in which AQAP formally pays traffickers to move the group's members and equipment between the two countries. While neither scenario is comforting, more evidence is necessary before it is possible to determine the extent of AQAP's involvement in the narcotics trade. To date there is little in the open source literature suggesting that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula possesses the means, and the traffickers the incentive, to integrate AQAP operators into existing smuggling networks.

## **Grievance and Threat Perception**

The single most effective positive incentive used by AQAP remains one common to other cases of al-Qa`ida tribal outreach, most notably al-Qa`ida in Iraq. As in al-Anbar, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula frequently projects a narrative centered around local grievances in which disparate tribes are assimilated under the banner of jihad. This is perhaps clearest in AQAP's media efforts and will be discussed in greater detail below. But a brief analysis reveals that since 2006 al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has paid particular attention to at least four popular grievances: civilian deaths resulting from counterterrorism raids; U.S. efforts to invade, disarm and subjugate Yemen's tribes; the unwelcome presence of Yemeni security forces in tribal territory; and the pilfering of natural resources by the Salih regime.<sup>311</sup>

That AQAP's leadership was almost without exception foreign to the governorates commonly cited in such messaging and by convention had no legitimate stake in the tribal areas has not stopped the group from attempting to manipulate these local grievances. Nor has al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula acknowledged that the group itself was frequently the justification for the deployment of military forces, counterterrorism strikes and the escalating U.S. presence against which it railed.

In targeting Yemen's tribes for recruitment, AQAP has used a variety of narrative techniques to obscure the very real divisions separating its leaders from local communities in Marib and al-Jawf. An emphasis on the shared consequences rather than specific causes of grievances predominates in much of the group's media. This blurring of local perceptions emerges even more clearly in armed confrontations

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<sup>311</sup> These are only of the more frequently cited objections, and do not constitute the entire range of issues focused on by the group.

between AQAP and security forces near tribal communities, a key to explaining the group's limited success east of Sana'a. Four cases in Marib from July 2009 to June 2010 illustrate this well. Each reveals the complexities of conducting counterterrorism raids outside the capital and the ways in which even successful security operations can drive neutral communities toward AQAP.

The 'A'yd al-Shabwani episode of late July 2009 and the *Battle of Marib* video that followed are perhaps the best example of AQAP's ingenuity in turning Sana'a's missteps into Tribal Engagement wins.<sup>312</sup> On 30 July, a military convoy from Yemen's 101st Brigade clashed with roughly a dozen tribesmen led by an alleged member of AQAP, a previously unknown twenty-five-year-old named 'A'yd Salih Jabir al-Shabwani.<sup>313</sup> According to media accounts and author interviews, an initial firefight resulted in the killing and abduction of several soldiers, and the seizure of a vehicle and Army munitions.<sup>314</sup> After the skirmish, the tribesmen retreated to their homes in the village of 'Arq Al Shabwan, drawing the military's counter-response to the small community of mud-walled homes. Mortar and what appear to be .50-caliber rounds provoked return fire from the village's tribesmen. AQAP claims that at this point the group's members from surrounding areas of Marib and perhaps Shabwah raced to 'Arq Al Shabwan in order to reinforce the village against attack. The stalemate ended several hours later with Sana'a's order to withdraw its troops.

It is still not entirely clear what prompted the conflict. The most likely and least remarkable explanation suggests that the soldiers were standard infantry headed for Sa'da after finishing a tour guarding foreign petroleum facilities in northern Shabwah. The convoy either strayed too near 'Arq Al Shabwan or was ambushed by opportunistic tribesmen, perhaps led by 'A'yd al-Shabwani himself. As fighting neared the walled villages, noncombatants assumed that they were under attack and joined in efforts to

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<sup>312</sup> For Arabic accounts of the clashes, see: "La Qatla fi Sufouf Afrad al-Qa'ida," *Marib Press*, 30 July 2009, [http://www.marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=17881](http://www.marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=17881); "Masadir Amnia Tu'akid Najah 'Amlia Marib," *Marib Press*, 2 August 2009, [http://www.marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=17916](http://www.marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=17916).

<sup>313</sup> Though local reports claimed al-Shabwani was twenty-five years old, several members of Al Shabwan and Jid'an tribes familiar with the incident refuted the claim in conversations with the author, arguing that he was considerably younger. Regardless of his age, the Maribi also known by his kunya Abu Salih was only referred to by AQAP as a "brother" or "supporter" rather than a shaykh, leader or amir—the latter three titles were used by the group to describe deceased members Mihdar and al-'Anbari. Given that AQAP has been fiercely protective of its brand, particularly through denying attacks and alleged members, accusations that al-Shabwani served as AQAP's commander in Marib are not convincing. For AQAP's mention of the men, see: 'Hamil Misk', "Batrayus wa Ra's al-Dik," *Sada al-Malahim* 13 (18 May 2010), 32; "Yataqadam Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Jazirat al-'Arab bil-T'azia lil-Umma al-Islamia b-Istishhad kawkaba min Abtaliha," *Sada al-Malahim* 12 (14 February 2010), 19.

<sup>314</sup> All but two of the men were from the local Al Shabwan micro-tribe of the 'Abeeda macro-tribe. The two exceptions allegedly were from Sa'da's Waila macro-tribe.

push back government troops. The violence quickly spiraled out of control, and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula made good use of anger over the collateral damage that resulted.<sup>315</sup>

Whatever the cause, the death of at least three soldiers and abduction of seven more was an embarrassing setback for Sana`a.<sup>316</sup> Because it occurred just five miles from the site of a poorly executed operation to capture Muhammad al-Ahdal and Abu `Ali al-Harithi in `Abeeda's Hasun al-Jalal district nearly eight years earlier, a bungled operation in which at least a dozen civilians were killed, the incident triggered bitter memories of past counterterrorism raids. Compounding the missteps, Sana`a badly mishandled its post-attack messaging, asserting that Shabwani was killed in the fighting and that damage to civilian property remained minimal. The result opened the door for a strategic communications victory for AQAP, allowing it to merge what had been distinct sources of anger into a single narrative of government provocation and tribal self defense.<sup>317</sup> By drawing return fire into the village of `Arq Al Shabwan, `A'yd al-Shabwani baited security forces—perhaps deliberately—into a firefight with villagers that they were unlikely to win. More important, the battle transformed operations against an alleged member of AQAP into an encroachment on Al Shabwan's territory and an unprovoked attack on its citizens.

The effect was a propaganda windfall for AQAP. Two days after the attack, AQAP released its "Statement Concerning the Recent Battle of Marib," and on 8 September it released a video titled *Battle of Marib*.<sup>318</sup> Both offered a description of the clashes quite different from government reports. Complete with footage of collateral damage in `Arq Al Shabwan, the releases presented the Yemeni military as unable or unwilling to distinguish tribesmen from terrorists, simply pounding the village with artillery from afar. The attacks themselves and narrative that followed significantly raised the social costs of expelling `A'yd al-Shabwani from the village or visibly assisting the central government, in essence pushing a community of otherwise disinterested tribesmen closer to AQAP.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Author interviews with security officials from Western oil company, Sana`a, 31 September and 6 August 2009; author interview with member of Al Shabwan, Sana`a, 13 September 2009; author interview with Maribi shaykh, Sana`a, 4 September 2009.

<sup>316</sup> The group also reportedly hijacked an armored carrier and seized munitions from the destroyed convoy.

<sup>317</sup> The government's claims seem a poor choice given that phone calls to contacts in `Arq Al Shabwan, Jabal Murad, Sirwah and Hazm (al-Jawf) in the days after the attack all claimed that the twenty-five-year-old Shabwani was still very much alive and walking uncontested through the village on a daily basis. Author interviews, Sana`a, 7 August, 17 August and 13 September 2009.

<sup>318</sup> "Bayan Bishan M'arakat Marib al-Akhira," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 1 August 2009; "M'arakat Marib," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 8 September 2009.

<sup>319</sup> For one of the strongest accounts of such a process in insurgency and terrorism broadly, see: David

The situation deteriorated in January when Yemeni forces targeted `Arq Al Shabwan a second time.<sup>320</sup> Though the air strikes destroyed the farm and home of `A`yd al-Shabwani's father, they again resulted in collateral damage. As many as fifteen missiles reportedly hit neighboring property, including the farms of two senior shaykhs of `Arq Al Shabwan. The attacks predictably sparked angry recriminations from local villagers, who claimed they had been unfairly targeted twice in less than six months. Though Sana`a did not directly address the tribe's concerns, AQAP did. A series of media releases highlighted the air strikes and the killing of a leading shaykh from `Arq Al Shabwan in May of 2010, both strengthening al-Qa`ida's claim that Sana`a was waging a war against a branch of tribesmen rather than the criminals it claimed it was fighting.

The latter incident was especially damaging to the legitimacy of U.S. interests and the Yemeni government in Marib.<sup>321</sup> On 24 May, the deputy governor and head of Marib's local council, Shaykh Jabir bin `Ali bin Jabir al-Shabwani phoned the relative of an alleged AQAP leader living nearby. Details of the conversation are not known, but most accept that al-Shabwani organized a meeting with Muhammad bin Sa`id bin Jamil of `Abeeda's al-Hutayk micro-tribe in hopes of negotiating the surrender of the tribesman's brother and purported amir of AQAP in Marib. The two men, each accompanied by a host of bodyguards, met that evening in an isolated patch of desert along the border dividing Wadi `Abeeda's al-Rashid Manif from the northeastern `uzala of al-Quz'a.<sup>322</sup> Minutes later, U.S. missiles pounded both of their cars, killing Shaykh Jabir al-Shabwani and a pair of the deputy governor's guards while injuring two others. Muhammad bin Jamil apparently survived the attack, returning to his village—presumably Hudba' al-Jamil— just south of the strike the next morning.

News of the bombing sparked outrage throughout central Marib in a matter of hours. Among Al Shabwan, many felt it represented the third unjustified attack against the sub-tribe in less than a year. To `Abeeda's members, the attack seemed an act of

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Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38, 40.

<sup>320</sup> As with most media regarding the governorate, the two best accounts of the attack are found in the Arabic daily *Marib Press*. See: "Anba' Ghayr Mu`akada `an Suqout Madaniin," *Marib Press*, 20 January 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=21652](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=21652); "Masdar Mahali li-Marib Press al-Shabwani Naja," *Marib Press*, 20 January 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=21650](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=21650).

<sup>321</sup> For detailed descriptions of the meeting and attack, see: "Kayf Qada Na`ib Muhafiz Marib Akhr Sa`at Hiyatuhu?," *al-Masdar Online*, 2 June 2010, [http://www.almasdaronline.com/index.php?page=news&article-section=1&news\\_id=8613](http://www.almasdaronline.com/index.php?page=news&article-section=1&news_id=8613); "Qabail Marib Tumhil al-Sultat Yu`main wa Anba'an Najat Muhamed Jamil Shaiq Amir al-Qa`ida fi Marib," *Marib News*, 25 May 2010, <http://www.marebnews.com/Detail123456789.aspx?ID=3&SubID=2991>.

<sup>322</sup> The exact location of the missile strike differs between local news sources. Several cite a piece of desert between villages of Hadba' (حدباء) and al-Marda (المردا). By the author's estimate, this puts the location at the northern tip of al-Rashid Manif directly below the series of farms of villages that begin `uzala al-Quz'a, named for a sub-tribe also of `Abeeda's Kharees sub-tribe.

aggression against one of its most respected and ironically progovernment leaders. This reaction was shared amongst Maribis generally. Most residents interviewed by the author interpreted the raid as a sign of malign intent or incompetence. The killing of a leading local politician who was asked to negotiate with militants on behalf of the state did not encourage confidence in Sana`a's or Washington's ability to protect the few remaining tribal leaders willing to work with either government.

In the days that followed, tribesmen from Al Shabwan launched a series of retaliatory attacks against military bases, oil pipelines and electricity grids.<sup>323</sup> The harassing fire subsided after President Salih launched a formal inquiry into the missile strike, eventually concluding that the U.S. played no role in the raid and reportedly paying a multimillion dollar settlement to the father of Jabir al-Shabwani.<sup>324</sup> AQAP wasted little time in taking advantage of the incident. The group referenced it in a number of print and video releases as nothing less than the latest evidence of Sana`a's military campaign against the besieged tribes of eastern Yemen.

Twelve days after the missile strike, the commanding general of Yemen's Brigade 315 was assassinated on the road leading to Safir outside of Wadi `Abeeda.<sup>325</sup> Sana`a immediately indicated that AQAP was responsible for the attack, and Yemeni security forces established a blockade around a village in al-Rashid Manif just south of the location of the air strike that had killed Jabir al-Shabwani the previous month. The suspect in the assassination was alleged to be a member of `Abeeda's al-Hutayk micro-tribe thought to be residing in his family's home in al-Humah.<sup>326</sup> The siege of the village lasted two days as soldiers threatened to attack the tribesmen if they refused to surrender the twenty-eight-year-old Hasan `Aridan al-`Aqili within forty-eight hours.<sup>327</sup>

Shaykhs from neighboring tribes attempted to negotiate a settlement but failed to locate or persuade al-`Aqili before the deadline, and on 8 June armor and artillery units began shelling the village. Some combination of tribesmen and members of AQAP fired back,

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<sup>323</sup> "Wazir al-Dakhilia wa Wakil al-Amn al-Qawmi Yaslan Marib," *Marib Press*, 25 May 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25103](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25103); "`Abeeda Tu`wjil al-Rud `Ala Tahkim al-Daula," *Marib Press*, 27 May 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25183](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25183).

<sup>324</sup> Subsequent leaks by unnamed officials conceded that the strike was in fact launched by the United States, despite maintaining it had no role in the attack. Scott Shane, Mark Mazzetti and Robert Worth, "A Secret Assault on Terror Widens on Two Continents," *New York Times*, 15 August 2010.

<sup>325</sup> The ambush also killed a second soldier and critically wounded the Brigade's head of intelligence and two others in the convoy. See: "Ma Huwa Hajamu al-Qa`ida fi Marib?," *Yemen Today Net*, 10 December 2010, <http://www.edharalhaq.com/vb/showthread.php?t=20283>.

<sup>326</sup> "Tahalof Qaba'il Marib wa al-Jawf Yodin al-Hadith," *Marib Press*, 5 June 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25416](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25416).

<sup>327</sup> "Muhadida bi-Qasf al-Mintaqa," *Marib Press*, 7 June 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25461](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25461).

and a bloody stalemate ensued for nearly twenty-four hours. By late 9 June, local media reported that Yemeni tanks had destroyed both of al-Humah's mosques, the village's water depot and several homes.<sup>328</sup> At least four civilians were killed, including two children, and ten villagers were injured in what was described as random fire.<sup>329</sup> Worse, the father of the AQAP suspect Hasan 'Aridan al-'Aqili apparently possessed an official court document absolving his family, the village and al-Hutayk from any responsibility for Hasan's relationship with extremists.<sup>330</sup> The agreement was signed by a judge in Marib's sole appeals court and prohibited any punitive government action against al-'Aqili's family or tribe.<sup>331</sup>

Two days later al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula issued a "Statement Regarding the Killing of Women and Destruction of Homes and Mosques in Wadi `Abeeda."<sup>332</sup> In written and audio versions of the release, the group immediately denied involvement in the incident that killed Jabir al-Shabwani and the assassination of the Brigade 315 general Muhammad Salih al-Shayif. The attacks, according to the statement, were falsely attributed to AQAP by Sana`a in an effort to incite discord between the tribes and the mujahideen. It argued that such a campaign—later termed the "American Project" in Marib—was intended to turn villagers against one another, allowing Sana`a and the United States to control Wadi `Abeeda by stripping tribesmen of their independence and honor.<sup>333</sup> In a poignant critique, AQAP asked Maribis

Who, by God, is it that destroys your mosques and kills your women and children?  
Is it the mujahideen or `Ali `Abdullah Salih? And who violates the sanctity of your  
homes and bombs your farms. . . . Is it the mujahideen or `Ali `Abdullah Salih?<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> "Anba' `an Qatilayn wa 21 Jarihan bi-Marib," *Marib Press*, 9 June 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25520](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25520); "Jadhr al-Jihat al-Amnia bi al-Muhafadha wa Tabra' minhu Mundu `Amayn," *Marib Press*, 9 June 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25535](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25535).

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> Al-'Aqili also took the kunya Fawaz al-Maribi. He was later killed in clashes between security forces and militants in Aden in spring 2011.

<sup>331</sup> Compounding matters, government forces pushed north from al-Humah on the evening of 10 June in a move locals alleged was merely a ploy by Sana`a to convince Washington of its support for fighting AQAP. Soldiers shelled the home of Ali bin Sa`id bin Jamil in al-Hutayk's al-Murda village, according to reports, missing the man by a full four days. For the documents barring action against al-Humah or Hassan 'Aridan's family, see: "al-'Aqil Yadinun Qasf al-Manazil Raghm Waduh Mawqifuhum min Ibnihim al-Mutaham wa al-Maqtu`a Rasmiyan," *Marib Press*, 10 June 2010, [http://www.marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25554](http://www.marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25554); for the ground offensive north, see: "Qasf Midf'ai Mutafariq . . . Yusib Manzal Ahad al-Abriya'," *Marib Press*, 11 June 2010, [http://www.marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25567](http://www.marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25567).

<sup>332</sup> "Bayan Bishan Qatl al-Nisa' wa Tadmira al-Buyut wa al-Masajid bi-Wadi `Abeeda," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 12 June 2010.

<sup>333</sup> For a more complete description of the "American Project," see: al-Tahrir, "al-Iftitahia," *Sada al-Malahim* 14 (23 July 2010), 3.

<sup>334</sup> "Bayan Bishan Qatl al-Nisa' wa Tadmira al-Buyut wa al-Masajid bi-Wadi `Abeeda." *Tanzim Qa`idat al-*

The statement was followed by another on 20 June justifying AQAP's attack on a Political Security Organization prison in Aden as a "response to the brutal aggression imposed on our people in Marib in order to humiliate the tribes under the pretext of fighting terrorism . . ." <sup>335</sup> Neither of the two releases made reference to the roles of the presumed AQAP operatives Hasan 'Aridan al-'Aqili or 'Ali bin Sa'id bin Jamil as the targets of the raids. Yet both reinforced the belief that after coming under attack four times in less than a year, the sons of 'Abeeda were a far more important target for Sana'a than attacking AQAP was.

AQAP's initial role in each of these incidents remains ambiguous. Yet al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula capitalized on its talent for exploiting military action against the group for recruitment and radicalization purposes. Regardless of whether AQAP triggered the violence, government firefights entangling previously neutral tribal communities were a communications windfall for the group. <sup>336</sup> Disproportionate security operations in villages where the Yemeni military enjoyed little legitimacy were not an effective means for dismantling AQAP or improving local opinion of security forces. Imprecise army shelling in Wadi 'Abeeda strengthened AQAP's claims that counterterrorism raids were intended to kill tribesmen rather than eliminate terrorists far more effectively than AQAP's media efforts alone. <sup>337</sup>

## Coercive Violence

Unlike al-Qa'ida and Associated Movements in Iraq and Pakistan, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula has not used coercive violence as a primary tool of Tribal

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*Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab*, 12 June 2010.

<sup>335</sup> "Bayan Bishan Iqtiham Mubana al-Amn al-Siyasi bi-Aden," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-Arab*, 20 June 2010.

<sup>336</sup> The strategy was by no means unique to al-Qa'ida. Terrorist movements have long sought to provoke government overreaction in hopes of mobilizing neutral communities. See: Martha Crenshaw, *Terrorism in Context* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 473-514; Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13:4 (July 1981), 387.

<sup>337</sup> Not surprisingly, one of 'Abeeda's most respected shaykhs announced to a local journalist on 12 June that heavy-handed counterterrorism tactics were "serving al-Qa'ida" by alienating local tribesmen and stoking antigovernment discontent. Shaykh Sultan al-Aradah's conclusion that the government's current approach threatened to transform Marib into a second Sa'da was echoed in an interview the next day with a leading al-Jid'an shaykh, Alawi al-Basha bin Zab'a. For both, see: "al-Qaba'il Tawahid Sufufaha wa Takhruj Tarsanataha al-'Askariya," *Marib Press*, 12 June 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25585](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25585).

"al-Dawla Qararat Naql al-Harb min Sa'da ila Marib," *Marib Press*, 13 June 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25611](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=25611).

Engagement. In a limited number of cases beginning in the spring of 2007, AQAP relied on threats and attacks to raise the perceived costs of cooperating with President Salih and foreign governments. While the audience was not exclusively tribal and focused more on targeting security officials rather than local villagers, the selective use of violence against security officials and “informants” remains a component of AQAP’s outreach in Yemen. However, it is essential to note that to date AQAP has refrained from targeting shaykhs, tribesmen, civilians and representatives of the Yemeni government.<sup>338</sup> This point is critical. Unlike comparisons with al-Qa`ida in Iraq or Pakistan, AQAP has not attempted to violently coerce support from tribal communities.<sup>339</sup> While a turn toward violence is possible, in at least Marib and al-Jawf, it does not seem especially likely. Among al-Qa`ida in Yemen’s 1998–2003 iteration, the Army of Aden Abyan of 1994–1998 or Islamic Jihad of 1990–1994, there is no precedent for the widespread use of violence to intimidate or coerce tribesmen. Strong norms of retribution, tribal coherence and force of arms in both governorates suggest that were al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula to attempt to seize support through repression, it would almost assuredly spark a violent tribal backlash. Given the poor reputation of the military and police, and the risks implicit in alienating large sections of the local population, AQAP’s decision to almost exclusively strike Western targets and Yemeni security forces within the country is a sound strategy.

### **Targeted Assassinations: Qasaylah, Kua`lan, Tarboush, Far’a**

On 28 March 2007, the director of Marib’s Criminal Investigation Directorate, the forty-three-year-old `Ali Mahmud Qasaylah, was gunned down in a nighttime ambush as he and several colleagues returned to the governorate. Roughly a month later, al-Qa`ida in Yemen (as the group was then known) claimed responsibility for the shooting in a letter sent to a local journalist. In the statement, the group alleged that Qasaylah was assassinated for his role in the November 2002 drone strike that killed Abu `Ali al-Harithi.<sup>340</sup> No proof was given, and within some circles in Marib, Qasaylah’s death was

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<sup>338</sup> Al-Qa`ida did claim responsibility for an assassination attempt against the governor of Abyan in October 2010. Although the attack on Ahmad al-Maysari is plausible, some degree of skepticism is necessary. Even a failed attack on a relatively high-profile political figure would mark a fundamental shift in AQAP’s targeting preferences. Given the group’s history, it does not seem likely that such an attack would occur without a clear communications or propaganda effort to fully exploit its effect. As of spring 2011, no such release exists. For reference to aspects of the ambush, see *Inspire* 4 (Winter 2010), 29.

<sup>339</sup> As was alleged of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, there is also no evidence that AQAP partnered with tribal allies against noncompliant villages and rivals. For an account of the Iraq case, see: “An Iraqi Tribe Goes to War,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 12 September 2007.

<sup>340</sup> Gregory Johnsen, “Yemen Attack Reveals Struggle Among al-Qa`ida’s Ranks,” *Terrorism Focus* 4:12 (The Jamestown Foundation), 10 July 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=4291](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4291).



viewed with suspicion. A Maribi colleague still maintains that the likely motives for the attack were far from ideological, more likely stemming from Qasaylah's investigation into al-Qa`ida's involvement in drug trafficking from Marib to Saudi Arabia.<sup>341</sup>

In May, three men from `Abeeda's al-Hutayk micro-tribe were identified in the attack: Naji bin `Ali bin Salih Jaradan, `Ali bin `Ali bin Salih Doha and `Abd al-`Aziz bin Sa`id bin Muhammad Jaradan. Several months later, government pressure forced the men from what was likely the village of Jithwa in al-Rashid Manif. According to AQAP, the men fled with the help of `Amer bin Hasan Salih Haraydan al-Muhashami of upper al-Jawf before `Abeeda's shaykhs could surrender the group to authorities.<sup>342</sup> Yemeni counterterrorism forces quickly surrounded the four between the districts of Raghwan and Marib in an isolated peak reportedly popular with smugglers.<sup>343</sup> During the raid on al-Fatikha Mountain, a firefight broke out between the group and what AQAP claimed were hundreds of soldiers and several attack helicopters. The battle was a short one, and in a matter of minutes—or hours according to AQAP—all of the suspects were dead, including the three accused of organizing the assassination of `Ali Mahmud Qasaylah the previous spring.

The relationship between these men and AQAP remains a contested one. In a trend repeated often in AQAP media, the group exploited anger over the raid without claiming a connection to those killed. In winter 2008, a counterterrorism strike was used to justify the assassination of another Marib security official. On 20 October, the director of security for the governorate's northwest Madghal district, Muhammad bin Rubaysh bin Ku`alan, died after opening a package filled with explosives sent from Sana`a.<sup>344</sup> A member of AQAP claimed responsibility for the attack through a phone interview the next day.<sup>345</sup> In the November issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, the group wrote that the bombing

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<sup>341</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 15 July 2009.

<sup>342</sup> "Liqa' M'a Ahad al-Matlubin," *Sada al-Malahim*, 1 (13 January 2008), 8–9.

<sup>343</sup> Media reports claim Fatikha was situated between three of Marib's macro-tribes: al-Jid`an to the northwest, Jahm to the west and `Abeeda to the southeast. For mention of Fatikha, see: "'Amiliya Naw'iyah Daqiqa Taqtul Thalathat Matlubin `ala Khalfiat Tafjirat Marib," *Marib Press*, 8 August 2007, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=7164](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=7164); the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat* claims the raid took place in area called al-Sahim (⦿⦿⦿⦿⦿) in northern Marib. See: Husayn al-Jarbani, "al-Yemen: Maqtal 4 min (al-Qa`ida) Khatatu li-'Amiliyat al-Siyah al-Asban fi Hijum Eshtarak fihi Mazalyoun wa Marwahiyat," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 August 2007, [http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=431780&issue\\_no=10481](http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=431780&issue_no=10481).

<sup>344</sup> A May 2009 video titled *Rubaysh and the Just Punishment* showed what was presumably the package and explosives—packed into a videocassette box—before both were sent to Ku`alan. For the video, see: "Rubaysh wa al-Qasas al-`Adil," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 20 May 2009.

<sup>345</sup> "al-Qa`ida Tatabana Ightiyal Ku`alan wa Takshef Hawiyat Munafid 'Amiliyat al-Safarah," *Al-Wasat*, 21 October 2008.

was in retaliation for Ku`alan's "direct involvement" in the assassination of Abu `Ali al-Harithi in 2002 and his responsibility for the August raid that killed Doha, Naji and `Abd al-Aziz Jaradan and Muhashami.<sup>346</sup> The statement ended with a warning to locals thinking of cooperating with security forces:

All those whose hands are stained with the blood of mujahideen or who cooperate with [the West] and their henchmen from the National Security [Bureau], Political Security [Organization], Criminal Investigations [Directorate], Special Forces, and Counterterrorism Forces [who fight] against the mujahideen . . . their fate is the fate of Qasaylah [ `Ali Mahmud] and Rubaysh [Ku`alan].<sup>347</sup>

The threat was followed in summer 2009 with the abduction of the head of Marib's Criminal Investigations Directorate, Lt. Colonel Bassam Suleman Tarboush al-Sharjabi. Like Qasaylah, Tarboush was not a native Maribi, but had relocated from Aden to Marib to work in the governorate's criminal investigation unit in 1997.<sup>348</sup> As head of the department in 2008, Tarboush rose to prominence after overseeing a counternarcotics raid that seized a shipment of some two tons of hashish moving from Marib to Saudi Arabia.<sup>349</sup>

On the evening of 26 June 2009, Tarboush was kidnapped as he traveled to his office in central Marib.<sup>350</sup> AQAP failed to comment on the incident until the November release of the first in a series titled *Masar` al-Khuna*, or "Fighter of Traitors."<sup>351</sup> The tape showed a blindfolded Tarboush kneeling in front of several bottles of gin. In a

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<sup>346</sup> In the statement, AQAP argued Ku`alan worked in close cooperation with the former U.S. ambassador Edmund Hull, even hosting the diplomat in his Madghal home several times. "al-Qisas al-`Adil," *Sada al-Malahim*, 6 (9 November 2008), 17.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid. The threat was repeated in an AQAP video release in May 2009.

<sup>348</sup> Tarboush was born in Aden in 1967. After unification in 1990 he enrolled in the college of police and graduated as an investigations officer shortly thereafter. He was assigned to criminal investigations in Aden until his move to Marib in 1997, where according to an AQAP media release, he was promoted to head of Marib's Criminal Investigation Directorate in 1999. For a short bio, see: "Fi Absh'a Jarima ruwi'at laha Madinata 'Aden wa Marib," 14 October, 5 December 2009, <http://www.14october.com/news.aspx?newsid=f2efd212-2786-4131-8140-8b76c7795e49>.

<sup>349</sup> "Tam fiha Taqlid Tanzim al-`Iraq: bi-Tariqa Muhtakarrah Tanzim al-Qa`ida Y`arid Maqt`a Fidyu Yuzhir I`adam Dabit Mabahith bi-Marib," *Marib Press*, 25 November 2009, <http://marebpress.net/nprint.php?lng=arabic&sid=20352>.

<sup>350</sup> As in the Qasaylah assassination, the Tarboush case was not without controversy. After his abduction, Tarboush's family alleged that government officials and drug smugglers were complicit in the kidnapping, though little evidence beyond the prevarications of Marib's governor was given. See: Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> "Masar` al-Khuna," *Mu`asat al-Malahim*, 27 November 2009.

prompted confession, Tarboush admitted to drinking alcohol frequently and recruiting spies within Yemen's tribes to gather intelligence on AQAP.<sup>352</sup> Several minutes before the video closed with the apparent execution of Tarboush, the Lieutenant Colonel warned off others considering working with authorities against AQAP, saying, "Do not undertake any work like this . . . do not become what I became. Leave from this before you regret it like me."<sup>353</sup>

The Tarboush killing was unusual. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula had taken prisoners on several occasions previously, but neither in tribal outreach nor in its general media efforts had the group filmed the confession and presumed execution of a hostage. The practice resembled media releases closer to those of al-Qa`ida in Iraq or the Tehrik-e-Taliban in Pakistan than any al-Qa`ida antecedent in Yemen. The Tarboush video was followed by a second video in the Fighter of Traitors series in February 2011. In the release, the deputy director of Political Security Organization in Sa`da, `Ali Muhammad Salih al-Hussam, was shown blindfolded and accused of attacking the homes of innocent Muslims, kidnapping students from the country's most prominent Salafi religious institute and coordinating the abduction of two members of AQAP by Huthi fighters in al-Jawf.<sup>354</sup> As with the Tarboush film, al-Hussam confessed to the crimes, was forced to kneel before a group of AQAP fighters who read the charges against him and then was presumably executed after the footage concluded.<sup>355</sup>

On 26 August 2010, Marib's Criminal Investigations Directorate was targeted for the third time in little more than three years. The then-CID deputy director, Muhammad

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<sup>352</sup> Later in the tape, Tarboush claimed that "some of the sons of [Marib's] tribes had relations with Saudi national intelligence organs." AQAP's focus on alcohol as a marker for corruption and moral decay was repeated in the May 2010 issue of *Echo of Epic Battles*. In the journal, a footnote justifies the killing of Tarboush by arguing that he was "abducted in possession of alcohol and confessed to his role in spreading moral corruption in tribal areas." See: Ibid, 5:44-6:15; Abu Jina al-Qurashi, "Man Yahmi al-Fasad fi al-Yemen?," *Sada al-Malahim* 13 (May 2010), 33.

<sup>353</sup> Tarboush's death is insinuated in the film but not directly shown. A group of men surround the blindfolded official, and after reading a list of allegations of his infidelity, the image fades as gunfire is heard in the background. See: "Masar` al-Khuna," 5:44.

<sup>354</sup> Al-Hussam was abducted by AQAP the previous September in retaliation for what it claimed was collusion between the Huthi movement and Sana`a against al-Qa`ida. The video is notable in that unlike the earlier Tarboush film of the same name, the February release begins with a mix of media reports and personal video of Yemenis claiming to have been tortured by state security forces before showing real-time footage of attacks on local security forces. The second of these is particularly significant in presenting not the attack itself, which AQAP ultimately aborted, but the group's commitment to abstain from risking civilian casualties in its military operations. See: "Masar` al-Khuna 2," *Muasasa al-Malahim*, 2 February 2011.

<sup>355</sup> While certainly a worrying shift, to date AQAP has not issued similar recorded killings or expanded the campaign to include tribesmen or tribal leaders.

`Abdullah Fara`a, was shot in the head as he left his home in Madina Marib after evening prayer.<sup>356</sup> The shooting had little in common with the Tarboush abduction. Instead, Fara`a's death looked a great deal more like the assassination of `Ali Mahmud Qasaylah in spring 2007. Both men headed the governorate's drug enforcement unit, both were killed in small arms attacks and both assassinations were claimed by AQAP in a less-than-convincing fashion. Like the letter sent to journalists accepting Qasaylah's death, the two-paragraph statement released by AQAP on 29 August was uncharacteristically short and included few details. It failed to name a time or place of the attack, only calling it a success for the group's nascent Eliminate Evil Operations campaign.<sup>357</sup> The brief statement concluded with prose familiar to the style of messages made infamous by al-Qa`ida in Iraq:

This is the fate of each spy or agent that stands in line with the Crusader campaign against the lands of Islam. The swords of the mujahideen will reach them sooner or later, and they will meet the same fate as Basam al-Sharjibi, [Ali Mahmud] Qasayla, and Muhammad Fara`a if they do not repent and return to the line of their nation [the Ummah].<sup>358</sup>

## Shaykhs, Tribesmen and U.S. Tribal Engagement

Scattered accounts suggest tribesmen and shaykhs suspected of involvement in U.S. Tribal Engagement may have been targeted by members of al-Qa`ida in Yemen as well. On 30 January 2007, Salim Muhammad `Abdullah al-Hajiri, originally of Shabwah, was shot to death outside of his home in Sana`a.<sup>359</sup> Some claimed the thirty-five-year-

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<sup>356</sup> "Wafat Na'ib Mudir al-Bahth al-Jina'iy bi-Marib Muta'thiran bi-Jirahihi," *al-Masdar Online*, 27 August 2010, [http://www.almasdaronline.com/index.php?page=news&article-section=1&news\\_id=11004](http://www.almasdaronline.com/index.php?page=news&article-section=1&news_id=11004); "Wafat Na'ib Mudir al-Bahth al-Jina'iy Mutathiran bi-Isabatihi min Qibal Majhulin," *Marib Press*, 27 August 2010, [http://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=27179](http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=27179).

<sup>357</sup> "Bayan Ightiyal Na'ib Mudir al-Bahth fi Wilayat Marib," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 29 August 2010.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid. For a representative statement by al-Qa`ida in Iraq, see: Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, "They Plot and Allah Plots Too," *Islamic State of Iraq*, 14 September 2007.

<sup>359</sup> He is also referred to as Salim Sa'id al-Hajiri. After his death, there was some debate whether Hajiri was from Shabwah or Marib. The news article claimed he was from Shabwah and moved quite frequently within the governorate, while a participant in a local Internet forum maintained Hajiri held no connection to Shabwah and was instead born, educated and raised in Marib. Given his contentious past, it is not altogether surprising that there was little rush to assume responsibility for the former prisoner and alleged spy. For the media account, see: "al-Mutaham bil-Ta'mor M'a al-Amrikiin fi Qatl Za'im al-Qa`ida fi al-Yemen Yalqa Mus'ahu," *Marib Press*, 31 January 2007, [http://www.marebpress.com/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4445](http://www.marebpress.com/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4445).

old worked closely with the U.S. Embassy for years in targeting AQAP members in the country's tribal areas, with others even claiming he was directly responsible for Abu `Ali al-Harithi's death in 2002.<sup>360</sup>

Though AQAP would not claim responsibility for al-Hajiri's murder, some concluded the attack was nonetheless instigated by members of the group.<sup>361</sup> In addition, for many in Marib the shooting sent a clear message to those who had or were considering participating in U.S. Engagement: American support offered little protection against retaliation by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and its supporters.<sup>362</sup> Al-Hajiri's actual role in collecting intelligence against AQAP operatives is far from certain, and the motives behind his death remain unclear. Nevertheless the narrative reinforced by his killing within certain circles in Yemen is significant. The incident was referenced several times in nearly a dozen discussions with a Maribi who claimed to have assisted in U.S. Tribal Engagement in 2002. The tribesman conceded that he had received several phone calls from AQAP members threatening him for his suspected involvement in al-Harithi's death.<sup>363</sup>

A second case loosely conforms to the al-Hajiri example, but is unique in several respects. Interviews conducted in fall 2009 with a midlevel shaykh from a tribe located in al-Jawf's Khab wa al-Sha`af, al-Hazm and Maslub districts revealed that in at least one instance a suspected leader of al-Qa`ida may have leveraged existing tribal conflicts to combat mounting security pressure.<sup>364</sup> Although the accuracy of his claim is impossible to verify, its basic details were confirmed in discussions with shaykhs elsewhere.

According to the shaykh, eight years earlier his father was privately cooperating with an unnamed government to track the movement of Abu `Ali al-Harithi. As a senior shaykh of a tribe of some 15,000 fighters spanning lower al-Jawf and populating much of the desolate Khab wa al-Sha`af region, long a haven for smugglers and criminal gangs, the man was an appropriate choice. At some point in 2002, he and a member of `Abeeda's

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> A Maribi colleague claimed that members of AQAP paid local criminals to carry out the shooting in order to maintain some distance from the killing of a civilian tribesman. Again, the author is aware of no evidence that validates the assertion, but given that it represented a narrative accepted by many in Marib, it is noted here. Author interview, Sana`a, 15 July 2009.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 12 June 2009.

<sup>364</sup> The following account is based on author interviews conducted in Sana`a on 15 August, 12 September and 26 September 2009.

al-Mash'al sub-tribe began gathering intelligence on al-Harithi's location. In late fall, just hours after meeting his contact in `Abeeda, the shaykh was gunned down as he walked with another tribal leader from al-Jawf through the central market in Madina Marib.

The attack was unusual in that it appeared to target a senior shaykh and occurred openly in one of the city's most secure areas. It was also peculiar given that the assailants sprayed the man with automatic fire from a vehicle as they passed the suq—a method contrary to norms of tribal conflict and customary prohibitions on violence in the marketplace. To some of those involved, it was at least plausible that a third party played a role in the assassination.

In the weeks prior to the attack, Abu `Ali al-Harithi evidently received word that government proxies were following him. According to the slain shaykh's son, at or around this time al-Harithi contacted an intermediary from al-Jid`an macro-tribe of northwestern Marib, then locked in a nearly two-decade land dispute with the tribe of the shaykh allegedly tracking Abu `Ali.<sup>365</sup> Though the conflict was suspended by late 2002, the truce was a fragile one as the clashes had yet to achieve the equivalency (*ghurm*) necessary for a durable cease-fire.<sup>366</sup> Given the disparity in casualties between both sides, mobilizing support for a resumption of fighting was not difficult. According to the shaykh's son, al-Harithi paid his contact to convince a group of seven men from al-Jid`an to carry out the shooting, which would then appear as merely the revival of a longstanding conflict rather than an al-Qa`ida strike against one of al-Jawf's more respected leaders.

Whatever his role, al-Harithi was dead weeks later, killed by a U.S. drone attack in southern Marib. The shooting in Madina Marib did in fact spark renewed clashes between al-Jid`an and the tribe of southern al-Jawf, though the fighting proved comparatively brief. After nine months, both sides agreed to a cease-fire that remained through the period of the author's fieldwork. Despite leading several attacks against al-Jid`an, the shaykh's son learned of al-Harithi's apparent role in the killing shortly after his father's death through a Maribi also involved in the surveillance. Yet without

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<sup>365</sup> Interestingly, the shaykh's son was adamant that al-Harithi did not involve shaykhs from al-Jid`an. Instead, he claimed Harithi bypassed them by working through sympathetic civilians with broad ties to the targeted community, especially its youth. This is a pattern repeated in accounts of how sanctuary is provided to nonmembers by tribes in Marib and al-Jawf.

<sup>366</sup> Four fewer members of the shaykh's tribe had been killed in fighting than in al-Jid`an.

proof and already mired in fighting with al-Jid`an, he had few options for justifiably retaliating against al-Qa`ida, al-Harithi or his Bal Harith tribe of upper Shabwah.<sup>367</sup> The man told only his immediate family of the accusations made against al-Harithi, but none of his remaining micro-tribe was aware of al-Harithi's alleged role in killing one of its leaders.

The murder of the shaykh remains the only example the author is aware of an al-Qa`ida affiliated group or any of its predecessor organizations exploiting tribal conflict in a Tribal Engagement strategy in eastern Yemen. Accounts of Huthi insurgents brokering or participating in existing tribal conflicts persist, as do allegations that the central government has long provoked and manipulated hostilities between tribes to better manage them. However, if accurate, the al-Harithi instance is the first such case of an AQAP predecessor using tribal violence toward strategic ends in Marib or al-Jawf.

Despite the al-Harithi example, it is important to note that no jihadist group in Yemen has used coercive violence to force or intimidate tribal acquiescence on a scale comparable to al-Qa`ida affiliates in Iraq or Pakistan. AQAP has not targeted local governance or civic institutions, and shaykhs, local councils, schools and development projects have thus far not been attacked.<sup>368</sup> Tribal leaders in Marib and al-Jawf have not been subjected to hundreds of targeted killings as in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and tribesmen have not endured torture or excessive violence as have those in western Iraq.

This does not imply that AQAP is immune from the failings of similar groups. The use of violent coercion could indeed occur in the future. Yet such a development would mark a radical transformation in the group's relationship with tribal communities. Islamic Jihad in Yemen, the Army of Aden Abyan and early manifestations of al-Qa`ida in Yemen all abstained from employing violence against tribal leaders and villagers. As discussed earlier, given the coherence and military capability of most of Marib and

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<sup>367</sup> By early to mid-2003, Harithi was dead and most of what remained of al-Qa`ida in Yemen was in jail. Beyond seeking retribution from al-Jid`an—which he did by killing four and wounding three members of the tribe—there were few people left to target within AQY. More important, without compelling evidence that Harithi was involved, he could not attack al-Harith without jeopardizing his standing within his own tribal unit.

<sup>368</sup> Admittedly the governance aspect of this is muddly. AQAP has without question mounted escalating military operations against the state's military and intelligence forces, though it has not attacked those responsible for actually administering territory. Were either security branch to represent key providers of governance in the Yemen case, and particularly in the areas where they have been most frequently attacked—Marib, Abyan, Hadramawt, Shabwah and so forth—the implications would be quite different.

al-Jawf's tribes, any strategic turn toward violence in displacing the traditional roles of shaykhs or the autonomy of tribal units would have an enormous impact on AQAP's ability to survive in either governorate.

Likewise, while the murder of security personnel is more common, it is still rare in comparison to other theaters of al-Qa`ida activity. Of the four senior officials in Marib who were reportedly killed by AQAP, only one was a native Maribi.<sup>369</sup> Few of the men carried significance among Marib's tribes. Only the killing of Rubaysh Muhammad bin Ku`alan, the fourth son of a senior shaykh of the Madghal's al-Jid`an macro-tribe, could have been perceived as an attack against one of Marib's sons.<sup>370</sup> Though AQAP's media response was given a tribal spin, the attacks appeared more likely a reaction to traditional counterterrorism—or counternarcotic pressure—aimed at dissuading security personnel rather than encouraging tribesmen to support the group.

## Media Engagement

While AQAP's use of violence against security forces occurred largely beyond the view of those outside the country, a parallel and quite public tribal outreach effort developed through the group's online media releases. These releases offer a virtual medium through which AQAP's Tribal Engagement can also be examined. Videos and written statements provide an indication of the growing importance of tribes in the broader metanarratives of al-Qa`ida and Affiliated Movements throughout the Middle East, South Asia and East Africa.

AQAP media efforts have targeted a variety of audiences simultaneously. Much of the group's outreach was directed at the governorate level—Marib, Abyan and Shabwah the most common—while a smaller proportion mentioned specific tribes by name,

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<sup>369</sup> `Ali Mahmud Qasaylah was from northwest Yemen's Mahweet governorate, while Bassam Suleman Tarboush al-Sharjabi hailed from Aden.

<sup>370</sup> For a counterexample, see the death of `Abdullah Muhammad al-Baham of Abyan's Mudiyah district. In October 2010, `Abdullah, then serving as Mudiyah's head of security, was gunned down by unknown assailants. Tribesmen from al-Baham suspected Anwar al-`Anbari, the brother of the former AQAP leader Jamil al-`Anbari, was behind the killing. On 13 October, a group of tribesmen and government soldiers surrounded al-`Anbari's home between the villages of al-Jeeza and al-Qashabir in an effort to arrest him. Though he apparently escaped the siege, the author is aware of no equivalent response in Marib or al-Jawf following the death of a senior security official. For the al-Baham case, see: "Najat Muhafiz Abyan min al-Ightiyal wa Maqtal Shaqiquhu wa Hisar al-'Anbari," *Yemen Nation*, 14 October 2010, <http://www.yemennation.net/news3519.html>.



including `Abeeda, al-`Awaliq and Bal Kazim.<sup>371</sup> The releases did not target particular shaykhs or villages. Rather, the media appeared to express AQAP's interest in the regions broadly while positioning itself to champion grievances common to each area. In this sense, the tactic provided a ready-made vehicle to strengthen the group's credibility in select parts of the country, while perhaps even bolstering its appeal to wealthy `Abeeda, Bal Harith and Muradi emigrants living in the Gulf.<sup>372</sup> The statements and videos also tied AQAP to macro-al-Qa`ida Central narratives emphasizing the importance of Tribal Engagement in Pakistan and Afghanistan, strengthening the group's authenticity to donors and prospective recruits abroad.

Despite these sometimes contradictory audiences and interests, a number of themes emerge from AQAP media posted on the Internet between January 2008 and February 2011. The themes do not follow a clear chronological pattern, nor do they dominate single statements. Instead these themes emerge nonsequentially over several years and often in releases that present conflicting arguments and aims.

Unlike the group's strategic discipline and refusal to attack Yemeni civilians, which distinguish it from other al-Qa`ida affiliated organizations, AQAP's media and communications outreach to tribal communities closely resemble other AQAM media outreach efforts. In Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and at times in Somalia, al-Qa`ida-inspired groups have relied on similar means of Virtual Engagement, each moving through several stages of discourse before confronting tribesmen with recommendations for action. The narratives generally open with some attempt at establishing a conceptual framework in which an illegitimate national government seeks to divide and subjugate local villagers. Once firmly positioned in opposition to the regimes targeting them, these tribesmen are then alternately praised and shamed by AQAP leaders, lauding them for their honorable past while chiding them for their materialistic present. Some combination of challenge and threat is made against the tribesmen, ultimately resolved by presenting the men with several courses of action in which their reputation and al-Qa`ida's objectives can be promoted in unison. The emphasis focused on each step varies according to the particularities of the al-Qa`ida affiliate and the security and political environment confronted by the tribesmen, but the themes connecting each group remain fairly consistent. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian

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<sup>371</sup> Al-Huta, the southwestern most district of Shabwah, is cited occasionally after shaykh `Abdullah Ahmad `Abdullah ba-Yasin was killed in January 2010, but not to the same degree as three governorates listed above. It is important to note that Bal Kazim is a subdivision of al-`Awaliq, not a distinct macro-tribe.

<sup>372</sup> Given the high rates of illiteracy and low rates of Internet connectivity in Yemen it is likely that much of AQAP's media efforts are directed to constituencies in the Gulf. There is anecdotal evidence that AQAP videos and speeches are shared via cell phone or in Internet cafés in Marib and al-Jawf.

Peninsula's virtual outreach offers one of the clearest examples of this narrative progression.

## Narrative Context

Beginning in January 2008, AQAP's media engagement with tribes of Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwah revolved around a number of common themes. A discourse exploiting existing grievances while increasing fears of U.S. aggression was repeatedly articulated early in the release. AQAP frequently alleged that Sana'a's subservience to Washington placed it in opposition to the independence of Yemen's tribes, at least once referring to Sana'a as a Zionist entity and calling Marib Yemen's Gaza.<sup>373</sup> According to the discourse, a fear of losing authority drove the central government to confiscate villagers' weapons, allowing the state to steal their land and natural resources and turning tribes against one another.<sup>374</sup> Without a means for defending themselves, AQAP maintained that the tribesmen would be left humiliated and unable to curb government repression or a potential U.S. invasion.<sup>375</sup> The AQAP amir Nasir al-Wahayshi presented the argument most clearly in his February 2009 audio release titled "They Plot and God Plots Too."<sup>376</sup> In the statement, repeated in the group's digital journal a month later, al-Wahayshi explained:

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<sup>373</sup> Abd al-Fattah al-Maribi, "Bayn Marib wa Gaza: T'adadat al-Sawar wa al-Mawt Wahid," *Sada al-Malahim*, 14 (23 July 2010), 58.

<sup>374</sup> Though the three listed in the text were the most common objectives cited of a malign central government, two others bear mention. In several releases AQAP alleged Sana'a sought to corrupt Yemen's tribes by distributing alcohol among the governorates' youth. Most explicit in the execution video of Lt. Colonel Bassam Suleman Tarboush al-Sharjabi in winter 2009, the accusation is interesting given it recurs in discussion of Egypt's Tribal Engagement some forty-eight years earlier in the civil war of North Yemen. Maribi and Jawfi tribesmen recounted in 2009 that during that war, Egyptian officers sought to subvert Yemen's eastern tribes by exposing them to alcohol and other vices. A second theme arrived at relatively recently by AQAP involves both Sana'a's and Washington's interest in militarizing Yemen's tribes. The argument is somewhat contradictory to AQAP's earlier accusations that both governments sought to disarm and subjugate Marib's citizens. Nevertheless, it did have a certain degree of currency amongst Maribi tribesmen, who echoed similar sentiments in 2009. According to the claim, the host government's desire to withdraw vulnerable military units from Marib, Shabwah and Abyan has increasingly prompted it to relocate the burden of providing security to tribal militias outside the capital. The move fits nicely with interest in Washington's defense community for exporting a Tribal Engagement strategy refined in al-Anbar. For AQAP's mention of alcohol and Sana'a's attempts at militarizing tribes, see: "al-Liqa' al-Awal wa al-Hasri Ma'a al-Shaykh a-Da'aia/Anwar al-'Awlaqi," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 22 May 2010; "Masar' al-Khuna," 27 November 2009; *Sada al-Malahim* (volume 13), 32; for the accusations made in the text, see: *Sada al-Malahim* (volume 13), 39; Abu al-Bara' al-Sana'ani, "al-Huthiun Rawafidh bi-Qina'a Zaydi," *Sada al-Malahim* 12 (14 February 2010), 20; 'Adil al-'Abab, "Hukm al-Musharaka M'a al-Amrikan fi Qital al-Muslimin," *Sada al-Malahim* (12), 13; 'Adil al-'Abab, "al-Hamla al-Salibiya 'Ala al-Yemen," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 29 March 2010.

<sup>375</sup> For the social importance weapons hold in 'urf, see: Dresch (1990), 54–55.

<sup>376</sup> "Wa Yamkurun wa Yamkuru Allah," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 19 February 2009.

This military campaign amassing in Marib, al-Jawf, Shabwah, Abyan, Sana`a, and Hadramawt . . . is just a step towards striking the tribes and their sons with weak and false pretexts that really aim to break the dignity of tribes, disarming them, controlling their land, and killing their sons in order to facilitate the despicable agents and with them the Crusader campaign to humiliate you . . .

He [‘Ali ‘Abdullah Salih] is stealing your oil and gas, and in return you get nothing but reminders of his generosity . . . he wants to take your weapons, control your land, and do with you what the Jews are doing with Gaza. This [happens] with weapons in your hands, so what [will happen] when you are disarmed, and control and humiliation imposed on you? What do you think he will do to you [then]?<sup>377</sup>

Efforts to delegitimize the Salih regime were paralleled by warnings of U.S. intentions in the country. By 2010, AQAP framed Washington’s designs for Yemen as part of a single “Petraeus Strategy” in which the United States would apply to Yemen counterinsurgency principles learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula predicted that American officials would begin sowing dissent among tribesmen, executing false flag operations implicating the group’s members, recruiting networks of tribal informants and promoting immorality through democratization and civil society programs.<sup>378</sup> AQAP leaders cautioned tribesmen to be wary of such efforts, paying special attention to attempts at organizing them into “councils” to better defend their villages. These tribal militias, according to the group, were little more than veiled efforts to turn Muslims against one another as in Iraq, Afghanistan and parts of western Pakistan.<sup>379</sup> A May 2010 issue of *Sada al-Malahim* warned its readers that Petraeus would soon begin tying attacks against tribal shaykhs, mosques and the homes of civilians to AQAP, alleging that the group’s members had begun the same descent toward nihilistic violence as al-Qa`ida in Iraq several years earlier.<sup>380</sup> It cautioned tribesmen to avoid

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<sup>377</sup> The claim that the benefits of Marib’s oil fall to those in the West rather than the governorate’s tribes was made again in the tenth edition of *Sada al-Malahim*. For the quotation above, see: Nasir al-Wahayshi, “Wa Yamkurun wa Yamkuru Allah,” *Sada al-Malahim* 8 (22 March 2009), 5; for *al-Malahim* volume 10, see: Hamam ‘Abdullah, “al-Hukm bi-Ghair Ma Anzal Allah,” *Sada al-Malahim* 10 (5 August 2009), 10.

<sup>378</sup> Though not explicitly stated in the plan, targeted strikes by surface-to-air missiles and unmanned aerial vehicle attacks could reasonably represent a fifth aim under the approach. See: Sa`id al-Shihri, “Rad al-‘Adwan al-Salibi,” *Mu`asasat al-Malahim lil-Intaj al-I‘alami*, 8 February 2010; *Sada al-Malahim* (13), 32; “Bayan Bishan Qatil al-Nisa’ wa Tadmir al-Buyut wa al-Masajid bi-Wadi ‘Abeeda,” *Tanzim al-Qa`ida fi Jazirat al-‘Arab*, 11 June 2010.

<sup>379</sup> Al-Shihri, February 2010.

<sup>380</sup> AQAP’s claim of false flag operations was boosted with the apparently forged statement attributed to it on 2 June 2010. The document posted on the *Markez al-Fajr lil-‘Alam* forum labeled the deceased Maribi deputy governor Jabir al-Shabwani an infidel and alleged that the mujahideen successfully lured the

state-controlled and Western media likely to propagate such false information, instead advising them to look to the group's written statements for clarification on AQAP's role in any alleged attack.

The group has also cleverly played on controversy in the United States over the legality of targeting Anwar al-`Awlaqi. In two video releases in particular, al-`Awlaqi and Nasir al-Wahayshi allege that the United States has shown little restraint in targeting Americans in Yemen without first providing credible or public evidence of their crimes. Al-Wahayshi cites the case of Kamal al-Derwish, the Buffalo native who was killed with Abu `Ali al-Harithi in November 2002, as an example of Washington's willingness to breach Yemeni sovereignty and assassinate its own citizens without a trial or explanation.<sup>381</sup> Given the debate within the U.S. government over the value and precedent for his killing, al-`Awlaqi's comments are perhaps more pointed. The cleric asks viewers precisely what he has been charged with in Yemen or the United States that would warrant his death, speculating, "That I call for the truth? That I call to Jihad in the way of Allah? That I call to defend the cause of the Ummah?"<sup>382</sup>

## Unifying Threat Perceptions

Such a discourse worked to align interests by conflating targets and objectives. In its messaging, AQAP frequently reconfigured the purpose of counterterrorism operations targeting the group. Military raids were transformed from strikes against individuals suspected of terrorism to attacks on Yemen's noble and defiant tribes. The death of villagers caught in the middle of operations poignantly reinforced this view. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's response to U.S. and Yemeni counterterrorism raids in

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shaykh into a trap knowing they would likely be attacked by U.S. missiles. The text closes with a call to "renounce the traitors and agents and those that work for them . . ." imploring its readers to "kill them [agents] where you find them." If fake, the letter was a sloppy forgery. It lacked the familiar heading and numerical signature—chronologically statement 14—of preceding AQAP statements and was not released through *al-Malahim* media. By July, the document was cited in online jihadi forums as an example of government disinformation. See: "Bayan Bishan Maqtal al-`Amil Jabir bin `Ali al-Shabwani," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-Arab*, 2 June 2010; "Wa Hadha Bayan Akhar Mulafaq wa `Andi Malahaza B`ad al-Qira'," *Shabakat Ansar al-Mujahideen*, 2 July 2010, <http://www.mareeb.net/vb/showthread.php?t=63621>. For material mentioned in the text, see: *Sada al-Malahim* (13), 3; Al-`Awlaqi, May 2010; Al-Shihri, February 2010.

<sup>381</sup> The argument implicitly suggests that if the United States were willing to target its own citizens overseas without first establishing their guilt, it would have even less prohibition in killing Yemeni civilians regardless of their innocence. See: Nasir al-Wahayshi, "Nusrat lil-Shaykh Anwar al-`Awlaqi," *Mu`asasat al-Malahim lil-Intaj al-I`alami*, 16 May 2010, 1:20.

<sup>382</sup> Al-`Awlaqi, May 2010.

December 2009 is a useful case study. In its media releases, AQAP exploited reports of U.S. involvement in a series of CT operations in Arhab, Sana`a and Abyan, the latter reportedly claiming dozens of civilian casualties.<sup>383</sup> The statements implicitly argued that the deaths of innocent tribesmen were not indirect consequences but rather the primary objectives of U.S. and Yemeni strikes. In the 27 December release "Statement Concerning the Massacre of Muslims in the State of Abyan," the group wrote:

Five American fighter jets carried out a savage raid against the innocent Muslims of Bal Kazim tribes in the al-Mu`ajila village of the al-Mahfad region in the state of Abyan after dawn prayer on Thursday. Following this savage bombing on the village of Bal Kazim almost 50 women, children, and men were killed. [This] occurred simultaneously with a military campaign against the tribes of Arhab, under the pretext of counterterrorism and elimination of the mujahid vanguard from the sons of the proud tribes of Yemen.<sup>384</sup>

The AQAP deputy Sa`id al-Shihri made the point in more emotive terms in a February 2010 audio message, saying:

O` people of Yemen . . . We are all in the same trench and the enemy does not differentiate between us. This is a religious Crusade spiteful of Islam and Muslims.

O` tribes of Yemen . . . Know that we are with you against your enemies and the enemies of the Islamic world. We are from you and you are from us, blood for blood and destruction for destruction . . .<sup>385</sup>

This argument is made repeatedly by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula leadership. In the frequently cited *Ma`arakat Marib* ("Battle of Marib") release of September 2009, the AQAP military commander Qasim al-Raymi leveraged counterterrorism missteps and

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<sup>383</sup> *Sada al-Malahim* 12 (February 2010), 3; *Sada al-Malahim* (13), 32; Nasir al-Wahayshi, "Interview with Shaykh Abu Basir," *Inspire*, 1 (July 2010), 16.

<sup>384</sup> A similar argument was also made a day later in the 28 December "'Amiliyat al-Akh al-Mujahid `Umar al-Farouq al-Nijiri." See: "'Amiliyat al-Akh al-Mujahid `Umar al-Farouq al-Nijiri," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 28 December 2009; for the quotation in the text, see: "Bayan Bishan Majzarat al-Muslimin bi-Wilayat Abyan," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 21 December 2009.

<sup>385</sup> Al-Shihri, February 2010.

a visit by Pentagon officials to Sana`a to reiterate the message once again. After alleging that presidents Salih and Obama desired to corrupt and enslave Marib's tribes, al-Raymi dryly concluded that the military's destruction of homes and killing of a woman and elderly man—both several kilometers away from the conflict—were the “epitome of precision and aim!”<sup>386</sup> Al-Raymi insisted these casualties were merely the latest victims of America's broader war against Islam, one in which the United States used Muslim forces to advance its objectives in Iraq, Pakistan and Palestine. The visit of the CENTCOM commander, general David Petraeus, to Sana`a days before the attack and the deployment of the deputy commander of Yemen's National Security Bureau (NSB) to Marib shortly thereafter were cited as proof of this collusion.

## Praise

As with al-Qa`ida branches elsewhere, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has also relied on both praise and humiliation to inspire tribal support. Beginning in spring 2009, the group spent considerable energy remarking on the honor and dignity of Yemen's tribes.<sup>387</sup> Nasir al-Wahayshi's speech in February 2009 is most emblematic of the approach. In the twenty-minute release, the AQAP leader declared:

O proud tribes, which God honored by making them support His religion, and [about whom] history has written chapters [describing] your manhood and heroism . . . Your ancestors were the ones who conquered Palestine, the Levant, and Iraq; whose armies reached the gates of France and the borders of China. Your sons [who were] pictures of heroism in Baghdad, Kabul, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and elsewhere; they had the glory and the honor of destroying the United States.<sup>388</sup>

The trope is a familiar one.<sup>389</sup> There is little distinguishing it from al-Qa`ida in Iraq's

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<sup>386</sup> “Ma'arakat Marib,” *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, September 2009, 14:00.

<sup>387</sup> Because it was repeated frequently and often with little change, the affirmation assumed more of an honorific than descriptive quality. See for example: “Ma'arakat Marib,” *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, September 2009; Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Min Kabul Ila Muqadishu,” *al-Sahab lil-Intaj al-I'alami*, 22 February 2009; Al-Shihri, February 2010; Sa'id al-Shihri, “Nasr min Allah wa Fathun Qarib,” *Mu'asasat al-Malahim lil-Intaj al-I'alami*, 18 April 2009; “Masar` al-Khuna,” *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 27 November 2009.

<sup>388</sup> Nasir al-Wahayshi, “Wa Yamkurun wa Yamkuru Allah,” February 2009.

<sup>389</sup> Interestingly, it was also used with little modification in Nasir al-Wahayshi's entreaty to Yemen's largely nontribal secessionist movement. In the audio message, al-Wahayshi implored: “Oh free men,

calls to the villagers of al-Anbar or al-Qa`ida Central's entreaties to tribesmen of Waziristan.<sup>390</sup> It was also complemented by a less frequent and slightly condescending distinction between "good" and "bad" tribesmen. In both the *Battle of Marib* and the *Fighter of Traitors* releases in September and November 2009, AQAP argued that those who cooperate with security forces have abrogated their claim to tribal virtue, sullyng the values upheld by Marib's tribes.<sup>391</sup>

## Shame

The group's use of humiliation was also well rehearsed, though less common than in similar messaging efforts by al-Qa`ida in Iraq. In the first issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, tribal leaders opposed to AQAP were impugned with relative caution. Nayif bin Muhammad al-Qahtani recalled his surprise at learning that shaykhs of `Abeeda were willing to "sell" their own sons, Naji and Muhammad Jaradan and `Ali bin Duha of al-Hutayk, to government forces in the fall of 2007.<sup>392</sup> In the same release, another author expresses shock that Bayd'a's Humayqan macro-tribe would fail to avenge the death of a fellow tribesman and al-Qa`ida suspect at the hands of police.<sup>393</sup> However by 2009, AQAP's discourse regarding tribal leaders had grown considerably less restrained. In *Battle of Marib*, Qasim al-Raymi denounced progovernment tribesmen, saying:

How shameful that some shaykhs allow themselves to become soldiers and slaves of [President] `Ali `Abdullah Salih, who is himself a slave to the Saudi riyal and American dollar. And I say to these shaykhs: be careful that you do not become that piece of chewing gum that a person enjoys for a short time, and then throws in the nearest trash bin.<sup>394</sup>

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resistors of injustice and oppression in Yemen and in the Arab Peninsula . . . It is because you by your nature do not accept injustice and humiliation. With your faith, you were able to resist the British occupation and to force troops to leave your country." "Ila Ahlna fil-Janoub," *Muasasa al-Malahim*, 15 May 2009.

<sup>390</sup> Al-Wahayshi's emphasis on Yemen's ancestors is ironic given that the Maribi tribe most celebrated for its role in driving the Persians from Iraq and the Levant some 1,400 years ago now enjoys arguably the weakest link with AQAP of any of the governorate's tribes.

<sup>391</sup> "Ma'arakat Marib," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, September 2009, 4:00; "Masar` al-Khuna," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 27 November 2009, 2:40.

<sup>392</sup> Abu Hamam al-Qahtani, "Liqa' M'a Ahad al-Matlubiin," *Sada al-Malahim* 1 (13 January 2008), 8.

<sup>393</sup> "Wa `ala al-Tariq Rijal," *Sada al-Malahim* 1 (13 January 2008), 17.

<sup>394</sup> "Ma'arakat Marib," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, September 2009, 3:20.

A one-page statement released two days after the clashes in `Arq Al Shabwan condemned tribal agents of the regime in bolder terms.<sup>395</sup> It cautioned that cooperating with Sana`a would bring permanent shame not only to the individuals but also to the families and macro-tribes of those involved. The statement, along with the warning levied against “spies and agents” in the aftermath of Deputy Director Muhammad `Abdullah Fara`a’s death in August 2010, represents two of AQAP’s most strongly worded attacks on tribesmen and tribal informants to date.

However, the group has not threatened shaykhs or tribes in a way comparable to other al-Qa`ida Affiliated Movements. In Iraq, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi first pledged to target tribes proven to have collaborated with U.S. forces in late 2005.<sup>396</sup> His successor, Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, announced a brigade dedicated to assassinating tribal leaders caught working with the U.S. military some two years later.<sup>397</sup> No such practice exists in Yemen. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has indeed grown more aggressive in chastising tribal communities, even recently calling for tribesmen to restore the honor of their tribes by striking out against shaykhs cooperating with Sana`a or Washington, but for the reasons discussed earlier in this chapter it has yet to directly attack them.

## Challenge

In addition to employing flattery and criticism, AQAP media often aggressively challenge core notions of tribal identity and esteem. The Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula leader Nasir al-Wahayshi, his deputy Sa`id al-Shihri and then–al-Qa`ida Central deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri all drew comparisons between the tribes of eastern Yemen and those of Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>398</sup> Al-Zawahiri’s comments are the most

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<sup>395</sup> “Bayan Bishan Ma`arakat Marib al-Akhira,” *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 1 August 2009.

<sup>396</sup> Abu Mus`ab al Zarqawi, “Hadha Bayan lil-Nas wa li-Yundharou bihi: al-Harb `ala al-Rafida,” *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*, 14 September 2005.

<sup>397</sup> Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, “Fa `ama al-zabd fa yadhbb jufa`an,” *Mu`asasat al-Furqan lil-Intaj al-I`alami*, 4 December 2007. The title comes from the Quran: 13:17.

<sup>398</sup> Oddly, a forum participant claiming to be of the mujahid tribes of Somalia—a likely reference to al-Shabaab—also levied his own estimation of Yemen’s tribes relative to Somalia’s clans. In the February 2010 posting, ‘Abu Zubayr al-Somali’ implored, “Tribes of Yemen, you have no excuse to fail Shaykh Osama after the tribes of Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and the sons of Sudan and Nigeria have left to support him. You have no excuse after the tribes of Africa [supported Bin Laden]. It is not reasonable that the tribes of Africa are more jealous of Islam than you, and support and protect Islam [more strongly than you] . . .” While interesting, as with comparisons to Pashtu tribes in South Asia, the utility of these types of arguments in influencing behavior in Marib or al-Jawf is questionable. For al-Shihri and al-Wahayshi in the text, see: Sa`id al-Shihri, “Nasrun min Allah wa Fathun Qarib,” *Mu`asasat al-Malahim*, 18 April 2009; Nasir al-Wahayshi, “Nusrat lil-Shaykh Anwar al-`Awlaqi,” *Mu`asasat al-Malahim*, 16 May 2010, 6:00.



direct, imploring the “noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen” to not “be less than your brothers in the defiant Pashtun and Baloch tribes who aided Allah and His Messenger and made America and the Crusaders dizzy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”<sup>399</sup> Al-Zawahiri’s message was clear one. The honorable sons of western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan had proven themselves committed Muslims and capable soldiers by harboring al-Qa`ida and fighting the U.S. and its allies. If Yemen’s tribes failed to do the same, their piety and independence would fall well short of the standards set by the devout and martial tribes of Pakistan.<sup>400</sup>

While an interesting comparison, the effect of these challenges is questionable at best. Tying the integrity of Marib’s tribesmen to their willingness to match the support given to al-Qa`ida by groups with which they enjoy no shared cultural, ethnic or linguistic bond seems a questionable choice. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula’s use of more locally oriented rhetoric seems a more compelling strategy, often challenging tribesmen to equal the distinction of their ancestors by selectively highlighting passages from the Quran describing support given by 7th-century tribes of the Arabian Peninsula to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>401</sup> It is a subtle trick, but one that provides al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula with a veil of religious legitimacy while simultaneously linking assistance and support for AQAP with all those who admire and revere Yemen’s early archetypes of tribal virtue.

A second method is more explicit and clearly grounded in Yemen’s contemporary history. In media releases in spring 2009, leaders of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula openly challenged the sons of Marib, Shabwah and Nihm to honor the memories of their forefathers who traveled to Afghanistan for jihad.<sup>402</sup> In the eighth issue of *Sada al-*

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For the forum posting, see: ‘Abu Zahir al-Somali’, “Risala Ila Qaba’il al-Yemen al-Abiya min Ahad Abna Qaba’il al-Somal al-Mujahida,” *Muslim Net*, 13 February 2010, <http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=377892>.

<sup>399</sup> Though not directly tied to his Pashtun comparison, al-Zawahiri continues his discourse with Yemen’s tribes, asking: “How, O noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen, can you agree to let the Yemen be a supply center for the Crusade against the Muslim countries? How can you agree to let the ruling authority in Yemen be the CIA?” See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Min Kabul Ila Muqadishu,” *al-Sahab lil-Intaj al-Ialami*, 22 February 2009.

<sup>400</sup> It was also aided by AQAP Central’s ability to control the criteria that it argued Yemen’s tribes would need to meet in order to equal the distinction of Pashtu and Baluch. In this sense, the group could essentially set the bar—albeit a fictitious one—wherever it liked.

<sup>401</sup> Al-Wahayshi, May 2010;

<sup>402</sup> Al-Wahayshi, “Wa Yamkurun wa Yamkuru Allah,” February 2009; Al-Wahayshi, “Wa Yamkurun wa Yamkuru Allah,” *Sada al-Malahim* 8 (22 March 2009), 5; “Rubyash wa al-Qisas al-`Adil,” *Mu’asasat al-Malahim*, 20 May 2009. Interestingly, the last of these also mentions a sixth martyr and Maribi tribe, `Ali Nasir Sa`id Muqshid of Marib’s northwest al-Jid`an macro-tribe. Muqshid was apparently killed fighting U.S. forces in Iraq.

*Malahim*, al-Wahayshi writes:

Where are the descendants of Abu Tariq al-'Aradah, Abu `Ali al-Harithi, Abu al-Hasan al-Mihdar, Salim al-Haddad, Abu Muslim al-Nihmi, and others? If you can hear, Islam is calling you.<sup>403</sup>

The message is a much stronger one than comparing Yemeni tribes to Pakistan's Pashtun. All but one of the men mentioned were from the tribes of Marib and Shabwah, all fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and all lost their lives waging jihad. The trope was repeated again in a video released by *Sada al-Malahim* in May 2010. There, instead of citing individuals from Yemen's past, al-Wahayshi points to those of al-`Awaliq's present. The AQAP leader juxtaposed Fahd al-Qus'a with Muhammad Ahmad bin Salih `Umayr al-Kalawi al-`Awlaqi, claiming both represented models of tribal behavior exemplified by al-`Awaliq's strong history of support for jihad.<sup>404</sup> Again, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula subtly constructed a historical account through which the decision of al-`Awaliq to protect its son, Anwar al-`Awlaqi, was not only justified, but admirable. Al-Wahayshi confirmed, "This is not something new for al-`Awaliq, they have a long history of support and jihad, and many of their sons are mujahideen and have been martyred and are wanted [by Yemeni security services]."<sup>405</sup>

The group's manipulation of fears of deteriorating tribal norms was also well chosen. The concern of a generational decline in tribal values and customs targeted by al-Wahayshi and his deputy was an issue of immense importance to many in Marib and al-Jawf.<sup>406</sup> It was this fear of internal decay rather than al-Zawahiri's comparisons with Pashtun tribesmen that was often cited in discussions with men from both governorates.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Qasim al-Raymi's speech in the September 2009 *Battle of Marib* release extends al-Wahayshi's comments even further. In the video, al-Raymi asks Yemen's tribes, "Where is your manhood, dignity, and chivalry, O sons of manhood and chivalry? Have they been buried alongside your forefathers?" For the quotation in the text, see: *Sada al-Malahim* (8), 5; for al-Raymi, see: "Ma'rakat Marib," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, September 2009, 3:44.

<sup>404</sup> The latter was killed in a U.S. air strike in December 2009.

<sup>405</sup> Al-Wahayshi (16 May 2010), 6:00.

<sup>406</sup> In interviews with tribesmen predominantly from Marib and al-Jawf, the external pressures cited above were most frequently identified as modernity, migration, globalization and Western expansionism.

<sup>407</sup> For the proposals made to tribesmen, see: Al-Wahayshi, February 2009; Al-Zawahiri, February 2009; "Bayan Bishan Majzarat al-Muslimin bi-Wilayat Abyan," *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 21 December 2009.

Challenges to preserve the reputation of kin were echoed by more general calls in defense of tribal honor. AQAP routinely implored tribesmen to consider their collective responsibilities.<sup>408</sup> Two releases in spring 2010 reminded tribesmen that they prayed neither to America nor its Arab clients, asking how tribes can appeal to a Sana`a that attracted Jews and Christians into their country.<sup>409</sup> The AQAP leader Sa`id al-Shihri provoked his audience bluntly, inciting those repressed by U.S. counterterrorism efforts in tribal governorates to “take the position of men” in defense of Yemen’s weak and oppressed.<sup>410</sup> Though al-Shihri’s approach is not surprising, the audacity of his language is. Regardless of ties between communities on both sides of Yemen’s northern border, al-Shihri was not a Maribi, Jawfi or Abyani. He was not a tribesman, nor was he even a Yemeni. Foreigners are generally not well positioned to impugn the bravery of Yemen’s eastern tribes, and al-Shihri is no exception.

## Resolution

AQAP presents several courses of action available to honorable tribesman willing to assist in jihad. Of these, uniformity of behavior, the provision of sanctuary and attacks against U.S. military interests are most common.<sup>411</sup> Interestingly, none is unique to the tribal identity of AQAP’s intended audience; similar calls were made to Yemeni and Saudi citizens irrespective of tribal affiliation. However, a more aggressive set of demands emerged sporadically in mid-2010. In February, Sa`id al-Shihri rallied the noble sons of al-`Awaliq, Arhab, `Abeeda and al-Huta to confront those conspiring with Washington and Sana`a in their war against Islam.<sup>412</sup> Later that same year, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula issued a two-page release declaring:

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<sup>408</sup> This move occurred in the group’s dedication of two operations to civilian casualties caused by U.S. and Yemeni counterterrorism strikes in Marib and Abyan. While not an outright strategic shift, linking the justification of the 19 June and 16 July 2010 raids on PSO prisons in Aden and Abyan with the violation of tribal honor in governorates for which AQAP had no public leadership was a crucial step in presenting the group as *the* defender of Yemen’s tribes. This does not come without a variety of risks, for both AQAP and of course the tribes themselves. For the statements, see: “Bayan Bishan Iqtiham Mabna al-Amn al-Siyasi bi-`Aden,” *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 19 June 2010; “Bayan Bishan al-Hijoum `ala Mabna al-Amn al-Siyasi wa Mabna al-Amn al-`Aam fi Wilayat Abyan,” *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 16 July 2010.

<sup>409</sup> Mujahid `Adil, “al-Qasf al-Amriki `ala al-Yemen,” *Sada al-Malahim* 12 (14 February 2010), 36; `Adil al-`Abab, “al-Hajma al-Salibiya `ala al-Yemen,” *Mu`asat al-Malahim*, 29 March 2010.

<sup>410</sup> Al-Shihri, February 2010.

<sup>411</sup> Al-Wahayshi (May 2010), 5:45; *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 21 December 2009.

<sup>412</sup> Al-Shihri, February 2010.

O zealous youths from the sons of `Abeeda and tribes of Marib: If some of your shaykhs have abandoned the act of your predecessors in aiding the oppressed and honoring the guest, disgrace cannot be washed [away] with water. These are instances that will not be forgotten by history. The expectation [is for] you to wash away this disgrace with blood.<sup>413</sup>

Whereas al-Shihri only implied attacks against progovernment tribes, the June statement explicitly calls for them. More astounding, the document incited violence specifically targeting shaykhs rather than tribesmen or government informants. This shift marks a significant milestone in AQAP messaging. Al-Shihri's audio message and the subsequent statement on Wadi `Abeeda evoked language similar to that used by al-Qa`ida in Iraq in its violent turn against tribes in that country several years earlier.<sup>414</sup> Though AQAP has not followed the releases with repeated calls for tribal conflict, the possibility of an escalation in violence against uncooperative shaykhs—or more likely against ill-defined tribal “agents”—cannot be totally discounted.

## TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES: FAILURES OR MISPERCEPTIONS?

Despite the group's media campaign, there is no evidence that any al-Qa`ida iteration in Yemen has been effective in winning formal tribal support east of Sana`a. The first manifestation of al-Qa`ida in Yemen did not enjoy a disproportionate following among the tribes of Marib, al-Jawf or even Shabwah, and a strong tribal presence was absolutely not reflected in its leadership. Until its demise in 2003, this nascent al-Qa`ida branch was led by a mixture of foreigners, southerners and Sana`anis.<sup>415</sup> There is no

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<sup>413</sup> “Bayan Bishan Qatl al-Nisa’ wa Tadmīr al-Buyut wa al-Masajid bi-Wadi `Abeeda,” *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 12 June 2010.

<sup>414</sup> A second and related set of recommendations also targeted local security personnel. Throughout much of its tribal outreach, AQAP carefully explained that it held no grievance with Yemeni troops. It instead sought the overthrow of Yemen's leaders and the illegitimate Western governments that backed them. The restraint implied in the message fit well with the nuances of AQAP's broader media efforts; its application has, however, been less than consistent. For calls to soldiers, see: “Ma`arakat Marib,” 8 September 2009; “Masar` al-Khuna,” 27 November 2009; Muhammad Ahmad bin Salih `Umayr al-Kalawi al-`Awlaqi, recorded speech at rally in Abyan, 20 December 2009; “Bayan Bishan Ma`arakat Marib al-Akhira,” *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-`Arab*, 1 August 2009; Al-Wahayshi, 19 February 2009.

<sup>415</sup> The alleged AQC regional commanders `Abdul Rahim Husayn Muhammad `Ali al-Nashiri and Walid Muhammad bin `Attash were both raised in Saudi Arabia, and neither claimed family from Yemen's “tribal governorates.” Abu `Ali al-Harithi's chief financial officer and purported successor, Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal, was also a citizen of Saudi Arabia, obtaining a Yemeni passport in the northwest port city of Hudayda in 2000. The accused local leader of the USS *Cole* bombing, Jamal Muhammad Ahmad `Ali al-Badawi, grew up in the heart of the socialist party's former People's Democratic Republic in Aden, and a key leader in the post al-Harithi era, Fawaz Yahya Hasan al-Rabay`i, was born in Saudi Arabia and

record of a senior-level al-Qa`ida commander hailing from Marib or al-Jawf, and with the exception of Abu `Ali al-Harithi from `Usalan's Bal Harith, no comparable leader from Shabwah.

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's post-2006 leadership likewise holds no connection to Marib, al-Jawf or Shabwah.<sup>416</sup> Nasir al-Wahayshi, the group's amir since June 2007, is from the village of Mart`a in Yemen's southern al-Bayda governorate, while the current military leader, Qasim al-Raymi, was raised in the Rayma governorate just southwest of Sana`a.<sup>417</sup> The military commander and frequent *Sada al-Malahim* contributor Muhammad Sa`id `Ali Hasan al-`Umda is from Ta`izz, while `Adil bin `Abdullah bin Thabit al-`Abab, AQAP's leading shari`a authority since late 2008, is from a well-known religious family in Sana`a's Qadisiya neighborhood.<sup>418</sup>

By 2008, emigrants from Saudi Arabia began playing an increasingly prominent role in AQAP's leadership. In addition to Nayif al-Qahtani's founding of *Sada al-Malahim*, the former Guantanamo Bay detainees Sa`id `Ali Jabir al-Kathim al-Shihri and Muhammad

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relocated to Sana`a in 1990.

<sup>416</sup> Three men are knowingly discounted in this assessment of the latter governorate: Fahd Muhammad Ahmad al-Qus'a, Anwar al-`Awlaqi, and `Abdullah Ahmad `Abdullah ba-Yasin [Abdullah al-Mihdar]. Though their roles can and have been widely debated within U.S. counterterrorism circles, the author is aware of no open source evidence that clearly connects any of the men to the group's strategic or operational leadership. Although al-Qus'a will be discussed in the text below, the latter two bear further discussion. Al-`Awlaqi has certainly cultivated an outsized online presence advocating for a variety of jihadist movements, including AQAP. But as of spring 2011, there is little open source evidence that the U.S. citizen is a member of, or exerts influence over, AQAP's senior command. Ba-Yasin is the most interesting case of the three, and from what can be gathered by AQAP accounts, functioned somewhere between a Salafi tribal shaykh and a local facilitator for the group. Contrary to media proclamations following his death, AQAP has not afforded the shaykh any title indicative of leadership in AQAP.

<sup>417</sup> Al-Wahayshi is from al-Bayda's southernmost district of Mukayras, just seven miles from Abyan's Lawdar district. This proximity to Lawdar is likely the reason al-Wahayshi is occasionally mischaracterized as a native of Abyan rather than al-Bayda.

<sup>418</sup> Al-`Abab is also known by the kunya Abu al-Zabir. Al-`Umda is also referred to by his kunya Gharib al-Ta`izzi. According to brief biographies published in *al-Malahim*, al-`Umda was first inspired to support Muslims in Chechnya in the late 1990s, but was persuaded by Abu Khaloud al-Ta`izzi in a local mosque in the Republican Hospital neighborhood of Ta`izz to travel to Afghanistan instead. In 1998, al-`Umda trained at the fabled al-Farouq camp in southern Afghanistan, purportedly meeting Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, among others. At some point in the subsequent months, he was promoted to serve as a bodyguard to Bin Laden, and with a group of Arab Afghans was sent from Afghanistan back to the Arabian Peninsula shortly before 9/11 with instructions to target American interests in the region. He was arrested sometime after the *Limburg* attack of late 2002, and held for two years in solitary confinement in Sana`a's Political Security prison before escaping with al-Wahayshi and al-Raymi among others in February 2006. "Liqa' Khas m`a al-Akh Gharib al-Ta`izzi," *Sada al-Malahim* 5 (9 November 2008), 14.

`Atiq `Awayd al-`Awfi assumed senior positions in the group in January 2009.<sup>419</sup> A third Saudi veteran of Guantanamo, `Uthman al-`Amira al-Ghamdi, took what appears to be a military command role in May 2010.<sup>420</sup> AQAP's religious leadership also reflected the growing influence of Saudi talent, with the former Guantanamo prisoner Ibrahim al-Rabaysh and Muhammad bin Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid assuming religious positions in 2008 and 2009.

Rather than representing a tribal leadership, current AQAP leaders most frequently cited in *al-Malahim* media releases hail from Sana`a, Hadramawt and Hudayda. While most of the group's Yemeni members presumably claim some tribal affiliation, this should not be surprising given that three-quarters of Yemen's citizens self-identify as members of a tribal unit. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula enjoys no ethnic or tribal center of gravity, and no single tribe predominates in the group. Inferring that AQAP remains dependent on Yemen's tribes simply because many of its members identify with dozens of macro-tribes and their subdivisions spread across multiple regions and confederations fundamentally misinterprets how tribal affiliation functions in Yemen.<sup>421</sup>

While it is true that AQAP's known leaders are not the sons of Marib or al-Jawf, prior to the prominent influx of Saudis and other foreigners they could at least highlight widely held grievances common to all Yemenis.<sup>422</sup> This became far more difficult with

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<sup>419</sup> The current deputy commander of the group, al-Shihri also took the kunya Abu Sufyan al-Azdi.

<sup>420</sup> Al-Ghamdi first appeared in AQAP's *America and the Last Trap* in May 2010, and was featured in a full English-language interview in the second edition of *Inspire* in September of that year.

<sup>421</sup> The tendency toward simplifying Yemen's myriad complexities is hardly new. Dresch's observations of Western misunderstandings of Upper Yemen's civil war of the 1960s are an outstanding example. Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 99, 103, 117.

<sup>422</sup> Natives of Marib and al-Jawf have nevertheless been frequently accused of holding local leadership positions in AQAP. Yet none has been proven to enjoy anything near command over AQAP's organizational behavior, and very few could plausibly claim similar influence over the group's local operations. As of spring 2011, no Jawfi had appeared in the group's media in over four years of output. Despite its focus on the governorate, just one (presumably) Maribi, `Abd al-Fattah al-Maribi, played any public role in the group—authoring a short article in the fourteenth edition of *Sada al-Malahim* in summer 2010. Two members of `Abeeda's al-Hutayk micro-tribe, `Ali bin `Ali Nasir Duha and Naji `Ali Salih Jaradan, perhaps held some operational responsibility in the group. However, their positions were uncertain. Nothing in the months prior to clashes with security services in fall 2007 indicates that the men were anything more than local shooters rather than AQAP planners and leaders. Their biggest contributions to AQAP appear to have been their deaths at the hands of security forces in northwest Marib. Likewise, `A'yd Salih Jabir al-Shabwani boasted no operational or strategic tie to the group before he was connected to AQAP in a divisive firefight between soldiers and villagers from `Arq Al Shabwan in July 2009. Al-Shabwani did not offer the group military experience or strategic insight, and according to the author's discussions with tribesmen from northwest Al Shabwan, at best `A'yd provided safe houses and a local point of contact to members of AQAP. The Jamil brothers of al-Murda in northern al-Rashid Manif present a more difficult case. Like Duha and Jaradan, both Muhammad bin Sa'id and `Ali bin

the increasing importance of foreign jihadists within the organization. This changing composition of the group represents an important shift. While the uptick in Saudi members may have improved the group's media capacity and fundraising, it certainly has not bolstered al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's ability to influence tribesmen in Marib and al-Jawf. A growing cadre of non-Yemenis within AQAP has undercut efforts to maintain an authentic local voice in outreach efforts to the sons of `Abeeda, al-Jid`an, Dhu Husayn and Hamdan.

### **Tribal Sanctuary: A Losing Bet?**

As discussed in Chapter Two, Yemen's tribes are extraordinarily diverse social and political units. The salience and expression of tribal affiliation and local custom are quite different in much of Marib and al-Jawf than in the rest of the country, and a clear distinction—if not disdain—persists for the less independent tribes of Yemen's south, center and west. The regions themselves are also quite isolated. Beyond Madina Marib, Harib, Hazm and parts of Barat al-`Inan, the villages and districts are some of the country's poorest and most insular. Police and tribesmen frequently turn away Yemenis from other areas, and the presence of outsiders is uncommon. Unless AQAP leaders renounced the tribal affiliation of their families and formally petitioned a Maribi or Jawfi tribal segment to adopt them under *al-rab`a* or *qa`ida sahb*, for example, their ability to secure safe haven or even openly travel throughout the region would be constrained.<sup>423</sup>

There would be considerable costs for both AQAP and tribes in brokering these types of agreements as well. Tribes in Marib and al-Jawf did not commonly offer either form of sanctuary.<sup>424</sup> When haven was offered, it was given only after an extended deliberation within the village and with the explicit understanding that the host community would seek to resolve the guest's dispute and return him to his tribe of origin as quickly as possible. Allowing non-native tribesmen, and certainly foreigners, to stay indefinitely in rural Marib threatens the reputation of the protecting tribe while risking entangling

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Sa`id hailed from `Abeeda's al-Hutayk micro-tribe. The latter was, and presumably remains, the alleged amir of AQAP in Marib, while his brother, Muhammad, apparently attracted the U.S. missiles that killed deputy governor Shaykh Jabir bin `Ali bin Jabir al-Shabwani in May 2010. Given then that raids targeting Muhammad bin Sa`id bin Jamil—and indirectly his brother—resulted in unusually high-profile civilian casualties in Marib, AQAP could have been expected to exploit the fighting as it did with `A`yd al-Shabwani's Battle of Marib in July 2009. But it did not.

<sup>423</sup> For an overview of both forms of sanctuary, see Chapter Two.

<sup>424</sup> Dresch (1990), 108–109.

villagers in the visitor's conflict. In the case of protecting members of AQAP, the potential for being drawn into terrorist violence or aggressive security campaigns imposes far greater risks on the host community than those implied by conventional tribal violence.

For those in al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, winning formal protection through *al-rab`a* or *qa`ida sahb* is equally problematic. In either case, the individual would not be admitted into the village quickly or quietly. The decision would occur only after each male head of household voiced his opinion during a period of collective deliberation. Given the importance of operational security for known members of AQAP, accepting the possibility that even a single informant in a village of several dozen may pass his location to Saudi or Yemeni intelligence is a serious risk.

However, if successful, an agreement of safe haven could offer AQAP enormous benefits. The prospect of a secure location in which members or matériel could be concealed with the promise of protection by the micro-tribe's members, and perhaps even those of the unit's broader sub- and macro-tribes, would greatly advantage a small terrorist cell. But any formal tribal protection would require that the behavior of the AQAP member be strictly controlled. A written contract stating the visitor's pledge to avoid participating in illicit activities—or any activity that may otherwise reflect poorly on the tribe—would be signed at the point of protection. Frequently transiting nonmembers of the tribe through the village, regardless of their allegiance to AQAP, would sufficiently violate the second of these requirements.

Maintaining tribal protection also demands high investments of time and continued residence in a local village. Merely brokering the agreement is not sufficient. Were the guest to win protection and immediately leave, setting off for Saudi Arabia or a secure location elsewhere in Yemen, the incentive of the host tribe to protect the new member once he returned could be in doubt. As with a shaykh, in order for the individual to enjoy the benefits of his privileged position as a guest, he would be expected to actively engage in the affairs of the tribe. Preserving haven remotely or through proxies would not be encouraged. The guest would be required to have a near-permanent presence in the village, chewing *qat* with colleagues, debating local issues and taking part in many forms of collective action.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Among them intertribal conflict or paying *ghurm* in the case of *Qa`ida sahb*, for example. For more details on these terms, please see Chapter Two.



Most problematic for AQAP, the guest would be expected to seek a resolution to any existing dispute. Assuming the host tribe was aware of its guest's association with AQAP, this would require proving to authorities that the visitor was falsely accused or no longer maintained links to the group. To committed members of AQAP, this is not a realistic option. The cases of `A`yd al-Shabwani, `Ali Duha and Naji Jaradan and his brother `Abd al-Aziz suggest that at times Maribis did provide personal sanctuary. But by most accounts these safe houses were provided secretly and without the consent of broader villages or tribal units. They were temporary arrangements, and at least in the al-Shabwani example, were sources of keen embarrassment for the host tribe.<sup>426</sup> Although locals hardly supported uninvited military intervention once the presence of the men became common knowledge, the cases in no way resembled the type of fixed or collective safe haven implied in conventional analysis of AQAP.

### **The Role of Shaykhs in AQAP Tribal Engagement**

Lastly, there is no indication that AQAP has effectively won over local shaykhs. Quite the opposite, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula seems to have taken a stronger interest in recruiting tribesmen generally rather than co-opting shaykhs specifically. As discussed in the previous chapter, the limited authority of shaykhs provides some insight into why this is likely the case. Perhaps the most significant conclusion drawn from the author's fieldwork in the eastern governorates remains that Western notions of shaykhs, and more precisely their influence, is badly misplaced. Personal preferences of tribal leaders were rarely strong indicators for the formal positions of the tribe they represented, much less signals of collective action. Absent group consensus, a shaykh's support would be insufficient to guarantee either type of formal sanctuary as described in Chapter Two. It would seem reasonable to assume that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is well aware of these constraints and has adjusted its tribal outreach accordingly.

The group's media releases reflect this ambivalence. The few examples of media directed at shaykhs indicate that the organization has only modest expectations for tribal leaders. The experiences of Shaykh `Abdullah Ahmad `Abdullah ba-Yasin and to a lesser degree Abu `Ali al-Harithi are helpful examples. The first, a native of Shabwah's southeast city of Huta, was killed during a security raid in January 2010.<sup>427</sup> As with `Ali

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<sup>426</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 13 September 2009.

<sup>427</sup> Ba-Yasin was more commonly referred to as `Abdullah al-Mihdar or his kunya, Abu `Abd al-Rahman. For background on his death, see: "Masdar Amni Akid Inna al-Harb `ala al-Qa`ida Maftuha," 26 September, 14 January 2010, [http://www.26sep.net/news\\_details.php?sid=60389](http://www.26sep.net/news_details.php?sid=60389).

bin Sa`id bin Jamil, media outlets quickly tabbed ba-Yasin as an AQAP amir, alleging he had provided shelter for training camps in the mountains of the surrounding Mayfa`ah district and even pledged an oath of *bay`a*, or loyalty, to Nasir al-Wahayshi. Yet unlike the case of Marib's `Ali bin Sa`id bin Jamil, AQAP did in fact acknowledge ba-Yasin, calling him a shaykh, though not a commander and certainly not an amir—both titles the group had little trouble assigning to Yemenis previously martyred by security forces.<sup>428</sup> In May, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula released footage of ba-Yasin sitting with tribesmen and presumably members of the group.<sup>429</sup> More intriguing, in the February 2010 issue of *Sada al-Malahim* and in a video release entitled *America and the Last Trap*, the group stated that ba-Yasin, a shaykh from al-Faqih attempted but failed to fight in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq before finally joining in jihad in Yemen with another local shaykh from Shabwah, Abu `Ali al-Harithi.<sup>430</sup>

By the time of his death, according to AQAP, ba-Yasin had distinguished himself among Yemen's shaykhs for "arbitrating according to the book [Quran] and Suna [teaching and practices of the Prophet Muhammad] in tribal issues . . ."<sup>431</sup> This is a concept AQAP returned to twice in describing the tribal leader. The implications of the statement are fascinating. The group failed to name him as a commander or leader, though it had little trouble manipulating other aspects of his history. Rather, it claimed that he merely supported and harbored Yemen's mujahideen. Where AQAP could have reasonably declared that ba-Yasin brokered a formal alliance between his tribe and the group, or that he mobilized fellow tribesmen in support of AQAP, it did not.

The language used in describing the shaykh reflects the low expectations that the group seems to have for tribal leaders. Though it consciously sets a standard that AQAP hopes other tribal leaders will emulate, it remains a surprisingly low bar. Given his position and the apparent respect he was afforded in Shabwah, ba-Yasin was assuredly capable of doing more than moving mujahideen and arbitrating disputes according to Islamic law. Discussion with a Yemeni security source regarding Abu `Ali al-Harithi's decision not to recruit from Bal Harith echoes a similar understanding of the limits of tribal authority. Both suggest that AQAP and its earlier predecessors have been wary of the

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<sup>428</sup> "Yataqadam Tanzim al-Qa`ida fi Jazirat al-`Arab bi-Tazia lil-Umah al-Islamiyah bi-Istishhad Kawkaba min Abtaliha wa hum:," *Sada al-Malahim* 12 (14 Febraury 2010), 19.

<sup>429</sup> There is of course no way to actually know the affiliation of the men, many of whose identities were distorted presumably in an effort to suggest their membership in AQAP.

<sup>430</sup> Unfortunately what is not specified is whether ba-Yasin joined al-Harithi during the civil war against the socialists of Lower Yemen in 1994, or later as a nascent al-Qa`ida began to emerge in Yemen in 1998 through 2002.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*; restated in similar terms in "Amrika wa al-Fakh al-Akhir," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 28 May 2010, 21:45.

influence and utility of shaykhs in Yemen. The group to date has eschewed efforts at brokering tribal alliances or agreements with specific tribal leaders. Instead, the diffuse and acutely egalitarian nature of authority in Marib and al-Jawf may have convinced al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula that the risk of maintaining formal collective sanctuary far outweighs the potential reward. The group has more often adopted an opportunistic approach, identifying individual tribesmen for safe houses, logistics routes and assistance with low-level operations.<sup>432</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to the expansive nature of the group's calls for the support of entire tribes and indeed governorates in its media outreach.

### **Tribal Membership**

Estimating the geographic disposition of low-level fighters and sympathizers of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is impossible given the current research environment. However, fieldwork in the country, subsequent phone interviews with tribesmen east of the capital and demographic details of shooters and suicide bombers used in high-profile AQAP attacks all indicate that the presumed tribal badlands of Marib, al-Jawf and even Shabwah are considerably weaker sources of manpower than is generally thought. Each data point by itself is admittedly an imperfect metric for support; however, taken together, the three indicators suggest that the settled and urban cities of Sana`a, Aden, Mukalla, Ta`izz and Hudayda remain far stronger recruiting grounds for the group than the hinterlands of eastern Yemen.<sup>433</sup> As stated previously, interviews with shaykhs and tribesmen from Marib and al-Jawf reinforce AQAP's ineffectiveness at winning the loyalty of large numbers of rural tribesmen. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's use of Yemenis in suicide bombings and VBIED and RPG attacks points to the populations of particular neighborhoods of Sana`a and Ta`izz, while the group's most sophisticated attack, the September 2008 active shooter raid on the U.S. Embassy, drew its operatives entirely from the port city of Hudayda.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Interestingly such recruitment is thought to occur often when young men are resettled in urban centers far from tribal support systems.

<sup>433</sup> The author recognizes the limitations in each of these approaches. Qualitative interviews are biased by the opinions of those interviewed, and the choice of shooters and bombers is often informed by political and messaging interests of the group in question. But given that each method of analysis indicates a similar trend, they should not be discounted.

<sup>434</sup> The Embassy attack was organized and headed by an Imam of Hudayda's al-Furqan Mosque, Latf Muhammad Bahr Abu Abd al-Rahman. Hudayda was also home to Shafeeq Ahmad Zayd and `Umar bin Sa`id Jarallah, two of the four bombers used in the attack on dual oil facilities in Marib and Hadramawt in 2006.

According to recent discussions with tribesmen and shaykhs in Marib and al-Jawf, by early 2011 al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula was in many ways a negligible force in both governorates.<sup>435</sup> The Huthi movement enjoyed advantages in numbers and terrain in al-Jawf, and were rumored to be expanding their presence in parts of western Marib. Fear of informants and a need for operational security helped push whatever visible presence AQAP maintained in central Marib south to Shabwah, Abyan and presumably elsewhere. This is not to say that the group is no longer capable of applying violence east of the capital, particularly targeted assassinations of security officials or small fire ambushes in Marib. But it does suggest that the group does not enjoy a permanent or strongly imbedded presence in Marib or al-Jawf, and certainly that neither governorate represents a geographic center of gravity for the group.

### **AQAP'S Engagement Failures**

Considering the frequency with which al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has been alleged to enjoy safe haven among the tribes of Marib and al-Jawf, why has the group failed to establish durable sanctuaries in either region? The strongest explanation is perhaps the simplest: Tribal Engagement is difficult. While the United States has traditionally struggled to navigate the complexities of tribal politics in the Middle East and South Asia, al-Qa`ida and Associated Movements have not proven considerably better. Al-Qa`ida Central's Africa Corps of the early 1990s struggled mightily to win the support of Somali clansmen, while al-Qa`ida in Iraq squandered limited popular support through a policy of violent coercion. Post-9/11 al-Qa`ida Central appears to have been slightly more effective along Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, although a host of factors unique to the Pakistani case suggest that it is better understood as an outlier rather than the norm for AQ Tribal Engagement.<sup>436</sup>

In this sense, AQAP's struggles are not unexpected. Its leadership is not native to the areas targeted for Tribal Engagement, nor can it claim the legitimacy of shared membership in either governorate or its tribes. AQAP has also suffered from intense competition from rivals, namely Saudi Arabia and more recently the Huthis. Where the Kingdom enjoyed obvious advantages in experience and resources, the Huthi

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<sup>435</sup> Phone interviews, January and February 2011.

<sup>436</sup> These factors would include: AQ's unusually long history in the northwest frontier, the unique status of its senior leaders, the bitterly unpopular war in Afghanistan and highly capable local surrogates, foremost among them the Haqqani Network (HQN). For more on the relationship between the two groups see Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, "The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of al-Qa`ida," *Combating Terrorism Center*, July 2011.

case is less intuitive. Contrary to the movement's purported use of coercion in Sa`da and AQAP's inability to build popular support in Marib or al-Jawf, the Huthis appear to have tentatively expanded their reach east through a deft use of soft power. Conversations with former members of the movement and colleagues in western al-Jawf confirmed that as of January 2011 Huthis had managed to press deep into the governorate while abstaining from imposing taxes on villagers, targeting local shaykhs or imposing religious education on youths, each reportedly a common practice in Sa`da.<sup>437</sup> More intriguing given AQAP's approach to Tribal Engagement, the Huthis appointed at least two Jawfi tribesmen to head the movement's local leadership, affording it an authenticity that AQAP has not matched to date.<sup>438</sup>

Beyond fierce competition, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula suffers from a dearth of local partners as well.<sup>439</sup> Unlike the Africa Corps's use of Somalia's Islamic Union in the early 1990s, no readily apparent political party, militant faction or civil society organization seems ready to facilitate AQAP outreach to tribes. This includes Yemen's Islamist opposition party, religious institutes and broader Salafi community.<sup>440</sup> Of the remaining fighters from predecessor groups including Islamic Jihad in Yemen or the Army of Aden Abyan, none possess a clear relationship with any of the post-2006 iterations of AQAP.<sup>441</sup> Those that have emerged as enablers for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Tribal Engagement efforts in the Marib and al-Jawf appear to have done so on an individual or perhaps familial basis rather than through formalized means of collective protection.

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<sup>437</sup> Author interview, Sana`a, 30 August 2009; phone interviews, Washington DC, January and February 2011.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> This does not imply that there was an absence of individuals willing to assist in AQAP Tribal Engagement, only that semiorganized parties and organizations did not appear to do so.

<sup>440</sup> The case of Sa`da's Dammaj Institute has been intensely debated by U.S. intelligence analysts for many years. Despite AQAP's surprising mention of the school in its second release of Masar` al-Khuna in February 2011, there remains no compelling open source evidence that Dammaj actively facilitates AQAP activities or that it plays any role in tribal outreach.

<sup>441</sup> Personal relationships may have connected followers of all the groups, but there is no evidence that any of the organizations provided formal support for AQAP. This is contrary to media accounts of Yemen's Salafist communities that often confuse shared interests with structured alliances.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Despite al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's lack of a clear tribal base, diminishing AQAP's ability to strike the United States will be extraordinarily difficult. The United States enjoys little legitimacy and few easy policy options in Yemen; Washington's ability to solve the country's many structural crises is limited at best, while escalating counterterrorism pressure has thus far showed no sign of reducing AQAP's ambition or capabilities. Continuing unrest surrounding the transition of power from President Salih will further complicate an already demanding political standoff.<sup>442</sup> Washington's future partners in Sana`a will confront political, resource, economic and security crises that will inevitably exceed the capabilities of the central state. Given the preponderance of challenges facing Yemen, AQAP will likely continue to be perceived as a single and comparatively manageable source of instability by Yemen's future leadership.<sup>443</sup>

Yet there is reason for optimism. Despite uncommonly pragmatic leadership, excellent strategic communications and widespread animosity toward U.S. foreign policy in Yemen, AQAP is not a popular movement. It boasts no formal safe haven in Marib or al-Jawf. Nor has it successfully mobilized tribes to its cause. The group is a mediocre military practitioner at best, and to date does not have the power to overthrow the Yemeni state. Reports widely attributing the recent violence in the south to AQAP alone are misleading. Rumors of an ill-defined Islamic Emirate in Abyan's Zinjibar in the spring of 2011 are a far better indication of the range of actors vying for political power than of AQAP's expanding influence.<sup>444</sup> Islamists of varying stripes appear to have established a presence in Ja`ar and Zinjibar during the recent political unrest sweeping through the country, some apparently using the same name as an ambiguously defined AQAP outreach branch referenced by the group in 2010 and 2011. Yet as with violence tied to the al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula generally, it remains incumbent on the group to prove its ties to the events occurring in Abyan. Shared organizational names and statements of congratulations do not suffice for evidence of AQAP's move toward governance and insurgency. AQAP has never proven itself capable of holding territory, and there are significant operational risks inherent in its trying to do so. In the past,

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<sup>442</sup> Robert Worth and Laura Kasinof, "Yemeni President Wounded in Palace Attack," *New York Times*, 3 June 2011.

<sup>443</sup> These challenges are well documented in Dr. Christopher Boucek's work. See "The Unraveling of the Salih Regime in Yemen," *CTC Sentinel*, March 2011.

<sup>444</sup> For an account of events in Zinjibar see Sudarsan Raghavan, "Militants Linked to al-Qaeda Emboldened in Yemen," *Washington Post*, 12 June 2011; Robert Worth, "Chaos in Yemen Creates Opening for Islamist Gangs," *New York Times*, 26 June 2011.

attempts to establish an open presence have left AQAP vulnerable to air assaults, and there can be no doubt that formal control over rural territory risks provoking hostilities with southern tribesmen.

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's use of terrorist violence has frequently been marred by tactical failure. AQAP boasts a low success rate against hardened targets. While operationally innovative, the group has consistently failed to match the tactical skill of other al-Qa`ida affiliates.<sup>445</sup> The group too often reuses failed tactics and has not capitalized on real or perceived successes as often as would be expected of an organization that demonstrates such strategic discipline. Although the increasing influence of foreign members does extend AQAP's reach deeper into the West than at any other point in the group's history, attacks on the U.S. homeland remain an issue of low salience to a vast majority of Yemenis, preoccupied as they are with far more pressing local concerns.

As Washington braces for a highly uncertain period in U.S.-Yemeni relations, a reconsideration of the assumptions driving U.S. counterterrorism policy in Yemen is vital. Political turmoil in Sana`a represents an opportunity not only to support a transition toward more accountable and transparent governance, but also to reshape how the United States combats radical jihadist movements in Yemen. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines what accounts for AQAP's dynamism relative to other jihadist movements in Yemen, before discussing the group's strengths and vulnerabilities to better contextualize the different threats posed by AQAP to U.S. and Yemeni interests. The second section outlines current approaches and possible alternatives for countering the group, before closing with policy recommendations.

## **AQAP: KEY REQUIREMENTS AND CENTER OF GRAVITY**

Assessing how the United States can best combat AQAP requires first identifying the group's center of gravity. As the preceding chapters have discussed, AQAP cannot be understood as a tribal organization. No tribe has openly declared its support for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, and there remains no evidence the group enjoys a formal safe haven from any particular tribal unit. Though many of its members undoubtedly claim some tribal affiliation, the group's ranks are not filled with a disproportionate number of tribesmen relative to the country's demography.

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<sup>445</sup> AQAP's inability to repeat the multiteam live shooter and VBIED design used in the 2008 U.S. Embassy attack and the group's frequent use of stationary suicide bombers against fast-moving motorcades are two examples of these tactical weaknesses.

Neither is the group exclusively either a terrorist or a guerrilla movement. Discussion that characterizes AQAP as transitioning from terrorism to insurgency suggests a linear progression of violence that both misinterprets AQAP's behavior and exaggerates its strength. AQAP has long pursued political ends through a variety of violent means: simultaneously displaying the organizational characteristics of a terrorist group; the tactics of a guerilla movement and terrorist group; and a narrative that draws on local grievances as well as the rhetoric of global jihad.<sup>446</sup> Since its founding after the prison break in 2006, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has capably balanced terrorist attacks against U.S. economic and diplomatic interests while waging a limited insurgency against local security services. In 2009, the group added a third dimension, reaching outside Yemen for the first time to target the Saudi royal family, and several months later the U.S. homeland.

Any complete assessment of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula requires a better understanding of the intersection between the group's strategy, intentions and capabilities. Distinctions in tactics and targets do exist, but terrorism and insurgency have never been mutually exclusive means for pursuing AQAP's objectives in Yemen and abroad. Instead, AQAP has pursued both simultaneously, switching between audiences, means and objectives at rapid pace. Since al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen's first attack in late 2006, the group's structure has been that of a conventional terrorist organization, prizing operational security and making little attempt at seizing territory or providing alternative governance. Yet tactically, AQAP has simultaneously used insurgent tactics against Yemeni security forces for more than four years.<sup>447</sup> Similarly, the group's media efforts have shifted from local to regional to global with almost equal regard, at once discrediting the Salih administration, rebuking the United States and pledging support to militants from Baghdad to Mogadishu. From its inception, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has matched its ambitious aspirations with a variety of tactics: using strategic communications, economic warfare, conventional military power, small unit ambushes and terrorism to wage a guerilla campaign against Yemen's central government.

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<sup>446</sup> As study of AQAP suggests, the divisions separating organizations that practice insurgency versus those that employ terrorism are rarely clear in practice. However a brief summary of the differences is important. Robert Taber's seminal *War of the Flea* explains, "Insurgency, or guerilla war, is the agency of radical social or political change; it is the face and the right arm of revolution." One that pursues such change through conflict is foremost a "political partisan, an armed civilian whose principal weapon is not his rifle or his machete, but his relationship to the community, the nation, in and for which he fights." Bruce Hoffman continues that groups that rely on terrorism differ from insurgents because they "do not function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging enemy forces in combat, are constrained both numerically and logistically from undertaking concerted mass political mobilization efforts, and exercise no direct control or governance over a populace at either the local or international level." Therefore, terrorism may be distinguished from insurgency by the scale of the movement, the location of its audience and the relationship with the host community and the target—generally noncombatants. See, Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 35; Robert Taber, *War of the Flea*, 10.

<sup>447</sup> The group has of course utilized terrorism in the conflict, but it cannot rightly be considered merely a terror campaign.



The prospect of AQAP involvement in the insurgency in Abyan is therefore less of a strategic shift than the group's recent use of terrorism against United States and Saudi Arabia. Those who argue that AQAP has finally evolved into an insurgent movement in some ways have it backward. With the Christmas Day bombing and the parcel plot, AQAP may finally have emerged as a genuine transnational jihadist group, capable of simultaneously targeting the U.S. homeland while destabilizing allied Arab governments closer to home. This point is often lost in historical coverage of the group, which tends to view track the group's activity only after the merger with Saudi jihadists in 2009.

As the previous chapters have emphasized, an understanding of AQAP's capabilities informed by a more complete history of its Yemeni operations suggests two important points. First, balancing local, regional and global agendas as AQAP has, is an incredibly difficult task. Even AQAP's unusually skilled leaders have been unable to resolve the tensions inherent in balancing these competing agendas, which inevitably limits the coherency of the group's narrative and the efficacy of its operations.

Second, because balancing is designed to allow AQAP to focus on multiple adversaries simultaneously, different facets of the organization contribute to different types of operations. The group's center of gravity therefore does not lie in Yemen's political crises, weak central state, tribes or a single aspect of the group's organization, but rather changes depending on which aspect of the group's capabilities and operations are prioritized. The key question for degrading the organization is identifying the aspect of AQAP's organizational structure that sustains insurgency at home and terrorism abroad.

## **Insurgency and Terrorism**

Conducting a limited insurgency inside Yemen requires al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula to depend on the local population for support. The Yemeni government must continue to be perceived as feckless and illegitimate. Nonexistent public services, widespread corruption and heavy-handed counterterrorism measures all support AQAP's argument that Yemen's two-decade experiment with democracy has failed. Perceptions among Yemenis of a history of U.S. disinterest broken by Washington's high-profile and singular refocus on security concerns strengthen skepticism of American intentions and staying power. Both promote a narrative that Washington's ambitions end with the regime rather than the Yemeni people, reinforcing the familiar refrain that the United States seeks stability at the expense of reform. Moreover, unpopular U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the expanded deployment of Special Forces

and intelligence personnel to Sana`a stoke fears of U.S. military occupation, while increased air strikes raise concerns over a Pakistan-style drone campaign.

Terrorism beyond Yemen's borders demands very different capabilities than insurgency. AQAP's ability to launch high-profile attacks against the United States is not strongly tied to its relationship with the local population. Neither fixed territory nor a critical mass of supporters was necessary to carry out the Christmas Day attack of 2009 or the parcel bombings of October 2010. Presumably no more than a handful of safe houses, a single explosives expert and several thousand dollars were necessary for each attack.<sup>448</sup> Nor is a capacity to conduct terror abroad contingent on Yemen's multiple political, resource and economic crises. While a permissive Yemen has long enabled jihadist groups, the unhappy experiences of AQAP's predecessors suggest that jihadists do not enjoy de facto success in Yemen. AQAP's rise with the prison break of 2006 bears little imprint from preexisting al-Qa`ida members or sympathizers in Yemen. Although the group's leadership does claim close historical ties with Bin Laden and other prominent al-Qa`ida leaders, there is no open source evidence to substantiate the claim that AQAP is under the operational control of al-Qa`ida Central. Nor does al-Qa`ida Central's long-standing interest in Yemen adequately explain AQAP's success. Osama bin Laden called for jihad against Yemen's socialists nearly two decades ago.<sup>449</sup> For much of the 1990s and 2000s, loosely affiliated al-Qa`ida commanders and strategists alike trumpeted the country's mountains, tribes and proximity to shipping and energy reserves.<sup>450</sup> Yet none of these factors has proven sufficient to sustain an enduring jihadist group in Yemen prior to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>451</sup>

## Leadership

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's effectiveness at balancing insurgency at home and terror abroad is due to the unusual abilities of its founding Yemeni leadership, and it is this small cadre of Yemenis that constitutes AQAP's center of gravity.<sup>452</sup> The

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<sup>448</sup> Identifying and recruiting a willing suicide bomber with a "clean" passport was also necessary for the first plot.

<sup>449</sup> Burke (2003), 128

<sup>450</sup> See: Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, "Masuliyat Ahil al-Yemen Tejah Muqadasat al-Muslimin wa Tharawatihim," *Markez al-Ghurba' lil-Dirasat al-Islamiyah* (1999), 12-14, <http://www.almaqdese.net/r?i=wksqfnyz>.

<sup>451</sup> AQAP's failure to draw large numbers of recruits to fight the Salih government stands in stark contrast to far more successful historic efforts at recruiting Yemenis for jihad abroad. While absolute numbers are rarely a decisive (or easily obtainable) metric for measuring the success of terrorist groups, Yemenis have clearly demonstrated considerably more interest in jihad abroad than with AQAP.

<sup>452</sup> In order for such a leadership to remain effective, it must maintain at least three capabilities: command

group's core nucleus of Nasir al-Wahayshi, Qasim al-Raymi, Muhammad al-'Umda and, arguably, 'Adil al-'Abab, also distinguishes AQAP from its predecessors. Relative to Islamic Jihad in Yemen, the Army of Aden Abyan or al-Qa`ida in Yemen, AQAP has proven a vastly more resilient, capable and articulate jihadist movement than any in Yemen's recent history.

Though the importance of foreign personalities often dominates discussion of the group in the West, their role within AQAP should not be overemphasized. To be sure, the addition of Saudi recruits in 2008 and 2009 has added to the group's media, military and presumably fundraising capabilities. The emergence of Americans, including Anwar al-'Awlaqi and Samir Khan, has raised the profile of the group among English-speaking audiences as well. Yet these foreigners remain almost entirely dependent on the assistance and support of Yemeni AQAP members to conduct attacks, maintain operational security and persist in such a complex operating environment. Nor do they explain al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's focus on operations outside Yemen. AQAP's foreign ambition and careful brand management began well before the arrival of Saudis in 2009 or *Inspire's* inaugural release in summer 2010. The group's first military operation is an instructive example of its long-standing commitment to attack Western interests.

Then operating under the name al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen, the organization's dual VBIED attack against oil facilities in Hadramawt and Marib in fall 2006 scarcely resembled the parochialism of a group focused on local issues alone. AQAP quickly followed this strike with a written statement justifying the blasts in terms both global and local, dedicating the first to Abu Mus`ab al Zarqawi and the second to Abu `Ali al-Harithi. More than twelve months before Anwar al-'Awlaqi would be released from a Yemeni jail—and a full three-and-a-half years before the American would issue his first propaganda tape through AQAP—the statement presents a well-crafted argument blurring local injustice with international jihad. It reads:

Let them know that the blood of our brothers is not cheap. The killing of Shaykh Abu Mus`ab [al-Zarqawi] in the land of Iraq will not pass without retribution. Let them know that the Muslim nation is one body. If any part of that body suffers, the rest of the organs will respond with fever and pain. Let the tyrant of Yemen know that the killing of Shaykh Abu `Ali al-Harithi in the land of Yemen by American missiles will not pass without punishment.<sup>453</sup>

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and control; exposure to local and foreign audiences; and operational security.

<sup>453</sup> "Ghazwat Badr al-Yemen," *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi A`rd al-Yemen*, 13 October 2006.

In this sense, the influx of Saudi, American and more recently North African recruits reflects AQAP's successes far more than it explains them. The addition of Saudi and American talent certainly functions as a force multiplier, but foreign talent does not account for the group's resiliency or strategic vision in Yemen, which were both already well developed prior to 2008 and 2009. Instead, AQAP's success is best understood as the work of a small group of Yemenis who have guided AQAP and its immediate predecessors from obscurity in 2006 to the most direct terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland today.

Ironically this Yemeni core consisting of al-Wahayshi, al-Raymi and al-`Umda does not resemble the cult of personality or military skill associated with classic cases of leadership-centric terrorist movements elsewhere. None save al-`Abab—an early addition following the prison break of 2006—boasts religious credentials of any authority. Nor are any of the core leaders terribly charismatic on film, though al-Raymi comes closest, and none possess critical military skills.<sup>454</sup> Yet it is this cohort that has avoided the strategic mistakes that commonly defeat jihadists elsewhere, keeping AQAP relevant in a highly competitive domestic and international environment. Since 2006, al-Wahayshi, al-Raymi and al-`Umda have proven at once opportunistic and perspicacious, exploiting counterterrorism missteps and correctly anticipating local reactions to attacks inside the country.<sup>455</sup> In doing so, AQAP has avoided killing Yemeni civilians, striking potentially divisive Western targets or directly confronting President Salih.<sup>456</sup> This restraint is implicit throughout the group's narrative, in which AQAP repeatedly defends the integrity of its brand by carefully explaining guidelines for official attacks and countering government misinformation.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> Al-Wahayshi remains one of the least charismatic leaders among Qa`ida's affiliates today. He did, however, maintain a direct and personal link to Osama bin Laden, serving as the Saudi's personal secretary in Afghanistan for years.

<sup>455</sup> Although here the group was assisted by the lack of historical sectarian tensions in Yemen. Recent media releases demonizing Shi`a and the attack on the Huthi procession and the funeral for Badr al-Din al-Huthi reflect stark exceptions to the group's rhetoric and actions.

<sup>456</sup> Nor has it lashed out at potential allies or popular civic or tribal leaders. The group's refusal to target potentially divisive American and European targets is especially interesting. Until at least 2010, Western-language students and foreign aid and medical workers remained among the softest targets in the country. A powerful VBIED attack against any number of poorly defended language schools in the capital could have claimed dozens of Western casualties and bought the group enormous attention. However, the potential for sparking local revulsion at slaughtering young foreigners in great number has presumably dissuaded the group from pursuing such a policy.

<sup>457</sup> If local media reports are correct, al-Wahayshi has also maintained personal authority over new members and cells by requiring oaths of *bay`a* (loyalty) from new recruits.

## COUNTERTERRORISM CURRENTLY DEFINED

Since at least spring 2009, U.S. attempts at combating al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula have involved a mix of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts.<sup>458</sup> Increased air and ground raids have sought to escalate pressure on the group, while limited efforts to strengthen Yemen's airport and border security have attempted to reduce the likelihood of a future attack against the U.S. homeland. Targeted aid projects, population security and counter-radicalization efforts have sought to deny AQAP haven in the tribal governorates of Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwah. Finally, U.S. officials have applied a combination of diplomatic pressure and financial incentives in the hopes of coaxing Sana`a to confront the root causes of instability through reform.

This approach has not been sufficient. Direct military action has proven thus far a boon to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, stoking resentment against Washington and Sana`a for heavy-handed and imprecise security operations. AQAP has acknowledged as much, thanking the United States for handing the group recruiting windfalls following air strikes in Abyan, Shabwah and Marib. In February 2010, an author writing under the *kunya* Mujahid `Adil gloated that America appeared committed to repeat in Yemen the mistakes it failed to learn in the tribal areas of Pakistan. As noted earlier in the paper, Anwar al-`Awlaqi concluded that U.S. missile strikes in rural villages provided "a publicity campaign for the mujahideen . . . [that] accomplished within a few days what would have taken [al-Qa`ida] several years."<sup>459</sup>

Continued attempts at denying AQAP a safe haven in Marib and al-Jawf are also problematic. As explained previously, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula does not boast formal sanctuary in either area. More important, U.S. and Saudi efforts at winning over tribes in both governorates have rested on a dual policy of targeted aid and direct assistance.<sup>460</sup> Yet in order to succeed, such a strategy must demonstrate linkages

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<sup>458</sup> According to author interviews with Department of Defense personnel, Sana`a, 6 August and 6 September 2009; USAID officials, Sana`a, September 2009; and a Nihmi shaykh, Sana`a, 3 September 2009.

<sup>459</sup> Drawing parallels with Pakistan's FATA still further, the twelfth issue of *Sada al-Malahim* also warns that continued U.S. air strikes will only ensure the emergence of Yemen divided by "Abyanistan, Arhabistan, Shabwahistan, [and] Maribistan . . ." Mujahid `Adil, "Al-Qasf al-Amriki `ala al-Yemen," *Sada al-Malahim* (12), 37; for al-`Awlaqi, see: Al-`Awlaqi, July 2010; for quotation in the footnote, see: Ibrahim al-Sana`ani, "Khawatir fi Zaman al-Mukhatat," *Sada al-Malahim* (12), 51.

<sup>460</sup> As of 2011, USAID was in the process of implementing seven development projects in al-Jawf, nine in Shabwah and nine in Marib—the latter two the most of any region in the country. As a point of comparison, USAID carried out exactly two projects in Hudayda and none in Ibb or Ta`izz. "Risk Assessment of USAID/Yemen's Major Activities," *Office of Inspector General U.S. Agency for International Development*, 30 March 2011, 19.

between poverty, tribal conflict and the absence of civil society to increased levels of support for AQAP. Likewise, purchasing the support and strengthening the legitimacy of tribal leaders through cash and public works projects requires that several conditions be met. Shaykhs must maintain tangible authority over the actions of their tribal units, and financial incentives must be demonstrated to influence leaders' behavior. Finally, wealth and influence over local development projects must in some way boost an individual shaykh's legitimacy.

In Marib and al-Jawf, each of these assumptions is deeply flawed.<sup>461</sup> Despite communications efforts targeting the tribes discussed in detail in the previous chapter, AQAP's known leadership and lower-level members most commonly hail from urban locales. AQAP does not enjoy formal safe haven in Marib and al-Jawf, and it is not at all clear that traditional tribal protection of the kind discussed in Chapter Two would advantage the group.<sup>462</sup> Finally, there is sufficient evidence to question whether shaykhs in Marib and al-Jawf retain authority over the decision making of their subordinate tribesmen.<sup>463</sup> Although they play important roles in mediating disputes and articulating local consensus, tribal leaders are not kingmakers, nor do they derive legitimacy from wealth. They cannot rely on money or services alone to build credibility, particularly when advocating for policies outside of the consensus of their tribe.<sup>464</sup>

Lastly, there is reason to question whether pressuring Sana`a to address drivers of instability is an appropriate tool for counterterrorism. To be clear, as normative and even strategic ends, longer-term U.S. efforts to slow state collapse, help provide basic services and bolster the accountability of the Yemeni government are more than justified in Yemen. However, it remains less certain that structural reforms are a useful

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<sup>461</sup> Again, Anwar al-`Awlaqi has admitted as much, arguing that its rush to find tribal allies has left the United States at the mercy of liars and opportunists. See: al-`Awlaqi, 7.19.2010.

<sup>462</sup> Fixed sanctuaries in the villages of Marib and al-Jawf would traditionally require the formal offer of protection from a tribal unit writ large—and almost invariably with the knowledge of its larger associated branches. The practice is acutely transparent and consensus driven, and would impose serious costs on the operational security and freedom of movement and action for those who receive collective protection. In very few scenarios would AQAP benefit from such an arrangement.

<sup>463</sup> A misunderstanding of influence of shaykhs has figured prominently in coverage of Yemen's recent political unrest as well. Claims that tribes sided with or against government forces based on the declarations of tribal leaders most often confused personal decisions with collective behavior. Phone interviews with Maribi colleagues, April 2011.

<sup>464</sup> America's effort at expanding tribal influence primarily through money, services and political access in Iraq has generated a class of so-called Condoleezza Rice Shaykhs in the country, many increasingly criticized for lacking credibility or concern for their communities. In Yemen, decades of state patronage spawned a similar cadre of "political shaykhs," many resettling in Sana`a or the Gulf. For Iraq, see: Stephanie McCrummen, "Tribal Lawsuits, 'Fake Sheikhs' Threaten Iraqi Doctors," *Washington Post*, 1 April 2011.

tool for reducing AQAP's capabilities to attack the West, which have not relied on large numbers of disaffected Yemenis. A correlation between economic deprivation and extremism must be established to justify such a policy from a counterterrorism perspective. In Yemen this has not been demonstrated, particularly in the poorly integrated eastern governorates that are the central focus of this report. As discussed in Chapter One, Yemen's structural challenges proved insufficient for generating resilient and internationally minded jihadist movements prior to the emergence of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula in 2006. Because AQAP's center of gravity remains its uniquely capable Yemeni leadership, ambitious efforts to refashion Yemeni society misdiagnose the causes of the group's successes. Treating Yemen's very real maladies is a worthy political and humanitarian aim, but it will not diminish the threat posed by AQAP.<sup>465</sup>

## OFFENSIVE RECOMMENDATIONS: LEADERSHIP TARGETING

Defensive measures must complement the direct application of force against al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's leaders. Enhancing Sana`a's ability to control the movement of people and matériel in and out of the country represents a low-risk and cost-effective means for reducing the likelihood of terrorism abroad. Continued support and training for airport, border and port security all make conducting attacks outside Yemen more difficult. However, limiting the group's capacity to conduct attacks abroad is only a part of the solution. Defensive measures by themselves will not decisively weaken the capability of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. This can only be achieved through offensive efforts, and the group's continued reliance on its founding leadership represents an exploitable weakness. Dealing a decisive blow to the group will require killing, capturing or sufficiently isolating those responsible for the group's strategic guidance, foremost among them the founding Yemeni leadership of Nasir `Abd al-Kareem `Abdullah al-Wahayshi, Qasim Yahya Mahdi al-Raymi, Muhammad Sa`id `Ali Hasan al-'Umda, and to a lesser degree `Adil bin `Abdullah bin Thabit al-`Abab.

A narrow focus on al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's local leaders may appear counterintuitive, especially given the importance often attributed to high-profile foreign members. The jihadist ideologue Anwar al-`Awlaqi, the propagandist Samir Khan, the

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<sup>465</sup> Economic growth, transparent governance and some resolution to the country's water problems may indeed diminish the attractiveness of AQAP over a long-term horizon. But they would not do so over a two- or three-year period, and there is considerable literature questioning whether development and political reform are effective tools for combating terrorist networks. See Alan Krueger and Jitka Maletkova, "Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is there a Causal Connection?" (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 9074, July 2002).

bomb maker Ibrahim `Asiri and the numerous Saudis who joined the group in 2008 and 2009 have received enormous attention in U.S. media and are usually highlighted rather than the group's less-well-known Yemeni leaders. Yet although the addition of these prominent foreigners reflects AQAP's success, it does not explain it. Killing Khan, al-`Awlaqi or `Asiri might reduce the threat to the U.S. in the short term but will do little to address AQAP's resiliency or legitimacy in Yemen. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has long excelled at attracting foreign talent while preserving its local authenticity. It is the group's local leadership that allows AQAP to persist and continue to threaten the United States in Yemen's highly competitive ecology of violent nonstate actors. Isolating or removing these Yemeni leaders strips AQAP of the individuals most responsible for maintaining its credibility and strategic coherence.

As terrorism experts have long noted, leadership decapitation is not a magic solution. The strategy has its limits, and Yemen is no exception. Against established organizations with moderate levels of support and a deep pool of fighters, killing or capturing leaders rarely defeats a terrorist group.<sup>466</sup> Successful terrorist organizations generally enjoy deep reserves of fighters from which they can quickly replace targeted personnel.<sup>467</sup> Those arrested or killed often become key symbolic figures, and successful targeted killings risk providing a recruiting boost to the terrorist group. Eliminating top-tier leaders threatens to disrupt stable hierarchies within terrorist organizations as well, devolving power to less strategic or experienced commanders. Without solid backing or facing the prospect of a succession struggle, ambitious members may be pushed to consolidate their influence by escalating violence and further destabilizing an already delicate security situation.<sup>468</sup>

However, in the case of Yemen, both the nature of AQAP and the country's experience with jihadist groups suggest that removing the group's prominent Yemeni leadership could deal a decisive blow to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>469</sup> The group is

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<sup>466</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 31; Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 18 (2009), 723, 744; M. Mohammed Hafez and M. Joseph Hatfield, "Do Targeted Assassinations Work? A Multivariate Analysis of Israel's Controversial Tactic during Al-Aqsa Uprising," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29(4) (2006), 359–382.

<sup>467</sup> Al-Qa`ida Central for example has replaced at least ten commanders labeled the group's third-highest or "operational" commander. See: Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock, "Al-Qaeda is Likely to Replace No. 3 Leader With Ease," *Washington Post*, 2 June 2010.

<sup>468</sup> Cronin (2009), 100; Daniel Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006, 99.

<sup>469</sup> For commonly cited examples of decapitation's successes, see the Shining Path of Peru, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of northern Iraq and Aum Shinrikyo of Japan. Cronin cites the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) of Northern Ireland as another, while Byman points to the collapse of Palestinian Islamic Jihad.



comparatively young, does not enjoy wide popular backing and is not well integrated across local communities.<sup>470</sup> It does not provide governance or enjoy a political platform, and within the melee of competing opposition groups vying to address Yemeni discontent, AQAP remains a marginal player at best.<sup>471</sup>

AQAP has been forced to clear an exceptionally high bar in order to achieve only minimum levels of support in Yemen. Though potential successors to al-Wahayshi, al-Raymi and al-'Umda are impossible to predict, the organizational behavior of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is sufficiently distinct from the group's Yemeni predecessors to suggest that a mix of local commanders is unlikely to reproduce the strategic coherence or foresight of AQAP's current leaders. Removing this top tier of Yemenis while leaving the group's foreign leaders in place would be a catastrophic loss for the group, in effect stripping it of the local credibility and strategic guidance essential to endure in Yemen.

Were the group's swelling cadre of Saudis, Americans and North Africans to assume control of the group, a review of their rhetoric suggests that they would almost certainly press for escalating sectarian attacks and increasing the operational focus in Saudi Arabia. Opening an active front against the region's most capable counterterrorism regime—and the country responsible for ending an earlier Saudi iteration also called al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula—presents a serious threat to the group. Given that no precedent exists for groups led by foreigners or that pursue unrestrained violence surviving in Yemen, a shift toward internationalist and sectarian aims would likely lead to the eventual defeat of the group.

A strategy focused on eliminating the group's core Yemeni leadership requires their location be identified and carefully monitored until an opportunity presents itself to safely target them in a capture-or-kill mission. This will demand a significant investment of resources but even more importantly an enormous investment of patience. Targeting more accessible midtier leaders and facilitators will be tempting. Yet low- and midlevel fighters are not worth the risk of direct U.S. intervention in a country where American military operations are bitterly unpopular and any action, no

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<sup>470</sup> Precisely how decentralized the group is remains a point of debate. Geographically dispersed cells without question exist, as does a growing and diverse collection of authors writing in the group's Arabic-language media. Yet the degree to which this signals a flattening of AQAP command or a diffusion of the group's strategic leadership remains unclear.

<sup>471</sup> Though AQAP does certainly articulate a clear set of grievances and means for redressing them, it does not boast a political platform in the sense of Hamas, Hezbollah or Lashkar-e-Taiba for example. Unlike these groups, AQAP has no party, charity or local ally through which it can mobilize Yemenis to solicit forms of support for the group.

matter how tactically successful, will inevitably undermine the fragile Yemeni central government. Risking collateral damage in a strike against Nasir al-Wahayshi may be justifiable in strategic terms, but a strike aimed at Fahd al-Qus'a is not. Instead, a mix of defensive counterterrorism, local law enforcement, Saudi security forces and U.S. intelligence support should be used to combat mid-tier and foreign leaders and low-level fighters.<sup>472</sup> An overly expansive or impatient targeting campaign represents one of the few scenarios in which AQAP could begin to meaningfully draw broad support from a Yemeni populace enraged by the constant threat of U.S. air power. Such an approach must be avoided at all costs.

Successfully countering al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula will demand not only a better of understanding of the group but also the social and political landscape surrounding it. This point was reiterated in at least a dozen interviews with shaykhs and tribesmen from Marib and al-Jawf. Contrary to notions of xenophobic tribes hostile toward outsiders, the men interviewed consistently requested more, not less, research in the tribal areas east of Sana`a. Supporting outreach and fact-finding missions outside Sana`a will be essential, as will continuing efforts at building a more robust U.S. intelligence capacity in the country. While security threats to U.S. diplomats in Yemen are very real and travel restrictions imposed by Embassy security personnel valid, restrictions must be loosened in order to allow State Department officials to engage with the Yemeni populace.<sup>473</sup>

Imposing sharp limits on the use of air power and sharpening messaging efforts will be critical if this approach is to succeed. The killing of Abu `Ali al-Harithi in November 2002 is a telling example. More than eight years later, Abu `Ali's death remains an intensely unpopular event for many in Marib and al-Jawf.<sup>474</sup> To those interviewed,

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<sup>472</sup> Numerous high-profile escapes from PSO prisons by Yemeni terrorists, including the founding members of AQAP, clearly complicates the role of law enforcement. However, any broad effort against the group must involve conventional law enforcement mechanisms.

<sup>473</sup> Beginning no later than 2009, State personnel were largely confined to the Embassy and their Hadda Street residential compound. For much of that year, U.S. employees were barred from traveling to all but two cities outside of Sana`a. Such restrictions not only decreased physical movement, but also narrowed access to the local assets and alternative sources of information that government-to-government relations alone are incapable of delivering. The limitations posed considerable problems for development officials as well. Since 2007, USAID has been unable to travel directly to the tribal governorates that have demanded the agency's attention. By early 2011, Embassy personnel were barred from leaving the capital. Without a consistent means for maintaining project oversight or accountability, AID was forced to place responsibility on local contractors to implement, and in most areas of the Marib and al-Jawf, to represent the U. S. government in the only contact many would have with the United States. According to phone interview, 17 June 2009; author interview, Sana`a, 1 September 2009; "Risk Assessment of USAID/Yemen's Major Activities," *Office of Inspector General U.S. Agency for International Development* (30 March 2011), 11, 19.

<sup>474</sup> Interviews with tribesmen from Marib more than six years after the attack also suggest that any goodwill created from the U.S. development spree in Raghwan and Marib City was lost after news

the assassination represents a violation of international law as well as state and tribal sovereignty.<sup>475</sup> Worse, it was neither preceded nor followed by compelling evidence that al-Harithi was guilty of committing a crime, certainly not one justifying his death. Given that al-Harithi was killed without the due process of a trial or proper tribal arbitration, the drone strike appeared to those interviewed as an especially egregious disregard for the same values the United States claims to represent.

The United States must redouble its effort to publicly establish the guilt of those targeted. Though sources and methods of intelligence collection must be protected, the process of articulating to the Yemeni public why AQAP's leadership is being targeted by counterterrorism operations must begin immediately. If the United States holds any hope of limiting anger following successful operations against AQAP's leadership, solid evidence linking key individuals to specific illicit activities needs to be presented in a transparent manner to the Yemeni public.

The consequences of failing to make a convincing public argument for targeting an AQAP member are evident in the case of Anwar al-`Awlaqi. Though the United States is unpopular throughout much of Shabwah, and presumably within the tribe of al-`Awaliq, there is virtually no support for prosecuting al-`Awlaqi within al-`Awaliq, Shabwah or Yemen broadly. Such resistance does not merely stem from anti-American sentiment, but also reflects a failure by both Sana`a and Washington to publicly present persuasive or credible evidence that al-`Awlaqi has committed a crime under Yemeni law.<sup>476</sup> AQAP and al-`Awlaqi have exploited this dilemma in several media releases, questioning precisely what those targeted by U.S. or Yemeni forces have done to justify the deaths of innocent women and children.<sup>477</sup>

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surfaced of American involvement in the strike. According to several colleagues, the incident was met with particular anger by the small minority of Maribis who by the end of 2002 were cautiously supporting a larger American role in developing the governorate. In fall 2009, a tribesman from southwestern Marib recalled that the millions in development aid spent by the U.S. Embassy in the run-up to the Harithi attack struck most in his district as little more than an American ploy to gather intelligence from Yemen's tribes. As a result, he said, the likelihood of finding anything but political opportunists willing to align with the United States was nil. Author interview, Sana`a, 17 August 2009.

<sup>475</sup> Media accounts of more recent drone strikes in Wadi `Abeeda convey a similar anger. See: Khaled `Abdullah, "Drones Spur Yemenis' Distrust of Government and U.S.," Reuters, 27 October 2010.

<sup>476</sup> The very public connection between al-`Awlaqi and the British Airways employee Rajib Karim is one example of the advantages of this legal approach in establishing culpability. See Vikram Dodd, "Jihadist Who Took BA Job to Plot Terror Attack from Inside Jailed for 30 Years," *Guardian*, 18 March 2011.

<sup>477</sup> Anwar al-`Awlaqi, May 2010.

## EXPLOITING WEAKNESSES

Tensions internal to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula must be exploited as well. AQAP's increasing emphasis on plots against the West represents a serious obstacle to developing wider support within Yemen. Attacks targeting the United States may be a strong fundraising tool in the Gulf, but they are considerably less popular in Yemen. AQAP's expanding international profile and influx of non-Yemeni talent constitute real vulnerabilities for the group. While foreigners offer money, expertise and increased opportunities to strike the West, they do not strengthen the authenticity of a group that has managed to survive for nearly five years largely through strategic discipline and a steady emphasis on local grievances. The glut of Saudis taking public positions in the group in 2008 and 2009 does not strengthen AQAP's narrative of a shared common purpose and anger directed against a single enemy. Evidence of an increasing North African and American presence within the group in 2010 and 2011 is even more troubling for an organization whose legitimacy at home depends on its capacity to address core Yemeni problems.

New and foreign fighters are also presumably less interested—and equipped—to engage in the tedium of local issues rather than mass casualty attacks or operations outside the country. As with any organization dependent on operational security, rapid organizational growth places AQAP leaders in the difficult position of managing recruits with whom they may have little connection and cannot fully trust. Incorporating additional members, whether foreign or Yemeni, requires negotiating the often competing aims and expectations of new fighters. Similar dynamics in terrorist groups elsewhere suggest that messaging and discipline are likely to suffer during such a period of expansion.<sup>478</sup> Yet rejecting or failing to incorporate new talent risks alienating al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula from foreign resources while increasing the very real threat of encouraging splinters within the AQAP brand. The potential for this type of internal fracturing will likely intensify should AQAP's profile continue to rise.

As AQAP's numbers grow and counterterrorism efforts push senior leaders further underground, the group will be under intense pressure to devolve command and control to mid- and lower-level members. While organizational flattening will improve internal security, decentralization can be expected to erode AQAP's ability to discipline the use of its narrative and violence. Greater distance between the group's talented founding commanders and newer cells and sympathizers leaves a swelling cohort animated by the rhetoric of al-Qa`ida's ideology but not restrained by the foresight of AQAP's leadership.

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<sup>478</sup> Cronin (2009), 100, 185.

Regulating the behavior of members who are loosely tied with AQAP command will pose a serious risk to the group's coherence of behavior and message.<sup>479</sup>

The case of the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen illustrates the difficulties associated with an expanding operational presence.<sup>480</sup> The group's rise and sudden decline stands in stark contrast to AQAP's otherwise tightly disciplined development in Yemen since 2006. The SBY's leader, Hamza Salim `Umar al-Qu`ayti, appeared in no AQAP media before his death and was not named a leader throughout any of the group's name changes between 2006 and 2008. Yet his *Kita'ib Jund al-Yemen* (Soldier's Brigade of Yemen) frequently posted media under the banner of al-Qa`ida, even releasing a martyrdom video with a distinct logo and flag for the bombers used in al-Qa`ida in the Land of Yemen's first military operation in fall 2006.<sup>481</sup> By 2008, al-Qu`ayti launched a flurry of largely amateurish attacks and media releases without the public endorsement of al-Wahayshi or al-Qa`ida proper, eventually ending with his death in a security raid later that year.

Whether al-Qu`ayti broke with al-Wahayshi or was merely afforded unusual autonomy is difficult to establish.<sup>482</sup> Yet in either circumstance al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula faced an uncomfortable choice: AQAP could openly support a faction with little of the restraint or skill of its parent organization, or remain silent and risk its standing in Yemen. Neither alternative was attractive. The SBY's media lacked the nuance or sophistication of AQAP products, while the Brigades' high-speed Fly-K mortars and mobile launch platforms were notoriously imprecise.<sup>483</sup> Perhaps more troubling given AQAP's strategic discipline, the SBY's target selection did not display the foresight of al-Wahayshi's larger al-Qa`ida affiliate. According to a senior U.S. diplomat posted to Sana`a at the time, a failed SBY mortar strike on the presidential palace in May 2008 was interpreted by President Salih as a direct attack on his personal authority.<sup>484</sup> The poorly

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<sup>479</sup> For a more detailed discussion of how poorly chosen targets and amateurish attacks are deeply problematic for terrorist groups who depend on even minimum levels of local support to survive, see: Cronin (2009), 100–112, 186.

<sup>480</sup> AQAP was then technically named al-Qa`ida in the Southern Arabian Peninsula

<sup>481</sup> "Amiliyat al-Qa'id al-Shahid – Fawaz al-Rabay'i," *al-Qism al-I'alami Kita'ib Jund al-Yemen*, 2007.

<sup>482</sup> Al-Qu`ayti's operational role in AQAP proper—then AQ in the Land of Yemen—prior to 2007 and certainly 2008 is much clearer. A video released by the group in July 2010 includes footage of al-Qu`ayti, al-Wahayshi and several others taken sometime late 2006. In it, al-Qu`ayti dedicates the teams that would be used in the oil bombings in September of that year to the memory of Abu `Ali al-Harithi. See: "Wa Yatakhath Minkum Shuhada'," *Mu'asasat al-Malahim*, 21 July 2010.

<sup>483</sup> According to a senior U.S. Embassy official in Sana`a at the time, the SBY often used antiquated versions of the Fly-K mortar system composed of a small piston with a range of up to 800 meters. The description matches rumors that the SBY's lackluster aim partially stemmed from firing mortars from moving motorbikes and vehicles. Among its most egregious missteps, a March 2008 attack aimed at the U.S. Embassy inadvertently hit a girls' primary school. Author interview, Washington DC, 26 April 2011.

<sup>484</sup> Author interview, Washington, DC, 26 April 2011.

chosen attack sparked the mobilization of the regime's security forces in the months that followed, ending with the SBY's defeat and the death of al-Qu`ayti and his alleged deputy in August 2008.

These types of vulnerabilities posed by friends and competitors alike should be exacerbated in any counterterrorism strategy moving forward. The unhappy experience of the Soldier's Brigade suggests that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is hardly immune from threats to its credibility by like-minded groups. More recent allegations of excessive violence levied against Ansar al-Shari`a in Abyan appear poised to do the same, forcing AQAP to either claim responsibility for the group and attempt to discipline it or remain conspicuously silent, leaving al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula open to criticisms that it has abandoned the Yemeni theater.

The types of vulnerabilities posed to AQAP by the Soldier's Brigade of Yemen should be exploited in the future, especially given events in Abyan that suggest AQAP is but one of many different armed actors engaged in rebellion in the south. As AQAP's profile grows and its number of fighters increases, counterterrorism forces should seize the opportunity to increase internal fissures within the group and militarily pressure an organization that has no experience in holding territory or governing. Given that AQAP has faced many challenges simply to survive in Yemen's political landscape, if increased pressure caused drastic shifts in the group's use of violence—explicitly targeting southern tribesmen or Yemeni civilians, for example—it would have severe consequences for AQAP's ability to endure.

### **Countering Tribal Engagement**

In addition to kinetically exploiting the group's weaknesses, a competing narrative to AQAP's efforts at Tribal Engagement should also be developed. This is important not because al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula has proven successful in Marib and al-Jawf, but because the rhetoric—and often the behavior—of al-Qa`ida and Associated Movements demonstrates the hostility of al-Qa`ida's ideology to tribal identity and law. Contrary to Anwar al-`Awlaqi's assertion that jihad is now inextricably linked with the tribes of the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, historically al-Qa`ida has rarely enjoyed an easy relationship with tribes inside or outside Yemen.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Anwar al-`Awlaqi, May 2010.

In Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Pakistan, AQAM repeatedly encountered a contradiction between their desire for a truly global *Ummah* (global Islamic community) and the persistence of territorial, ethnic and tribal divisions. Through media and internal documents, al-Qa`ida's leaders have long called for the dissolution of tribal affiliation and custom. An undated document presumably written during or near al-Qa`ida Central's founding states as much, asserting that the group sought to "eliminate regionalism and tribalism."<sup>486</sup> This goal is echoed by Abu Bakr Naji's *The Management of Savagery*, released in 2004. Naji writes:

The first step of polarization in the stage of "the management of savagery" is mastering the administration of the regions which are under our control . . . When we address these tribes that have solidarity we should not appeal to them to abandon their solidarity. Rather, we must polarize them and transform them into praiseworthy tribes that have solidarity. They have power and capacity, so our message should not seek the dissipation of this power—aside from the difficulty of doing so. It is preferable to change the trajectory of the solidarity so that it will be set upon the path of God, especially since they are prepared to sacrifice for the sake of the principles and honor which they believe in. It is possible to begin doing so by uniting the leaders [lit. "those who are obeyed"] among them with money and the like. Then, after a period of time in which their followers have mixed with our followers and their hearts have been suffused with the picture of faith, we will find that their followers do not accept anything which contradicts the sharia. Of course, solidarity remains, but it has been changed into a praiseworthy solidarity instead of the sinful solidarity [tribal affiliation and custom] which they used to have.<sup>487</sup>

Though Naji fails to call for overt confrontation with tribes, he articulates a vision that is clearly opposed to tribal structure and influence. The significance of his conclusion revolves not around advocating for a more inclusive partnership with tribes, but rather a more sophisticated approach that would seek to gradually diminish the importance of tribes. This patience is less apparent in a letter sent to tribal leaders in Diyala province by members of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) between 2006 and 2007.<sup>488</sup> The letter, written in the form of a legal contract, reads:

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<sup>486</sup> Although both the author and date are unknown, the content and tone of the letter suggests it was written in the late 1980s or early 1990s. <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AFGP-2002-000080-Trans.pdf>, 2.

<sup>487</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, trans. William McCants, *The Management of Savagery*, (Cambridge, MA: John Olin Institute of Strategic Studies, 2005), 111, 112.

<sup>488</sup> The document was more specifically written by a later iteration of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). To avoid confusion the letter was attributed to al-Qa`ida in Iraq.

We were dreaming of the day we would see the land of al-Rafidayn [Iraq], ruled by an Islamic State according to shari`a, after God's Law was absent for more than 50 years. We the Tribe [of] \_\_\_\_\_ thank God for this great and abundant blessing and the realization of our dream. So we, the Tribe [of] \_\_\_\_\_, pledge allegiance to the Amir of the Believers Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, the Amir of the Islamic State of Iraq, accept and obey his command under good and bad conditions, [accept] judgment by God's shari`a and by a judge from this Islamic State, reject pre-Islamic customs, tribal customs [whose legitimacy, like those of Pharaoh do not come from God's law], and support the oppressed even if [doing so] is against our interest, and not fail [any] Muslim who comes to us [seeking] refuge from the injustice of the oppressors.

Shaykh of \_\_\_\_\_ tribe,

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_<sup>489</sup>

The demand that Diyala's tribes abolish customary norms and cede their authority to al-Qa`ida's Islamic State of Iraq is remarkable. Yet taken within the context of broader al-Qa`ida and jihadist discourse regarding tribes, the ISI contract is not unique. In an audiotape released by al-Qa`ida Central in December 2007, Osama bin Laden addressed Iraq's tribes directly, counseling:

The strength of faith is in the strength of the bond between Muslims and not that of a tribe or nationalism. The strength of faith is not in the affiliation to the tribe, the country or the organization. The interest of the group should be given priority over the interest of the individual, the interest of the Islamic state should be given priority over the interest of the group, and the interest of the Umma should be given priority over the interest of the state. These divisions were not laid down by Allah . . . for religion trumps blood.<sup>490</sup>

Together, the comments contradict assertions that al-Qa`ida is a natural ally of

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<sup>489</sup> Though undated, the contract was presumably issued between 15 October 2006 and 29 November 2007. See: "Bay`ah Wala' al-`Asha'ir," *Dawla al-`Iraq al-Islamia - Wilaya Diyala. I*," CTC Harmony Database, [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/CTC-AllegiancetoISI\\_Orig.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/CTC-AllegiancetoISI_Orig.pdf).

<sup>490</sup> Osama bin Laden, "The Way to Contain the Conspiracies," *Al-Sahab Media*, 30 December 2007.



tribes.<sup>491</sup> Despite praising their independence and courage, AQAM have consistently articulated an antagonism toward the basic tenets of tribal identity and custom. Any accommodation with tribal custom made by al-Qa`ida's leaders is an uneasy one, necessarily driven by expediency rather than ideology. Given the frequency with which al-Qa`ida and Associated Movements praise tribes from Marib to Waziristan, these highlighted passages provide perhaps the best counterargument to al-Qa`ida's efforts at Tribal Engagement.

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is not immune from this tension. Despite lauding the collective virtues of Yemen's tribes, AQAP carefully cited shaykh `Abdullah Ahmad `Abdullah ba-Yasin's use of Islamic law rather than *`urf* in arbitrating local disputes when it eulogized the tribal leader. The declaration was a guarded one. Displaying the foresight long a hallmark of the group, AQAP's media releases avoided explicitly calling for the subordination or outright end of tribal identity. Given the context of relations between tribes and contemporary jihadist groups, AQAM in particular, the implications are significant.

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula harbors little sympathy for modes of social organization that directly contradict transnational jihad. Tribal communities that maintain geographic and familial concepts of identity are anathema to an al-Qa`ida narrative that argues for exactly the opposite—a nonterritorial and nontribal nation of believers. By AQAP's words alone, and certainly those of other al-Qa`ida affiliates, the stipulations of *`urf* do not fit well with the aspirations of transnationally minded jihadists in Yemen.<sup>492</sup> Just as al-Qa`ida has long railed against the modern nation-state and prevailing world order, its ideology is no less hostile to the traditional systems that have governed much of Yemen for well over a thousand years.

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<sup>491</sup> They are seconded by dozens of less prominent releases and captured documents. Among them, the anonymous and undated letter presumably written by a member of the Africa Corps, and numerous audio and video releases of al-Qa`ida in Iraq's leadership. Two earlier documents evoke similar arguments. In Fall 1993, Hasan al-Tajiki observed, "The more dangerous obstacle is the presence of armed jihad forces with the addition of undisciplined [Afghan] tribal forces prepared only to take money from any source, the foremost being Satan himself, yet unprepared to obey any order except within the weakest confines and for a limited period of time." Mustafa Hamid al-Misri recalls similar problems with Afghani tribes in 1989, describing a section in western Khost province that the Egyptian believed exploited foreign mujahideen for weapons and support while playing them off of the local government. For Tajiki, see: Hassan Al-Tajiki, "The Five Letters To: The African Corps," CTC Harmony Database, AFGP-2002-600053, 14; for Hamid see, Mustafa Hamid, "The Airport 1990," CTC Harmony Database, AFGP-2002-600090, 22.

<sup>492</sup> *`Urf* has long enjoyed an uneasy relationship with religious governance in Yemen. Dating to the country's early history as a Zaydi Imamate, customary law has proved resilient to attempts at imposing shari'a from above. Interestingly, tribal law was often attacked using the same language that al-Qa`ida uses to describe Arab leaders today, calling them tyrants or idolaters (*tawghut*). See, Dresch (1990), 183–188, 214, 229.

Nevertheless, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's collapse in Yemen is far from assured. The group may indeed survive by deftly navigating the tension between jihadist ideology and tribal identity and law. Yet the contradiction between religious absolutism and tactical opportunism is not one that has been exploited sufficiently by AQAP's opponents. Nor has sufficient attention been focused on AQAP's glaring lack of authenticity. AQAP boasts no leader native to the tribal areas from which it often demands assistance. Those AQAP members attempting to draw support from Yemen's tribes commonly do so through exploiting highly sensitive notions of collective history and esteem to which they have no legitimate claim. It is highly problematic for an urbanized foreigner to question the integrity of tribes he neither belongs to nor has the authority to admonish. Yet Sa`id al-Shihri, Qasim al-Raymi, and to a lesser degree Nasir al-Wahayshi have boldly and repeatedly done this, often while challenging the manliness of tribesmen.

Relevant government and civil society actors should highlight the hypocrisy implicit in these calls for support from the sons of Marib, al-Jawf, Shabwah and Abyan. Two decades' of jihadist rhetoric unambiguously hostile to tribes and tribalism presents AQAP's adversaries with more than ample evidence from which to attack the group's recent Tribal Engagement efforts. The lack of any prominent AQAP figure northeast of Arhab likewise undermines the claim that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula is capable of representing the interests of much of the country, particularly residents of Marib and al-Jawf.

## CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented in this report will not guarantee success against AQAP. Those willing to use violence against Yemeni civilians and U.S. interests will persist, while al-Qa`ida's ideology even after the death of Osama bin Laden will continue to be a useful tool for justifying violence. Effective policy would therefore reduce the threat of terrorism, but it cannot eliminate the threat of jihadists in Yemen entirely. A victory in Yemen would transform an intolerably high risk of terror attack against the U.S. homeland into a more manageable one.

There is no simple solution for doing so. While this report has focused largely on military and messaging efforts, nonmilitary steps should also be taken. U.S. diplomatic and foreign assistance efforts must better address the interests of the Yemeni people— for whom AQAP remains at best a peripheral concern. A competing narrative of U.S.

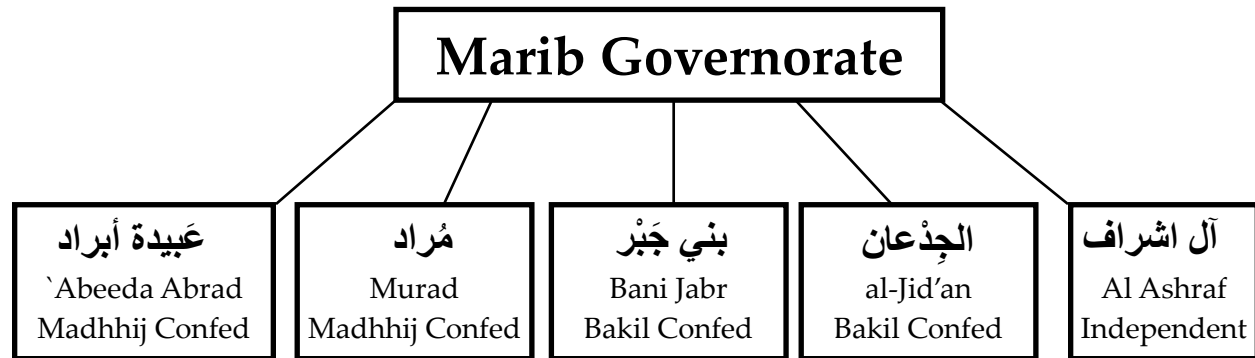
interests in the country must also be more effectively presented. However, given the available options and nature of the adversary, the direct application of force should play the central role in combating al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Insistence that counterterrorism measures must include ambitious efforts to address the deficiencies of the Yemeni state confuses normative goods with counterterrorism ends. AQAP is not a well-liked actor in Yemen. It remains a small, relatively isolated group driven by operational security concerns. Despite the force of its narrative, the group's survival is owed neither to Yemen's crises nor the popularity of jihadist ideology, but rather to the deft guidance of a small number of unusually talented Yemeni leaders. Reducing AQAP's ability to strike the United States over the medium and long term requires removing the group's founding Yemeni leadership. Either a return to the disposition of past jihadist groups in Yemen or a refashioned and foreign-led group would dramatically change the nature of the threat posed to the United States by AQAP.

This approach will require time and must be politically sustainable. Developing the human sources necessary to locate, capture or kill the leaders of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula will not happen overnight. Even once properly resourced, maintaining the political support necessary for an extended fight against AQAP will demand explaining to the American public why Yemen warrants scarce resources and the potential loss of American lives. Establishing realistic expectations regarding the aims, risks and limitations of this strategy will be critical if the United States is to maintain a consistent approach to confronting al-Qa`ida in the wake of American casualties or a successful terror attack against the United States.<sup>493</sup> Developing a more nuanced understanding not simply of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula but also of Yemeni and U.S. policy in the country will be essential for sustaining an effective counterterrorism campaign against AQAP.

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<sup>493</sup> This point has been made far more eloquently regarding U.S. intelligence policy by the CIA and National Security Council veteran Paul Pillar. Responses to recent terror plots against U.S. interests at home and abroad have frequently generated pressure for withdrawing assets, cutting political or economic programming or escalating the security components of country strategies. Though each may be justified in its own right, none of these reactions will contribute to combating AQAP in Yemen.

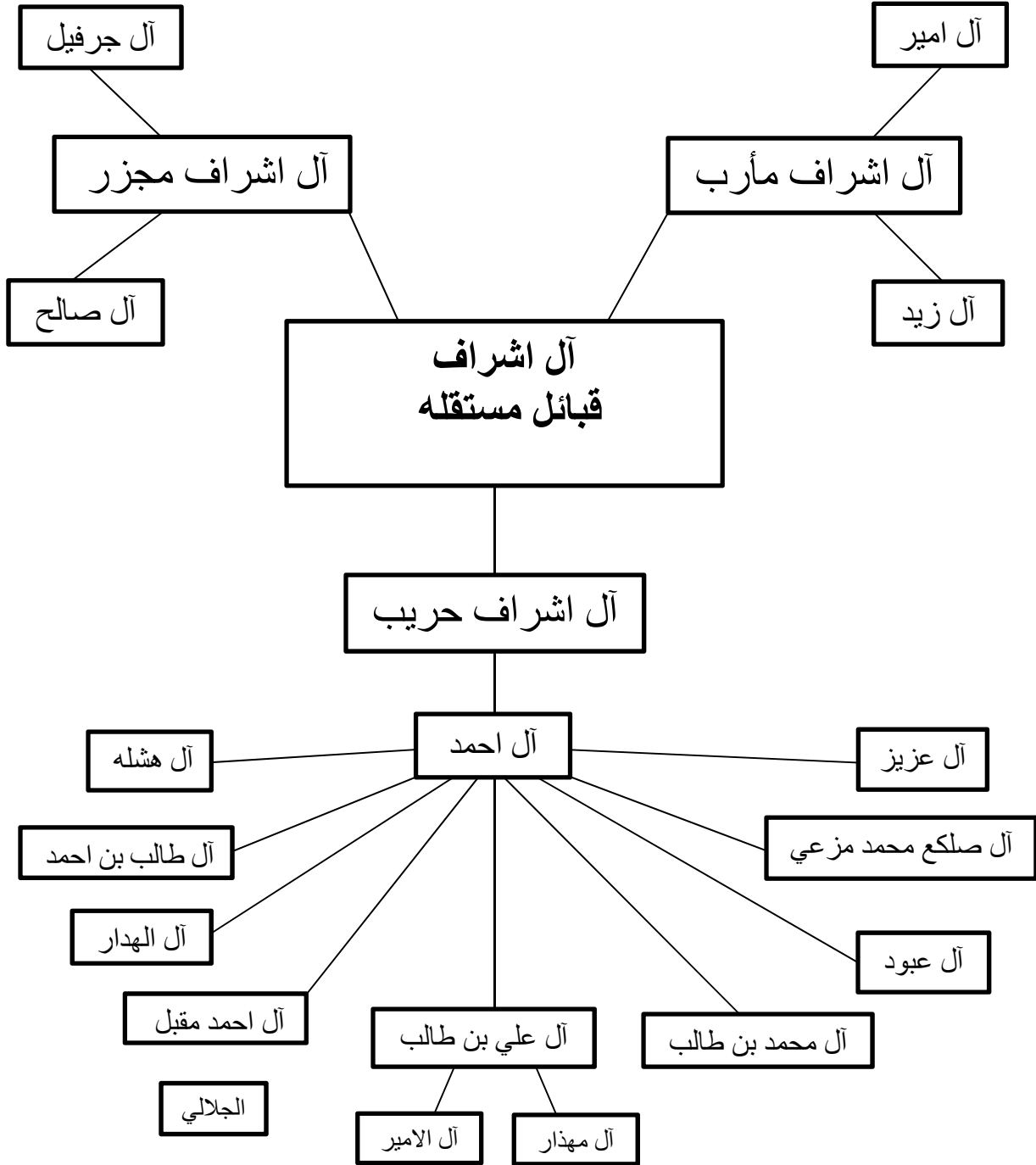
## APPENDIX: MAJOR TRIBES OF MARIB AND AL-JAWF



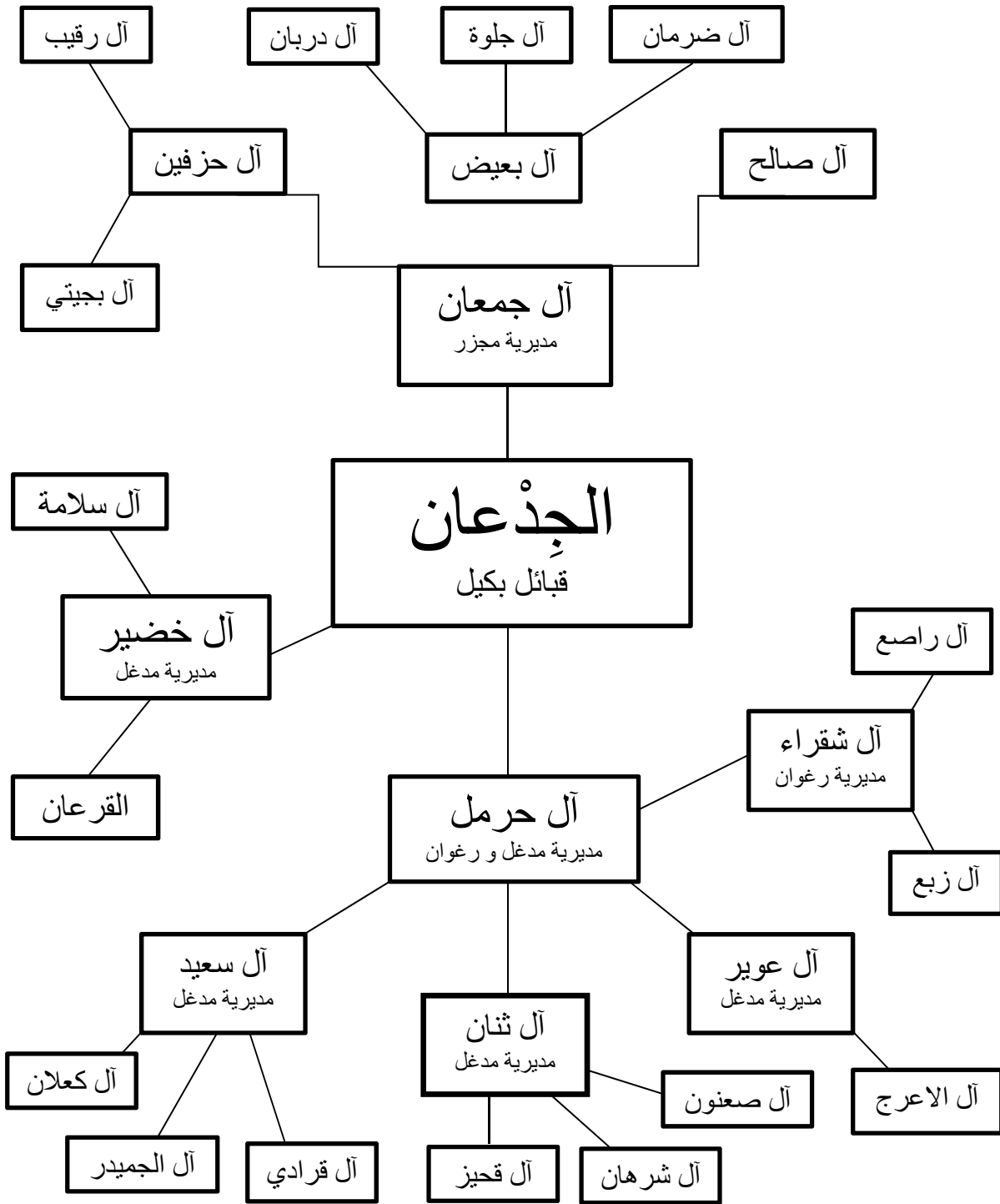
Source: Author<sup>494</sup>

<sup>494</sup> The diagrams presented here are according to the author's fieldwork in Yemen, subsequent phone conversations with contacts in the country, a small body of existing Arabic language scholarship and online forum discussions. While the major tribes in each governorate are transliterated into English at the beginning of each chapter, the names of macro-, micro-, and subsections are left in their original Arabic in these appendixes. This is done because experts frequently disagree on the proper spelling of tribal names and there is not a standardized transliteration of the divisions in English. Any errors in spelling or ordering the tribal sections in this text are the author's alone. The genealogies are intended to serve as a starting part for further research and are neither comprehensive nor authoritative. The author strongly encourages feedback from those with an interest in Marib and al-Jawf, and asks that corrections be sent to this project's editor at: [Gabriel.Koehler-Derrick@usma.edu](mailto:Gabriel.Koehler-Derrick@usma.edu)

**Al-Ashraf**  
Independent



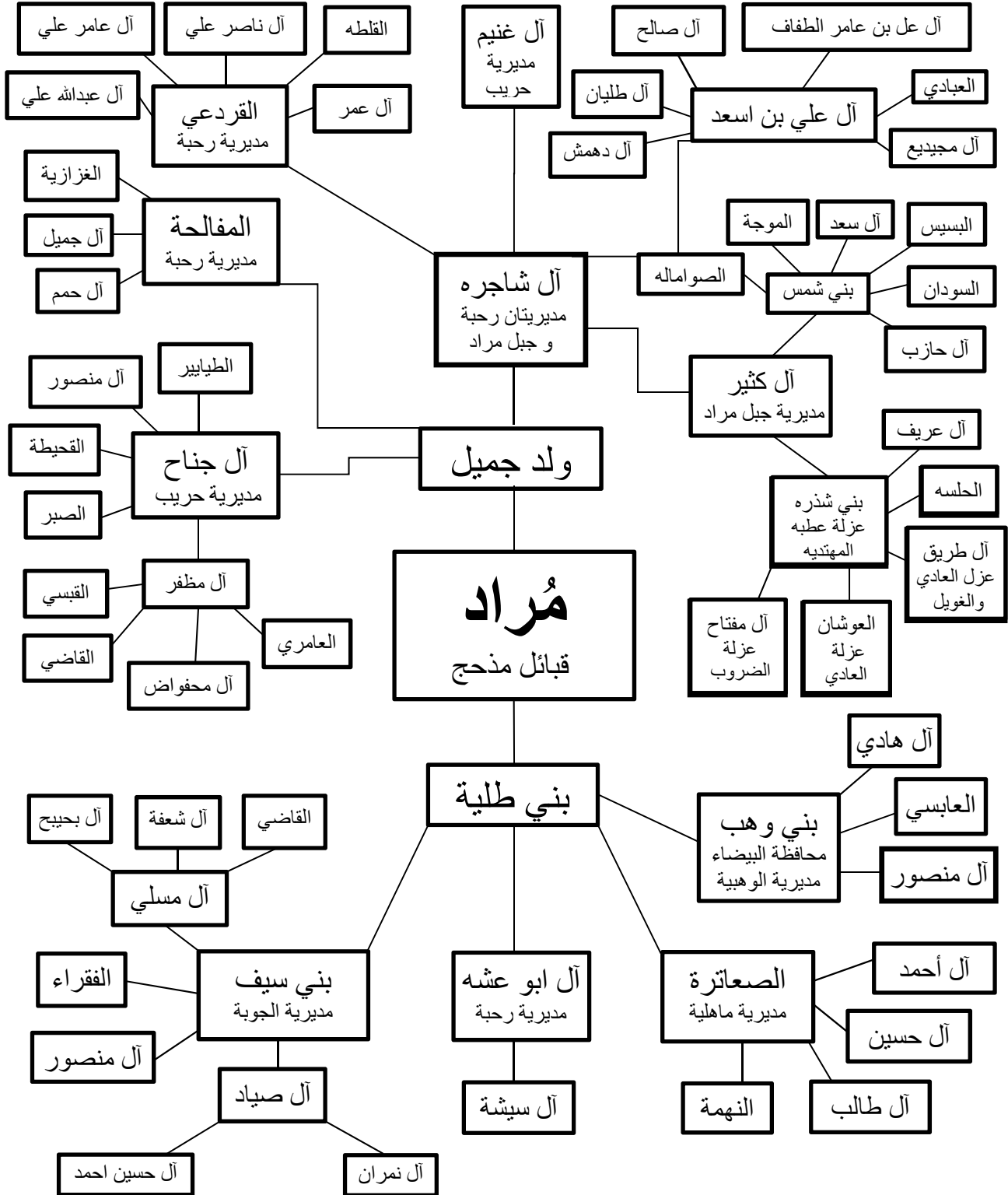
**Al-Jid`an**  
Bakil Confederation



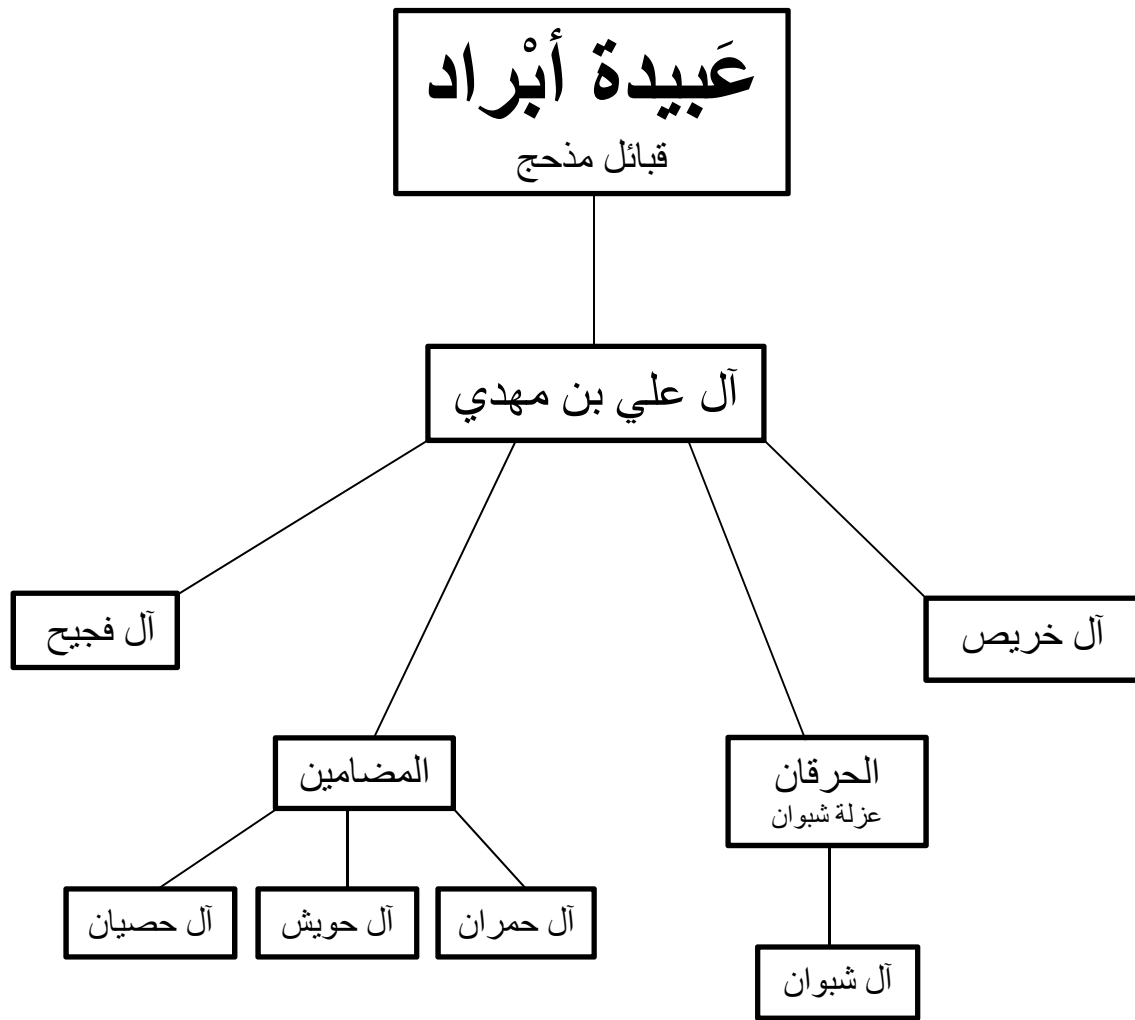


# Murad

## Madhhij Confederation



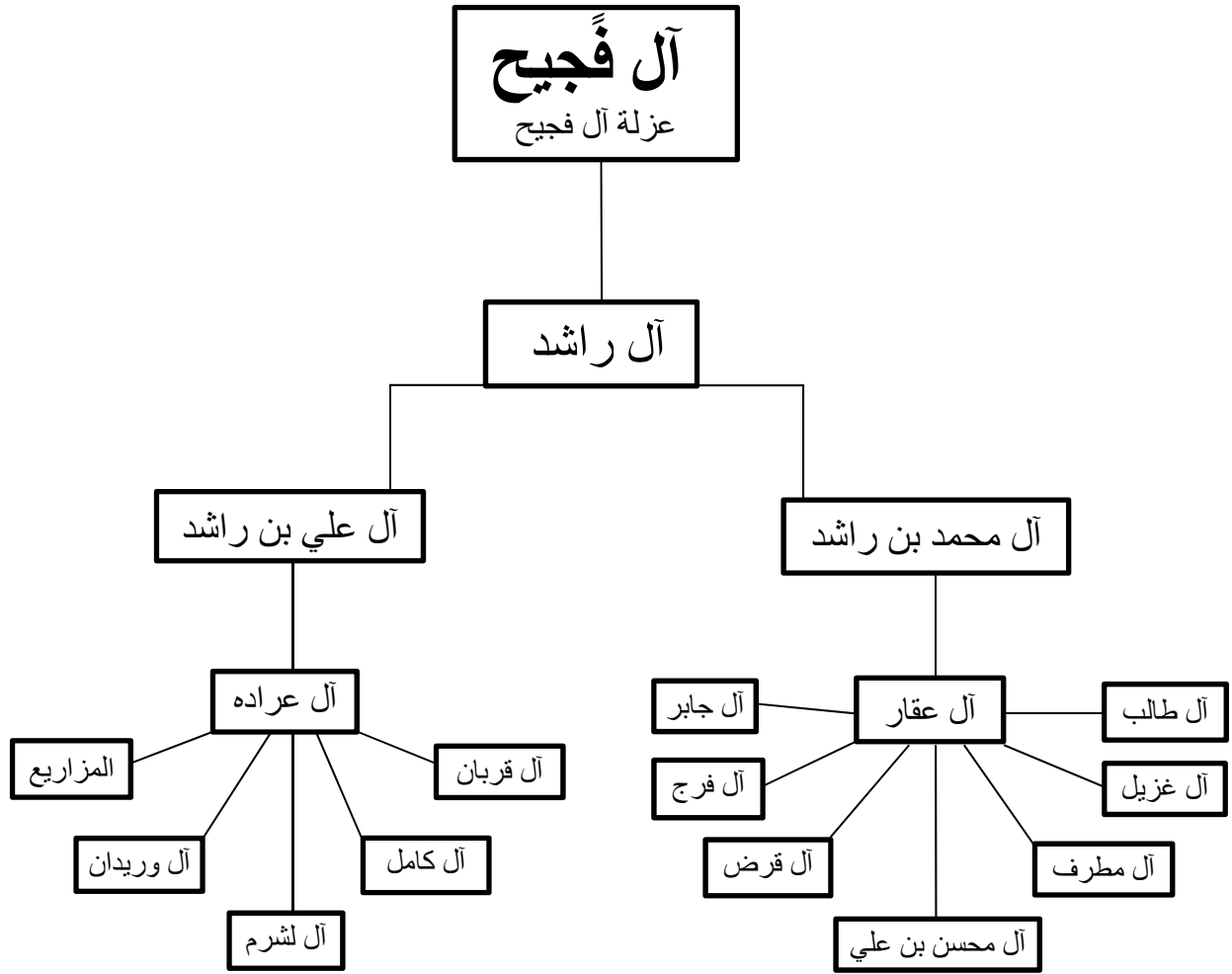




<sup>495</sup> Rafeeq (رفيق) and corollary units al-Shineetar (آل شنيتار) and al-Saylan (آل سيلان) are not included in the `Abeeda diagrams because the author could verify their correct lineage with Abrad.

## Al-Fajih

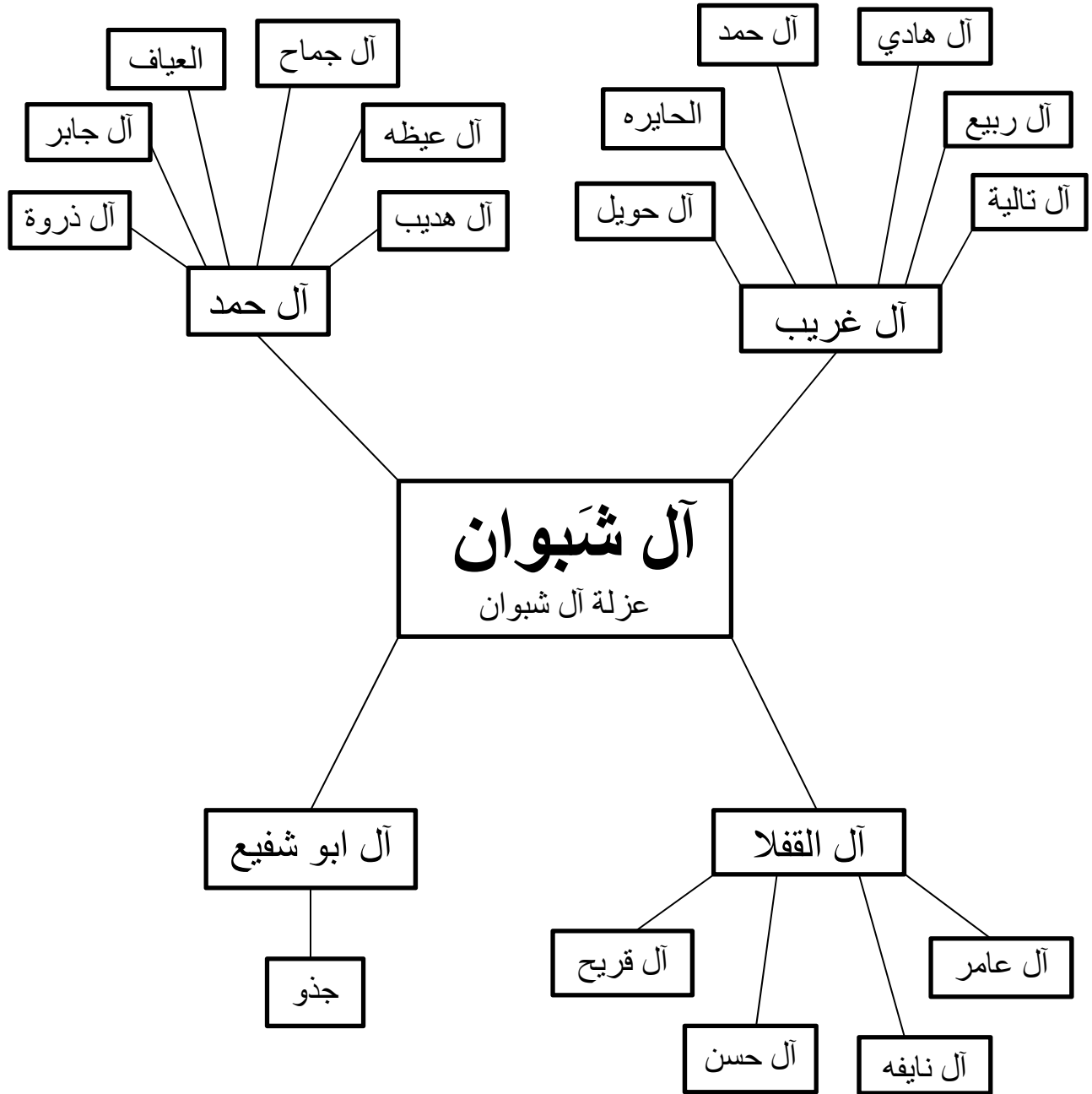
Al-`Ali bin Mahdi (`Abeeda Abrad)



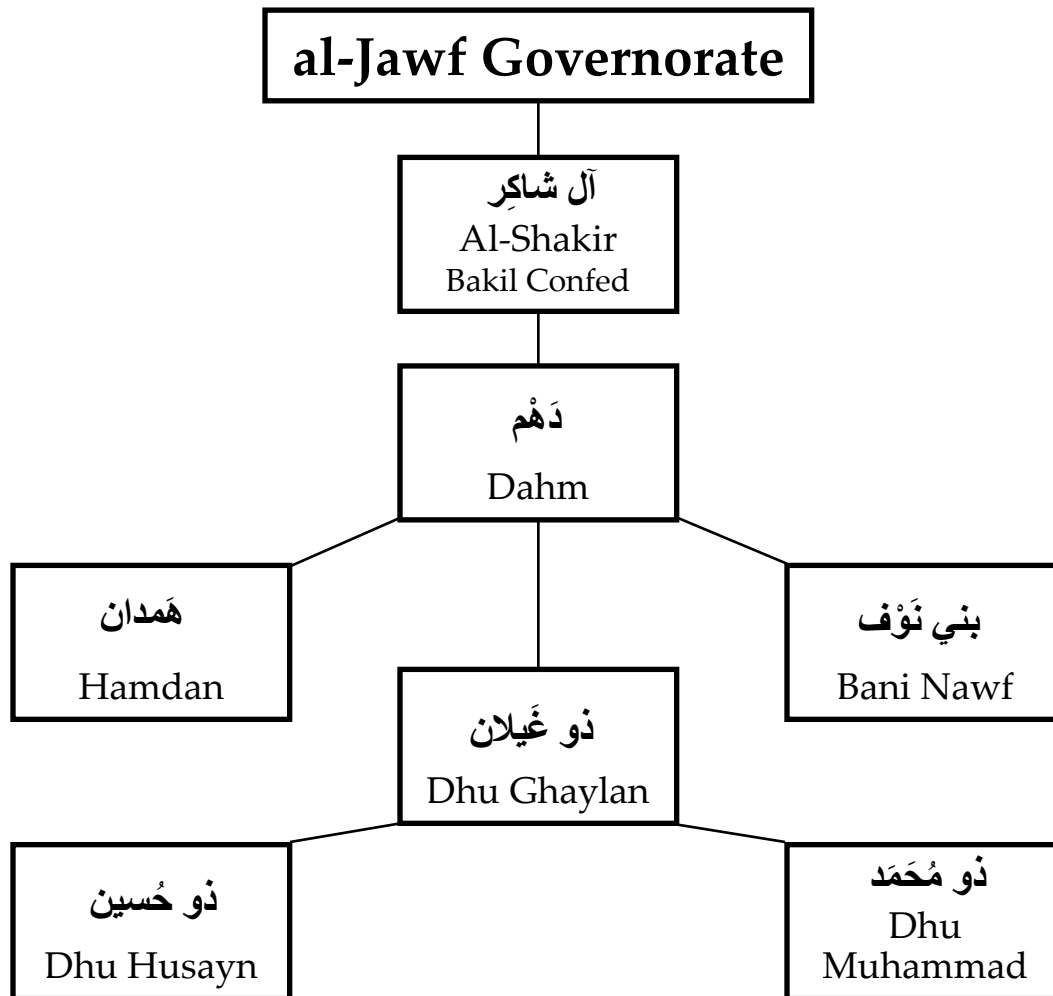


## Al-Shabwan

Al-Hurqan (Al-`Ali bin Mahdi - `Abeeda Abrad)



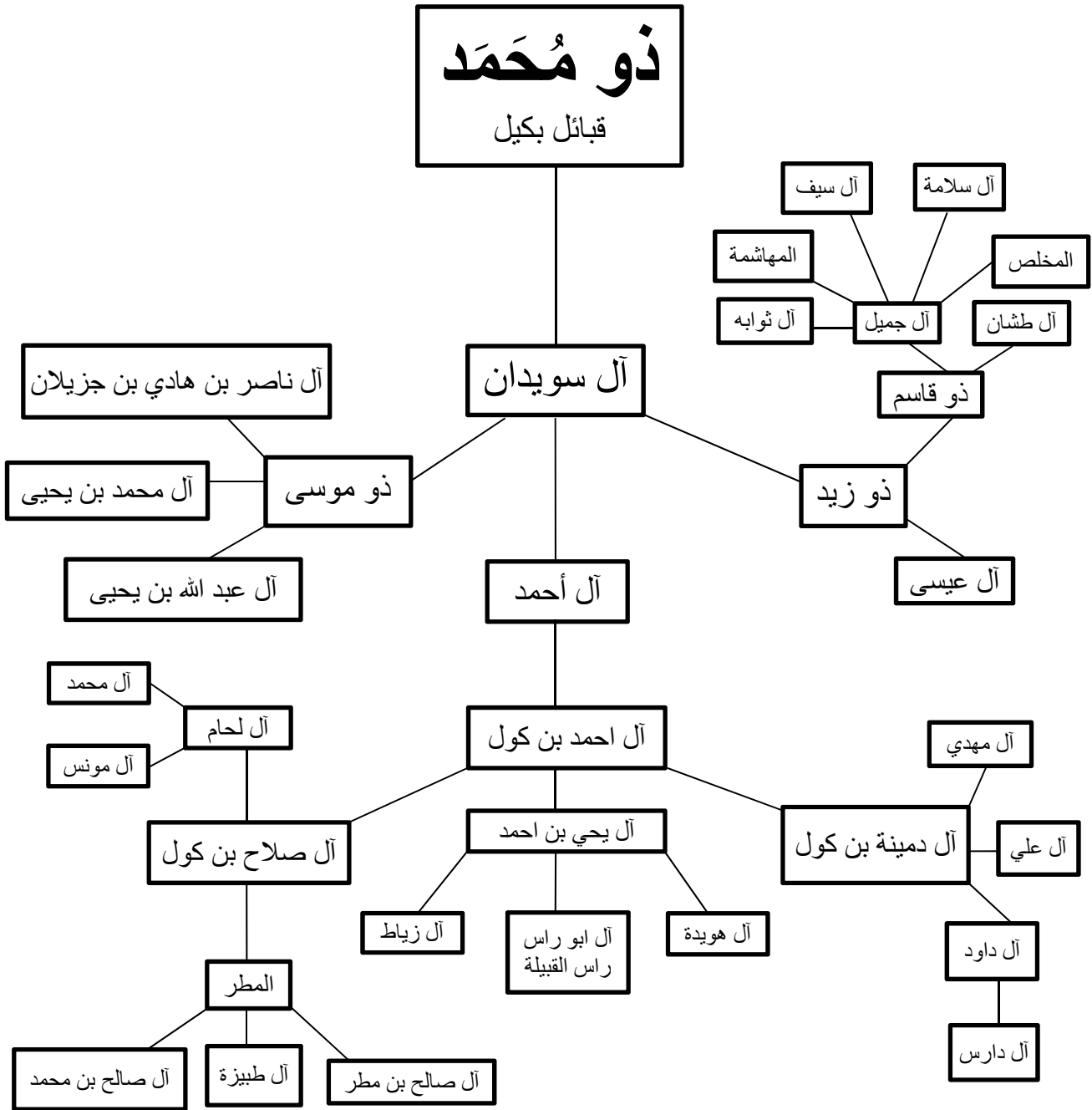
## Major Tribes of al-Jawf Governorate



Source: Author<sup>496</sup>

<sup>496</sup> Though they are not recorded here, a number of midsize tribes command authority as well. Of these, al-Muhashima located in northern Khab wa al-Sha`af near Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia and members of al-Ashraf in al-Ghayal, southern al-Mutama and southern al-Zahir, are among the most prominent. The four major tribes listed above are ordered again based on their predominant locations, starting northwest and moving southeast. There is no significance to this arrangement other than geographic disposition.

**Dhu Muhammad**<sup>497</sup>  
Bakil Confederation



<sup>497</sup> Al-Ma`atira (المعاطرة) is not included here. It is a primary tribe in al-Jawf and in Barat al-'Inan and deserves stand-alone discussion and diagram in the future. However, the author was not able to reach an agreed upon lineage and structure for al-Ma`atira during his interviews with members of tribe.

# Dhu Husayn Bakil Confederation

