

YEMEN: ON THE BRINK

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What Comes Next in Yemen?

Al-Qaeda, the Tribes,
and State-Building

Sarah Phillips

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ■ MOSCOW ■ BEIJING ■ BEIRUT ■ BRUSSELS

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Only a fundamental restructuring of the political system that includes more Yemenis will lead to stability.

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YEMEN

- International Boundaries
- Governorate Boundaries
- - - Former North/South Boundary (approx.)
- ★ Country Capital
- Governorate Capital

SAUDI ARABIA

HADRAMAUT

AL-MAHRAH

Al-Ghaydah●

RED
SEA

SADAH

●Sadah

AMRAN

AL-JAWF

●Al-Hazm

HAJJAH

Hajjah●

Amran●

Al-Mahwit●

★Sanaa

MARIB●

Marib●

SANAA

DHAMAR

Dhamar●

SHABWAH

●Ataq

Al-Mukalla●

AL-MAHWIT

Al-Hudaydah●

AL-HUDAYDAH

RAYMAH

Hanish Islands
(YEMEN)

AL-BAYDA

Al-Bayda●

IBB●

Ibb●

AD DALI

Ad Dali●

ABYAN

Taiz●

TAIZ

LAHIJ

Lahij●

Zinjibar●

Aden●

ADAN

GULF OF ADEN

Socotra

(YEMEN)

ERITREA

DJIBOUTI

Summary

News that the failed Christmas Day attack on a U.S. passenger jet was tied to al-Qaeda elements in Yemen prompted questions of whether the fractious Arab state might give rise to a Taliban-style regime. For its part, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has stated its intent to achieve “our great Islamic project: establishing an Islamic Caliphate” but it is vulnerable to the threat that Yemen’s tribes may ultimately find its presence a liability.

Al-Qaeda operatives have found safe haven in some of Yemen’s tribal regions, but their goal of establishing an international caliphate conflicts with many local political realities, potentially limiting this hospitality. Tribal society in Yemen is regulated by complex rules that bind its members to one another. Much of Yemen’s periphery is without effective formal, state-administered governance, but this does not mean that these regions are ungoverned—or there for the taking, particularly by outsiders to the area. As an external actor with a clear political agenda, AQAP poses a threat to the local mechanisms that maintain a level of order, and it is the tribes that are most able to rout AQAP if they see fit.

Yemen is a relatively young and developing state in which the rules of political power remain under negotiation. Western policy makers must consider the intricacies of the Republic’s domestic politics before acting. While overt military intervention is likely to further entrench al-Qaeda in the country, greatly increasing development aid also risks reinforcing a regime that is poorly equipped and poorly motivated to distribute the aid effectively among its people. Western chances of encouraging a more inclusive political system are questionable. In the long term, only a fundamental domestic restructuring of the political system to become much more inclusive will lead to stability.

News that the attempted Christmas Day bombing of a Northwest Airlines flight to Detroit was tied to al-Qaeda in Yemen brought a flurry of front-page articles warning that the fractious Arab state might become the next Afghanistan. Could al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) bring about the collapse of the fragile Yemeni government and usher in a Taliban-style regime? Is Yemen becoming the next base from which al-Qaeda will target the West?

Western policy makers are scrambling to be seen as responding decisively to the crisis, offering increased military assistance, development aid, or some

combination thereof. Foreign intervention presents opportunities for positive change, but there are limits to what it can accomplish. Two issues must inform any action in Yemen: the nature of authority in the state, and the complex relationship between its tribal communities and militant jihadis such as AQAP.

Al-Qaeda benefits from the weakness of the Yemeni regime, but the regime's failure would not necessarily be a win for the militants. Yemenis are not inherently sympathetic to militant jihadism, and AQAP probably benefits more from Yemen's position as a weak state than it would if the state were to fail altogether.

The process of state-building in Yemen has been rapid, but remains underway. As recently as fifty years ago, the Yemeni imam presided over a country with no local currency, no sewage system, and only three hospitals (Brown 1963, 357). Change has been swift since the republican revolution abolished the imamate in 1962, but the country has never settled on the rules of its political game. As in many developing states, negotiations over "who gets what, when, and how" are ongoing.¹ When a state is in the throes of establishing a new domestic political order, other nations must be more constrained in their involvement there than when it has imploded.

Since Yemen's oil era began in the 1980s, a state-sponsored patronage system has distorted the country's traditional mechanisms of dispute resolution and resource distribution. Tribal sheikhs are pillars in both the traditional and the patronage systems, although in the latter the regime detaches them from their communities by offering wealth and status in exchange for political acquiescence. This has resulted in the rapid centralization of the political system, which was built on the state's capacity to distribute oil wealth to those it deems politically relevant. This centralization, although artificial, has been transformative. Society does not function as it did only one generation ago; today, tribal leaders are rarely the first among equals and are sometimes rather divorced from their tribes' concerns (Dresch 1995, 40; Caton 2005, 331–2). And, broadly speaking, tribespeople no longer support their sheikhs as tenaciously as they did when the central government enjoyed less power. Now, as the regime's patronage system buckles under the pressure of reduced oil income, its imprint on Yemen's political ecology is clear: The patronage system has eroded many of Yemen's tribal codes and norms, helping create a vacuum where there is no clear alternative to the current patterns of leadership and in which entrepreneurial radicals such as AQAP have greater room to maneuver (S. Phillips 2009; 2008).

Oil exports are the government's economic lifeline, and still contribute about 75 percent of revenue to the country's national budget. In the six years since Yemen's oil production peaked, extraction has dropped by around 40 percent (to around 280,000 barrels per day), making the country desperately strapped for income. Furthermore, while it is widely reported that Yemen's oil reserves are likely to be depleted by around 2017, the country's oil is also consumed

domestically (currently approximately 120–125,000 b/d) and the critical point for the budget is thus even closer than it initially appears. The lack of money in the state's treasury—and the sense of pessimism about the future that this creates—is the most important driver of the country's other political crises.

The Yemeni regime's capacity to contend with domestic challenges such as AQAP has diminished so much in the past two years that by the tenth edition of AQAP's online magazine, *Sada al-Malahim*, in August 2009, AQAP appeared to no longer regard the regime as a significant obstacle to its ambitions.² The magazine asserted that AQAP's main goal was now to unseat the regime in Saudi Arabia, noting that Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's grasp on power was weakening: "We concentrate on Saudi Arabia because the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh is on the verge of collapse [and he is about to] flee the land of Yemen." AQAP's very public assertion that Saleh could not hinder its expansion marks a significant change from earlier editions of the magazine, which had called on Yemenis to fight the regime and hints at AQAP's plans for Yemen. Within a widening political space, AQAP has become more explicit about its domestic political ambitions.

In the same edition of *Sada al-Malahim*, Qassem al-Raymi (one of the founding Yemeni members of AQAP) called for skilled laborers to help "the mujahideen" establish an Islamic state:

A man's value is in what he does for a living.... The jihadi arena needs all powers, skills and abilities [such as] doctors, engineers and electricians. It also requires plumbers, builders, and contractors, just as it needs students, educators, door-to-door salesmen and farmers. It is searching for media specialists from writers and printers [to] photographers and directors. It also needs conscientious Muslim reporters and sportsmen, skilled in martial arts and close combat. It is searching for proficient, methodical, organized administrators, just as it is in need of strong, honest traders who spend their wealth for the sake of their religion without fear or greed.

Know my virtuous brother that by following your mujahideen brothers with some of these qualities it will accelerate the pace of achieving our great Islamic project: establishing an Islamic Caliphate. [translated by author]

This is essentially a political manifesto. Al-Raymi is attempting to rally sympathizers to embark on an ambitious state-building project, representative of the pious and directed by the mujahideen. AQAP is seeking to destroy the existing political system and establish its own. Much of Yemen's periphery is without effective formal, state-administered governance, but this does not mean that these regions are entirely ungoverned—or there for the taking, particularly by outsiders to the area. The informal norms of tribal governance and authority might have weakened over the past generation, but they remain a powerful local force. If AQAP intends to include Yemen's periphery, where it is currently based, in its political experiment, it must work with the tribes inhabiting those areas. In so doing it will need to remember that tribal communities are motivated by a

lot more than religious ideology; one's social responsibility within the tribe is, for example, an often-heard theme in Friday sermons in tribal areas.

In February 2009, AQAP leader Nasser al-Wahayshi and Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, demonstrated their understanding that the tribal system is still central to power and authority in large parts of Yemen. Al-Wahayshi called on the tribes to resist pressure to grant the state control of their territory.³ Likewise, al-Zawahiri called on Yemen's tribes to act like the tribes of Pakistan and Afghanistan and support al-Qaeda:

I call on the noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen and tell them: don't be less than your brothers in the defiant Pushtun and Baluch tribes who aided Allah and His Messenger and made America and the Crusaders dizzy in Afghanistan and Pakistan... noble and defiant tribes of the Yemen ... don't be helpers of Ali Abdullah Salih, the agent of the Crusaders ... be a help and support to your brothers the Mujahideen (al-Zawahiri 2009).

These statements played on notions of tribal honor, autonomy and, most important, the tribes' longstanding hostility to the central authorities (O'Neill 2009). Clearly al-Qaeda intends to capitalize on the tribes' well-founded distrust of the state.

In September 2009, AQAP released a video discussing the "Battle of Marib" (referring to a recent military operation against AQAP in Marib), which went further in trying to appeal to Yemen's tribal communities. The video's narrator says:

A lot of excuses were given for this military operation [in Marib] but its main aim was to break the prestige of the tribes and to disarm them. However, the government did not dare to commence its operation until [it secured] a betrayal by some of the sheikhs who allowed the tanks to invade their land.

The state's violence is portrayed as being aimed squarely at the tribes and resulting from tribal sheikhs turning their backs on their responsibilities and traditions. The video then crosses to Qassem al-Raymi, who makes a stinging critique to shame the tribal sheikhs who support President Saleh. He argues that sheikhs who support the president do not represent Yemeni tribes and have lost their legitimacy:

The biggest shame is for the tribal sheikhs to turn into foot soldiers and slaves of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is himself a slave to the Saudi riyal and the American dollar. And I say to those sheikhs ... where is the manhood and the magnanimity ... or did it die with your forefathers and you have buried it with them?

This was a very strong pitch toward notions of tribal honor and the way that a tribal sheikh—and by implication, a tribesman—"should" behave. Al-Raymi is attempting to detach sheikhs who have been co-opted by the state from their tribal support base. He urged the tribes to abandon leaders who had been complicit with the state. These accusations tend to resonate strongly in Yemen's tribal regions, where complaints that the regime has undermined

tribal traditions and livelihoods are commonplace. The video's narrator then ties this complaint back to the central goals of al-Qaeda and articulates a central role for Yemen's tribes, saying that the mujahideen in Yemen had overcome conspiracies against them because their "unity had increased and the heroes rose swiftly from all the tribes, moved by [their] pure conviction." In this view, the innate heroism of the tribes is aligned with jihadi ambitions to topple the corrupt, irreligious state. The mujahideen and the tribes are united. But what would happen if there were no corrupt, irreligious state to combat? Would the alliance that AQAP's leaders seek endure?

What Comes Next?

AQAP is attempting to construct itself as an alternative to a regime that is decried for selectively delivering wealth to Yemen's sheikhs at the expense of their tribes. In so doing it seems to assume an organic acceptance of a jihadi political model within grassroots communities. If al-Raymi's call to establish a new Caliphate is any indication, AQAP also appears to assume that "hearts and minds" are already sympathetic and can be readily converted into viable political institutions. History, most recently in Somalia and Iraq, suggests otherwise.

The growth of localized al-Qaeda groups can present problems when jihadis impose themselves on tribes. As AQAP cells grow stronger, they tend to require more territory for organizing their relationships and operations. The more they require control of territory, the more likely they are to be in competition with the tribes; this is why al-Qaeda groups are unlikely to pose a systemic challenge to the states in which they exist. That changes, however, if the cells are prepared to accept client status of the tribe, as they have partially done in Pakistan. Even if al-Qaeda attempts to discursively and operationally align itself with the Yemeni tribes against the state, one of the group's broader objectives—establishing political control—consigns tribes to a subordinate status. This exclusion would likely put AQAP in confrontation with the tribes.

The desire for political autonomy from a central power is a key component of Yemen's tribal system and the conceptions of honor integral to it (Caton 1990, 31-2; Dresch 1989, 47, 378; Wenner 1991, 39-40; Phillips 2008, 97-103). Outsiders might try to break in by offering bounty (money and weapons are standard currencies), or by offering assistance to fight against another outsider to the area. In order to operate effectively in tribally governed territories, outsiders must establish themselves in one of three broad relationships: patrons to the tribe, clients of the tribe, or partners with the tribe.

Patrons to the Tribe

Being a patron to the tribe requires ongoing independent financial largesse from the outsider. Patrons cannot expect their client's loyalty if their ability to

pay expires; and sometimes they cannot expect that loyalty even when their largesse continues.⁴ In Yemen, the government has attempted to solidify this relationship, but as dwindling oil revenues sap its patronage system, fewer sheikhs are being incorporated or maintained in its networks. The regime is no longer able to offer the benefits it did just five years ago, and the rapid decline is being sharply felt.

Clients of the Tribe

For outsiders operating clandestinely, being the client of a tribe would most likely entail protection, and perhaps logistical assistance, from the tribe in exchange for the outsider playing a spoiler role with the tribe's outside competitors. The value of the outsiders is predominantly their ability to increase the cost of not negotiating with the tribe for other outsiders. This relationship, therefore, requires the subordination of the outsiders to the tribe. Clients can be cast aside, or refused assistance such as safe haven, by their tribal patrons when those patrons no longer see the benefit of maintaining the client.

Some Yemeni tribes appear to be using the threat of al-Qaeda to gain leverage against the state. In October 2008 the government continued negotiations with the Abeeda tribe in Marib in an effort to secure the surrender of al-Raymi. Much of the Abeeda tribe (particularly its major sheikh) are considered pro-government, which suggests that al-Raymi's protection revealed a schism within the tribe itself as some of the more minor sheikhs were offering al-Raymi (and perhaps others like him) refuge to increase their leverage within the tribe against the government or the major sheikh.⁵ As the state's patronage system continues to unravel, there is less money available to those on the periphery of that system, which is fueling competition over the depleting resources. Smaller sheikhs are becoming more likely to be cut from the state's largesse and might be more inclined to aid al-Qaeda fugitives to assert their relevance or fill the vacuum created by dwindling state power.

This client relationship hinges on a tenet of Yemeni tribal culture: Honor requires providing hospitality to an outsider who requests protection, and turning over someone who has sought protection is shameful (Dresch 1989, 64–5). The tenth edition of *Sada al-Malahim* extolled the duty of sheikhs to give sanctuary to the mujahideen, referencing a story of how tribes offered sanctuary to the Prophet during a crisis. Given the cultural imperatives, and the relative inexpense of offering refuge, a tribe's provision of sanctuary does not necessarily mean it would support a more aggressive phase of the mujahideens' work.

Yemen's government must persuade the tribes that it can offer them more than al-Qaeda can. Al-Qaeda is making the reasonable assumption that the government will not be willing or able to persuade the tribes that it will offer much. They are likely correct, but unlikely to be able to offer much to the tribes themselves.

To most tribes, the Yemeni state is an instrument through which a small band of elites exploits and harasses the people. This will not change unless the state delivers benefits and builds trust between itself and grassroots communities. The Yemeni regime has weakened many aspects of the tribal system by co-opting sheikhs with access to wealth and power from the center, thus severing many from their traditional support bases. Sheikhs now often derive their wealth and status from the political center, rather than their traditional constituency in their local area. With the vacuum of legitimate authority that these fractured center-periphery relationships have created, the Yemeni system is poorly equipped to deal with the political and economic crises it faces. AQAP is presenting its credentials in the regime's stead but is offering little more than a lightning rod for entrenched grievances, of which there are many.

Al-Qaeda's gains in Yemen are rooted in mistakes by the security apparatus and policies that alienate the masses by rewarding the elites. Establishing good governance will be crucial to stability in Yemen, and Western policy makers must not assume the regime is necessarily going to be willing or able to include those it traditionally has excluded.

Partners With the Tribe

A partner relationship with a tribe requires personal, ideological, or goal alignment between the tribe and the outsider. Al-Qaeda groups' internationalist tendencies and exclusive ideology conflicted with local norms in Iraq and Somalia, where tribes valued relative autonomy from a central authority. Yemen is somewhat different in that militant jihadi ideologies had been fostered there decades before jihadis challenged the authority of the state. Thousands of Yemeni nationals returned to the country in the 1980s and early 1990s, following the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Northern elements of the government went to considerable lengths to reintegrate them into Yemen's political life and mobilize them as fighters against the South in the 1994 civil war. Some of these older al-Qaeda affiliates maintain relationships with the government. For younger militants, however—those who came of age during Yemen's oil era—jihadism is not cooperation with the state but resistance to the state.⁶

As Gregory Johnsen points out, AQAP has become a relatively representative organization within Yemen because it is unique among political organizations in its ability to span tribal, regional, and class divisions (Johnsen 2009). Its leaders are reaching out to the tribes, attempting to capitalize on traditional tribal animosity toward the central authorities. However, while widening the cracks in Yemeni society may be achievable, the ability to claim legitimate political and administrative authority does not necessarily follow from this. AQAP is representative in that it has constructed a narrative of popular discontent that has broader reach than other political organizations in Yemen, but it has not demonstrated it can translate this rapport into a palatable political

program. Despite its ambitiousness and the relative nuance of its rhetoric, AQAP's presence in Yemen is still fragmented.

Yet AQAP has demonstrated its political sophistication, focusing on the government's injustices and the tribes' need for independence and attaching local Yemeni grievances and cultural sensitivities to its mandate. But the political nature of its goal—"achieving our great Islamic project: establishing an Islamic Caliphate"—and its outsider status are likely to conflict with the tribes' desire to maintain a level of local autonomy. If al-Qaeda hopes to achieve its political objectives in tribal territory, it will have to flex its muscles, and withstand the blowback from that.

This lesson should have been learned in Somalia, where the conflict between al-Qaeda's internationalist ideology and local tribes' demand for autonomy undermined jihadis in the early 1990s. Documents captured by the United States from that time reveal that the foreign mujahideen became so exasperated with Somali clan politics that some suggested waging jihad on Somali clan leaders once Western forces had been expelled from the country (Combating Terrorism Center 2006, 6). In failed states and conflict zones where tribes dominate the political landscape, capable fighters are a much-prized commodity. In Somalia, bin Laden's mujahideen could not offer competitive benefits to their most capable potential recruits, many of whom had no desire to put themselves on the wrong side of tribal militias that were deeply suspicious of foreign interference in local affairs (Combating Terrorism Center 2006, 16–18).

Such tensions were also important factors in al-Qaeda's reversal of fortune in Iraq's al-Anbar province in 2007–2008, when the tribal "Awakening Councils" paramilitary groups (*al-sahwat*) successfully marginalized the jihadis. Al-Qaeda in Iraq relied on Sunni tribes for support, but went too far in insisting that sheikhs swear an oath to reject tribal legal traditions—a blatant infringement of tribal traditions of autonomy (Bergen 2008, 114). Al-Qaeda leaders also alienated themselves by attempting to impose themselves in marriage to prominent tribal families, despite cultural norms against women marrying beyond the clan (A. Phillips 2009, 72). Al-Qaeda's attempts to wrest control of smuggling networks from the local tribes further aggravated animosity toward these outsiders and undermined an important source of local resource generation for the jihadis (A. Phillips 2009, 72). Tribal opposition to al-Qaeda was further galvanized by the jihadis' propensity for using spectacular violence to promote their highly exclusive ideology (A. Phillips 2009, 73). Al-Qaeda was an outsider and a competitor that trespassed cultural, political, and economic norms that Iraq's tribes were not prepared to forgo.

Yemen is not Iraq, and the Yemeni regime's historical tolerance of militant jihadis and AQAP's sensitivity to tribal grievances might mean less competition between militants and tribal groups. However, al-Qaeda has relatively little to offer the tribes beyond destructive muscle. It is unlikely to be accepted as a vanguard for the tribes, which could find AQAP's presence a liability.

Violence and Blood Revenge

Al-Qaeda's propensity for extreme violence against civilians will continue to strain its potential support in the Muslim world. In Yemen's tribal society, breaching the peace carries significant consequences: When one tribe kills someone, the tribe of the victim may be entitled to kill "one man of theirs for ours" (Dresch 1989, 50–51, 66–69, 150). In the tribal areas, particularly the Marib, al-Jawf, and Shabwah governorates, revenge killings have led to cycles of inter-tribe violence spanning generations and dominating the political and economic landscape—local businesses are disrupted, children can be discouraged from going to school in order to avoid becoming targets, trips to get basic commodities can become dangerous, and so on.

After al-Qaeda's suicide attack against a group of Spanish tourists in Marib in July 2007, the Yemeni government organized a conference in Marib to discuss the causes and solutions to terrorism in the governorate. Marib is highly tribal, and a local tribe was believed to be harboring the al-Qaeda militants who orchestrated the fatal attack. A number of foreign diplomats and NGO employees were invited to attend the conference, and the government assured their security through the use of a mixed tribal escort.⁷ In the escort, a member of each of the tribes from surrounding areas sat in the convoy that took the foreigners to and from the conference. Any attack against the convoy would endanger either a member of the tribe that was assisting al-Qaeda or a member of a neighboring tribe, which could spark a blood revenge conflict endangering the attacker's tribe or tribal patron. Tribal society is regulated by complex rules that bind its members to one another. To suggest that it is "ungoverned" overlooks these robust traditions. Mechanisms to maintain a level of stability are intricate and function on the central premise that every individual has an obligation to maintain that stability.⁸ These mechanisms are sensitive to outside intervention, particularly when that intervention is predatory. As an external actor with a clear political agenda, AQAP poses a threat to the local mechanisms that maintain a level of order.

Ideology

Ideologically, al-Qaeda might also have difficulties bridging the considerable divides in Yemeni society. In May 2009, al-Wahayshi announced his support for "the people of Southern Yemen" in their struggle to secede from Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime (Madayash and Abu-Husain 2009). Although al-Wahayshi's comments were significant, he maintained an explicitly jihadi frame of reference, and emphasized that Islamic law (Sharia) was the only way for southerners to overcome the injustices of the regime. Another suspected member of AQAP, Ghalib Abdullah al-Zaydi, added that adopting Sharia was necessary for jihadi assistance in the South: "If they *continue* adopting socialist

or communist ideas, we will not join them” [italics added] (News Yemen 2009). As al-Zaydi’s statement suggests, al-Qaeda has ideological competition in the South. Al-Qaeda might have a hard time finding common cause with southern Yemenis if it maintains such a hard-line ideological stance. Yet this stance largely defines al-Qaeda. Cells such as AQAP are becoming more adept at integrating themselves in local political struggles but they do not abandon their internationalist ideology. The traditional Salafi insistence on unity of the *umma* (Islamic community) is inherently at odds with the secessionist movement. AQAP cannot advocate breaks within the *umma* when its mission is the establishment of an international Caliphate. The editorial in issue ten of *Sada al-Malahim* elaborated on this point, denying that AQAP called for political separation in Yemen but pointing out that unified Yemen does not belong to Saleh or former South Yemeni president Ali Salem al-Beidh, whom the article termed “killers.”

Marrying internationalist goals and ideology to local concerns is often contradictory. The dialogue between al-Qaeda’s internationalist ambitions and the local politics with which its cells become embroiled is strained ideologically and politically. Much of what al-Qaeda stands for is abhorrent to local populations but the exclusion of legitimate opposing voices has created space for extremists like AQAP. Yemenis are religiously conservative, but they are not inherently radicalized. AQAP is providing a narrative of injustice for a population that is suffering, but the jihadis are not (yet) the voice of the people or a surrogate government.

Both al-Qaeda and the Yemeni government have aspirations that clash with those of Yemen’s tribes. The gulf between the tribes’ local concerns and the internationally focused agenda of al-Qaeda provides opportunities for the government to solve simple grievances and convince the tribes that the government is a better long-term bet than al-Qaeda. However, with the Yemeni regime in crisis, this appears a distant hope. The only long-term solution to the question of bolstering the nation’s stability—the regime agreeing to include more of Yemeni society—is unlikely to be achieved soon.

AQAP can ride the wave of local and tribal grievances, but unless it fundamentally alters its ambitions to politically dominate territory in tribal areas—or can demonstrate its capacity to offer tribes tangible and lasting benefits through subordination to al-Qaeda—AQAP is likely to eventually go the way of other outsiders that have attempted the same. This is cause for optimism in the long run; in the short term, projections are much less promising. Yemen’s unraveling patronage system gives jihadis a window of opportunity to refine their approach to local politics and entrench themselves as actors in local struggles. Unlike Somalia and Iraq, where al-Qaeda was unable to maintain traction, Yemen is not a failed state. Al-Qaeda benefits from an environment where central authority is weak, but society is not completely chaotic. Experiences in Iraq and Somalia suggest that al-Qaeda groups might be better suited to an environment that is somewhere on the cusp of state failure rather than one in

actual failure,⁹ and where the prevailing chaos makes jihadis just one group among many fighting for survival. While Yemen's tribal terrain complicates al-Qaeda's ambitions, its chances of becoming perceived as a legitimate political actor increase the longer it functions in the background without overtly challenging the tribes for power.

Addressing the Problem

As the West scrambles to respond to recent events involving Yemen, it is important to consider that neither a military counterterrorism approach nor a short-term developmental approach can correct the source of the problem: The heavily centralized system of power that keeps resources and political leverage in the hands of a select few and further entrenches Yemenis' economic hardship.

The growth of militant jihadism in Yemen stems from the malignancy of the country's political system. Targeting AQAP's leadership in Yemen with U.S.-assisted air strikes does not change this, nor is it likely to strengthen the Yemeni regime against militant jihadism in the longer term. The U.S.-assisted air strikes conducted between December 17–24, 2009, have been seen on the Yemeni street as an affront to Yemen's sovereignty and were described in some of the local press as massacres. Overt Western military intervention is likely to further entrench AQAP in local political consciousness as the jihadis continue to argue that the Yemeni government is "America's lackey" (Reuters 2009).

The softer "whole of government" approach seems to assume that a loss for the Yemeni regime is a win for al-Qaeda but this oversimplifies the current crisis. A recent policy brief by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) calls on the U.S. government to "devote even greater resources to ... bolstering the Yemeni government's reach and improving its effectiveness" (CNAS 2009, 5) but this risks further entrenching the problem: More money will not necessarily make the Yemeni regime more willing to genuinely devolve power. The CNAS paper argues that the United States must seek "a multifaceted and enduring relationship that includes economic development, improved government, and domestic stability," pointing out that "less than 20 percent" of the \$4.7 billion in aid that was pledged by donors to Yemen in 2006 has been delivered. "However, 'willingness to follow through with pledges' of aid money (CNAS 2009, 5) is only part of the problem, another significant issue is that the pledged aid cannot be delivered because the arms of the Yemeni government have atrophied and there is no local mechanism through which to effectively deliver such large amounts of aid. This problem speaks volumes about conditions on the ground in Yemen. Unless there is to be an aid mission that intends to perform (and is capable of performing) the basic functions of government, foreign aid needs a local implementing partner. The Yemeni government has not proven it can fulfill this role; historically its leadership has lacked the political willingness and its institutions remain ineffective.

Reinforcing the aspects of the Yemeni regime that threaten its survival is not the answer; a fundamental restructuring of the Yemeni political system is. The system must become far more inclusive, which means removing considerable power from the incumbent elite. This is undesirable in the eyes of some within that elite, particularly those who maintain their influence through extra-constitutional means.¹⁰ At its foundation, this is an issue of leadership, and Yemen needs leaders who are willing and able to catalyse processes of progressive change. The question is whether the West can engage in the intricacies of Yemen's domestic politics without being perceived to underwrite the source of the government's legitimacy problem. This is an enormously complex undertaking and assumes that decisive Western action can engender greater long-term stability in the fragile state. This assumption is based on the long-standing development orthodoxy that foreign technical assistance and structural adjustment can change the nature of domestic political processes. As Yemen's future looks set to become increasingly turbulent, this orthodoxy deserves to be widely debated before being accepted.

Notes

- 1 This phrase was popularized by Lasswell 1936.
- 2 The first edition of *Sada al-Malahim* was published in January 2008.
- 3 Al-Wahayshi's audio speech was posted on various jihadi websites. For English language commentary, see *Thaindian News*, 2009.
- 4 The literature on tribes in Yemen is full of anecdotes about tribes that were “republican by day, and royalist by night,” in the 1960s northern civil war. The kaleidoscopic nature of shifting tribal alliances is often baffling to an outsider. Robert Stookey quotes a combatant in that war who had attempted to purchase the allegiance of tribesmen: “One had deserted because the republicans had bought him off; the other went off and attacked on his own, elsewhere than had been expected, because he was suspicious. That’s the way it has always been” (Stookey 1978, 244).
- 5 Interview with Yemeni analyst of tribal politics, Sanaa, October 2008.
- 6 Johnsen 2007 discusses the generational split in more detail.
- 7 The author attended this conference.
- 8 It is important to note that while the attempt to foster stability through deterrence is not always effective—and mediation is an important part of resolving disputes that have occasioned death—the impact on the local environment is very serious when it fails, and the possibility of this is not taken lightly.
- 9 Thanks are owed to Gavin Hales for articulating this point in email correspondence.
- 10 I thank Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani for this phrase.

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