



AL-BAYDA'S TRIBAL DYNAMICS CONTINUE TO ELUDE US COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY

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Cover photo: Yekla, al-Bayda governorate, the site of a botched 2017 US Special Forces raid that left many civilians dead // Photo Credit: Iona Craig



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



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INTRODUCTION

A mountain towers over hilly farmland, where the cash crop is Yemen's finest qat and rugged dirt roads are precarious not just because of the steep cliffs they skirt. Along the side roads between mountain villages, armed militants often with their faces covered man separate al-Qaeda and Islamic State checkpoints, keeping watch for Houthi rebels, government soldiers or any outsiders. Despite taking the same side against Houthi forces, they have fought each other more than once.

Al-Bayda is a vast, well-armed province southeast of Sana'a with a Sunni identity, a place that is proud of its warriors and fond of poetry, where tribal solidarity is paramount. But here, when people join Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the reasons aren't always ideological; tribal politics come into play. Over the years, Islamic militants from both the largely homegrown AQAP as well as the more often foreign fighters of Islamic State (IS) have found al-Bayda's rough terrain provides a degree of protection. Their presence, however, has made the province a focal point for US counterterrorism efforts, including controversial "signature strikes" launched from drones to destroy any activity deemed suspicious without intelligence information confirming the target's identity.

Precise figures for US drone strikes and their casualties are not available, but The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which has been tracking reports, confirms more than 300 strikes on Yemen, most of them believed to be from US drones, since 2002.⁽¹⁾ Dozens of these attacks have targeted AQAP and, more recently, IS militants in al-Bayda province, with some of them taking a devastating toll on Yemeni civilians and their mountain communities. Signature strikes have, for example, deemed funerals and weddings suspicious. One such attack in December 2013 in al-Bayda killed more than a dozen people in a wedding party. In January 2017, just days after taking office, US President Donald Trump approved his first ground raid in Yemen, a botched attack in al-Bayda that killed many civilians and failed to find the intended target or intelligence information it sought. While President Barack Obama's administration had vastly increased the number of drone killings in Yemen, it had not made a decision on the Pentagon's raid plans. At least three more ground raids have followed under the Trump administration. Most recently, US Special Operations forces reportedly participated in a Saudi-Yemeni raid June 3 in al-Mahra province that captured IS local leader Abu Osama al-Muhajir.

After traveling through remote areas of Yemen researching the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies, it is clear that practices including the drone strikes, as well as the 2017 US Special Forces ground raid, are failing to undermine AQAP's presence. They may take out individuals here and there, but the immense sense of indignation and anger in these resilient mountain communities ultimately strengthens the organization as a whole.

1) "US Strikes in Yemen, 2002 to present," The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/yemen>. Accessed June 24, 2019.

US RAID WEAKENS INFLUENTIAL TRIBE, NOT NECESSARILY AL-QAEDA

A big, unfinished cement house scarred by bullets stands high on a hill, with most of the dozens of other smaller stone houses of Yekla village scattered down the hillside. It belongs to one of the most influential families in the area, the Dahabs, one of three traditional families that has taken the chieftom of tribes in what is known as the Qayfa tribal area. Large parts of al-Bayda and several other Yemeni governorates come together in Qayfa, granting it geographic, military and security significance. As fighting against the Houthis intensified in 2015 in al-Manaseh, near al-Bayda's second-largest city of Rada'a, the al-Dahab family fled to Yekla.

The bullet marks in Abdul Raouf al-Dahab's house resulted from the January 29, 2017 firefight between US Special Forces backed by Emirati soldiers and the al-Dahabs, their neighbors and guests from the visiting al-Jawf tribe who had come to resolve a tribal dispute but found themselves drawn into battle. Several al-Dahab family members were killed, including Abdul Raouf, who led tribal fighters against the Houthis in coordination with the Yemeni government but whom the US claimed was affiliated with al-Qaeda. Abdul Raouf's brother, Sultan, several residents and visitors – perhaps as many as 25, including many women and children – also died along with some militants and one US soldier.

Residents of the village and members of both clans said in interviews that those present for the negotiations were unaffiliated with al-Qaeda. Neither the Yemeni nor the US government had declared Abdul Raouf al-Dahab a wanted man, which is typical but left local residents with no cues to distance themselves from him or assume responsibility for being around him. Al-Dahab had just arrived from Marib, loaded with Yemeni government-provided weapons and finances he had replenished to fight the Houthis, creating the impression he was not wanted.

In Marib, Yemeni Defense Minister Mohamed al-Maqdishi said in an interview with this author that Abdel Raouf al-Dahab's death and the US raid were a mistake. Al-Dahab, he said, had just met with officials of the US-backed Yemeni government in Marib, where he had received the money to pay anti-Houthi fighters.

THE DAHABS: A POWERFUL FAMILY DIVIDES

Family patriarch and prominent tribal chief and poet, the late Ahmed Nasser al-Dahab, was a man of renowned glory in Yemeni tribal history, especially among the tribes of al-Bayda. He had 18 sons from several marriages, 14 of whom have been killed over the years in tribal vendettas, fratricide, drone strikes and the ground raid. Following their father's death in the 1980s, arguments broke out between the sons and their uncle over land and inheritance, and later among the sons themselves, some of whom felt marginalized within the family because of their mother's slightly lower social status.

Although the clan is now indelibly linked to al-Qaeda, with its extreme Sunni Wahabi ideology, the family is not Sunni like many other tribes in their area. The al-Dahabs are Zaidis, followers of a branch of Shia Islam practiced in northern Yemen and adhered to by about a third of the Yemeni population. One of the sons, Ali, was a member of the Yemeni parliament, representing the decidedly secular pan-Arab nationalist and pro-Iraq Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Another son, Tariq al-Dahab, embraced conservative Sunni beliefs and joined al-Qaeda, prior to which many locals and acquaintances say he was far from being a pious man. His sudden radicalization, affiliation with AQAP and rise in its ranks to lead the al-Bayda wing gave him and the other marginalized brothers who supported him — Abdul Raouf, Nabil, Sultan, Qaed, Ahmed and Abdul Illah — protection from their half brothers and ultimately power within the clan. Tariq also married his sister off to the American Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed by US drone strikes in 2012. Their child also was killed in the Yekla raid.

Usually, al-Qaeda seeks the strength of tribes to bolster its position in an area. Tariq al-Dahab, however, used al-Qaeda to strengthen his position in the clan. His brothers Nabil, Abdul Raouf, Sultan, Qaed, Ahmed and Abdul Illah benefitted as well, though which ones among them actively helped al-Qaeda, sympathized with it or simply kept on good terms with AQAP to maintain his position in the clan is debatable.

Ultimately, Tariq's position in AQAP couldn't protect him from his family or four of his brothers from the US military. In 2012, a half-brother, Hizam, killed Tariq and Ahmed in a dispute over their views on al-Qaeda. Hours later, Hizam was killed by AQAP fighters and other half brothers. In 2013, Qaed was killed in a US drone strike, followed by Nabil in late 2014. Abdul Raouf and Sultan died in the Yekla raid. Abdul Illah lives in the mountains, staying mostly out of sight after his own near-misses with US drones.

Its traditional influence in the region had made the Dahab clan a perfect ally, whether to government forces or to armed groups. Like many families and tribes in Yemen, they have seen some fragmentation since 2014. Beyond Tariq al-Dahab pulling the clan closer

to al-Qaeda, a cousin of the brothers, Ahmed Said al-Dahab, fights with the Houthis, going against the majority of the anti-Houthi family. The family dynasty is threatened now, leaving the chiefdom of Qayfa vulnerable to be taken on by one of the other two traditional clans of the area, Jaroun or al-Qibli. Abdul Illah al-Dahab cannot be out and about mediating disputes and handling regional affairs as is expected of a sheikh.

Tribal resilience cannot be underestimated, however, and the decimation of the Dahab clan is not viewed by tribesmen as a lesson to stay away from al-Qaeda because many did not view their neighbor and sheikh, Abdul Raouf, or his brother Sultan as particularly close to AQAP. Tribal AQAP allies in general, and especially those like the Dahabs who don't as a rule share al-Qaeda's broader ideology, would likely distance themselves from the group if they believed it was in their best interest. Washington, the Saudi-led military coalition and even the Yemeni government haven't yet capitalized on that.

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INADEQUACY OF AMERICAN COUNTERTERRORISM POLICIES

The Qayfa area, like many of the country's impoverished tribal regions, is not susceptible to coercion or deterrence via the threat of military force. Its tribes retain armaments and are willing to use them to protect their kin against others, even when it means confronting state authority. Therefore, a counterterrorism strategy including drone strikes and raids by US Special Forces is bound to fail in undermining al-Qaeda's presence in al-Bayda and areas with similar dynamics, such as Marib. It is instead strengthening the organization. This is especially the case as Yemen's bloody civil war continues, further exacerbating sectarian schisms to create an ideal environment for al-Qaeda. The use of force and killing of civilians only agitates public opinion against the United States, enabling recruitment of more young men to the ranks of its enemies.

Al-Qaeda also was able to use the Yekla raid to gloat about downing a US military aircraft, which the Pentagon claimed had malfunctioned, and about killing a member of the US Special Forces. In al-Qaeda's calculations, such propaganda is far more valuable to its cause than any individuals it may have lost.

Anger and indignation goes beyond the US military actions themselves, with residents expressing frustration over what they consider a lack of recognition of any wrongdoing, or even any apologies for civilian deaths. Several people interviewed in Qayfa also interpreted the American raids and drone strikes as direct support for their Houthi adversaries because they have come at the height of battles against the Houthis.

In a few cases, the United States has paid out reparations intended for relatives of civilian victims, including some in Yekla, according to senior US officials working on the region. However, even the payment process lacks transparency with the result that none of the families interviewed had received any money by the end of 2018. US payments went through affiliates of President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi, but apparently had gone missing en route to the families.

US MILITARY, IS COULD TAKE A LESSON FROM AQAP

In order to defeat al-Qaeda, the United States could learn from the organization itself. Oddly enough, so could AQAP's jihadist rivals in al-Bayda, Islamic State (IS). Both AQAP and IS target the Yemeni Armed Forces and the Houthis, both run checkpoints on the ground in al-Bayda province, and both are targets of the US operations. But AQAP has far more fighters in Yemen than Islamic State, and the majority of AQAP's adherents are locals. Conversely, IS is generally composed of non-Yemeni Arabs and foreigners, which explains its insensitivity towards local nuances. Islamic State militants rarely understand local dialects, or sometimes even Arabic, and generally disregard the unwritten rules: never stop locals and don't interfere with their smuggling. While IS seeks to strictly, immediately and directly impose a caliphate, al-Qaeda's present aim in al-Bayda is to defeat its Houthi enemies on the battlefield. Here, it is willing to slow its steps toward a caliphate that could, if imposed too soon, be taken as an unwelcome infringement on tribal sovereignty.

Al-Qaeda has found ways to gloss over local norms that contradict group doctrine. Al-Qaeda's leadership, for example, strictly prohibits qat. In this qat-growing and trading region, a place where the habit is a way of life, al-Qaeda tolerates its local AQAP fighters chewing qat. In interviews, local fighters explained while working away at mouthfuls of leaves that al-Qaeda's mufti in al-Bayda, Ibrahim Arbaysh, had issued a special fatwa prohibiting himself from chewing qat, but then said he would not prohibit others from doing so. Al-Qaeda likewise acknowledged tribal strength in al-Bayda when it was pushed out of the province's second-largest city, Rada'a. Al-Qaeda, which had stormed the city in 2013, left not by force but through tribal negotiations.

This sensitivity toward and pragmatism about the local environment is what has allowed one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations in the world to thrive in this region. It is something neither Islamic State nor the United States has been able to understand or use to their advantage. Despite its apparent Sunni (Shāfi'i) identity, al-Bayda is not a fundamentalist region per se, when speaking of tribal communities; it is a region with largely unique local and tribal dynamics. As one resident of Qayfa put it: "My religious creed is to pray to God and fight with my friend." With its lethal airstrikes, raids and indifference to local sensitivities, the US has found no friend in the mountains of al-Bayda.

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