



THE EMIR AND THE SHEIKH: AL-QAEDA'S ATTEMPTS TO INTEGRATE INTO THE YEMENI TRIBAL SYSTEM

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COVER PHOTO: AQAP militants in Yemen, 2014. Screen capture: Wikimedia Commons

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INTRODUCTION

The 2009 announcement of the merger of the militant group Al-Qaeda's Yemeni and Saudi Arabian branches marked a fundamental change in the organization's structure.^[1] No longer would the group restrict itself to the borders of regional nation-states. The new organization, announced from Yemen's Shabwa governorate and headed by Yemeni Nasser al-Wuhayshi, Osama Bin Laden's former personal assistant,^[2] was to be called Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and has remained so to the present day.

With the Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi as its chief ideologue, AQAP, in turn, established an offshoot, *Ansar Al-Sharia*, in 2011.^[3] Ansar Al-Sharia's creation came as part of a new strategy, after AQAP realized that it needed to adapt to its environment, in part, by infiltrating and working within the local tribal system.^[4] The idea was to 'rebrand' AQAP, and make it more palatable, with the appearance that it was a local organization. This was antithetical to the beliefs of the most radical Al-Qaeda ideologues and other Islamist extremists, who would argue that the group should not offer concessions to any governing system that does not completely adhere to its AQAP's interpretation of Islamic law.

This new strategy saw its biggest success in the infiltration of the Qayfah tribe, based in an area of the same name in central Yemen's Al-Bayda governorate, between 2010 and 2014. This was AQAP's longest and most stable presence in one area of Yemen, yet it did not translate into a widespread expansion of support within other Yemeni tribes – for reasons examined below. It does, however, highlight how AQAP was able to utilize tribal divisions and state collapse to entrench itself within the Yemeni tribal system.

1) Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen has Made Al Qaeda Stronger and Richer," Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>

2) "Yemen Al Qaeda Chief Al-Wuhayshi Killed in US Strike," June 16, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33143259>

3) "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," Stanford/Center for International Security and Cooperation, last update August 2018, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula>

4) Murad Batal Shishani, "Who Are Ansar Al-Sharia in Yemen? [AR]," BBC Arabic, March 7, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2012/03/120305_ansar_yemen

The Al-Dhahab family was a central part of how this transpired. They had inherited the title of tribal sheikh within a part of the Qayfah tribe since at least the second half of the 20th century.^[5] When Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al-Dhahab died in 1987, divisions between his 18 sons led to the emergence of a disinherited wing of the family. These brothers, led by Tariq al-Dhahab, eventually became attracted to AQAP, facilitating the group's presence within Qayfah and the brief declaration of an Islamic Emirate in Rada', Al-Bayda's largest city, in January 2012. With the backing of the group, the pro-AQAP wing of the Al-Dhahab family was able to take over the tribal leadership of the Qayfah, forcing the anti-AQAP wing of the family out.

In Qayfah, the tribe's highest authority, the tribal sheikh, was recruited by AQAP. In effect, there was a quid pro quo; to take control of the area, the group needed figures like Tariq al-Dhahab and his brothers and the status they held. At the same time, Tariq and his brothers needed AQAP to strengthen their positions, restore their right to inheritance and enhance their prestige. Affiliating with AQAP, and becoming emirs, or local leaders of the group, became a fundamental condition for their acquisition of the position of tribal sheikh.

This paper will examine the relationship between AQAP and the Qayfah tribe, and the story of the rise, and eventual fall, of the pro-AQAP wing of the Al-Dhahab family within the tribe. The story highlights the manner in which AQAP dealt with the restrictions placed on it by the Yemeni tribal system, how they were able to capitalize on divisions within the Al-Dhahab family, as well as some of the contradictions of a tribal system operating within a modern state structure. The paper will also analyze how attempting to find a balance between the tribal system and the goals of the organization eventually proved to be too difficult for AQAP, leading to the collapse of the group's project in Qayfah.

5) Author's interview with a member of the Al-Ghonaïm tribe in Qayfah who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, November 13, 2020.



METHODOLOGY

This paper primarily relied on five interviews with tribal sources from Qayfah and the Rada' area, including a member of the anti-AQAP wing of the al-Dhahab family, and the head of the mediation committee that expelled al-Qaeda from Rada' in 2012, as well as other tribal and family sources, for whom it was necessary to not reveal any details as to their identity or the information they provided for security reasons. Other interviews were also planned but were canceled due to security concerns on the part of both the potential interviewees and the author himself, who has faced threats from AQAP in the past. The author was also able to use his own experience in Rada' to write the paper; the author studied at the University of Al-Bayda's College of Education and Science in Rada' from 2001 until his graduation in 2005, and then worked as a teaching assistant at the same institution until 2013. He was, however, dismissed from his position by the university after pressure from militants in the region, after he was accused of discussing controversial matters with students. The author's time in Rada' coincided with the beginning of AQAP's presence there, and in neighboring Qayfah, and this was undoubtedly useful in preparing this paper in terms of understanding tribal rationale, the social context, and the background of the events described in this paper, many of which the researcher witnessed.

THE QAYFAH TRIBE AND THE AL-DHAHAB FAMILY

The Qayfah tribe is based in the Wald Rabi' and Al-Qurayshiyah districts in the northeast of Al-Bayda governorate. The tribe has three sub-tribes: Al-Ghonaim, Wald Rabi' and Al-Mahan Yazid, of which the Al-Dhahab family dominates the latter two. Much of the Al-Dhahab family's prominence, and its inherited sheikhdom, was owed to Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al-Dhahab, who was the most prominent tribal sheikh in the region. Sheikh Ahmed had a complicated relationship with the Yemeni state and opposed the 1962 revolution in North Yemen, which saw the creation of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the end of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom and the Zaidi Imamate.^[6]

Sheikh Ahmed died in 1987,^[7] and was succeeded by his eldest son, Sheikh Ali. He went on to become a member of the Yemeni parliament for the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. But Sheikh Ali was only one of Sheikh Ahmed's 18 sons, who would eventually feud with each other over inheritance and their influence within the tribal leadership.^[8]

The Al-Dhahab brothers were roughly divided into two camps. Sheikh Ali, along with Hizam and Khalid, sons of Sheikh Ahmed's powerful and influential first wife, were the most prominent in the first camp. They took the tribal leadership for themselves, and deliberately deprived their younger half-brothers of their inheritance, including vast farmlands left by their father. The second camp, made up of those younger half-brothers, including Tariq, Nabil, Abdul-Raouf, Abdul-Illah, Qaed, Ahmed and Sultan, were left disinherited and forced to search for a way to reclaim what they thought of as their right.^[9] It is this second camp that eventually embraced AQAP.

6) Ahmed Mubarak Bashir, "Eye on the Revolution.. An interview with the Patriot Al-Hajj Yahya Al-Kukabani, Personal Escort of President Judge Abdul Rahman Al-Eryani [AR]," Aden al-Ghad, October 15, 2016, <https://adengad.net/public/articles/225325>

7) Sheikh Ahmed was killed in murky circumstances. Some reports indicate that he died during tribal infighting, while others blame former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. See "An Exclusive Photo: The Yemeni Sheikh who Shook the Martyr Saddam Hussain's Hand and was Killed by Ali Saleh [AR]," Nass Times, May 25, 2017, <https://nass-times.com/news22782.html>

8) Farea Al-Muslimi, "Yemen's 'Qifa', Where Trump's Bloody Hand Reveals Itself [AR]," Assafir Al-Arabi, March 4, 2019,

9) Author's interview with a member of the anti-AQAP wing of the Al-Dhahab family who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, November 11, 2020, as well as the author's interview with a member of the Al-Ghonaim tribe, who also wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, in Qayfah, November 13, 2020.

The younger Al-Dhahab brothers were forced to leave Qayfah and settle in Sana'a in the mid-2000s. There, according to a source within the anti-AQAP wing of the family, Tariq became acquainted with the US-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi, who had left the US in 2002 after suspicions of his involvement in the September 11 terrorist attacks.^[10] The relationship between Tariq, who eventually became the most important family member within AQAP, and Al-Awlaqi was cemented when the cleric married Tariq's sister. This created a direct relationship between AQAP and the younger Al-Dhahab brothers, who were provided with money and weapons, enabling them to return to Qayfah.

10) Al-Awlaqi arrived in Yemen in 2004 and spent 18 months in prison between 2006 and 2007 on terrorism charges, although he was never found guilty. He was killed on September 30, 2011, in a US drone strike in Al-Jawf governorate. See Scott Shane & Souad Mekhennet, "Anwar Al-Awlaki: From Condemning Terror to Preaching Jihad," New York Times, May 8, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/world/09awlaki.html>; and Dominic Rushe, et al., "Anwar Al-Awlaki Death: US Keeps Role Under Wraps to Manage Yemen Fallout," The Guardian, September 30, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/30/anwar-al-awlaki-yemen?newsfeed=true>

THE RISE AND FALL OF AQAP'S QAYFAH PROJECT

Tariq returned to Qayfah shortly before his elder brother, Sheikh Ali, passed away in late 2010. Although the tribe's leadership officially passed to Sheikh Ali's son, Majid, Tariq was able to establish himself as a leader within the tribe, and began to be sought after to resolve issues^[11] and blood feuds.^[12] Tariq's rising status within the tribe allowed him to increase the ties between it and AQAP. The militant group began to see Qayfah and Rada' as places to establish its own Shariah courts, thereby entrenching itself in the area.

Tariq and AQAP's increased power within Qayfah led to increased attacks by the militant group against its opponents in Rada', and the eventual storming of the city and the declaration of an Islamic Emirate there, on January 13, 2012. Tariq took the opportunity to officially pledge allegiance to the leader of AQAP, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, as well as Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, from the historic Al-Amiriyah Mosque in Rada', thereby cementing the relationship between Tariq and AQAP.^[13]

The group's takeover of Rada' was short-lived, however. Tribal forces from the surrounding area quickly rushed to the city, and, after almost two weeks of fighting, succeeded in driving AQAP and Tariq out.^[14] While Tariq was allowed to return to his family's home village of Al-Mannassih, he was publicly disowned by his older half-brothers Hizam and Khaled, as well as his nephew Sheikh Majid, on January 22, 2012.^[15] The next month, Tariq and his brother Ahmed were killed by Hizam during an armed confrontation. The fratricide was intended to weaken AQAP while also preventing the outbreak of a blood feud between different tribes, given that a member of Tariq's own family had killed him.

11) Author's personal interview with a member of the anti-AQAP wing of the Al-Dhahab family, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, November 11, 2020, as well as the author's interview with a member of the Al-Ghonaim tribe in Qifa who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, November 13, 2020.

12) Sami Noman, "Al-Dhahab Family Afflicted by Sheikhdome Conflict, and 'Al-Qaeda' Charge [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, September 1, 2013, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/49569>

13) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

14) Hakim Al-Masmari, "Al-Qaeda cell leader killed in family dispute," CNN, February 16, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/02/16/world/meast/yemen-al-qaeda-killing/index.html>

15) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

Yet, the issue was far from settled. Hizam was killed the same day he murdered Tariq by AQAP militants, led by his brother Qaed. Sheikh Majid was forced to leave Al-Mannassih for Sana'a.^[16] AQAP had grown so strong in Qayfah that they were able to overcome Tariq's death and use it as an opportunity to cement their control over the tribe. The previously disinherited younger Al-Dhahab brothers were now finally in charge, and divided tribal and AQAP responsibilities between themselves.

AQAP were now in a position, with some degree of official tribal backing from Qayfah, to move across the region and begin imposing their own rules. This led to a number of murders, including against people deemed to be 'sorcerers',^[17] and threats against civilians, including toward the author of this paper, who received death threats in April 2012 for opinions shared with students during his time as a lecturer at the College of Education and Science in Rada'.^[18]

AQAP's presence in Rada' and its surrounding area lasted until January 2013, when government forces launched an operation against the militants following the abduction of three foreigners by the group in December 2012 and ejected them from Rada'.^[19] AQAP members of the Al-Dhahab family continued to be targeted by US and government forces; Qaed and Nabil were killed in US drone strikes in 2013 and 2014, respectively.^[20]

By September 2014, when the Houthi movement effectively took control of the capital, Sana'a, and began expanding into the rest of Yemen, the ties between Qayfah and AQAP were used as a justification by Houthi forces to enter Al-Bayda'.^[21]

16) Nevertheless, he was still subject to an assassination attempt. In July 2012, an attack targeted the house of Majid Al-Dhahab, located in the Asir neighborhood of Sana'a, with a booby-trapped package. While Majid survived, his 14 year old son, Ali Majid Ali Al-Dhahab, who received the package was killed in the incident. "Sheikh Majid Al-Dhahab's Son Killed by a Booby-Trapped Parcel Explosion in their Home in Sana'a [AR]," Al-Moatamar.net, July 28, 2012, <https://www.almotamar.net/pda/100841.htm>

17) "Al-Qaeda Slaughters a Sorcerer in Rada' and Hangs her Head in Front of the House of Al-Awbali [AR]," Radfan Press, April 11, 2012, http://rdfanpress.com/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4695

18) "University Professor Ahmed Al-Arami Suspended and Threatened with Beheading and Having his Head Hung at the Entrance to Rada' City [AR]," Yemenat.net, April 30, 2013, <https://yemenat.net/2013/04/103103/>

19) Abdo Ayesh, "Rada': The epicenter of a new clash in Yemen [AR]," Al-Jazeera, January 30, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140122030658/http://aljazeera.net/news/pages/95e09529-bc44-47a8-bb19-14ce6ef0a97f>

20) Farea Al-Muslimi, "Al-Bayda's Tribal Dynamics Continue to Elude US Counterterrorism Policy," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 26, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7567>

21) Andrea Carboni & Matthias Sulz, "The Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen," ACLED, December 14, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/12/14/the-wartime-transformation-of-aqap-in-yemen/>

The advance was resisted by local tribes, as well as AQAP. The Houthis, however, were eventually able to convince Sheikh Majid,^[22] who had been residing in Sana'a, to join their side. Al-Mannassih fell to Houthi forces in late October 2014,^[23] who have held it since. AQAP then withdrew to the more remote areas of Qayfah, such as Yakla and Al-Mushayrif, on the border with Marib. The Houthis fought government and other anti-Houthi forces, including AQAP, there, and in other parts of Al-Bayda, until September 2021, when the Houthis defeated government forces, as well as AQAP militants, and took full control of the governorate.

22) Adel Al-Ahmadi, "Yemen's Rada': Al-Qaeda, the Houthis, and the Tribes [AR]," Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, November 14, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3pjQFGc>

23) Abdullah Ghorab, "Yemen: Houthi Militants Announce Advances in Bayda' Governorate [AR]," BBC Arabic, October 26, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/10/141025_yemen_huthis_advance

AQAP AND THE YEMENI TRIBAL SYSTEM

The relationship between AQAP and Qayfah marked an evolution in the militant group's association with Yemen's tribes. While AQAP had long moved between locations, its presence in Qayfah meant that it was explicitly associated with a particular location and tribe. The increased integration of AQAP was a result of its acknowledgment of the tribal importance of the Al-Dhahab family, and the elevation of members of the Al-Dhahab family within AQAP. Essentially, the militant group infiltrated Qayfah's social structure and adapted itself to it.

But AQAP and the 'tribe' are distinct in both identity and structure. AQAP is a religious and political entity, not necessarily tied to any place. Its members are united by a religious notion that sees a caliphate as the only political approach to governing^[24] and uses violence as a means of achieving this. Meanwhile, the tribe is an independent social entity, whose members are brought together by a shared ethnicity, or geographical ties, and follow a system of norms that regulates the relationship between individuals within the same tribe and with other tribes. In addition, AQAP, as part of the wider Al-Qaeda network, is largely autonomous, while the autonomy of the tribe is limited, as it remains part of a broader tribal alliance and is also subservient to the state.

The two also have different frameworks when it comes to violence. While a tribe's importance is often related to the number of its members capable of fighting, it is not an organized military force. Violence is not an inherent part of a tribe's identity, and the tribal system dictates that violence carried out by a tribe, or by an individual tribesman, must only be within the framework of the tribal rules. AQAP, on the other hand, considers that the only limits to violence are those set by their interpretation of Islamic laws.

There are also some similarities shared between the two, such as a tendency towards conservatism and tradition. Yet, the tribe is not a 'natural' ally of AQAP, and the tribal system is not inherently a fertile environment for AQAP to grow. The two do not share an ideology, and tribal relations with AQAP are determined primarily by tribal interests. Indeed, Yemeni tribes have often served as a barrier to the expansion of AQAP and other militant groups.^[25]

24) "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," BBC News, June 16, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11483095>

25) Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 11, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/01/11/our-common->

While valuing their independence, Yemen's tribes, including the Qayfah, have predominantly viewed the state as the ultimate authority^[26] (with the state serving as the successor to the Zaydi Imam, which played a similar role during the pre-1962 Imamate in North Yemen). The relationship between the tribes and the state has been established over centuries, and there is little appetite among tribal members to change it, or to accept the infiltration of an outside force, such as AQAP, seeking to radically alter that relationship. The fact that AQAP actively desires to bring down the Yemeni state^[27] means that aligning with AQAP would mean that a tribe was actively aligning itself against the state, and becoming an opponent of it – a position few tribes want to take. This is not to say that some tribes have not participated in attempts to overthrow the state authorities – some tribes, for example, aligned themselves with the Houthi movement in the run-up to their march toward Sana'a. Yet, the Houthi takeover did not bring about a total removal of the Yemeni political system, particularly as the Houthi movement was allied with ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his longstanding patronage networks and alliances. In contrast, support for AQAP would mean a total break with the Yemeni political system and its state institutions, and indicate support for a radically different way of running the country. AQAP's totalitarian system of governance would also be unlikely to tolerate the kind of independent power that tribes have enjoyed under the Yemeni political system.

In Yemen, each tribe has a specific territory, much in the same way as a country does, and this idea has been broadly accepted by recent Yemeni state authorities. The tribe sees itself as having a right to the resources of the area, but it also has responsibility for keeping the territory safe and secure, protecting it from invaders, militants, or individuals or groups who could cause strife.^[28] Cities and towns also fall under this system, but their status can vary. Some, such as Sana'a, are considered '*hijra*',^[29] or a safe and neutral area, where fighting between tribes is not allowed. Others, such as Dhamar, are under the authority of a particular tribe, while some, such as Rada', are divided between several tribes. Yet, in all of

[enemy-ambiguous-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-yemen-s-tribes-pub-75225](#)

26) Author's interview with Abdullah Al-Fallahi, a tribal sheikh from the Bani Fallah tribe in Dhamar, November 3, 2020

27) Peter Salisbury, "Misunderstanding Yemen," International Crisis Group, September 20, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/misunderstanding-yemen>

28) Shelagh Weir, "A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen," Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

29) Ahmed Al-Arabi, "Animal Carcasses as an Alternative to Violence: The Anthropology of Al-Hijjar Among Yemeni Tribes [AR]," Arabia Felix Center for Studies, March 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3JcggJ6>

these instances, the tribe still acknowledges the supremacy of the state, regarding it as ultimately responsible for the protection of the country and the safeguarding of Yemen's interests.

The tribal reaction to AQAP's attempted takeover of Rada' in January 2012 illustrates the role tribes perceive themselves to play in defending an area under their protection. After AQAP forces, led by Tariq Al-Dhahab, entered Rada', local tribes immediately set about protecting government institutions and maintaining security following the near-disappearance of government security forces.^[30] The tribes divided responsibilities in Rada' according to the tribal territorial division of the city. The Al-Arsh tribe took control of the southwestern part of Rada', while the Al-Sarhan, Al-Hatima and Al-Shawahira tribes of Qayfah deployed their armed men in the eastern part. Other tribes sent armed men, or mediators for negotiations, driven by their responsibility toward the city as an area of common interest for all the Rada' tribes.^[31]

There is a paradoxical element to the actions of the tribes in defending Rada' from AQAP, as prior to 2012 the tribes themselves had been involved in clashes with government security forces in the city. The author of this paper lived in Rada' in this period, during which time the town's center had become a lawless area that was neither under the control of the state, nor under the control of a tribe. Instead, it became an arena for settling blood feuds. Tribesmen also refused to comply with government efforts to prevent the open carrying of weapons in the city's streets, on the basis that to do so would be to leave themselves open to attack from rival tribesmen.

Despite that history, however, in the wake of AQAP's attack, the tribes joined with government forces to push the group out of Rada'. The tribes still viewed AQAP as an extremist group that was attempting to destroy the little that the state actually did provide.^[32] The measures they took against AQAP's presence in the city were also almost identical to the practices established by tribal custom for facing individuals or groups that incite *fitna*, or sedition.^[33] In tribal custom, such

30) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

31) Author's personal interview with Sheikh Abdullah Al-Falahi, from the Bani Falah tribe, Al-Hada'a, Dhamar governorate, November 3, 2020.

32) Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 11, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/01/11/our-common-enemy-ambiguous-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-yemen-s-tribes-pub-75225>

33) "Laws of Territories and Boundaries," Tribal Custom Council, and author's personal interview with Sheikh Abdullah Al-Falahi, from Bani Falah tribe, Al-Hada'a, Dhamar governorate, November 3, 2020,

individuals or groups should be ostracized, as they pose a threat to the peace and security of a tribe. The actions of AQAP in Rada' were enough for the militants to be considered to be inciting sedition, including a prison break on January 16, 2012, which saw the release of 70 people imprisoned for murder,^[34] and attacks on areas that were supposed to be under tribal protection.

34) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

TRIBAL CONTRADICTIONS

While the Rada' tribes did force AQAP out of the city, their aim was not a total victory over AQAP and the eradication of the group. Instead, the tribes aimed to resolve the groups' transgressions in a manner befitting tribal customs – avoiding an escalation in the conflict that might bring about more bloodshed and the potential for retribution.

This behavior, while having ultimately peaceful intentions, also exposes some of the contradictions created by a powerful tribal system operating within a state – particularly a weak one, such as Yemen. The contradictions, in which the Rada' tribes dealt with AQAP both as a dangerous group that needed to be stopped, but also as a quasi-tribal grouping that could be dealt with by using tribal customs, opened up a path for AQAP to exploit and gain legitimacy, which they then did.

A case in point here is the aftermath of the prison break, mentioned above. Tensions had escalated in Rada', with two tribesmen and an AQAP fighter killed in clashes between AQAP and tribal members.^[35] Yet, given that many of the AQAP fighters had some tribal affiliation (which was not necessarily negated by their membership in AQAP), the tribes were keen to avoid blood feuds developing,^[36] or open warfare with AQAP. Instead, the actions of the Rada' tribes were in line with the tribal custom of *sadd hirabah*, in which a tribe mobilizes a group of armed tribesmen to deter anyone from outside the tribe from violating tribal territory or areas under its protection.

Mediation was also carried out concurrently and in accordance with traditional tribal strategies. This was, on the one hand, complicated by the fact that the AQAP contingent in Rada' was made up of fighters from multiple tribes, regions and

35) Ibid.

36) The phenomenon of the blood feud manifests itself in a reciprocating manner; every murdered member of a tribe is a 'debt' owed by the killer's tribe, and every 'revenge' operation from the other party, the 'debtor,' is tantamount to 'payment' of that debt, with the words 'debt,' 'obligation' and 'justice' often used to express this process. The tribe sees the death of one of its members, in a context where the killer is not known or the murder was committed by a non-tribal member, or unknown party, as a waste, as retribution cannot be exacted. The phrase, 'He was killed without justice or debt,' meaning his life was wasted outside the reciprocating process of violence known as a blood feud. Equal loss is a key factor in the nature of this system and in the settling of blood feuds. To kill one member of a family entails killing a person in return from the other family. Reaching an equivalence point in the number of dead is the basis for ending the blood feud. See Saeed Al-Masri, "Revenge in Arab Society: A Reading of the Work of Ahmed Abu Zaid (AR.)," *Aranthropos*, <https://bit.ly/3FnCh5s>.

nationalities,^[37] but at the same time, this diversity meant that the potential for multiple tribal blood feuds was high. The presence of Tariq Al-Dhahab, and his important tribal background, was an opening for both sides, allowing the Rada' tribes to deal with the matter with established tribal strategies, as if it were a purely tribal matter.

Fundamentally, while the Rada' tribes generally support the state, and are opposed to AQAP, they do not classify the group as a terrorist organization – or rather, they have not adopted an explicit stance toward the militant group. The tribal stance toward AQAP is therefore not consistent but changes, depending on how a dispute or conflict relates to two fundamental pillars of the tribe: defense of its land; and protection of individuals associated with it. While one tribe may provide protection to some of its members affiliated with AQAP, another tribe may conversely provide protection to members affected by AQAP's actions. Tribesmen may fight alongside AQAP elements against government forces in defense of tribal lands, and also fight alongside government forces (and sometimes even in their absence) against AQAP fighters, also in defense of tribal lands.^[38]

These tribal loopholes were of further importance when mediation between AQAP (led by Tariq Al-Dhahab) and the Rada' tribes concluded. Under the Rada' Agreement, which resulted from the mediation, the tribes succeeded in expelling Tariq and the AQAP militants, obliging them to return to Al-Mannassih. The tribal leaders were not particularly concerned by what happened after that, believing that their duty – under tribal custom – of defending Rada' was fulfilled, and that dealing with AQAP from then on was a matter for the state. The tribal leaders also believed they had confined the threat of violence to Al-Mannassih, and that any potential future conflict would be an internal matter within the Al-Dhahab family.

Although Tariq was dealt with within the Al-Dhahab family, too, AQAP was still able to leverage the Rada' Agreement and use it to legitimize itself and expand its reach. Having such an agreement gave AQAP a claim to be a local body with tribal roots in the region, thereby giving it cover to be present in the area and move about it without interference from the local tribes. Aside from leading to the eventual amalgamation of AQAP and the Qayfah tribe, it allowed the militant group to gain more followers and attack opponents within Rada' and the surrounding area.^[39]

37) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

38) Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Middle East Center, February 8, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/01/11/our-common-enemy-ambiguous-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-yemen-s-tribes-pub-75225>

39) "Al-Qaeda Slaughters a Sorcerer in Rada' and Hangs her Head in Front of the House of Al-Awbah [AR]," Radfan Press, April 11, 2012, http://rdfanpress.com/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4695

It is also important to recognize that the contradictions of the tribal system that allowed AQAP to entrench itself in Qayfah would not have been so pronounced if the Yemeni state had been stronger. The fact that AQAP were able to leave Rada' days after forcefully storming the city, then set themselves up elsewhere, was only because the tribes had had to take it upon themselves to deal with AQAP and come to an agreement using the methods they knew best. If the state had been able to defend itself, then it would have taken the lead in the fighting, and the tribal role would not have been as necessary. The weakness of the state also meant that the tribes regarded the state as incompetent and unable to fulfill its role as the ultimate protector. The tribes were therefore less likely to fulfill their part of the tribal-state bargain and be subservient to the state. As a further result, they were more likely to tolerate the presence of AQAP.

DISINHERITED TRIBESMEN

While the intricacies of the Yemeni tribal system, its attitude to violence and *fitna*, and its relationship with the Yemeni state created openings that AQAP could exploit, the militant group would not have been as successful in integrating itself within the Qayfah if it were not for the particular circumstances of the tribe. AQAP played on divisions not just within the tribe, but within the very family that supplied the Qayfah sheikhs, the Al-Dhahab. AQAP were also willing to adapt to the partnership and goals that Tariq Al-Dhahab wanted, which allowed for AQAP to have a presence in Qayfah, from 2010 onwards. AQAP had sought to elevate Tariq's standing, knowing that he was their man. He represented a rare opportunity for the group; a man with tribal standing and a claim to be a tribal sheikh, but at the same time in need of help and a believer in AQAP ideology.

Tariq became known for solving disputes between tribesmen. A large part of this, however, was thanks to money that had been supplied to him by AQAP to pay blood money and settle tribal disputes^[40] in a tribe that was nationally infamous for them.^[41] Tariq's prestige increased as a result, and he was able to use this increased standing to gradually open the tribe's doors to an influx of AQAP members, weapons, and funds.^[42] Tariq became more powerful while also benefiting from his nephew, Sheikh Majid's, lack of charisma and his older brother Hizam's preference for peaceful resolutions.

Following the Rada' Agreement, Tariq and the AQAP's return to Al-Mannassih simply transferred the conflict from Rada' to Al-Mannassih. In February 2012, about a month after the withdrawal of Tariq and AQAP from Rada', Hizam expelled AQAP members from a mosque in Al-Mannassih that they were based in. The action provoked Tariq and led to an armed confrontation between the two factions, with Tariq and his brother Ahmed both being killed.^[43]

40) Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Middle East Center, February 8, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/01/11/our-common-enemy-ambiguous-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-yemen-s-tribes-pub-75225>

41) Sami Noman, "Al-Dhahab Family Afflicted by Sheikhdome Conflict, and 'Al-Qaeda' Charge [AR]," Al-Masdar online, September 1, 2013, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/49569>

42) Author's interview with a member of the anti-AQAP wing of the Al-Dhahab family, November 11, 2020, as well as the author's interview with a local source from the Al-Ghonaim tribe in Qifa, November 13, 2020. Both sources wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

43) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

This did not mark the end of AQAP in Qayfah, however. If anything, it allowed a new seed of discord to grow – one which AQAP were rapidly able to take advantage of. The five remaining brothers in the Al-Dhahab family's pro-AQAP camp – Abdulrauf, Abdulillah, Sultan, Nabil, and Qaed – immediately leaned on AQAP for support. The 'disinherited' Al-Dhahab brothers had at their disposal the weapons and men of an AQAP that had become integrated within the tribe, unlike previously, before Tariq's return to Qayfah in 2010. They were therefore able to quickly hit back and either kill their enemies within the family or force them into exile.

AQAP's exploitation of a sense of victimhood did not end with the Al-Dhahab family; it was also used to recruit or ally with tribe members who had become angry at the state's response to the actions of AQAP in Al-Bayda. Many tribesmen complained about shelling conducted by government forces during the government military campaign against AQAP that began in January 2013. This, coupled with frustration at the government for neglecting to provide proper services to the area, led to an increase in support for AQAP.^[44]

44) Author's correspondence with a tribal source in Rada' who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, January 2021.

EXPLOITING THE RELIGIOUS-TRIBAL DIVIDE

AQAP understood that in order to properly take advantage of its developing relationship with the Qayfah, it would need to compromise and avoid a maximalist approach to implementing its authority over tribal law and customs. AQAP did this by accepting the continuation of the traditional tribal legal system.

The religious learning that Tariq had received from AQAP's religious instruction helped gain him a certain degree of respect from his fellow tribesmen when he first returned to Qayfah in 2010.^[45] Yet, it was mostly his adeptness in solving tribal problems and resolving disputes through traditional tribal methods (which are not necessarily the same as those advocated under AQAP's interpretation of Islam) that were key to cementing his new status. AQAP understood that by using tribal traditions to appear to serve people's interests and solve their problems, tribesmen would be drawn to Tariq.

Although AQAP was immediately interested in establishing a Shariah court in Qayfah – following the group's practice in other parts of Yemen that had come under its control – it eventually became clear that this was not the wisest decision if AQAP wanted to gain the acceptance of the local tribesmen. Instead of presenting an AQAP mufti as the ultimate arbiter or authority, the tribal sheikh could take on this role, just as long as he was aligned with AQAP.

The apparent continuation of the tribal way of doing things under the tutelage of AQAP, which truly began with the death of Tariq Al-Dhahab and the departure of Sheikh Majid, allowed for plausible deniability for any of the Al-Dhahab family accused of being members of AQAP. The remaining pro-AQAP Al-Dhahab brothers, with Qayfah firmly under their control, divided AQAP and tribal roles between themselves. Tariq's brothers had learned the lesson from his adventure in declaring the 'Emirate of Rada' and its aftermath, which merely brought on the wrath of the local tribes.

Along with Tariq, the Al-Dhahab brother with the firmest AQAP credentials was Nabil. He had attempted to go and fight alongside Al-Qaeda in Iraq^[46] and

45) Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Carnegie Middle East Center, February 8, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/01/11/our-common-enemy-ambiguous-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-yemen-s-tribes-pub-75225>

46) Tik Root, "Al-Qaida Destroyed Our Family: How One Family Lost Four Sons to the Fight for the Terrorist Group," Slate, February 28, 2014, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/02/al-qaida-destroyed-the-al-dhahab-family-how-a-yemeni-family-lost-four-sons-to-the-fight.html>

had been imprisoned in Syria and Yemen. Yet, despite being the oldest of the remaining pro-AQAP Al-Dhahab brothers, they decided that his past disqualified him from any tribal position. Another brother, Qaed, gained the allegiance of tribal members after Tariq's death, but he was also passed over because of his well-known loyalty to AQAP. Instead, Abdulrauf was assigned tribal affairs, because his character was apparently closest to that of the traditional tribal chief. Meanwhile, Qaed dedicated himself to the AQAP agenda and fought in its ranks, ultimately having one of his arms amputated during fighting in Zinjibar.^[47]

Abdulrauf thus became Qayfah's tribal sheikh. He resolved issues according to tribal laws, drawing on the prevailing tribal customs and using tribal mechanisms, assisted by Abdulillah and Sultan, who were also more tribal in outlook. People resorted to them for arbitration, but in their capacity as tribal sheikhs, not as clerics. Their rulings were not necessarily based on Sharia, either. Abdulrauf justified this religiously by stating that decisions were based on the establishment of a consensus within the tribe,^[48] reassuring tribal members that their laws and traditions, such as mediation and conflict resolution, would be respected.

Abdulrauf was the tribal chief, but not the mufti. Out of all the pro-AQAP Al-Dhahab brothers, he was chosen to be the tribal sheikh as he was able to come across as such a leader should, in terms of his personality, presence and effectiveness. Ultimately, this was a tribal cover for the presence of AQAP within Qayfah, however. When push came to shove, such as when the government launched its military campaign against AQAP in Al-Bayda in January 2013, Abdulrauf, along with Abdulillah and Sultan, joined the fight alongside AQAP, and against the government.^[49]

The tribal cover Abdulrauf provided for AQAP also served another purpose during the tribal mediation that ended the fighting after the launch of the government's military campaign. That mediation succeeded in concluding an agreement between the local authority and the pro-AQAP Al-Dhahab brothers. The mediators, led by Sheikh Ahmed al-Qarada'i, the sheikh of the Murad tribe

47) Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

48) Author's personal correspondence with a tribal source from Rada', January 2021, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons. Also, see "Sheikh Abdul Raouf Al-Dhahab Denied Belonging to Any Terrorist Group and Refuted the Allegations of the Americans and the Gulf States [AR]," YouTube, January 29, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_ikyL6G5UQ

49) Majid Karot, "Tribal Mediation from Murad's Sheikhs Diffuses Fighting Between Yemeni Army and Al-Qaeda Militants in Al-Bayda [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, January 30, 2013, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/41063>

in neighboring Marib, were adamant that they would not engage in dialogue with those affiliated with AQAP. However, Abdulrauf, along with Abdulillah and Sultan, could provide the respectable, tribal face of the Al-Dhahabs – one that the government could do business with – unlike Nabil and Qaed, given their public affiliation with AQAP. The mediators said that Abdulrauf and his ‘tribal’ wing wanted to join the state and spare the region further fighting, emphasizing that this wing reportedly wanted to live like Yemeni sheikhs and reform their areas.^[50]

This recognition of the pro-AQAP Al-Dhahab brothers, even if it was the ones not officially affiliated with AQAP, achieved AQAP’s goal. Abdulrauf was acknowledged by the state as Qayfah’s tribal sheikh,^[51] and a political rally was held in Al-Mannassih itself, on February 22, 2013, to mark the first anniversary of Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi’s election as president of Yemen. Abdulillah appeared alongside Al-Dhahiri al-Shaddadi, the governor of Al-Bayda, and gave a speech that touched upon the tribe’s grievances, including the government shelling.^[52] AQAP now had recognition of the Al-Dhahab wing it supported as the heads of Qayfah, which made the organization feel more secure in its presence in the region.

AQAP had also already taken steps not to aggravate local tribes with its presence in Al-Bayda, despite an overlap in the boundaries between AQAP and the Qayfah. The militant group largely avoided activities outside Al-Dhahab territory in Qayfah, and made sure not to enter other tribal territories, so as to avoid provoking other tribes. AQAP set up training camps in mountainous areas such as Yakla, along the border with Marib, and stayed in remote areas in an effort to distance itself from the Qayfah tribal leadership. At the same time, laying low allowed AQAP to use the area as a safe haven to launch attacks in Sana’a, Hadramawt and Aden.^[53] While AQAP continued to launch attacks in cities, it refrained as much as possible from carrying out terrorist activities in tribal areas.^[54]

50) Fahad Al-Taweel, “Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR],” Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

51) “Sheikh Abdul Raouf Al-Dhahab Denied Belonging to Any Terrorist Group and Refuted the Allegations of the Americans and the Gulf States [AR],” YouTube, January 29, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_ikyL6G5UQ&has_verified=1&pbjreload=101 29/01/2017

52) Majid Karot, “Tribal Mediation From Murad’s Sheikhs Diffuses Fighting Between Yemeni Army and Al-Qaeda Militants in Al-Bayda [AR],” Al-Masdar Online, January 30, 2013, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/41063>

53) “Al-Qaeda in Rada’: The Secrets of its Presence and Power [AR],” Akhbar Alyom website, August 13, 2012, https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news_details.php?sid=57806

54) “Al-Qaeda in Rada’: Its Military Capabilities and Areas of Influence [AR],” Abaad Studies and Research Center, undated, <https://abaadstudies.org/print.php?id=59672>

CONCLUSION: OVERSTEPPING THE MARK

Despite the fertile ground that the Al-Dhahabs had provided for AQAP – and the tribal ‘recognition’, of sorts, that the militant group had received – the Qayfah-AQAP integration experiment would eventually end in failure. AQAP had always found it difficult to balance the considerations of the tribe and its own goals, and eventually overexposed itself.

Indeed, the problems AQAP had in showing deference to the tribal way of doing things were evident. From the day the group entered Rada’, the tribes had taken steps to avoid confrontation. Tribal sheikhs from the area were dispatched to Qayfah, as part of the tribal *al-dai’i* custom,^[55] to protest against the actions of one of Qayfah’s sons, Tariq. The tribes were signaling to Qayfah that dealing with Tariq should be their responsibility, and if they should fail, then the tribes would be allowed to deal with the problem in any manner they deemed fit. Tariq’s brother, Hizam, took it upon himself to ask Tariq to leave Rada’ on January 19, 2012, and told his brother that he risked death and becoming a disgrace to Qayfah if he did not go.^[56]

Tariq had therefore become a visible threat to the tribe. He appeared indifferent to its calculations and its fears of an outbreak of non-stop violence. In the following days, clashes took place between tribesmen and AQAP militants in which five people were killed.^[57] This led to Hizam, Khaled, and Majid al-Dhahab disowning Tariq, marking a public split between the two wings of the Al-Dhahab brothers.^[58] Tariq had consistently gone against tribal customs and laws, clearly prioritizing the goals of AQAP over those of the tribe. He had violated the *hijra* status of the center of Rada’, and had insisted on the implementation of AQAP’s interpretation

55) Author’s personal interview with Sheikh Abdulkarim Al-Maqdashi, who led the tribal mediation to expel AQAP from Al-Amriya Citadel, November 18, 2020. An *al-dai’i* is a verbal or written letter of protest. It is sent by the party that believes it has suffered an injustice or violation to the party that it believes has caused that injustice or violation. If that recipient party does not respond, tribal custom gives the party against whom the injustice was inflicted justification to take more stringent steps, depending on the case.

56) Fahad Al-Taweel, “Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR],” Mareb Press, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

57) Ibid.

58) Ibid.

of Shariah law over tribal law. His calls for the establishment of a Council of *Ahl al-Hal wal-Aqd*, a body made up of people of influence to appoint and terminate a leader's rule, also went against tribal norms.^[59]

Tribal law was what eventually dealt with Tariq and ended his life. While AQAP changed its tactics accordingly, becoming more adaptable to tribal customs, its explicit presence in Qayfah was inconsistent with its traditionally more clandestine way of operating. Taking on a tribal role naturally meant taking on a more public one, even if this was through the more tribal wing of the pro-AQAP Al-Dhahabs. Eventually, this more visible presence made the Al-Dhahab brothers easy targets for US drones. Nabil and Qaed were unable to vanish from tribal society, even though they had essentially abandoned their tribal roles. Both were killed in Al-Bayda (Nabil in Rada' and Qaed in Al-Mannassih). The noose also tightened around the brothers from the 'tribal' wing of the pro-AQAP brothers. Abdulrauf and Sultan were killed in a US raid in January 2017, leaving Abdullah as the last remaining member.^[60]

AQAP's biggest miscalculation in attempting to integrate into the Yemeni tribal system, however, was possibly one that it did not foresee: the Houthi movement's takeover of Yemen's state institutions in Sana'a, and the movement's subsequent spread to Al-Bayda. Indeed, AQAP's presence in the region was used as a pretext by the Houthis to expand into the governorate, as it looked for justifications for its continued expansion, despite the restrictions placed on it by the 2014 Peace and National Partnership Agreement. The agreement was supposed to prevent the Houthis from further military expansion, but the Houthis made sure to include an exemption to that restriction that obliged the Yemeni authorities to support Houthi forces against AQAP in Al-Bayda.^[61] The Houthis used AQAP as a way to legitimize their war and expansion, which they portrayed as a battle against *takfiris* and Islamic State.

AQAP had attempted to garner support in Qayfah on a sectarian basis, with the 'Sunni' AQAP on one end and the 'Shia' Houthi movement on the other. While it was successful in this to a certain extent, AQAP overestimated the Sunni nature

59) Author's personal interview with Sheikh Abdulkarim Al-Maqdashi. See also, Fahad Al-Taweel, "Qifa... Fear of the Unknown (1-2) [AR]," Mareb Press, Monday, September 2, 2013, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=59406

60) Bill Roggio, "US Military Says AQAP Leaders Killed in Yemen Raid," FDD's Long War Journal, February 3, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/us-military-says-aqap-leaders-killed-in-raid.php>

61) Adel Al-Ahmadi, "Yemen's Rada': Al-Qaeda, the Houthis and, Thirdly, the Tribes[AR]," Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, November 14, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3pjQFGc>

of Qayfah. The Sunni Shafi'i and Shia Zaydi sects actually overlap within the tribe, and, unlike neighboring tribes in Al-Bayda and Marib, the Qayfah did not engage in sectarian wars against the Zaidi Imamate. In fact, the Qayfah continued to pledge allegiance to Imamate royalists during the North Yemen Civil War. Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al-Dhahab, the father of the Al-Dhahab brothers, fought for the royalist forces against the republicans and their Egyptian allies, and did not lower the royalist flag until 1970.

This is not to say that the Qayfah welcomed the Houthi forces. Initially, they were fought against, with the Houthis regarded as invading tribes from Sa'ada. But the Qayfah tribesmen were largely fighting the Houthis based on their tribal principles, while for AQAP the fight was about religion.^[62] This made it easier for the Houthis to use a tactic that AQAP had itself used in entrenching itself in Qayfah, the championing of a disinherited wing of the Al-Dhahab brothers. Sheikh Majid, then based in the now-Houthi controlled Sana'a and still believing in his right to lead the Qayfah, had found a powerful enough group in the Houthis to facilitate his own return.

Indeed, Sheikh Majid agreed to join the Houthis in October 2014, and his tribal standing was enough to convince the majority of Qayfah's tribesmen to stop fighting and allow for his return. The terms agreed were that only Majid and his allies from the tribe would be allowed to enter the lands of Qayfah, but, in much the same way AQAP had once entered the area, the Houthis used Majid as tribal cover, and entered anyway.

AQAP has since retreated to remote areas, its influence among the tribes diminished. Its experiment in integrating with the Yemeni tribal system had some successes, but ultimately had the same results the group has had in other parts of Yemen: failure.

62) To illustrate this, a story circulating in Qayfah at the time detailed a quarrel that took place between an AQAP member and a tribesman. The AQAP member expressed his annoyance about some tribesmen not praying, even though they were fighting on the same front as AQAP against the Houthis. "What is common between us are weapons, not prayer and fasting," the tribesman responded, indicating that the agreement with AQAP was about fighting the Houthis, and not religious matters.

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