"It is the tribal view that the 'enemy of my enemy is my friend'—more so than common religious and ideological affinities or hostility toward the West—that motivates certain Yemeni tribes to cooperate with Al Qaeda. . . . Al Qaeda is merely the most recent in a string of 'friends' who have supported these tribes against the government."

Breaking the Yemen–Al Qaeda Connection

MARK N. KATZ

Yemen has earned the dubious distinction of becoming one of the most important theaters in the war on terrorism. It was in the Yemeni port of Aden where Osama bin Laden's allies mounted the attack that heavily damaged the USS *Cole* and killed 17 of its sailors in October 2000. Two years later, in October 2002, Al Qaeda elements carried out a similar attack against a French oil tanker, killing one crew member, as it was approaching another Yemeni port. One month after that attack, an American missile launched from an unmanned drone aircraft destroyed a car carrying Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi—the man believed to be one of the architects of the *Cole* attack—and five other Al Qaeda members (including a United States citizen). But just as the attacks on the American and French vessels have not ended the Western presence in Yemen, the killing of six Al Qaeda agents does not spell the end of that group's presence in the country either.

There are, of course, Yemeni Islamists who support Al Qaeda, including some "Yemeni Afghans"—Yemeni volunteers who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation of that country in the 1980s and later returned home. But the strong Al Qaeda presence in Yemen can also be traced to Yemeni tribes that have been harboring it in areas largely outside the control of the Yemeni government. The United States is obviously concerned about the support Yemeni tribes have given to Al Qaeda and wants to end their cooperation with bin Laden's organization as soon as possible. Each group that collaborates with Al Qaeda, however, has its own particular motivations for doing so. Determining how the Yemeni tribal–Al Qaeda connection might be brought to an end first requires an understanding of why it exists.

THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATION

It is the tribal view that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend"—more so than common religious and ideological affinities or hostility toward the West—that motivates certain Yemeni tribes to cooperate with Al Qaeda. For the tribes in the Marib area, the enemy in question since the mid-1970s has been the government in Sanaa. Further, Al Qaeda is merely the most recent in a string of "friends" who have supported these tribes against the government.

Two large tribal confederations exist in the former North Yemen: Hashid and Bakil.[1] Each of these confederations consists of many individual tribes. Tribal conflict often occurs not just between the two confederations but also within them. Individual tribes sometimes even switch their affiliation from one confederation to the other. While larger than the Hashid, the Bakil confederation is not centrally organized; its chief shaykhs can influence (often through patronage) the individual Bakil tribes, but do not control them. The Hashid confederation is more centrally organized under one powerful paramount shaykh, Abdallah al-Ahmar, who has served in this position for over 40 years. His influence is based on an elaborate patronage system that he has built and maintained. Whether his successors will be able to exercise the same degree of influence over the Hashid confederation is unclear.[2]

MARK N. KATZ *is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.*

[1]A former province of the Ottoman Empire, North Yemen was an absolute monarchy from the end of World War I until 1962, when the Yemen Arab Republic was proclaimed. The British ruled South Yemen from the mid-nineteenth century until their departure in 1967, when a Marxist regime came to power in what would become the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen. Amid the collapse of communism, North and South Yemen merged into the Republic of Yemen in 1990.

[2]For a thorough discussion of the North Yemeni tribes, their outlook, and their role in Yemeni politics, see Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). For a recent history of Yemen, see Dresch's *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

During the North Yemeni revolution and civil war (which took place between 1962 and 1970), important elements of both the Hashid and the Bakil tribal confederations fought with the Egyptian-backed republican government against the Saudi-backed Yemeni royalists. After the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from North Yemen in late 1967, the republican government appeared especially vulnerable to the royalists in early 1968. Leading shaykhs from Hashid and Bakil played a key role in defending the republic and gained a major political role in it during the presidency of Qadi Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani, who governed the country from 1967 to 1974.

Al-Iryani was overthrown in a coup by an army leader, Ibrahim al-Hamdi, in 1974. Shortly thereafter, al-Hamdi ousted some of the leading Bakil shaykhs from their positions of power and influence within the Yemeni army and government. Neither al-Hamdi (assassinated in 1977) nor his immediate successor, Ahmad al-Ghashmi (a Hashidi who was himself assassinated in 1978), lasted long, but Ali Abdallah Salih—also a Hashidi—has ruled since 1978 in relatively close cooperation with the Hashid leader, Abdallah al-Ahmar.

From the point in the mid-1970s when the Bakil lost positions of authority, many of their shaykhs have been at odds with, and have sought alliances against, Hashid-backed governments in Sanaa. Indeed, a general sense has arisen among the Bakil that government institutions have come under the domination of the Hashid, and that the Bakil are discriminated against.

Marib has been the scene of much of the Bakil opposition activity not only because it is a Bakil stronghold, but also because of its mountainous terrain and distance from Sanaa, the porousness of the nearby border with Saudi Arabia (and, until 1990, with South Yemen), and its tradition of lawlessness—all of which have made it a difficult region for Sanaa to control. These factors have also made it relatively easy for the tribes living in the area to receive assistance from several external allies.

Bakil tribal leaders around Marib who are at odds with Sanaa have reportedly received military or financial assistance since the 1970s from several parties, including

- the Marxist South Yemeni–backed National Democratic Front (NDF) during the NDF insurgency in the southern regions of North Yemen between 1979 and 1982;
- Iraq during much of the 1980s, despite relatively good relations between Sanaa and Baghdad;
- former Marxists from South Yemen who were unhappy with their steadily weakening position after Yemeni unity in 1990 and who tried (but failed) to reestablish the south's independence in 1994;
- Saudi Arabia after the sharp deterioration in Saudi–Yemeni relations that occurred because of the actions Sanaa took in support of Saddam Hussein during the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War;
- Al Qaeda, especially after the Saudi–Yemeni border agreement and rapprochement of 2000.

This list demonstrates that the tribes around Marib are not ideologically motivated: they are willing to accept support from literally anyone—Marxist, Baathist, royalist, or Islamist—who is willing and able to provide it. The tribes have sought this assistance to strengthen themselves against the government in Sanaa. Their allies, in turn, have provided the aid because they wanted to pressure, weaken, or even overthrow the Sanaa government as well as advance their broader international agenda.

The aims of the Bakil tribes and their various "friends," however, have not been identical. Those providing aid to the tribes have not wanted to see the Bakil leaders replace the Hashid-backed regime in Sanaa. Nor have the Bakil leaders receiving this aid wished to see the Sanaa regime replaced, or controlled, by any of their supporters.

As much as they dislike the regime in Sanaa, the Bakil leaders prefer it to one replaced or controlled by their "friends," who, once in power, might prove more capable of destroying the independence the Bakil tribes now have. The Bakil have seen how the Saudi, Iraqi, and former South Yemeni governments defeated or marginalized the tribes in their countries. Thus, the Bakil tribal leaders value the relative weakness of the current regime in Sanaa, since this allows them more freedom (including the freedom to obtain support from others) than they would have under any other regime, except one they themselves dominated. They are not naïve enough to think that they would fare any better if Yemen ever fell under the rule of Al Qaeda.

Why then would the Bakil leadership collaborate with parties who, once in power, might prove far more capable of eliminating it than the present government in Sanaa? The tribes around Marib have learned that obtaining outside support from Sanaa's opponents motivates Sanaa—and perhaps others—to provide resources to them as well. Without such outside support, the central government has much less incentive to take the tribes seriously. The power

of the tribes, as their leaders well know, derives from their ability to cause trouble (or at least to threaten it).[3]

HALTING YEMENI TRIBAL COOPERATION WITH AL QAEDA

What would it take to end collaboration between the Yemeni tribes and Al Qaeda? The defeat of Al Qaeda would obviously render it unable to support the Yemeni tribes. But whether or how the defeat of Al Qaeda might occur is beyond the scope of this essay. The more central issue is determining what might make the Yemeni tribes unwilling or unable to cooperate with Al Qaeda while the latter is both active and capable of supporting them.

Military action against those tribes collaborating with Al Qaeda could leave them unable to continue cooperation. This could be undertaken by Yemeni armed forces or Western forces acting in conjunction with them. But both types of military action would face significant obstacles.

Because its personnel are drawn heavily from the tribes, the Yemeni armed forces would be ineffective against them. Bakil and Hashid soldiers are clearly reluctant to fire on their fellow tribesmen. A Hashid soldier, and all his relatives, would undoubtedly be concerned that firing on a Bakil tribe might lead to an extended confrontation between it and his own tribe. Knowing this, Hashid officers—indeed, the largely tribal Yemeni government—are likely to see negotiation as preferable to a confrontation that could lead to extended tribal warfare. Even when the government orders military action against recalcitrant tribes, individual tribesmen within the armed forces sometimes tip off the intended targets either out of sympathy or for their own personal protection. Indeed, a tip may have led to the escape of three Al Qaeda suspects and the ambush and killing of 18 Yemeni soldiers sent to arrest them in December 2001 near Marib.

Foreign forces would not face the same constraints Yemeni troops confront with the tribes. In addition, foreign forces—particularly Americans—could undoubtedly operate more effectively than the poorly armed and trained Yemeni army. There are, however, important obstacles to successful external military intervention. As earlier experiences with the British, Egyptian, and Soviet militaries showed, any foreign military presence in Yemen is likely to be profoundly unpopular.

Although the Yemeni government approved the November 2002 American missile attack that killed the six Al Qaeda operatives, initial reports indicated that the Yemeni public viewed the action negatively. "Yemeni religious leaders and tribesmen vowed revenge," according to the November 6 *Daily Telegraph*. Aware of this public disapproval, the Yemeni government does not want American use of force on its territory—especially when it is so highly publicized—to become a regular occurrence, since it could quickly undermine the Yemeni government's domestic legitimacy. Resentment over an American military presence might also arise within the Yemeni army, resulting in elements within it warning intended targets about planned joint action against them. This fear of undermining the Yemeni government may explain why the United States has based forces in nearby Djibouti (which has hosted French troops) rather than in Yemen itself.

Since the military approach involves serious risks, a nonmilitary plan designed to end the tribes' willingness to cooperate with Al Qaeda should also be explored. This approach is favored by the tribes because they want Washington to compete for their loyalty by providing them with more resources than Al Qaeda does.

Yet the United States might be highly reluctant to pursue this course for several reasons. First, it smacks of "rewarding terrorism." If others see that cooperating with Al Qaeda leads to aid from Washington, they may attempt similar tactics—something Washington definitely does not want to encourage. Second, there is no guarantee that tribal leaders receiving support from the United States would actually stop colluding with Al Qaeda. Indeed, they may calculate that if their connection to Al Qaeda resulted in the receipt of support from America initially, then continued cooperation will bring them continued American aid. Third, even if tribal leaders receiving American support cease (or do not initiate) cooperation with Al Qaeda, the decentralized nature of the tribal confederations (especially the Bakil) means that a deal with some tribal leaders does not bind others. They will want to receive direct American assistance themselves, and may initiate (or threaten to initiate) cooperation with Al Qaeda until they do. Fourth, the Yemeni government would be wary of an effort by the United States or any other external party

[3] I do not wish to imply that only Bakil tribes have received assistance from Sanaa's opponents or are capable of doing so. Many Hashid tribesmen reportedly resent President Salih and Shaykh Abdallah al-Ahmar, believing that the largesse these two receive either from the state or from the Saudis goes mainly to benefit their own immediate families and tribes, and not the Hashid confederation as a whole. These "outsider" Hashid, then, might also be motivated to cooperate with Sanaa's opponents, such as Al Qaeda, in the hope that they will receive increased attention and benefits from President Salih and Shaykh Abdallah.

to subsidize the tribes since this would result in the tribes becoming even more independent from Sanaa than they are now.

Providing aid to the tribes as an incentive to end cooperation with Al Qaeda, however, is at best a short-term solution. Even if American or other external support did have the desired effect, it could only be expected to last while this support continued. If it ended—or did not match the (perhaps escalating) level demanded by the tribes—their unwillingness to help Al Qaeda might also end.

A long-term approach to ending tribal cooperation with Al Qaeda would focus on eliminating the tribes' underlying grievances against the Yemeni government. If the Bakil tribal leaders who lost senior government positions in the 1970s could regain those posts, or similar ones, and if the Bakil in general were given greater representation in state institutions, they would presumably gain a stake in the regime and would not want to see it undermined. Development of Yemen's economy would allow the government sufficient resources to eliminate tribal members' dependence on—and obligations to—the tribal shaykhs. A prosperous economy would also help Yemen develop a more effective educational system that could foster a sense of national rather than tribal identity. Finally, the growth of a more pluralistic political system would see common interests, not tribal affiliation, become the basis for political organization.

Change in this direction would undermine the willingness and the ability of the tribes to cooperate with Al Qaeda. But even if the United States actively encourages these changes, they are not going to occur any time soon, if at all. Given Yemen's many problems, it is conceivable that Al Qaeda will have been long defeated before the political dynamics that induce Yemeni tribes to cooperate with Sanaa's opponents are eliminated. Thus, while Washington should undoubtedly encourage the positive long-term change that would eliminate the tribes' willingness and ability to collaborate with outside parties against their country's government, a more immediate policy is clearly needed to minimize the links between the tribes and Al Qaeda.

What kind of policy would accomplish this goal? Given the difficulty in using military means to render the tribes unable to cooperate with Al Qaeda, it would have to be one that focused on making them unwilling to do so—but that also provided strong disincentives for double-dealing.

The United States clearly does not want to reward terrorism by providing aid to those who are actively colluding with Al Qaeda, and who may well continue to do so. It would be another matter altogether, however, for the United States (or its partners) to aid those tribal leaders who undertake actions that make it impossible for them to continue (or begin) cooperating with Al Qaeda—such as through surrendering Al Qaeda personnel and property to United States or Yemeni government authorities.

Al Qaeda, of course, could be expected to retaliate for such "betrayal." Indeed, fear of this might deter some tribal leaders from ending their collaboration with Al Qaeda. An important ingredient in the recipe for inducing tribal leaders to take this step, then, would be the provision of a significant degree of protection against Al Qaeda. If Al Qaeda did succeed in striking at any tribal leader for ending his collaboration with it or cooperating with the United States, Washington and its partners—perhaps in conjunction with the tribes themselves—would need to swiftly counterretaliate. Otherwise, the effort to wean the tribes away from Al Qaeda is unlikely to succeed.

The Yemeni tribal structure itself allows the United States and its partners an opportunity to punish those tribal leaders who continue to support Al Qaeda. The Yemeni tribal confederations are not cohesive, unified organizations. Tribal leaders exercise varying degrees of autonomy. The tribes around Marib may see the government in Sanaa as their principal opponent, but rivalries also exist among these tribes. One response to a shaykh who continues to cooperate with Al Qaeda, then, could be to provide support to his rivals. These rivals might even be recruited (and rewarded) for capturing those tribal leaders who collaborate with Al Qaeda.

These efforts should not be expected to immediately and completely end Yemeni tribal cooperation with Al Qaeda. Over time, however, they could dramatically reduce it—perhaps even to the point where Al Qaeda no longer saw the tribes as useful partners. To put the process in motion will require the provision of resources to tribal leaders willing to work with Washington on a continuing basis, deft diplomacy with the Yemeni government in an area it considers highly sensitive, and a thorough and detailed knowledge of Yemeni tribal politics by those in the United States responsible for managing this program. Conversely, relying solely on military means to end the Yemeni tribal connection with Al Qaeda could end up seriously backfiring. ■