

Thoughts on Hostage Taking in Yemen

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By

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Introduction

Hostage taking, or kidnapping as it is often called, is a capital crime in many western countries. In America, for example, a conviction for kidnapping can hold the death penalty in some states. Hostage taking deprives a person of his or her liberty and places their life at potentially serious risk. Having spoken with a number of kidnap victims, I can assure you that the experience can be terrifying for those thus taken and held. Both physical and psychological trauma can be devastating.

Essentially, kidnapping is defined as unlawfully taking a person or persons against their will and holding them with an eye toward gain. Threats against the lives of hostages are common. In an abduction or detainment, persons are unlawfully held against their will, but no demands are made for their release. Gain may not be the objective of a detainment or abduction. To do harm to the victims might be.

Hostage taking in Yemen has a different slant. Yemen, as you may already know, has many tribes. These tribes have used kidnapping as a kind of conflict resolution for centuries. Kidnapping as a means of conflict resolution may strike some Westerners as perverse. But, because Yemen does not share in the Western cultural experience, it may be useful to examine the Yemini form of hostage taking, and its roots, from a less emotionally charged perspective.

Yemeni Tribal groupings are tight-knit. Local sheiks generally rule by right of hereditary – meaning fathers pass on the legacy of leadership to sons. Sheiks are not kings, though. They most often rule by the consent of the tribe by dispensing tribal justice fairly, acquiring services from government and by assisting in the resolution of inter-as well as intra-tribal disputes.

Yemeni Tribal society is completely male dominated and therefore may be considered highly chauvinistic. Armed conflicts between tribes, and between tribes and the central government, are not uncommon. Nearly every Yemini male over the age of ten years carries some form of weapon, from the traditional jumbiya (curved dagger) to Russian-made AK-47 assault rifles. The carrying of weapons is in large measure central to Yemini male identity. This is especially true among Yemen's tribal groups.

Blood feuds within and between tribes are also not uncommon. Some rationales for blood feuds between tribes are literally hundreds of years old. Today, such conflicts would seem to have little rational basis, yet they are very real nonetheless.

Yemen is a much more complex place than once it was. The primacy of traditional tribal groups is today being threatened by a central government, which is attempting to build a parliamentary democracy in the wake of the 1994 civil war and subsequent reunification. The central government is moving to consolidate its power in the various provinces of Yemen. This centralization of authority clearly runs in opposition to the authority of tribal sheiks, who no doubt feel threatened, and are seemingly unwilling to surrender their traditional leadership roles.

The Yemini Form of Kidnapping

John Lancaster in the Washington Post discusses the last monarch of Yemen, Imam Ahmad, who died in 1962, and "...is said to have kept tribal leaders in line by making permanent "guests" of their sons, treating them to first-class educations even as he held their lives in his palm." In so doing, the Imam maintained a kind of peace – keeping tribal sheiks from engaging in full-scale battle for regional supremacy.

Modern day Western-style conflict resolution forms are dominated by mediation and arbitration. Essentially, Westerners attempt to settle disputes through the rational discussion of differences. Compromise is often the result. In this context, compromise is the ultimate goal, and is generally viewed as a positive development by both sides.

In past centuries, and within the Yemeni cultural context, compromise might well have been viewed as a sign of weakness – something no traditional sheik could tolerate. But, a compromise that is the result of a hostage taking, where a family or tribal member's life is spared, might be perceived as honorable. This analysis seeks to make no value judgments, but merely suggests that within the Yemeni tribal context, kidnapping has found a niche that apparently still finds expression today.

Most reliable information sources suggest that tribal sheiks generally "authorize" the taking of a hostage. Once a kidnapping is thus sanctioned, Westerners are most often the preferred kidnap victims because tribal leaders perhaps rightly sense that foreigners of North American or European extraction provide them greater leverage with the central government. Male kidnap victims are preferred over females – perhaps because Islam enjoins believers to protect women.

Not all hostage takings are sanctioned by tribal sheiks, though. Credible reports have been received that some recent kidnappings have been conducted with mere criminality in mind. Such kidnappings provide for a less predictable result than traditional forms, and are therefore more potentially dangerous to victims.

Generally though, and within a tribal context, the reasons for ransoming hostages are manifold. Demands for money, roads, schools, commissions in the national army for tribal or family members, government jobs, better electrical power, water wells and much more have been on the ransom lists of tribal kidnappers. As you can see, ransom demands that benefit the tribe predominate. The central government, to date,

has seemingly met, or promised to meet, many demands. Reportedly, unmet demands have in some cases led to more kidnappings.

The general agreed to rule of thumb for most governments worldwide is to never make "substantive concessions" to kidnappers. To do so, merely encourages more of the same. The central government of Yemen loosely rules one of the poorest countries on the face of the globe. The competition for scarce government-provided resources and services among tribal groups is fierce. Tribes who feel rightly or wrongly that they are not getting their fair share of these resources and services resort to kidnapping because it so often works.

Kidnappings are not always tied to the central government, though. Oil companies in Yemen have suffered many hostage takings. Very often demands are tied to money or jobs. Tribal groups who straddle oil rich areas of Yemen may sometimes feel that they are not receiving adequate compensation for the potential wealth located beneath lands that have been traditionally theirs for untold generations. Also, the competition for good-paying jobs with the oil companies is often contested when oil is discovered and extracted from the border areas between different tribes.

Tribes by their very nature are insular and exclusive. It is the tribal sheik's job to lookout for the best interests of his group. Many tribal sheiks seemingly have little genuine interest in furthering the goals of the State. Tribal loyalties often outweigh any sense of emotional commitment to the central government and the nation. For many tribes, the central government is merely a cow to be milked in the furtherance of tribal objectives.

There has been much made of the hospitality that has been shown to the overwhelming majority of tribal kidnap victims in Yemen. It is true. In many cases, those Westerners who are taken hostage and held for ransom are well treated by Yemeni standards and subsequently released unharmed. There have even been reports of former hostages returning to villages where they were held captive for vacation visits. Hostages have sometimes been given the freedom of villages; had sheep slaughtered and prepared in their honor; been permitted to shoot weapons; been given gifts upon their release from captivity and more.

Essentially, some tribal kidnap victims have been treated like honored guests, even while their lives are held at risk. In some cases hostages have come to sympathize, and in some cases actively support, the goals and aspirations of their captors.

It is clear that some of the tribes who engage in kidnapping intend no real harm to their victims, but merely wish to use them as leverage to gain what they might view as "appropriate compensation." In other words, these tribes hope to compel a third party, normally the government or an oil company, to address their "just demands."

In a sense, these kidnappers feel that they occupy the moral high ground in their continuing battle with what they might sense is a government which is antithetical to their traditional way of life, and oil companies that may be perceived as exploitive.

There are a number of tribal areas in Yemen, which have been identified as potentially hazardous zones for the travel of Westerners. Some of these areas are, for

all intents and purposes, off limits for cautious travelers. Those Westerners, who do travel within these zones, if prudent, acquire armed government or tribal escort. Hostage taking tribes no doubt have become frustrated with these precautions and have changed their tactics.

Formerly, most hostage takings occurred in or near tribal areas. No more. Today, tribal groups interested in acquiring kidnap victims come to Sana'a, the national capital, where there is a virtual smorgasbord of potential Westerners up-for-grabs. The diplomatic, United Nations, non-government affiliated humanitarian organizations and international business communities provide much to choose from.

Since almost any Westerner will do, tribal hostage takers need not select a particular victim in advance. Instead, the kidnappers will simply come into town and begin patrolling the streets of Sana'a looking for a likely candidate who appears vulnerable. A male of North American or European appearance, walking alone, even in broad daylight, is a perfect target.

It only takes moments. The hostage takers debark their vehicle nearby, surround their victim with guns, and then insist that the individual enter their vehicle with alacrity. Once inside, the vehicle returns to the tribal area, where the central government likely holds little sway. Demands shortly follow.

Again, and seemingly more often than not, the government will accede to some or all of the kidnappers' demands, or promise that they will. The victim is normally released unharmed some days or weeks later. This is the norm, but it doesn't always workout so well for the victim, or the hostage takers. Intended or not, deaths have sometimes been the result of either poorly planned or badly executed tribal kidnapping attempts.

For example, and in 2000, a man of European extraction was kidnapped off the streets of Sana'a. All seemed to go well for the hostage takers until they ran unexpectedly into a police checkpoint on their way out of town. A shoot-out ensued between the tribal members and police. The victim died of bullet wounds in melee.

This paper has focused on the potential for the kidnap of the members of the International Community living in or visiting Yemen, but as mentioned previously, hostage taking has a long history in the country, and among Yemenis. Most recently, and in this year, a tribal group kidnapped the son of the Mayor of Sana'a. Allegedly, the group was seeking the release of other tribal members who were held in a Sana'a jail for the crime of hostage taking. The mayor's son was ultimately released unharmed.

Long-time observers of the Yemeni landscape have suggested that kidnappings, although prevalent, are nearly completely unpredictable. To date, statistical analysis has not proven to be useful as a means of predicting when kidnapping incidents are likely to occur. Literally any dispute between tribes and the central government can spark a kidnapping.

An unusual characteristic of Yemeni hostage negotiation is the common use of intermediaries. Usually, respected tribal sheiks will serve in this role to resolve the

hostage taking peacefully – attempting to bridge the gap between tribal kidnappers and the central government.

There is one other potential hostage-taking scenario that is possible in Yemen, but it does not fit either the tribal or criminal model. In 1998 radical Islamists took 16 Western tourists hostage. Four of the tourists died in a resulting shoot-out between government troops and the kidnappers. Obviously, radical Islamic groups may not conform to basic Yemeni cultural forms of behavior concerning acts of kidnapping. In this incident, the victims were not treated as honored guests.

The October 2000 bombings of the USS Cole and British Embassy suggest that the more radical Islamist elements within Yemen are both active and dedicated. The incident with the USS Cole was a suicide bombing, which led to the deaths of 17 US Sailors. Radical Islamists might return to kidnapping as another means of violent expression in the not too distant future.

Recommendations

To avoid becoming a victim:

1. If at all possible, never walk alone. Pairs and groups are less vulnerable.
2. Avoid walking on the streets of Sana'a.
3. Whether for business or pleasure, check with the UN Security Office and obtain a travel clearance prior to planning a trip. In the event of an incident, your UN insurance will not cover you without a clearance.
4. Change travel routes frequently. Avoid establishing patterns.
5. Keep a low profile in public places.
6. When traveling, avoid stopping for picture taking and similar pursuits. By so doing, you make yourself vulnerable to opportunist kidnapping.
7. Trust your intuition. If you sense a threat, you could be right. Get off the street or proceed to the nearest Safe Haven -- a police station or UN facility, for example.
8. Ensure that your vehicle is well maintained. Breakdowns can present potential kidnappers an unexpected opportunity.
9. If traveling in potentially hazardous areas, armed security escort is strongly recommended.
10. Travel in vehicles with doors locked, seatbelts on, and windows closed.
11. Two or more cars traveling in close convoy are less vulnerable.
12. Those who are of Western appearance are under special threat. Act accordingly. Be safe!

If taken hostage:

1. Remain calm. Do nothing to aggravate your kidnappers. Follow their instructions.
2. If you speak Arabic, it might be prudent to initially play dumb. You may learn more about the nature of the threat to your person.
3. An escape attempt can be very dangerous. Consider this carefully before taking any action.
4. Survival is your primary goal as a hostage. Keep this always in mind.

5. Avoid aggressive behavior toward your captors.
6. Eat and drink when you can, regardless of whether or not you are hungry or thirsty.
7. Never beg, plead or cry.
8. Exercise if possible.
9. Attempt to be patient and to maintain a positive mental attitude.
10. Attempt to demonstrate your humanity to your captors. Show them pictures of your family – make a connection, if possible. A kidnapper who recognizes your humanity is less likely to do you harm.
11. If you have a camera, you may be permitted to keep it, if so, never take pictures of local women.
12. If you are carrying large amounts of cash, especially US Dollars, hide the money if you can. Never show it. If you do, you can add tension to an already tense situation.
13. Do not encourage discussions about religion, but if you can, demonstrate respect and admiration for Islamic virtues -- such as generosity, kindness, and hospitality.
14. Without appearing to do so, try and remember everything you can about your captors, their vehicles and the location/s where you are held.
15. If there is a rescue attempt by force, drop to the floor and keep your hands over your head. Once the situation stabilizes, identify yourself.

If a UN staff member is taken hostage, winning his or her freedom will become our first priority mission.

Conclusion

The President of Yemen issued a proclamation in August of 1998 making kidnapping a capital crime. The following year a Special Court was empowered to deal with kidnapping offenses. The Republic of Yemen has taken kidnapping seriously. Obviously though, the proclamation and Special Court have not curtailed the phenomenon.

Within the Yemeni tribal context, the taking of a hostage or hostages serves to focus the attentions of whomever the target audience might be – normally compelling the government or an oil company to deal with demands for ransom. If the method were not generally successful, kidnapping certainly would have fallen out of use long ago.

The general pattern of preference for Westerners continues to this day. Recent kidnappings in 2001 include four German males; a Swedish male; a Chinese male (an aberration); an Italian female; as well as an aborted attempt on a French male. During this last instance, kidnappers tried unsuccessfully to force the Frenchman into the trunk of their car. In September 2001, two more attempts were made. In these cases the kidnappers tried to drive their intended victims' vehicle off the road. As mentioned previously, males are preferred kidnap victims, but women are not necessarily immune.

The threat of hostage taking in Yemen is very real. Well over 100 kidnappings have been recorded in the last decade. Kidnapping may indeed be an age-old form of conflict resolution in the Yemeni cultural context, but if things go wrong, as sometimes happens, UN staff do not wish to be caught in the crossfire. **END**

About the Author

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