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## Yemen

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FOR THE BETTER PART of 20 years, Yemen's political landscape was shaped substantially by the relationship between its largest Islamist party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), and the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The 2011 uprising and ensuing transitional process and descent into war have altered the position of Islah by increasing the number of major players and reducing the significance of party politics at the center in relation to armed conflicts and populist pressure from the periphery.

The changing role of Yemen's Islah party offers important lessons not only for those interested in mapping Yemen's domestic politics but also for the study of Islamism more broadly. It speaks to the pressures that mainstream Islamist parties face in the revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) climate of 2011 and its aftermath, balancing emerging opportunities for political power with extra-institutional challenges to party relevance on the ground. In Yemen, the most pressing issues have included the party's ambiguous position on wider populist mobilization, the murky relationship between the party's Salafi right flank and extremist organizations like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State, and the impact of a fraught regional climate in which Muslim Brotherhood-allied parties face uncertainty and out-right suppression.

Before the 2011 uprising and in the challenging years since, Islah has remained adaptive and dynamic, pursuing a strategy of self-preservation but not immune to miscalculation. In particular, this adaptability has come at some cost for centrist Muslim Brotherhood members within the party. While Islah has an ideological hard core of party leaders with clear Muslim Brotherhood ties, these figures have never been unconstrained in their ability to pursue their goals. Instead, they have needed to be ever mindful of a Salafi flank within the party that has regularly flirted with other centers of power, as well as a tribal faction with access to regime largesse. To add to this challenge, the party leadership has been over-reliant on external patrons and international organizations to maintain its political position in the context of a destructive, ongoing war.

To the extent that its leadership grounds its politics in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's school of thought, it is fair to consider Islah a Brotherhood affiliate. Yet there are limits to this interpretation. On the one hand, Yemen's greater political openness in the 1990s and 2000s gave the Yemeni Brotherhood organizational opportunities that many others throughout the region, and certainly those in Egypt, lacked. On the other hand, the Brotherhood's necessary (and politically costly) relationships with other party factions mean that it has never been fully in command of Islah. This is an important reminder to approach Islamist organizations not as ideological monoliths, but as networks of actors situated in specific relationships, and to inquire as much into their allies and adversaries (both within and across organizations).

Taking this approach to Islah reveals the ways in which the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood has adapted to survive decades of authoritarian encroachment—but also why it has struggled to navigate the tumultuous politics of a failed transition and civil war. Like other Brotherhood organizations in the region, Yemen's movement can be characterized as paradoxically “resilient and adaptable but also reactive and slow moving.”<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the Brotherhood's increasing difficulty in adapting is less about its Islamist ideology than it is about the declining relevance of formal institutions as the arbiter of political power in post-2011 Yemen. Islah poses the question, then, of what happens to mainstream, gradualist Islamists in moments of more radical change.

## ISLAMISM BEFORE UNIFICATION

Because Yemen only came into being as a single unified state in 1990, "Yemeni Islamism" is not a single phenomenon but is grounded in complex histories and patterns of state-society relations. Intra-Yemeni regionalism remains a significant fault line today and is intimately interwoven with the story of Yemeni Islamism as well.<sup>2</sup>

Yemenis from the North and South were exposed to Muslim Brotherhood ideology through scholarly and political interactions with founder Hassan al-Banna and his followers in Cairo and Beirut in the 1940s, but the ideological lessons from these interactions tended to be of a generically republican and postcolonial nationalist variety.<sup>3</sup> Yemenis influenced by Banna criticized the legitimacy of the Zaydi Imamate in the North and British colonial rule in the South, but this critique was neither the sole purview of Islamists nor particularly sectarian in flavor, with Zaydi Shiite and Sunni intellectuals alike seeking guidance from their more organized and politicized Egyptian brethren. In part, this was a reflection of the doctrinal closeness between the Sunni traditions of the Shafi'i school and Zaydi Shiism, and the legacy of integration between members of the two communities.

Indeed, the political Left was, and for many years remained, the more significant target of Islamist mobilization. Following the establishment of a republican regime in the Northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), an organization led by students of the then more radical Brotherhood of the 1960s was promoted by the regime to counter real and perceived threats of leftist interference from the South.<sup>4</sup> This "Islamic Front" functioned as an auxiliary to the emerging state in the YAR, but given the weakness of representative institutions at the time, it functioned neither as a party nor a broad-based social movement.

In the 1980s, the leadership of North Yemen's Islamic Front was gradually incorporated into and empowered by the institutions of the expanding bureaucracy of the YAR. Islamists carved out distinct ideological space under the wide tent of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), even in the absence of formal partisan competition. President Ali Abdullah Saleh drew several future leaders of Islah into his governing apparatus, most notably Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, a

prominent Salafi figure, and Shaykh Abdullah bin Husayn al-Ahmar, paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, whose attraction to Islamism was largely driven by his social conservatism.<sup>5</sup> President Saleh also appointed the most prominent member of Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, Yassin Abdul Aziz al-Qubati, to head the Ministry of Education.<sup>6</sup> A Brotherhood-affiliated newspaper was established in 1985, and when internal elections within the GPC were held in 1988, Brotherhood-affiliated Islamists won six out of the seven constituencies in which they competed.<sup>7</sup> As one scholar of the period remarked, "It was clear, even in the muddled conditions of no explicit parties or party platforms and of large numbers of candidates, that people wished for a change. In Sanaa the Islamists seemed like those who might promote such change."<sup>8</sup>

It was from this internal faction within the ruling party that the future leadership of Islah began to coalesce by the late 1980s. The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 provided a major institutional incentive for Islah's formalization, even as the very concept of *hizbiyya* (multi-party politics) drove a wedge in Islamist ranks.<sup>9</sup> Senior Salafi figures rejected the notion of partisanship in favor of a more quietist *da'wa*, but Muslim Brotherhood members were keen to seize the political opportunities offered by new multiparty competition. In this, they followed reasonably closely the "template" of other Brotherhood organizations in the region, one characterized by "great responsiveness to the political context and legal environment in which they operate."<sup>10</sup>

Unlike other Brotherhood affiliates, Yemen's Brotherhood faction initially lacked the momentum to develop and unify into a strong social movement (*haraka*), prompting Brotherhood leaders to align with those Salafis who could countenance party building (like Zindani), as well as tribal figures, to build a broad tent of social conservatives. Several tribal and Salafi figures enjoyed popular support far greater than that of the Brotherhood leaders, who could command only a modest following in major cities and on university campuses in the early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Many of the tribal figures were of Zaydi Shia background, and the Salafi and Brotherhood wings each had different visions of the relationship between state and society, making this a messy, uneasy grouping. But as the party's strong showing in the 1993 election would indicate, the three factions that jointly made up Islah could together pose a formidable

threat to the Yemeni Left, while helping to further cement Northern dominance within Yemen's political elite.

#### THE UNITY REGIME AND ISLAH'S ADAPTIVE ISLAMISM

Governing in coalition with Saleh's GPC, the Muslim Brotherhood spent much of the 1990s under the Islah tent, building an organizational base on the national level by mobilizing on university campuses and via the networks of the Islah Charitable Society, one of only two genuinely national nongovernmental organizations with branches in every governorate. Like other Brotherhood affiliates in the region, the charitable society, while nominally independent, had overlapping membership with the political apparatus.

Alongside the Brotherhood faction's growing organizational capacity, the early decision of many Salafis to reject electoral politics effectively divided the country's Salafi movement and consequently strengthened the Brotherhood's position within the new Islah party, allowing Brothers to lay claim to influential leadership roles. While the biggest names in the party remained Shaykh Zindani and Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar—with each representing important non-Brotherhood sources of mobilizational power—the Brotherhood designed and articulated party platforms, represented the party at partisan functions, and did the organizational heavy lifting involved in party building, moving quickly to establish branch offices, youth organizations, and campus affiliates in every governorate. Meanwhile, Salafis aligned with Islah engaged in heavily politicized *da'wa* through tertiary educational institutions and Zindani's Al-Imān University, relying on the party's relationship with the GPC to stave off leftist calls for curricular oversight.<sup>12</sup>

Islah's effort to build a national base should be understood not only as an expression of the Brotherhood's leadership but also in relation to North-South divides. The combined legislative impact of Islah and the GPC after 1993 gave "the North" a commanding majority in the parliament, fueling the Southern leadership's anxiety and ultimately contributing to the outbreak of civil war in 1994. While Salafi figures were the driving force behind the deployment of the armed Islamist auxiliaries that supported the North during the fighting, Muslim Brotherhood

leaders lacked the capacity (and perhaps the will) to rein in targeted violence in the South.

Islah's transition from regime ally to adversary unfolded in fits and starts over the remaining years of the 1990s, facilitated by the obsolescence of the Yemeni Socialist Party after 1994. Islah participated in a governing coalition until after the 1997 parliamentary elections, when ministers began to resign in protest against the (predictable) encroachments of the Saleh regime. Still, criticism of the regime was not universal, with different views emanating from Islah's senior leadership. The shift toward opposition to Saleh was deepest and earliest among Brotherhood members, who began reaching out to non-Islamist parties without the support of senior tribal and Salafi figures. The result was deepening tensions within Islah. Both Zindani and Shaykh al-Ahmar endorsed President Saleh's 1999 move to amend the constitution and consolidate power under a directly-elected presidency, against vociferous opposition from disenchanted Muslim Brotherhood members.

By the early 2000s, the Brotherhood faction within Islah could count on the fruits of its institution building over the previous decade, as many campus activists entered the workforce and became increasingly influential within professional syndicates and other NGOs. This facilitated coordination with other parties, as both leftists and Islamists had pragmatic and effective leaders who hoped to limit Saleh's further consolidation of power. It was the combination of a changing global climate after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attacks and the assassination of socialist Jar Allah Umar in December 2002, however, that pushed Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood to stem both Saleh and the Salafi Right through the formation of a formal opposition alliance.

The six parties of the new Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) alliance (which included Islah, the Yemeni Socialist Party, Nasserists, Baathists, al-Haqq, and the Union of Popular Forces) naturally had considerable ideological differences and thus coalesced around issues of procedural reform, decentralization, and anticorruption.<sup>13</sup> Regime officials kept Islah busy, exploiting wedge issues among JMP members and between the Brotherhood and Salafi wings of the party. Brotherhood leaders within Islah shifted considerable attention away from building grassroots support outside of the capital toward sustaining their delicate alliances.



Not only were its ties to constituents eroded by this elite focus, but Islah's participation in the JMP also led to Salafi efforts to "discipline" Brotherhood members through campaigns of *takfir*, or excommunication, and even the establishment of a rival extrapartisan institution of Salafis bridging the gap between Islah and the ruling party. Brotherhood leaders, cognizant of the threat Salafi defection from Islah would pose to their own viability, were under considerable strain; while some pulled closer to the JMP, others refused to back opposition policies that they feared would further alienate Salafis. These internal conflicts contributed to the postponement of the 2009 parliamentary elections.<sup>14</sup>

The agreement to delay the elections may well have been a decisive one for the Brotherhood, as it further eroded the faction's credibility on the ground. Closing down formal institutional channels through which Yemen's increasingly educated and urban population could pursue its grievances against the Saleh regime, the postponement occurred alongside the growth of alternative channels of mobilization. Popular unrest arrived well ahead of the rescheduled elections, and neither the JMP nor Islah's Brotherhood leadership were well positioned to respond.

#### HOW ISLAH COMPARED TO OTHER BROTHERHOODS BEFORE 2011

Ideologically, the Brotherhood core of Islah can be characterized as republican and modernist in its outlook and priorities, advancing notions of citizenship that are nonsectarian, promoting some political equality for women, and most of all calling for accountable governance.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, non-Brotherhood pressures from within the party have meant that Islah as a whole has adopted positions and enacted policies that have been inconsistent with these principles. The establishment of the JMP exacerbated these internal divides. On the one hand, forming an alliance with leftists and other non-Islamists left the Brotherhood vulnerable to critique by Salafis of *takfir*. On the other hand, the formalization of the alliance gave Brotherhood members a network of allies and channels of support from outside the party with which to balance against internal demands and pressures.<sup>16</sup>

The tensions within Islah are reflected in how different factions have taken responsibility for the party's political and evangelical roles. The

Brotherhood exerted a strong grip on a complex set of intersecting institutions throughout the country, mobilizing students and women activists through dedicated youth and women's branches. The growing power of these groups was reflected in internal elections in the 2000s.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the Salafi wing of the party played a larger role in the organization's *da'wa* efforts through "scientific institutes" that were not formally under the control of the party and are better understood as "aligned" with Islah. These institutions posed a particular challenge to the Brotherhood in the 2000s, as they advanced a less republican and more sectarian agenda and were seen as enabling, if not encouraging, violence. The Houthis-Salafi conflict thus became something that Brotherhood Islahis could not fully disavow, but which many found counterproductive to the JMP's reform agenda. In the transitional period after 2011, this tension came to a dramatic head as violence occurred between supporters of the Zaydi revivalist Houthi movement and rival militias aligned with Salafi factions of Islah.<sup>18</sup>

The centrifugal pressures that stem from the party's fragmentation mean that Islah's experience has differed from other Brotherhood organizations, which have maintained greater internal coherence and discipline. At its most polarized moment following the death of Sheikh al-Ahmar in 2007 through the delay of the 2009 elections, it seemed possible that Islah might split into a Brotherhood wing tied to the JMP and a Salafi organization, with the latter potentially aligning with the regime. The 2011 uprising nonetheless showed that when the opportunity for a split presented itself, the party had some institutional stickiness. The Salafi faction could have very well defected in 2011 to the Rashad Union, a newly established Salafi party, but the benefits offered to Islah as a whole by the transitional process helped hold its disparate factions together, even as they did little to resolve its characteristic fragmentation. Indeed, this fragmentation may have been essential to Islah's adaptability, allowing the party to be many things to many people in a time of uncertainty.

#### ISLAH IN A CLIMATE OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE, 2011-2015

As with other countries that experienced populist uprisings in 2011, Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood was not the primary driver of mobilization

but managed to secure a substantial share of power in the transitional process. As protest movements gathered strength in Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen's JMP responded with tepid, reform-oriented "pink protests" designed to signal its position as a loyal opposition with reformist, not revolutionary, demands.<sup>19</sup> This focus on reform was out of sync with the aspirations of many young activists. While Brotherhood leaders participated in protests, they took a backseat as youth activists in "Change Square" and other squares throughout the country organized for Saleh's ouster. This decline in the JMP's relevance (and, by extension, the Brotherhood's relevance) among protesters stood in stark contrast to international mediation efforts pursued simultaneously, which sought to work directly with organized opposition parties as representative of "the Yemeni people." Once it became clear that the Gulf Cooperation Council-backed transitional agreement would offer President Saleh and his associates legal immunity for crimes committed before and during the uprising, and that the transitional government would include many Saleh loyalists, protesters began to target the JMP itself, critical of an opposition that would agree to such concessions.<sup>20</sup>

With this shift in the protest movement came a shift in the Brotherhood's ties to its allies and adversaries. Whereas Brotherhood leaders initially sought to piggyback on youth enthusiasm, Salafi militias soon began to work to control protest spaces, in alliance with some tribal militias. Members of the Houthi movement, who had until this point participated alongside other protest groups against Saleh, also began to bring weapons to the protest squares, and the collaborative relationship that had developed among some Islahi and Houthi youth began to deteriorate.<sup>21</sup> While the violence of Islah and Houthi members pales in comparison to the warlike conditions that unfolded between tribal militias and factions of the fractured armed forces outside the capital, Islah-Houthi skirmishes nonetheless undermined the coherence of protest spaces and laid the foundation for substantial conflicts during the transitional period.

Islah generally, and the Brotherhood specifically, became the single greatest beneficiary of the transitional agreement after former president Saleh and his closest associates. The framework established by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and later adopted by the United Nations hinged on a power-sharing agreement between members of the JMP

and the General People's Congress, the former ruling party. As the largest and best-organized member of the JMP, Islah played an important role in brokering the JMP's appointments, and was thus in a position to heavily shape the "opposition" half of the transitional government.<sup>22</sup> Given the divisions within Islah, this disproportionate reliance on the JMP also offered centrist Brotherhood members a lifeline at a moment of particular weakness.<sup>23</sup>

That said, unlike Egypt or Tunisia, Yemen is not a case in which the Muslim Brotherhood has governed as such. Instead, before the collapse of the transition period in early 2015, Islah's Brotherhood members worked to consolidate what hold they could over the institutions that, theoretically, would remake Yemen's political regime. The GCC transitional framework was focused at the top—it prioritized an uncontested presidential election over parliamentary elections or civil service reform, and it reallocated power primarily through cabinet and ministerial portfolios.<sup>24</sup> Because the "implementation mechanism" (as the formal United Nations endorsement of the GCC agreement is known) stipulated that the terms of the agreement "may not be challenged before the institutions of the state," any opposition to its terms took a necessarily populist form.<sup>25</sup> This could be seen in dramatic acts of opposition ranging from the "parallel revolution," a series of sit-ins and coordinated work stoppages throughout the public sector,<sup>26</sup> to the Life March, in which tens of thousands of Yemenis walked hundreds of kilometers on foot in protest against the immunity law required by the transitional agreement and endorsed by the transitional government.<sup>27</sup> In these and other cases, Islahi leaders, who had long campaigned for political accountability, faced an acute credibility challenge as signatories to and beneficiaries of an agreement that blocked accountability in multiple ways. Yemen's Muslim Brothers were thus in an ambivalent position.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, leaders attempted to maintain ties to protesters and retain the mantle of opposition; on the other hand, as a part of the transitional government, they played a substantive role in suppressing new forms of dissent, including through the authorization of force against unarmed protesters opposing transitional terms.<sup>29</sup>

Even as its role of representative of "the opposition" was foundering in the streets, the GCC framework guaranteed Islah a substantial role in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Designed as

the centerpiece of the transitional process, the NDC was intended to address thorny issues that fell outside of the relatively narrow scope of the transitional power-sharing agreement.<sup>30</sup> It included nine working groups, but Islah was particularly active—and polarizing—in two: the Sa'da committee (dealing with conflict in the historic Houthi homeland) and the Rights and Freedoms committee. It was in this context that Islah's internal fissures were most evident, with the party's delegates—responding to pressures from their right flank—pursuing more ideologically polarizing positions than the Brotherhood members represented in the transitional government. This pressure was intensified by the formation in June 2012 of a new Salafi party, the Rāshad Union, which had no role in the transitional government but was able to exert a rightward pull in NDC committee sessions by caucusing with Islah.

The substantive sticking points were ideological and related to familiar issues that many Islamist parties engage: the status of sharia in the country's legal system, the rights of women and non-Muslims, and issues of religious freedom. In the case of the Sa'da working group, the conflict between Islahis and Houthis in committee sessions paralleled the armed conflict that would escalate between militias aligned with both groups in 2013 and into 2014; their work was so stymied that the committee's final report was substantially delayed.<sup>31</sup> As armed conflict between rival militias intensified, Islahis and Salafi allies outside of the party sought to frame themselves as underdogs to mobilize anti-Houthi (and, in some quarters, anti-Zaydi) sentiment.<sup>32</sup> The end of the NDC raised the stakes for the Houthis, as they lost the only formal institutional voice they were afforded by the transitional framework and were thus returned to their position as political outsiders. It was in this context that they pushed to revisit the GCC framework in its entirety. Yemen soon found itself on the path to civil war.

#### ISLAH UNDER CONDITIONS OF WAR

The breakdown of the GCC transitional framework began well before Houthi militants arrived in Sanaa in September 2014, and is as much a story of the outsized empowerment of Islah (and the Brotherhood

faction within Islah) by an unaccountable transitional framework as it is about the ambitions of the Houthi movement itself. This is particularly evident in the Houthis' explicit targeting of Islahis and Islah-affiliated institutions, as senior Brotherhood figures were detained, prevented from traveling, and harassed in other ways.<sup>33</sup> Brotherhood figures maintained an impressive commitment to nonviolence in the capital, but outside of Sanaa, they were neither able to exercise much influence over Salafi militias nor to offset the sectarian polarization that came from an increasingly aggressive campaign of violence by al-Qaeda. A conflict that was largely institutional became, over a series of months, almost intractably ideological.

The breakdown of the transitional process also reflected shifting fortunes for the Muslim Brotherhood on a regional level. Despite the threat of a republic on its borders, the GCC made space for Islah in the transitional framework for two main reasons. First, while the member parties of Yemen's JMP were universally undesirable in ideological terms (from the standpoint of most GCC countries), they were a preformed opposition that might be able to bring a speedy end to the conflict and promote reform over genuine revolution in the GCC's backyard. Owing to its long-standing role in Yemeni politics, Islah's leaders were also well known and at least some had political and financial ties to the Gulf kingdoms. Second, there was unquestionably less concern over Islahi Brotherhood members' republicanism than there might otherwise have been, given that the party's internal factionalism prevented much real Brotherhood autonomy and that the Brotherhood's grassroots base was so eroded by 2011. In other words, Islah was simply not a tremendous threat, relative to an electoral process in Egypt that Gulf actors could not as easily contain. That said, Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood was swept up in the broad Gulf campaign against the Brotherhood in 2014. Still, regional shifts—increased anxiety regarding Iran and polarizing sectarianism first among them—contributed to what Toby Matthiessen has called Islah's "rehabilitation" as a tactical ally in 2015, as major Islah figures sought refuge in (and called for war from) Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf, and as the Saudis attempted to promote their war in Yemen with the support of their own domestic Islamist movement.<sup>34</sup>

Today, several senior Islahis remain in exile along with other members of the transitional regime. No longer an opposition in any meaningful sense, the party's Brotherhood leadership has committed to President Hadi's foundering government, in ways reminiscent of the party's old role as Saleh allies in the 1990s. The Muslim Brotherhood, lacking a strong social movement foundation for many years now, is heavily dependent on the legitimacy tenuously afforded it by international agreements and the actors who back them. While the Yemeni Brotherhood long disavowed violence as a political strategy in domestic politics, it now depends on an international coalition of armies that promises to restore their political position through force. While the Hadi government has been only fitfully committed to peace negotiations, a negotiated settlement is the likeliest way for the Brotherhood to emerge from the current military impasse with a modicum of institutional power. The fact of the government's equivocation in these negotiations seems to suggest that Islah (or at least its Brotherhood leadership) holds less sway than it did before the onset of the war.<sup>35</sup>

While it might be tempting to disregard Islah as "too different" to tell scholars much about Muslim Brotherhood politics owing to its internal fragmentation, it is also possible to read it as essential to the broader Brotherhood story. Islah reinforces what we know about the limits of politics without a strong grassroots movement, and of the risk of working primarily within existing institutions and state structures. It tells a cautionary tale of the vulnerabilities that come with alliances, with other Islamists and non-Islamists alike. And it shows how Brotherhood trajectories can be shaped by others' use of force, even when Brotherhood members themselves do not endorse violence as a political strategy. As an organization schooled in North Yemeni traditions of negotiation and accommodation, the Islah party has shown itself to be an adaptable organization capable of surviving Yemen's civil war.<sup>36</sup> Whether the same can be said for the fortunes of its Brotherhood leaders more specifically remains to be seen, but their political survival is likely to depend far more on forces outside of Yemen than those within.