



YEMEN

Quick Facts

Population: 28,036,829 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 527,968 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Predominantly Arab; but also Afro-Arab, South Asians, Europeans

GDP (official exchange rate): \$16.51 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated September 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Yemen is a fragile Gulf state home to numerous Salafi-jihadi and Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a leading al-Qaeda affiliate, as well as a branch of the Islamic State terrorist group. Both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have exploited the conditions created by Yemen's collapse into civil war. The Zaydi Shi'a Houthi movement, which has received Iranian support, is also empowered through the civil war. The Houthi movement is now a power broker in the Sana'a-based government, having seized control of state infrastructure after the collapse of the National Dialogue Conference.

Islamist extremist and separatist groups have taken advantage of Yemen's general instability to advance their political agendas and create terrorist safe-havens in the country. The Yemeni government, for its part, has coordinated closely with the United States on counterterrorism operations to target AQAP leaders, including through the use of U.S. drone strikes on Yemeni soil. An Arab military coalition intervened in Yemen in March 2015 to counter the Houthi movement and restore power to the Yemeni government. Nevertheless, AQAP, which governed certain areas for over a year, has expanded its influence, while the Islamic State now likewise has a foothold in Yemen. Both groups will continue to operate in the country as long as the civil war continues.

The economic, social and security issues that plague the Yemeni state, coupled with civil war, have paralyzed the Yemeni government. It is not able to provide effective governance and security to much of the country. The breakdown of the Yemeni state over the course of the civil war adds to historical internal challenges, including political and economic instability, declining oil reserves, severe water shortages, internally-displaced persons (IDPs), and deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions. As of April 2017, the UN had listed Yemen as having the world's largest humanitarian crisis.¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The land of Yemen holds religious significance in Islam. There are two hadiths (accounts of the sayings of Muhammad) directly referencing the area. The first prophesies that a Muslim army of 12,000 men will

rise from Aden and Abyan in southern Yemen to give victory to Allah. The second states that two religions would not co-exist on the Arabian Peninsula, implying that Islam would overcome the other. Yemen's status in Islam has made it important to transnational Islamist groups, particularly Salafi-jihadi ones.

Yemen has served as a safe haven to opposition and terrorist groups of varying political stripes throughout its history. Prior to the unification of traditionalist North Yemen and Marxist South Yemen in 1990, the latter was used as a sanctuary for a wide array of Palestinian and terrorist organizations with the support of local authorities. Tacit support for subversive groups continued in Yemen after unification, but extremist Islamist organizations, especially those opposed to the Saudi monarchy, replaced radical Palestinian and leftist organizations.²

Yemen's prolonged civil conflicts, increasing sectarianism, absence of an effective central government, and continued existence of popular grievances have created the conditions for the development of homegrown Islamist militants like the Houthis, as well as a safe haven for transnational Salafi-jihadi organizations like al-Qaeda. Yemen's education system, which uses textbooks containing some degree of anti-American and anti-Israeli ideology, coupled with an unemployment rate of around 35 percent, are factors that play into the vulnerability of young men to be exploited by Islamist militant organizations.³

Further compounding the problem is the accessibility of weapons through Yemen's vast underground arms market; roughly three guns exist for every one person in Yemen.⁴ The Yemeni political and social landscape is replete with tribal leaders and Islamist groups that have the arms and power to deny the Yemeni government a monopoly on the use of violence. Under these conditions, analysts have noted, "piracy, smuggling and violent jihad can flourish, with implications for the security of shipping routes and the transit of oil"⁵ through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal.

The ouster of the country's longtime autocratic president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the political transition that followed his departure transformed Yemeni politics. After 33 years in power, Saleh was removed from power following widespread anti-government protests in 2011 during Yemen's version of the Arab Spring. A U.S.-backed, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-brokered transition agreement led to a referendum electing former vice president Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi as Saleh's replacement. Hadi later presided over a National Dialogue Conference to lay the groundwork for a new Yemeni Constitution. The National Dialogue Conference, the forum to address longstanding grievances against the government, included a number of opposition groups and Islamist factions, including Shi'ite Houthi rebels in the north.⁶

Opposition groups decried the transition process after it did not fully shift power from the established elite. The Houthis left the negotiating table and began to militarize, advancing from their northern stronghold to Sana'a, the capital, with Saleh's support.⁷ They forced the Hadi government to sign an agreement giving opposition groups, including the Southern Movement (Hirak), an umbrella group for southern opposition factions, more power in the government.⁸ The Houthi coup culminated in the winter of 2015, when the Hadi government fled the country. An Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and including the United Arab Emirates intervened in Yemen in March 2015 in support of the Hadi government.⁹ Civil war broke out between two large factions of loose, pragmatic alliances: the Houthi-Saleh faction and those opposed to it, now including the Southern Movement, the Sunni al-Islah party, local tribal militias, and al-Qaeda. The most radical actors on both sides of the civil war are actively promoting sectarianism in Yemen, where it had not been strong before.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda has a longstanding presence in Yemen. Yemenis ranked second only to the Saudis in terms of nationals serving as members of the mujahideen who fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, a war that constituted a key milestone in the consolidation of radical Islam in Yemen. Yemenis trained under al-Qaeda's high command in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s, up until the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.¹⁰

From its inception until the late 1990s, al-Qaeda maintained training camps in various locations in

Yemen.¹¹ A November 1996 autobiography of bin Laden provided to the Islamist journal *Nida'ul Islam* highlighted the terrorist chief's enduring interest in Yemen and mentioned his support for the mujahideen fighting the Communist party in South Yemen in the early 1980s and later in the early 1990s.¹² In 1997, bin Laden reportedly sent an envoy to Yemen to explore the possibility of establishing a base there in the event the Taliban expelled him from Afghanistan.¹³ The al-Qaeda leader also listed Yemen as one of six countries "most in need of liberation" in 2003.¹⁴

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Yemeni government implemented stiff counterterrorism measures and cooperated with the United States to eliminate senior al-Qaeda operative Abu Ali al-Harithi in November 2002.¹⁵ By the end of 2003, however, Sana'a began to lag in its counterterrorism efforts, and in February 2006 twenty-three al-Qaeda terrorists, including the mastermind of the 2000 *USS Cole* bombing, escaped from a Yemeni prison.¹⁶ An October 2009 report by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) asserted that:

Many Western intelligence analysts viewed elements of the Yemeni security apparatus as complicit in the prison break. The more relaxed security situation in Yemen stemmed both from complacency and the government's perceived need to reallocate security resources to address other domestic threats. Such circumstances made Yemen a favorable alternative location for al-Qaeda to plan, train for, and execute attacks against the regimes of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, both of which it views as hypocritical, apostate puppets of the West.¹⁷

In the late 2000s, Yemen was a fragile state focused on putting down the Houthi rebellion in the north. The state's distraction made the country ideal as a base of operations for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which represented a merger of Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda in January 2009. Saudi operatives had fled to Yemen after the Saudi government imposed a crackdown inside its borders following a series of terrorist attacks in the Kingdom between May 2003 and December 2004 against oil company offices, foreign targets, Saudi government offices, and security targets.¹⁸

Since its establishment, AQAP has been the most active of al-Qaeda's affiliates in targeting the United States. It has been implicated in a number of terrorist operations, including: a suicide bombing against a group of South Korean tourists in Hadramawt and a South Korean diplomatic convoy to Sana'a; the attempted suicide bombing targeting Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef; and the ambush and killing of seven Yemeni security officials near the Saudi border.¹⁹

AQAP repeatedly attempted to attack the U.S. homeland or American interests. It claimed responsibility for the attempted Christmas Day 2009 downing of Detroit-bound Flight 253 by Nigerian extremist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.²⁰ AQAP also claimed the cargo plane bomb plot foiled in Dubai and the UK in October 2010, and asserted it was behind the September 2010 downing of a UPS flight in Dubai, although U.S. officials have found no conclusive connection between the crash and terrorism.²¹ The group attempted to attack the United States again in May 2012 (an attack which was thwarted by a tip from Saudi intelligence), and was behind the threats that closed over twenty U.S. diplomatic missions across the Middle East and North Africa in August 2013.²² Its chief bombmaker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, has trained others to share expertise with al-Qaeda groups in Syria and Somalia.²³

AQAP is conducting an insurgency within Yemen. The group seeks to mobilize the country's Sunnis behind it against the Yemeni state. AQAP operates within local customs and has developed local relations based on pragmatic lines of support.²⁴ It does not require ideological alignment to support various groups and factions. It uses asymmetrical attacks to degrade Yemeni military capabilities, as well as other forces opposed to it. The group conducts targeted assassinations against military and government leadership, as well as against intelligence officers and local powerbrokers aligned with the government. AQAP has kidnapped individuals for ransom money and could in the future use this tactic to gain political leverage over foreign powers. The kidnapping of Saudi deputy consul Abdallah al-Khalidi at his home in the south

Yemeni port city of Aden in March 2012 is one such example.

The number of Yemenis claiming allegiance to AQAP is unknown. Estimates of membership have ranged from the low hundreds to a few thousand.²⁵ This number has increased significantly as AQAP and associated organizations active in Yemen, such as Ansar al-Sharia, have gained power and influence in southern Yemen. More recently, fighters have traveled from conflicts in Syria and Iraq to Yemen, bringing with them new skills and tactics.²⁶ Even before the 2011 anti-government protests swept through Yemen, AQAP had been on a path to establish links with tribes in the Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwah governorates of eastern Yemen.²⁷

In the wake of the 2011 uprisings, AQAP sought to capitalize on the political transition, increasing its attacks against government targets. AQAP's insurgent arm, Ansar al-Sharia, seized key cities in the south, including the provincial capital of Abyan province, Zinjibar. Ansar al-Sharia held Zinjibar from May 2011 until the Yemeni military, aided by tribal militias known as Popular Committees, were able to overrun the al-Qaeda "emirates" in late June 2012.²⁸ AQAP has found a more favorable political climate in the aggrieved Sunni south, though its mass appeal remains limited in a region historically dominated by socialism. Its primary mechanism to cultivating popular support is through pragmatic relationships, where AQAP provides the local population with basic goods or services.²⁹

AQAP also conducts an international outreach strategy that is much more pronounced than that of other al-Qaeda affiliates. Anwar al-Awlaki, the late American-born Muslim cleric who became a leading figure within AQAP, ran an online campaign from Yemen to recruit and aid Muslims in foreign countries to carry out attacks that led to over a dozen terrorist investigations.³⁰ Al-Qaeda's English-language magazine, *Inspire*, has been produced in Yemen since 2010 and provides radicalizing literature and instructions for planning and conducting terrorist attacks.³¹ AQAP released a shorter "Guide to Inspire" following the June 2016 Orlando shootings and the July 2016 attack in Nice that analyzed those attacks and provided additional guidance for would-be recruits.³² Current AQAP leaders featured in its publications include leader Qasim al Raymi, senior leader and former Guantanamo detainee Ibrahim al Qosi, senior leader Khaled Batarfi, and religious scholar Ibrahim al Banna.³³

AQAP's strength increased significantly during Yemen's civil war.³⁴ It controlled al Mukalla, a major port city in southeast Yemen, from April 2015—April 2016 and also expanded its influence behind the frontlines of Yemen's war.³⁵ AQAP may be expanding its influence in Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, and it continues to have sanctuary in Abyan, al Bayda, Shabwah, Ma'rib and al Jawf.³⁶

A sustained UAE-led counterterrorism campaign in Yemen has attrited AQAP leadership and reclaimed territory AQAP had taken control of in 2015. The UAE military supported Yemeni forces in Aden from Fall 2015 forward to roll up the al-Qaeda and Islamic State cells in the city. The UAE has trained and equipped Yemeni security forces as part of its counterterrorism efforts. These include the Security Belt forces in Aden, Lahij, and Abyan (also known as al Hizam brigades) and the Elites in Hadramawt, al Mahrah, and Shabwah governorates.³⁷ U.S. and Emirati counterterrorism cooperation, along with the presence of Yemeni ground forces, has affected AQAP's operational ability³⁸ and removed AQAP from populated areas in Hadramawt and Shabwah. The counterterrorism operations have degraded AQAP's media capabilities as well, diminishing AQAP's output and responsiveness to current events.³⁹ However, the U.S.-backed Emirati counterterrorism operations have not removed AQAP's historical sanctuaries, which will leave the group permissive terrain to reconstitute should pressure against it cease. The effect of leadership attrition may not be lasting. Further, many of the conditions that enabled AQAP to spread in Yemen persist.

The Islamic State

Since its emergence as an independent entity in 2013, the Islamic State has competed globally with al-Qaeda for leadership of the Salafi-jihadi movement. Yemen is key terrain for this contest, not just because of its religious significance but also because of the presence of AQAP.⁴⁰ To this end, the late Islamic State

military commander Omar al-Shishani mentioned Yemen among eight other fields of jihad in the Islamic State's celebratory June 2014 video calling for the end of borders that separate Muslims.⁴¹

Initial support for the Islamic State appeared in Yemen immediately after the group declared its caliphate in Iraq in June 2014. A prominent Salafi-jihadi cleric, Sheikh Ma'moun Abdulhamid Hatem, was one early supporter of the Islamic State.⁴² Sheikh Hatem probably facilitated recruitment in Ibb for the Islamic State even as he remained within AQAP's network.⁴³ A Saudi Arabian national named Bilal al-Harbi, who was in communication with leadership in Syria by September 2014, was commissioned to gather pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State.⁴⁴ Al-Harbi is now one of the group's leaders in Yemen. Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recognized the Yemeni branch alongside four other groups in a November 2014 video.⁴⁵

The Islamic State claimed its first attack in Yemen on March 20, 2015, simultaneously bombing two mosques in Sana'a. The attack was the deadliest terrorist incident in Yemen to-date and targeted Zaydi Shia.⁴⁶ AQAP disavowed responsibility for the attack, noting that it does not target mosques or public spaces. The Sana'a mosque bombings began a series of attacks against targets, many of them civilian, that the Islamic State labeled as being "Houthi." These attacks are part of a global strategy by the Islamic State to increase sectarianism and mobilize the Sunni behind its leadership.⁴⁷

The group shifted its primary focus from targeting the Houthis to targeting the Arab coalition in Yemen, and thereafter the coalition-backed Yemeni military and government in October 2015. The Emiratis had led a ground offensive to reinstate the Yemeni government in Aden in July 2015 and were beginning to reestablish the internationally recognized government in the country. Islamic State militants targeted coalition and government sites in Aden on October 6, 2015.⁴⁸ The group began regular attacks in Aden through the winter and into spring 2016. It subsequently expanded attacks against the government to the southeastern port city of al Mukalla after an April 2016 Emirati-led offensive regained control of the city from AQAP.⁴⁹ The Islamic State did not conduct a mass-casualty attack in Yemen for the year after these campaigns in the south, likely due to degraded capabilities, but did engage in low-level activities. For most of 2016, the Islamic State only claimed attacks in the Hadramawt and Aden governorates, a significant decrease in activity (as well as the number of active cells) from 2015. It expanded into al Bayda governorate in central Yemen, where AQAP is also active, claiming small-scale asymmetrical attacks beginning in Fall 2016.⁵⁰ By Fall 2017, the Islamic State had established training camps in al Bayda, which the U.S. targeted with airstrikes.⁵¹ The Islamic State regenerated an attack capability in Aden, where it conducted a mass-casualty attack in November 2017 and has continued irregular attacks.⁵²

The Islamic State's expansion in Yemen has been limited because of AQAP's strong presence there and because of how the Islamic State had operated. The targeting of non-combatants, a practice generally not seen in Yemen, has helped to alienate the population. The participation in the fight in central Yemen against the Houthi movement may indicate a shift in ground operations, or may simply be because of the Islamic State's inability to generate support elsewhere. The Islamic State uses a top-down leadership approach, working with a primarily non-Yemeni leadership body. Its leaders also do not follow Yemeni tribal customs, and in fact reject them entirely. Yemeni members of the Islamic State issued a public denunciation of the Islamic State's leadership in Yemen in two letters in December 2015, rejecting the leadership but reaffirming their allegiance to Baghdadi.⁵³ The group's core in Yemen, however, ultimately suppressed this rebellion.

The Islamic State continues to run small cells in Aden, Yemen, and in al Bayda, in central Yemen. Broad-based support for the Islamic State is absent. The group has been able to recruit and train cells inside of Aden that enact well-executed attacks on Yemeni security services. The Islamic State claimed a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device that targeted a police force camp in Aden in November 2017, which killed at least six people, and a complex attack—suicide bombers and a small tactical team—on a Yemeni counterterrorism force headquarters building in Aden in February 2018, which killed at least

fourteen people.⁵⁴ In al Bayda, Islamic State teams conduct small-arms attacks on al Houthi positions. It also had run basic military skills training camps in the area. The U.S. targeted two of these camps in October 2017, killing about 50 fighters.⁵⁵

The Houthi Movement

Prior to the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings, Yemeni military and security forces were already spread thin. The Saleh regime had devoted considerable resources to suppressing a rebellion led by the Houthi family, from where the movement derives its moniker. The Houthis are Zaydi Shi’a and have a stronghold in northern Yemen. They were the most direct threat to the Yemeni state from 2004-2010. The Houthis were engaged in an on-and-off guerrilla war with the Yemeni government from 2004-2010, leading to the death and displacement of thousands. The Saleh regime accused the Houthis of receiving support from Iran and of “trying to reinstate the clerical imamate” (Shi’ite Islamic government) that ruled northern Yemen for roughly 1,000 years prior to 1962,⁵⁶ while the Houthis contend they are merely advocating “freedom of worship and social justice.”⁵⁷

Currently led by Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the younger brother of the group’s late founder, Sheikh Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, the group has accused the Yemeni government of “widespread corruption, of aligning itself too closely with the United States, of allowing too much Wahhabi (fundamentalist Sunni) influence in the country, and of economic and social neglect in predominantly Shi’ite parts of the country.”⁵⁸ The Houthis couched their challenge to Saleh’s rule in religious terms—Saleh is not of Hashemite descent, which made him illegitimate to rule in strict Zaydi practice—though the roots of the conflict are political.

The origins of the armed conflict trace back to 2003, when followers of the group “Believing Youth” shouted anti-American and anti-Israeli slurs inside a Sa’ada mosque where then-president Saleh was attending service at a time when he was trying to maintain strong relations with the West.⁵⁹ The Yemeni government responded by killing Hussein al-Houthi in a firefight in September 2004. Houthi’s followers took up arms for revenge. The Yemeni military’s heavy hand caused collateral damage, drawing additional tribes to the side of the Houthis and mobilizing a large faction in northern Yemen.

In the years that followed, the Yemeni government and Abdul Malik al-Houthi expressed their readiness for dialogue on a number of occasions. However, several resulting ceasefire agreements proved short-lived. The Yemeni government and Houthis fought six small wars in the decade after 2004. In the fall of 2009, the conflict spilled over the Saudi border as Houthi fighters seized areas within Saudi Arabia and the Saudi military retaliated with air and ground forces to repel the Houthi incursion.⁶⁰

Saudi Arabia has since launched an initiative to fortify its border with Yemen with motion sensors, infrared systems, and GPS trackers.⁶¹ The initiative was launched in tandem with a March 2013 law that mandated the deportation of hundreds of thousands of illegal foreign residents.⁶² The International Organization for Migration documents that almost 310,000 Yemenis returned to Yemen from Saudi Arabia between June 1, 2013 and February 28, 2014. A separate estimate found 27 percent of the deportees planned to return to Saudi Arabia when possible. Oman also perceives a security risk and is considering building a barrier along its own border with Yemen.⁶³

As the conflict between the Yemeni military and the Shiite Houthis escalated, so too did accusations by the Yemeni and Saudi governments of Iranian involvement in arming the Houthis, though the evidence on this score is not conclusive. Overt, unofficial statements by Houthi officials to reporters,⁶⁴ recordings of conversations between smugglers and members of Iran’s Quds Force paramilitary unit,⁶⁵ and an intercepted Iranian ship off Yemen’s southern coast carrying weapons (including 10 Chinese anti-aircraft missiles) originating from Iran have been proffered as evidence of Iranian involvement.⁶⁶ Tehran has vehemently denied these accusations, and in turn condemned Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the conflict. Meanwhile, Houthi rebels have accused Saudi Arabia of supporting the Yemeni government and aiding its offensives, a charge which the Saudis have denied.⁶⁷

The Houthis were among many groups that supported the anti-Saleh protests that erupted in January

2011. As the military shifted its resources to restoring security in the capital and combating a growing threat from al-Qaeda in the south, the Houthis were emboldened to expand territorially. This led to clashes with the Sunni al-Islah party, as the two groups jockeyed for power and influence in the northern province of al-Jawf.⁶⁸ Adding to the Houthis' list of adversaries, in January 2011 the late AQAP deputy chief Saeed Ali al-Shihri declared jihad against "Iranian-backed Houthi Shiite advocates."⁶⁹ From spring 2011 through early 2013, there were reports of sectarian clashes between Houthi militants and Sunni tribes in the northern province of Sa'ada.⁷⁰ Another spike in violent activity began in October of 2013 in al-Jawf province after Houthis accused Sunni Salafis of recruiting foreign fighters.⁷¹

Since Saleh was ousted from power in 2011, the reconciliation process under the supervision of President Hadi granted the Houthis political recognition with 35 of 565 seats at the National Dialogue Conference.⁷² The Houthis, however, rejected the outcome and continued to use military force to expand their influence throughout the process. The decision to divide Yemen into six administrative districts was inimical to Houthi interests, because the movement's stronghold would be isolated. The Houthis would also be required to compete with another powerful Zaydi family in Sanhan, Sana'a.⁷³

The Houthis have had a partnership of convenience with former President Saleh and his allies since 2014 that has given them control of the capital, Sana'a, and the majority of Yemeni state infrastructure. They have sought to negotiate a political settlement to the civil war, but have repeatedly rejected the terms put forward by the international community, which favor the Yemeni government. The Houthis enjoy an out-sized level of influence over national politics compared to the small percentage of Yemenis who are actually members of the movement. They have made maximalist demands to retain this influence, including disproportional representation within the national government. Saleh and the Houthis cut a power-sharing agreement in July 2016, establishing a political council to govern the country split between Saleh's General People's Congress party and the Houthis' Ansar Allah party.⁷⁴ The al Houthi-Saleh political council announced a 42-minister "National Salvation Government" on November 28, 2016.⁷⁵

There is increasing evidence that the Iranian regime is supporting the Houthi-Saleh faction in Yemen. The UN Yemen Panel of Experts cited Iran for violating the arms embargo on Yemen by providing the Houthis with short-range ballistic missiles.⁷⁶ The Houthis have modified these ballistic missiles and have been able to strike as far as Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.⁷⁷ Two notable ballistic missile attacks are a November 4, 2017, strike that fell just short of Riyadh's international airport and a second strike targeting the palace in Riyadh on December 19, 2017.⁷⁸ The Houthis threatened to target Abu Dhabi, UAE, with a ballistic missile on June 1, 2018.⁷⁹ In addition to the interdiction of weapons shipments transported by sea, there have been allegations that Iran is also moving weapons by land, through Oman.⁸⁰ The Houthi-Saleh forces, in turn, have used modified ballistic missiles against Saudi Arabia, a capability likely transferred from Lebanese Hezbollah, and an Iranian variant of the Chinese Silkworm missile was identified in the series of attacks against the U.S. naval presence in the Red Sea off Yemen's coast in October 2016.⁸¹ Iran also likely provided the Houthis with sea mines found in the port of Mokha, Yemen, anti-tank missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that fly at Emirati PATRIOT systems in order to overwhelm them as part of a strategy targeting Emirati positions in Yemen.⁸²

The Houthis began to meet openly with members of Iran's proxy and partner network in the region by October 2015. Houthi delegations have met with Hezbollah in Lebanon, even going so far as to take a photograph⁸³ with the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah; with members of the Assad regime in Syria; and with Iranian proxy groups in Iraq like Asaib Ahl al Haq. Yemenis had been reported to have operating with Hezbollah in Syria, too, for example.⁸⁴ Additionally, Abdul Malik al-Houthi offered to send forces to support Lebanese Hezbollah in July 2017.⁸⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Historically, Yemeni society has been divided along two main religious identities, the Shi'ite Zaydi sect

followed in the country's north and northwest, and the Shafa'i school of Sunni Islam predominant in the south and southeast. Although no accurate and reliable statistics exist, Sunnis are generally acknowledged to represent a majority among Yemen's population of 26 million, while Zaydis claim around 35 percent of the total.⁸⁶ There is a strong Sunni Salafi trend within certain areas of Yemen. Zaydis are constituents of a Shi'a sect often described as moderate in its jurisprudence.⁸⁷

In his studies of Islamism in Yemen, Laurent Bonnefoy of the Institut Français du Proche-Orient found that “despite episodes of violent stigmatization orchestrated by certain radical groups, the vast majority of the population is at times indirectly (and most of the time passively) involved in the convergence of the once-distinct Sunni and Zaydi religious identities.”⁸⁸ He cites one such example of this as former president Saleh, who himself is of Zaydi origin but never refers to his primary identity. Bonnefoy goes on to say that: “at the grassroots level, many Sunnis do not mind praying in Zaydi mosques, and vice versa. Consequently, the religious divide only marginally structures political affiliations and adherence to specific Islamist groups.”⁸⁹

However, as anti-government protests threatened his presidency, Saleh drew on his Zaydi identity “in an attempt to rally Zaydi tribal solidarity against what he also allegedly framed as a Shafa'i-led protest movement,” even going so far as to suggest that he could be the “last Zaydi president.”⁹⁰ Such actions led to criticism that Saleh was “concentrating on solidifying tribal allegiances even at the cost of exacerbating sectarian divisions.”⁹¹ The increase in sectarian tensions in northern Yemen in recent years can be seen, in part, as a result of policies and governing strategies playing competing tribal and sectarian groups off of one another.

Rising sectarianism in the region against the backdrop of the wars in Syria and Iraq is also seeping into Yemen. The Islamic State has attempted to provoke sectarian furor, and Houthi and AQAP rhetoric increasingly play upon sectarian divisions. Reports from on the ground indicate that Yemenis of different sects are less likely today to practice in the same mosques.⁹² For their part, both Saudi Arabia and Iran see Yemen as a space for contest, though Yemen is much more important to Saudi Arabia. Iran sees an opportunity in Yemen to expand its “Axis of Resistance” through the Houthi movement while simultaneously contesting Saudi regional hegemony. It has been able to drive Saudi responses in Yemen with minimal investment in the Houthi movement.⁹³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In a March 2009 journal article for *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA), Laurent Bonnefoy pointed to the “presence of a strong traditional ‘civil society’ in the form of tribal and religious groups, most of them armed or capable of opposing the state” as a source in “undermining the regime’s capacity to monopolize all the levers of power and fulfilling any totalitarian dreams.”⁹⁴ For years, the Saleh regime maintained such power-sharing arrangements out of self-interest (i.e., weakening its enemies, dividing political and religious groups, etc.). Such arrangements, however, have been unable to withstand a range of endogenous and exogenous shocks.

Over the past decade, divisive policies and shifting political alliances stressed an already fragile system, due in large part to the erosion of the legitimacy and power of the central government. Allegations of widespread corruption, a growing view of the government as an American and Saudi puppet by Islamist groups, and widening economic and resource inequity all contribute to the government’s domestic weakness. These trends became more pronounced as the counterterrorism partnership with Washington grew. Since President Hadi’s ascension to power, U.S. officials have noted “a new determination [and] a new consistency in terms of what the Yemeni government is doing on the counterterrorism front.”⁹⁵

The unification of Yemen was initially built upon a partnership between the two former ruling parties of North and South Yemen, within the framework of a power-sharing coalition. However, the Vice President of the coalition government, Ali Salim al-Baidh, who represented the south, fled to the city of Aden in

1993 and accused the government of marginalizing the south and attacking southerners. The ensuing civil war between leaders in the north and south paved the way for increased participation of Islamist groups in the government throughout the 1990s.

Sheik Abdel Majid al-Zindani was a key player during the initial infiltration of radical Islam into Yemen due to his role as a senior Islamic religious leader and prominent Islamist political figure. Zindani was a central activist in recruiting Yemeni mujahideen members for the jihad in Afghanistan, as well as being himself a combatant against the Soviets during the 1979-89 war. Upon his return to Yemen, Zindani established the al-Islah Islamic movement, which later became the major political opposition party to former President Saleh's General People's Council. The al-Islah party brought together Yemen's Salafists, Muslim Brotherhood members, and also a significant tribal faction.

After the first multiparty general elections in 1993, al-Zindani became part of the five-man presidential council, while the then-head of al-Islah, Abdallah al-Ahmar, was elected as speaker of parliament.⁹⁶ As tensions rose with the socialist leaders in the coalition, President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to govern with al-Islah. With the outbreak of war in May 1994 between the Saleh regime in the north and formerly Soviet-aligned separatists in the south, al-Zindani condemned the separatist movements in Yemen as a "foreign conspiracy," and stressed the need both for the unity of Yemen and for allegiance to the regime. Al-Zindani, along with the Islah party, was easily able to rally the returning veterans of the Afghan jihad behind the Saleh regime in the north as a continuation of the jihad that had been waged in Afghanistan against the Marxist regime.

After the victory of Saleh's regime over the southern separatists in July 1994, and with the reunification of north and south Yemen, Saleh rewarded the Afghan veterans for their contribution by incorporating their leaders into the government.⁹⁷ One such example of this is Tariq al-Fadli, heir of the sultan of Abyan and former Afghan mujahideen leader, who later was appointed by the president to the Majlis al-Shura, the upper house of the parliament. Veteran jihadists were thus able to strike what Bonnefoy describes as "a 'covenant of security' deal with the security services on their return home from Afghanistan," under which they would enjoy freedom of movement within Yemen in return for a promise of good behavior inside the country's borders. During this transition, greater participation by the Muslim Brotherhood could be seen in Yemeni politics, with al-Islah members holding several important ministries, including justice, education, trade, and religious affairs.⁹⁸

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, formal and informal integration of numerous Islamist groups into the state apparatus continued. Individuals identifying with various sects of Islam gained important posts in the army and security forces. As a result, repression of Islamist groups was limited, allowing for easy access to political and tribal elites for Salafists, Sufis, Zaydi revivalists, Muslim Brothers, and some individuals sympathetic to jihadist doctrines.⁹⁹

Al-Islah became entrenched in Yemen's political landscape and in numerous regions of the country. The party had considerable support in the former Marxist South, where a strong anti-socialist movement favored Islamist candidates and platforms over the dominant Yemeni Socialist Party and had gained influence in some areas of the north. Nationally, the Islamist party won an average of 18 percent of the vote during the 1993, 1997, and 2003 parliamentary elections. Although a lack of electoral transparency reduces the significance of these numbers, the influence of al-Islah in Yemen was very sizeable.¹⁰⁰

Al-Islah gained power in the immediate post-Arab Spring reforms in Yemen. During the transition and the NDC under President Hadi, al-Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party were the two major factions in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of parties opposing Saleh's GPC. Al-Islah shared power with the former ruling GPC party and had a significant role, holding 50 seats in the NDC, negotiating and shaping the reforms that were to be instituted by the Hadi government.¹⁰¹ The addition of the Houthis' party, Ansar Allah, to the NDC negotiations added to the list of Islamist groups represented in the post-Saleh government, which also included the Zaydi al Haqq party. However, it also put President Hadi at

odds with many Sunni clerics, including prominent Salafi Islamist Abd al-Majid al-Zindani,¹⁰² and some within al-Islah.¹⁰³

There was an increase in U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation following the ouster of Saleh, and President Hadi made statements openly supporting U.S. drone strikes against al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁴ The U.S. provided military assistance to Yemeni security forces in order to facilitate Yemeni ground operations against AQAP, while conducting direct action operations to eliminate imminent threats from the group.¹⁰⁵ The U.S. administration lauded the partnership in 2014 and described Yemen as a model for future counterterrorism alliances.¹⁰⁶ The model did not survive the outbreak of civil war, however. The Yemeni government now supports U.S.-backed Emirati counterterrorism operations in southern Yemen in addition to sustained U.S. direct action operations against AQAP leadership.

The outbreak of civil war has had a significant effect on Islamism in Yemen, driving Islamists to embrace more radical positions and permitting them to expand their influence. A concerning trend has been the assassinations of imams in Aden, Yemen, which has not yet been credited to a single group. Many of the imams were affiliated with al-Islah.¹⁰⁷ The al-Islah party has been marginalized politically¹⁰⁸ and many of its leading members fled the country along with some of the more moderate Salafi voices. Those remaining in Yemen are more extreme. The Houthis are empowered in northern Yemen and have expanded governance into the skeleton of the former Yemeni state through the deal with former president Saleh. They have targeted Salafis and other Islamists, placing individuals under house arrest. The more hardline faction of the Houthis is dominant, and propounds sectarian rhetoric. AQAP and other Salafi groups in Yemen also propagate sectarian messages, trying to cast the war as a religious one. Additionally, members of the Arab coalition, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are supporting Salafi militias in Yemen in order to counter the Houthis in the ongoing civil war.

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