YEMEN

Quick Facts

Population: 29,884,405 (July 2020 est.)
Area: 527,968 sq km
Ethnic Groups: Predominantly Arab; but also Afro-Arab, South Asian, European
GDP (official exchange rate): $31.27 billion (2017 est.)
Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Yemen is home to multiple militant Islamist organizations as well as Salafi-jihadi groups. Both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have exploited the conditions created by Yemen's protracted civil war and collapse over the past several years. The Zaydi Shia Houthi movement, which receives Iranian support, has also been empowered through the conflict, and now controls much of northern and central Yemen.

Multiple Islamist groups have taken advantage of Yemen's instability to advance their political agendas. At the extreme end of the spectrum, Salafi-jihadi groups have established safe-havens within the country's borders. The Yemeni government and Emirati-backed Yemeni militias, for their part, have coordinated with the United States on counterterrorism operations to target leaders of al-Qaeda, which expanded its influence at the beginning of the civil war but has receded in recent years. The Islamic State likewise maintains a modest foothold in Yemen.

The economic, social, and security issues plaguing the Yemeni state, coupled with a drawn-out civil war, have paralyzed the government, leaving it unable to provide effective governance and security to much of the country. This has added to historical internal challenges facing the nation, including political and economic instability, declining oil reserves, severe water shortages, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and regional and tribal tensions. The UN has ranked Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis due to the staggering rates of malnutrition and starvation, the world's largest cholera outbreak, and more than 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in the country.[1]

ISLAMIC ACTIVITY

In the three decades since the unification of traditionalist North Yemen and the Marxist South, Yemen has suffered from frequent instability and weak governance. This has made it an ideal safe haven for opposition and terrorist groups of varying political stripes. Prior to 1990, local authorities in the Marxist South supported and harbored an array of Palestinian terrorist organizations. 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 ones.[2]

The accessibility of weapons through Yemen's underground market has compounded the country's insecurity; estimates suggest that three guns exist for every one person in Yemen.[3] The Yemeni political and social landscape has historically been replete with tribal leaders and Islamist groups that had the arms and power to operate outside the constraints of the Yemeni government, creating conditions for piracy, smuggling, and Salafi-*jihadi* activity.[4]

The ouster of the country's longtime autocratic president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in 2011 after widespread anti-government protests and the political transition that followed his departure transformed Yemeni politics. 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. A National Dialogue Conference, presided over by Hadi, laid the groundwork for a new Yemeni Constitution and included a number of opposition groups and Islamist factions, including Zaydi Shiite Houthi rebels.[5]

Opposition groups denounced the transition process for not fully shifting power away from the established elite. In 2014, The Houthis left the negotiating table and militarized, advancing from their northern stronghold towards Sana'a, Yemen's capital, with Saleh's support.[6] They forced the Hadi government to sign an agreement giving opposition groups - including *Hirak* (the Southern Movement), an umbrella group for southern opposition factions - greater power in the government.[7] The Houthi coup culminated in the winter of 2015, when the Hadi government fled the country. Thereafter, civil war broke out between the Houthi-Saleh faction and those opposed to it, including the Southern Movement, the Sunni party al-Islah, local tribal militias, and al-Qaeda. An Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, intervened in Yemen in March 2015 in support of the Hadi government.[8] Most of Saleh's coalition split with the Houthis in December 2017, following Saleh's death at the hands of Houthi forces.[9] New groups opposed to the Houthis have also emerged since the start of the civil war, including the UAE-backed Transitional Political Council for the South (STC), which formed in May 2017 as a hardline splinter of the Southern Movement.[10] Radical actors on both sides of the war are actively promoting sectarianism in parts of Yemen where it was not previously prevalent.

Islamist and Salafi-jihadi actors

Yemen hosts a diverse array of Islamist actors, ranging from establishment political parties like al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced organization, to Salafi-*jihadi* insurgents like al Qaeda and the Islamic State at the extreme end of the spectrum. Within Yemen's Shi'a community, the Houthi movement is the most dominant Islamist actor.

Al-Qaeda

From its founding until the late 1990s, Al-Qaeda maintained training camps in various locations in the country.[11] 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.[12] Additionally, Ayman al-Zawahiri - Osama bin Laden's successor as the head of Al-Qaeda - and several of his companions from Egyptian Islamic Jihad briefly established a base of operations in the country in the 1990s.[13] Yemenis trained in camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including under al-Qaeda's high command, through a pipeline facilitated by the Yemeni government throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[14] The Saleh regime integrated many of these militants into existing state security and political organizations, directing them against socialists and separatists in the south.

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.[15] By the end of 2003, however, Sana'a began to lag in its counterterrorism efforts, and in February 2006 23 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 the escapees were likely assisted by members of the Yemeni security apparatus. [17]

Capitalizing on Yemen's instability of the late 2000s, the group has subsequently emerged as a major insurgent actor in Yemen, where it seeks to mobilize the country's Sunnis against the Yemeni state. Significantly, it does not demand ideological support. The group instead operates within local customs and develops relations based on pragmatic lines of support and by providing locals with basic goods and services.[18] AQAP has found a particularly favorable political climate in the aggrieved south.[19]

The number of Yemenis aligned with AQAP is unknown. Membership estimates range from the low hundreds to several thousand, and numbers have fluctuated over the last decade.[20]

Fighters are known to have travelled to Yemen from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq in recent years, bringing with them new skills and tactics.[21] Even before the 2011 anti-government protests swept through Yemen, AQAP was on a path to establish links with the country's eastern tribes.[22]

In the wake of the 2011 uprisings, AQAP sought to capitalize on the political transition, increasing attacks against government targets. The group's insurgent arm, Ansar al-Sharia, was powerful enough to seize key cities in the south at the time; it held the capital of Abyan province, Zinjibar, from May 2011 till June 2012.[23] The group controlled al Mukalla, a major port city in southeast Yemen, from April 2015 to April 2016, and expanded its influence behind the frontlines.[24]

AQAP uses asymmetrical attacks-such as complex attacks involving vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and small tactical teams-to degrade the military capabilities of opposing forces. The group has assassinated military and government leadership, intelligence officers, and government-aligned local powerbrokers. AQAP has also kidnapped individuals for ransom and political leverage over foreign powers. The 2012 kidnapping of Saudi deputy consul Abdallah al-Khalidi is one example.[25]

AQAP has historically conducted significant international outreach, although recent counterterrorism operations have disrupted its media capabilities. 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.[26] Al-Qaeda's English-language magazine, *Inspire*, which provides radicalizing literature and instructions for planning and conducting terrorist attacks, has been produced in Yemen since 2010, although there has not been a new issue since 2017.[27] AQAP released a shorter "Guide to Inspire," designed for potential recruits, after the June 2016 Orlando shooting and the July 2016 attack in Nice.[28] AQAP has also directly supported al-Qaeda affiliates in other theaters.[29]

AQAP has also repeatedly attempted to attack the U.S. homeland. Most recently, AQAP played a significant role in the attack on the U.S. naval air station in Pensacola, Florida by Saudi pilot Mohammad al Shamrani in December 2019. The FBI assessed that the Saudi had been in touch with AQAP since 2015 and had joined the Royal Saudi Air Force with the intention of carrying out an attack.[30] AQAP has also claimed responsibility for the January 2015 assault on the Paris offices of the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.[31]

In recent years, a sustained UAE-led and U.S.-backed counterterrorism campaign in Yemen has worn down AQAP leadership and reduced the group's safe haven. The group's first two leaders both perished in U.S. airstrikes-first Nasir al-Wuhayshi in 2015 and then Qasim al-Raymi in January 2020. Several other prominent AQAP officials have also been killed in U.S. operations, including the infamous bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri.[32] AQAP's current *emir*, the Saudi-born Khaled Batarfi, was named as Raymi's replacement in February 2020. He inherits a weakened organization that suffers from internal divisions and controls only a portion of the territory it could once claim.[33]

The Islamic State (IS)

Since its emergence as an independent entity in 2013, IS has competed with al-Qaeda for leadership of the global Salafi-*jihadi* movement. Yemen is key to this contest, due to both its religious significance and the presence of AQAP in the country.[34] To this end, IS's late military commander, Omar al-Shishani, mentioned Yemen in the Islamic State's celebratory June 2014 video calling for the end of borders that separate Muslims.[35]

Initial support for IS materialized in Yemen immediately after the group declared its caliphate in Iraq in June 2014, culminating in the creation of a dedicated IS branch in the country – known as *Wilayat al-Yaman* – later that year. IS *emir* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formally recognized the Yemeni branch alongside four others in a November 2014 video.[36] The group reaffirmed its pledge to Baghdadi in July 2019 as part of an IS media campaign across many of its global affiliates.[37]

IS claimed its first attack in Yemen on March 20, 2015, simultaneously bombing two mosques in Sana'a. The attack was at that time the deadliest terrorist incident in Yemen, and targeted Zaydi Shi'a.[38] In October 2015, 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. It attacked the government in al-Mukalla after an April 2016 Emirati-led offensive wrested control of the city from AQAP.[39] IS then expanded into al-Bayda governorate in central Yemen, claiming small-scale attacks against Houthi and Houthi-aligned tribal forces beginning in the fall of 2016. It also established training camps in the governorate, but these were later destroyed by U.S. airstrikes.[40]

Both AQAP's strong presence as well as the nature of IS's strategy has limited the latter's expansion to date. The targeting of non-combatants – a practice generally absent in Yemen, but common for IS – has alienated the group from the Yemeni people. In the first years of its existence, the group used a top-down leadership approach, working with a primarily non-Yemeni leadership body that generally rejected Yemeni tribal customs.

By 2017, IS was severely weakened, but it retained its presence in al-Bayda and regenerated an attack capability in Aden that fall.[41] In February 2018, IS again claimed an attack in Aden, killing fourteen people in an assault on a local counterterrorism force's headquarters.[42] In August 2019, IS claimed a bombing of an Aden police station that killed eleven officers.[43] The group may have maintained a cell in eastern Yemen in 2019 as well. U.S.-backed Saudi and Yemeni counterterrorism forces captured the alleged leader of the Islamic State in Yemen, Abu Osama al-Muhajir, and the group's chief financial officer in the al-Mahrah capital, al-Ghaydah, in June of that year.[44]

IS focused most of its attacks in Yemen between September 2018 and January 2019 against AQAP rather than the Houthis or Yemeni counterterrorism forces, according to data compiled by Elisabeth Kendall of Oxford University.[45] IS escalated its campaign against AQAP in March 2019, using suicide vests in multiple attacks. Fighting between the two groups continued throughout that summer, though the pace of attacks declined in the autumn. The last significant skirmish between the groups occurred in February 2020.[46] However, the rivals have continued their fight online, posting a litany of grievances, accusations, and taunts against each other in *jihadi* chat rooms. IS has repeatedly accused AQAP of collaborating with Yemeni security forces and urged its fighters to defect while AQAP propaganda has featured IS defectors who testify regarding the group's cruelty.[47]

IS's enduring presence in al-Bayda since 2016 may reflect a newfound pragmatism that allows the group to better navigate local rivalries. In a January 2020 report, UN investigators documented instances of collaboration between IS and the Houthis in al-Bayda, including "prisoner exchanges and [the] handover of military camps to ISIL under Houthi supervision."[48] The Houthis likely seek to prolong the IS-AQAP conflict as a means of securing their own presence in the governorate. Kendall has gone further and speculated that other actors within Yemen's civil war, and possibly regional powers, have coopted AQAP and IS or factions thereof in order to advance their own interests within the country.[49]

The Houthi Movement

The Houthis are a Zaydi Shi'a movement that maintains a stronghold in northern and central Yemen. They were the most direct threat to the Yemeni state from 2004–2010, engaging in an on-again, off-again guerrilla war with the Yemeni government that led 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*" (Shiite Islamic government) that ruled northern Yemen for roughly 1,000 years.[50] However, the Houthis contended that they were merely advocating for "freedom of worship and social justice".[51]

Currently led by Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the younger brother of the group's late founder, the group accused the Saleh government of "widespread corruption, of aligning itself too closely with the United States, of allowing too much Wahhabi… influence in the country, and of economic and social neglect in predominantly Shi'a parts of the country."[52] Though the Houthis based their challenge to Saleh's rule on religious grounds – Saleh was not of Hashemite descent, making him illegitimate to rule in strict Zaydi practice – the roots of the conflict were political. It began in 2003 when followers of the Zaydi revivalist group "Believing Youth" shouted anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric inside a Sa'ada mosque where Saleh was attending service.

In the years that followed, the Yemeni government and Abdul Malik al-Houthi expressed their readiness for dialogue on a number of occasions. However, the resulting ceasefire agreements always 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 southern Saudi Arabia. The Saudi military retaliated with airstrikes and ground forces.[53]

After 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 (NDC).[54] The Houthis, however, rejected the outcome and continued to use military force to expand their influence. The decision to divide Yemen into six administrative districts would have isolated the Houthi stronghold and forced the Houthis to compete with another powerful Zaydi family, the Sanhan, in Sana'a.[55]

The Houthis decided to overlook their historical animosity towards Saleh and developed a partnership of convenience with the former President and his allies in 2014. This allowed the Houthis to unseat the Hadi government from Sana'a in early 2015. The Houthi-Saleh bloc sought to negotiate a political settlement to the civil war but repeatedly rejected the terms put forward by the international community, which favored the Yemeni government. Today the Houthis possess an outsized level of influence over national politics compared to the movement's small size. Saleh and the Houthis cut a power-sharing agreement in July 2016, establishing a political council to govern the country that was split between Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party and the Houthis' Ansar Allah party.[56] However, the Houthis gradually sidelined this council and expanded their control over the state's security and political apparatus at the expense of Saleh and his allies.

The Houthis' relationship with Saleh's bloc soured in 2017 as Saleh sought to privately broker a political resolution with the Saudi-led coalition to serve his interests while the Houthis expanded their control of Sana'a government ministries.[57] These tensions sparked a conflict in late November 2017. After roughly three days of clashes, Houthi forces killed Saleh in early December, parading his body around the streets of Sana'a.[58] Many members of the pro-Saleh wing of the GPC split from the Houthis at this time, including the influential commander Tareq Saleh, nephew of the late president, who has since commanded thousands of troops in operations against the Houthis.[59] Some GPC members remained aligned with the Houthis, however, and continue to hold positions in Sana'a government.[60]

The al-Houthi movement has grown closer to Tehran over the course of the civil war and the Iranian regime appears to be elevating the group to a more prominent position within its proxy and partner network. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei received a Houthi delegation for the first time on August

13, 2019, an honor that is generally reserved for world leaders or Iran's closest non-state partners.[61] The Houthis formally appointed an ambassador to Tehran a few days later.[62]

The Iranian regime has armed the Houthis with a wide range of weaponry over the course of the civil war. Houthi IEDs have been found to contain components that originate in Iran while Lebanese Hezbollah appears to have transferred even deadlier explosively formed penetrators to the group.[63] The UN Yemen Panel of Experts has cited Iran for violating the arms embargo on Yemen by providing the Houthis with short-range ballistic missiles and suggested that Iran has supported the Houthis' drone program.[64] The Houthis have modified Iranian ballistic missiles – a capability also likely learned from Hezbollah – enabling them to strike as far as Riyadh.[65]

The Houthis initiated a campaign of drone and missile attacks against Saudi Arabia in May 2019 in tandem with Iranian and Iranian proxy actions in the Persian Gulf.[66] During this campaign, the Houthis shot down two U.S. surveillance drones in June and August 2019, respectively. U.S. Department of Defense officials assessed that the Houthis used an Iranian surface-to-air missile in the first incident and implied that Iran was linked to the second.[67] Saudi Arabia repeatedly blamed Iran for directing Houthi drone and missile attacks over the course of 2019, but Houthi leadership denied taking orders from Tehran and framed the attacks as either retaliatory or as part of a deterrence strategy.[68]

On September 14, 2019, the Houthis claimed a massive drone and missile attack on Saudi ARAMCO facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. U.S. officials assessed that the incident originated in Iran and that the Houthi claim was intended to provide Tehran with plausible deniability.[69] Shortly after the September attacks, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis began backchannel talks over a potential ceasefire. The Houthis consequently ceased large-scale cross-border attacks that month while the Saudis reciprocated by limiting airstrikes. The Houthis resumed some missile attacks on Saudi Arabia in the spring of 2020-albeit at a lower tempo than in the summer of 2019-likely as a means of maintaining diplomatic pressure.[70]

Saudi Arabia, once confident in its ability to defeat the Houthis militarily, now seeks a face-saving exit from Yemen that secures its vital interests. In February 2020, Saudi Arabia conceded to a long-standing Houthi demand and allowed a UN medical flight from Sana'a airport.[71] Subsequently, in March, the Saudi ambassador to Yemen invited Houthi and Hadi government representatives to the Kingdom for in-person talks, although a Houthi official claimed that Riyadh would not be a suitable venue. Then, in early April, Saudi Arabia announced a two-week ceasefire in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further strained Saudi resources by precipitating a steep decline in global oil prices. Saudi Arabia subsequently extended the ceasefire by a month.[72] The negotiations with Saudi Arabia have not stopped the Houthis from continuing the fight within Yemen, however.[73] The Houthis appear confident-perhaps overly so-in their favorable military balance within Yemen and seem to believe that they can sideline the weak Hadi government in any peace talks. The Houthis' latest proposal for ending the war, published in April 2020, insists for the first time that any comprehensive peace settlement be signed between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition rather than with the Hadi government.[74]

Al-Islah

Al-Islah is Yemen's most notable Sunni Islamist party and is entrenched in the country's political landscape. In the years following unification, 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.

Al-Islah gained power in the immediate post-Arab Spring reforms in Yemen. During the transition and in 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 held 50 seats in the NDC.[75] 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. However, it also put President Hadi at odds with many Sunni clerics, including the prominent

Salafi Abd al-Majid al-Zindani-who had recruited many Yemenis to the anti-Soviet *jihad* in the 1980s[76]-and some within al-Islah.[77]

Today al-Islah remains an important ally of the Hadi government. Hadi's Vice President since 2016, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, has historically had close ties with senior Islahis. However, as with many other factions in Yemen, the party is itself not a particularly unified or coherent organization.[78]

Saudi Arabia has close relationships with senior members of al-Islah despite the fact that many Islahis have strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider a terrorist organization.[79] Saudi Arabia is in competition with its coalition partner in Yemen and sees al-Islah as a counterweight to Emirati influence. The UAE has sought to weaken al-Islah and is allegedly behind several assassination attempts on its officials.[80] The UAE signaled a desire for rapprochement in November 2018, when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed hosted the group's leaders in Abu Dhabi. The UAE has since expressed that it maintains good relations with all Hadi government parties.[81] However, The UAE-backed STC remains openly hostile to al-Islah and characterizes the group as a terrorist organization that controls the Hadi government. When the STC temporarily seized Aden from the Yemeni government in August 2019, it called for the expulsion of al-Islah's members from Hadi's cabinet.[82] Islah-linked militias may have participated in clashes with STC-aligned forces in the weeks thereafter.[83] Saudi Arabia eventually brokered a power-sharing agreement between the STC and Hadi government in November 2019, but it quickly stalled. In April 2020 the STC declared "self-rule" in several southern provinces. Then in June, clashes between the STC and Hadi government-aligned forces briefly flared up again.[84]

While creating opportunities for new partnerships, the war has also put al-Islah under strain, as evidenced by a spate of recent unclaimed assassinations of Islah-affiliated imams in southern Yemen, particularly Aden.[85] Many Islahis appear to have fled the country along with some of the more moderate Salafi voices since the war began. Yemen's "southern question" is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, suggesting that the bad blood between al-Islah and the STC will persist for some time.

Islamism and Society

Yemen holds religious significance in Islam. Two *hadiths* (accounts of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) directly reference the area. The first prophesies that an 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 could not co-exist on the Arabian Peninsula, implying that Islam would overcome the other. Yemen's status in Islam makes it important to transnational Islamist groups, particularly Salafi-*jihadi* ones.

Historically, Yemeni society has been comprised of two main religious identities: the Zaydi Shi'a sect common in the north and northwest, and the Shafa'i Sunni sect popular in the south and southeast. Sunnis are believed to represent the majority sect among Yemen's population of 26 million; Zaydis claim around 35 percent.[86]

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."[87] For example, former president Saleh was of Zaydi origin but did not initially refer to this as his primary identity. 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." In response, Saleh was accused of exacerbating sectarian divisions.[88]

While Yemeni Salafi-*jihadism* predates the civil war, sectarian tensions, as noted by Bonnefoy, were not particularly widespread prior to the conflict. However, this has changed in recent years. Reports indicate that Yemenis of different sects are less likely today to worship in the same mosques than they were before

the war.[89] Al Qaeda and the Islamic State portray the civil war in starkly religious terms. The Houthis also employ sectarian rhetoric, having long accused Saudi Arabia of attempting to export Wahhabism to northern Yemen. The Houthis have also begun appropriating certain symbols, rhetoric, and celebrations associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran and/or Twelver Shi'ism, such as celebrations of Ashura and Quds Day. However, there is no evidence to support the claims made by some of the Houthis' detractors that the group's leadership has converted to Twelver Shi'ism.[90]

Islamism and the State

Islam is the official religion of the Yemeni state according to its constitution, and *sharia* law rests at the center of the country's legal system.[91] Under the constitution it is illegal to convert from Islam, political parties cannot oppose the religion, and penalties for violating blasphemy laws are steeper if the offense is committed against Islam than if it is committed against other religions. To become the president of Yemen, one must be Muslim.[92]

However, because of the fractured nature of modern Yemen and its weakened central government, state administration is not merely top-down. In a 2009 article for *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 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."[93] For years, the Saleh regime maintained power-sharing arrangements with these groups as a way of coopting and dividing any potential opposition. As part of these arrangements, numerous Islamist groups were integrated into the state apparatus throughout the 1990s and 2000s, gaining important posts in the army and security forces. As a result, repression of Islamist groups was limited, allowing easy access to political and tribal elites for Salafists, Sufis, Zaydi revivalists, Muslim Brothers, and some individuals sympathetic to *jihadist* doctrines (see Islamic Activity).[94]

The practice of religions other than Islam can be significantly restricted in Yemen. Individuals and institutions ascribed to the Baha'i faith – a religion considered heretical by some Islamic countries – have, for years, been targeted by the Yemeni government and Houthi groups.[95] On January 2, 2018, Hamed bin Haydara, a Baha'i man, was sentenced to death for his religious beliefs.[96] Haydara had been first detained in 2013; according to James Samimi Farr of the U.S. Baha'i Office of Public Affairs, Haydara was 'beaten and electrocuted, forced to sign documents while blindfolded, accused of being a "destroyer of Islam and religion" and of being a spy for Israel. while in custody.[97] Haydara's sentencing was upheld in court in March 2020, but Yemen's Houthi authority leader Mahdi al-Mashat called for the release of Haydara – as well as the release of all Baha'i "political prisoners." Haydara, as well as other Baha'i prisoners, have since been released.[98]

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