

American Foreign Policy Council

YEMEN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 25,408,288

Area: 527,968 sq km

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

Religions: Muslim including Shaf'ī (Sunni) and Zaydi (Shi'a), small numbers of Jewish, Christian, and Hindu

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$36.37 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated May 2013)



The inability of the Yemeni government to address the complex and intertwined challenges posed by an economic crisis forced by declining oil reserves, severe and expanding water shortages, an ever-increasing population of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and multiple internal threats to security, has allowed radical Islamist groups to flourish within Yemeni society and the government.¹ Widespread anti-government protests that led to a U.S.-backed, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-brokered transition agreement and the subsequent resignation of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011 have deepened divisions within the Yemeni government and military, further hindering the state's ability to address the plethora of issues it faces moving forward. Although reforms stipulated under the transition agreement are currently underway by the government of the newly elected President—and former vice-president—Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, former president Saleh's continued involvement in, and opposition to, the process

is further destabilizing an already weakened government and deepening divides within Yemeni society. The economic, social and security issues that continue to plague the Yemeni state, coupled with the internal political turmoil faced by the Hadi government, have further exposed the regime's inability to effectively govern and provide security outside of Sana'a, and allowed for Islamist groups to advance their interests and further establish a foothold throughout a deeply fractured society.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The al Houthi Rebellion

Prior to the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings, Yemeni military and security forces had already been spread thin to deal with a variety of security issues throughout the country, with the Saleh regime devoting a considerable amount of its resources to suppressing the Houthi rebellion in the north, which was viewed as the most direct security threat to then-president Ali Abdallah Saleh’s government. The uprisings and the resulting transition have taken forces away from this front, as the government has moves to reform a deeply fractured military, while at the same time bringing security back to the capital, Sana’a, and pushing back advances made by Islamist groups allied with al-Qaeda attempting to capitalize on current security situation.

The Yemeni government accuses the Shi’a group of “trying to reinstate the clerical imamate” (Islamic government) that ruled northern Yemen for roughly 1,000 years to 1962,² while the Houthis assert they are calling for “freedom of worship and social justice.”³ The Houthi rebels have engaged in a guerrilla war with the Yemeni government on and off since mid-2004, a conflict that has led to the death and displacement of thousands. Currently led by Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the younger brother of the group’s founder, Sheikh Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, the group accuses the Yemeni government of “widespread corruption, aligning itself too closely with the United States, allowing too much Wahhabi (fundamentalist Sunni) influence in the country, and years of economic and social neglect in predominantly Shi’a parts of the country.”⁴

The current conflict can to be traced 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.⁵ An uprising ensued after the Yemeni government responded by killing Hussein al-Houthi in a firefight in September 2004.

Under Saleh, the Yemeni government and Abdul Malik al-Houthi expressed

their readiness for dialogue on a number of occasions, with several cease fire agreements being forged. However, such attempts at peace were short-lived, resulting in a quick resumption of violence between both sides. The Yemeni government has launched a number of military operations against the group since 2004. In the fall of 2009, the conflict in the north between the Yemeni military and Houthi rebels escalated, with the Saudi military joining the fight after an incursion onto Saudi soil by Houthi rebels which resulted in the killing of two Saudi border guards that November.⁶

As the conflict between the Yemeni military and the Shi'a Houthis escalated, so too did accusations by the Yemeni government of Iranian involvement in the arming the Houthis. Western officials, however, say there is no firm evidence to support such accusations, and Tehran has vehemently denied them, while at the same time condemning Saudi Arabia's involvement in the conflict. Meanwhile, Houthi rebels have accused Saudi Arabia of supporting Sana'a and aiding its offensives—something which the Saudi government has denied.⁷

In February 2010 a ceasefire agreement was reached between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. However, fighting between the military and Houthi rebels has continued. The widespread anti-government protests that erupted in January 2011, and their aftermath, shifted the priority of the military to restoring security in Sana'a and combating the growing threat of al-Qaeda in the south. This shift in priorities, coupled with divisions within the military as a result of the uprisings, left a security vacuum in the north. The resulting inability of the Yemeni regime to provide security and effectively govern outside of Sana'a has emboldened the Houthi to expand territorially—which has, in turn led to clashes between the Sunni al-Islah Party and the Shi'a Houthis, as the two jockey for power and influence in northern province of Al-Jawf.⁸ Adding a new dimension to sectarian tensions in Yemen, in January of 2011 AQAP deputy Saeed Ali al-Shihri “announced jihad (holy war) against Iranian-backed Houthi Shiite advocates.”⁹ The security situation and subsequent power grab by the Houthis corresponded with an increase in reports of sectarian clashes between al-Houthi militants and Sunni tribes in the northern province of Sa'ada, which has been under the control of al-Houthi since the spring of 2011.¹⁰

In addition to the AQAP declaration, the sectarian nature of the conflict in Yemen's north has once again led the Yemeni government to point to Iranian interference in the conflict. As such, the situation in the north has become not only of concern for the Yemeni government, but also has the potential of spilling over the border into Saudi Arabia, which has a large Shi'a population in the provinces along its common border with Yemen.

Al-Qaeda

Throughout its history, Yemen has played the role of safe haven to opposition and terror groups of varying political stripes. Prior to the unification of traditionalist North Yemen and Marxist South Yemen in 1990, the latter was used as a safe haven for a wide array of Palestinian and terror organizations with the support of local authorities. Since unification, this tradition of support for subversive groups and “freedom fighters” has continued, but with radical Palestinian and leftist organizations being replaced by radical and extremist Islamic organizations, especially those in opposition to the Saudi monarchy.¹¹

Al-Qaeda is one such group which has a long-standing presence in Yemen. Elements sympathetic to Osama bin Laden’s jihad predated the actual formation of al-Qaeda in late 1989, with Yemenis ranking second only to Saudis as members of the mujahedeen that fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. That war constituted a key milestone in the consolidation of radical Islam in Yemen.

From its inception until the late 1990s, al-Qaeda is known to have maintained training camps in various locations, in Yemen.¹² Such enduring interest in Yemen was expressed “in a November 1996 autobiography bin Laden provided to the Islamist journal *Nida’ul Islam*,” in which, “the al-Qaeda chief boasted about supporting the mujahedeen fighting against the Communist party in South Yemen in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s.”¹³ In 1997, bin Laden reportedly sent an envoy to Yemen to explore the possibility of setting up a base there in case the Taliban expelled him from Afghanistan.¹⁴ The al-Qaeda leader in 2003 listed Yemen as one of six countries “most in need of liberation.”¹⁵ Yemenites also “continued to train in Afghanistan under al-Qaeda’s high command throughout the 1990s” and even up until the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 terror attacks.¹⁶

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Yemeni government implemented stiff counterterrorism measures, including its cooperation with the CIA to kill al-Qaeda leader Abu Ali al-Harithi in November 2002.¹⁷ By the end of 2003, however, Sana’a began to lag in its counterterrorism efforts; which “hit a low point in February 2006, when twenty-three al-Qaeda terrorists, including the mastermind of the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, escaped from a Yemeni prison.”¹⁸ An October 2009 report by AEI asserts 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.”¹⁹

Yemen has come to be viewed as a fragile state on the brink of failure. This potential opportunity has not been missed by al-Qaeda, which has long viewed Yemen as a potential base of operations. This view was a contributing factor in the formation of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which represented a merger of Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda. Yemen was a likely choice for the newly consolidated al-Qaeda movement to set up shop after the Saudi government imposed a crackdown inside its borders “following a string of deadly attacks throughout the Kingdom between May 2003 and December 2004” against oil company offices, foreign targets, Saudi government offices, and security targets.²⁰

Since its establishment, AQAP has emerged as one of the most active branches of the bin Laden network. In 2009, AQAP was 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 of Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef; and the ambush and killing of seven Yemeni security officials near the Saudi border.²¹ AQAP has also claimed responsibility for the attempted Christmas Day 2009 downing of Detroit-bound Flight 253 by Nigerian extremist Abdul Farouk Abumuttalab.²² The failed Christmas Day bombing was followed by the September 2010 downing of a UPS flight in Dubai, although U.S. officials have found no connection between the crash and terrorism, as well as for an attempted cargo plane bomb plot foiled in Dubai and the UK in October of the same year.²³

The number of Yemeni mujahedeen claiming allegiance to AQAP is unknown, although Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi claimed in late 2008 that Yemen was playing host to more than 1,000 jihadist fighters and al-Qaeda affiliates.²⁴ This number has increased significantly as AQAP and associated organizations active in Yemen, such as Ansar al-Sharia, have increased their power and influence in southern Yemen, which is quickly “becoming a top draw for foreign fighters, who used to travel to Afghanistan or Pakistan to wage jihad.”²⁵

Even before the 2011 anti-government protests swept through Yemen, AQAP had been on a path toward establishing links and putting down roots with the tribes in the Marib, al-Jawaf and Shabwa governorates of eastern Yemen.²⁶ The group had been largely successful in building alliances with tribes in the region, and felt little pressure from the Yemeni government,

which resulted in a new boldness on the part of AQAP, manifested through its reconstitution in Yemen and greater activism beyond its borders, in the Gulf region.²⁷

The growing threat of AQAP has not been lost on Washington, with senior policymakers and analysts testifying before the House Homeland Security Committee in February 2011 that they “consider al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with Awlaki as a leader within that organization, probably the most significant risk to the U.S. homeland.”²⁸ The subsequent, October 2011 targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical American-born Muslim cleric who became a leading figure within AQAP, and the deaths of other high value al-Qaeda affiliated targets over the past year, has likely dealt a significant blow to AQAP’s efforts to recruit, plan and strike at targets outside of the region. The ongoing internal political turmoil, however, has enabled al-Qaeda and affiliated Islamist organizations to increase their power and influence, and further establish roots in the southern Yemen in hopes of building its base for future operations against targets across the border in Saudi Arabia and beyond. The kidnapping of Saudi deputy consul Abdallah al-Khalidi at his home in the south Yemen port of Aden by al-Qaeda militants in March 2012, is one such example; this, coupled with the inability of the Yemeni government halt attacks and advances made by Islamists throughout the country, is not only a challenge for an already weakened Yemeni government, but also a cause for concern for both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia of a potentially resurgent al-Qaeda able to conduct attacks against the Kingdom and western targets in the region, and eventually beyond.²⁹

AQAP has stepped up to capitalize on the political, social and military transition underway in Yemen. In the wake of the 2011 uprisings that ousted longstanding President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Islamist groups associated with AQAP have increased attacks against government targets and expanded their influence throughout southern Yemen, occasionally holding key cities in the south, including the provincial capital of Abyan province, Zinjibar, which al-Qaeda elements held from May 2011 until the Yemeni military, aided by tribal militias known as Popular Committees, were able to overrun the “emirates” that had been established by al-Qaeda aligned militants in late June 2012.³⁰

Yemen continues to teeter on the brink of becoming a failed state. Many analysts view such a failed state scenario as “perhaps the greatest appeal that Yemen holds for al-Qaeda” as it would provide the group “with the political and geographic space to operate unhindered; to plan and train for operations, set up training camps, establish safe houses, and shelter top leaders.”³¹ In the event of such a scenario, AQAP’s capabilities would expand dramati-

ically, enabling AQAP to operate all the more freely, and in the absence of a central government, AQAP may attempt to fill the power vacuum, a situation which U.S. officials, and others, fear, as al-Qaeda continue to target government offices and senior security officials and tribal militias, alongside the army, continue to battle al-Qaeda militants in the southern and eastern provinces of Yemen. In response to such fears and threats to national security, the U.S. has increased counterterrorism efforts in Yemen.³² U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism efforts have dealt a number of significant blows to AQAP's leadership and operations over the last year, including the October 2011 targeting killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, and, more recently, the September 5, 2012 operation that killed AQAP's second-in-command, Saeed Ali al-Shihri.³³

The Southern Secessionist Movement

Aside from the Houthi rebellion, the other indigenous threat to the Yemeni government is posed by the resurgent southern secessionist movement. Yemen's Southern Movement, or al-harakat al-janubiyya, is described by analyst Katherine Zimmerman of AEI as "an umbrella group for various southern anti-government factions that trace their roots back to the 1994 civil war between northern and southern Yemen."³⁴ The secessionists are not viewed as Islamist by nature and have not used Islamist rhetoric.

The Southern Movement poses less of a threat to state stability than the Houthis and has not yet demonstrated that it can sustain a violent insurgency. Indeed, the greatest threat from this movement derives from the fact that the bulk of Yemen's already scarce oil reserves are located in the southern provinces as well as its history of providing a safe haven to foreign opposition and terrorist movements, including al-Qaeda.

The Southern Movement has held massive demonstrations and has clearly stated its grievances to the Yemeni government. The grievances expressed by the secessionists include: "economic marginalization (much of the country's oil revenue is generated in the southern provinces but believed to be distributed throughout the country); forced early retirements and insufficient pensions for military officers from the south; and restrictions on press freedoms in the south for newspapers advocating secessionist agendas."³⁵

The year 2009 witnessed a deteriorating security situation in Yemen with the Southern Movement's more militant factions increasingly being implicated in assassination attempts on government officials and ambushes on security checkpoints and military convoys, as well as anti-unity demonstrations held by supporters of the movement, which have turned violent on occasion. Despite the occasional violent clashes between demonstrators and the military, as well as the threat posed by the more militant factions to government

and military officials, prior to the 2011 anti-government uprisings the conflict was seen as manageable by the Yemeni government and reconciliation was still viewed as a real and achievable option.³⁶

Emboldened by the success of popular uprisings throughout the region, the Southern Movement tempered its calls for secession and joined the youth movements, along with al-Houthi rebels and Joint Meeting's Party (JMP), in calling for President Saleh's resignation.³⁷ While the Southern Movement's calls were answered when Saleh resigned his presidency in November 2011, the Movement has since denounced the February 2012 presidential election—which had just one consensus candidate on the ballot, former Vice President Hadi—seeing it as a continuation of the Saleh regime's rule. At the same time, the Southern Movement, like others in Yemen, is frustrated with the fact that the Saleh family remains involved in the country's security affairs and politics, and continues to hold several influential positions and military posts, including the former president's continued role as the president of the General People's Congress party (GPC).³⁸

Although the Southern Movement is not motivated by Islamist ideology and extremism, it does present yet another issue for a heavily-divided Yemeni government in transition putting additional pressure on an already-fragile Yemeni state on the brink of collapse.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Historically, Yemeni society has been divided along two main religious identities, the Shi'a Zaydi sect primarily followed in the North and Northwest and the Salafi school of Sunni Islam in evidence mostly in the South and Southeast. Although no accurate and reliable statistics exist, Salafis are generally acknowledged to represent a majority among Yemen's population of 24 million, while Zaydis claim around 35 percent.³⁹ Zaydis are constituents of a Shi'a sect often described as moderate in its jurisprudence.⁴⁰

In his studies of Islamism in Yemen, Laurent Bonnefoy of the Institut français du Proche-Orient finds 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.”⁴¹ 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.”⁴²

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 Shafei-led protest movement,” even going so far as to suggest that he could be the “last Zaydi president.”⁴³ Such actions led to criticism that Saleh was “concentrating on solidifying tribal allegiances even at the cost of exacerbating sectarian divisions.”⁴⁴ The increase in sectarian tensions in northern Yemen over the past year can be seen, in part, as a result of policies and the overall governing strategies of playing competing tribal and sectarian groups off of one another, which, while it kept Saleh in power for over 30 years, has led to deep social divisions along sectarian and tribal lines in the north.

In a November 2008 Chatham House report, journalist Ginny Hill describes Yemen as “an incomplete state where the majority of the population lives without regard to laws made in Sana’a. A corrupt, self-interested government that fails to provide the bare minimum of social services has little relevance and legitimacy outside, and even inside, the major urban areas. With a nascent civil society sector and a flimsy middle class, Yemen is unable to generate sustained momentum for political change. Low literacy rates, unreliable public data and the absence of grassroots democracy inhibit a genuine national debate that would create sustained internal pressure for accountability and reform.”⁴⁵

These are just some of the factors that contribute to the appeal of jihadi groups in relatively “isolated, underdeveloped regions (such as Marib, Shabwa, al-Jawf, and Abyan) and among peripheral and marginal tribal groups who do not benefit from state investments and infrastructure. It is these specific regions that international donors are targeting in order to undermine violence and support for radical groups through the establishment of development programs.”⁴⁶

Many Western observers have focused on the role of al Iman University in Sana’a. The institution has been portrayed by locals as one solely dedicated to Islamic higher learning. But this has not prevented outside observers from charging al Iman with “being akin to a terrorist ideological training camp.”⁴⁷ This view of al Iman University is primarily due to the fact that it is headed by Sheik Abdel Majid al-Zindani, who has been formally designated by the United Nations’ 1267 committee as a terrorist financier, and identified by the U.S. Treasury Department to have been an ideological and spiritual aide to late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.⁴⁸ It has also been supported by the history of some of its alumni, among them John Walker Lindh, the so-called “Orange County Taliban” who was captured in 2001 in Afghanistan and sen-

tenced to 20 years in prison for his participation in the Taliban, and by the university's reluctance to open itself up to outside observers.⁴⁹ According to scholar Gregory Johnsen, the reality probably is somewhere in between the two arguments, with al Iman continuing "to straddle this divide as a legitimate religious institution and as a fundamentalist pipeline."⁵⁰

Yemen's demography, social inequity, tribal societal structure, prolonged civil conflicts, increasing sectarianism and the absence of an effective central government has created the conditions for the development of homegrown Islamic militant groups like al-Houthi, as well as a safe haven for foreign fundamentalist and terror organizations. Yemen's education system, which utilizes textbooks containing some degree of anti-American and anti-Israeli ideology, coupled with an employment rate around 35 percent, are factors which play into the vulnerability of young men to be exploited by organizations such as al-Qaeda.⁵¹

In March 2011, Gregory Johnsen summed up how uprisings in Yemen could swing in favor of Islamist groups like al-Qaeda, contending that, although a group like AQAP is "nowhere strong enough to make a play for control of the state," should Saleh leave office, raising hopes for rapid change and those expectations are not met, "in a year, that could open the way for al-Qaeda to say, 'You tried Saleh, you tried democracy now you have to try the way of the way of the prophet and the rule of Sharia law.'"⁵² The fall of Saleh has already produced a number of gains for Islamist groups throughout the country, with some reports in the Yemeni media warning that a scenario such as the one discussed by Johnsen is beginning to take shape.⁵³ Such a situation would not bode well for Yemen's neighbor to the north, Saudi Arabia, and certainly not for U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

Further compounding the issue is the accessibility of weapons through Yemen's vast underground arms market; roughly three guns are said to exist for every one person in Yemen.⁵⁴ 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. Since the start of the uprisings in early 2011, tribal groups and Islamists have taken control of provinces throughout Yemen and attacks against government and military installations have been on the rise, especially in southern Yemen, as Islamist groups in Yemen move to reinforce their position and gain local support.⁵⁵ 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"⁵⁶ through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal, and has the potential of to further endangering security throughout the region and beyond.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In a March 2009 journal article for *The Middle East Review of International Studies* (MERIA), Laurent Bonnefoy cited power-sharing as “one of the main features of Yemen’s political system” which has also been a source of equilibrium in the country. 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.”⁵⁷ For years, the 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.

In recent years, divisive policies and shifting political alliances have increasingly 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, an increasing view of the Saleh government as a U.S. and Saudi puppet by Islamist groups, and growing economic and resource inequity all contributed to the government’s domestic weakness and wrecked the equilibrium that the such a power-sharing model had helped to maintain. This was especially true following 9/11, as the Saleh regime sought to balance certain power-sharing arrangements with its emerging counterterrorism role and alliance with Washington. Many of the issues Saleh faced, and the issues that the transitional government must now confront, find their roots in the fall-out of the Afghanistan jihad and the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990.

Unification 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, that partnership did not endure, with the Vice President of the coalition government, Ali Salim al-Baid, representing the south, fleeing to the city of Aden and accusing the government of marginalizing the south and attacking southerners in 1993. The conflict that ensued between leaders in the north and south paved the way for increased participation of Islamic 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 Islamic political figure. Zindani was a central activist in recruiting Yemeni mujahedeen members for the jihad in Afghanistan, as well as himself being a combatant against the Soviets during the 1979-89 war. Upon his return to Yemen, Zindani established the Islah Islamic movement, which later became a political party now headed by Muhammed Abdallah

al-Yadum.

Laurent Bonnefoy describes Islah as a “conservative religious movement that calls for social reform in accordance with Islamic principles and is generally described as the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. This party was created in September 1990, bringing together Islamist figures, tribal leaders, and businessmen. The party leadership claims to accept the current constitution, thus appearing to recognize the need to operate within Yemen’s democratic framework, but Islah qualifies its support for the constitutional status quo by insisting that sharia law should form the basis of all legal rulings. Yemen’s constitution already conforms to this position, but it is a very loose interpretation.”⁵⁸

After the first multiparty general elections in 1993, Abd al-Majid 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.⁵⁹ 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 southern separatists, 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.⁶⁰ One such example of this is Tariq al-Fadli, heir of the sultan of Abyan and former Afghan mujahedeen 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.⁶¹

Throughout the 1990s, and into 2000, formal and informal integration of numerous Islamist groups into the state apparatus continued, with important posts in the army and security forces being held by individuals identify-

ing with various sects of Islam. As a result of the diversity of the security and political body's, 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.⁶²

Al-Islah is well-entrenched in Yemen's political landscape and in numerous regions of the country. One region where al-Islah seems to have considerable support is in the former Marxist South, where anti-socialist reaction is strong and which favors Islamist candidates and platforms and is currently gaining influence in some areas of north. Nationally, the Islamist party has won an average of 18 percent of the vote during the 1993, 1997, and 2003 parliamentary elections. Although lack of transparency reduces the significance of these numbers, the influence of al-Islah in Yemen is still significant and should not be ignored.⁶³ This is especially true under the current transition plan currently being implemented by the Hadi government. Under the U.S. backed, GCC-brokered transition plan, al-Islah, as one of two major parties in the JMP, a coalition of former opposition parties (the other being the Yemeni Socialist Party), is now sharing power with the former ruling GPC party and as such will have a significant role in negotiating and shaping reforms by the Hadi government. Moreover, in April 2012, Abu Ali Abdullah al-Hakem, a senior leader of the al-Houthi, indicated that the group will participate in the upcoming national dialogue, as stipulated in the GCC-brokered agreement on transfer of power,⁶⁴ thus adding to the list of Islamist groups who will play a role in shaping the post-Saleh Yemeni government. At the same time, however, moves by the Hadi government to open up dialogue with the Shi'a al-Houthis has put him at odds with many Sunni clerics, including Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, and some within al-Islah.⁶⁵

Although there has been an increase in U.S.-Yemeni cooperation on counterterrorism efforts since the ouster of Saleh, and President Hadi has made statements openly supporting U.S. drone strikes against al-Qaeda,⁶⁶ the influence of Islamist groups in post-Saleh Yemen will continue to present Sana'a with a dilemma in its relationship with Washington, just as it did for the Saleh regime. On the one hand, the Yemeni government will continue to rely on foreign assistance, especially from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, to address the security and economic challenges it faces in the years to come. On the other, the support Yemen receives from such actors is likely to continue to play into the rhetoric of opposition and Islamist groups, such as AQAP, and, unless their demands are addressed by the transitional government, al-Houthi.

Such a dilemma was highlighted in meetings between the U.S. and Yemeni officials in the spring of 2012 on future counterterrorism cooperation against al-Qaeda and affiliated groups in Yemen, during which a U.S. request to

expand drone strikes to “target groups of fighters who appear to be militants” was rejected by the Yemeni government.⁶⁷ At the same time, Sana’a acknowledged it is losing ground against AQAP, and requested an increase in U.S. military trainers and advisers, as well as authorized an increase in counterterrorism operations, including drone strikes, “targeting individuals with known links to al-Qaeda.”⁶⁸

The ongoing transition makes for a very fluid situation in Yemen and only time will tell what formal role Islamist groups of various stripes will play in post-Saleh Yemen. Although reforms now underway have removed a number of Saleh loyalist and kin from key government and security posts, the Hadi government is not likely to make a clean break from the past power sharing mechanisms which kept Saleh in power for over 30 years. As such, Hadi will likely continue to consolidate his power by building networks which mirror those of his predecessor. The need to build such networks and establish a base of his own, while wrestling power away from Saleh and his loyalists is likely to influence policy moves by President Hadi, especially in regards to his government’s relationship with of certain Islamist groups. Hadi’s September 2012 statement indicating that his government would consider dialogue with al-Qaeda militants “on condition that al Qaeda announces its agreement to cast aside its weapons, repent of its extremist ideas that are far from Islam, and give up protecting armed elements from outside the country,” adding that, “Mediators... pressured me to accept dialogue,”⁶⁹ is a departure from his presidential acceptance speech promising to “eradicate Al-Qaeda loyalists,”⁷⁰ and should raise concerns as to Hadi’s ability to withstand pressure to engage with Islamist extremists and terrorists.

While attempts by President Hadi to wrestle power away from Saleh and his loyalists and sideline Islamist figures such as al-Zindani are promising developments, continued political and security sector instability, Hadi’s need to build a power base that rivals those of his challengers, coupled with statements expressing a willingness to engage with certain extremist and terrorist elements, are likely to raise questions as to Yemen’s reliability as a counterterrorism ally. In any event, whether working on behalf of or in opposition to the regime, in either formal and informal arrangements, Islamist groups, such as al-Islah, al-Houthi, newly established Salafi parties, and al-Qaeda and its affiliates, will likely continue to play a significant role in Yemeni society and have a great deal of influence on policy moves by Sana’a.

ENDNOTES

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