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VARIETIES OF ISLAMISM IN YEMEN: THE LOGIC OF INTEGRATION UNDER PRESSURE¹

Laurent Bonnefoy*

One of the most remarkable features of the contemporary Yemeni political formula has been its capacity to deal with the various Islamist ideal-types through integration and cooptation rather than repression. Muslim Brothers, Salafists, violent “jihadi” fringes, Sufis, and Zaydi revivalists have all at some point collaborated with the state to a certain extent. Since the 1970s, such an equilibrium has proved rather functional, as it has reduced the level of political violence, allowed the participation of most, and maintained government stability. Yet due to internal developments and external pressures after September 11, this system has increasingly been placed in jeopardy with still unknown consequences.

In the spring of 2005 in a remote corner of former South Yemen, the driver of an old Toyota Land Cruiser displayed two seemingly opposite pictures on his windshield. The first showed Ali Abdallah Salih, the president of Yemen since July 1978 and a new ally of the United States in the “War on Terror,” while the second depicted Usama bin Ladin, the world-famous embodiment of transnational terrorism. This reveals much about Yemeni society and its political system; nevertheless it can be framed and interpreted in different ways.

First, the relative tolerance of local authorities (who were necessarily aware of the truck driving through the villages) toward such a display of double allegiance can be seen as yet another symbol of the infiltration of the government by violent Islamist groups and of tolerance toward so-called “jihadi” movements.

In Yemen, these groups have been given much attention since the investigation into the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2000 by a cell linked to al-Qa’ida in Aden. In this framework, Yemeni authorities are frequently accused of paying only minimum lip-service to the American anti-terrorist agenda, while many inside the government directly support violence or turn a blind eye toward those who grant active support to militants.²

The Land Cruiser anecdote (while not necessarily common) could [consequently](#) be understood as an illustration of the ambivalent relationship between the state and the Islamists. It may also symbolize a manifestation of state and government plurality. The integration of various Islamist groups into the state apparatus should actually be considered a stabilizing factor. It is a means of minimizing violence through social and political integration rather than encouraging it through stigmatization and repression.

Since the beginnings of Islam, religion has been closely associated with political power in the Yemeni highlands and coastal areas. After having ruled for over a millennium, it was only in 1962 that the fall of the Zaydi imam’s monarchy gave way to a more direct separation between politics and religion in the country. This occurred through the establishment of the republican regime, once inspired by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s model in Egypt. The modernization of the state and society in North Yemen and in Marxist South Yemen (a former British colony that became independent in 1967 and remained the only socialist Arab state until its fall in 1990) did not really undermine the influence of the religious political actors. The same can be said of the May 1990 unification of North and South Yemen.

Historically, Yemeni society has been divided along two main religious identities. Zaydis are constituents of a Shi’a sect often described as moderate in its jurisprudence, distinct from the Twelver Shi’as found in Iran, and close to Sunnism in many aspects.³ Shafi’is are Sunni. Yet throughout the twentieth century, the divide eroded considerably, and consequently it does not appear to be as important as in the past, when Zaydi imams ruled North Yemen. No accurate and

reliable statistics exist, but Shafi'is are usually considered to be the significant majority among a population of 24 million in Yemen, while Zaydis represent around 35 percent of the population, with their bastions in the North.

Owing to recent changes--particularly internal and external migrations, individualization and marketization of religious identities, as well as the improvement of education levels--most Yemenis now consider the divide as merely symbolic. Recent difficulties due to a brutal conflict in the North of the country opposing the army and an armed Zaydi revivalist group called the Believing Youth do not seem to have had a significant effect on the structure of the convergence of religious identities. Indeed, 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. For instance, the president is himself of Zaydi origin but never refers to his primary identity. 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.⁴

YEMENI ISLAMIST IDEAL-TYPES

In the Yemeni context, the plurality of Islamism is expressed through five distinct Islamist ideal-types: the Muslim Brothers, violent “jihadi” fringes, Salafists, Sufis, and Zaydi revivalists. All five are rooted in the country’s complex, rich, and ancient history, but are also products of contemporary international and transnational dynamics. Groups may also overlap and situations change quickly due to shifting alliances. Nevertheless, each of these groups is structured in a specific way and distinguishes itself from the others through a number of key issues: participation in party politics, loyalty to the ruler, significant episodes of confrontation with the state, and overt stigmatization of other religious and political identities.

	Main leaders or organizations	Direct and overt participation in party politics and democracy	Automatic loyalty to the republican ruler	Significant episodes of violent confrontation with the state	Participation in inter-religious violence and stigmatization
Muslim Brotherhood	Al-Islah Party	Yes	No	No	Yes
Violent “Jihadi” Fringes	Al-Qa’ida affiliates	No	No	Yes	Yes
Salafists	Muqbil al-Wadi’i (died in 2001)	No	Yes	No	Yes
Sufis	Dar al-Mustafa	No	Yes	No	No
Zaydi Revivalists	Hizb al-Haqq; Husayn al-Huthi (died in 2004)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Figure 1: Outline of the strategies of the diverse Islamist ideal-types in contemporary Yemen.

Muslim Brothers

Those groups inspired by the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood are the most prevalent in the wide spectrum of Yemeni Islamism. As early as the 1940s, the reformist and revolutionary movements opposed to the Zaydi monarchy were closely associated with Islamist intellectuals. While studying in Cairo, many reformists--including Muhammad Ahmad Nu'man (of Shafi'i origin) and Muhammad Mahmud al-Zubayri (of Zaydi origin)--became acquainted with the ideas of Hasan al-Banna, although it seems that most of them were never formally Muslim Brothers. Both the failed 1948 revolution against the Zaydi imam, Yahya, and the successful 1962 revolution against his grandson, Imam Muhammad al-Badr (a few days after his accession to power), were at least in part inspired by the teachings of the Muslim Brothers.

During the September 26, 1962 revolution, as nationalists, Nasserists, Muslim Brothers, and modernists united to overthrow the Zaydi imam and to establish a republic, disagreements quickly emerged among the new leaders. Through the creation of the Hizballah (Party of God) in 1964, Zubayri, who felt that the new Egyptian-backed regime lacked legitimacy, intended to draw together different segments of society, the intellectuals (many of whom could be labeled as Islamist) and the tribal elements in particular.⁵ While Zubayri was assassinated in 1965, his project of reconciliation and integration of all parties became a founding principle of the republic. In that framework, Muslim Brothers were brought into various institutions, especially the education system and the security forces.

This association appears to have been successful and still lives on through the al-Islah (Reform) party, 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.⁶ From its foundation until late 2007, it was headed by Shaykh Abdallah al-Ahmar, chief of the most prominent tribal confederation (the Hashid, of which Ali Abdallah Salih's tribe, Sanhan, itself is a member) and speaker of parliament.⁷ More than a year after Shaykh Abdallah al-Ahmar's death on December 29, 2007, the tribal and political consequences are still unclear.

The party loosely brings together individuals with different agendas and strategies and has proven its ability to adapt to the changing internal, and international, context.⁸ The party has taken part in the democratization process since its inception, competing in free elections and participating in the parliament. While debate over whether the democratic system holds religious legitimacy may exist inside the party, al-Islah overtly accepts the multiparty system and has never supported direct armed confrontation with the government. It collaborates with the regime and could even be considered an integral part of it. In 1994, during the secession war opposing Southern elites to the North, militias supported by al-Islah assisted the government in defeating the socialist-led secessionists.⁹ Today, al-Islah is well-implanted in numerous regions of the country (including in the former Marxist South, where anti-socialist reaction is strong and favors Islamist candidates and platforms). Nationally, it won an average of 18 percent of the vote during the 1993, 1997, and 2003 parliamentary elections (though the elections' lack of transparency reduces the significance of this data).¹⁰

With the turn of the new millennium, a new strategy of alliance and collaboration with other opposition movements--particularly with its former enemy, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), which headed South Yemen--emerged among the party's leadership.¹¹ Although not necessarily popular among all activists,¹² a common platform was composed, and Faysal bin Shamlan (a former oil minister) was designated as the main opposition candidate against Salih in the September 2006 presidential election.¹³ Shamlan won 22 percent of the votes. His relative success (considering the means monopolized by the president to ensure his reelection) has opened new horizons for the opposition and for the Islamists. The April 2009 parliamentary elections will be an important test for the party's strategy of frontal opposition and alliance rather than of cooptation as in the 1990s [but the opposition threatens to boycott the ballot as it considers that it lacks transparency.](#)

Aside from its deceased leader Abdallah al-Ahmar and his sons (including Hamid, a successful businessman), the most prominent figures of al-Islah include Yahya Lutfi al-Fusayl, Muhammad

Qahtan, Muhammad al-Yadumi (who took over the leadership after the death of al-Ahmar), and Abd al-Majid al-Zindani. Al-Zindani is likely the most famous of all and is said to embody the radical component of al-Islah. This former comrade of Zubayri, heads the al-Iman religious university in San'a and spent many years in Saudi Arabia. In the 1980s, he organized for Yemeni fighters to be sent to Afghanistan and thereby gained stature. In the post-September 11 context, Zindani has frequently been described by the American administration as a close partner of bin Ladin. His historical role has protected him from direct government repression.¹⁴ He plays an ambiguous role, acting both as a mainstream popular figure (his criticism of American foreign policy is commonly accepted by Yemenis) and a marginal one, as he represents a bridge to a type of violent militancy that does not appeal to many.

Violent “Jihadi” Fringes

Although small in number, the fringes labeled as jihadi have played an important role in Yemen's recent history, often putting the country on the map of international terrorism. Since the 1990s, they have become increasingly visible in the media, a fact that often obscures other versions of Islamism.¹⁵ The participation of Yemenis in the Afghan War in the 1980s and the subsequent “jihad” in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iraq have affected internal politics. In 1994, during the war against the socialist-led secessionists in the South, militias (some comprised of former “Afghan Arabs”) assisted the national army, murdered socialists, and sacked Aden. Some were integrated into the security forces or local tribal institutions.¹⁶ An example is Tariq al-Fadli, heir of the sultan of Abyan and leader of the *mujahidin* (fighters) in Afghanistan, who later was appointed by the president to the Majlis al-Shura, the upper house of the parliament.

Others create cells with transnational links (such as the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army or other groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida that eventually turned against government interests and explicitly targeted Westerners). These took part in the 1998 kidnapping of tourists; in the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000; and since September 2001 in various assassinations or (often failed) bombing plots throughout the country, including against infrastructure.¹⁷ In November 2002, a missile shot by an American drone in the central desert of Yemen near the city of Marib killed Abu Ali al-Harithi, alleged to be the leader of al-Qa'ida in Yemen. Some other activists were arrested and tried by the authorities. Nevertheless, the level of security controls has been considered insufficient by the new U.S. ally. In February 2006, the escape of 23 al-Qa'ida militants, including a leading operative, Jamal al-Badawi, from a high-security prison raised questions about infiltration into the state apparatus. In 2008, after a campaign of low level (and often unsuccessful) attacks on state and Western interests, including in the capital and the bombing of the American embassy on September 17--in which a total of 19 people died--symbolized a new strategic phase. In July of the same year, the attack in Say'un (east of the country) against the buildings of security services and the subsequent claim by the attackers showed that the Yemeni regime was becoming a target of jihadi groups more than ever.

Repression of militants, new anti-terrorist policies by the government, imprisonment, and torture were surely radicalizing the strategies of jihadi groups. Beyond such a trend, some continued to highlight the links between these movements and the state, claiming upsurges in violence were not entirely alien to competition and struggles inside the wide state apparatus.

Jihadi groups are generally popular in 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.¹⁸

Salafists

The third ideal-type, the Yemeni version of Salafists (sometimes labeled “Wahhabis” by their

opponents due to their real or supposed links to Saudi Arabia), is often inaccurately associated with the jihadi groups. Although connections may exist between groups, significant differences exist. The Salafi movement emerged in Yemen in the early 1980s around the figure of Muqbil al-Wadi'i.¹⁹ Al-Wadi'i was educated in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and 1970s and maintained ambiguous links with that country's rulers and religious elites until his death in 2001.²⁰ The Salafists' principals include a claim of complete loyalty to the ruler, even if he is corrupt and unjust, as well as a will to transcend local and national contexts by delivering a universal message. Salafists, then, aim to preserve all Muslims from chaos (*fitna*) by not engaging in any kind of politics and not participating in elections, demonstrations, or revolutions. Instead, they believe they can play a role in orienting state policies through secret advice given to the ruler. They usually condemn violence and have long been critical of terrorist operations targeting civilians. In fact, the Salafi leader al-Wadi'i remained very critical of the jihadists' strategy at the global level as well as inside Yemen from the early 1990s onward. At the time, he accused Usama bin Ladin--who, following Afghanistan, was trying to launch new wars--of preferring to invest in weapons rather than in mosques. He even botched some of his plans for jihad against the socialist elites of South Yemen.²¹

In the post September 11 period (and after al-Wadi'i's death), condemnation of violence became a way for the Salafi movement to legitimize its position in a precarious context. Abu al-Hasan al-Maribi supported the Yemeni president during the 2006 presidential election, while his opponent Muhammad al-Imam, now probably the most charismatic tenant of Muqbilian Salafism in Yemen, delivered a conference in 2003 condemning jihad in Iraq against the U.S.-led occupation.²² He claimed that in order to be legitimate, jihad had to be endorsed by the Yemeni government, which as a new ally of the United States in the "Global War on Terror" it would obviously never dare to do. In such a context, Yemenis leaving for Iraq were considered illegitimate fighters. Such positions undoubtedly transformed the Salafists into new allies of the Yemeni government in a matter that was reminiscent of the Saudi religious authority's capacity to endorse its state's policies and decisions in all circumstances.

At the same time, the Salafists have supported operations against Zaydi individuals and Sufi shrines.²³ They are also famous for stigmatizing all other religious and political groups--particularly the Muslim Brothers--as dividing Muslims and being morally corrupt.

In contemporary Yemeni society, the development of the Salafi movement is rendered particularly visible by a number of distinctive practices, clothing, and social and linguistic habits. Salafists clearly express their will to stay out of a "corrupt" society as much as possible by refusing to participate in prominent social events such as religious celebrations, traditional music festivals, elections, or *qat* (a mild narcotic plant whose leaves are chewed daily by the majority of the Yemeni population) consumption.

The "apolitical" Salafists play a very political role and have received indirect assistance and benevolent tolerance from the government. Their doctrine is convenient, as it helps undermine support for more political Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brothers and the Zaydi revivalists, as well as to socialists in former South Yemen. The mainstream Salafi doctrine indeed helps keep certain segments of the population out of politics and considers all opposition to the ruler to be illegitimate. Consequently, abstention during local or national elections favors candidates of the ruling party. The division of its opponents has long been a strategy of Ali Abdallah Salih's the regime, and it appears to have been rather successful.

Sufis

Sufis constitute the fourth Islamist ideal-type in contemporary Yemen. Like the Salafists, their most outspoken opponents, they advocate an apolitical doctrine but nevertheless end up playing an important role in Yemeni politics. Popular in former South Yemen and especially in the eastern province of Hadhramawt, they suffered from intense repression under the socialist regime, and many clerics then found refuge in Saudi Arabia and North Yemen. After unification, the support by some

of their leaders for the Southern secessionist movement in 1994 (essentially due to their links to Saudi businessmen) continued to undermine their position. After the war and the defeat of the secessionists, the government even turned a blind eye toward the destruction of their shrines in Aden and Hadhramawt by the Salafists and some radical Muslim Brothers.

From the late 1990s, the Sufi movement has experienced a significant revival, symbolized by the Dar al-Mustafa institute in Tarim.²⁴ Headed by two internationally renowned figures, al-Habib Umar bin Hafidh and al-Habib Ali al-Jiffri (the son of Abd al-Rahman al-Jiffri, a prominent leader of the 1994 secession), this religious teaching institute has received much attention and support from the government. In return, local candidates of the ruling Congress party were granted support during the 2003 parliamentary elections against candidates of al-Islah. While Sufis have been described by many analysts as a group threatened on all sides by government policies and by other Islamist groups, this is no longer entirely the case. Despite his small following, in 2003, al-Habib Umar was appointed to be the national television anchorman for religious programs during Ramadan. As a sign of the new link between this Islamist group and the state, President Ali Abdallah Salih has also paid numerous visits to Dar al-Mustafa, benefiting from the groups historic transnational connections.²⁵

Like that of the Salafists, Sufi doctrine appears to be politically useful. It does indeed help weaken government support for other Islamist groups while broadcasting a supposedly more tolerant, peaceful, and moderate version of Islam. Indeed, the Sufi doctrine taught in their various institutions apparently tends to focus more on individual spirituality and personal development than on politics. Furthermore, the doctrine does not appear to clash with liberal economics and entrepreneurship and is therefore appealing to the upper and middle classes. The revival of this movement is part of the wider process of individualization of the faith that is being experienced in all Muslim societies and that is best embodied by Egyptian figure Amr Khalid and by Tariq al-Suwaydan from Kuwait.²⁶

Zaydi Revivalists

The fifth Islamist ideal-type can be classified as Zaydi revivalist. Of all five groups, it is the only one that is specifically Yemeni but nevertheless has created transnational links. It finds its roots in an intellectually based reaction to the fall of the Zaydi imamate in 1962. Most of its supporters can be found among a specific segment of the population: the *sayyids*, descendants of Muhammad.²⁷ With their loss of the civil war after the 1962 revolution, the demise of their leadership, and the end of what constituted a central element of their religious doctrine, Zaydis have had to find new ways to legitimize their position and existence. Some have felt the republic is in essence anti-Zaydi and has favored the Muslim Brothers, Salafists, and Saudi-backed “Wahhabis”--all their long-time enemies--in order to eradicate Zaydi heritage.

In that context, Zaydi revivalists have begun to react and to organize themselves. In the 1980s especially, a small minority turned toward Iranian Shi'ism, abandoning much of the Zaydi dogma and admiring the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Others are eager to portray Zaydism as a modernist religious doctrine with potential for reform and enlightenment, as liberal intellectuals who present the most severe critiques of the government.²⁸ Another group--which remains loyal to the Zaydi doctrine--creates religious institutions, publishes many books, and in 1990 even established a political party, the Party of Truth (Hizb al-Haqq). In 1993, two of its leaders were elected to parliament, and in 1997, the secretary general of al-Haqq was chosen to head the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

A split in this party in the mid-1990s led to the creation of a more radical fringe called the Believing Youth (al-Shabab al-Mu'min), headed by Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a former al-Haqq member of parliament. The objective of this group, backed by intellectuals in the region of Sa'da, was to oppose the rise of the Salafi movement which they perceive as the cradle of Zaydism. At first, they received support from the government, but in the post-September 11 context, tensions began to rise. Huthi and his supporters were very critical of the regime's new strategy and its cooperation in the War on Terror. In June 2004, the government sought to arrest Husayn al-Huthi, who was accused

of receiving aid from Iran and from the Lebanese Hizballah and of wanting to restore the Zaydi imamate (which he denied). He and his supporters resisted. What started as a police operation quickly turned into a full-scale war that left thousands dead or injured. In May 2005, the prime minister admitted on television that 525 soldiers of the Yemeni army had perished in the operations, but he never provided estimates of civilian or rebel casualties.²⁹

Although the Believing Youth has little in common with al-Qa'ida, the Yemeni government, pressured by the United States, has been eager to show its own involvement in anti-terrorist operations. [Zaydi revivalists emerged as alternative targets in the “Global War on Terror”, as opponents who would not directly affect the existing relations between some groups in power and other Islamist movements.](#) Despite Husayn al-Huthi's death in September 2004, the dispute remains unsettled, and ~~in 2007~~, new violent clashes erupted [episodically](#). The violence continued until July 2008, when President Salih announced a unilateral truce. As of the writing of this article, the situation remains fragile and has led to new discrimination against the Zaydis and sayyids. During the war, Zaydi revivalists managed to find support outside the original group among tribal segments tired of government repression and lack of investment in the Northern regions. Despite the massive violence--this war, which by all means cannot be considered a legitimate operation of the War on Terror--drew little criticism from Western powers and scarce media attention. It is nevertheless likely to destabilize a political and sectarian equilibrium that had until recently proved effective.

THE LOGIC OF INTEGRATION

While many analysts and journalists have long portrayed Yemen as on the brink of collapse, it has in fact remained surprisingly stable. Despite strong internal opposition (by political and tribal actors) and frequent hostility from neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, the republican regime and Ali Abdallah Salih's rule have resisted and managed to overcome numerous periods of crisis: wars between antagonistic Yemeni regimes, clashes with Saudi Arabia and Eritrea, the unification of the two Yemens, the Gulf War and the subsequent eviction of around 800,000 Yemeni workers from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as the post-September 11 crisis.

Overall, the price paid by the population for such institutional stability has been relatively low when compared to other regimes of the Arab world. If Yemen is by no means a democracy and suffers from endemic corruption and underdevelopment as well as upsurges of brutality, it has not experienced comparable levels of state-sponsored violence--as in Saddam Hussein's Iraq--or deprivation of political liberties--as in the Saudi monarchy. It has not been confronted with massive bloodshed or repression like Algeria in the 1990s or Egypt in the 1970s, whether from the state, the army, or rebels. Even during the 1994 war between the Northern army and the Southern secessionists, civilian casualties remained scarce, and many leaders of the secession were later reintegrated into the state apparatus, some becoming close advisors of the president. For this reason at least, the hundred thousand or so internally displaced persons and the bombing of villages during the war in Sa'da since June 2004 are to be considered a significant rupture.

Participation of Islamists

In that framework, the relationship between the state and the various political groups, especially Islamist ones, and their integration into public institutions (army, police, universities, and so forth) are likely the key to understanding such stability. While it may have been maintained over the years by the regime out of self-interest (weakening its enemies, dividing political and religious groups) or due to its own incapacity--for better and for worse--power-sharing has long been one of the main features of the system. 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, has undermined the regime's capacity to monopolize all the levers of power and to fulfill any totalitarian dreams. Unfortunately, it appears that internal dynamics (erosion of the regime, cult of personality, monopolization of

resources by the President's kin) as well as external pressures have wrecked the equilibrium rather than tried to preserve it.

Early on, the 1962 Republican revolution was supported by Nasserist Egypt, which sent troops to Yemen for five years in order to fight the Saudi-backed royalist opposition. It was uncompromising at first, but the new regime soon held dialogues with Islamists as well as with tribal groups, some of which had initially opposed the Republic. From 1967 onward, the Yemeni government sought to reintegrate the former royalists through compromise. [Certain](#) Zaydi clerics were given high positions, including the prestigious rank of mufti of the republic. The Muslim Brothers were also a central proponent of the system. As in other countries, they focused most of their attention on reforming the education system to their advantage.

In 1967, one of their leaders, Abd al-Malik al-Tayyib, was named minister of education of North Yemen. In the 1970s, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, deemed to be a radical Muslim Brother, was in charge of religious education; and Egyptian and Sudanese teachers educated in religious universities such as al-Azhar were recruited. At the same time, individuals close to the Muslim Brothers also headed a parallel school system: the scientific institutes (*ma'ahid ilmiyya*). These were initially created in order to oppose socialist expansion in the regions on the border with South Yemen, and the Saudi government continued to be their main source of funding, despite unification in 1990. After a harsh debate, the scientific institutes, then said to have had around 600,000 pupils, only became nationalized and reintegrated into the public education system in 2002.³⁰

During the 1990s, this power-sharing with the Islamists became more directly political. While unification was initially built on a partnership between the two former ruling parties of North and South Yemen, Northern elites were eager to find new allies. In 1993, after the first multiparty general elections, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani became part of the five-man presidential council, while Abdallah al-Ahmar, head of al-Islah, was elected as speaker of parliament benefiting from the voices of the ruling Congress party MPs. As tensions rose with the socialist leaders in the coalition, Ali Abdallah Salih agreed to govern with al-Islah. The Muslim Brothers directly participated in government between 1993 and 1997, playing an even greater role after the 1994 war and the complete demise of the socialists. Abd al-Wahhab al-Anisi was named deputy prime minister, and al-Islah members held important ministries (justice, education, trade, and religious affairs).

While direct governmental participation by al-Islah was interrupted in 1997, the integration of all types of Islamist groups into the state apparatus has continued both formally and informally. Many important positions in the army and security forces continue to be held by individuals identified with Islamists of all streams. This is the case with one of the regime's most controversial figures, Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a relative of President Ali Abdallah Salih and the head of an army brigade based in San'a. As a result, repression of Islamist groups has been limited. Salafists, Sufis, Zaydi revivalists, Muslim Brothers, and even some individuals sympathetic to jihadi doctrines have had easy access to political and tribal elites.

An Equilibrium Under Pressure

While the crisis following the September 11 attacks affected these political arrangements, it has not yet threatened their existence. With pressure coming from both its own society and from its new American ally, the Yemeni government has tried to show its involvement in the War on Terror while also remaining eager to prove its independence from Western powers. In cooperation with the United States, the government also implemented a new strategy of conciliation with the terrorists in 2002. This strategy was put into operation by Judge Hamud al-Hitar, who became minister of *awqaf* (religious endowments) in 2007, in order to show the success of dialogue as opposed to pure repression. Fighters coming home to Yemen after having participated in "jihad" abroad are frequently offered deals from high-ranking officials: They are given a grant to start a small business and are guaranteed to be left alone by the authorities, provided they cease all illicit activity and activism, at least inside Yemen. A blind eye is usually turned toward militants traveling to Iraq or

other places abroad for violent activities. This practice has for the most part been successful. The regime has only been confronted with low levels of internal violence from Islamist groups.

Nevertheless, growing international pressure and criticism (including from former U.S. President George W. Bush, who wrote a letter to his Yemeni counterpart in 2006 questioning the faithfulness of his commitment to the War on Terror) is slowly leading to change.³¹ This trend is furthered by elites inside the government in order to enhance their own power. Since 2004, repression in the form of arrests, closure of religious institutes (including those controlled by al-Islah), army raids, torture, and imprisonment have seemed to go in tandem with rising instability and violence from Islamists affiliated with or inspired by al-Qa'ida rhetoric. The September 2006 bombings against oil facilities, the July 2007 suicide bombings against Spanish tourists that left 10 dead, fighting between militants and the army in August 2007, and the September 2008 attack on the American embassy illustrate these tensions. In this context, it appears as if the government is actually losing touch with the violent groups it once largely managed to control through political and economic integration.

While the split with the jihadi groups is still questionable, incomplete, and probably reversible (as many inside the security forces are still in contact with these cells), the war in Sa'da against Huthi and his supporters since 2004 seems to be creating a much wider gap, giving it a sectarian anti-Shi'a dimension reminiscent of that in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. Along with the radical Zaydi revivalists, the regime targets Zaydi clerics and organizations that once were its allies. Indiscriminate violence by the army also enhances resentment by local tribal and social groups that already feel excluded by the state.

Finally, it appears that by attacking Zaydi revivalists, the government is actually taking less risk than if it were to seek to satisfy all of its Western allies' demands and repress more representative Islamist groups, especially those identified with the Muslim Brotherhood. It would then endanger its entire political foundation and most likely lead to further violence. Zaydis are indeed isolated and have already been largely vanquished by historical developments. The Yemeni state's action against them does not pose any serious threat to the government as [long as](#) it continues its efforts to maintain good relations with the other Islamist ideal-types.

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NOTES

- 1 A different version of this article will be published in Barry Rubin (ed.), *Global Survey of Islamism* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, forthcoming).
- 2 Such a position is, for example, developed in journalist and activist Jane Novak's blog, *Armies of Liberation* (<http://www.armiesofliberation.com>). This fiercely critical (and quite often biased) website is frequently censored in Yemen.
- 3 The historical role played by various scholars such as Ibn al-Amir al-San'ani or Muhammad al-Shawkani in the reform of Zaydism since the eighteenth century has been thoroughly studied by Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 4 Laurent Bonnefoy, "Les identités religieuses contemporaines au Yémen : convergence, résistances et instrumentalisations," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, No. 121-122 (2008), pp. 201-15.
- 5 François Burgat and Marie Camberlin, "Révolution mode d'emploi : Zubayri et les erreurs des libres," *Chroniques yéménites*, No. 9 (2002), pp. 107-16.
- 6 Paul Dresch and Bernard Haykel, "Stereotypes and Political Styles: Islamists and Tribesfolk in Yemen," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, No. 27 (1995), pp. 405-31. See also, Abd al-Fattah al-Hakimi, *al-Islamiyyin wal-Siyyasa: Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimun Namudhajan* (San'a: Al-Muntada al-Jami'i, 2003).
- 7 A few ~~weeks~~ ~~months~~ before his death, Abdallah al-Ahmar published his long awaited memoirs. They provided insight as to his central position in the Yemeni political system, which allowed him to link tribes, ideologies, government, and regional powers. See Abd Allah bin Husayn al-Ahmar, *Mudhakirat* (San'a: al-Afaq, 2007).
- 8 The different positions adopted by al-Islah leaders during the American led military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 are an illustration of such pluralism and capacity to adapt to changing political contexts. See Laurent Bonnefoy and Fayçal Ibn Cheikh, "Le Rassemblement yéménite pour la Réforme (al-Islah) face à la crise du 11 septembre et la guerre en Afghanistan," *Chroniques yéménites*, No. 9 (2002), pp. 169-76.
- 9 Jamal al-Suwaidi (ed.), *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 1995).
- 10 Since its foundation, al-Islah has been the focus of both foreign and local scholars. See for example, Jillian Schwedler, "The Yemeni Islah Party: Political Opportunities and Coalition Building in a Transitional Polity," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamist Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 205-29. Schwedler develops her argument and questions the link between moderation of the Islamist parties and their integration in the political party by comparing the situations in two Arab countries. See *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 280.
- 11 Michaëlle Browers, "Origins and Architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2007), pp. 565-86.
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- 13 Marine Poirier, "Yémen nouveau, futur meilleur? Retour sur l'élection présidentielle de 2006," *Chroniques yéménites*, No. 15 (forthcoming).
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- 15 Abd al-Karim Qasim Sa'id, *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimun wal-Haraka al-Usuliyya fil-Yaman* (San'a: Maktabat Murad, 1998).
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