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Yemen: Salafis and the war

Dr. Laurent Bonnefoy

In the context of the conflict in Yemen, Salafis of various shades have not made the headlines, nor have been the object of much expert analysis.¹ This fact has been rather counter-intuitive considering how much Salafism had been scrutinized in the wake of 9/11. Obscured by other religious and political movements or state actors, their standing and evolution over the last five years in Yemen remains insufficiently understood. Yet they are undoubtedly playing a role in the fighting, and, simultaneously, are themselves being transformed by the war. Thus, the ambition of this paper is to update our collective knowledge on such meaningful actors which are likely to remain a significant force should peace ever again become a realistic perspective in Yemen.

The bulk of the Salafi movement in Yemen emerged in the early 1980s around a figure, Muqbil al-Wadi'i. Through his institute, located in Dammaj, near Saada in what would become the cradle of the Huthi rebellion, al-Wadi'i developed a network of mosques and schools across the country. His movement generally received support from the Yemeni authorities due to its overtly apolitical stance and its quietist calls to be unconditionally loyal to the government. As such, in the best interest of the Ali Abdallah Salih regime, it served as a conduit to weaken other movements, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand through the Islah party, or on the other hand to Zaydi revivalism which would give birth to the Huthi movement. Salafism then developed as the antagonist of these two groups, as well as a rival to the Jihadi movement which developed from the late 1990s onwards. Considered as a "Trojan horse" of Saudi influence by its adversaries, Salafism was in reality often critical of Saudi policies and adapted to the local Yemeni context, melting into its local debates and dynamics.²

A sectarian reading of the conflict

After Muqbil al-Wadi'i's death in 2001, the movement went through an internal crisis and splintered. Some of its figures advocated in favor of direct politicization and the establishment of a party which would compete during elections, something that al-Wadi'i bluntly rejected. The dynamic culminated in 2011 in the context of the 'Yemeni Spring' with the foundation of the Rashad Union. Leaders of this political party considered that the popular uprising against President Ali Abdallah Salih was a game changer that could finally allow the Salafis to participate in decision making, present candidates during elections, and enforce their views top-down, rather than bottom-up as an apolitical movement.³

Others, headed by Yahya al-Hajuri who was based in Dammaj refused this evolution. However, their maintained apolitical stance did not save them from confrontation with the rising local force, the Huthis. In late 2013, skirmishes between the latter and Salafi residents of Dammaj led to the forced closure of the religious institute and the relocation of many activists across the territory. This humiliation traumatized Salafis turning them into resolute enemies of the Huthis. Consequently, Salafis would later easily be mobilized in the military and ideological efforts against the Huthi rebels, with support from the coalition headed by Saudi Arabia.

It is thus not surprising that from January 2015 onwards, the Huthis' outreach in non-Zaydi majority territory, in particular in Taiz, al-Baydha and Aden was met with direct opposition from Salafis, along with other Sunni Islamist movements like al-Islah. Individuals linked to the various branches of Salafism contributed to the fighting on the ground. Figures like Hashim al-Junaydi, Mahran al-Qubati, Abd al-Wahhab al-Humayqani or Hani Bin Burayk, who all had been

¹ Various online publications by Sami al-Kaff (<https://debriefer.net/news-1276.html>), Bushra al-Maqtari (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/4843>) and Fernando Carvajal (<https://diwansite.wordpress.com/2016/10/14/salafis-the-vengeful-giants-part-i-historical-shifts-in-the-balance-of-power-in-central-and-southern-yemen/>) are interesting exceptions, often focusing on specific areas of Yemen: Taiz and Southern Yemen in particular.

² Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen. Transnationalism and Religious Identity*, London : Hurst, 2011.

³ Laurent Bonnefoy and Judit Kuschnitzki, « Salafis and the 'Arab Spring' in Yemen: Progressive Politicization and Resilient Quietism », *Arabian Humanities*, 4, online. <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/2811>; <https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.2811>.

socialized to the Salafi ideology in the network of institutes established by al-Wadi'i in the previous years had the ideological fuel to combat Huthi presence, thus gaining a new form of prominence. They directly contributed to a sectarian reading of the conflict, stressing how the war waged against Zaydi revivalists had religious justifications and was a legitimate means to combat Shia encroachment in a Sunni dominated society.

The Ambivalent Normalization of Salafism

However, Salafis neither had the military might, nor the clear will to take the lead in that fight. Leaders of the movement remained in the background, supporting warfare within tribal structures or broader militias, generally funded by regional powers or linked to Yemeni political parties. The constitution of Salafi militias per se, built around a common ideology and leadership remained the exception and only lasted for a limited period of time. Such was the case in Taiz where Abu al-Abbas established his own cell. This fact sets Yemen apart from developments in Syria where the institutionalization led to a fragmentation. Rallies around tribal identity and the role played by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the field did not immediately set Yemeni Salafis apart from a broader efforts against Huthi territorial control.

As such, the most remarkable trend during the war has been the normalization of Salafism and its integration in other structures be they military, tribal or political. Such a dynamic has been manifest within the Southern movement which advocates in favor of the renewed independence of the former Popular Democratic Republic of Yemen. With direct Emirati support, the movement has reorganised itself since 2017, establishing the Southern Transitional Council (STC) whose vice-President is Hani bin Burayk. This individual, with manifest Salafi credentials (he had studied in Dammaj), had played a role in the "liberation of Aden" from Huthi presence during the summer of 2015. Since his inception as a leader of the Southern movement he has moderated his stances, seeking to appear as a respectable political figure able to unify a diverse spectrum which holds together only because of a shared objective of regaining a form or another of autonomy from northern elites, and a hostility to the Huthi movement. Similar trends have unfolded in the Taiz front around the Salafi militia of Abu al-Abbas, gradually integrated in the structures of the 35th Brigade of the national army despite the fact its leader is labeled a terrorist both by the United States and the Gulf Co-operation Council.

In parallel, this dynamic of increased integration nevertheless did not prevent ambiguous dynamics from unfolding, at times blurring the lines between a weaponized quietist Salafi movement and the jihadi trend. With al-Qaida, later the Islamic State (Daesh), and the Salafis sharing a common enemy, many foot soldiers are mobilized regardless of formal institutional and ideological borders between groups. Local propaganda efforts of the Jihadis appear to be tolerated. With the war, Salafis have also thus become part of a wider continuum that pushes in favor of a dangerous form of sectarian polarization, paving the way for future violence and prejudice. Assassinations of Salafi figures (like that of Abdurahman al-Adani in February 2016) and tensions with the Islah party, in particular in Aden, have shown that the integration of Salafism in wider structures, especially ones loyal to the United Arab Emirates like the STC or the National Resistance Forces headed by Tariq Salih nephew of former president Ali Abdallah Salih, as a way of mitigating their political and religious demands is far from systematically successful. Consequently, placing Salafis in positions of leadership or military commandment may end up deepening existing rifts, leaving little opportunity to build peace.

Troubled identities

The role played by Salafis in the context of the war in Yemen is yet at times counter-intuitive and is not always tantamount to deepening political and religious rifts. The automatic criminalization of its activists is thus certainly not a solution. All in all, Salafis are better off integrated in the political system than excluded from it as blunt exclusion is likely to push them in the arms of Jihadis. Beyond the example of Hani Bin Burayk in the South, the pragmatism of many Salafi leaders nevertheless shows how local identities and immediate personal interests are in certain contexts factors that contradict ideological mechanisms that lead to a form of sectarian prejudice that is allegedly at the core of Salafism. The establishment of a de facto truce between the Huthis and Muhammad al-Imam, a prominent Salafi figure, in Ma'bar (south of Sanaa) as well as the choice of former head of the Dammaj institute, Yahya al-Hajuri, to back off and, at the beginning of the war, mitigate his hostility to the Huthis as his region of origin was being targeted by Saudi bombardments highlight political processes that are in themselves ambivalent. It is precisely because Salafis (despite their denials) get caught into politics and local dynamics that their evolution should not be discarded but contextualized.

It is then a sharp analysis that is needed, one that refuses to essentialize movements but delves into what actors say and do at the grassroots level before making decisions.

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