

Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood and the perils of powersharing

WORKING PAPER

Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

SUMMARY: After the country's uprising against President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's multi-factional Islamist party Islah enjoyed new opportunities for institutional power, joining a coalition government in December 2011. But, while the Muslim Brotherhood faction within Islah initially seemed ascendant, it has since found itself targeted by the Houthi movement, weakened in relation to other factions within the party, and increasingly dependent on external actors to retain its political relevance.

About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

This is accomplished through three stages:

- A **working paper** for each country, produced by an author who has conducted on-the-ground research and engaged with the relevant Islamist actors.
- A **reaction essay** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.
- A **final draft** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.

BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment and the analysis and recommendations are not determined by any donation.

Copyright © 2015 Brookings Institution

BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036 U.S.A.
www.brookings.edu

For the better part of twenty years, Yemen's sociopolitical landscape was substantially shaped by the relationship between its largest Islamist party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah), and the regime of former President Ali Abd Allah Şaliḥ. The 2011 uprising and ensuing transitional process and descent into war has altered the position of Islah, by multiplying the major players, shifting domestic alliances, and reducing the significance of partisan politics at the center in relation to armed conflicts and populist pressure from the periphery.

The changing role of Yemen's Islah party offers important lessons not only for those interested in mapping Yemen's domestic politics, but also for the study of Islamism more broadly. It speaks to the pressures that many reformist Islamist parties face in the revolutionary (and counterrevolutionary) climate of 2011 and its aftermath, balancing emerging opportunities for institutional power with extra institutional challenges to the party's relevance on the ground. Such pressures include the party's ambiguous position in wider populist mobilization, a murky relationship between the party's Salafi right flank and extremist organizations like al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS), and the impact of a fraught regional climate in which Muslim Brotherhood-allied parties face uncertainty and, in some cases, outright suppression.

Before the 2011 uprising and in the challenging years since, Islah has remained adaptive and dynamic, pursuing a strategy of self-preservation. Yet this has come at some cost, particularly for centrist Muslim Brotherhood members within the party. While the party has an ideological hard core of party leaders with clear Muslim Brotherhood ties, those working in this tradition have never been unconstrained in their ability to pursue their prerogatives. Instead, they have needed to be ever mindful of a Salafi flank within the party that has consistently flirted with other centers of power, and a tribal faction with access to regime largesse and considerable independent resources. Added to this challenge has been the party leadership's post-2011 reliance on external patrons and international organizations to maintain its political position in light of its waning domestic relevance and in the context of war.

Thus to the extent that its central political leadership has grounded its politics in precepts derived from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it is fair to consider Islah a Brotherhood affiliate. Yet there are limits to this interpretation. On the one hand, Yemen's greater political openness in the 1990s and 2000s gave the Yemeni Brotherhood organizational opportunities that many others throughout the region, and certainly those in Egypt, lacked. On the other hand, the Brotherhoods' necessary (and politically costly) relationships with other factions within the party mean that this leadership has never been fully in command of Islah. This is an important reminder to approach Islamist organizations not as ideological monoliths, but as networks of actors situated in specific contexts, and to inquire as much into their allies and their adversaries (both within and across organizations) in order to better capture the dynamism that characterizes their decision-making and to map possible future trajectories.

Taking this approach to Islah reveals ways in which the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood has adapted to survive decades of authoritarian encroachment, but also shows why they struggle to navigate the tumultuous politics of a collapsing transitional process today. Ultimately, this is not simply – or even largely – about the Islamist ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, but speaks to

the declining relevance of formal institutional processes as the arbiter of political power in post-2011 Yemen (as elsewhere in the region). Islah poses the question, then, of what happens to reformists in moments of more radical change.

Islamism Before Unification

Because the Republic of Yemen only came into being as a single unified state in 1990, organized Islamism is grounded in different institutional histories and patterns of state-society relations and “Yemeni Islamism” is far from a single political phenomenon. The intra-Yemeni regionalism that remains a significant fault line today is intimately interwoven with the story of Yemeni Islamism as well.

Yemenis from North and South were exposed to Muslim Brotherhood ideology through scholarly and political interactions with Hasan al-Banna and his followers in Cairo and Beirut in the 1940s, but the ideological lessons derived from these interactions tended to be of a generically republican and post-colonial nationalist variety.¹ Yemenis influenced by al-Banna criticized the legitimacy of the Zaydī Imamate in the North and British colonial rule in the South, but this critique was neither the sole purview of Islamists, nor was it particularly sectarian in flavor, with Zaydī Shiite and Shafi'i Sunni intellectuals alike seeking guidance from their more organized and politicized Egyptian brethren. In part, this was a reflection of the doctrinal closeness between the Sunni traditions of the Shafi'i school and Zaydī Shiism, and the practical history of integration between members of the two communities. Indeed, Leftism was, and for many years remained, a more significant target of Islamist mobilization than sectarian animus. Following the establishment of a republican regime in the Northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), an organization led by students of the more radical Brotherhood of the 1960s was promoted by the nascent republican regime as a counter to real and perceived threats of Leftist interference from the South and the Southern-backed National Democratic Front.² This “Islamic Front” functioned as an auxiliary to the emerging state in the YAR, but given the weakness of representative institutions in the YAR at the time, functioned as neither a party nor as a broad-based social movement.

In the 1980s, North Yemen's leadership of the Islamic Front was gradually incorporated into and empowered by the institutions of the YAR's developmental state. Islamists carved out distinct ideological space under the wide tent of the General People's Congress, even in the absence of formal partisan competition. President 'Ali 'Abd Allah Ṣāliḥ drew several future leaders of Islah into his governing apparatus, most notably Shaykh 'Abd al-Majīd al-Zindāni, a prominent Salafi Islamist, and Shaykh 'Abd Allah bin Husayn al-Aḥmār, paramount *shaykh* of the Hāshid tribal confederation, whose attraction to Islamism was largely driven by his social conservatism and

¹J. Leigh Douglas, *The Free Yemeni Movement, 1935-1962*. (Beirut: American University in Beirut Press, 1987), 124. For an elaboration in this point, see Sheila Carapico's discussion for Free Yemeni and Muslim Brotherhood convergence around publication of the Sacred National Charter in 1948. Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Southern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 98.

² According to Dresch, al-Qubāṭī was among those expelled from Cairo following the Nasser regime's execution of Sayyid Qutb. Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 246, n58.

material ties to Saudi Arabia.³ President Ṣāliḥ also appointed the most prominent member of Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, Yassīn 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Qubāṭi, to head the Ministry of Education.⁴ A Brotherhood-affiliated paper was established in 1985, and when internal elections within the ruling General People's Congress were adopted within the GPC Consultative Council in 1988, Islamists associated with the Brotherhood won six out of seven constituencies.⁵ As one scholar of the period remarked, "it was clear, even in the muddled conditions of no explicit parties or party platforms and of large numbers of candidates, that people wished for a change. In San'ā the Islamists seemed those who might promote such change."⁶

It was from this internal faction within the ruling party that the future leadership of Iṣlāḥ began to coalesce by the late 1980s. The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 provided a major institutional incentive for their formalization, even as the very concept of *hizbīyya* drove a wedge in Islamist ranks.⁷ Senior Salafi figures rejected the notion of partisanship in favor of a more quietist dawa, but Muslim Brotherhood members were keen to seize the opportunities offered by new multiparty competition to advance a political agenda capable of shaping state and society. Lacking a solid enough social foundation at the point of unification, Brotherhood leaders aligned with those Salafis who could countenance party-building (like al-Zindāni), as well as tribal figures like Shaykh 'Abd Allah. Several tribal and Salafi figures had ties to President Ṣāliḥ and others within the ruling party, but they also enjoyed popular support far greater than that of the Brotherhood leaders, who could command only a modest following in major cities and on university campuses. Many of the tribal figures were of Zaydi background, and the Salafi and Brotherhood wings had different visions of the relationship between state and society, making this a messy, uneasy grouping. But as their strong showing in the 1993 election would indicate, the three factions that jointly comprised Iṣlāḥ together could pose a formidable threat to the Yemeni Left, while helping to further cement Northern dominance in Yemen's political elite.

The Unity Regime and Iṣlāḥ's Adaptive Islamism

Governing in coalition with Ṣāliḥ's GPC, the Muslim Brotherhood spent much of the 1990s under the Iṣlāḥ tent, building an organizational base on a nationwide level by mobilizing on university campuses and via the parallel institution of the Iṣlāḥ Charitable Society, one of only two genuinely national NGOs with branch offices in every governorate. The early decision of many Salafis to reject *hizbīyya* divided Yemen's Salafi movement and strengthened the position of the Brotherhood within the new party apparatus, as they laid claim to leadership roles. While the biggest names in the party remained Shaykh al-Zindāni and Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Aḥmar – with each representing important sources of mobilizational power on the ground – the Brotherhood designed and articulated party platforms, represented the party at interpartisan

³As an indication of the limits of arguments about sectarianism, the Aḥmars are traditionally Zaydi, yet Shaykh 'Abd Allah was one of the founding members of the presumptively Sunni Iṣlāḥ party and his son Hamīd is one of its leaders – and leading financiers - today.

⁴Michaëlle Browsers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 141-142.

⁵Dresch, 175-176.

⁶Dresch, 176.

⁷Lit. partisanship, but connoting a form of division among Muslims likely to provoke *fitna* within the *umma*. The decision to participate in an imperfect system was a wedge issue, as it has been among Islamists elsewhere, and many Salafis opted not to participate in partisan politics they decried as a form of *hizbīyya*.

functions, and did the organizational heavy lifting involved in party-building, moving quickly to develop branch offices and youth movements in every governorate of the country. Meanwhile, Salafis aligned with Islah engaged in heavily politicized *dawa* through a series of tertiary educational institutions and al-Zindani's Al-Imān University, relying on the party's cooperative relationship with the GPC to stave off Leftist demands for curricular oversight that might inhibit their evangelism.

Islah's effort to build a national base should be understood not only as an expression of Brotherhood leadership, but also in relation to its Northern social composition. The party's *de jure* independence in the early 1990s only thinly masked its *de facto* role as part of a socially conservative Northern bloc. The combined legislative impact of Islah and the GPC after 1993 gave "the North" a dramatic majority in the parliament, fueling the Southern leadership's anxiety and ultimately contributing to the conditions of civil war in 1994. While Brotherhood leaders were not the driving force behind the deployment of the armed Islamist auxiliaries that supported the North during the fighting, they lacked the capacity (and perhaps the will) to reign in targeted violence in the South.

Islah's transition from regime ally to adversary unfolded in fits and starts over the remaining years of the 1990s. It participated in a governing coalition until after the 1997 parliamentary elections, when ministers began to resign in protest against the (predictable) encroachments of the Ṣāliḥ regime. Still, Islahi criticism of the regime was not universal, nor did its entire senior leadership articulate the same view. The shift toward opposition to the Ṣāliḥ regime was greatest among Brotherhood members, who initiated cross-ideological cooperation without the support of senior tribal and Salafi figures, deepening tensions between party factions. Both al-Zindāni and Shaykh al-Ahmar endorsed President Ṣāliḥ's first bid for direct presidential election in 1999, against vociferous opposition from disenchanted Muslim Brotherhood members.

By the early 2000s, the Brotherhood faction within the party could begin to count on the effects of its institution-building over the previous decade, as many campus activists entered the workforce and became prominent members of professional syndicates and organizations in the associational sector. This improved conditions for opposition coordination, as both Leftists and Islamists had pragmatic and effective leaders with a desire to limit Ṣāliḥ's further consolidation of power, and many opportunities for sustained interaction. It was the combination of a changing global climate after 2001 and the assassination of socialist Jār Allah 'Umar in December 2002, however, that gave the decisive push to Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood to attempt to stem both Ṣāliḥ and the Salafi right through a politics of cross-ideological alliance.

The six member parties of the new Joint Meeting Parties alliance (which included Islah, the Yemeni Socialist Party, Nasserists, Baathists, al-Haqq, and the Union of Popular Forces) had many substantive differences in their respective agendas, and thus coalesced around issues of procedural reform, decentralization, and anti-corruption. Regime officials kept the party busy, exploiting wedge issues among JMP members and between the Brotherhood and the Salafi wing of the party. Brotherhood leaders within Islah necessarily shifted considerable attention away from the cultivation of the grassroots base outside of the capital toward sustaining a delicate alliance tied to politics at the center. This led to Salafi efforts to "discipline" members of

the Brotherhood faction through campaigns of *takfir*, and even the development of a rival extrapartisan institution of Salafis bridging the gap between Islah and the ruling party. Brotherhood leaders, cognizant of this threat that Salafi defection from Islah would pose to their own political viability, were under considerable strain; while some pulled closer to the JMP as a means of political support against their rightward flank, others refused to back opposition policies that they feared would further alienate Salafis in the party, despite their own commitments. These internal conflicts contributed to the postponement of the 2009 parliamentary election.⁸

The agreement to delay the elections may well have been a decisive one for the JMP, and contributed further to the erosion of Muslim Brotherhood credibility on the ground. Closing down formal institutional channels by which Yemen's increasingly educated and urban population could pursue its grievances against the Ṣāliḥ regime, the postponement occurred alongside the growth of alternative channels of contention and mobilization. Popular unrest arrived well ahead of the rescheduled elections, and neither the JMP nor Islah's Brotherhood leadership, was well positioned to respond.

How Islahis Compared to Other Brotherhoods Before 2011

Ideologically, the Brotherhood core of Islah can be characterized as republican and modernist in its outlook and priorities, advancing notions of citizenship that are non-sectarian, promoting some political equality for women, and most of all calling for accountable governance.⁹ At the same time, non-Brotherhood pressures from within the party have meant that Islah as a whole has adopted positions and enacted policies that have sometimes been inconsistent with these principles, with Brotherhood leaders unable to fully advance such positions, or at least unwilling to bear the full costs of doing so. The establishment of the JMP exacerbated this tension. On the one hand, forming an alliance with Leftists and other non-Islamists left the Brotherhood vulnerable to critique by the Salafi right and its politics of *takfir*. On the other hand, the formalization of the alliance gave Brotherhood members a network of allies and channels of support from outside the party, with which to balance against the demands of other factions within the party.¹⁰

This is both reflected in and amplified by the way in which different factions have taken responsibility for the party's political and evangelical roles. The Brotherhood exerted a strong

⁸Lengthy extracts from a number of interviews with leading JMP figures at the time of the postponement are included here: Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Janine Clark, "Disappointments and New Directions: Women, Partisanship, and the Regime in Yemen," *HAWWA* 8 (2010): 83-88.

⁹As Muhammed Qaḥṭān explained to Egypt's *Al-Ahram*, "There can be no compromising on this principle and the republican theory. At the very least, the Houthis have to say that they accept this. We need a nation state that offers partnership to all and in which every person is free in his beliefs. We are for democracy and the principle that the people are the source of power." Ahmed Eleiba, "Interview: Mohammed Qahtan, Senior Member of Yemen's al-Islah," *Al Ahram*, November, 27 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/WriterArticles/NewsContentP/2/116588/World/Interview-Mohammed-Qahtan,-senior-member-of-Yemens.aspx>.

¹⁰In individual (but significant and publicly-discussed) cases, there was demonstrable movement toward the political center by Brotherhood figures. A prominent feminist figure, for example, recalled that a well-known Islahi leader from the Brotherhood faction once participated in physically barring a bus of female students from reaching a research center devoted to gender studies at Sana'a University, and less than a decade later threatened to resign from the party unless the Brotherhood faction's more gender progressive positions were adopted by the whole. Interview with Raufa Hassan, 7 January 2009.

grip on a complex set of intersecting institutions throughout the country, mobilizing the energies of students and many women activists through dedicated youth and women's branches. The growing power of this group was reflected in internal elections in the 2000s.¹¹ By contrast, the Salafi wing of the party played a larger role in the organization's *dawa* efforts through tertiary "scientific institutes" which were not formally under the control of the party and are better understood as "aligned" with *Islah*. These institutions posed a particular challenge to the Brotherhood in the 2000s, as they advanced a less republican and more sectarian agenda than that promoted by the JMP and were seen as enabling, if not encouraging, violence. The Houthi-Salafi conflict became something that Brotherhood *Islahis* could not fully disavow, but which many found counterproductive to the JMP's reform agenda. In the transitional period after 2011, this tension came to a dramatic head.

The centrifugal pressures that stem from the combined effect of the party's fragmentation and its alliances with ideological others mean that *Islah's* experience has differed from Brotherhood organizations that have maintained greater internal coherence and discipline. At its most polarized moment following the death of Shaykh al-Aḥmar in 2007 and through the delay of the 2009 elections, it seemed possible that *Islah* might split into a Brotherhood wing tied to the JMP and a Salafi organization, with the latter potentially aligning with the regime. The 2011 uprising, discussed in greater detail in the next section, nonetheless showed that when the opportunity for split presented itself, the party had some stickiness. The Salafi faction had an important opportunity to defect in 2011, but the benefits offered to *Islah* as a whole by the transitional process have helped to hold its disparate factions together, even if they have done nothing to resolve its characteristic fragmentation. Indeed, this fragmentation may have been essential to *Islah's* adaptability, allowing the party to be many things to many people in a time of great uncertainty.

Islah in a Climate of Revolutionary Change, 2011-15

As with other countries that experienced populist uprisings in 2011, Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood was not the primary driver of mobilization, but did secure a substantial share of power in the transitional process. For years, it was widely acknowledged by opposition and regime alike that *Islah* was the best-organized party in the JMP, making it the clearest voice of partisan opposition. As protest movements developed in Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen's JMP responded with tepid, reform-oriented "pink protests" designed to signal its position as a loyal opposition with reformist, not revolutionary, demands.¹² This focus on reform was out of sync

¹¹Like Yemen's other major political parties, no internal elections have been held within *Islāh* since the 2011 uprising. This makes it difficult to assess the distribution of views within the party today, though a poll of partisan youth ahead of the National Dialogue Conference suggested that senior Brotherhood figures welcome youth mobilization more than youth voice. Ala Qassem, "Five Barriers to Youth Engagement, Decision-Making, and Leadership in Yemen's Political Parties," *Saferworld Briefing*, December 2013, accessed March, 13 2015, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/785-five-barriers-to-youth-engagement-decision-making-and-leadership-in-yemens-political-parties>.

¹²Anthony Shadid, Nada Bakri, and Kareem Fahim, "Waves of Unrest Spread to Yemen, Shaking a Region," *New York Times*, January 28, 2011, accessed March, 24 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/world/middleeast/28unrest.html?_r=1. According to my own discussions with members of the JMP at the time, the color-coding of the early protests in January 2011 were deliberately chosen to signal the "color of love," and to indicate that the JMP, unlike opposition activists in Tunisia, was calling for reform, not revolution.

with the aspirations of many young activists outside of the partisan framework, and while Brotherhood leaders participated in protests, they took a backseat as youth activists in “Change Square” and other protest squares throughout the country organized for Ṣāliḥ’s ouster. This diminution of the JMP’s relevance (and by extension, the Brotherhoods’ relevance) among protesters stood in stark contrast to international mediation efforts, which sought to work directly with organized opposition parties as representative of “the Yemeni people.” Once it became clear that the Gulf Cooperation Council-backed transitional agreement would offer President Ṣāliḥ and his associates legal immunity for crimes committed before and during the uprising, protesters began to target the JMP itself.¹³

With this shift in the protest movement came a concomitant shift in Brotherhood ties to its supporters, other factions in the party, and alliance partners in the JMP. Whereas Brotherhood leaders initially sought to piggyback on youth enthusiasm, Salafi militias soon began to work to control protest spaces and discourses, in alliance with some tribal militias. Members of the Houthi movement, who had until this point participated alongside other protest groups in a joint campaign against Ṣāliḥ loyalists, also began to bring weapons to the protest squares, and the collaborative relationship that had developed among some Islahī and Houthi youth began to degrade.¹⁴ While the violence of Islahi and Houthi members in the squares pales in comparison to the warlike conditions that unfolded between tribal militias and factions of the armed forces aligned with and against Ṣāliḥ outside of the capital, Islahi-Houthi skirmishes nonetheless contributed to the erosion of coherence within the central protests spaces, and laid foundation for substantial conflicts during the transitional period, armed and otherwise.

Alongside this deterioration, Islah generally, and the Brotherhood specifically, became the single greatest beneficiaries of the transitional agreement after former President Ṣāliḥ and his closest associates. The framework established by the Gulf Cooperation Council and later adopted by the United Nations hinged on a powersharing agreement between members of the JMP and the General People’s Congress; as the largest and best-organized member of the JMP, Islah played an important role in brokering the JMP’s appointments, and was thus in a position to heavily shape the “opposition” half of the transitional government.¹⁵ Given the internal divisions within Islah, this disproportionate reliance on the JMP also offered centrist Brotherhood members a lifeline at a moment of particular weakness.¹⁶

That said, unlike Egypt or Tunisia, Yemen is not a case in which the Muslim Brotherhood has

¹³Erik Stier, “Saleh, Yemen Opposition Agree on Plan to Transfer Power,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April, 26 2011, accessed March, 24 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0426/Saleh-Yemen-opposition-agree-on-plan-to-transfer-power>.

¹⁴For an excellent account of the transformations that unfolded among partisan and independent youth during 11 months of protest, see: Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirer, “The Structuration of the Yemeni Revolution: Exploring a Process in Motion,” *Revue Française de Science Politique* 62, no. 5-6 (2012). Laurent Bonnefoy, Marine Poirer, and Jasper Cooper, trans. *Revue Française de Science Politique* 62, no. 5-6 : 131-150.

¹⁵The JMP has always operated on a formal powersharing model internally, but Islahī and non-Islahī members have also long recognized Islah’s disproportionate weight within the alliance. Under Saleh, members of the smaller parties in the JMP suggested that they have viewed their relationship with Islah pragmatically, ceding some agenda-setting power to the larger party in exchange of its protection.

¹⁶While Islah’s grassroots standing declined significantly over the 2000s, no other member of the JMP saw great grassroots gains, meaning that Islah’s claim to popular leverage over the other JMP member parties was largely intact at the beginning of its shift into government in 2011.

governed as such. Instead, before the collapse of the protracted transition period in early 2015, Islah's Brotherhood members worked to gradually consolidate what hold they could over the institutions that would, theoretically, remake Yemen's political regime. The transitional framework focused at the top – it prioritized an uncontested presidential election over parliamentary elections or civil service reform, and it reallocated power primarily through the vehicle of the cabinet and ministerial portfolios.¹⁷ Because the implementation mechanism (as the formal United Nations endorsement of the GCC agreement is known), stipulated that the terms of the agreement “may not be challenged before the institutions of the state,” any opposition to its terms took a necessarily populist form.¹⁸ This could be seen in dramatic acts of opposition ranging from the “parallel revolution,” a series of sit-ins and coordinated work-stoppages throughout the public sector,¹⁹ to the Life March, in which tens of thousands of Yemenis walked hundreds of kilometers on foot in protest against the immunity law required by the transitional agreement and endorsed by the transitional government.²⁰ In these and in other cases, Brotherhood leaders, who had long campaigned in the name of political accountability, faced an acute credibility challenge as signatories to and beneficiaries of an agreement that blocked accountability in multiple ways. Islahis were thus in an ambivalent position.²¹ On the one hand, leaders attempted to maintain ties to protesters and to retain the mantle of opposition; on the other hand, as a part of the transitional government, Islah played a substantive role in suppressing new forms of dissent, including through the use of force against unarmed protesters.²²

Even as its role of representative of “the opposition” was foundering in the streets, the GCC framework guaranteed Islah a substantial role in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Designed as the centerpiece of the transitional process, the NDC was intended to more inclusively address thorny issues that fell outside of the reasonably narrow scope of the transitional powersharing agreement.²³ It included nine working groups stipulated in the agreement, but Islah was particularly active – and polarizing – in two: the Sa'da committee, and the Rights and Freedoms committee. It was in this context that Islah's internal fissures were

¹⁷UNDPA, 3-5.

¹⁸United Nations Department of Political Affairs, “Agreement on the implementation mechanism for the transition process in Yemen in accordance with the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),” December, 5 2011, accessed March, 13 2015, <http://peacemaker.un.org/yemen-transition-mechanism2011>.

¹⁹Abubakr Al-Shamahi, “New ‘Parallel Revolution’ Against Corruption,” *Al Jazeera*, January, 2 2012, accessed March, 24 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01/20121114410857143.html>.

²⁰Media coverage of the Life March, in which tens of thousands of Yemenis walked 264k over the course of four days, was muted, but Yemeni activists and journalists at the #SupportYemen media collective and Global Voice, among others, made ample use of social media and citizen journalism to document the events. See <http://lifemarch.supportyemen.org/> and “Yemen: The Amazing Life March Arrives in Sanaa,” *Global Voices*, December, 24, 2011, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/12/24/yemen-the-amazing-march-of-life-arrives-in-sanaa/> for examples. Yemeni analyst Atiaf al-Wazir covered the event for Muftah here: Atiaf al-Wazir, “In Yemen, the Life March Revives the Debate on Immunity for Saleh,” *Muftah*, December, 22, 2011, accessed March, 12 2015, http://muftah.org/in-yemen-the-life-march-revives-the-debate-on-immunity-for-saleh/#.VaAvgPPD_5q.

²¹Farea al-Muslimi, “Yemen's Brotherhood: Early Losses and an Unknown Future,” *Al-Monitor*, September, 25 2013, accessed March, 24 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/yemen-brotherhood-losses-unknown-future.html#>

²²“Protests Continue Over ‘Life March’ Killings,” *Yemen Times*, December, 26 2011, accessed March, 24 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1532/news/146/Protests-continue-over-%E2%80%99Life-March%E2%80%99-killings.htm>.

²³Farea al-Muslimi, “Deadlocked Yemen,” *Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June, 20 2013, accessed March, 19 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/06/20/surmounting-southern-stalemate/gb6g>.

most evident, with the party's delegates pursuing more ideologically polarizing positions than the Brotherhood in the transitional government, with NDC delegates responding to pressures from their right flank. This pressure was intensified by the formation in June 2012 of a distinctive Salafi party, the Rāshad Union, which had no role in the transitional government but was able to exert a rightward pull in committee sessions of the NDC by caucusing with Islah.

The substantive sticking points in both groups were ideological, and related to familiar issues that many Islamist parties engage: the status of sharia in the country's legal system, the rights of women and non-Muslims relative to Muslim men, and issues of religious freedom. In the case of the Sa'da working group, the conflict between Islahis and Houthis paralleled in committee sessions the armed conflict that was developing and would escalate between militias aligned with both groups in the city of Dammāj and throughout Amrān in 2013 and into 2014; their work was so stymied that the committee's final report was substantially delayed.²⁴ As armed conflict between rival militias escalated, Islahis and Salafi allies outside of the party sought to frame themselves as underdogs to mobilize anti-Houthi (and, in some quarters, anti-Zaydī) sentiment.²⁵ The end of the NDC raised the stakes for the Houthis, as they lost the only formal institutional voice they were afforded by the transitional framework and were thus returned to their position as political outsiders. It was in this context that they pushed to revisit the GCC framework in its entirety, and that Yemen found itself on the path to war.

Islah Under Conditions of War

The breakdown of the GCC transitional framework began well before Houthi militants arrived in San'a in September 2014, and is as much a story of the outsized empowerment of the Brotherhood faction within Islah and the dynamics of an unaccountable transitional framework than it is about the ambitions of the Houthi movement. This is particularly evident in the explicit targeting of Islahis and Islah-affiliated institutions by Houthi militants, as senior Brotherhood figures (but not Sunnis, generally) were detained, prevented from traveling, and harassed in other ways.²⁶ Brotherhood figures maintained a commitment to non-violence in the capital, but outside of San'a, they were neither able to exercise much influence over Salafi militias, nor to offset the sectarian polarization that came from an increasingly aggressive campaign of violence by AQAP. A conflict that was largely institutional became, over a series of months, almost intractably ideological.

The breakdown of the transitional process also paralleled shifting fortunes for the Muslim Brotherhood on a regional level, as well as the rise of the Islamic State. Despite the threat of a republic on its borders, in 2011 the GCC made space for Islah for two central reasons. First, while the member parties of Yemen's JMP were universally undesirable in ideological terms,

²⁴Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Outcomes of Yemen's National Dialogue Conference: A Step Toward Conflict Resolution and State-Building?" *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, February, 2014, accessed March, 19 2015, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/get/a6de2897-5e7e-417d-953a-90f10a527da9.pdf>.

²⁵Nasser Arrabaye. "National Dimensions of the Saada Conflict." *Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November, 26 2013, accessed March, 19 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/11/26/national-dimensions-of-saada-conflict/quol>.

²⁶Khalid al-Karimi, "Islah Appoints Arrested Members as Dialogue Representatives," *Yemen Times*, March, 16 2015, accessed March, 19 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1868/news/4970/Israh-appoints-arrested-members-as-dialogue-representatives.htm>.

they were a pre-formed opposition that might be able to bring a speedy end to the conflict and promote reform over revolution in the GCC's backyard. Furthermore, owing to its longstanding role in Yemeni domestic politics, Islah's leaders were well known and at least some had political and financial ties to the Gulf kingdoms. Second, there was unquestionably less concern over Islahi Brotherhood members' republicanism than there might otherwise have been, given that the party's internal factionalism prevented much real Brotherhood autonomy and that the Brotherhood's grassroots base was so eroded by 2011. In other words, Islah was simply not a tremendous threat, relative to an electoral process in Egypt that Gulf actors could not as easily contain. That said, regional shifts – increased anxiety regarding Iran and polarizing sectarianism first among them – contributed to a more open endorsement of Yemen's Brotherhood by 2015, as major Brotherhood figures sought refuge in (and called for war from) Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and as the Saudis endeavored to promote regional realignment through their war in Yemen.

Today, much of Islah's senior leadership is in exile along with other members of the transitional regime. No longer an opposition in any meaningful sense of the word, the party's Brotherhood leadership has committed to President Hadi's foundering government, in ways reminiscent of the party's old role as *Ṣāliḥ* allies in the 1990s. The Muslim Brotherhood cohort within the party, lacking a strong *haraka* foundation relative to other factions, is heavily dependent on the legitimacy tenuously afforded it by international agreements and the actors who back them. While the Muslim Brotherhood long disavowed violence as a political strategy in domestic politics, they now depend upon an international coalition of armies that promises to restore their political position through force.

While it might be tempting to disregard Islah as “too different” to tell scholars much about Muslim Brotherhood politics owing to its internal fragmentation, it is possible to read it as essential to the broader Brotherhood story. Islah reinforces what we know about the limits of partisan politics without a strong *haraka* foundation. It tells a cautionary tale about the vulnerabilities that come with alliances, both with other Islamists and with ideological others. And it shows how Brotherhood trajectories can be shaped by (others') use of force, even when Brotherhood members themselves do not endorse violence as a political strategy. As an organization schooled in North Yemeni traditions of negotiation and accommodation, the Islah party has shown itself to be an adaptable organization capable of surviving the current impasse.²⁷ Whether the same can be said for the fortunes of its Brotherhood leaders more specifically remains to be seen, but their political survival is likely to depend far more on forces outside of Yemen than those within.

²⁷Laurent Bonnefoy, “The Islah Party in Yemen: Game Over?” *Muftah*, February, 27 2015, accessed March, 3 2015, <http://muftah.org/Islah-party-yemen-game/#.VQLcOvnF8VA>.