

HOUTHISALAFI COEXISTENCE AGREEMENTS: MOTIVES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS



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COVER PHOTO: An elderly man reads the Quran at the Great Mosque in the Old City of Sana'a, January 24, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi



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INTRODUCTION

One of the salient features of recent Yemeni history has been the tension between the Houthi and Salafi movements. The Houthi movement – an armed group adhering to the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam – views the Salafis as an anti-Shia extension of Saudi Wahhabism, imported into modern Yemen from Saudi Arabia, while the Salafis – an ultraconservative branch of Sunni Islam claiming to represent the authentic traditions of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions – view the Houthi movement as an extremist sectarian group inspired by Iran.

Both groups are new political phenomena emerging in the 1980s and 1990s in north Yemen, which has historically been a center of Zaidi Shi'ism. The first Salafi center, known as Dar al-Hadith, was established in Dammaj in Sa'ada governorate in the early 1980s by Muqbil Hadi al-Wadie. Al-Wadie, who died in 2001, was a Sa'ada native born into Zaidism who came under the influence of the late Syrian Salafi cleric Nasir al-Din al-Albani when studying in Saudi Arabia. A follower of Juhayman al-Utaybi, the leader of the millenarian group that staged an armed insurrection in Mecca in 1979, Al-Wadie spent several months in prison before returning to Yemen to found his own Albani-style Salafi movement.^[1] Through Al-Wadie's efforts Salafism spread beyond Sa'ada to have a presence in most governorates in Yemen.

Zaidi religious leaders in Sa'ada opposed Salafi activities based in the belief that the area should remain ideologically closed to other sects. The area had historically been the heartland of Zaidism, an offshoot of Shia Islam unique to Yemen, with the first Zaidi state having been established in Sa'ada in the 9th century, and from where the sect developed in isolation from surrounding Sunni-majority areas. Local Zaidi scholars and leaders established the Believing Youth group in 1992 to revive Zaidi identity and religious practice as a response to the Salafism spreading in Sa'ada.^[2] Many members of the Believing Youth would later go on to form the core of the Houthi movement, including current leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi, brother of the group's founder Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi who died

[1] Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and religious identity* (London: Hurst, 2011).

[2] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Yemen's War-Torn Rivalries for Religious Education," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 7, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/yemen-s-war-torn-rivalries-for-religious-education-pub-84651>

in 2004. In the 2000s, the Houthi movement and Yemeni government forces fought a series of conflicts in the governorate, which became known as the Sa'ada wars. The fighting was reignited in Dammaj between 2011 and 2013 in the wake of Yemen's Arab Spring-inspired uprising that led to the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. It ended with the negotiated exit of Salafis from the city in early 2014, leaving Houthi forces in control of the town.

With the Houthi movement's takeover of the capital Sana'a in September 2014 and subsequent spread into other governorates, including traditionally non-Zaidi areas, Salafis assumed the Houthi authorities would again seek to end their religious activities and perhaps pursue further sectarian conflict with them. Instead, they entered into a series of coexistence agreements with the Salafis in three governorates outside the northern Houthi strongholds but now under Houthi control - Sana'a, Ibb and Dhamar^[3] - and it is Salafi-Houthi relations in these three areas specifically that are the focus of this paper.

The paper examines the content of these agreements, the various Salafi movements party to them, political factors behind their signing, motivations of the parties involved, and the degree to which they were implemented on the ground. It ends by discussing the future prospects for the agreements and recommendations for how the relevant parties should proceed to maintain and build on them.

The paper is based primarily on interviews with five Salafi leaders^[4] and a member of the politburo of the Houthi movement (officially known as Ansar Allah). Some were conducted in person in Sana'a, while others were conducted via WhatsApp due to difficulties around holding in-person meetings. Secondary sources of information, including Yemeni news websites, media articles, research papers and books, were also utilized.

[3] Sana'a has a mixed Zaidi-Sunni population, Dhamar immediately to the south is mainly Zaidi but to the south borders Ibb which is mainly Sunni.

[4] Of a total 17 Salafi leaders contacted in Sana'a, Dhamar and Ibb, 12 declined to participate in this research.

SALAFI MOVEMENTS IN YEMEN

The Salafi movement founded by Al-Wadie in Sa'ada is the seed from which all other Salafi groups in Yemen grew. The original movement based in Dammaj branched out into other Salafi movements, each with their own leadership and activities. Some of these movements focused on aid work, while others had a political focus, playing an active role following the 2011 protests. Though grouped under the banner of Salafism, they must be viewed as different movements with their own views regarding education, politics and relief work.

Salafism in Yemen can be divided into three main groups: traditional Salafism, new Salafism and jihadi Salafism.

1- Traditional Salafism

This is a trend sometimes referred to as scholarly Salafism due to its apolitical and quietist approach that is focused on study and usually shuns overt political activity. It was represented by the Dammaj Center in Sa'ada governorate, which has been led by Yahya al-Hajouri since al-Wadie's death. Following battles with the Houthi movement in 2014, Al-Hajouri left Dammaj with his students who spread out in Sana'a, Dhamar and Ibb.^[5] Other groups that fall within traditional Salafism include the Ma'bar Center in Dhamar governorate, led by Mohammed al-Imam, which was founded in 1986, and the Ahl al-Hadith Association (Rabitat Ahl al-Hadith) in Marib, established by Mustafa al-Sulaimani in 1989.

Each of these movements operates independently. They contain no clear organizational structures, with centralized decision-making being the sole prerogative of the "sheikh", or leader of the movement. Activities focus on religious teaching in the mosques and study centers, overseen by the various leaders. For example, Mohammed al-Imam, the head of the Ma'bar Center, oversees 50 mosques in the district of Jahran in Dhamar, in addition to mosques in other governorates.^[6]

[5] Al-Hajouri then spent some years in Saudi Arabia before returning to Al-Jubah in Marib, outside Houthi control.

[6] "Brief Introduction to the Dar al-Hadith in Ma'bar [AR]," Dar al-Hadith for Sharia Sciences, www.sh-emam.net/
 نبذة عن دار الحديث - بمعبر

While decisions in traditional Salafi movements are made by the leader of each movement, other individuals can be selected to represent them during conflicts. Reviewing the agreements reached between the Houthi authorities and the Salafis of the Ma'bar Center in Dhamar, the Salafi representative in the negotiations was Saleh al-Uwairi, though the agreement was signed by the center's leader, Mohammed al-Imam.

2- New Salafism

This type of Salafism is focussed on preaching, charity work, and political activity. It is represented in Yemen by the Hikma movement, led by Abdulaziz al-Duba'i, Mohammed al-Mahdi and Ahmad al-Mu'allim, and the Ihsan movement, led by Abdullah al-Ahdal. While these two movements broadly agree on the questions of proselytization, relief and engagement in politics, they operate independently and as two separate entities.

The Hikma movement is mainly based in Ibb governorate, though it has a presence in all 21 Yemeni governorates coordinated by one individual managing its proselytization, relief and political work. These activities include teaching religious sciences in mosques and centers and providing aid to poor families and orphans through the Hikma Association. The Hikma movement founded the Peace Party in 2014 but its political activities have been severely curtailed or ended outright following the March 2015 Saudi-led military intervention. This applies in both southern governorates under the nominal control of the internationally recognized government and the Saudi-led coalition, and northern governorates under the control of the Houthi movement.

The Ihsan Movement is led by Abdullah al-Ahdal and mainly active in Sana'a and Ibb. Like the Hikma movement, Ihsan has a representative to preside over the activities of its followers in all governorates. These activities include providing religious lessons in study centers and mosques and distributing food and medical supplies to needy families through administratively independent foundations within the Ihsan framework such as *Al-Ard al-Tayyiba* (The Blessed Land). Both Hikma and Ihsan provided leaders of the Rashad Union (Ittihad al-Rashad), the first Salafi political party in Yemen, established in 2012.^[7] Though the Rashad Union is represented in the cabinet of the internationally recognized government formed in December 2020, its activities effectively ended in Houthi-controlled areas and southern governorates in 2015.^[8]

[7] See Laurent Bonnefoy et Judit Kuschnitzki, "Salafis and the 'Arab Spring' in Yemen: Progressive Politicization and Resilient Quietism," *Arabian Humanities*, 2015 (issue 4), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.2811>

[8] The party's leader, Mohammed Musa al-Amiri, is an advisor to President Hadi in Riyadh.

3- Jihadi Salafism

This category of Salafis is represented by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Led since 2020 by Khalid Batarfi, it has a presence in a limited number of governorates, with most members based in Al-Bayda. Pursued by US forces via drone and other attacks, AQAP does not publicize its administrative structure or operating procedures.

COEXISTENCE AGREEMENTS BETWEEN THE HOUTHIS AND SALAFI MOVEMENTS

During the period from 2011 to 2014, as the authority of state institutions and agencies receded in the wake of the 2011 uprising, the Houthi movement expanded and took control of a number of governorates, starting with Sa'ada and continuing south to other areas of the country. As the Houthi movement established its authority in these areas, it struck a number of coexistence agreements with Salafi movements in Sana'a, Dhamar and Ibb.^[9] Some of the agreements, which mainly aimed to prevent armed clashes between the two sides, were formalized in writing, while others were verbal agreements.

The first truce was agreed on June 26, 2014, between the Houthi movement and the Ma'bar Center group based in Dhamar. The written agreement, entitled the "Coexistence Document", included three points:^[10]

1. Peaceful coexistence between the two sides, and not allowing any clashes, fighting or sedition, no matter the circumstances or justifications, with freedom of thought and culture being preserved for everyone.
2. An end to inciteful and hostile rhetoric by both sides against the other in any medium and working to instil a spirit of brotherhood and cooperation among all.
3. Direct communication between the two sides to deal with any emergencies, developments, problems, individual actions or any attempt by a hidden third party that aims to start a conflict between the two sides, and a clear position will be taken in this regard.

From the Coexistence Document, it is clear there was an agreement between the Salafis in the Ma'bar Center and its affiliates, represented by Mohammed al-Imam, and the Houthi authorities, represented by Abdulmalek al-Houthi.

[9] This paper focuses on agreements struck between the Houthi movement and Salafi groups in Sana'a, Dhamar and Ibb. This includes the Mohammed al-Imam movement, the Yahya al-Hajouri movement, the Hikma movement and the Ihsan movement. It is not known if Al-Sulaimani's Ahl al-Hadith Association in Marib made agreements with the Houthi movement, but it appears unlikely since it has no representation in the coordinating committees.

[10] A copy of the agreement was obtained by the Sana'a Center.

On the Houthi side, the deal was signed by senior politburo member Yusuf al-Fishi,^[11] but the document did not specify any implementation mechanisms, other than mentioning, in the third article, a general provision on continued communication between the two sides to deal with any problem that led to or could provoke armed clashes. The verbal agreements were reached after the start of the war in March 2015 and after Houthi forces took control of Sana'a, Dhamar and Ibb.

Separate agreements were reached between the Houthi authorities and the other Salafi movements in Sana'a and Ibb, and their provisions included “the Houthis not confiscating the mosques of the Salafis, not replacing the mosque imams with other imams affiliated with the Houthis, and enforcing freedom of thought and culture, in exchange for [the Salafis] not inciting sectarian hatred or supporting the aggression [of the Saudi-led coalition].”^[12]

Due to the state of war during the period when the agreements were reached, interviewees did not provide the names of the Houthi representatives, but the Houthi side later formed a committee comprising Mahdi al-Mashat and Ghaleb al-Maqrani - both senior leaders in the movement - to respond to Salafi complaints in the governorates under their control. These agreements were in line with the provisions of the coexistence document signed with the Salafis in the Ma'bar Center in Dhamar, but the fact that they were neither written down nor signed indicated a lack of commitment that raised the possibility of their being violated or ignored in the future.

In January 2019, “a joint committee was formed by the Houthis, represented by eight members, and Salafis from the various movements, represented by six members, to ensure continued coexistence and coordination to resolve internal disputes.”^[13] This 8+6 coordinating committee oversees in turn a sub-committee called the Committee to Guide Religious Discourse.^[14] The functions of this committee, which is overseen by the Ministry of Religious Endowments in Sana'a as well as the coordinating committee, is to “guide religious discourse in a way that does not conflict with fundamental national values and is appropriate to the Yemeni people and unifies them on a single track, while maintaining the intellectual traces of each movement.”^[15]

[11] He is currently head of the Houthi movement's National Reconciliation Committee.

[12] Member of the General Secretariat of the Salafi Peace and Development Party, Mohammed al-Sharafi, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, February 16, 2021.

[13] Advisor to the Supreme Political Council in Sana'a and a member of the Supreme Body of the Salafi Rashad Party, Mohammed Taher An'am, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, March 4, 2021. He named the Salafi members as Saleh al-Uwairi of the Ma'bar Center, Abdulkhaleq Hanash from Ihsan, Mohammed al-Matari from Hikma, and Abdullah al-Salafi and Adham al-Sabri as representatives of Al-Hajouri's group.

[14] The sub-committee is headed by Salafi leader Mohammed Ameen al-Himyari and made up of six Salafis only, who differ from those on the 8+6 coordinating committee.

[15] The head of the 8+6 coordinating committee and member of the Houthi politburo, Dr. Hizam al-Assad, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, March 12, 2021.

During the meetings, however, “the representatives of [the Houthis] brought up a number of points that established the religious rhetoric to be used in Salafi mosques, including not inciting people against [the Houthi movement], not encouraging people to not fight against the coalition and the [internationally recognized government], raising religious rhetoric to be appropriate to the stage Yemen is going through in resisting the aggression, and including chants at the end of sermons against America and Israel.”^[16]

What these agreements make clear is that the main focus of the Houthi and the Salafi movements in Sana’a, Dhamar and Ibb has been preventing armed clashes between them. There was an increased potential for such conflict at the time when the agreements were made due to the Saudi-led intervention. But the fact that there are no clear, written agreements with the other Salafi movements means there is still a risk that the existing agreements will be violated, reneged upon or subject to Houthi insistence on new conditions.

[16] A member of the 8+6 coordinating committee representing the Salafis, interview with the author, Sana’a, Yemen, March 3, 2021.

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE HOUTHY-SALAFI AGREEMENTS

The agreements came in the context of the collapse of state institutions and the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in 2015. Given the reality of Houthi power it was in the Salafis' interests to establish a modus vivendi that protected their operations. The Salafis in the Ma'bar Center in Dhamar, for example, "were forced to go into the agreement due to the Houthis becoming a military force. The Salafis, like other political groups and parties, decided to bow to the demands of the de facto authority until the storm passes."^[17] As for the Salafis in the Ibb governorate, they "believed that the objective of an agreement with the Houthis was to protect their educational centers after the Houthis had become the de facto authorities."^[18]

Facing an air and ground war, the Houthi authorities also had no interest in additional conflict with the Salafis. As the coordinating committee head Hizam al-Assad put it: "There is no reason for conflict with the Salafis, and any conflicts that did occur were due to outside interference. There is a lot of common ground with the Salafis in Yemen that can enable the Yemeni people in all of their different ideological components to stand as one and face any threats."^[19] In other words, they were acting according to short-term interests. Houthi authorities needed the Salafis to remain neutral during the war, while the Salafis acted to preserve their presence on the ground. Neither party was renouncing its sectarian claims to embrace a new worldview of coexistence.

[17] Salafi leader in Dhamar governorate who is closely affiliated with the Salafi Ma'bar Center, interview with the author, via WhatsApp, February 27, 2021.

[18] Member of the General Secretariat of the Salafi Peace and Development Party, Mohammed al-Sharafi, interview with author, Sana'a, Yemen, February 16, 2021.

[19] The head of the 8+6 coordinating committee and member of the Houthi politburo, Dr. Hizam al-Assad, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, March 12, 2021.

ARE THE COEXISTENCE AGREEMENTS BEING IMPLEMENTED?

The Salafis assumed they would be unable to continue their educational and ideological activities after Houthi forces took control of the northern governorates.^[20] The two parties had been in conflict since the Houthi rise to power in the early 2000s. Yet the agreements meant the Salafis were able to continue their core activities. Six years later, the two parties continue to maintain basic adherence to the coexistence agreements, with only a few violations. This section will look at two core elements of the Houthi-Salafi rapprochement: ending incitement and ensuring freedom of thought and culture.

In the view of Hizam al-Assad, who is also a member of the Houthi politburo: “The Salafis have space and freedom, and we do not force them to do anything. This includes the freedom of belief and opinion, and this also applies to the other groups such as the Sufis... There are some problems that occur with the Salafis, but they are rare and a result of extremist ideologies.”^[21] As for incitement: “The law has provisions that prohibit one group from inciting against another. Groups are prohibited from showing disdain for the beliefs of other groups, and there is no need for this. This applies to all sects, including Zaidis, Salafis, Sufis and Ismailis. We are all citizens in the Republic of Yemen and under the leadership of the Supreme Political Council.”^[22]

The Salafis continue to pursue their educational and aid activities in Sana’a, Dhamar and Ibb. They manage several religious education centers, with more than 5,000 students, including foreigners at some of them. The Ma’bar Center in Dhamar governorate is the largest in areas under Houthi control and thought to be the largest in Yemen as a whole since Al-Hajouri’s group left Dammaj in 2014.^[23] There has also been a revival of Salafi charitable foundations that provide

[20] Mohammed al-Mahdi, “The Houthis Did Not Prohibit Us from Spreading Our Ideology, and Our Brothers Need to Rethink Their Policies [AR],” *Al-Manhaj al-Salafi*, July 26, 2020, <http://www.minhajsalafy.net/216/>

[21] The head of the 8+6 coordinating committee and member of the Houthi politburo, Dr. Hizam al-Assad, interview with the author, Sana’a, Yemen, March 12, 2021.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Salafi leader in the Dhamar governorate who is closely affiliated with the Ma’bar Center, interview with the author, via WhatsApp, February 27, 2021. In recent years other Salafi centers have been established such as Markaz al-Afyush in Lahij and the Ma’rib center where Al-Hajouri settled.

assistance to poor families like the Ihsan-linked Al-Ard Al-Tayyiba Foundation^[24] in Sana'a whose work the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) in Sana'a generally facilitates without hindrance.^[25] As for the prohibition of sectarian incitement, the Salafis believe that "it is suitable, but [the Houthi movement] must also adhere to not discussing ideological matters or making accusations."^[26]

Though the Houthi and Salafi movements adhere to opposing ideologies they have for the most part managed to abide by the terms regarding freedom of education and thought and cracking down on sectarian incitement in Salafi mosques and Houthi public celebrations. Some sectarian rhetoric remains in Houthi commemorations such as the Wilaya Day^[27] and Ashoura,^[28] and in some of their religious chants (known as zawamil), as well as their educational curricula.

The Salafis say there have been other violations by the Houthi field supervisors that they can only try to resolve through their representatives in the 8+6 coordinating committee. According to one Salafi member of the committee: "In the northern areas, [the Houthi movement] confiscated more than 70 mosques belonging to Mohammed al-Imam's movement, 20 mosques belonging to the Ihsan Movement, and closed a number of Quranic schools and orphanages in Sana'a. [The Houthis'] justification for these actions was that they did not have official permits from the Ministry of Religious Endowments. We later tried to get these permits but were refused. There are also Salafi youth who have been detained, and some of them have been imprisoned for three years now."^[29] Detention without trial, whatever the cause of arrest, is against the law though it is not specifically prohibited in the agreements.

In Ibb, there are fewer violations by Houthi field supervisors compared to the situation in Dhamar and Sana'a, probably because Salafis have been more active in mobilizing civilians against the internationally recognized government and the coalition. By contrast, the Salafi movements in Dhamar and Sana'a do not participate in such mobilization due to their apolitical, quietist ideology, limiting

[24] While many of its members belong to Ihsan the foundation has no official affiliation with Ihsan.

[25] Some obstacles still arise due to a lack of coordination between SCMCHA officials and Houthi leaders in Sana'a.

[26] Member of the General Secretariat of the Salafi Peace and Development Party, Mohammed al-Sharafi, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, February 16, 2021.

[27] Commemoration of Ali ibn Ali Talib assuming the caliphate.

[28] Commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

[29] Member of the 8+6 coordinating committee representing the Salafis, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, March 3, 2021.

their activities to education and charity. Salafi leaders such as Mohammed al-Mahdi, one of the most prominent Salafi figures in Ibb and Yemen as a whole, play a leading role in public gatherings.^[30] In terms of Islamic legal culture, the governorate of Ibb is also in a Shafi'i rather than Zaidi area of the country, so the Houthi authorities lack a popular support base there.

Despite this, Houthi supervisors in the Ibb governorate took over Salafi educational facilities like the Imam al-Dhahabi Center, north of Ibb city, in early 2021. A Salafi leader played down such actions, saying they do “not represent the overall orientation of [the Houthi movement], because they always stress coexistence with us. When we demand a solution for a problem, they engage with us in resolving it.”^[31] Houthi supervisors are generally stricter as the authority on the ground, while the leadership shows more flexibility as a political authority presenting itself as open to all Yemenis.

The Houthi view is that the few mosques that have been subject to government measures engaged in clear violations of the coexistence agreements in terms of incitement and sectarian rhetoric. Coordinating committee chief Al-Assad said the movement had been tolerant towards the Salafis: “We had the opportunity to clear out any governorate. For example, in Sa’ada alone, there are more than 600 Salafi mosques. Have they lost even one since 2011? Not at all, and this applies to Sana’a and the rest of the governorates. There are many foundations that have been established since the beginning of the aggression, but we did not object to them.”^[32]

The coordinating committee chief rejected the claim that mosques identified as problematic are taken from Salafi control: “Some of the Salafi mosques resort to incitement, takfir (excommunicating Muslims) or using discourse that is in line with the orientation of the aggression, so there are steps taken by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. These steps start with advice, then the leadership of the Salafi movement is informed that the preachers in a particular mosque need to improve their religious discourse or the preacher should be replaced. There are other steps, like sending a preacher from the Ministry of Religious Endowments to the mosque, but to say that the mosque is seized, this is just not correct.”^[33]

[30] “The President of the Supreme Political Council Attends a Public Meeting in Ibb [AR],” Saba Net, May 3, 2017, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news463702.htm>

[31] The head of the Committee to Guide Religious Discourse, the Salafi Mohammed Ameen al-Himyari, interview with the author via WhatsApp, February 27, 2021.

[32] The head of the 8+6 coordinating committee and member of the Houthi politburo, Dr. Hizam al-Assad, interview with the author, Sana’a, Yemen, March 12, 2021.

[33] Ibid.

Al-Assad also said the authorities react only to complaints coming from citizens over the rhetoric emanating from Salafi mosques: “When we receive complaints that a Salafi mosque is causing a problem, we investigate the matter and find that it is the residents of the neighborhood itself who first raised the issue with the preacher because there are still some preachers who are completely out of touch with our reality and our suffering. There are still some preachers who act like they are in Riyadh, saying the same things that are in the interests of the Saudi regime, which upsets the families of the martyrs and the injured, and this starts a dispute.”^[34]

Both parties have adhered to the agreement in their public practices. Each sect has been able to pursue its religious, educational, humanitarian and cultural activities without inciting sectarian hatred.^[35] There remain, however, some unresolved violations such as the Houthi authorities taking over Salafi mosques and educational facilities. The current situation of coexistence seems transitory since neither party is convinced about the importance of applying the terms, which means the state of conflict between them continues. The relationship in Ibb is less confrontational on the surface because the Salafis take part in popular events against the coalition and the ousted government, maintain good ties with Houthi leaders in Sana’a, and the Houthi authorities are generally more accommodating in non-Zaidi governorates.

[34] Ibid.

[35] The Houthi authorities maintain public cultural activities in all governorates they control; before they took power these activities were more clandestine.

HOW DISPUTES SHAPE EACH PARTY'S EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE AGREEMENTS

The continued tension between the Houthis and Salafi parties is due firstly to the Salafis' ambivalent public position on the coalition's military campaign in support of Hadi's government as well as on the status of Houthi rule. Salafi preachers "remain neutral in the religious sermons they give to civilians in mosques," one Salafi leader said,^[36] focusing solely on religious topics, and this has led to disputes with the Houthi authorities.

The Houthi view is that the losses incurred its fighters and civilians during the war make it inappropriate to maintain silence on the coalition airstrikes. Thus, since religious discourse in mosques has an impact on civilians, the Salafis should take the opportunity to address the issue. Houthi officials stress these points during visits to the leaders of each Salafi movement and through the Committee to Guide Religious Discourse. Houthi leaders also meet on a periodic basis with the Salafi leaders in Sana'a, Dhamar and Ibb, during which, a Salafi leader says, they argue that: "There is a common enemy, America and Israel, and everything must be directed at them. There must be work to end incitement and sectarian tensions and build a relationship based on trust."^[37]

The same points were presented to the Salafis who form the Committee to Guide Religious Discourse, which is overseen by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. One of the Salafi members of the committee says: "We agreed to the points, but we were surprised to find that texts distributed to the preachers to talk about in mosques included cursing Saudi Arabia, but we did not agree because praying against Saudi Arabia is a sectarian issue and it is a Muslim country. The ongoing war is sedition among Muslims, so we cannot make prayers against them."^[38] The Houthi response is that the sermons – which are meant to follow guidelines issued

[36] The head of the Committee to Guide Religious Discourse, the Salafi Mohammad Ameen al-Himyari, interview with the author, via WhatsApp, February 27, 2021.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Member of the 8+6 coordinating committee representing the Salafis, interview with the author, Sana'a, Yemen, March 3, 2021.

by the ministry – are general and not specific to a sect or group: “These texts were written by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and they were distributed to all of the mosques, whether they are Salafi or Zaidi.”^[39] Yet in acting as guide and monitor of religious discourse the ministry is making demands that clash with Salafi ideology that views Saudi Arabia in positive terms and Iran in negative terms.

Each side has a different view of the trajectory of the relationship and the future of the coexistence agreements. As much as the Salafis have been able to continue their activities and protect their interests, they are now concerned with how committed the Houthi authorities are to the coexistence agreements in view of the violations, especially among more extreme Houthi elements. Indeed, the Salafis think this wing does not want to continue with the agreements at all.^[40] The Houthi leaders, on the other hand, seem satisfied with the relationship, which they describe as “harmonious”: “There are no attempts by us to marginalize the Salafis, or any other group, in the future, as long as there is adherence to the constants, principles and values that everyone has agreed to.”^[41]

Still, there is a possibility that the agreements could effectively lapse in the future over the issue of Salafi discourse, as the Salafis resist pressure from the Houthis to take public positions on the war and the legitimacy of Houthi rule.

[39] The head of the 8+6 coordinating committee and member of the Houthi politburo, Dr. Hizam al-Assad, interview with the author, Sana’a, Yemen, March 12, 2021.

[40] Member of the 8+6 coordinating committee representing the Salafis, the interview with author, Sana’a, Yemen, March 3, 2021.

[41] The head of the 8+6 coordinating committee and member of the Houthi politburo, Dr. Hizam al-Assad, interview with the author, Sana’a, Yemen, 12 March 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Houthi movement:

- The Houthi authorities should deal with the agreements, both written and verbal, as long- not short-term arrangements that apply to both wartime and the post-war period. The terms must be adhered to if they are to survive, especially the oral agreements.
- After six years as the de facto authorities, the Houthi side must strive to treat the Salafis as civilians with full rights and freedoms to carry out lawful activities, without being treated as a dangerous sectarian group. Such a successful modus vivendi could become a model for Houthi relations with other sects.
- Commit to avoid injecting sectarianism into popular public events and religious chants to avoid aggravating social rifts that could have long-term consequences.
- Resolve the dispute over control of Salafi mosques and reopen educational centers, in accordance with the agreements. The Ministry of Religious Endowments should be left to regulate these activities according to the law, which will decrease the possibility of violations against any other Yemeni group or movement and entrench a legal environment that establishes freedom of thought and activity.
- Salafi detainees in prisons should be released via the 8+6 committee. If there are criminal cases against them, they should be moved to trial to ensure due process. Strengthening the authority and independence of the judiciary will protect civilians from violations of rights.
- Ensure that field supervisors' interactions with the preachers and imams of Salafi mosques take place in the context of official memoranda regarding violations, which should be sent by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the Committee to Guide Religious Discourse (as the body responsible for sermon content) to the public prosecutor's office, and on the basis of which perpetrators should be summoned. Failure to deal with such disputes over mosques will only increase sectarian tensions.

- Salafi and other independent civilian entities working in the humanitarian field should be allowed the freedom of action to pursue relief work, given the humanitarian crisis the country is facing.
- More work should be done to create a tolerant social discourse that builds trust with the Salafis, since imposing political viewpoints, such as through inserting opinions into sermons in their mosques, puts the coexistence specified in the agreements at risk.

For the Salafis:

- Do not treat the agreements as purely a way to maintain their mosques, charities and educational activities, but as a basis for coexistence that extends beyond the war. This will help ensure that sectarian conflicts are not reignited and that society is not mobilized along sectarian lines.
- Salafi leaders in areas under Houthi control should communicate more with their representatives on the 8+6 committee to learn the outcomes of each meeting and work to avoid clashes over mosques with Houthi field commanders.
- Form Salafi field committees to liaise with mosque preachers over implementation of the coexistence agreements, preventing sectarian rhetoric and contributing to tolerance and communal peace.
- Deal with all religious groups and ideological movements, including the Houthi movement, as integral elements of Yemeni society and on the basis of laws, the constitution and the coexistence agreements, with the aim of extending the communal peace established now to post-war Yemen.

For the United Nations and the countries supporting peace in Yemen:

- Build on the Houthi-Salafi agreements as a positive example of local actors establishing workable communal relations, which helps to reduce the tendency to view the conflict through the lens of “proxy war”.
- Establish contacts with Salafi relief organizations to make use of their resources and networks to distribute aid to civilians affected by the war.
- Include Houthi and Salafi representatives from the 8+6 committee in future UN-organized meetings comprising the various internal political parties to the Yemen conflict. In other words, use the sectarian coexistence agreements as a model for wider political coexistence.

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

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