

# TAIZ: A HOTBED OF IRREGULAR MILITIAS



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*COVER PHOTO: Al-Turbah city and the strategic Sabran mountain, where battles took place between the 35th Armored Brigade and Islah-affiliated brigades before the latter seized control of the area in July 2020 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha*



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# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Islah in control</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Islah's military expansion</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Looming confrontations with the STC and Tareq Saleh</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Civilian concerns and political impacts</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>18</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Yemen's Taiz enjoys a strategic location, stretching from central Yemen to the Red Sea Coast, and extending south to the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the world's most important shipping lanes. The governorate has paid a heavy price during the past decade as a result of the turmoil that Yemen has experienced since 2011, when popular protests erupted against the former regime of late President Ali Abdullah Saleh. During the outbreak of the current conflict in 2014-15, Taiz witnessed the formation of the first factions of the armed resistance against the armed Houthi movement. The Houthis attempted to defeat what soon became known as the 'Popular Resistance', moving against Taiz in March 2015, as part of their desire to secure the city before expanding toward Aden.

Taiz city, the governorate capital and Yemen's third largest urban center, quickly became a hub for anti-Houthi fighters from across the country, in particular areas that had fallen to the Houthis. Many came from religious backgrounds, including fighters from neighboring Ibb governorate supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islah Party, Salafists from Sa'ada who had been forced out by the Houthis, as well as extremist factions that unashamedly raised the flags of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State from inside Taiz, a city known as the cultural capital of Yemen.

In April 2015, various popular resistance factions united to fight the Houthis; around the same time the Houthis imposed a blockade on Taiz city. By August 2015, the popular resistance had achieved some success, and had partially lifted the blockade on the city, opening up a route south to Aden. The Houthis remained in control of the northern outskirts of Taiz, content to maintain a blockade rather than attempt to seize the city.

Amid the ongoing six-year siege, the unity among anti-Houthi factions in the governorate would eventually shatter as they turned their guns on each other. Taiz has now become emblematic of the infighting that has riven Yemen's anti-Houthi coalition, and the battle for dominance between the Islah Party and its rivals.

The Taiz Military Axis, the official body responsible for protecting Taiz governorate militarily, is dominated by Islah-affiliated leaders. Islah has gradually asserted itself over the majority of Taiz, firstly when it forced rivals in the Salafist Abu Al-Abbas Brigade out of Taiz city in early 2019, and then after the mysterious assassination of Brigadier General Adnan Al-Hammadi, the commander of the 35th Armored Brigade, on December 2, 2019. Al-Hammadi's death allowed the Taiz Military Axis to eventually take over the brigade, along with its base of operations in the rural Al-Hujariah region of southern Taiz governorate.

Al-Hujariah has become a hotbed of training camps for Islah-affiliated irregular militias that operate outside the Yemeni military's official structure. The emergence of these militias, and attempts to formalize their presence (most notably in the unofficial 'Tur Al-Bahah Military Axis'), have raised concerns of imminent clashes between Islah-affiliated forces and rival forces in surrounding areas – most notably the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) as well as the forces of Tareq Saleh, both of which are backed by the United Arab Emirates.

This policy brief describes the mobilization of pro-Islah military formations in the southern parts of rural Taiz and the counter-mobilization by the STC, and how the border area between Taiz and Lahj governorates has become a new hotbed of tension that could draw in other forces and factions based in Taiz and the Red Sea Coast. It will also detail the fears among some parties over a potential military escalation and the impact of the rising tensions on civilians in the area.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper relied on more than 15 interviews with military personnel affiliated with the internationally recognized Yemeni government and members of irregular armed factions, some of whom participated in and later left Islah-run military training camps. Interviews were also conducted with local officials in rural Taiz, political party leaders in Taiz city, officials in the Taiz governorate local authority, as well as local residents of Al-Hujariah in Taiz and Ma'bak and Al-Subaiha in Lahj governorate, areas which have become an arena of mobilization and counter-mobilization by forces affiliated with Islah and the STC.

## ISLAH IN CONTROL

Beginning in September 2015, factions within Taiz’s anti-Houthi coalition began turning on each other, using resources provided to them by regional backers and local businessmen to wage internal battles for control of the governorate. The dominant camp in Taiz was led by the Islah Party, a Yemeni Islamist political party associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It faced accusations from political rivals that it controlled military and political decisions inside Taiz city, and received undisclosed funding from Qatar and Oman in addition to the material support provided by the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition.<sup>[1]</sup> The second camp consisted of the Salafist Abu Al-Abbas Brigades, Al-Hammadi’s 35<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade,<sup>[2]</sup> and, after 2017, forces commanded by Tareq Saleh, the nephew of late president Ali Abdullah Saleh. This camp enjoys broad and explicit Emirati support to this day.<sup>[3]</sup>

The pro-Islah camp went on to effectively co-opt the Taiz Military Axis – the official military leadership of government forces in Taiz governorate. Islah allies were appointed to senior leadership positions, such as Major General Khaled Fadel,<sup>[4]</sup> the leader of the axis, and Brigadier General Abdo Farhan al-Mekhlafi, also known as Salem,<sup>[5]</sup> an advisor to the leader. This dominance over a supposedly politically-neutral military formation has exacerbated fears and suspicion among rival political parties and forces in Taiz, and has aroused suspicion that the national army had deviated from its mandate to pursue partisan interests.<sup>[6]</sup>

[1] “Statement by the Yemeni Socialist Party organization, the Nasserite People’s Unitary Organization Branch and the Baath National Socialist Party,” Nasserist Unionist People’s Organization official Facebook page, July 12, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/492928607441104/posts/4334815576585702/>

[2] The 35<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade was gradually brought under the control of Islah-affiliated commanders following Al-Hammadi’s death in December 2019.

[3] “An analysis of the reasons and causes of the clashes in Taiz,” Aden Al-Ghad, July 20, 2020, <https://adengad.net/public/posts/478241>

[4] Fadel was temporarily removed from his position in December 2018 and re-appointed less than a year later in November 2019.

[5] Salem was appointed in February 2018.

[6] “Statement by the Yemeni Socialist Party organization, the Nasserite People’s Unitary Organization Branch and the Baath National Socialist Party,” Nasserist Unionist People’s Organization official Facebook page, July 12, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/492928607441104/posts/4334815576585702/>

Fadel is said to enjoy support, both in public and private, from the office of Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.<sup>[7]</sup> Meanwhile, his advisor Salem works independently of the state institutions, instead abiding by directives issued by the chairman of Islah, Mohammed al-Yadumi, who is based between Riyadh and Istanbul.<sup>[8]</sup> Salem is a long-standing figure within Islah; he has run the party's military wing in Taiz and Lahj since the 1994 Civil War, in which Islah forces aligned with Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime to defeat an attempt by southern groups to secede from the recently-united Republic of Yemen. Since then, he has kept a low public profile, despite being the covert architect behind the formation of the resistance factions that fought Saleh regime forces during the 2011 uprising.<sup>[9]</sup>

Islah now largely dominates the military and security establishment in Taiz. Increasingly focused on its own priorities, Islah and affiliated military units have come to view Tareq Saleh's forces as a threat to its control of the governorate, one potentially even bigger than that posed by the Houthis.<sup>[10]</sup> Saleh is backed by the UAE, which aims to weaken the role Islah can play in Yemen. The UAE also supports another enemy of Islah, the STC, as part of the broader Emirati regional strategy of weakening Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups by supporting domestic rivals.

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[7] Author interviews with an Islah-aligned politician and an Islah-aligned military figure, March 2021.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.



## ISLAH'S MILITARY EXPANSION

To counter perceived threats from UAE-backed groups, in 2019 Islah moved to cement its military and political dominance of Taiz. This began with non-Houthi controlled areas of Taiz city, where it forced out the Abu Al-Abbas Brigades in early April 2019 after months of fighting.<sup>[11]</sup> Prior to this, Abu Al-Abbas Brigades, named after the group's Salafi leader, controlled much of the Old City and eastern parts of Taiz.

In mid-2020, Islah gradually extended its control into southern parts of Taiz outside its traditional areas of support in the governorate, including the area of Al-Hujariah.<sup>[12]</sup> This involved clashes with the 35th Armored Brigade, many of whose members had rebelled against the appointment by presidential decree of Al-Hammadi's Islah-aligned successor, Abdulrahman Al-Shamsani in July 2020. The UAE-backed 35th Armored Brigade had long been seen to be aligned with local leftist and Nasserite forces that wanted to retain their independence from Islah after the assassination of Al-Hammadi in December 2019.

The clashes, which were justified as being part of an effort to extend the state's authority over all non-Houthi controlled areas,<sup>[13]</sup> raged throughout the summer of 2020 in areas such as Al-Turbah, Al-Ma'afar, Al-Mawasit and Al-Shamaytayn, all strongholds for the 35th Armored Brigade. By August 2020, Taiz Military Axis forces succeeded in forcing the submission of rebellious members of the 35th Armored Brigade, but not before numerous human rights violations had occurred, including the murder of Aseel Abdelhakim Al-Jabzi, the son of the 35th Armored Brigade's chief of operations, August 22, 2020.<sup>[14]</sup>

With its control over official military structures in Taiz consolidated, Islah has also moved to create a parallel and unofficial structure through the establishment

[11] Abdulhakeem Hilal, "Why did Abu Al-Abbas surrender and decide to withdraw from Taiz [AR]?", Al Jazeera, August 29, 2018, [www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/8/26/كتائب-موالية-للإمارات-تغادر-مدينة-تعز](http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/8/26/كتائب-موالية-للإمارات-تغادر-مدينة-تعز)

[12] Al-Hujariah includes the districts of Al-Ma'afar, Al-Mawasit, Al-Shamaytayn, Al-Silw, Hayfan, Jabal Habashy, Khdeir, and Same'a.

[13] "Taiz police reveal the reasons for the armed clashes in the south of the governorate [AR]," Al-Harf28, August 21, 2020, <https://alharf28.com/p-42872>

[14] "Taiz police starts investigation in the killing of son of leader in 35th Brigade," AdenNews, August 23, 2020, <https://adennews.net/en/117241>

of irregular military units and training camps in southern Taiz, and along the border area with Lahj. The area was chosen due to its rural terrain, reassuring distance from Houthi-controlled areas, and proximity to southern Yemen and the Red Sea coast.

Hammoud Al-Mekhlafi, a tribal sheikh who was exiled from Yemen in 2016 at the behest of the UAE and has been based in Turkey since, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Yafrus training camp in Jabal Habashy district at the end of 2019. The approximately 2,000 fighters trained at Yafrus, the majority of which were recruited from Taiz city, were paid regular monthly salaries of 60,000 Yemeni rials, equivalent to the salaries paid to regular government military forces.<sup>[15]</sup> The source of the funding for Yafrus, and other irregular training camps created after, is still unclear. Fingers have mainly been pointed by Islah's rivals at Doha and Muscat as both countries during various points of the conflict have sought to covertly support local Yemeni proxies to counter regional rivals Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

After Yafrus, three new training camps were established in 2020 rural Al-Hujariah in the towns of Rasin (Al-Shamayatayn district, Al-Sannah (Al-Ma'afer district and Al-Fawada' (Al-Mawasit district. In an effort to strengthen the connection between the camps and the areas they were established in, Islah affiliated-figures from the towns were chosen to lead the irregular forces once training was completed.<sup>[16]</sup> However, following complaints from locals about the proximity of the camps to populated areas, Al-Mekhlafi's followers began in October 2020 to deploy the irregular units to areas along the border between Taiz and Lahj governorates, such as Tur Al-Bahah, Maabeq, and the Al-Arf Mountains.<sup>[17]</sup>

The move to the Taiz-Lahj border area coincided with the announced formation in November 2020 of the Tur Al-Bahah Axis, named after the Lahj district that borders Taiz. The name gives the false impression that the group is an official Yemeni government military entity, a sense bolstered by the fact that the Tur Al-Bahah Axis is led by Abu Bakr Al-Jaboli, the commander of the Yemeni government's 4<sup>th</sup> Mountain Infantry Brigade since 2016. Al-Jabouli has attempted to impose the irregular military axis as a reality on the ground, merging it with the 4th Mountain Infantry Brigade, which is based in Lahj's Al-Maqatirah district. However, no official decree has been issued by President Hadi to establish the

[15] Author interview with a former fighter with Al-Mekhlafi's irregular militia via telephone, February 2021.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Author interviews with local government officials in Yafrus and Al-Ma'afer, via Whatsapp, April and May 2021.

Tur Al-Bahah Axis nor appoint its brigade commanders. Al-Jabouli, who is considered loyal to Islah,<sup>[18]</sup> appointed other Islah loyalists<sup>[19]</sup> in the military to head the newly created irregular brigades.<sup>[20]</sup>

Despite its forces not exceeding 5,000 fighters thus far,<sup>[21]</sup> the Tur Al-Bahah Axis' activity has alarmed Islah's opponents. In early February 2021, it officially launched what it said was the "first phase of the 2021 combat and operational training year," with a military parade in Tur Al-Bahah. The event intensified the STC's suspicions that Islah planned to move against Aden.<sup>[22]</sup> Al-Jabouli seeks to increase the numbers of the Tur Al-Bahah Axis, and has continued to train new recruits.<sup>[23]</sup> The commander has also sought to expand the Tur Al-Bahah Axis from its current Al-Kumb base in Wadi Al-Humr, in the Ma'baq area of Lahj's Al-Maqatirah district, to STC-supporting regions in other parts of Lahj, in a bid to challenge the separatist group.<sup>[24]</sup>

The mobilization of the Tur Al-Bahah Axis forces, and the lack of clarity as to its aims, has led to suspicions that factions loyal to Islah in Taiz are seeking to secure arms smuggling routes along the Lahj coastline,<sup>[25]</sup> as well as potentially preparing the ground for an incursion toward the Red Sea Coast through the areas of Al-Alqama and Al-Kadahah and Al-Waz'iyah district, all in southwestern Taiz governorate. This would bring pro-Islah forces into conflict with UAE and Saudi-backed groups that control those areas.

However, the irregular Islah-affiliated forces would need to bolster their weaponry if they are to pose a real threat to Tareq Saleh or the STC. Tur al-Bahah Axis forces currently lack a large arsenal of heavy weapons. In March 2021, this was limited

[18] Adam Baron & Raiman Al-Hamdani, "The 'Proxy War' Prism on Yemen," December 10, 2019, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/the-proxy-war-prism-on-yemen/>

[19] Commander Noman Dokum, one of Al-Jabouli's former comrades in the 4th Mountain Infantry Brigade, was appointed head of the 6th Brigade, the 9th Brigade was assigned to Munif al-Atwi, the 120th Artillery Brigade to Rami Mahmoud al-Somati, and the 8th Brigade to Yasser Mohammed al-Sawmali.

[20] Author interview with a fighter with the Tur Al-Bahah Axis via telephone, March 2021.

[21] Author's interview with a commander within the 4th Mountain Infantry Brigade via Whatsapp, February 2021.

[22] "Answering a call from the STC's leadership: Tur Al-Bahah rises up in support of the Security Belt forces and rejects the Brotherhood's attempts to gather fighters [AR]," STC official website, February 11, 2021, <https://stcaden.com/news/13945>

[23] "Lahj: Tur Al-Baha Axis leadership discuss a plan to complete the liberation of fronts adjacent to the district [AR]," 26 September Net, February 11, 2021, [www.26sepnews.net/2021/02/11/لحج-قيادة-محور-طور-الباحة-26سبتمبر-نت/تناقش-خطة-اس](http://www.26sepnews.net/2021/02/11/لحج-قيادة-محور-طور-الباحة-26سبتمبر-نت/تناقش-خطة-اس)

[24] Author interview with a local official in Al-Maqatirah district via Whatsapp, February 2021.

[25] "Dividing the tribes of Al-Subaiha: a Brotherhood plot to ignite Yemen's south [AR]," Al-Ain Al-Ikhabariyah, October 20, 2020, <https://al-ain.com/article/brotherhood5-plot-strike-stability-southern-yemen>

to two armored vehicles, a Katyusha rocket launcher, four-wheel-drive patrol vehicles carrying 14.7 and 23 heavy machine guns, B-10 and RPGs (or rocket-propelled grenade, and some M4 rifles. Much of this weaponry was obtained from the 4th Mountain Infantry Brigade. Around the same time Al-Mekhlafi was also able to secure large quantities of light and medium weapons from domestic arms markets in Yemen's south as well as quantities smuggled from abroad via Al-Mahra governorate.<sup>[26]</sup> Al-Jabouli claimed in July that the Tur Al-Bahah Axis would soon be officially integrated within the Yemeni government military and receive weapons as well as salaries from the government.<sup>[27]</sup>

The money that Al-Mekhlafi lavished on sheikhs and military commanders in the areas of Al-Subaiha and Tur al-Bahah in Lahj governorate has helped secure passage for weapons and equipment destined for the irregular units to be smuggled into the area. This includes more than 70 modern four-wheel-drive patrol vehicles, which crossed seamlessly by land from the Omani border all the way to rural Al-Hujariah and the city of Taiz without being intercepted.<sup>[28]</sup> Other advanced weapons were also smuggled in for this route, including thermal rockets, state-of-the-art sniper rifles, as well as reconnaissance drones. Islah's armory generally lacks such weapons, being mainly stacked with large quantities of conventional weapons such as Kalashnikov rifles and RPGs.<sup>[29]</sup>

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[26] Author interview with a fighter with the Islah-aligned irregular militias via telephone, March 2021.

[27] "Tur Al-Bahah Axis leadership in Lahj inspect the condition of fighters on the fronts," 26 September Net, July 21, 2021, <https://www.26sepnews.net/2021/07/21/1231-4/>

[28] Author interview with a fighter with the Islah-aligned irregular militias via telephone, March 2021.

[29] Author interview with a fighter with the Tur Al-Bahah Axis familiar with armaments via telephone, February 2021.

## LOOMING CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE STC AND TAREQ SALEH

The proximity of the forces of the Tur Al-Bahah Axis and STC forces to each other (only around 2.5 kilometers apart in Ma'baq means that there is potential for tensions to escalate into armed conflict. Much as in Abyan governorate, Saudi-led coalition-backed Giants Brigades forces, seen as a neutral force by all parties, currently separate the rival forces.<sup>[30]</sup>

STC forces have deployed across Tur Al-Bahah in a pre-emptive attempt to prevent Islah-affiliated forces from expanding further into Lahj.<sup>[31]</sup> Some of that fear related to Islah expansion in the governorate is based on efforts by Tur Al-Bahah Axis forces, beginning at the start of 2021, to build new roads and erect military positions in the area, as well as the transfer of fighters from frontlines with the Houthis in Taiz's Hayfan district to Tur Al-Bahah. The redeployment of additional fighters from Taiz prompted the head of the STC, Aiderous Al-Zubaidi, to accuse Islah in February of derailing the battle against the Houthis in Taiz governorate, and instead seeking to open a new battle against "the South".<sup>[32]</sup> For its part, Islah has not responded to the accusations.

The situation in Abyan is the most important indicator as to whether clashes will likely break out between the Tur Al-Bahah Axis and the STC. Although the partial implementation of the Riyadh Agreement's military sections led to an end to fighting between Yemeni government and STC forces in southern governorates in December 2020,<sup>[33]</sup> the truce that has followed has been fragile. If the ceasefire holds, and if the unity government, including members of the STC, remains in place, outright fighting between Tur Al-Bahah Axis and STC forces is unlikely, at least for the time being.

[30] Author interviews with tribal sources in Al-Subaiha via Whatsapp, May 2021.

[31] "Al-Ka'alouli: Tur Al-Bahah is a theater of operations for the 9th Sa'iqah Brigade according to the Riyadh Agreement [AR]," News Yemen, February 24, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2WTX8Mw>

[32] "STC Presidential Council commends the results of the delegation's visit to Russia and warns against a Brotherhood plot targeting the Riyadh Agreement [AR]," STC Aden, February 6, 2021, <https://stcaden.com/news/13902>

[33] Saeed Al-Batati, "Government and separatist forces withdraw from flashpoint in Abyan, Yemen," Arab News, December 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1775886/middle-east>

Another scenario could be an eventual move by pro-Islah forces toward Al-Mokha district on the Red Sea Coast, which is currently under the control of Tareq Saleh's UAE-backed forces. In late 2020, Salem, the Islah military commander in Taiz, was heard in a leaked recording declaring "Al-Mokha is ours". Besides being an implicit threat against Tareq Saleh's forces, the explicit implication of the statement was that the port city should be under the administration of the Taiz local authority. Islah supporters believe that Al-Mokha is being used as a base to serve an Emirati strategy aimed at separating it from the rest of Taiz, and creating an autonomous region. On paper, Al-Mokha is further away from Tur Al-Bahah than Aden is. However, Islah-affiliated forces will find the route west to Al-Mokha easier to pass through, owing to payoffs made to the tribal leaders in the area.<sup>[34]</sup>

However, it is still unlikely that a push toward the Red Sea Coast will take place in the short term. According to a military source familiar with the recruitment of fighters, the process of training new recruits is still ongoing, with a new training camp established in early 2021 at the site of the former Higher Institute for Teachers in Osifra, in the center of Taiz city, and other fighters being trained in Marib.<sup>[35]</sup>

For their part, Tareq Saleh's forces suspect that the Taiz Military Axis' March 2021 offensive against the Houthis in western Taiz was in fact a prelude to a move against them on the Red Sea Coast.<sup>[36]</sup> Taiz Military Axis forces were initially able to make gains against the Houthis in Al-Kadahah and Al-Waz'iyah in western Taiz, but a stalemate soon emerged. While some government supporters saw the offensive against the Houthis as a chance to bring about a renewed sense of unity among anti-Houthi forces and end the partial blockade of Taiz city,<sup>[37]</sup> Islah's dominance of the Taiz Military Axis meant that Saleh's forces were wary of any advance in their direction, even if at the expense of the Houthis.

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[34] Author interview with a member of the Tur Al-Bahah Axis' press office via telephone, May and June 2021.

[35] Author interview with a military source close to Al-Mekhlafi's militias, March 2021.

[36] Author interview with a member of Tareq Saleh's forces, May 2021.

[37] Khaled Farouq, "Short of trust, weapons and planning, government surge in Taiz fails," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/13952>

## CIVILIAN CONCERNS AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

Taiz governorate is home to a diverse array of political parties, many of which have united around the importance of preventing an escalation in violence and the associated harm it will have on civilians. Parties such as the Yemeni Socialist Party and the Nasserist Unionist People's Organization have specifically called for the rapid abolition of militias operating outside of the official government military structure, the withdrawal of military forces from private and public facilities that have been transformed into bases and the relocation of brigades and barracks far from densely populated areas.<sup>[38]</sup> The Islah-affiliated irregular training camps have also been criticized specifically. A number of parties in support of the Yemeni government, including the General People's Congress, the Socialist Party, the Nasserists, and the Salafi Al-Rashad Party issued a statement in December 2020 declaring their opposition to the mobilization of fighters in Yafrus.<sup>[39]</sup>

However, by agreeing to these calls Islah would see its military wing lose its current advantage in Taiz. Such a move by the group is therefore unlikely. The elimination of Islah-affiliated irregular militias, any restructuring of the army, and the withdrawal of military forces from urban areas would dilute Islah's influence on the ground in the governorate. Rather, Islah seems to be pursuing an opposite course of action. New threats, whether local or regional, perceived or otherwise, lead Islah to double down on efforts to recruit additional fighters into its ranks and expand its footprint in Taiz. An overall fear remains that Islah's opponents may unite against it, particularly in light of the threat posed by the Houthis to Marib, Islah's other power center in Yemen.

While Islah remains the top player among the broader anti-Houthi coalition in Taiz, continued regional backing of its opponents adds to the state of suspicion

[38] "Socialists and Nasserites in Taiz call to get rid of corrupt force and war merchants," Yemeni Socialist Party in Taiz official Facebook page, May 30, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/878133342279583/posts/4072698352823050/>

[39] "Political Statement: Political parties and movements have observed reports in Taiz concerning the mobilization of men in Yafrus area...[AR]," Nasserist Unionist People's Organization Official Facebook Page, December 11, 2019, [www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2772837432783532&id=492928607441104](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2772837432783532&id=492928607441104); Islah signed the statement, but this can be explained as an effort to distance the political wing from the actions of Islah-aligned militias, and provides plausible deniability.



that moves are being prepared against the party. The reports in May 2021 of the UAE' establishing a military base on Perim (Mayyun Island, in the strategic Bab Al-Mandeb Strait, gave further impetus to these fears. The subsequent confirmation that Tareq Saleh's forces are also present on Perim only serves to stress this point. In reaction, Islah adopted a populist and nationalist narrative that depicts the UAE's presence on the island as a sovereignty issue, and the latest example of Emirati efforts to take over Yemeni territory.<sup>[40]</sup>

For their part, the business community and civilians within Taiz city fear that a military escalation between the Islah and the STC may impact the only supply line into Taiz city, which comes from STC-controlled Aden. These fears are particularly pertinent in light of the STC's continued refusal to allow a new road to be built to replace the Hayjat Al-Abed road, which extends from Bani Omar in Al-Hujariah to Al-Subaiha in Lahj and is in poor condition. The STC rejects the establishment of a newly-paved road, viewing it as an attempt by Islah to extend its areas of control.<sup>[41]</sup>

Civilians in Taiz continue to pay the price of the weakness of the Yemeni state and the resultant empowerment of local armed groups during the conflict. This state of affairs turned Taiz city into a hotbed of criminal activity; illegal land seizures and extortion by armed groups against civilians has become a regular occurrence. A recent example came on August 10, when members of the Taiz Military Axis' 170th Brigade attacked civilians attempting to stop their land from being seized, leading to the death of seven people, including five civilians from one family.<sup>[42]</sup> Despite an official complaint from members of the Yemeni parliament, it is expected that members of the Taiz Military Axis, and the irregular militias operating in Taiz, will continue to be able to act with impunity.

[40] Jon Gambrell, "UAE-backed Yemen leader says his troops at island air base," Associated Press, June 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-middle-east-business-628ae4a2d20e074e7e5f43fda2df46b6>

[41] "Preventing Islah from advancing to Bab Al-Mandab: STC stops the building of an alternative road between Aden and Taiz [AR]," Taiz Al-Youm, February 3, 2021, [www.taiztoday.net/2021/02/03/-قاطعا-الطريق-أمام-الإصلاح-لتمدد-نحو-با](http://www.taiztoday.net/2021/02/03/-قاطعا-الطريق-أمام-الإصلاح-لتمدد-نحو-با)

[42] "Yemen: Government orders and parliamentary demands to stop insecurity in Taiz [AR]," Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, August 14, 2021, [www.aawsat.com/home/article/3130956/-اليمن-أوامر-حكومية-ومطالب-برلمانية-بوقف-انفلات-الأمن-في-تعز](http://www.aawsat.com/home/article/3130956/-اليمن-أوامر-حكومية-ومطالب-برلمانية-بوقف-انفلات-الأمن-في-تعز)



## CONCLUSION

Islah is unlikely to risk an all-out war with its rivals in Taiz, at least for the time being. Currently, the primary focus for the party remains defending Marib, its last major stronghold in Yemen's north, from the Houthis. A total collapse of government and Islah-affiliated forces in Marib would be a disaster for both parties, and would leave Islah in a more precarious position in Taiz. Knowing this, pro-Islah forces in Taiz have been moved to Marib to join the fight against the Houthis, further highlighting Islah's priorities in Yemen.<sup>[43]</sup>

Securing the rest of Taiz governorate, including the Red Sea Coast, remains a goal for the future, and thus the risk of conflict, intentional or inadvertent, continues. The governorate is a strategic prize for both Islah and Tareq Saleh. The STC continues to view the threat posed by a strong Islah as existential. Meanwhile, regional powers, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman, will continue attempts to influence events in Taiz and covertly place their proxies in a stronger position.

The weakness of the internationally recognized Yemeni government and President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi means that the local parties and regional powers believe they have the opportunity to fill the current power vacuum. Islah's moves to grow their strength in Taiz by establishing training camps for irregular militias should be viewed in this light. If successful, others may seek to copy the model, leading to an even more fractured and militarized Yemen – one that will be even more difficult to put back together. In the meantime, armed militias operating in Taiz represent a timebomb that could go off at any time, threatening to plunge the governorate into further bloody conflict.

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[43] Khaled Farouq, "Short on Trust, Weapons and Planning, Government Surge in Taiz Fails," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/13952>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **To the Islah Party:**

- Define Islah's clear and explicit position toward the ongoing training and mobilization of forces by armed factions loyal to it.
- Stop the formation of any irregular military entities and reject the sending of any reinforcements to areas adjacent to Yemen's southern governorates, which are vital corridors and the only lifeline to the residents of the partially-besieged city of Taiz.
- Address irresponsible practices committed by the armed factions loyal to Islah and refrain from using Taiz as an arena for settling regional scores.
- Work with the official authorities and all parties within the new government to preserve the tenuous gains of the Riyadh Agreement, and contribute to building a genuine national army that is not subject to the orders of any single party or group.
- Support any political and official efforts that would, above all, spare civilians the scourge of conflict and that would stop the worsening of the blockade imposed on the people of Taiz city.

### **To the Southern Transitional Council/Tareq Salah:**

- Avoid any military escalation that would impact civilians in Taiz and prevent the governorate from being used as an arena for fighting regional proxy battles.
- Guarantee the safe movement of food and goods from Aden and Al-Mokha to Taiz city.
- Work with the Yemeni government to implement the military aspects of the Riyadh Agreement, and abolish any entities outside of the framework of the regular military establishment, whether affiliated with the STC or Islah, in Tur Al-Bahah and Al-Hujariah.

**To the internationally recognized government under President Hadi:**

- Restore the standing of the government's military institutions by restructuring the army command on the basis of allegiance to the state, rather than to individuals, political parties or regional backers.
- Act immediately to inspect contact lines between Islah-affiliated militias and their opponents in Tur Al-Bahah and Al-Hujariah to defuse tensions, separate the rival forces and deploy neutral forces.
- Restructure the Taiz Military Axis and the Lahj Military Axis to reflect the makeup of the unity government, and exclude any military commanders working to use the army for narrow political objectives.
- Counter any partisan or regional attempts to establish irregular military entities that operate parallel to the national army.
- Hold accountable those responsible for irregular military recruitment outside of the framework of the military establishment, as well as those allowing the national army's equipment and weapons to be used for political purposes.
- Rapidly implement the military aspects of the Riyadh Agreement, and abolish any entities outside of the framework of the regular military establishment, whether affiliated with the STC or Islah, in Tur Al-Bahah and Al-Hujariah.

**To the local authorities in Taiz and Lahj:**

- Engage international and regional guarantors in pressuring local armed actors to permit the free flow of medical and food supplies to residents, and prevent checkpoints and main roads from becoming zones of conflict. Advocate for the reopening of talks for local deescalation and humanitarian corridors with international and regional backing.
- Advocate against the conversion of government and educational facilities into military bases, and clear armed forces from any civilian facilities currently being used by them. Engage regional backers of armed groups on this issue, as well as international accountability actors and mechanisms who can bring greater visibility and documentation of international humanitarian law violations.
- Form a broad-based committee of political parties, local dignitaries, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to establish a common vision for security governance in which the security concerns of civilians are recognized and addressed only through official state structures.

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

