

Salafism in Yemen and War Challenges

Case Assessment

Political Analysis Unit

August 2021





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Summary:

This research deals with the course of the Salafis movement in Yemen since its foundation and then the subsequent splits and differences occurred inside the movement later in light of some effective events and changes, including the conflict between Salafis and the Hotuhis in Dammaj, the Salafis' stronghold in Saada province, in the north of Yemen. Those changes and events also included the declaration of political pluralism and the emergence of parties after the announcement of the Yemeni unity in 1990, and the Yemeni popular revolution during the Arab Spring in 2011, and the qualitative transition that resulted in the participation of a large part of the Salafis in the political action, then the participation of the Salafis in the current war along with the legitimate government forces against the Houthi group, which has a Zaydi (Shiite) sectarian reference. The paper also highlights the most important challenges facing the Salafi groups in the present and/or challenges may face in the future.

Emergence and Expansion:

Although Salafism in Yemen seems to be an extension of the general Sunni ideology, it has doctrinal (scholastic) origins with its roots dating back to the Hanbali archaeological school, related to Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (780-855 AD), and developed in the 18th century by Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdul-Wahhab (1703-1792). Salafism was transferred to Yemen through cleric Muqbil bin Hadi Al-Wadi'i (1937-2001), who moved to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after he received his education in the mosques of Saada, northern Yemen. He belongs to the Zaydi doctrine and lives in the same geographical area where the doctrine is prevailing.

However, al-Wadi'i changed his convictions during his stay in Saudi Arabia and received religious sciences, including the science of Hadith. He returned to Yemen in the late 1970s to Saada where he founded Dar Al-Hadith in Dammaj area, which would become one of the most important and influential educational institutions for Salafism in the world, teaching tens of thousands of students ranging from the Arab world to Africa to the Southeast Asia and the Western world.

The Period of Emergence of Yemeni Salafism Can Be Divided Into Two Phases:

The first stage (1980-1984): the stage of polarization and the demand for religious sciences, foremost of which is the science of hadith, and the generalizations of the Salafist call. The Salafist call witnessed a remarkable spread, as young people from different regions of Yemen came to the Dammaj Center for study.

The second stage (1985-1990): the crystallization of traditional Salafi ideology, and the declaration of its rivalry with other intellectual and political currents, including the Muslim Brotherhood organization that the Salafists had cooperated with it at the beginning. Al-Wadi'i distributed handouts and cassettes in which he attacked his rivals and expressed his objection to many issues, such as the prohibition of partisanship, elections, democracy, and the disobedience of the rulers.

The Difference and the Emergence of the Dynamic Salafism:

After the Salafi Movement had completed its first decade (1980 - 1990), the first dispute came to the surface between Sheikh Al-Wadi'i and a number of his students, who accordingly departed the traditional Salafi thought and adopted the organized Salafi Movement, and they established the Yemeni Al-Hikma Charitable Society. The most prominent founders are Abdul-Majeed Al-Raimi, Mohamed bin Musa Al-Amiri, Mohamed Al-Hadaa, and other Salafi clerics. ^[1]

This move resulted in a strained relationship between those clerics and their leader cleric al-Wadi'i, who began to issue warnings against them, describing them as "opportunists" and accusing them of stealing the Salafi call and affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood^[2] Two years later, an internal dispute occurred inside Al-Hikma Charitable Society, which caused the separation of some of its founders, who founded Al-Ehsan Charitable Society, which was announced in the city of Mukalla in Hadramout governorate by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Yazidi and others. ^[3]

Researchers attribute the Salafi differences to the political and social situation after the Yemeni unity and the declaration of political pluralism, in addition to different positions of the Salafist parties towards local and regional events,

and the state of intellectual and political polarization. While cleric al-Wadi'i did not show any interaction with new changes, most of his students displayed a positive interaction. So the dispute between al-Wadi'i and his disciples expanded.^[4]

Nevertheless, Sheikh Al-Wadi'i retained his symbolic position as the leader of the Salafi Movement in general, and the traditional Salafi Movement in particular. After his death, Sheikh Yahya Al-Hajouri succeeded him in managing the Dammaj Center and the traditional Salafi Movement from which other Salafi clerics emerged in some governorates, including Sheikh Rahman al-Adani in Aden and Sheikh Mohamed al-Imam in Maabar city in Dhamar governorate, while the new organized Salafist Movement began to expand in the capital, Sana'a, Aden, and other governorates. It was represented by members and leaders of the Al-Hikma and Al-Ehsan societies. Sheikh Abu Al-Hassan Al-Maribi, who runs the Hadith Center in Marib governorate, is closer to the new Salafi trend. He engaged in several debates with traditional Salafi leaders, and some of its supporters participated in the establishment of Salafi charitable societies.

When the Yemeni popular revolution erupted in 2011, the division between the two Salafi currents appeared more clearly in their respective positions towards the revolution. While the traditional current declared a hostile position against the revolution as a violation of loyalty to the ruler, the new Salafist current sided with the revolution, and Salafi revolutionary youth blocs appeared in various Yemeni governorates. In Sana'a, the Association of Youth for Renaissance and Change was formed in April 2011. In the same period, Nahda Movement arose in Aden, the Justice Movement in Taiz, and Youth Movement of Renaissance and Changes appeared in Hodeidah, the Freedom and Construction Movement and the Peaceful Youth Alliance in Ibb. However, these components dissolved themselves in March 2012, with the exception of the Renaissance Movement in Aden and the Freedom Movement in Ibb, and announced the formation of an inclusive political entity called the (Yemeni Rashad Union party). In 2013, other Salafi leaders announced the establishment of the Peace and Development Party. While most of members of Al-Rashad and Al-Nahda movements belong to the Al-Ehsan Society, members of Al-Hikma Society constitute the majority of the Peace and Development Party.

Researchers and those interested in the transformations of the Salafism believe that the discourse of the kinetic Salafi Movement has changed, in an almost a radical way, from a hostile position against the partisan activity to reconciliation and normalization; from a closed position towards the West to an open one; from disregard to the issue of women to a positive interaction with the women's role in the society; from reluctance and refusal of the political participation to acceptance; and from satisfaction of what the ruling regime imposes to political participation and advocacy.^[5] All these changes constitute an important development in the path of the Yemeni Salafism at the level of discourse and the practical acts.

The Sectarian Conflict with the Houthis and the Dammaj War:

The emergence of the Shiite revolution in Iran in 1970s led to a rapprochement between the two prominent Shiite currents, the Imami "Twelvers" in Iran and the Zaydi-Hadawi in Yemen. This rapprochement resulted in the emergence of a radical Shiite Zaydi current that publicly shows hostility against the Sunnis in general and against the prophet's companions in particular, in a clear deviation from what was known about the Zaydi sect in Yemen. This coincided with the return of Sheikh Muqbil al-Wadi'i to Yemen and the foundation of the Salafi Movement (Wahhabist) in Saada, the most prominent stronghold of the Shiite Zaydis, so the stage of the Shiite-Sunni conflict between Zaidi scholars and al-Wadi'i started, especially after the latter tried to spread his Salafi ideas in the mosques of Saada.

Some researchers believe that the Dammaj Center (Dar al-Hadith Institute) as one of the most important factors that prompted some scholars of the Zaydi sect to establish Zaydi centers and what was known as the "Believer Youth Forum" in a practical response to the challenge posed by the establishment of the Salafi Dammaj Center.^[6] However, the two sides did not enter into an armed conflict even during the six wars between the government forces and the Houthis during the period (2004-2009). Whereas, the Salafis were "keen not to get involved practically in those wars, despite their keenness to encapsulate their positions in support of the regime with obedience to the ruler and the legitimacy of fighting those who rebel against him."^[7]

After the Yemeni popular revolution, the Houthi movement began to expand in northern Yemen, relying on support from Iran, which sees that the Houthis are a local ally that share Iranians the affiliation with the Shiite sect and hostility to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its Yemeni allies. The Houthis waged a war against Salafis in Dammaj in Saada, which is their main center, for several months in 2013. The Salafis went through difficult conditions. In addition to the inequality in terms of equipment and armament, “the Houthis imposed a suffocating siege on the Dammaj region from all sides, and prevented any entry and exit from it. And they bombed it with heavy weapons, machine guns and 120 mm mortars,” according to statements issued by the Salafis, who were waiting for a firm stance from the Yemeni government against the Houthis, and they believed that the solution “lies in the imposing of the state’s control and influence on Saada governorate, and the disarming of the Houthis and forcing them to accept the peaceful coexistence with others.”^[8] However, the government’s efforts were less than what the Salafis had expected, and this doubled their feeling of let down from the state and society, with the exception of some tribes that stood with them.^[9]

As for the Houthis, they continued the war and besieging the region under the justification that those in Dammaj are “tools of the Saudi intelligence,” according to a press statement made to media outlets by Ali al-Bukhaiti, a spokesman for the Houthi group at the time.

The confrontations ended with the Houthis taking control of Dammaj and completely overrunning the area at the beginning of 2014. They destroyed the Dar Al-Hadith Center, displaced 15,000 Salafis, and blew up several homes, mosques and schools in Dammaj. The Houthis’ practices created a motivated attitude by the majority of Salafis to join confrontations against the Houthis, while other Salafis saw that they were incapable to confront the Houthis and preferred to accept the Houthis as a fait accompli.

In September of the same year, the Houthi group took control of the capital, Sana'a, and seized state institutions and army weapons, and ended the political process. After the armed coup took control of power, the traditional Salafi current was divided into two groups, the majority of them in Taiz, al-Bayda and southern governorates were motivated to fight against the Houthis, while other Salafis, represented by the Salafis of the Maabar School in Dhamar governorate, led by Sheikh Muhammad al-Imam, and the Salafis of Ibb governorate and in other Houthi-controlled areas in the north of the country.

Salafism and War.. Challenges of the Current Situation:

After the Houthi group took control of the capital, Sana'a, and several governorates in northern Yemen in late 2014, the group tightened its grip and began to expand to areas in the south to complete control over all governorates, including Taiz, Al-Bayda, Al-Dhale, Lahj, Aden and Abyan. A popular resistance was formed against the Houthis in those governorates. The extent of the resistance's participation in the fight against the Houthi militia varies from one governorate to another, most of them are Salafis who participated in confrontations against the Houthis in Dammaj.

In late March 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the Arab Coalition to support the Yemeni legitimacy, and the launch of a military operation called the Decisive Storm against the Houthi coup. The Salafists obtained the lion's share of Saudi and Emirati support for their active participation in the war on one hand, and for being the closest to the ruling circles and influential powers in Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other hand.

The Salafis, especially those who participated in the Dammaj confrontations that ended in favor of the Houthi group, were present in all battlefields and many Salafis, who were displaced from Dammaj, became field leaders on a number of fighting fronts,

such as Sheikh Rawi Abdulaziz, Hashem al-Sayed, and Bashir Al-Mudharibi, Bassam Al-Mihdhar, Mahran Qubati, Hani bin Braik on the fronts of Aden; Hamdi Shukri and Abdul Rahman Al-Lahji in Lahj; Rashad Al-Dhali in Al-Dhalea; and Abu Al-Abbas in Taiz to enhance the presence and participation of the Salafists in the war against the Houthis.

A few months after the outbreak of the war against the Houthis, the Salafis came to the fore due to their active participation in the fighting. According to researchers, "Salafi groups quickly transformed from Dawah advocacy into fighters due to the repercussions of the armed conflict with the Houthis that it is now affecting all transformations of the scene."^[10]

Although the Salafis appeared during the war to have one position consistent with the religious discourse against the Houthi group, the differences between them began to emerge soon after the liberation of a number of provinces. The differences were linked to the trends and projects that emerged after the liberation. While a large part of the Salafis remained loyal to President Hadi and Saudi Arabia, other Salafis were linked to the Emirati agenda, and moved from obedience to the ruler to rebellion against him. This trend is topped by Hani Bin Braik.

The Assassination of Cleric Al-Adani and Targeting the Salafism:

In February 2016, the Salafist movement suffered the biggest blow when Sheikh Abdul-Rahman Al-Adani, one of the most prominent Salafi sheikhs in southern Yemen, was assassinated. Observers saw that his assassination came in response to his rejection of the Emirati policy in Yemen. The perpetrators who assassinated him were arrested and handed over to the Emirati camp in Aden, but then they disappeared and the case was neglected.

Between 2016 and 2018, Aden witnessed a wave of assassinations that targeted more than 30 imams and preachers of mosques belonging to the moderate Salafi current that are affiliated with al-Hikma and al-Ehsan societies, and some of them are affiliated with the Islah party.

Fingers were pointed at the UAE and its allies, such as Hani bin Braik, as the investigation records revealed his involvement in supporting and planning the assassinations, according to confessions by some assassins in the Public Prosecution in Aden, which were made public in mid-2018. The issue did not stop with the assassinations, but rather dozens of Salafists were arrested, and some others were disappeared in secret prisons for long periods. In addition, 25 Salafi and Islahi imams were replaced by other Salafis loyal to Abu Dhabi.

Salafism Presence In Spite of Division:

The Salafis who are supported by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi constitute the backbone of the fighters against the Houthis. The Kingdom accounts for the support of thousands of Salafis on the fighting fronts on the Yemeni-Saudi border, and the UAE controls the fronts of Hodeidah (the western coast), where thousands of Salafis participate in the fighting there. They are distributed in almost 20 brigades, known as “Giants Brigades.” Although these brigades enjoy support from the UAE, most of their commanders are loyal to President Hadi.

In Taiz, the UAE supports a group of Salafi fighters, led by Adel Farea, known as “Abu Al-Abbas.” Although there are other Salafi factions fighting the Houthis in Taiz, Abu Dhabi’s support was limited to Abu Al-Abbas faction, which the UAE considered the best an armed local ally in the city. Through Abu al-Abbas, the UAE can confront its main opponent, the Islah Party. Abu al-Abbas and his supporters fought several rounds of fighting against the government security services and armed forces. The US Treasury had included Abu al-Abbas in its terrorist lists in October 2017, for his involvement in working with terrorist organizations, according to the US Treasury statement. Nevertheless, the man still receives Emirati support.

The participation of the Salafists in the war was not limited to the fighting fronts only, but there are a number of Salafi leaders who have recently occupied administrative positions in the government institutions.

The Salafists' participation in the war and in managing some liberated regions gave them some expertise, and they overcame the isolation state that they were imposing on themselves in the past period. The armed confrontations between the legitimate government and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council's forces in Aden in 2018 and 2019 proved the active presence of the Salafis in the two warring camps, and many of the military brigades of both parties are led by Salafis.

The Salafist Movement and Future Challenges:

The current war showed the Salafist groups as a force that cannot be underestimated, but the main warring parties were able to penetrate these groups, and to reproduce them in new molds compatible with the war data, developments of events and the interests of the parties and the active forces.

It is possible to identify the most important challenges facing the Yemeni Salafist movement by looking at its current reality, the effective factors internally and externally, and the events and developments that Yemen witnessed, foremost of which are the popular revolution, the Houthi coup, and the current war, as the Salafis can be distributed as follows:

- 1- Most of the Salafis declared their loyalty to President Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi as the guardian, and they constitute a significant force in the strength of the government forces, especially in southern Yemen.
- 2- The Salafis who are associated with the Emirates and became involved in the armed formations it established after the war. They became an integral part of the local forces that receive directions and orders from the rulers of Abu Dhabi, including leaders in the Giants Brigades, as well as the Security Belt and the Thunderbolt forces of the Southern Transitional Council.
- 3- Salafi clerics in the Houthi-controlled areas showed great rapprochement with the Houthis, although their discourse - as part of the general Salafi discourse - was against the Houthis. They believe that the Shiites must be fought, but their attitudes changed towards reconciliation with the Houthis and subjected to their authority.

Some of them engaged in the fighting along with the Houthis under the pretext of confronting the Arab Coalition, which the Houthis describe as aggression. The most prominent Salafis who represent this trend are Sheikh Mohamed al-Mahdi in Ibb, and Sheikh Mohamed al-Imam in Dhamar. However, the Houthis' violations in their areas of control affected everyone, including their allied Salafis.

4- A new Salafi discourse emerged and integrated into the Yemeni political scene since the outbreak of the popular revolution, and its companions participated through revolutionary components in all events and activities, recording their presence and participation in the revolution. They also participated in the National Dialogue Conference and political action after the revolution. This trend is represented by Al-Rashad party, Al-Nahda Movement, the Peace and Development Party, and the Association of Aden Scholars and Preachers. They fought besides the army forces of President Hadi's government against the Houthi group.

Like other Yemeni forces and components, the future of the Yemeni Salafist groups is linked to the future of Yemen in general, and the post-war situations in the country. It is also linked to the situation of the army forces after the war and the parties with which the Salafis are associated, especially the Salafi entities that became tools in the hands of some internal and external forces.

5- The failure of the Arab Spring resulted in a reaction among many Salafis, who began to believe in violence as a means to take power, so they helped their ideological opponents from the Houthis to control the power. Some terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State took advantage of the state of desperation among some Salafists and attracted them to their ranks.

Although new Salafi formations emerged, the main two currents, the traditional Salafism, represented by the Dammaj Center and its branches, and the new kinetic Salafism, still cover the majority of the Salafism map. It is possible to anticipate the future of Salafism in Yemen in light of its current situation and its different positions towards the main issues and challenges facing each of them.

First: Traditional Salafism

Although the traditional Salafi trend was subjected to major vibrations as a result of the Houthi war against its supporters and centers, including the main center in Dammaj in Saada, the Saudi support for the movement restored it and compensated it for what it lost in the first rounds of the war. Indeed, the movement itself has become at the forefront of forces fighting against the Houthis.

The matter indicates that the future of the traditional Salafism depends upon this support, which includes the establishment of new centers and mosques enabling them to maintain the position they have reached at the present time and ensuring their expansion in the future at the expense of other forces and trends. This seems to be clear through the establishment of Salafi centers in a number of southern and eastern regions, including Mahra, al-Dhalea and Marib. The establishment of those Salafi centers in new geographical areas that were not on the map of interest in the past period, raises questions about whether this move comes in the context of the struggle for influence. Observers view these centers as Saudi projects to enhance its influence against the Omani influence in Mahra, and the influence of the Islah Party in Marib, and to put an end to the presence of Salafists, who are linked to Kuwait in al-Dhalea.

What is certain here is that the traditional Salafi trend will benefit from Saudi support at the present time and in the near future to maintain their survival and to expand every time Riyadh seeks to expand its influence against its local and regional opponents using the Salafi group's card.

Second: The New Kinetic Salafism

In addition to challenges facing the Salafi movement in general, the neo-Salafist movement faces challenges mostly related to its transition to the political action and the establishment of political parties, including the following:

• **Bilateralism of Political Party and Charitable Activity:**

The new Salafist currents witnessed two important changes. The first change was its split from the traditional Salafism and the establishment of the Yemeni al-Hikma Charitable Society and Al-Ehsan Charitable Society in the late 1970s. The second change was its participation in the popular revolution in 2011 and then in the political action through establishing political Salafi parties. Thus, this trend had to face the most important challenge, as it had to administratively and organizationally separate the political party from the charitable activity, as each one has its own characteristics, features, and specialty. The future of this Salafist movement is linked to the possibility of overcoming its reality, and its ability to create new relations with other Yemeni political and intellectual parties. This Salafi current should have adopted a discourse that reflects its transformation from negativity against the political action into a positive interaction with the political scene, as that will reflect its intellectual development and awareness of reality and challenges.

• **External financing and its repercussions**

The Yemeni Salafist currents, either the traditional or the new kinetic one, are linked to the Gulf support and financing, Saudi in particular, for several considerations, including the intellectual and methodological relationship between Yemen's Salafis and Gulf supporters, as they all belong to the Wahhabi Salafi School, and to the geographical rapprochement between Yemen and the Gulf. The local events and developments in Yemen, the latest of which is the current war, have strengthened the Yemeni-Gulf relationship, so the Gulf support continues to take several forms, and it is governed by new factors. The Saudi support is often focused on the traditional Salafi trend, while the new currents of Yemeni Salafism depend on support from Kuwaiti and Qatari Salafi charitable associations and bodies. The most important factor behind the Gulf support is the intellectual harmony and the extent of commitment to the Salafi approach. While Saudi supportive bodies adhere to the traditional Salafism and support followers who are more committed to the same approach, their counterparts in Kuwait and Qatar tend to renew and support the Salafi current that is compatible with them.

Accordingly, this Gulf support - at the present time and/or in the near future – seems to be an important tributary in supporting activities and strengthening the Salafist presence,

but at the same time it constitutes a major challenge against the Salafi trend that has opted the transition to the political participation, as support becomes restricted to what is permitted by law and order, and the requirements of the democratic practice and partisan competition, in addition to the necessity of keeping away from any foreign support to maintain the independence of decision-making within the leadership of the political party. This situation pushes the political Salafis to strengthen their independence and to overcome the state of loyalty and dependency that characterized the Salafist march during the past years.

- **Intellectual connection and local concerns:**

Like other Yemeni political parties and forces, the Salafi political parties suffer from an intellectual dependency and ideological commitment, which make them face the same challenge. They are required – with the passage of time- to reach the most extent of intellectual independence. They need to create new independent visions that meet the demands of the local reality and deal with challenges of the surrounding environment, not just a reflection of ideas and perceptions coming from beyond the borders.

Observers noted that no special political theory has emerged from the Salafi parties, and the interfaces of the websites of the Salafi parties (Al-Rashad Union Party and the Peace and Development Party) are still almost devoid of local intellectual production that takes into account the development that took place in the path of the Salafism in Yemen. So it is imperative for the Salafi leadership to address this issue, not to be satisfied with importing what others produce from outside Yemen, especially since the new Salafist movement includes personalities who are able to bridge this gap and develop local visions and theories that keep pace with developments and express the position towards them.

It is important that the required political theory reflects the Salafi parties' vision towards the issues raised on the local and regional arena, including democracy, the peaceful transition of power, combating corruption, good governance, women's participation, the relationship between parties and other political and ideological currents, and other issues and challenges.

The participation of Salafis in the political work requires an aware involvement in the political process that reflects the size of the popular base of the party, and meets the needs of citizens, based on the experience of Salafis in charitable and relief work for many years. The more the Salafi political participation is aware of the existing requirements, the needs of society, and the challenges of reality and future, the more effective and able to mobilize popular support they will be. The Salafists can enter the political arena without the burdens of previous conflicts and consequences, unlike other political forces whose pages are not free from articles about the past conflicts and effects for at least 30 years ago. The Salafi parties can benefit from other parties' experience, if they manage to deal with the existing forces and present themselves well to the Yemeni people.

Conclusion:

Salafism has emerged in Yemen as one of the Sunni Islamic religious trends. The Salafism had tangible effects over the past forty years, but it has also been affected by the reality in Yemen and the local, regional and international conditions. It has gone through many transformations according to subjective and objective factors. The most important transformation is represented the emergence of the kinetic Salafi trend that emerged from the womb of the traditional Salafi School. The second important transformation was the transition to the political action through the establishment of political parties and movements, and the participation in major events at the level of Yemen, starting with the popular revolution and passing through the national dialogue, and not ending with the current war.

While the kinetic Salafi trend (New Salafism) has become one of the political currents in the Yemeni scene, the traditional Salafist movement still has its presence and influence, especially in light of its extensive participation in the war, and its association with the forces of internal and external influential powers. This foretells of an active role in the future,

but this is related to several factors and elements, the most prominent of which are the financial support, and the ability of this Salafi trend to cohesion and preserve its intellectual unity amid non-stop acts of polarization. So its position - in the present time and the near future - subjects to the extent of its strength, cohesion and adherence to the principles of the Salafist call. The polarization leads to the creation of schisms and multiple loyalties within the same school, and the emergence of new leaders with new convictions and positions.

The real concerns about Salafism in Yemen during the war and its aftermath remain in two main points: the possibility of external employment of the Salafist groups and the expectation that their members may join violent and terrorist groups.

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