

The evolution of militant Salafism in Taiz



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By Bushra Al-Maqtari

Executive summary:

The rise of Salafi militias in the Yemeni city of Taiz has contributed to the now frequent outbursts of violence there between ostensibly pro-government factions. It has also helped foster an environment conducive to extremist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). If not addressed directly, these developments are likely to continue destabilizing the city and wider governorate well after any potential resolution to the larger conflict in Yemen.

While Taiz has traditionally been known for its leftist political tendencies, the Salafi presence has grown steadily in recent decades. Prior to Yemen's 2011 uprising, however, local adherents to this ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam, as elsewhere in Yemen, had been staunchly apolitical and focused their activities on charitable work. Following the massive public demonstrations against then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Salafis leaders in Yemen were at odds over whether to support the protest movement. Salafi groups were divided further over whether to join the country's transitional political process following Saleh's resignation.

Houthi fighters' 2013 military campaign against the town of Dammaj – a Salafi bastion in the otherwise Houthi-dominated northern governorate of Sa'ada – and the subsequent expulsion of Salafis from there helped initiate a general militarization of Salafis in the country. The Houthi siege of Taiz City, which began in 2015, led to the rise of local armed resistance groups; primary among these were three distinct clusters of Salafi militias.

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These militias' varying allegiances with the Islah Party – commonly associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen – and the local scarcity of resources have led to intense competition and increasingly violent rivalries between them. The Saudi-led military coalition intervening in the Yemeni conflict, and the United Arab Emirates in particular, have helped inflame these rivalries with their preferential provision of arms and financing to militias unaffiliated with Islah. Yemeni army divisions operating in Taiz are similarly divided over their affiliations with Islah. These factors, combined with absence of effective state institutions and public services, have created a deeply unstable security environment in which AQAP has found opportunities for influence and expansion.

Importantly, the factors undermining stability in Taiz are increasingly divorcing themselves from the larger battle against the Houthi forces and their allies. The implications of this are that national and international stakeholders will likely need to engage directly with the situation in Taiz if stability there is to be achieved in any larger post-conflict scenario.

A history of dissent

Taiz City is Yemen's third most populous urban center, after Sana'a and Aden, with the wider governorate being Yemen's most populous province.¹ The Taiz governorate is located in central Yemen, though in the North-South divide that defines the country's socio-political dynamics, it has traditionally been part of the north. Throughout Yemen's modern history people from Taiz have had a strong reputation for civic and political activism. A main factor in this has been a popular perception and dissatisfaction with the region's political marginalisation at the hands of Yemen's northern political and tribal elite, from whom Taizis have traditionally sought to distance themselves.

For centuries, a Hashemite religious autocracy – known as the 'Imamate' which adhered to the Zaydi Shia sect of Islam – ruled North Yemen from the country's northern highlands.² The majority of people in Taiz, however, belong to the Shafi'i Sunni sect and have historically been denied any real political decision-making authority, despite high levels of literacy and education.³

The majority of Taizis supported the 1962 republican revolution that overthrew the Imamate, and largely fought with the republicans against the royalists during the subsequent 1962-1970 civil war, repelling attempts to restore the Imamate.⁴ In 1968 there was a split within the republican camp between the leftists, many of whom were from Taiz, and the conservatives, from Yemen's northern governorates. The latter went on to dominate Yemeni politics for decades, particularly after Ali Abdullah Saleh became president in 1978.⁵ Animosity toward Yemen's northern political and tribal elite thus continued to fester in Taiz during Saleh's 33-year presidency.

Manifestations of anti-Saleh and anti-establishment opposition are often attributed to Taiz's leftist traditions, however the governorate is also a recognised home for religious conservatives. Since its formation in 1990, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, commonly known as Islah, has developed strong grassroots support in Taiz. Islah is made up of a broad spectrum of moderate and more extreme Islamist factions, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabi, and Salafi elements. Islah would later become the main player in a coalition of opposition parties called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) that looked to challenge Saleh and his General People's Congress (GPC) party.⁶ Incidentally, many of the opposition parties that would later make up the JMP were originally formed in Taiz in the 1960s.⁷

The establishment of Salafism in Taiz

Various groups of Salafis have increased their presence across Taiz over the past several decades, a further illustration of the governorate's socio-political and religious diversity. As the Salafi presence in Taiz grew, they started integrating themselves socially and physically in many areas of Taiz City through establishing



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mosques and engaging in local charitable activities – a trait that has historically defined Yemen's Salafi movement. In Taiz, charitable activities were particularly pronounced among Salafis associated with the al-Hikma and al-Ihsan branches of the Salafism, which were known for their financial largesse.

The increased presence of Salafi groups in Taiz brought with it increased competition between them as they looked to operate in the same space. Salafis in Taiz also competed with other well-established religious groups, such as followers of the Sufi branch of Islam that were active in Taiz City and the outlying villages. With the exception of members of the al-Ihsan faction who are also close to the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, there has generally been a tense relationship between Salafis and Sufis in Taiz. The founder of Yemen's Salafi movement, Muqbil al-Wadai'i, and his preachings against Sufis are at least partly to blame for these sectarian tensions in Taiz.

The Arab Spring and the embrace of politics

In 2011, the so-called 'Arab Spring' initiated a contagion of social unrest across the Middle East and North Africa. In Yemen, tension in the cities of Taiz, Sana'a and Aden spilled onto the streets as tens of thousands of youth and activists occupied public squares and called for Saleh to step down. While Sana'a took the media spotlight – with an elite power struggle unfolding between Saleh and his detractors leaving Yemen teetering on the brink of civil war⁸ – many regarded Taiz as the heart of the Yemeni uprising. Popular protests in Taiz were among the earliest and largest, and were sustained throughout the brutal crackdown by Saleh's security forces.⁹

Against the backdrop of prolonged protests and sporadic violence, Yemen's Salafi movement was torn over how best to respond to the changing political landscape. Continued opposition to Saleh led to members of the Salafi movement questioning one of its central tenets: the jurisprudence on whether it is permissible to revolt against a sitting ruler.

One school of thought, headed by the prominent Salafi scholar Sheikh Yahya al-Hajuri, viewed the anti-Saleh protests as an unacceptable act of disobedience. This stance was tied to the Islamic notion of *Wali al-Amr*, whereby adherents are fully obedient to the ruler and should remain apolitical. Importantly, Al-Hajuri ran the Dar al-Hadith Institute in the small town of Dammaj, in Yemen's northern Sa'ada governorate, which was often depicted as the ideological home for Yemen's Salafi movement.¹⁰

By contrast, other Salafi leaders that belonged to the al-Hikma and al-Ihsan branches, most prominently Sheikh Abdulwahab al-Homaiqani, decided there was a need for Salafis to engage in Yemeni politics. In March 2012, al-Homaiqani formed Yemen's first Salafi political party, the Rashad Union; this came the month after Saleh had handed the presidency over to his successor Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered deal to end Yemen's political crisis.¹¹ The party was formally established on the back of a three-day conference convened in Sana'a that brought together various Salafi leaders to discuss how the party could operate in accordance with Salafi ideology.¹²

Supporters claimed the move was borne out of necessity and that participation in mainstream politics and the abandoning of the principle of *Wali al-Amr* was, in this instance, deemed to be justifiable. During the unveiling, one of the co-founders of the Rashad Union party, Sheikh Mohamed al-Baidani, stated: "Salafis in Yemen have made significant contributions, particularly in charitable works; it's time for Salafis here to have their own political visions consolidated in one entity, one that represents all Salafi factions."¹³ Salafists in Dammaj, however, rejected the premise on which the party was founded and thus rejected the party's establishment.¹⁴

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Members of the newly-formed Rashad Union party went on to participate in one of the central pillars of the transition process laid out in the GCC agreement, the National Dialogue Conference (NDC).¹⁵ In sum, the NDC sought to pull together all the major entities that made up Yemen's social and political fiber in the aim of forging a collective way out of the crisis that had enveloped the country.

The siege of Dammaj

The next major turning point for Yemen's Salafi movement began in August 2013, when it came under armed attack from one of its main ideological opponents, the Houthi movement. The primary Houthi doctrine is the preservation and promotion Zaydi Shiism, while Houthi opponents often go as far as accusing the group of wanting to restore the Hashemite dynasty and Imamate that fell in 1962.¹⁶

The Houthis had participated in the anti-Saleh protests, given their longstanding grievances with the president. These included the establishment of Wahhabi and Salafi schools in Dammaj, which began soon after Saleh took power.¹⁷ Six rounds of armed conflict between the Yemeni army and the Houthis between 2004 and 2010 entrenched these grievances and left the group battle-hardened.

While the Houthis had declared their intent to engage in the NDC and the planned two-year transition to a new political order, they were also engaged in a parallel military campaign that saw the group expand out of their northern stronghold of Sa'ada. From mid-2013 until January 2014, the Houthis launched an armed offensives against the Salafis in Dammaj, and later tribal forces affiliated with Islah and the al-Ahmar family in neighbouring al-Jawf and Amran governorates.

The Houthi military campaign against the Dammaj Salafis focused on the Dar al-Hadith institute and its students. The Houthis denounced the institute as an existential threat, claiming it was an incubator for foreign fighters, that Salafi militants as well as weapons were being sent to the institute ahead of a planned attack on Houthi strongholds in the governorate.¹⁸ In November and December 2013, fighting intensified between the Houthis and Salafi fighters that had mobilized in Sa'ada in response to the Houthi offensive.¹⁹ A month later, Hadi sent a presidential committee to mediate the conflict, with the committee subsequently declaring non-local students enrolled in Dammaj were to be forcibly relocated to Hudaydah governorate.²⁰ Hundreds of Salafis, both local and not, fled Dammaj. The bulk sought refuge in Sana'a but many also dispersed to Taiz, Lahj and Hudaydah governorates.

The presidential committee ruling created a feeling of 'double-victimization' among Salafis fleeing Dammaj. Not only did they feel abandoned by a transitional government that had not intervened on their behalf, but they felt they had been sold out in a political deal between the transitional government and the Houthis. This deep sense of abandonment and injustice amongst Salafis displaced from Dammaj still permeates today – particularly among groups in Aden and Taiz governorates – and helped fuel eventual Salafi militarization.²¹

The Houthi military expansion that continued after Dammaj, with the help of their former adversary-cum-ally-of-convenience Saleh²², also helped provoke a general rise in sectarianism that, historically, had largely been absent from Yemeni society.²³ For example, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the more extreme branches of Yemen's Salafi movement began employing blistering sectarian rhetoric in public pronouncements and framing the Houthi military campaign as part of a regional sectarian struggle. The Houthis themselves also began labeling all opponents generally as terrorists and Sunni religious extremists.

The emergence of Salafi militias

In September 2014, Houthi-Saleh forces overran Sana'a and in the months that followed continued to capture more territory. President Hadi was held under house arrest in the capital until escaping to Aden in February 2015.²⁴ On March 25, Houthi-Saleh forces captured Taiz city and the following day the Saudi-led military coalition began its intervention in support of the Hadi government, which was still internationally recognized as Yemen's legitimate governing authority.²⁵

An initial coalition objective was to clear Houthi-Saleh forces from Aden, which was accomplished by July 2015. As Houthi-Saleh forces withdrew from Aden, the battle for control of Taiz then gained increased strategic importance. Located in central Yemen, approximately 205 km (127 miles) south of Sana'a, Taiz is often referred to as a gateway to the capital, especially from Aden.²⁶ With this in mind, the Houthi-Saleh bloc has sought to maintain a tight stranglehold over the city of Taiz, and the governorate, more broadly.

Initially, local resistance in Taiz to the Houthi-Saleh occupation arrived in the form of peaceful demonstrations. When these demonstrations were met with force, however, different armed resistance groups started to assemble.²⁷ One of the first groups was commanded by Hammoud al-Mikhlaflafi, an established local security actor who previously led Islah-affiliated militias against Saleh's forces during the 2011 crisis.²⁸

In response to the formation of local armed resistance groups, the Houthi-Saleh forces imposed a stifling blockade, controlling the main entry and exit points into the city to their tactical advantage. The blockade choked both the opposition fighters and civilian population off from access to food, goods and medicine, while Houthi-Saleh forces also commonly shelled residential areas.²⁹

As elsewhere in Yemen, the variously-affiliated local armed groups in Taiz that mobilized in opposition to the Houthis have been popularly referred to using the umbrella term, 'Popular Resistance Committees' – Hammoud al-Mikhlaflafi himself has been dubbed the leader of Taiz's local Popular Resistance branch. The term, however, gives the mistaken impression of a united opposition front. It ultimately fails to account for the entrenched rivalries that divide different factions of the Taiz resistance, which often operate independent of, and at times in direct competition and opposition with, each other and the Hadi government.

Along with al-Mikhlaflafi and his pro-Islah militias, three main clusters of Salafi militias emerged as a key component of the anti-Houthi-Saleh effort in Taiz city. The first cluster can loosely be described as "traditional", apolitical Salafis who adhere to the Dammaj school of thought and the teachings of Sheikh Yahya al-Hajjuri. This cluster is commanded by Adel Abdu Farea – more commonly known as Abu al-Abbas – who relocated to Taiz after fighting the Houthis in Dammaj, protecting the Dar al-Hadith Institute.³⁰ Al-Abbas's men largely operate on Taiz city's eastern front, and often work closely with the Yemeni army's 35th Armoured Brigade, headed by Adnan al-Hammadi.³¹

The second cluster includes Islah-affiliated Salafis. This cluster is commanded by Sadek Mayhoub, also known as Abu al-Saddouq, who broke away from al-Abbas' forces to form his own following a financial dispute between the two leaders over the running of the eastern front. Unlike al-Abbas' fighters, Abu al-Saddouq's men are less geographically dependent and move between areas, often fighting alongside the Yemeni army's 22nd Armoured Brigade, commanded by Sadiq Sarhan. Al-Saddouq had close ties with Hammoud al-Mikhlaflafi until the latter departed for Saudi Arabia in early 2016. Like al-Mikhlaflafi, al-Saddouq is also suspected of having ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen.

The third cluster are Salafi fighters from a militia called Kataib Hasm, or 'Hasm Battalions'. These fighters are originally from outside Taiz, but relocated to the central governorate to join the fight against Houthi-Saleh forces. Kataib Hasm fighters are present along several fronts in Taiz, and are commanded by Adnan

bin Ruzaiq al-Qumaishi, more commonly known as Adnan bin Ruzaiq. Bin Ruzaiq reportedly commanded a number of Kataib Hasm fighters in Shabwa under the banner of the al-Qamoush tribes, and before relocating to Taiz had fought the Houthis in both Abyan and Shabwa governorates.³² Reports suggest many of his fighters are Salafis from Aden, as well as Taizis previously imprisoned by the Houthis.³³

Militia structure and operations

Although there are clear differences between the three main Salafi militia clusters in Taiz, there are also a number of operational and organisational similarities. Each militia quickly sought to differentiate itself from other armed groups and political actors in Taiz. This is in marked contrast to the groups of Salafi fighters in Aden, who were allied with, and integrated themselves within the established political and security forces.

For the Salafi groups in Taiz unaffiliated with Islah, part of this differentiation strategy included an attempt to distance themselves from the established political parties in the city. Following the Houthi expansion and subsequent capture of swathes of territory in the north, Islah was experiencing a general state of decline. The party still maintained grassroots support, but was less able to influence developments inside Taiz city. Al-Abbas sought to fill this socio-political vacuum using religion to transcend political boundaries. For example, he targeted outreach towards youth in the inner-city neighbourhoods, who had experienced an upsurge in religiosity as conflict descended on Taiz.

Even the Islah-affiliated militias in Taiz appear to operate with a degree of autonomy from the larger political party. Fighters of most Salafi militias in Taiz are primarily loyal to their respective leaders, with the factions named after these leaders. The main Salafi militia clusters in Taiz all have clear lines of authority, set out in a pyramidal structure to enhance the effectiveness of their respective political, military, and communications strategies.

Orders and responsibilities essentially filter down from leader – the emir or sheikh – to the rank and file. In between, there is the field commander, who is the emir or sheikh's deputy, and is in charge of running the battles; an officer in charge of armaments and distributing weapons to fighters; an operations commander; a special operations commander; an official spokesperson; a media officer; and a store keep.

The militia competition for greater recognition and legitimacy among local communities in Taiz, as well as members of the Saudi-led coalition, has seen the Salafi groups place significant value on a media communications officer, who is responsible for promoting their respective battlefield victories, as well as liaising with political actors and other armed groups. The three main Salafi militia clusters have thus established varying degrees of local recognition and legitimacy.

Generally speaking, the appeal of all three militias for some Taiz city residents has risen. The Salafi militias offer residents some form of protection on the ground against Houthi-Saleh attacks, and a degree of law and order amid the breakdown in local governance, which has strengthened the position of Salafi militias even in non-religious circles.

Competition for resources and influence

While also divided by their affiliation – or not – with Islah, competition for resources and influence on the ground has been a major source of tension between Salafi militias in Taiz. Perhaps most significant in this regard has been the contrasting levels of support the Saudi-led coalition, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular, has provided to anti-Houthi militias in Taiz.

The UAE has reportedly provided Abu al-Abbas and his cadre of Salafi fighters with weapons airlifted into Taiz city, as well as financial support.³⁴ Separate reports claim the UAE has also established a working relationship with Adnan bin Ruzaiq.³⁵ In sharp contrast, the UAE has shunned Islah-affiliated militias in Taiz, such as those previously commanded by Hammoud al-Mikhlaflafi and those currently commanded by Abu al-Saddouq.

This approach is consistent with the UAE's overarching opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood – a group it has listed as a terrorist organisation. In Taiz, the UAE appears intent on strengthening a local ally it hopes can not only prevent Islah-affiliated militias from dominating the battlefield, but also rival Islah politically once the larger conflict has subsided. This bolstered ability of al-Abbas and bin Ruzaiq to carve out their operational space and build broad popular support have thus become precipitating factors in Islah's general state of decline as a political force in Yemen.

Despite Saudi Arabia's historical relationship with Islah since the party's formation, it too has seemingly offered scant support to Islah-affiliated factions in Taiz. The extent to which Islah-affiliated militias have struggled to obtain outside assistance can be seen from the regional tour that al-Mikhlaflafi embarked on in early 2016, when he left for Saudi Arabia before visiting Turkey and Qatar.³⁶ In August 2016, al-Mikhlaflafi publicly criticised the Saudi-led coalition and the Yemeni government for the lack of support for him and his followers.³⁷

Inter-factional violence

The stated priority for each of the three main clusters of Salafi militias in Taiz is battle against Houthis-Saleh forces. Yet, despite the looming presence of this common enemy, the Salafi militias are engaged in their own local turf wars, in which they have sought to defend or even increase their authority at the expense of their competitors. This jockeying for position has led to frequent outbreaks of inter-factional violence, which in turn further entrench the rivalries.

Inter-factional violence has thus far largely been defined by targeted assassinations and sporadic armed clashes. For example, on April 23, 2016, clashes broke out north of Taiz city between Islah-affiliated fighters loyal to al-Mikhlaflafi and those loyal to bin Ruzaiq. These clashes resulted in the death of al-Mikhlaflafi's younger brother, Hamza Saeed al-Mikhlaflafi.³⁸ A more prolonged standoff was possibly averted by al-Mikhlaflafi playing down his brother's death during a statement issued shortly after the incident.³⁹ Incidentally, the clashes occurred while al-Mikhlaflafi was outside Yemen, which suggests bin Ruzaiq and his fighters perhaps saw a moment of opportunity to capitalise on.⁴⁰

One of the most volatile inter-factional rivalries in Taiz has pitted the increasingly-empowered al-Abbas and his fighters against Islah-affiliated militias. On January 12, 2016, al-Abbas' Salafi fighters engaged in a prolonged standoff with Islah-affiliated fighters commanded by Ghazwan al-Mikhlaflafi (no relation to Hammoud al-Mikhlaflafi).⁴¹ During clashes that ensued in central Taiz, al-Abbas's men detained Ghazwan's brother, Suhaib al-Mikhlaflafi. Al-Abbas claimed he intervened to stop the al-Mikhlaflafi brothers and their gang from extorting money from shoppers and shop owners in the local marketplace.⁴²

Al-Abbas himself acknowledged the underlying tensions during an interview published in October 2016.⁴³ He spoke of his readiness to fight other local dissidents in Taiz City while at the same time confronting Houthis-Saleh forces. Although he did not specify who these alleged dissidents were, his comments appeared to be a thinly veiled reference to Islah, as indicated by the rest of his interview, which included extensive criticism of the party.

Al-Abbas criticised Islah-affiliated factions for what he saw as a lack of desire to help end the Houthi-Saleh siege on Taiz City, a claim he supported with an allegation that Islah-affiliated factions were notably absent on the frontlines in the months prior to his interview. The lack of commitment from Islah-affiliated militias, he claimed, was the reason why the UAE had diverted resources elsewhere in the governorate.

Al-Abbas also criticized anti-Houthi-Saleh forces stationed in the western part of the city. It was unclear if he was referring to Islah-affiliated factions or bin Ruzaiq's forces, as the latter is also known to be present in the area. Al-Abbas claimed those on the western front were overly concerned with securing territory that could be of strategic value in a post-war setting, such as the Hayel Saeed Anam soap and cement factories owned by one of Taiz's prominent business families, the Al Saeeds.

Irrespective of the credibility of al-Abbas claims or indeed those made against the UAE, perceived favoritism has clearly facilitated the deterioration of relations between al-Abbas's faction and Islah-affiliated militias. This rivalry continued throughout the first half of 2017, with particularly intense clashes in central Taiz on July 14-15 2017.⁴⁴ These resulted in a civilian casualty and prompted government forces to intervene in order to enforce the temporary closure of the Deluxe Market area.⁴⁵ Much like the clashes that occurred earlier in the year, the July clashes centred on a financial dispute, with both factions thought to be fighting for control of sales revenues.⁴⁶

The absence of a strong, united national army has facilitated the anarchy in parts of Taiz. The internal divisions and regionalism that have historically plagued Yemen's army further compound the propensity for violence between Salafi and Islah-affiliated militias. The two main Yemeni army units that are stationed in Taiz governorate appear to operate independently of one another, and are split in terms of their loyalties to al-Abbas and Islah. The 35th Armoured Brigade commanded by Adnan al-Hammadi is thought to have a close working relationship with al-Abbas. The 22nd Armoured Brigade commanded by Sadiq Sarhan has ties with al-Saddouq, and is also said to have pro-Islah fighters in its ranks. Members of the 22nd Armoured Brigade reportedly clashed with al-Abbas men on January 24, 2017, hours before a local Political Security Organisation (PSO) building was blown-up. Incidentally, Al-Abbas' men are accused of being behind the PSO attack.⁴⁷

Rising sectarianism and extremism

The conflict in Taiz has created an environment in which religious extremism can thrive. The Salafi movement as a whole has previously been accused of fomenting religious extremism in Yemen. In Taiz, since the escalation of the conflict after the Saudi-led coalition intervention began, each of the three main groups of Salafi fighters are said to include fighters with suspected ties to AQAP.⁴⁸ With little easily verifiable information coming out of Taiz, it is difficult to either confirm or dispel such accusations. It is, however, widely known that AQAP has increased its presence in Taiz since March 2015. AQAP fighters joined the frontlines in Taiz and thus almost certainly fought alongside Salafi militias against Houthi-Saleh forces.⁴⁹ The presence, and indeed influence, of AQAP on the ground in Taiz increased after member of the group were forced to withdraw and relocate from al-Mukalla city in Hadramawt governorate in April 2016.⁵⁰ As has been the case elsewhere in south and central Yemen, AQAP has looked to capitalise on the local political and security vacuum in Taiz.

Against the backdrop of the longest-running continuous battle of the Yemen conflict, which shows no sign of abating, reports indicate AQAP has gained a stronger foothold in eastern Taiz city.⁵¹ One incident that highlights how AQAP has successfully integrated itself in the eastern part of the city occurred in March 2017 when AQAP summoned local journalist Jameel al-Samet to one of its offices. AQAP questioned al-Samet over a report he authored regarding the running of the Republican hospital, which is reportedly

controlled by AQAP.⁵² Signs that AQAP is possibly looking to exert its influence over the governing of local affairs has obvious parallels with the system of governance it established in al-Mukalla during the 12 months the city was under its control.

The presence of AQAP and the more extreme Salafi branches in Taiz is also contributing to the rising sectarianism in the city, the governorate, and Yemen more broadly. These extremist groups are using sectarian rhetoric to portray themselves as the defenders of Sunni Islam as well as the defenders of Taiz against Houthi-Saleh aggression.

These religious arguments prey upon the underlying resentment felt by people residing in Taiz as a result of their desperate situation. This resentment is not only felt towards Houthi-Saleh forces for the destruction they have wreaked upon the governorate but also towards Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition for the perceived neglect of Taiz. The severe deterioration of the local economy and increased poverty has also potentially increased the prospects of people turning to extremist groups for financial survival.

Looking ahead

As of this writing, the Houthi-Saleh siege on the city of Taiz has been in place for more than two and half years, barring two brief instances in which the siege was temporarily and partially lifted.⁵³ The balance of military power across Taiz governorate, however, has shifted somewhat since the beginning of 2017. First, an anti-Houthi, coalition-backed offensive known as Operation Golden Spear has seen anti-Houthi forces clear large parts of Taiz's western coastline of Houthi-Saleh forces, including the port city of Mokha.⁵⁴ Second, a band of anti-Houthi forces, including Salafi commander Abu al-Abbas and his fighters, advanced in the eastern part of Taiz city in June.⁵⁵ Third, in late July, anti-Houthi forces captured the Khalid bin Walid military camp in western Taiz after months of fighting in the area.⁵⁶

Although these recent developments are a breakthrough of sorts, the abovementioned anti-Houthi gains have not drastically altered the power dynamics on the outskirts or indeed inside Taiz City. Even if the siege were lifted and the overarching conflict somehow resolved, the local political and security vacuum caused by Islah's decline, the disunity in the Yemeni army and security forces, and the severe dysfunction of government institutions mean Taiz will face the prospect of becoming an open battleground for Salafi militias competing for power, resources and influence. This in turn would foster an ever more conducive environment for religious extremist elements and general human misery.

The formation of realistic and actionable policy options to head off this prospective future will require intensive further study. The successful implementation of any such policies would almost certainly require that 1) there is an overarching resolution to the nation-wide conflict, and 2) national and international stakeholders set aside short-term individual interests and commit to collective engagement in stabilizing Taiz's security environment, restarting public service provision and normal commercial activity, and laying the foundation for social reconciliation.

Prospective policy options should also take into consideration the need to remove the financial incentives local leaders may have to continue the hostilities, and neutralize the ability of radical groups to act as spoilers in the peace process. There are also thousands of fighters – who fought both with and against the Houthis – who will need to be demobilized to rejoin society in a productive capacity or incorporated in some manner into official security apparatuses; the latter of these, to be successful and conducive to national stability, would likely require an institutional overhaul of the Yemeni army and other security bodies, a daunting prospect in itself.

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This report was edited by Anthony Biswell.

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Notes

1. Protection Cluster, "Task Force on Population Movement: Seventh Report," February 2016. Accessed September 28, 2017; available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Protection%20Cluster_TFPM%207th%20Report_February%202016_FINAL.pdf
2. Hashemites are said to be direct descendants from the Prophet Mohammed. Hashemites in Yemen are an elite, minority group that made up approximately 12 percent of the population in 2014; Zaydism is a moderate brand of Shia Islam that is unique to Yemen and closer to Sunni Islam than the Twelver Shia doctrine popular in Iran; prior to unification in 1990, Yemen was two separate countries colloquially referred to as North Yemen and South Yemen.
3. There are some Taizis who adhere to the Shafi'i Sunni school of thought who are also of Hashemite background, such as the Al Junayd (or Al Guneid) family. Some of these Shafi'i Hashemite Taizis started supporting the Houthis from 2012 onwards.
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