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# A Widening Schism between Saudi Arabia and the Islah Party Prolongs Yemen's War

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Brief Analysis

## Saudi Arabia should not pursue its perfect political arrangement in Yemen at the expense of peace.

**A** November 10 [statement](#) by the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars has further defined the tensions that exist between Saudi leadership and the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the Council's announcement may not bring severe repercussions to all Arab nations, it may add to perceived rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated party, Islah. Such rifts in the anti-Houthi coalition represent a sustained obstacle for Yemen's peace process, and Saudi Arabia would be wise to at least temporarily maintain a productive relationship with Islah with the immediate goal of defeating the Houthis.

Yet this is complicated by the fact that over the last decade, Saudi Arabia has been intensifying its effort to counter the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. In 2014, Saudi Arabia's interior ministry displayed its explicit enmity towards this group by [designating](#) it as a terrorist organization. The rhetoric in the Council's statement indicates a continuing Saudi campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood in all Arab countries and illustrates the distance of any rapprochement between the two, reading, "The Muslim Brothers' Group is a terrorist group and [does not] represent the method of Islam, rather it blindly follows its partisan objectives that are running contrary to the guidance of our graceful religion."

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has continued to manage a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated party in Yemen, Islah, with whom it cooperates in its ongoing conflict against the Houthis. In fact, when the Saudi government first issued its terrorism list, which included Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties in other countries, it

exempted Islah.

That exemption is likely a product of the Saudi government and Islah's mutual interest in combatting the Houthis. In March 2015, when Saudi Arabia led an Arab coalition to counter the Iran-allied Houthis' military expansion in Yemen, Islah hailed and welcomed the Saudi intervention. As part of their strategy, the Saudi government cooperated with diverse Yemeni factions, including the Islah Party. Since then, Islah has benefitted Saudi interests through both political and military opposition to the Houthi movement. However, as time has passed, the alliance has grown increasingly fragile. With this new Saudi religious declaration, the trust between the two could reach a new low.

The statement compounds tension in this relationship of strange bedfellows. Since the breakout of Yemen's civil war in 2014, Saudi Arabia and Islah have not fully trusted each other, a situation compounded by their conflicting agendas. For example, while the Islah party showed support for the Arab Spring uprisings in various Arab countries, Saudi Arabia remained wary of such developments. And while some of Islah's senior members have been living in exile in Saudi Arabia since 2015 after fleeing Houthi rule, their relocation has not helped cement the trust between the two parties. Past Saudi support for Islah, most notably during 2014 and 2015 (after rapid Houthi expansion in Yemen), has likewise failed to generate a lasting cooperative relationship.

That being said, tension in the relationship has not created openly hostile language between the two sides. Despite the Saudi-Emirati political and military blows to the Islah party over the last few years, Islah's senior leadership has remained tight-lipped, preferring silence over open retaliation. Any anti-Saudi statement from the part would put it in an open clash with the Kingdom. In this way, the relationship, though beset by internal tensions, has thus far plodded along without open rifts.

But now, though officially unconfirmed, rumors and recent events have indicated that the relationship is beginning to sour beyond the usual differences of opinion. The good relation between the Islah party and the Turkish political leadership has contributed to weakening the connection between Saudi Arabia and Islah. The *Arab Weekly* newspaper reported last month that prominent religious scholar Abdul Majeed Al-Zindani left Saudi Arabia, heading to Turkey. The newspaper has said there had been an "exodus" of Islah party leaders who have arrived in Ankara.

Saudi Arabia's performance in Yemen has also infuriated members of the Islah party, pushing them to side with the Houthis. Sheikh Mohammed al-Khuzai'a, a former Islah member, joined the Houthis in July 2020, calling them "the defenders of the sovereignty and independence of Yemen." As Yemen's war goes on, the rifts between Saudi Arabia and Islah continue widening.

This dynamic reflects Saudi Arabia's awkward position in its interference in Yemen. Despite their differences, Saudi Arabia must recognize Islah's importance in Yemeni politics. Since its establishment in 1990, the Islah party is only second to the General People's Congress (GPC) in terms of popularity and influence in the country and served as a driving force behind the breakout of the popular uprising in Yemen in 2011. Furthermore, Islah has maintained control over a substantial military wing, which would be difficult and unwise for Saudi Arabia to dislodge or dissolve given their value in combatting Houthi militias and Al-Qaeda. And though the party's popularity appears to be waning recently, it remains powerful. Saudi Arabia would still need to engage in a separate political and military war if it wanted to eliminate the group's influence in Yemen.

In turn, this difficult position for Saudi leadership has exacerbated and prolonged Yemen's conflict. With KSA leadership fearful of a Muslim Brotherhood-allied party holding influence in Yemen, it has been reluctant to support restoration of the UN-recognized Yemeni government. Presently, Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, while publicly denying membership in Islah—claiming instead to be affiliated with GPC—is widely seen as having ties to the party. Saudi Arabia would never earnestly support a Yemeni government when it believes that some senior

Yemeni officials are Muslim Brotherhood loyalists or sympathizers. Saudi leadership therefore prefers a paralyzed government in Yemen over a strong one highly influenced by the Islah Party.

Unfortunately, this policy on the part of Saudi (and Emirati) leadership has left Yemen with no clear exit strategy from its now consistent state of war. Moreover, while convenient in the short term, Saudi Arabia's current policies towards Islah may have lasting negative effects for its own interests. The widening gulf between the two has, by crippling Yemen's internationally recognized government, largely benefited the Houthis and the southern separatists. The government's fragility or even demise opens the door for the Houthis and separatists to establish independent states in the country's north and south. Therefore, as long as this dynamic goes on unchanged, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to defeat the Houthis unless it bolsters its relationship with the Yemeni government, the Islah Party, and all other anti-Houthi elements in Yemen.

It would therefore be wise for Saudi leadership to set aside some of its concerns about Islah while it navigates an increasingly hostile political environment in Yemen, a theater where Saudi Arabia has practically lost almost all its friends. Aside from the Houthis and Islah, the southern separatists, Yemen's other major powerbroker, are not very confident of the Saudi support for secession, and some anti-partition southern provinces see the Saudi presence as colonialism. The Yemeni public also largely believes that Saudi Arabia has betrayed Yemen through its support for the long, destructive war in their country. Given Saudi Arabia's declining political assets in Yemen, Saudi leadership would be wise to focus on defeating the Houthis first, then work on empowering any Yemeni parties and/or leaders it sees as allies in an effort to stymy Islah's influence—assuming that it continues to see Islah as posing a real threat to Saudi security or interests.

Saudi Arabia's current policy towards Islah is likely to damage the effectiveness of peace efforts in Yemen, and it adds to the conflict's complexity. Rather than continuing to label its enemies as terrorist organizations and railing against them, Riyadh should seek a more realistic and nuanced approach that takes stock of its challenging political position and the disastrous toll of continued war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia cannot altogether eliminate the Houthis, the Islah party, and others in Yemen who reject Riyadh's policies, but it can seek an arrangement that doesn't necessitate endless war. ❖



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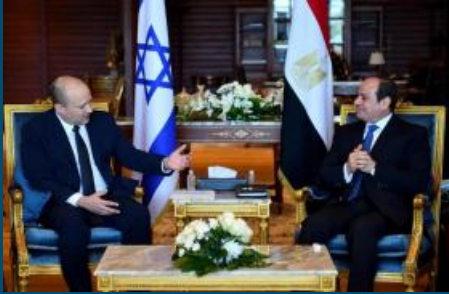


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