

An Exceptional Case: Saudi Relations with Yemen's Islah Party

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Brief Analysis

Yemen's Islah Party and Saudi Arabia have enjoyed a special relationship for over a decade, but now internal politics threaten to tarnish this unique partnership.

Following the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's March 2015 announcement of the launch of the Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthi militia in Yemen, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) was the first party to support the intervention. In response to this pro-Saudi stance, Houthi militants incurred heavy costs on the Islah Party, launching a wide campaign of kidnappings against Islah Party leaders and seizing the party headquarters in more than one city.

Hence, Operation Decisive Storm represented a new beginning for the Islah Party in its relationship with Saudi Arabia. This relationship has now gained considerable depth and strength. Several of the party's leaders, media outlets, and many of its supporters have fled to Saudi Arabia, and, in line with Saudi efforts in Yemen, party members have also actively engaged in the popular resistance that was formed in more than one Yemeni city to fight the Houthi militia, as in the city of Taiz. Consequently, many of the the Islah Party's leaders, cadres, and members were killed in combat, marking a considerable sacrifice in pursuit of a shared goal with Saudi Arabia.

And yet, the relationship does face challenges. Differing goals between the Islah Party and Saudi Arabia, Emirati coldness towards the Islah Party, and changing popular attitudes in Yemen all signify potential dangers for the relationship. Looking forward, changing conditions on the ground in Yemen could make the existence of even this special, historic relationship untenable, and the progress of the war itself will be critical in defining the future of this relationship and a political settlement to the Yemeni conflict, if it ever occurs.

An Unlikely Pair

Saudi Arabia's relationship with the Islah Party, an Islamist party often condemned for its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, is exceptional because it contrasts against Saudi Arabia's approach to the Muslim Brotherhood generally. As of now, the relationship defies conventional diplomatic boundaries in the region, and yet, it has continued to survive, and both parties have shown a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the relationship.

Though Saudi Arabia maintained a **longstanding connection** (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad8113.html>) with Party Leader Shaykh Abdullah bin Husayn al-Ahmar dating back to the 1990s, when he founded the party, the Saudi relationship with the Islah Party solidified in a real way following the 2011 Arab Spring protests.

Since then, Saudi Arabia has worked to promote its relationship with the Islah Party and pursue the mutual goals between the kingdom and the party, which initially included combatting leftist groups in Yemen at the end of the twentieth century. Now, those interests center chiefly on combatting the expansion of the Houthis.

These shared interests have helped maintain relations even at the most difficult junctures, such as the unease following the Houthi takeover of the Yemeni capital Sanaa on September 21, 2014, and when Saudi general Anwar Eshki stated that Houthi leader **Abdul-Malik** (<https://almushahid.net/79437/>), "submitted a request to Saudi Arabia to support him in return for abandoning relations with Iran." In

both of these moments, disagreements between the Islah Party and Saudi leadership regarding these events threatened to erode their relationship, and yet the relationship survived.

As a result, today, many of the groups within the Islah Party are under Saudi influence or are connected to Saudi Arabia in various capacities. Tribal religious leaders, academics, and other prominent community leaders in southern Yemeni governorates such as Al-Jawf, Saada, Hajjah, Hadramawt, Amran, Sanaa, and even Marib, have strong relations with Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the Islah Party tends to make serious efforts in keeping its relationship with Saudi Arabia safe. The Islah Party is willing to publicly support Saudi Arabia's role in the Yemeni conflict, to the point that it devoted some materials in its party platform to **Saudi relations** (<https://2u.pw/geV6z>). In addition, Islah Party media has avoided criticizing Saudi involvement in Yemen, and has even **suspended party membership** (<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-42936510>) of figures such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman, who had repeatedly criticized Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The party has likewise refused to communicate with Iran or take other steps in the region without Saudi cooperation or support.

Likewise, both sides seem willing to take criticism from allies over the unique nature of their relationship. The UAE, for instance, recently seen as a strong ally to Saudi Arabia, does not see the Islah Party as an exception to its own efforts to curb Muslim Brotherhood influence in the region. Saudi Arabia has tried to help reconcile the positions of the Islah Party and the UAE, culminating in a December 2017 meeting between Islah Party leaders, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammad bin Zayed and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in **Riyadh** (<https://2u.pw/d0WW2>) after the Houthis assassinated former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. **Islah Party leadership subsequently visited the UAE** (<https://2u.pw/2JeZV>) in November 2018, but the visit did not produce tangible change in the relations between the two sides.

Since then, Saudi Arabia has pursued a policy of limited inclusion for the Islah Party on 'coalition' matters, in contrast to the UAE's 'stick approach' to Islah. Media platforms backed by the UAE and Qatar (despite their opposing positions) have questioned the Saudi relationship with the Islah Party and tried to drive a wedge between them. The UAE-backed media challenged party positions and tried to swing party opinion on Qatar and Turkey in order to in frighten Saudi Arabia regarding expanding Turkish influence. On the other hand, the Qatar-backed media exaggerated Saudi and Emirati support for the Islah Party and cast doubts on their relationship, suggesting that the Islah Party had put their trust in the wrong place. Nonetheless, despite this criticism and diplomatic awkwardness, the relationship has remained strong.

Underlying Cracks in the Relationship

Despite the strength of their relationship, however, there are some foundational difficulties that exist within it. Differences in opinion and potential coercion towards maintaining the relationship indicate that the kingdom and the party may not be purely aligned.

For instance, Saudi Arabia's and the Islah Party's approaches to the war in Yemen do differ in notable ways. As part of that difference, the Islah Party has tried to present the war in Yemen in political rather than sectarian terms, **unlike the Saudi press** (<https://www.bayancenter.org/2016/07/2317/>) has done. Furthermore, the Islah Party has also said it does not want to proceed unilaterally and prefers to continue to work in political coalitions. In this sense, it seems the party realized the magnitude of the many challenges facing the Yemeni state and hence sought to avoid being targeted alone. The Islah Party has always been involved with some parties, where they exchanged visions and expressed their stance towards a specific cause as well as participating in Yemeni government delegations to negotiate with other components such as the Houthi group and Southern Transitional Council.

The party has also differed from Saudi Arabia in its eagerness to join and establish political alliances such as the National Alliance of Political Forces, which was formed in April 2019. Likewise, before that time, the Islah Party participated in the 2003 Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and signed the Peace and Partnership Agreement in September 2014 during the Houthi group's storming of the capital Sanaa. Moreover, the Islah Party also attempted to approach the Houthis when a delegation from the party met Abdul-Malik al-Houthi in the Saada governorate and the two parties agreed to normalize their relations.

And beyond difference of approach to the war, there are some indications that the Islah Party's relationship with Saudi Arabia is a product of force and circumstance, rather than a genuine alignment of views and desires. Some observers have noted that the Islah Party's **commitment to the GCC initiative** (<https://merip.org/2014/12/the-breakdown-of-the-gcc-initiative/>) in 2011 indicated its independent decision-making even on inter-Gulf issues. However, though the party issued a statement that supported the intervention of the Arab military coalition, such a statement was likely a product of the suppressive procedures taken against the party leadership. In this context, three leaders of the Islah Party who opposed the Arab intervention were targeted and arrested by the Houthi militia.

Such an act of internal coercion indicates that the party pursues a very **pragmatic** (<https://2u.pw/8heNC>) and sometimes counterintuitive approach in order to maintain power, likely a result of its long political history and the diversity of its political and

societal coalitions. These circumstances have propelled the party to develop a national discourse and form political alliances that transcend ideology, which was further illustrated through its involvement in establishing the [Joint Meeting Parties \(https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/2014/12/22/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/2014/12/22/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83), a coalition of several opposition parties with different ideologies on both the Left and Right. This dynamic is also clear from the [Islah Party's past shift \(https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemeni_congragation_reform.pdf\)](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemeni_congragation_reform.pdf) from opposition to participation in government, insofar as it has accepted the election results.

Shared Needs

At present, a split is unthinkable; both Saudi Arabia and the Islah Party realize that their relationship is currently a matter of necessity—at least while the war continues in Yemen. Likewise, the Islah Party realizes the importance of Saudi military, political, and economic clout in Yemen, particularly with regard to the conflict inside the Yemeni government prior to the Houthi coup. For its part, Saudi Arabia realizes the potential of Islah and its current and potential role for managing the balance of power in Yemen, especially after many other political forces—such as former President Saleh's party, the General People's Congress—have been divided and weakened.

Yet there is some [pessimism \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/widening-schism-between-saudi-arabia-and-islah-party-prolongs-yemens-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/widening-schism-between-saudi-arabia-and-islah-party-prolongs-yemens-war) about the party's future relations with Saudi Arabia. The fate of this relationship is tied to the future of the Yemeni state and the Islah Party, and these issues have implications for Saudi national security. The party has faced many challenges in this [multidimensional conflict "matrix," \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-matrix-untangling-relationships-drive-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-matrix-untangling-relationships-drive-war) most significantly the fallout from its political posturing, and its support for the Saudi-led military intervention.

The Islah Party's unequivocal public support of Saudi Arabia is particularly dangerous for its image in light of a growing Yemeni popular movement denouncing the Arab coalition's failure to achieve its stated goals, as well as increasing doubts about role of the UAE in undermining and splintering Yemeni state institutions.

It is therefore difficult to imagine how much longer the Islah Party leadership—or any of its constituent groups—can continue to [control \(https://2u.pw/4HqKF\)](https://2u.pw/4HqKF) the messaging of the groups within the party on Saudi Arabia, especially in the event that the situation in Yemen deteriorates to the point that the state collapses and armed groups take control over key regions. It is expected that, in this case, new groups could arise to challenge already existing actors in Yemen, and regional powers like Turkey may prove interested in exerting their own influence in Yemen.

According to the Islah Party's current media statements, it seems that party leadership will continue to try to reassure Saudi Arabia and depend on its support. At the same time, its stances have limited the party's choices within the broader Yemeni political sphere and its ability to maneuver independently of the Saudi agenda. At this juncture, much in the Saudi-Islah relationship depends on the fate of the war itself. ❖

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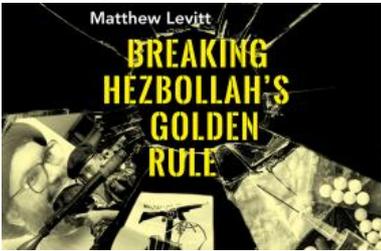
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Feb 11, 2022

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Simon Henderson

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