

# The UAE and Yemen's Islah: A Coalition Coalesces

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Brief Analysis

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**To jumpstart the moribund peace process and ensure Emirati influence in postwar Yemen, Abu Dhabi seems willing to swallow its distaste for certain Islamist parties, at least for now.**

**W**hen it comes to the public calendar of Muhammad bin Zayed, Abu Dhabi's crown prince and the UAE's de facto head of state, nothing is accidental. Thus, his November 14 meeting with Yemen's main Islamist political coalition offered potent evidence that diplomatic ice floes are breaking up in the long-frozen effort to negotiate an end to the war.

Regional press outlets and social media were awash with pictures of bin Zayed (often referred to as "MbZ") hosting the two leaders of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, a party commonly known as Islah. His meeting with Islah chairman Mohammed Abdullah al-Yadoumi and secretary-general Abdulwahab Ahmed al-Ansi was the second such encounter in a year; he attended a similar meeting hosted by Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman in December 2017. But the latest powwow was held without the Saudis and in Abu Dhabi, marking a crucial turning point between erstwhile antagonists just when the Saudi-UAE coalition is moving toward UN-brokered peace talks in Sweden and maneuvering for influence in postwar Yemen. The United States should capitalize on this step and ensure that the coalition implements a de facto ceasefire, providing diplomatic support to bring the Houthi rebels to the negotiating table.

## HINTS OF AN EMERGING UAE STRATEGY

**M**bZ's outreach to Islah may seem surprising given his longstanding antipathy toward the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its regional variants. For more than two decades, Emirati authorities cracked down on their own country's main Islamist party, also called al-Islah, in an effort to cleanse the UAE of MB influence. This policy accelerated with the shocking revelation that two young men from the conservative northern Emirates were among the September 11 hijackers. Viewing the group as a threat to the moderate Islam espoused by the UAE, authorities outlawed the group, purged its members from government office, and prosecuted many of them.

The events of the 2011 Arab Spring—particularly the MB's ascension to power in post-Mubarak Egypt—only hardened Abu Dhabi's resolve to confront the movement. Joined by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the UAE formally designated the MB as a terrorist organization in 2014, and worked assiduously (if unsuccessfully) to persuade the United States, Britain, and other Western governments to do the same.

The theory driving this approach was seemingly simple—in Abu Dhabi's view, the MB is a transnational organization that woos adherents away from their national loyalties and provides the ideological underpinnings for the world's most violent Islamist movements. Yet the regional applications of the MB model have been more complicated in practice. This is especially true with Yemen's version of Islah, a diverse coalition of groups that includes a local MB branch but also northern tribesmen, conservative businessmen, and Salafi Muslims.

As the Yemen war progressed after 2015, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi found themselves diverging on key issues and relationships, creating uncomfortable political dynamics on the ground. From the outset, the Saudis were willing to work with Islamist parties like Islah to fight their common adversary, the Houthis, and achieve stability in the north. The UAE was reluctant to do so, and was even accused of actively targeting Islah members across the south.

For a variety of reasons, the UAE also relied heavily on non-Islamist commanders and tribes in its fight against the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda. Yet those same factions are now actively pursuing secession—an outcome that Saudi Arabia opposes.

Most important, Abu Dhabi's relations with internationally recognized Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi rapidly deteriorated in 2015, to the point that UAE-backed forces battled Hadi's forces on several occasions in the streets of Aden. Emirati officials also kept Yemen's vice president, Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, at arm's length due to his Islamist ties. In contrast, Riyadh has hosted Hadi and his government since they fled the country and maintained cordial relations with Ali Mohsen.

More recently, however, the UAE has pursued an incremental and very public strategy to develop relationships with a full range of Yemeni political actors, particularly in the south. As such, it has been carefully positioning itself to play an outsize role there after the war regardless of the future government's political makeup, while still maintaining strategic ambiguity on controversial topics such as southern secession. MbZ's public meeting with Islah leaders is the latest and arguably most important step in this strategy. Yet his gradual pivot has come with one crucial condition: that Islah publicly sunder its ties to the MB.

## ENGINEERING A SPLIT

**T**he November meeting represents a pivot for Islah as well, continuing its tradition of survival through adaptation. Since its founding in the 1990s, the Yemeni party has comprised strange bedfellows whose differing objectives often led to deep internal divisions.

Although Islah benefited from the 2011 transitional agreement that forced President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down, its fortunes were dramatically reversed when the Houthis began their slow-motion takeover of Yemen in 2014. As a movement whose identity was forged in reaction to conservative Sunni Islamist encroachment in the north, the

Houthis reviled Islah above all. They burned down the family home of the Ahmars, the tribal group that helped found Islah. And when they captured Sana, they targeted MB members for arrest, torture, and imprisonment. Islah has yet to recover from these blows—its meeting with MbZ may therefore be an attempt to reestablish its political clout and ensure a seat at the postwar table.

As early as 2016, Yadoumi began sending public signals—presumably intended for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi—that his group was not connected to the transnational MB. In December 2017, he and Ansi held their first public meeting with Gulf coalition leaders in Riyadh. The day after that summit, UAE minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash posted approving remarks on Twitter regarding Islah’s formal severance of ties with the MB, a potent signal of Emirati intentions.

In January 2018, the Saudi newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* published an interview with Yadoumi in which he affirmed, “There are no organizational or political relations [between Islah and] the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood.” A month later, the party suspended the membership of Nobel laureate Tawakkol Karman, a prominent MB-affiliated figure who now operates primarily from Turkey. The decision came after Karman made statements critical of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

These actions paved the way for MbZ to bring Yadoumi and Ansi to Abu Dhabi last month. Posting photos of the meeting on his social media accounts, the crown prince signaled that the UAE has publicly accepted Islah’s separation from the MB and deems it an important player, if not entirely a partner, in Yemen. Islah’s leaders were fulsome in their widely publicized praise of MbZ’s move, asserting that Islah has “never been opposed to the UAE helping to restore order in Yemen.”

The meeting should not be confused for a blossoming friendship, however. Abu Dhabi and Islah will keep a skeptical eye on each other, and for good reason. The Emiratis have certainly not changed their strategic views on political Islamists, and Islah still needs its religious base. For the UAE, getting on good terms with Islah ensures its influence with a potentially relevant postwar player. For Islah, publicly claiming a split with the MB may seem like a fair trade—for now. The party likely wants the UAE to protect it in the south, where separatists generally revile it.

In the longer term, though, Islah will be hard-pressed to survive without its religious base, which has largely come from its MB wing. Like MbZ, Yadoumi is seemingly trying to thread the needle. His statements consistently note that Islah is not connected to the international MB, but his careful wording likewise avoids disassociating the party from any MB-like elements inside Yemen.

## THE U.S. ROLE

**A**s UN envoy Martin Griffiths races the clock to bring Yemen’s warring parties to Stockholm this week, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi’s efforts to knit up their differences on Islah represent a significant preparatory step. Many observers remain concerned that the main conflict between Hadi and the Houthis will wind down only to see other internal conflicts break out. The degree to which Saudi Arabia and the UAE can synchronize their diplomacy and form a big-tent coalition of Yemeni political actors will shape the odds of establishing a real transition out of civil war.

The United States has an urgent role to play in this regard. The Trump administration’s halting response to the war accelerated recently to stay ahead of potential congressional action aimed at cutting off all U.S. support for coalition operations. But simply calling for a ceasefire is insufficient. To reinforce the work of Griffiths, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, Washington should choreograph its own political outreach to various Yemeni factions. This would have the added benefit of pressuring the Hadi government and the Houthis to make substantive progress toward a peace deal.

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