



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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## SALAFISM IN YEMEN AND THE 2011 UPRISING: A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT AT THE CROSSROADS OF CONTINUOUS QUIETISM AND POLITICIZATION

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### The Development and Politicization of Yemeni Salafism:

The beginning of Yemen's Salafi movement is commonly traced back to the early 1980s and the establishment of a teaching institute, Dar al-Hadith, in the north of the country. A key role in the spread of Salafi ideas and concepts is accorded to the institute's founder, Muqbil al-Wadi'i. After having studied in Saudi Arabia, where he was first introduced to Salafi ideas, al-Wadi'i returned to the northern region of Sa'da, determined to provide an alternative to local Zaydi (Shi'i) religious practices and beliefs, which he deemed to be "un-Islamic." Soon, a network of mosques, bookshops and teaching centers developed around al-Wadi'i, which facilitated the nation-wide distribution of his written work and recorded sermons (Bonney, 2011).

In its beginning, Salafism in Yemen was quietist in nature, with Salafi leaders and activists retreating from worldly affairs, most notably from participation in politics. In fact, Muqbil al-Wadi'i and other leading Salafi clerics in Yemen have continuously rejected what is labelled *hizbiya* (party affiliation), refusing to endorse democracy and participation in elections (Bonney, 2011). Rather than discussing questions of social justice, they emphasized issues of creed (*'aqida*) and proselytism (*da'wa*) (Bonney and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

Underlying al-Wadi'i's and other Salafis' *hizbiya* critique is the concern that affiliations to formal organizations amount to a form of loyalty other than allegiance to God, and would thus divide the Muslim community. Based on that fear, democracy, seen as a factionalizing political system, was denounced, as were other attempts at institutionalizing Salafism—whether in the form of political parties, charitable associations, or others (Bonney, 2011).

Inter-Salafi debates and feuds revolving around the question of *hizbiya* have been recurrent in Yemen since the early 1990s, when some of Muqbil al-Wadi'i's former students founded the *Jam'iyyat al-Khayriya al-Hikma al-Yamaniya* (al-Hikma Yemeni Charity Association), referred to as al-Hikma. Two years later, Yemen's second major Salafi charity organization, al-Ihsan (benevolence), was founded, contributing to the increasing factionalization of the country's Salafi movement (Bonney, 2011).

The establishment of Salafi charity organizations in the early 1990s signalled a nascent politicization process in the course of which religious role models changed and the teachings of Kuwaiti Salafis were increasingly followed (Bonney and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming). The work of the Egyptian-Kuwaiti 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq, for example, was fairly influential within the Hikma association (Daghshi, 2013). 'Abd al-Khaliq advocated and justified Salafis running for political elections and their general engagement in political life. In line with these tenets, some Hikma members—although not the organization as a whole—began to run as

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independent candidates in local elections, launching Salafis' slow and timid politicization process in Yemen. In early 2008, as political parties were preparing for the upcoming parliamentary elections, 'Aqil al-Maqtari, one of the founders of al-Hikma association, explicitly called for the establishment of a Salafi party "as in Kuwait," later qualifying, however, that "the issue was just a possible objective for the Salafis" (al-Bakri, 2008).

While Muqbil al-Wadi'i and his followers continued to vehemently condemn any institutionalization of the Salafi movement and stigmatize Salafis who participated in institutional politics, their alleged "apoliticism" has to be treated with caution. In a multi-party political system, like the one established in Yemen in 1990, the political apathy of quietist Salafis translated into support of the ruling party and president 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih.

### **The 2011 uprising, diverging Salafi views and the establishment of al-Rashad:**

Not surprisingly, Salafis adopted a variety of positions during Yemen's uprising. While some prominent members of al-Hikma, including 'Aqil al-Maqtari, Murad al-Qadasi, and 'Abd Allah al-Humayri publicly supported the revolution early on, other members of al-Hikma and al-Ihsan, as well as quietist figures, like Yahya al-Hajuri (who had nominally replaced al-Wadi'i after the latter's death in 2001 by taking over the direction of Dar al-Hadith), explicitly and persistently opposed it.

Since all those Yemeni men perceived themselves as Salafis, religious figures and 'ulama, their debate about the Yemeni revolution was evidently framed in religious terms. A central theme underlying discussions on the uprising was the concept of the *wali al-amr*. Put simply, the *wali al-amr* is an Islamic notion referring to a temporal Muslim ruler. Within the dominant Salafi doctrine, the *wali al-amr* prescribes mandatory loyalty, providing a perfectly suited and widely-used reference for those condemning the uprising. Muhammad al-Mahdi, for example, who has strong ties with al-Hikma association, based his initial anti-revolution stance on the principle of required obedience to the *wali al-amr*, declaring: "I am a Muslim man who follows Islamic tradition; therefore, I do not permit myself to revolt against the Imam of Muslims [legitimate Muslim ruler], at least when he has not done anything that could be considered blasphemy and *kufur* [disbelief]" (quoted in Bonnefoy and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

Interestingly, Salafis in support of the 2011 uprising agreed on the theological validity and importance of being loyal to the *wali al-amr*. However, they did not perceive the theological meaning of the *wali al-amr* to be contradicted by Yemen's peaceful uprising. Muhammad Ibn Musa al-'Amiri, who was then a member of al-Ihsan's board of trustees, explained that the concept of *wali al-amr* prescribed not only rights, but also obligations to the "Imam of the Muslims." If he meets his duties, people are obliged to obey, help and advise him. If, however, he neglects or fails to act upon his obligations, people might be obliged to reject his policies and occasionally set him straight (Bonnefoy and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming). According to Muhammad al-'Amiri, Salih has clearly failed to stick to his side of the "Islamic contract," having led the country into what he called "a state of tyranny" (Al-Amiri, 2011).

As well as triggering a debate on the (il-)legitimacy of the revolution, Yemen's uprising acted as a further and final push in the Salafis' politicization process, ascribing an immense topicality to questions of political action (Kuschnitzki, forthcoming). In fact, political events encouraged several Salafis in Yemen's major cities to participate in the uprising, mainly through Salafi unions. A body to coordinate and guide these Salafi associations at the national level, the League of Revival and Change (*al-Rabita al-Nahda wal-Taghayyir*) (LRC), was established in

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late April 2011. It contained prominent members of both al-Hikma and al-Ihsan associations (Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

Building on the experience of the LRC, many of its members organized a large-scale three-day conference in San‘a’, which led to the public announcement of the establishment of the Rashad Union on March 14, 2012. As al-Humayqani, the party’s secretary-general, later explained, “the revolution was not only a revolution against tyranny, but it was also a revolution in attitudes and ideas within the Muslim communities, including the Salafi movement” (quoted in Bonnefoy and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming). Interestingly, when asked, al-Humayqani and other high-ranking party figures rationalized the establishment of al-Rashad in terms of the appearance of new political opportunities. As several researchers have pointed out (Sarkissan & Özler, 2012; Meyer, 2004), the creation of more open democratic systems, including participatory political processes or a liberalized sphere of debate, represents a core political opportunity that often compels groups to reorganize in order to take advantage of it (Schwedler, 2006). As ‘Abd al-Rahman Sa‘id al-Barihi, a high-ranking member of al-Rashad, explained: “We thought that we could have an influence and that there are new realities, which have come into existence because of the present revolution, to which we should conform” (quoted in Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

While the emphasis of institutional changes underlying the logic of “political opportunity” theory seems to rank high in al-Rashad members’ rationalization of recent politicization processes, it would be narrow and incomplete to view the party’s establishment through an exclusively structuralist lens. Instead, it is more accurate to portray the formation of al-Rashad as part of broader, ever-ongoing developments and social relations within and beyond Yemen. A variety of factors, including previous mobilization experiences, power relations, Salafi role models in other countries, and generational aspects, played into the establishment of al-Rashad establishment (Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

In addition to the liberal leaning Justice and Development Party (*Hizb al-‘adala w’al-tanmiya*), the Rashad Union was the only new party allowed to join Yemen’s National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in March 2013. In an interview conducted in July 2012, when the NDC was being prepared and participating groups and parties were being selected, al-Humayqani advanced the proposition that representatives of al-Qa‘ida should be included. While the party’s leadership clearly and continuously condemn al-Qa‘ida’s violent activities, al-Humayqani highlighted the socio-economic and political circumstances motivating young men to join the organization. In the long run, he argued, reconciliation was not possible through a continuous process of further antagonizing and excluding the enemy (Kuschnitzki, forthcoming). While the NDC offered an ideal platform for al-Rashad’s political profiling,<sup>1</sup> the party still finds itself at the beginning of long-term organizing and positioning processes. Its differences from existing Sunni Islamist parties, most notably al-Islah,<sup>2</sup> remain obscure, as does its relationship with quietist Salafis in Yemen (Bonnefoy and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

Initially, quietist Salafi figures strongly and publicly condemned al-Rashad, highlighting, yet again, its members’ breach with the concept of *hizbiya*. One of al-Rashad’s loudest and most fervent critics has been Yahya al-Hajuri. Not only does he criticize the partisanship of members

<sup>1</sup> For more information on al-Rashad’s party experience, see Bonnefoy and Kuschnitzki, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> The Islah party is a well-organized and long-established opposition party in Yemen that is often referred to as the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood. As several scholars have emphasized, however, “the passing reference to the Muslim Brothers [when discussing al-Islah] obscures more than it reveals” (Haykel & Dresch, 1995). Although members of the Muslim Brotherhood hold key administrative and decision-making posts inside the party (Philipps, 2008), al-Islah has an important tribal component and also has members with more radical Islamic inclinations (Dresch, 2000).

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of al-Rashad, he also opposes the concept of democracy and al-Rashad's participation in the democratic process. Division is portrayed as an in-built feature of democracy, whilst its concept of popular ruling challenges God's sovereignty. In his critique al-Hajuri went as far as to deny the “Salafi-ness” of members of al-Rashad, describing them as deviators who have left the “Salafi way.” Contrary to al-Hajuri, al-Rashad leaders continue to portray their politicization as an evolutionary process in line with both Salafi tenets as well as with broader socio-political developments in Yemen (Kuschnitzki, forthcoming).

Overall, recent political events inside the country have further divided Yemen's Salafi movement. Quietists not only disagree with their counterparts' involvement in charity work, but now also oppose the rise of “political Salafism,” symbolized by the establishment and political work of al-Rashad. While most al-Rashad members have backgrounds either in al-Ihsan or al-Hikma, and thereby continue previous politicization trends, not all Salafi charity members support the party's political involvement, which opens up a new dividing line within the movement. In general, it appears that distinctions between Yemeni Salafis do not reflect profound theological divides, but result from the adoption of new methods and activities, expressing ever-evolving preferences and priorities. The establishment of al-Rashad can rightly be claimed to stretch the meaning of Salafism, and related debates inside Yemen point to its fluid and contested character. In fact, the Yemeni uprising and its impact on Yemen's Salafi movement highlight the necessity of including the broader socio-political context in any discussion and understanding of Salafism.

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