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ADDRESSING JIHADI-SALAFISM IN YEMEN:

The Role of Religion and Community in the Midst of Civil War

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Preface

Building on data and insights from local experts and civil society leaders, this report is intended to enhance the development and implementation of non-military strategies for countering the influence of Jihadi-Salafi[1] organizations in Yemen. Specifically, this study aims to address a critical gap in existing analysis and practice by examining the current and potential role of the religious sector as one key factor within a broader community-wide response to Jihadi-Salafism. Of particular importance is the challenge of constructively engaging with conservative and exclusivist faith actors, including political or quietist Salafis.

This report will draw on interviews conducted with religious actors who were identified by local researchers as Salafi, in order to assess their views on violent extremism and collaboration with other community actors. While this study focuses solely on Yemen, it is one part of a larger research effort aimed at determining appropriate strategies for working with conservative religious actors in programs to mitigate the influence of Jihadi-Salafism. Recognizing the inherent risks and challenges associated with engaging those who seek to advance an illiberal agenda, ICRD believes that a nuanced, data-driven discussion within the field of policy and practice on this subject is urgently needed to prevent further social polarization in the Islamic world.

Acknowledgements

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Cover image, *Devout, Yemen,* and back image, *Sana'a, Yemen,* were produced by Rod Waddington (CC BY-SA 2.0).

[1] An ideological movement defined by both a Salafi (a conservative, fundamentalist strain of Islam) frame of reference and an acceptance of violence as a legitimate means to achieve social or political goals.

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Executive Summary

As Yemen is being torn apart by civil war, Jihadi-Salafi organizations – including al-Qaeda and ISIS – have been exploiting the security vacuum to solidify and expand their enterprise. New recruits continue to join the ranks of these organizations, whether driven by deep-seated frustration with systemic failures in governance, the growing normalization of violence, the allure of a viable and daring job, or a host of other factors. Over the past decade, the Yemeni government took steps to counteract this trend through military action, reforms in education, and public messaging. Such efforts, however, never truly received the institutional support and political commitment necessary to effect meaningful change, and have effectively been swept aside in the current political, social, and economic chaos.

Though the US, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Houthis have all launched various air and ground campaigns against Jihadi-Salafi groups, the principle point of resistance to further radicalization manifests at the local level. Over the years, community leaders and civil society organizations have mustered some response to violent extremism, though their efforts are severely undermined by a lack of sustainable resources and the constant threat of violence. Despite these challenges, it is local institutions and actors who are best positioned to prevent the continued growth of extremist movements. In the absence of a functioning central government that can provide support and security, it is more important than ever to promote collaborative action across different civil society sectors to strengthen the overall resilience of local communities to Jihadi-Salafism messaging and recruitment.

Any such “whole-of-society” approach, however, must contend with the unique challenge of engaging with the religious sector. Religious actors and institutions (schools, mosques, etc.) play an important role in shaping public discourse and strengthening local buy-in from their constituents. As such, they have an enormous potential to contribute either positively or negatively to stability. While some Yemeni religious actors have been integrated into existing government or civil society programming on violent extremism, there are many who remain stuck within their own insular networks, especially those conservative faith actors who are suspicious of the government and secular civil society.

In response to these challenges, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) conducted a mixed-method study to gather insights from conservative religious actors and other community leaders in selected Yemeni cities that have been impacted by the rise of Jihadi-Salafism. Respondents both assessed the reasons for the growth of violent extremism and offered their own ideas of what should be done at the local and national level to respond to this problem.

The findings from this research reinforce the common narrative that the core problem is an endemic lack of state capacity that has left a void in security, economic opportunities, and education. In this vein, while respondents did not view religious traditions as a contributing factor to extremism, they did see the lack of quality religious education as very significant. Respondents were highly critical of the corruption of national stakeholders and the proliferation of unregulated civil society leaders who are condoning political and identity-based violence. At the same time, however, some were convinced that the problem of violent extremism is a foreign imposition – perpetrated variously by the United States, Iran or the Gulf countries, depending on who you ask – that can only be resolved by cutting out sources of foreign influence.

Respondents offered unique insights on building bottom-up approaches to preventing the further growth of the Jihadi-Salafi groups, particularly in regard to enhancing the role of the religious sector. Among the 100 conservative religious actors interviewed during the field work, ICRD found widespread agreement that

while preventing radicalization is one of the most important duties for a Yemeni religious actor, they are not seen to be sufficiently fulfilling this responsibility. This may be due, in part, to religious actors' limited view of their own role in the community, as reflected in the fact that respondents seemed to value their moral and scholarly capacities over their ability to function more broadly as community leaders. It may also be a consequence of the lack of opportunities for religious actors to receive training or otherwise build relevant skills, which has led to a pervasive dearth of professional capacity in the religious sector. The vast majority of religious actors interviewed in this study supported the idea of developing programs to train imams, preferably under the auspices of a university, rather than the state.

At the same time, ICRD also sought to determine how the religious sector could be more effectively interconnected with government officials, CSOs, and the international community. Overall, respondents tended to look to the Yemeni government as the primary entity responsible for preventing extremism, placing comparatively less importance on the role of civil society. While the Yemeni government may be dysfunctional and lacking in its capacity, many respondents – both religious actors and civil society leaders – struggled to envision how community leaders and institutions could make any sort of meaningful impact.

The religious actors who participated in this research noted that there are few opportunities for local officials or CSOs to engage with the religious sector, and that these opportunities are sometimes marked by mutual suspicion. In particular, respondents were often highly suspicious of the motives of CSOs that are secular or Western-oriented. These barriers to cooperation could potentially be overcome if officials and CSOs are willing to interact with religious actors with an open recognition of their specific expertise and their positive social contributions. By contrast, given the level of antipathy expressed by many parties toward international actors, it would seem prudent for any international organization or state to be cautious in their involvement in combating violent extremism in Yemen.

Based on the findings outlined above, ICRD proposes the following key recommendations for developing a feasible "whole-of-society" response to Jihadi-Salafism:

I. Cultivate a sense of local ownership among various non-governmental actors for any strategy to address Jihadi-Salafism.

II. Support engagement across civil society sectors and ideological divisions.

III. Increase opportunities for respectful collaboration between religious and non-religious sectors.

IV. Identify constructive and appropriate roles for all religious actors and strengthen their ability to fulfill those roles.

V. Develop non-governmental mechanisms to facilitate coordination and cooperation within and across civil society sectors.

Research Methodology

The analysis and findings presented in this report are based on a combination of extensive desk study and mixed-method field research, implemented in collaboration with a team of local experts and several Yemeni civil society organizations – primarily the Dar al-Salaam Organization (DASO). Data was collected in September and October of 2016, in selected regions where the researchers had the capacity to safely engage subjects, using the following methods:

- 8 community discussions with a total of 110 participants, in Sana'a, Aden, Abyan, and Taiz, which included conservative religious actors as well as a diverse array of other local civil society actors. Given the participants' pressing concerns on the subject, the purpose of these meetings was not solely to gather data, but also to create a safe environment for concerned citizens to discuss practical recommendations for their community.

- Semi-structured interviews with 16 scholars, national stakeholders, and civil society leaders with relevant expertise or experience in analyzing or leading efforts to address violent extremism in Yemen.

- 100 structured surveys with religious actors[2], who were identified by researchers as Salafi[3], in Sana'a, Lahj, and Hadramaut. Given this demographic focus, the respondents tended to be disproportionately university-educated, male, and older than 30.

Challenges in Data Collection

It is important to acknowledge that the high level of instability within Yemen has made it increasingly difficult to generate generalizable public opinion data, particularly on sensitive issues like Jihadi-Salafism. The data outlined in this report are not intended to be considered as representative of the opinions of all Yemenis. Instead, researchers have sought to gather insights from those local actors who are best positioned to address questions regarding the religious sector and responses to Jihadi-Salafism at the community level.

Researchers were nonetheless faced with a number challenges in data collection that should be addressed:

- <u>Recruiting Research Subjects</u> – In conducting the structured surveys, researchers made every effort to identify and recruit Salafi religious actors. The process of differentiating Salafis from other Yemeni religious actors, however, is an imperfect science, as Salafism is an amorphous category that can cover a range of beliefs and social practices. Further, while some individuals may be willing to self-identify as Salafi, there are also many people who are unwilling to publicly identify with the contentious movement and others who eschew the label entirely (even if it may be an accurate description of their beliefs). To mitigate this challenge, researchers engaged Salafi

[2] "Religious actors" here includes any individual who exercises authority on religious matters. This may include: imams, teachers in religious schools, religious scholars and academics, leaders of religious organizations, and those who hold religious titles (e.g., hafiz, mufti).

[3] The Salafi movement is generally defined by: a) identification with the first generation of Muslim believers (*salaf al-salih);* b) connection to the legal and theological opinions of 14th century scholar Ibn Taymiyya; c) literalist interpretation of doctrine; and d) rejection of any practice or belief perceived to be syncretic or innovative (*bid'a*), which often includes Sufism and Shi'ism.

scholars with whom they had previously worked to serve as field researchers and thereby use their existing social networks to identify respondents. Researchers also focused their efforts on neighborhoods in Sana'a that are widely considered to have significant populations of Salafis, such as Musaik, Sa'awan, al-Iman University Street, and al-Hasaba Street.

Unfortunately, this method of sampling, compounded by security considerations, resulted in a geographic imbalance of respondents, with significant representation in Sana'a, and a smaller number of respondents in Lahj and Hadramaut. This sample left out some crucial regions where Salafis or Jihadi-Salafis have been active – including Aden and Sa'ada – in which research could not be conducted either due to lack of access or security. While researchers were able to facilitate community meetings in more diverse regions, religious actors were wary of participating in some locations due to fear of retaliation from local extremists.

- Security and Sensitivity – Given the wide proliferation of violent extremist groups and the lack of internal security, any discussion about religion, extremism, or militancy runs the risk of endangering respondents. Many respondents expressed some suspicion regarding the motivations and purpose of this research, which may have conditioned their answers to a greater or lesser degree.

  Researchers took several steps to mitigate these challenges. Firstly, research activities were conducted in areas where the risk of scrutiny and retributive violence was less significant. Secondly, researchers clearly identified the local CSO that facilitated the field work, but did not explicitly mention that this study was funded and supported by a US-based NGO, which would have greatly heightened suspicions.

  Finally, researchers did not make explicit reference to specific extremist groups, but instead framed their questions around violence, terrorism, or other relevant subjects. While ICRD has highlighted the challenges most directly relevant to Jihadi-Salafi groups – which are active in the regions where research was conducted – the recommendations and analysis contained herein are not specific to a particular ideology.

These limitations should be taken into account in any analysis of the data below. Further research could greatly complement and enhance this existing work.

Background

Since the early 1990s – following the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and the return of those who had left to fight in Afghanistan – numerous subnational militant groups have emerged in Yemen and have been alternately tolerated, empowered, or persecuted by the political establishment. This had included organizations that are part of the wider transnational Jihadi-Salafi movement, specifically al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the local affiliates of ISIS (IS-Y). While these organizations are not the only armed groups in Yemen that maintain a religious frame of reference – the Houthis[4] being the another – they represent a particular ideological threat that cannot be

[4] Ansar Allah is a religio-political movement popularly referred to as "the Houthis", in reference to the Houthi family which founded the movement in the 1990s and has led it to the present day. The Houthis have been a powerful dissident

addressed solely through the use of force or diplomacy. While many of the points outlined in this report may be equally relevant in the struggle against other militant groups in Yemen, the primary focus of this analysis will therefore be on Jihadi-Salafism.

The Emergence of Jihadi-Salafism in Yemen

The contemporary Salafi movement in Yemen emerged largely in the 1980s, driven by the prominent figure Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i (d. 2001) and the educational institution he founded in the northern city of Dammaj.[5] While the majority of the Yemeni Salafi community focused on scholarship and *da'wah* (outreach and proselytizing), the 1979 war in Afghanistan fostered the growth of a militant Jihadi-Salafist subset that survives today in the form of AQAP. With support from the Gulf monarchies, as well as former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Salafi religious scholars (*'ulema*) like 'Abdul-Majid al-Zindani and 'Abdul-Wahhab al-Daylami led an effort to recruit thousands of young Yemenis to join the Afghan resistance.[6]

After the Soviets were defeated, fighters from Yemen and other countries in the region began to return to Yemen. Most foreign fighters, who had left for Afghanistan with the blessing of their home governments, found that the political tide had turned against them in their absence. Yemen was one of a small number of countries that openly welcomed returning "Afghan Arabs,"[7] and thus became a refuge for a multi-national community of Jihadi-Salafists. These Afghan Arabs developed a powerful faction – linked by a shared ideology and experience of war – which was remobilized by President Saleh to fight against the socialist southern militias that were resisting unification in the early 1990s.

In return, Saleh promised the Jihadi-Salafi militias autonomy to create a Salafi state in the south. However, while some of Jihadi-Salafi leaders were given positions of power in the Saleh regime and minor changes to the constitution were made to achieve technical compliance with religious law (*shari'a*), many felt betrayed, and defected after the president made it clear that southern Yemen would not become a Salafi state.[8] New Jihadi-Salafi groups were formed that largely fell under the influence of al-Qaeda, and garnered international attention through a number of attacks against sea vessels at the Port of Aden, including the USS Cole in 2000, which killed 17 US sailors.

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group operating in the north of Yemen, originally emerging from the Zaydi Shi'a community. In 2014, a Houthi-led faction overthrew the Yemeni government and have since functioned as one of the leading parties in the ongoing civil war.

[5] While al-Wadi'i and his institution certainly played a pivotal role in promoting Salafism, the ideology should not be considered an exclusively modern or foreign trend in Yemeni Islam. It is notable that a similar tradition of Sunni Reformism was practiced by Yemeni jurist Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Abdullah al-Shawkani (1759-1839), a contemporary and peer of Muhammad ibn 'abdul-Wahhab.

[6] David Cook, "Paradigmatic Jihadi Movements," *CTC's Jihadi After Action Report*, eds. Jarret Brachman and Chris Heffelfinger (2006).

[7] This label was applied to foreign fighters from Arab (and some non-Arab) countries that traveled to fight alongside the Afghan fighters (*mujahidin*).

[8] Gregory Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012).

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)[9]

While no formal Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda existed prior to 2003, al-Qaeda operatives and influence have been present in the country since the earliest days of the organization.[10] The official establishment of AQAP (which occurred in 2009) is often linked to a 2006 prison break in Sana'a. Among the 23 escaped Jihadi-Salafi operatives were the two co-founders of AQAP: Nassar al-Wuhayshi (d. 2015), a senior Al-Qaeda lieutenant who would lead AQAP until his death, and Qasim al-Raymi, who leads the group today.

In the early years, AQAP was responsible for a low-intensity terrorist campaign that featured increasingly sophisticated methods of attacks against Western and government targets. In 2011, however, AQAP launched its first insurgency in the south and seized several population centers in the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa, which it held for a little more than a year. With significant attention and security resources devoted to containing the Arab Spring protests, there was little that the government could do to enforce its authority in those areas. Ultimately, AQAP was forced to retreat in 2011 by a hybrid force of local inter-tribal militias (known as Popular Committees[11]) and government forces.

During this insurgency, AQAP began to demonstrate a capacity for compromise that is uncharacteristic of other Jihadi-Salafi insurgencies in Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, or Syria. While the group's tactics were brutal, it earned some measure of public support by limiting its enforcement of the Shari'a to traditional criminality and adjudication of civil disputes, and focusing much more attention on providing very limited basic services, such as water trucks to drought-affected areas. One analysis by Elisabeth Kendall, for example, found that 56% of tweets from AQAP's governance Twitter account were about community development projects, compared to a mere 3% on the harsh punishments of religious law.[12]

To further encourage popular support, AQAP formed a branch called Ansar al-Shari'a, which promoted itself as a grassroots militia that focused on local grievances, rather than promoting al-Qaeda's more transnational agenda. By integrating its narrative with local norms and grievances, AQAP has managed to maintain a dominant position among Jihadi-Salafi groups, even during the emergence of IS-Y. As analyst Christopher Swift writes: *"[B]y grafting the foreign fighter ethos onto indigenous culture, [AQAP] has achieved a dynamic equilibrium between the practical realities of local insurgency and the doctrinal dictates of global jihad."*[13]

In 2015, AQAP launched its second major insurgency, seizing control of al-Mukulla, a major shipping port and economic hub in Hadramout. In possession of the local prison, armories, port and main bank, AQAP is

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[9] For further background on the current state of AQAP, see: International Crisis Group, "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base,*" Middle East & North Africa Report,* no. 174 (2017).

[10] It has been asserted that Al-Qaeda in Yemen was originally formed under the leadership of Abu `Ali al-Harithi, was responsible for the USS Cole bombing, and ended with his death in a 2002 US drone strike. This has been contested on grounds that the major plotters and facilitators of the USS Cole bombing were either part of the Islamic Army of Aden (IAA) or more closely affiliated with Al-Qaeda Core than any groups in Yemen. While Al-Qaeda had a presence in Yemen from the group's beginning, no domestic branch was formed.

[11] The meaning of this term has evolved significantly in Yemen. In this case it means fighting units that resemble tribal militias, but without the common familial linkage. Some members are from disparate tribes, while others hold no strong affiliations.

[12] Elisabeth Kendall, "War Torn Yemen May Attract Jihadi Fighters from Syria and Iraq," *Financial Times,* February 27, 2017.

[13] Christopher Swift, "From Periphery to Core: Foreign Fighters and the Evolution of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *The Foreign Fighters Problem, Recent Trends and Case Studies*, ed. Michael Noonan (2011): 55-67.

said to have looted and collected millions of dollars worth of hard currency, captured advanced military equipment, and released hundreds of supporters from incarceration. During this second insurgency, it pursued an even more ambitious localization strategy that relied on working through local governing councils and militias, taking steps to eliminate corruption, pay salaries, provide basic human services, and ease religious restrictions on the consumption of the local narcotic, *qat*.

The insurgency spread much further over the next months, to include additional cities along the southern coast of Yemen, until it was forced to withdraw by militias consisting of tribesmen from the Hadramout Tribal Confederacy backed by the UAE and the Yemeni government's military. It is important to note that, despite its brutal governance, AQAP's presence had secondary benefits for the general population. The territory it controlled was largely free of Houthi activity, which was the sole focus of the Gulf-led air campaign, meaning that Yemenis that came under AQAP rule were not subjected to the most devastating aspects of the ongoing civil war.

At present, the current force strength of AQAP is unknown, but is likely much lower than during the second insurgency. The core of AQAP has withdrawn back into their inland strongholds, where tribal alliances and lack of government presence protect the group. Despite this retreat, they have maintained an active campaign of ambush attacks against the al-Houthi/Saleh faction, and another against government or Emirates-backed forces that could threaten the group in the future. Quite apart from the number of active, dedicated fighters, AQAP's strength could be measured by the level of local resistance that it will face in a future insurgency and the ease of forming strong local militias in occupied land.

The Islamic State in Yemen (IS-Y) [14]

IS-Y was formed in November 2014, around the onset of the current civil war, when a small group of Yemeni jihadist militants publicly swore their allegiance to IS leader Abubaker al-Baghdadi. In the years that followed, IS-Y made a name for itself by siphoning away fighters from AQAP and committing attacks against mosques and government targets. Today, the Yemeni branch of ISIS is less powerful than AQAP but is still capable of conducting major, mass casualty attacks against civilian and military targets.

While the presence of IS-Y is both significant and alarming, the eight or more *wilayat* (provincial-level cells) that form this branch have not gained a significant foothold in the country, due to the group's brutal tactics and poor leadership. Yemeni Sunni society is particularly sensitive to attacks against civilians and mosques and has not fully bought into the IS-Y portrayal of the Houthi rebellion through a sectarian lens. Internally, the organization has also been marked by constant division and insubordination of the Yemeni sub-commanders against a primarily Saudi leadership. For these reasons, many Yemenis still consider the group to be a foreign actor.

[14] For more background on IS-Y, see: Katherine Zimmerman and Jon Diamond, "Challenging the Yemeni State: ISIS in Aden and al-Mukalla," *AEI Critical Threats Project* (June 2016); Katherine Zimmerman, "Exploring ISIS in Yemen," *AEI Critical Threats Project* (July 2015); or Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "A Comparative Analysis of 'Islamic State' & Al-Qaeda in Yemen," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 8, no. 8 (August 2016): 12-15.

Key Factors Fueling Extremism and Jihadi-Salafism

In order to develop a locally-informed understanding of the intersecting factors that drive Jihadi-Salafism in Yemen, this report will bring existing scholarship and analysis together with recent insights from community leaders and Salafi religious actors. The religious actors who participated in the structured surveys were asked to assess 32 potential drivers of violence and terrorism, including both domestic and international factors. As the chart below demonstrates (*fig. 1*), the data suggest that subjects overwhelmingly felt that violence and terrorism in Yemen are more directly related to endemic, structural concerns – including lawlessness, corruption, unemployment, and the lack of basic resources – rather than religious, cultural or ideological factors.

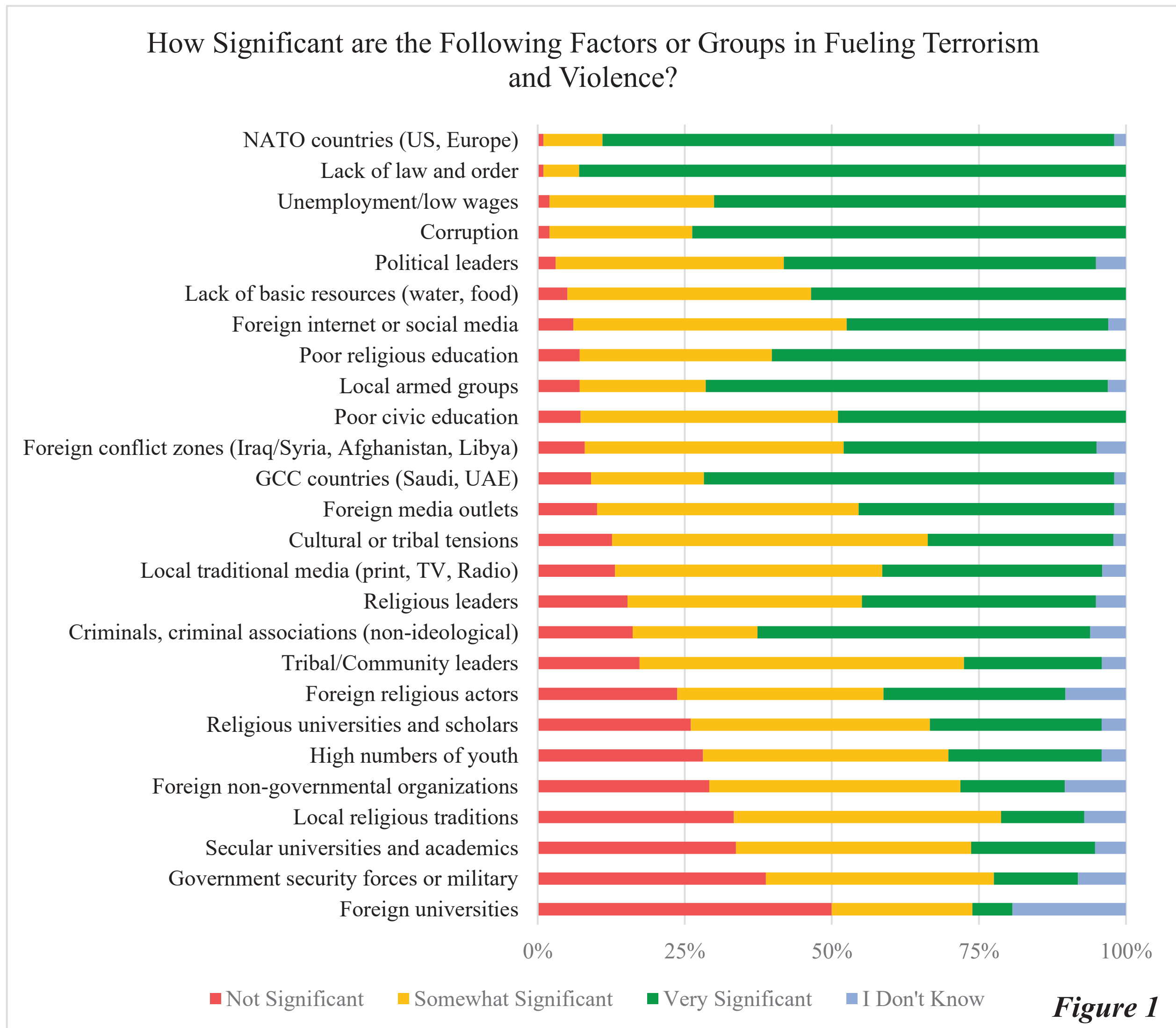

Figure 1

In general, non-religious factors were viewed as more significant drivers of violence and terrorism than religious factors. However, while local religious traditions, religious leaders, and religious universities were perceived as less influential, poor religious education itself was identified as one of the most significant drivers of radicalization. This distinction is significant, as it suggests that *respondents perceive that violence is more closely correlated with a lack of basic knowledge about religion than with flawed religious*

institutions and leadership. Undoubtedly, religious actors and centers of learning are closely tied to the state of popular religious understanding, but these data may point to a perceived systemic problem with religious education that extends beyond the immediate sphere of influence of religious actors [which is addressed further in the section *Engaging the Religious Sector*].

Respondents assigned the greatest significance to Western states, a finding that correlated with a general suspicion and criticism expressed by other community leaders that foreign states are largely responsible for the current violence and chaos in Yemen. Interestingly, Arab Gulf states were also viewed as fairly significant drivers of violence, despite the religiously conservative make-up of respondents.

Putting these results in the context of existing literature and inputs from other Yemeni actors, a few key insights emerge that should inform the development of any strategies to address Jihadi-Salafism in Yemen:

1. The *limited capacity of the Yemeni state* to support and exercise control over all sectors – security, justice, economy, education, infrastructure, etc. – has left a power void willingly filled by Jihadi-Salafi groups (particularly AQAP) looking to expand their social influence and credibility.

2. Prominent local and national leaders across the ideological spectrum have been complicit in *polarizing social discourse* and *normalizing calls to violence*, which makes it easier for Jihadi-Salafis to sell their divisive narrative.

3. A number of Yemenis believe that violent extremism only exists in Yemen because of the influence of major superpowers, whether the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Iran, or others. This *devolution of responsibility to foreign entities* distracts from the very real concern that Jihadi-Salafi rhetoric has gained significant traction by presenting itself as a homegrown ideology vested with the interest of the population.

Lack of State Capacity

For decades, Yemen has been plagued by poor governance and a lack of state resources, which are often allocated only to the capital and areas dominated by the ruling GPC party due to widespread corruption, while other regions are left to languish. As a result, much of the southern region – where Jihadi-Salafi groups like AQAP have been most active and successful – has been neglected and remains relatively underdeveloped.[15] These conditions did not improve following the 2011 uprisings, as the state collapsed amongst political bickering and basic services and living conditions deteriorated across the board.

- **Social Services –** As of January 2017, more than 11% of Yemenis have been displaced by the civil war.[16] Millions of children are severely malnourished, and both the UN and USAID warned of an impending famine in early 2017.[17] Most government workers have not been paid in at least the six months leading up to this report. Businesses have been closed and more than half of the country's

[15] International Crisis Group, "Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown," *Middle East & North Africa Report,* no. 145 (2013).
[16] International Organization for Migration, "12th Task Force on Population Movement," January 10, 2017.
[17] UN News Centre, "In Yemen, UN Aid Chief Rallies Support for Relief Efforts to Prevent Famine," *UN News Centre*, February 27, 2017.

health facilities have been closed or destroyed since the beginning of the conflict.[18] As noted in the *Background*, these needs are sometimes met instead by Jihadi-Salafi groups or affiliates looking to solidify their standing with the local population. AQAP, in particular, has focused on providing stability, social services, and functional institutions – such as courts, schools, and power plants.[19]

- **Education –** As a result of ongoing conflict, hundreds of schools have been shut down, occupied, or destroyed by one faction or another.[20] Even where education does exist, it often does not meet the needs of the community. Many community meeting participants decried the low quality of education and the proliferation of cheating and other "immoral" behavior,[21] while others argued that insufficient access to university education has left tens of thousands of youths without the knowledge or tools needed to find jobs. This situation, of course, limits the number of viable future prospects for youths, and leaves them without the critical thinking skills necessary to effectively see through Jihadi-Salafi messaging. Furthermore, it provides yet another window for Jihadi-Salafi groups to spread their influence by offering education where there might be none. As summarized by one Yemeni tourist guide: "The people were saying, 'we would rather have our kids get an al-Qaeda education than be illiterate'."[22]

Side Note on Recruitment Incentives

In addition to social services, Jihadi-Salafi groups can leverage their resources to provide material incentives to potential recruits, such as a competitive salary or luxury goods (technology, guns). Survey respondents and community group participants reported that a number of civil society organizations used aid to poor families to lure youths into extremist groups. In this sense, it is important to note that recruitment is not entirely (or even primarily) driven by ideological considerations. The practical benefits of joining an extremist group – stability, the hope of social mobility, etc. – can be very attractive to young people with few other options.

- **Law and Order** – For years, the Yemeni security apparatus has struggled to effectively combat Jihadi-Salafi groups kinetically, even when there is political will to do so. Instead, the state has often relied on local militia groups, like the Popular Committees who assisted in liberating Abyan and Shabwa in 2012. This situation has been exacerbated by the split of the armed forces between President Hadi and former President Saleh since the onset of the civil war. Even with the support of GCC forces, no single faction has sufficient capacity to secure the entire country, leaving Jihadi-Salafi groups with ample room to maneuver and evade a full-scale confrontation.

[18] UN News Centre, "Yemen's Health System Another Victim of the Conflict – UN Health Agency," *UN News Centre*, February 23, 2017.
[19] Christopher Swift, "Arc of Convergence: AQAP, Ansar Al-Sharia, and the Struggle for Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 6 (2012): 1–6;
Even before the war, the understaffed court system struggled to manage the overwhelming caseload, leaving many Yemenis with no official recourse to resolve legal disputes. In regions where it has been most active, AQAP has been more than willing to fill that vacuum and provide decisive, albeit medieval, justice.
[20] Ahmed Alwly, "Yemen's Education System Latest Victim of Ongoing War," *Al-Monitor,* October 7, 2016.
[21] Notes from community meeting in Aden, September 6, 2016.
[22] Robert Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan," *New York Times,* July 6, 2010.

An Enabling Environment

The Yemeni political system is marked not only by ineffective governance, but also a staunch resistance to change, with the legacy of former President Saleh's corrupt system of patronage politics ensuring that power remains concentrated in the hands of a few. Rigged and stacked elections have left the same people in power, gradually eroding the population's confidence in the democratic process. Such corruption was cited repeatedly by local actors as a direct driver of violent extremism.[23] According to participants in a Sana'a-based meeting:

> *[Following the 1994 civil war] youths were in despair, they felt helpless to bring about peaceful change through elections, and the only other option was violence. Extremist groups leveraged this opportunity to gain wide support among the youth, especially in the south…a whole generation grew up under these circumstances and became more willing to join violent radical groups to correct the injustice they had experienced.*[24]

As the country becomes more deeply mired in conflict, Jihadi-Salafi messaging can more effectively gain traction among dissatisfied citizens. Broadly speaking, most Jihadi-Salafi groups are political dissidents, and Yemenis in the south, in particular, have many reasons to be frustrated with the malfunctioning system that governs the political, social, judicial, and economic processes in their country.[25] This dissatisfaction in the system is widespread, with one public opinion survey from 2011 finding that only 3% of Yemenis believed the country was 'heading in the right direction.'[26]

In addition to these feelings of disillusionment and frustration in the political sphere, many leaders have normalized and legitimized antagonistic, exclusionary rhetoric to consolidate their power and dehumanize their enemies.[27] Given the need to balance a wide array of powerful spoilers, Yemen's national political system is often defined by tenuous alliances between various stakeholders united solely through shared opposition to a common enemy.[28] The exclusionary rhetoric used to legitimize this system, even when it is not employed to justify Jihadi-Salafi ideals, can reinforce black-and-white thinking and harden perceived identity divisions, thereby conditioning people to be more receptive to extremist messaging.

Since the onset of the current war, opponents of the Houthis (including the allies of President Hadi) have utilized religiously sectarian language to discredit the Shi'a Houthis as agents of Iran and, thereby, alien to Yemen. This rhetoric introduces suspicion and identity division in a society marked by generations of inter-mixing between Sunni and Shi'a communities.[29] Furthermore, the demonization of the Houthis can soften public perception toward groups like AQAP, which have a successful track record in fighting against the Houthis.

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[23] Notes from community meetings in Lahj, October 2, 2016; Sana'a, September 1, 2016; and Zinjibar, September 8, 2016.
[24] Notes from community meeting in Sana'a, November 5, 2016 [translated from Arabic].
[25] See for example, Erica Gaston and Nadwa al-Dawsari, *Justice in Transition in Yemen: A Mapping of Local Justice Functioning in Ten Governorates*, Peaceworks 99, (US Institute of Peace, 2014).
[26] Glevum Associates. "2011 Yemen Stability Survey," (2011).
[27] Notes from community meeting in Sana'a, November 5, 2016.
[28] Former President Saleh once described ruling Yemen as akin to "dancing on the heads of snakes," in reference to the prevalence of multiple influential actors with enough power to hinder the political decision-making process but not to exercise full control over the country.
[29] Farea Al-Muslimi, "How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen," *Syria in Crisis*, December 29, 2015.

According to community meeting participants, this antagonistic rhetoric is reinforced at the local level by traditional and social media, as well as by religious actors. Unfettered by state supervision, the latter are generally free to pursue their own agenda, often in alignment with the interests of particular religious organizations or political parties. As such, they are able to leverage their social influence over their constituents in favor of or against various parties in the conflict. Community meeting participants in Sana'a reported that all sides in the war have utilized Friday sermons as a platform to incite people to fight against another sect or tribe under the banner of jihad.

In the most extreme cases, some national leaders have gone beyond mere rhetoric to openly condone or even support extremist groups in order to defeat their competitors. Participants in a Sana'a community meeting, for example, cited the GPC's efforts to mobilize extremist fighters returning from Afghanistan in the early 1990s to counter the socialist party in the south.[30] More recently, some anti-Houthi factions have fought alongside AQAP on the front lines of the conflict.[31]

However, despite these occasional alliances, it is important to note that the national and local leaders who have been inflaming public opinion and rallying support for violence are not necessarily endorsing extremism or Jihadi-Salafism. In fact, many are avowedly opposed to AQAP or IS-Y. Regardless of actual allegiances, however, the consistent normalization of violence only serves to strengthen the appeal and legitimacy of extremist groups.

Extremism as a Foreign Import

Despite the factors outlined above, there are some who believe that violent extremism is not a problem endemic to Yemen, but rather a foreign import. In one discussion with conservative religious actors, participants unanimously arrived at the consensus that the United States was the source of all terrorism and had created ISIS in order to destroy Islam.[32] In other meetings, participants argued that the proliferation of militant groups, including Jihadi-Salafis, and the general level of violence and instability were the result of the failure of the Arab Gulf states to adequately ensure peace and security.

Though some of these narratives are conspiratorial, it is essential to recognize the extensive influence that foreign powers do exercise in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has become enmeshed in Yemeni society following decades of direct patronage of key leaders and religious institutions. These formal and informal patronage networks are now being mobilized to support the GCC-led intervention through messaging and force, which contributes to the enabling environment described above.

While recognizing the considerable role played by foreign powers in shaping Yemen's domestic affairs, local respondents also noted that national leaders often tried to associate extremism with foreign entities to deflect blame for ineffective governance. Whether justified or not, the negative perception of Western and, to a lesser extent, Gulf countries should be taken into account in shaping a global response to Jihadi-Salafism in Yemen.

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[30] Notes from community meeting in Sana'a, November 5, 2016.
[31] International Crisis Group, "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base," *Middle East & North Africa Report,* no. 174 (2017); Ludovico Carlino, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Prepares for Confrontation with North Yemen's Houthi Movement," *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 9 (2014).
[32] Community meeting in Lahj, October 16, 2016.

Assessing Past Strategies to Address Jihadi-Salafism

Before seeking to determine viable responses to the drivers of Jihadi-Salafism outlined above, it is important to reflect on what has already been attempted, both at the governmental and civil society levels. This section of the report specifically highlights several significant, non-kinetic strategies that have defined the field of countering violent extremism in Yemen to date.

De-radicalization Policies

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Yemeni government walked a careful line between tolerating and repressing Jihadi-Salafist activity. Following the bombing of the *USS Cole* in 2000, the government sought to demonstrate to the West that it was serious about the Global War on Terror, even if it was slow to confront some prominent Jihadi-Salafis. Thus, in 2002, the government developed a dialogue-based de-radicalization and reintegration program, thereby creating a channel to address extremism and al-Qaeda affiliates while minimizing the backlash from prominent Jihadi-Salafi leaders.

This program – known as the Religious Dialogue Committee (RDC) – was led by a judge and religious scholar, Hamoud al-Hitar, who would later become the Minister of Endowments and Guidance. Hitar's methodology consisted of engaging prisoners in extensive dialogues over their religious beliefs, in order to challenge and transform their ideological commitment to extremism. If participants were willing to disavow violence and any previous association with a violent extremist organization, then they would be released from prison and offered assistance in finding employment (though the exact parameters of the post-release care have not been well-documented). Between 2002 and 2005, when it was ultimately shut down, Hitar claims the program graduated and released 364 individuals who had been convicted of terrorism.[33]

Critics[34] have pointed to a number of deficiencies in the structure and administration of the program, such as:

1) The state did not invest sufficient resources in post-release care;

2) The program's core methodology focused on transforming participants' ideology, rather than changing their behavior, which is inherently difficult to assess with any accuracy; and

3) Judge Hitar drew on theological arguments that portrayed extremist violence as permissible in some cases, just not in Yemen, leaving open the viability of fighting in other conflict zones.

In the absence of robust data on recidivism, the effectiveness of the program has been difficult to quantify. While Judge Hitar claims that 98% of those influenced by al-Qaeda were fully convinced to abandon violence, the exact rate has not been confirmed by trusted non-governmental sources.[35] Challenging Hitar's

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[33] James Brandon, "Koranic duels ease terror," *Christian Science Monitor,* Feburary 4, 2005.
[34] See, for example, Ane Skov Birk, "Incredible Dialogues: Religious Dialogue as a Means of Counter-Terrorism in Yemen," (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2009); John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-Radicalization Programs," *Terrorism and Political Violence* no. 22 (2010): 267–91.
[35] Horgan and Braddock, 276.

optimistic claims, a number of scholars and international experts point out that several of the program graduates went on to become active in Jihadi-Salafi groups in Iraq. Moreover, as the detailed profiles of the program participants was never clearly disclosed, it is difficult to confirm that all were, in fact, active in a violent extremist organization prior to taking part in it.

Regulatory Policies for Religious Education and Discourse

While the Yemeni government is not inherently secular,[36] it has never maintained full control over the religious sphere. A myriad of political parties, religious organizations, and other interest groups serve to fill that void in shaping religious practice and discourse. While the provision of religious education is a function of Yemeni public schools, beginning around the 1970s, religious charities and political parties – most notably the Islamist al-Islah party – began offering alternative religious education options through private schools that operated under lax government supervision.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the federal government began to restrict and close down these schools, citing concerns that they were spreading radical religious ideologies. In 2005, the Ministry of Endowments and Guidance (MoEG) estimated that there were some 4,568 unlicensed religious schools still in operation. Over the next few years, the government claimed to have shut down thousands of these schools.[37]

It is important to clarify that this effort was not solely driven by the government's interest in combating Jihadi-Salafi ideology. In fact, the decision to target private religious schools was primarily aimed at curtailing the influence of Islah, which was gaining traction as a prominent opposition party. As summarized in the Department of State's 2011 Country Report on Terrorism: "*Yemeni government messaging often intentionally blurred the line between terrorist organizations and political opposition groups, regularly making unsubstantiated claims that the opposition, particularly the Islamist Islah party, had ties to AQAP*."[38] This mixed, political agenda calls into question the efficacy of this policy in terms of countering violent extremist ideology.

Side Note on Informal Education Alternatives

In spite of these efforts, the formal restrictions on religious education led to the development of more informal education spaces. "Religious centers" – schools outside government supervision that are run out of mosques or other private spaces – fill the void left by the state, using a limited, religion-centric curriculum. While it is difficult to effectively map the number or presence of such institutions, it is worth noting that 71% of survey respondents said that there were currently such religious centers in their community. Of course, the limited geographic spread of survey respondents may distort this statistic. Nonetheless, their responses reinforce the idea that unregulated spaces for religious education are still in operation.

In addition to the government's crack-down on private schools, the MoEG made a public effort to enhance religious education in public schools and promote positive religious messaging through schools and mosques. In 2010, the MoEG, in partnership with a number of other ministries, began to develop a

[36] Article 3 of the Constitution, for example, states that *shari'a* is the source of all legislation.
[37] U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010* (2010).
[38] U.S. Department of State Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011,* (2012).

comprehensive state strategy for addressing violent extremist ideology. In the years that followed, a number of MoEG-backed initiatives emerged, often based on some combination of youth engagement, religious education, and awareness-raising in schools, summer camps, or mosques.[39] Many of the survey respondents were familiar with MoEG programs, though several were quick to note that they were limited in scope.

Though the MoEG has not always been effective at challenging extremism, there has been anecdotal evidence of local success. For example, one local MoEG representative in Abyan, who participated in a community meeting, shared his personal story of successfully removing a religious group that had taken control of a mosque in the district capital of Zinjibar following the withdrawal of Ansar al-Sharia in 2012.[40] While such stories point to some progress on a case-by-case basis, there is little evidence to suggest that the overarching strategy to shape religious discourse has decreased the spread of Jihadi-Salafi ideology.

Turning Toward Civil Society

Despite the dysfunction at the government level, Yemen maintains a robust civil society, including both traditional forms of association – such as tribal structures and mosques – and a more recent wave of NGOs strongly supported by foreign aid. Though various elements within Yemeni civil society have been complicit in supporting the spread of Jihadi-Salafism, many local actors and organizations have actively resisted its growth, even at great personal risk. While civil society resistance to Jihadi-Salafism has manifested in many forms, a few cross-cutting strategies arose during conversations with Yemeni civil society activists:

- <u>Raising Awareness</u> - According to one local civil society activist, the 2008 terrorist attack on the American Embassy in Sana'a served as a turning point for many CSOs, which subsequently began to discuss the issue of violent extremism explicitly through media channels and direct engagement with local village councils.[41] Unfortunately, any effort to conduct public outreach has been severely limited by security risks, and is often much more feasible in Sana'a and the North than in the southern areas where Jihadi-Salafi groups are most active.[42] Thus, efforts to raise awareness have been limited by their ability to reach the populations that are most immediately vulnerable to radicalization or recruitment to extremist groups. Since the war, the threat of backlash has only become more severe, as illustrated by the case of Sheikh Rawi, an influential Salafi cleric in Aden who was tortured and murdered just days after delivering a sermon condemning AQAP and IS-Y.[43]

- <u>Filling the Vacuum of Social Services</u> – A number of CSOs have sought to address the structural deficiencies in governance and the provision of social services that are exploited by AQAP. Though specific programs have had varying degrees of success, CSOs and local leaders are woefully ill-equipped to serve as an alternative to the government.[44] Many of the local groups that have stepped

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[39] Faisal Darem, "Yemen Fights Terrorism through Textbooks and Teachers," *Al Shorfa*. October 28, 2013.
Faisal Darem, "Yemen Fights Extremism with Awareness Campaigns," *Al-Shorfa*, July 9, 2013.
Faisal Darem, "Yemen Summer Camps Seek to Empower Youth against Extremism," *Al Shorfa*. July 24, 2012.
Faisal Darem, "Yemeni Campaign Spreads Moderation among Youth," *Al Shorfa*. September 6, 2012.
[40] Notes from community meeting in Abyan, September 8, 2016.
[41] Conversation with CSO worker from Sana'a, April, 2016.
[42] Conversation with CSO worker from Sana'a, April, 2016.
[43] Ahmed al-Haj, "Top Yemeni Salafi Cleric Killed in Aden," *Associated Press*, January 31, 2016.
[44] Conversation with CSO worker from Sana'a, April, 2016.

up to provide humanitarian assistance are small – sometimes run by a single individual – and therefore lack the capacity to implement sustained, large-scale programs. As such, these groups can address short-term needs (e.g., delivering food, resolving a specific conflict) but they cannot, on their own, resolve overwhelming structural insufficiencies.

This problem is compounded by the fact that many civil society organizations are supported through national or international grants, and are therefore subject to the turbulence of short funding cycles. One CSO worker, for example, lamented that a lot of initiatives to empower youth leaders were only active for a month before people were laid off, and there was no follow-up. Despite this lack of capacity, some community meeting participants did note that humanitarian CSOs have managed to cultivate solid relationships of trust with the local populations, who are desperate to find someone to support them.[45] Unfortunately, this phenomenon also works to the benefit of AQAP and the charities and organizations that support its ideology.

- Bridging Social Divides – Several of the CSO workers interviewed during this research cited examples of successful civil society-led efforts to bring together people across religious, political, or social divides in order to promote cooperation and tolerance. These included programs run by international organizations and media programs, like the television show "Thoughts".[46] While such efforts are essential to strengthening community cohesion and overcoming the prejudices and black-and-white thinking that fuels extremism, local respondents noted that they are difficult to sustain in the midst of a divisive civil war.[47]

Enhancing Strategies to Address Jihadi-Salafism

Given the limited capacity of the Yemeni state, and the general lack of public confidence in its abilities, it is imperative that future efforts to curtail Jihadi-Salafism revolve around strengthening the resilience of local communities. In the long term, Yemen will need to resolve the systemic and structural problems that are driving local grievances and forcing people to turn to extremists to meet their basic needs. However, given the sheer magnitude of need, efforts aimed at humanitarian relief and governance capacity-building alone cannot offer the holistic and immediate solutions needed to prevent the further growth of Jihadi-Salafism.

There is a critical need to enhance the role of civil society actors and institutions in their capacity to affect certain local drivers of extremism. This can include a wide range of efforts – such as reducing the level of dehumanizing rhetoric in the public sphere, providing for some basic needs as an alternative to extremists, or offering pro-social counseling or guidance to youth who are sympathetic to Jihadi-Salafism. The exact strategies are, of course, best determined by the various community leaders – imams, teachers, parents, sheikhs, businessmen, local government officials, etc. – who understand local needs and are sensitive to the risks of retaliation from militants.

Nonetheless, given the vast range of current needs in Yemen, it is essential to foster a "whole-of-society" approach that includes participation and cooperation across a number of social sectors – media, education,

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[45] Notes from community meeting in Sana'a, November 5, 2016.
[46] Conversation with CSO worker from Abyan, April, 2016.
[47] Conversation with CSO worker from Sana'a, April, 2016.

family, CSOs, etc. While each of these sectors warrants an intensive examination, this report focuses primarily on the role of the religious sector. Participants in every community meeting highlighted the need to strengthen or transform the role of imams, mosques, and religious teachers in mitigating extremism.

This will require addressing the current barriers that inhibit effective engagement with the religious sector, an engagement that must extend even to Salafis and other such religious actors who promote an exclusivist and rigid religious worldview. Overlooking the Salafi community will only serve to foster further fragmentation and polarization, and make it more difficult to access youth who may be at risk of radicalization and recruitment to Jihadi-Salafi groups. By contrast, fostering trusting relationships with Salafi religious actors enables community leaders to reach these otherwise insular communities, which has proven, in other contexts, to soften divisions.

Engaging the Religious Sector

Given the challenge of developing an inclusive and constructive approach to engaging religious actors, the section below outlines reflections from Salafi religious actors on the religious sector itself and its relationship to other civil society and governmental actors. In analyzing this particular data set, it is important to note the context within which these answers were recorded – one of dire economic and security conditions due to the ongoing civil war. This environment undoubtedly contributed to the general disillusionment with the performance of the religious sector.

Some of the key findings and conclusions include:

1. Religious actors seem to place a greater value on their ability to provide wisdom and guidance, rather than their capacity to function as hands-on leaders in the community.

2. Respondents did not perceive religious actors to be sufficiently active in preventing violent extremism, despite the fact that they generally agreed that the religious sector is a key player in addressing extremism.

3. Even apart from their role in preventing extremism, religious actors may not be adequately meeting the needs of their community. This could be a function of a general lack of professional capacity or opportunities for training and skill-building.

4. There is a clear need to establish mechanisms in Yemen that would allow for the capacities of imams and other religious actors to be strengthened, preferably under the auspicies of a credible university.

Ideal Characteristics

Respondents were prompted to identify the most desirable attributes of a religious actor from a pre-determined list. The results (see *fig. 2*) suggest that respondents define religious actors by intellectual and ideological characteristics over their ability to engage with the public. In other words, it is more important

for a religious actor to be wise and moral than charismatic. This may indicate that religious actors place comparatively less value on their active involvement in community affairs.

Interestingly, despite the respondents' emphasis on honesty and incorruptibility, the non-religious civil society leaders interviewed in community meetings frequently criticized religious actors as corrupt and self-interested, suggesting that religious actors are not living up to this ideal. Given the widespread frustration with corruption in the public sphere, there remains an urgent need to identify local leaders who are not mired in dishonest practices.

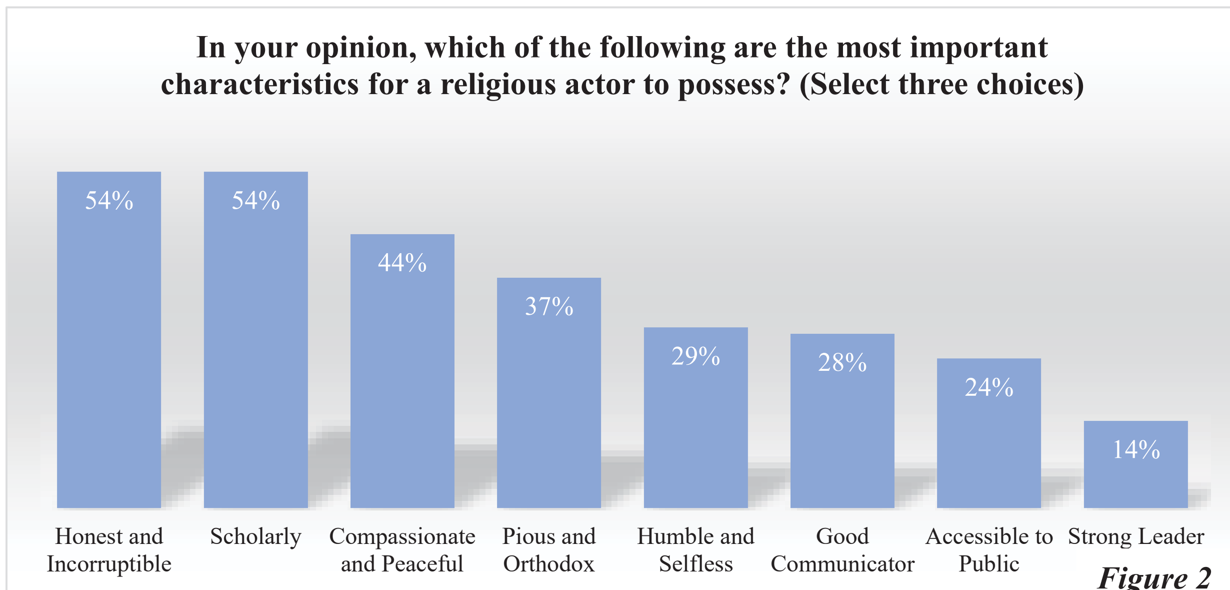

Figure 2

Preaching and Friday Sermons

Though respondents ranked communication skills among the least important characteristics, both religious and non-religious actors in the community meetings cited Friday sermons as a powerful tool for mobilizing the community to support a particular agenda for good or ill. Without disregarding the importance of other forms of religious media, including the growing pervasiveness of online content, Friday sermons remain an important medium for local religious actors to engage with their community.

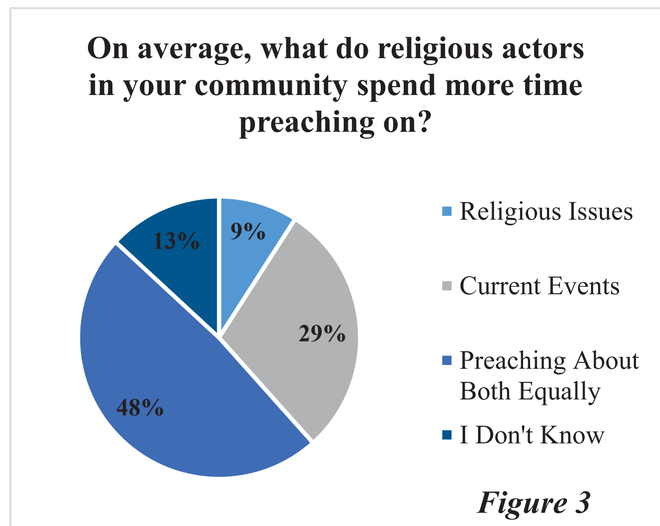

Figure 3

Respondents noted that the content of sermons in their community slightly favored current affairs over purely religious topics. This finding concurs with the comments of community meeting participants in Sana'a, who remarked that preachers would often use their pulpit to advance a particular social or political agenda. When asked about appropriate themes for Friday sermons, respondents ascribed less value

to subjects that touched on identity differences, instead favoring themes more directly related to day-to-day community affairs.

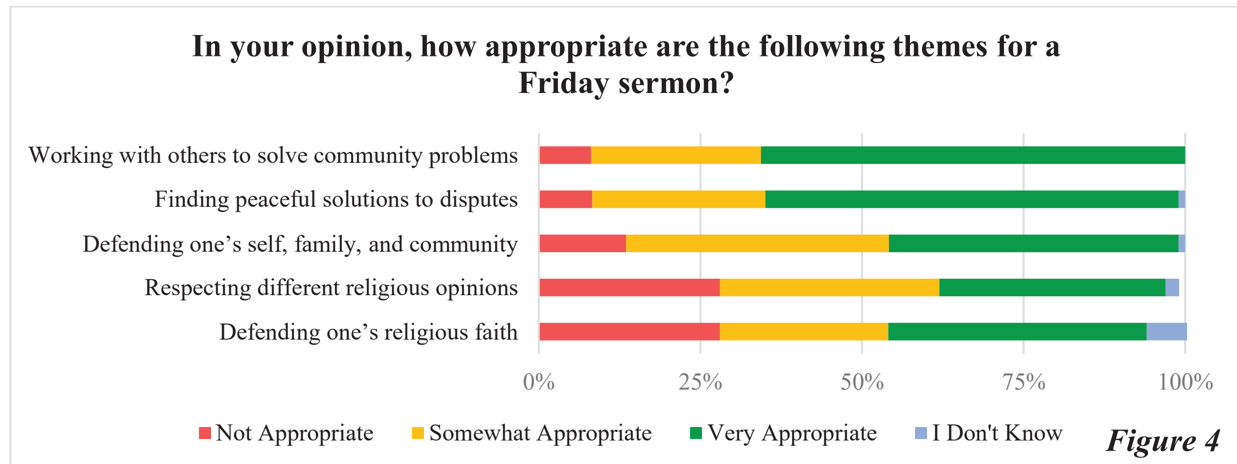

Figure 4

Social Roles

When asked to assess the importance of various potential roles for religious actors, respondents ascribed the greatest priority to activities involving guidance and education, and the least priority to activities that would expand religious actors' role in the community or public sphere. In particular, respondents saw comparatively little value in having religious actors serve as a nexus between the government and the community. Building on the findings in *fig. 2*, this may again suggest that religious actors imagine their proper role to be one of providing guidance and advice, rather than taking an active hand in community affairs.

Respondents were then asked to assess how well the other religious actors they know live up to their expectations in each of these various roles (see *fig. 6*). Their answers revealed a general disappointment with the performance of the religious sector, as the majority of respondents offered a negative assessment for almost every activity. While the lowest marks were given to "coordinating relations between government and the community," one of the more critical discrepancies appeared on the issue of preventing violent extremism. This activity was considered to be one of the most important, and yet a significant number of respondents found that religious actors were doing a poor job in that regard.

Religious actors were considered comparatively more effective in providing religious education, a finding which contrasts with the fact that respondents identified poor religious education as one of the more significant drivers of violence and terrorism (see *fig. 1*). There are a number of potential explanations for this discrepancy, chief among which is the fact that religious actors and institutions often are not the primary provider of religious education, particularly after the governmental crackdown on private religious schools. Individual religious authorities may be proficient in educating the limited number of students who attend their Quranic school or their university, but they are not necessarily reaching the masses who are taught religion through the public school system.

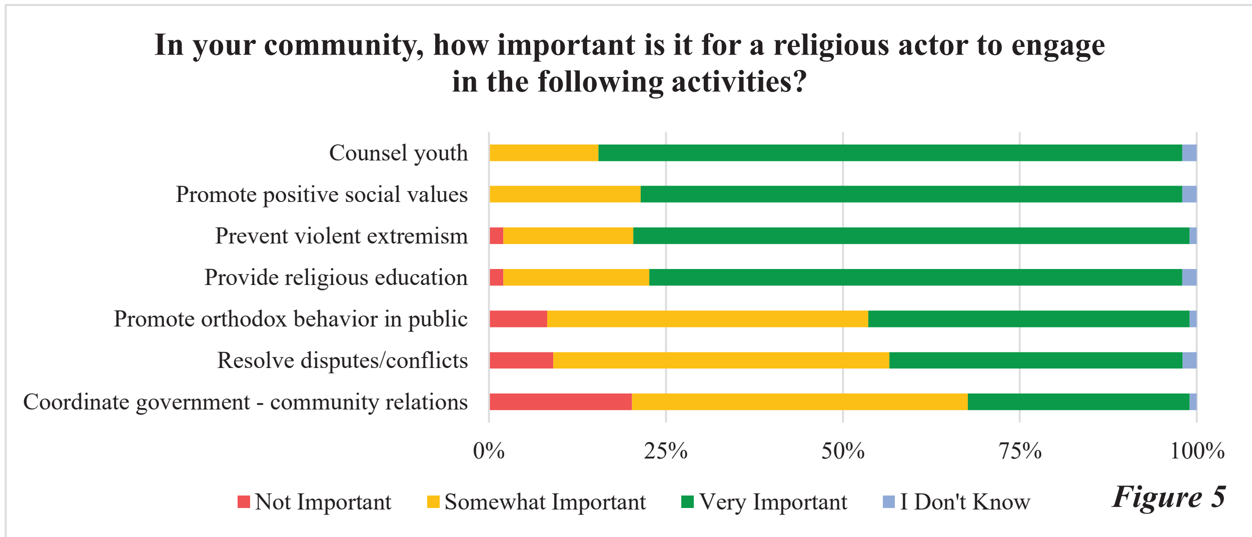

Figure 5

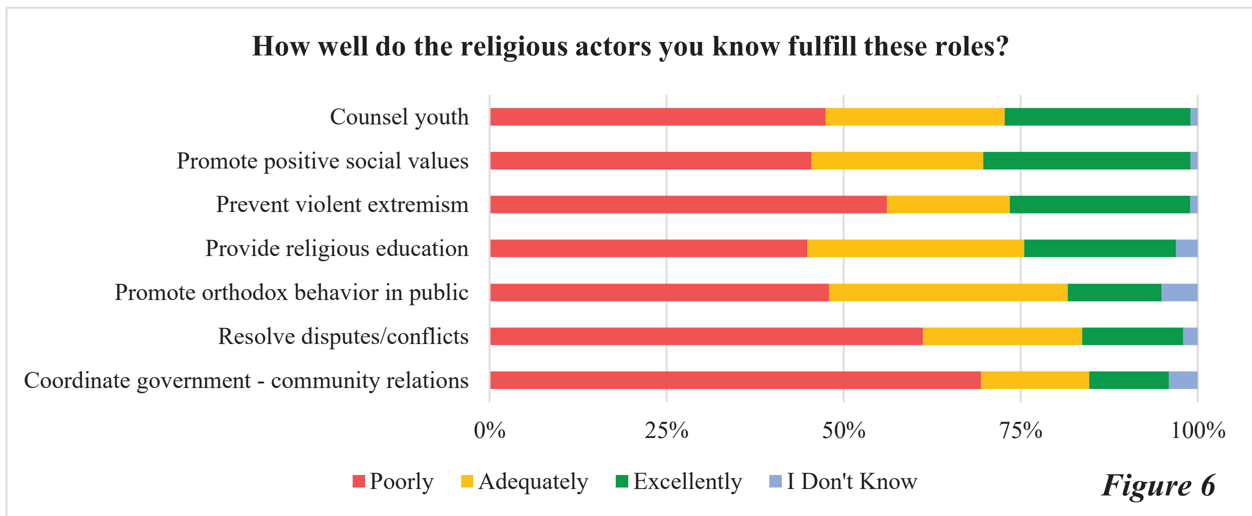

Figure 6

Training and Capacity Building

In Yemen, the process of becoming a religious authority is loosely regulated. While, on paper, imams are supposed to be sanctioned by the MoEG, in practice, the Ministry has little capacity to install or remove imams without strong support from the community. Further complicating matters is the fact that Yemen has not, historically, maintained a major center of religious learning to train its religious sector, like Al-Azhar in Egypt or Al-Zaytouna in Tunisia. To receive an in-depth education in Islamic sciences, a prospective Yemeni religious actor has few choices: either travel abroad or attend one of the comparatively new religious schools. For higher education this often means attending Iman University – founded in 1993 by Abdul Majid al-Zindani[48] but currently closed under Houthi occupation – which has been accused by some of being an incubator of violent extremist ideology.

The options for religious actors in Yemen to receive professional training are therefore very limited. As previously described, the Yemeni MoEG has begun to develop new initiatives aimed at promoting positive

[48] One of the co-founders of the Islamist Islah party and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.

religious discourse, which includes providing training and education to imams and religious scholars. However, there is little-to-no hard evidence on the progress of these programs and no indication that they have made any systemic impact on the professionalization of the religious sector.

Respondents were asked whether or not there was a need for religious actors to receive training, and, if so, who should lead such an effort. Their responses (*see fig. 7-8*) demonstrate a clear support for the idea of formal training. This sentiment was also reflected in the community meetings in Aden and Abyan, where participants stressed the importance of facilitating training workshops for imams. Though the only existing programs that survey respondents were aware of are run by the MoEG or by a civil society organization, there seemed to be a preference for programs to be run through a Yemeni university. There appeared to be little support for a government-led program, perhaps signaling a lack of confidence in the MoEG.

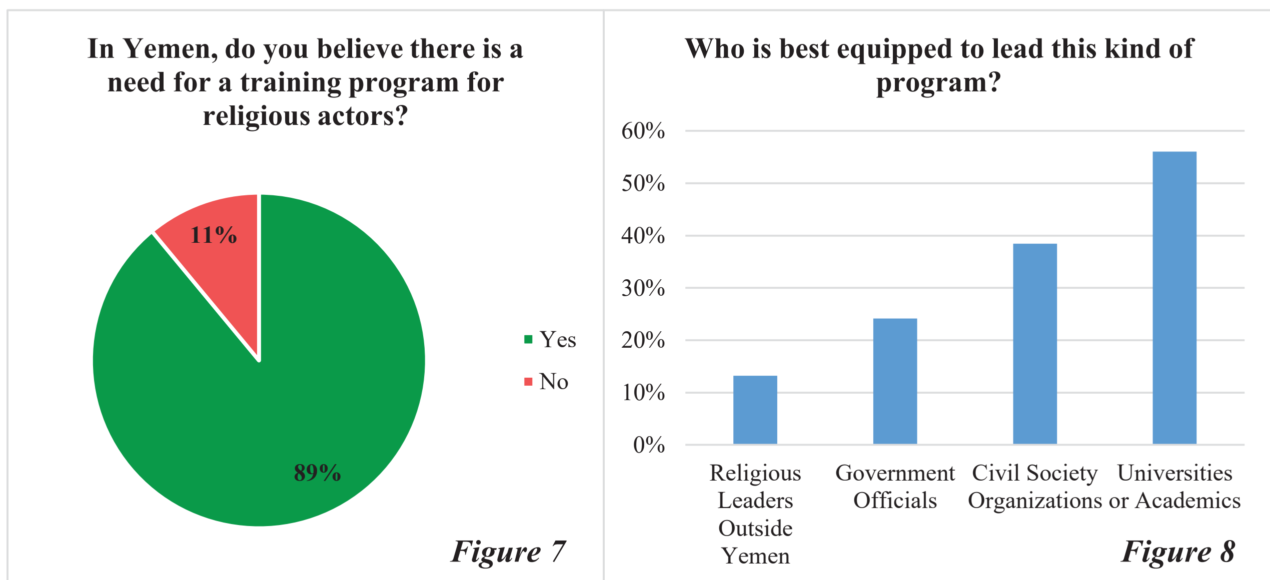

Figure 7

Figure 8

Perceptions of Other Community Stakeholders

Having examined local perceptions of the religious sector, this section seeks to assess the relationship between religious actors and other major stakeholders in their community, specifically the Yemeni government, civil society organizations, and the international community. While these three groups only represent part of the wider, complex social milieu that should be included in a "whole-of-society" approach to Jihadi-Salafism,[49] they most often function as the leading players in existing strategies to counter violent extremism. Any effort to engage with religious actors will likely be undertaken either through government channels or local and international CSOs.

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[49] As suggested by *fig. 9*, the media may also function as a significantly influential sector. However, recognizing the unique role that the media can play in addressing extremism, a full analysis of the media is beyond the scope of this research. Community meeting participants in Sana'a emphatically noted that media outlets have been used to exacerbate violence and hatred, while other local informants highlighted television programs promoting tolerance. It is clear that any overarching strategy to address Jihadi-Salafism must determine how to positively transform the messages that are conveyed via new and traditional forms of media. Further research is needed to consider the particular challenges of media in Yemen with greater depth and nuance.

Interestingly, from the respondents' perspective, CSOs and government officials are among the least influential actors within their community (see *fig. 9*), even less influential than the international community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents (who were all religious actors) tended to view religious actors and religious political parties as among the most influential. While these data likely overstates the significance of the religious sector, it illustrates a potential challenge in building cross-sector relationships: religious actors may not see those outside their sphere as influential enough to warrant collaboration.

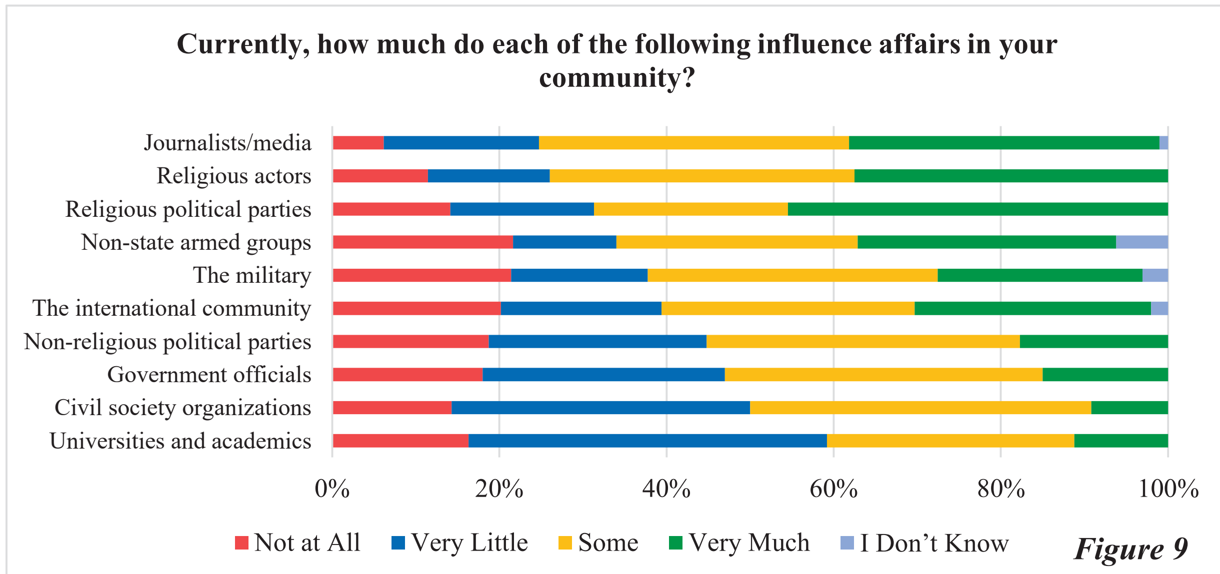

Figure 9

Respondents were asked to consider whether religious actors, the state, civil society organizations, or the international community should play a leading or supporting role in addressing various needs in the community. Their responses (see *fig. 10-16)* can be summarized as follows:

- With the exception of regulating social behavior, the **government** is expected to play the leading role for every activity. Despite decades of dysfunctional governance, the state is still expected to serve as a leader in meeting people's needs.
- **Religious actors** are expected to play a comparatively small role in addressing economic and humanitarian issues, and should instead be more active on issues that involve some element of moral guidance (including the prevention of violence and terrorism).
- **Civil society organizations** are generally expected to play a supportive role across the board, but very few respondents believed they should play a leading role anywhere, suggesting that respondents may not be ready to see CSOs try to fill the vacuum left by the failing state.
- Respondents did not, on the whole, want to see the **international community** play a role in domestic issues, with the possible exception of supporting educational or humanitarian needs. Despite the lack of domestic resources and capacity, respondents had a very narrow vision about what areas the international community should become involved in.

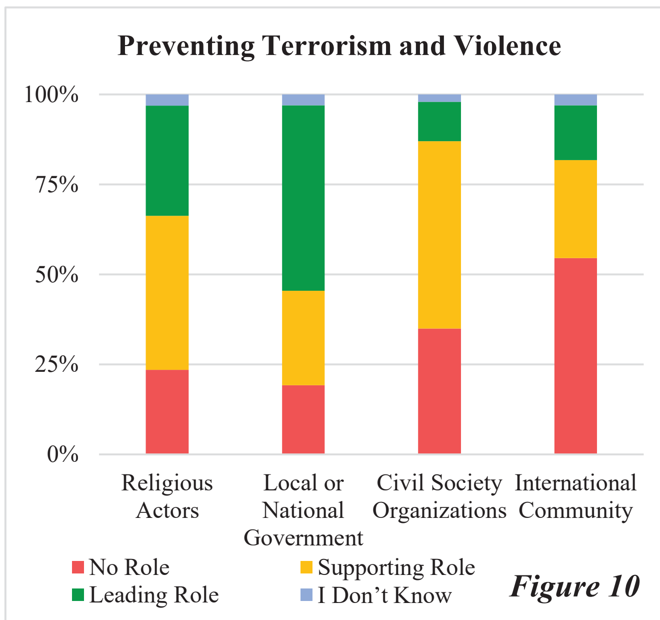

Figure 10

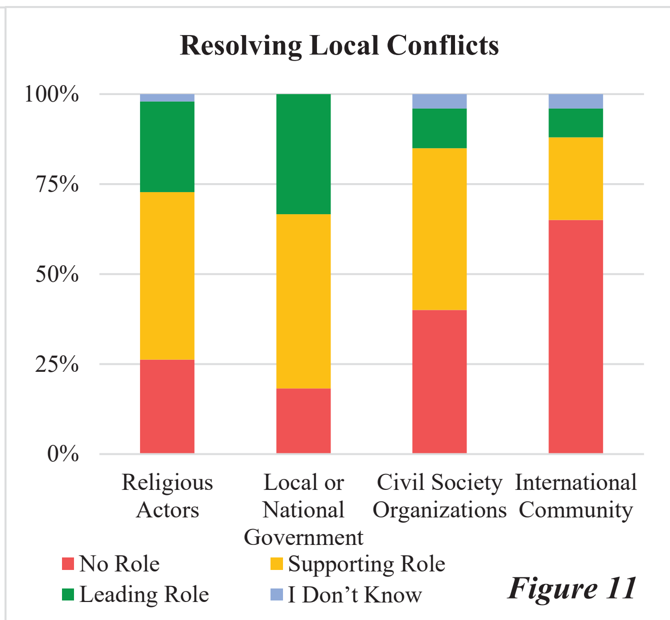

Figure 11

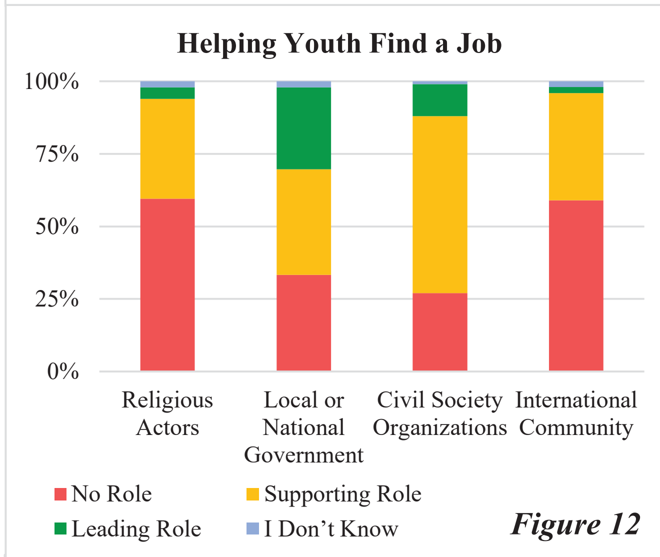

Figure 12

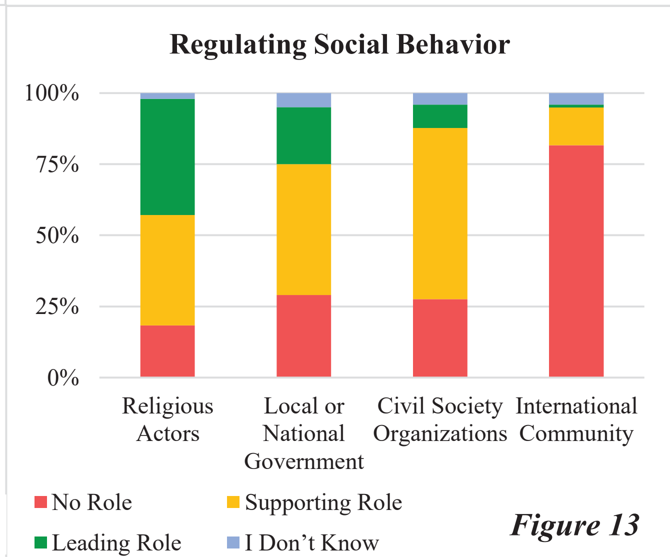

Figure 13

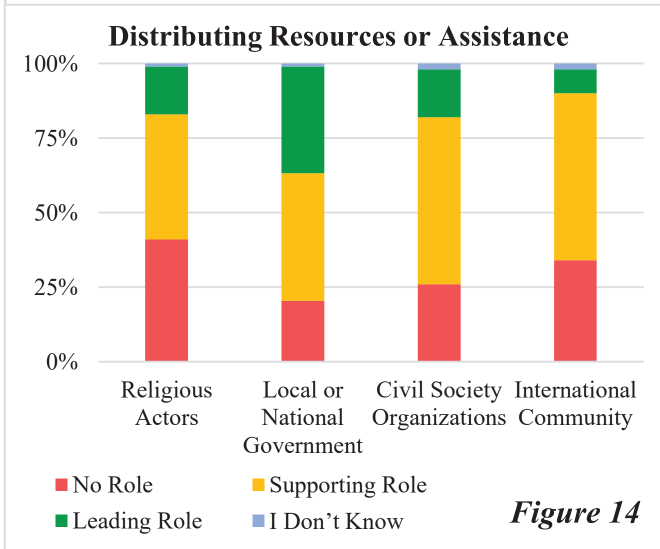

Figure 14

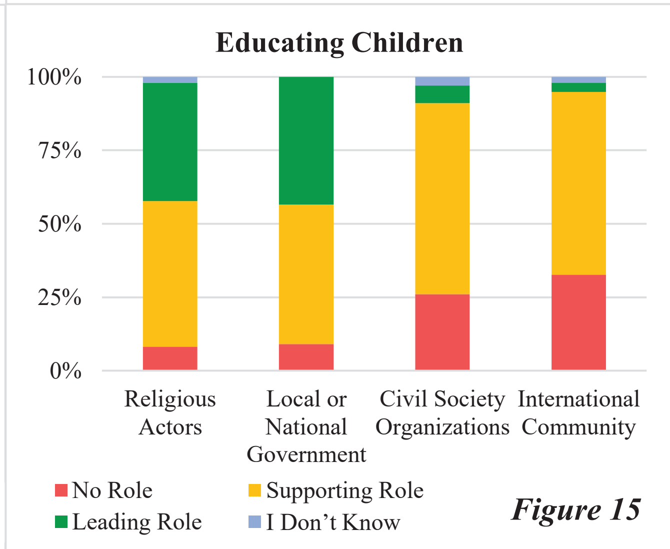

Figure 15

When asked to more clearly differentiate who is playing a sufficient or insufficient role in preventing violence and terrorism, respondents' expectations of these different sectors was even more evident (see *fig. 17*):

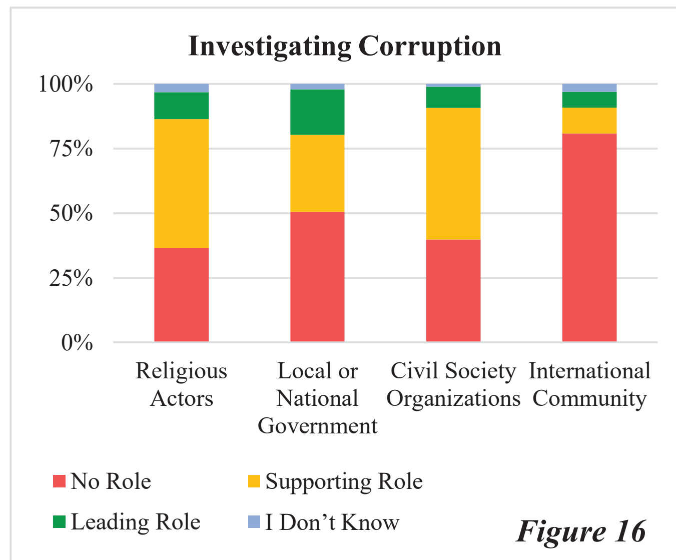

Figure 16

- A strong majority of respondents wished for the **government** (including the military) to take a more active role in preventing terrorism. This result is hardly surprising, given the fact that security-related issues traditionally fall under the purview of the state, and the Yemeni state is divided and ineffective in fighting Jihadi-Salafi groups.
- Correlating with other findings (see *fig. 5-6*), respondents wanted **religious actors** to play a greater role in preventing terrorism, indicating again that more is expected of religious actors.
- In comparison, a significant number of respondents said that **civil society organizations** should maintain their current level of involvement, suggesting either that CSOs have comparatively been meeting local expectations, or that respondents don't believe CSOs have as much to contribute. Of course, a plurality of respondents did still believe that CSOs should play a more active role, so this comparison should not be overstated.
- Support for the involvement of the **international community** was, again, low. In fact, more than a fifth of respondents argued that the international community should scale back its activity.

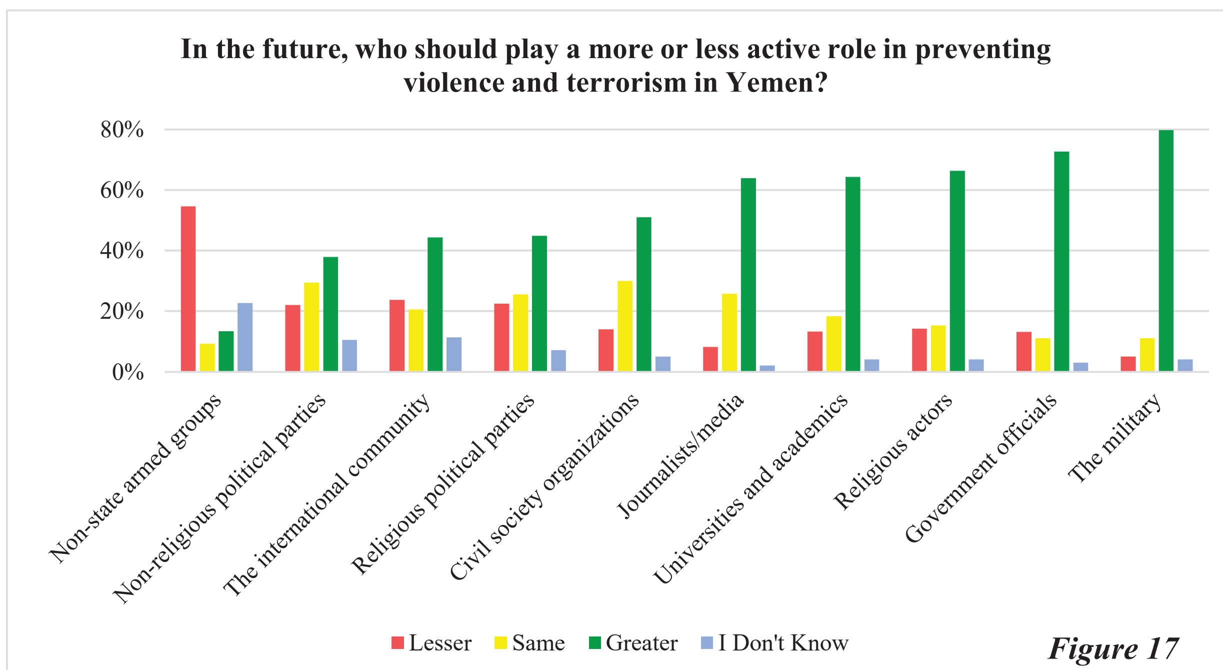

Figure 17

Local or National Government

From the perspective of respondents, the relationship between the religious sector and government officials is not wholly negative, though there is certainly room for improvement (*fig. 18-19*). When asked to elaborate, respondents made the following points:

- Those who claimed the relationship is **positive** tended to emphasize that religious actors are considered to be righteous[50] and are generally treated with respect by government actors. One respondent noted that religious actors tend to work under the umbrella of the MoEG, which enables them to have a constructive relationship with the state.
- Those who asserted the relationship is **negative** claimed either that government officials do not communicate with religious actors, that they view religious actors as backward, or that religious actors and government officials are simply motivated by different interests.
- Those who view the relationship as **mixed** tended to focus on its negative aspects, such as:
    - Religious actors and government officials have become isolated from one another and do not have meaningful communication. Some blamed this gulf on the current conflict and the absence of government.
    - Both sides are driven by different interests or agendas. Several respondents claimed that religious actors are frequently focused on their personal interests or the interests of a given political party, rather than the public good.
    - Government officials are either not following the right religious path, or have been influenced by the media to perceive religious actors in a negative light.

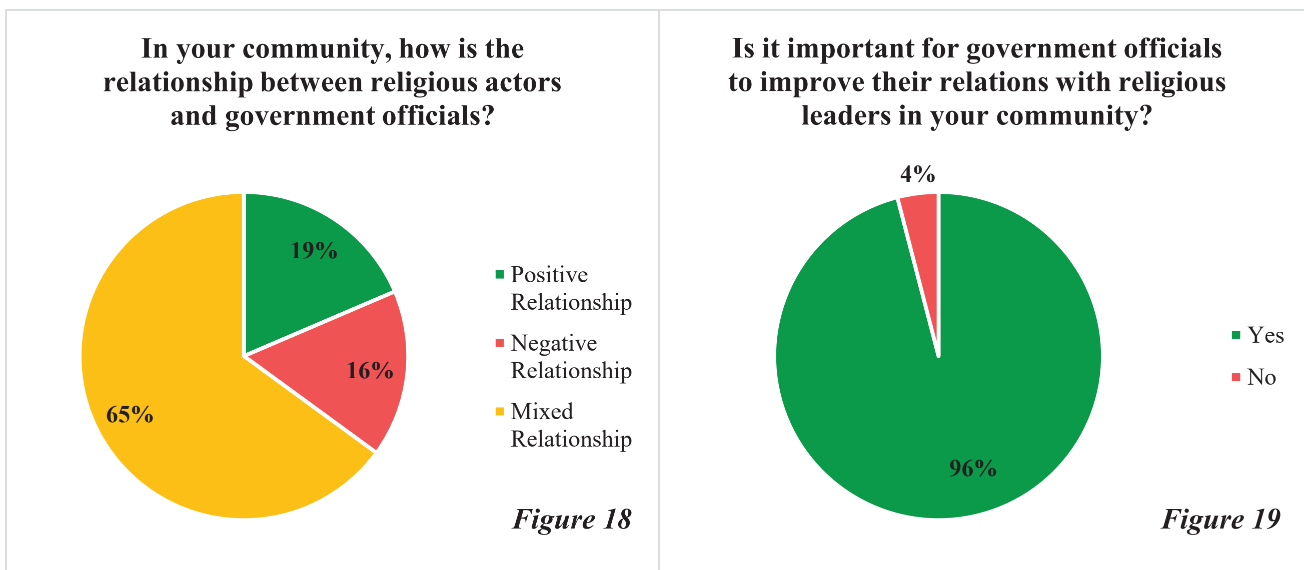

Figure 18

Figure 19

[50] Several respondents quoted the hadith: "If two groups in my community are righteous and worthy, my community will also be righteous; and if they are corrupt, my community will also be corrupt."

Respondents then offered a number of suggestions for how this relationship could be improved, including:

- *Create more opportunities for religious actors and government officials to work together* – Many respondents highlighted the importance of collaboration and interaction, with a few suggesting that there should be an established forum, assembly, or some clear mechanism to facilitate this kind of interaction.

- *Ensure that government officials are more respectful or reverential toward religious actors* – Respondents asserted that officials should acknowledge the prestige of religious actors and their positive contributions to society. Some even took this point one step further and argued that government officials should actively seek out guidance and advice from religious actors.

- *Increase government support for the religious sector* – This could include providing salaries to religious actors or creating a committee to coordinate religious activity. In the view of some respondents, the government should be more active in creating space for the promotion of Islam.

While most of these recommendations focus on positive interpersonal interactions, a few point to building a more formalized role for the government in the religious sector. This would not entail creating something wholly new, as the Yemeni government already plays some role in the religious sphere through the MoEG. Stepping up that role may improve government-civil society coordination, or it may risk a backlash from the religious sector – particularly if a government seen as corrupt is also perceived as meddling in religious affairs. Thus, it is instructive to identify potential areas where this involvement might be welcomed and areas where it might be resisted. For instance, respondents were, on the whole, more reluctant to support government regulation of religious speech (*fig. 20*). Despite that resistance, respondents were strongly supportive of government involvement in religious education and in managing imams.

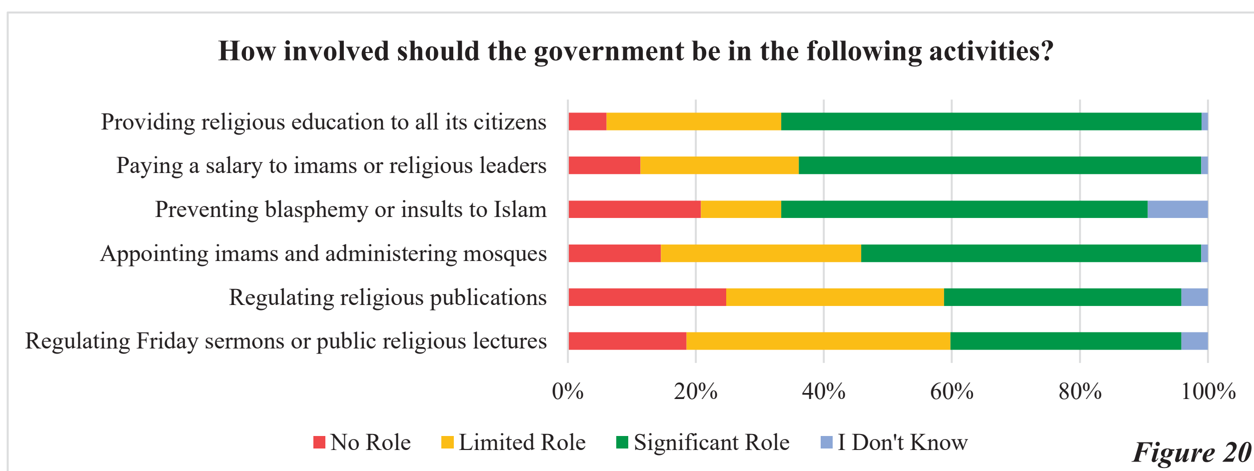

Figure 20

These results suggest that while religious actors are wary of the government controlling the content of their speech and theology, they would welcome some level of government administration of the religious sector. It is important to consider that these findings reflect, to some degree, the existing state of government control over the religious sector. The government does provide religious education and is nominally responsible for administering mosques, though it generally lacks the necessary resources to effectively regulate religious speech or publications.

Civil Society Organizations

In contrast to the government, the relationship between religious actors and civil society organizations is considerably more complex and polarizing. First and foremost, it should be noted that the field of CSOs in Yemen includes both Western-funded organizations that advance strictly secular agendas and religious associations or charities. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to precisely measure the number and capacity of these religious associations – many of which are one-man operations – only a small number of respondents asserted that none of the CSOs in their community were religious (see *fig. 21*).

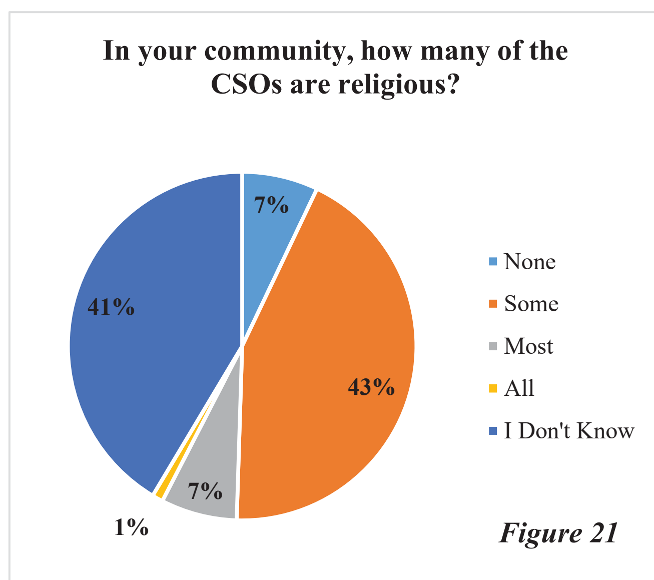

Figure 21

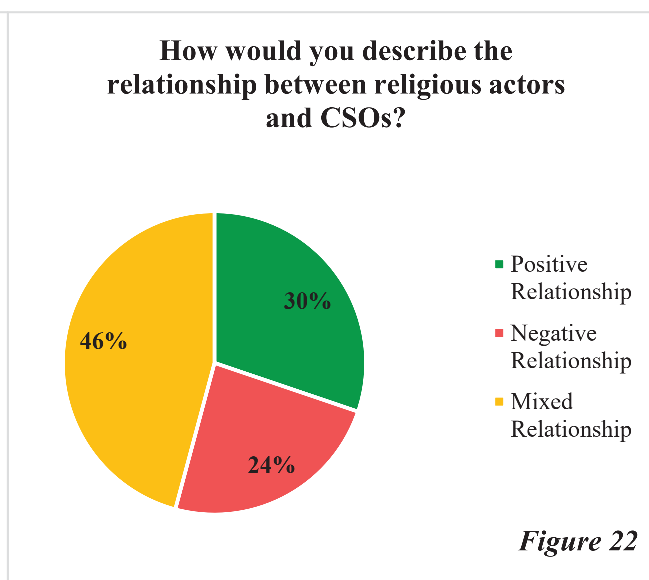

Figure 22

Given this diversity, the relationship between religious actors and CSOs can range from nonexistent to closely interwoven. This polarization is reflected in *fig. 22*, which illustrates that a larger number of respondents view this relationship as either entirely positive or negative, in contrast to the relationship with government officials (see *fig. 18*). These differing perspectives came into focus as respondents were asked to elaborate on their answers:

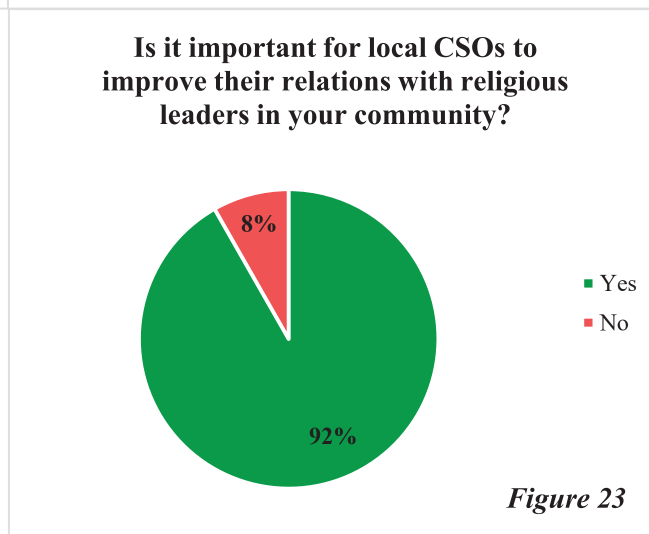

Figure 23

- Those who see the relationship as **positive** mentioned that they see a lot of cooperation between religious actors and civil society, particularly in addressing conflict. Many of these respondents highlighted the interconnectedness of religion and religious civil society organizations, noting that most civil society organizations are led by religious actors or otherwise directly support the work of religious actors.

- Those who see the relationship as **negative** cited a lack of trust and cooperation between the two sectors. Some attributed the negative sentiment to religious actors' suspicion of CSOs, due to their perceived secular agendas, ties to foreign entities, or independence from other areas of the society.

- Those who see the relationship as **mixed** generally noted that the relationship differs on a case-by-case basis, with some organizations doing good work and maintaining good relations with local religious actors and others pursuing their own agendas that seem to "contradict Islam."

These responses make sense when considering the idea that the perception of CSOs varies significantly depending on the type of CSOs that an individual has encountered.[51] Despite these different starting points, the vast majority of respondents see room for improvement in this relationship. The few respondents who did not believe it was important to improve relations generally stated that there was no point, as both sides have differing perspectives, interests, and goals. The others, however, offered a myriad of suggestions for how to enhance this relationship:

- Some respondents argued that CSOs should consult more frequently with religious actors on religious matters, and defer to their expertise. This could include sitting down with religious actors to reassure them that the goals of the CSO are in line with Islam. These suggestions highlight the importance of demonstrating respect and allowing religious actors to serve in their expected capacity as purveyors of religious knowledge.

- Others suggested that CSOs should be more active in inviting religious actors to participate in their events or programming, so that there are more opportunities for cooperation and partnership. A small number of respondents even suggested that CSOs should be providing religious actors with training on civic subjects.

It is important to acknowledge that there are non-religious CSOs within Yemen – including several that were consulted during this research – that have already taken such guidance into account as they work to build strong relationships with religious actors. However, regular engagement with religious actors is not a standard practice, particularly for those organizations whose mission does not explicitly overlap with the religious sector. Unfortunately, even though this self-segregation is a logical consequence of specialization, it can deepen suspicions of non-religious CSOs, dampening the prospect for cooperation when it comes to violent extremism.

International Community

There is little doubt that the international community will continue to play a heavy role in internal Yemeni affairs, at least for the foreseeable future. Foreign aid, security assistance, and cultural influences have played a major role both in the current state of Jihadi-Salafism and the broader socio-political sphere. However, for precisely this reason, international interference remains a delicate subject for many Yemenis. To avoid the perception that they were acting as international agents, researchers did not specifically ask about the international community or specific international actors, beyond the questions summarized previously, so the data on this subject are comparatively less expansive.

With some exceptions, research subjects rarely spoke favorably of the international community, often blaming foreign powers for the state of violence and conflict in Yemen. Some of the comments about the

[51] This distinction should be addressed more directly in future studies of the religious and civil society sectors in Yemen.

relationship between CSOs and religious actors, as summarized above, reinforce the notion that the affiliation with international funders can call into question a CSO's motives and credibility.

Furthermore, the findings in *fig. 17* suggest that there is comparatively little support for the international community to step up its involvement in countering terrorism or extremism. The fact that so many respondents wanted the international community to decrease its involvement in this sphere suggests that some Yemenis perceive there to be a cost to international involvement that outweighs the benefits. Given the high costs to lives, livelihoods, and property associated with U.S. drone strikes or the GCC-led air campaign, it is not difficult to imagine what might be driving this perception.

This is not to say, however, that the international community – whether the U.S., the UN, the Arab Gulf States, or others – should completely retreat from Yemen. As *fig. 10-16* illustrate, even conservative religious actors are willing to accept support from the international community in some areas. In fact, the number of respondents who believe the international community should increase or maintain its involvement in preventing terrorism far outweighs those who think otherwise (see *fig. 17*). However, the above results suggest that respondents tended to strongly favor international involvement in the value-neutral provision of services (aid, education assistance), as opposed to addressing internal conflicts.

International actors should remain sensitive to the fact that by working to address the drivers of conflict and violence, they can run the risk of appearing to favor or empower certain populations or sectors at the expense of others, which can deepen social divisions and impede community resilience. There is no easy solution to this problem, but it is important for international actors and funders – whether governmental or non-governmental – to prioritize efforts that engage a wide array of stakeholders, including religious actors.

Strategic Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the insights outlined above, ICRD has identified the following guidance to inform the development of future policies and programs to address Jihadi-Salafism in Yemen. These recommendations have not been suggested to the exclusion of all others. Violent extremism is a multi-faceted problem that requires a nuanced and integrated strategy across any number of disparate sectors – security, governance, religion, education, etc. Furthermore, violent extremism is only one of many pressing challenges that Yemen faces today, not least of which are civil war, widespread famine, and dysfunctional governance. **ICRD's recommendations are therefore meant to be considered as one piece of a much larger puzzle.**

Side Note on Risk

Given the substantial security vacuum and the current strength and reach of AQAP and IS-Y, any person or community that appears to directly oppose Jihadi-Salafi activity runs the risk of becoming the victim of retaliatory violence. As such, the recommendations below are not intended to encourage Yemeni citizens to undertake dangerous activities or to shame those who choose not to take these risks. These recommendations reflect suggestions from Yemeni community leaders in areas that have experienced significant Jihadi-Salafi activity, and are intended to offer useful guidance to those who are pursuing such work. Rather than encourage direct confrontation with violent extremists, ICRD seeks to outline a strategy, derived from community feedback, to strengthen community resilience and thereby prevent the further growth of extremist ideology and influence.

Recommendation 1: Cultivate a Sense of Local Ownership Among Various Non-governmental Actors for any Strategy to Address Jihadi-Salafism.

It is first essential to challenge the perception that preventing radicalization is solely the purview of the government. This view was echoed strongly both in community meetings[52] and among the survey respondents (see *fig. 10* and *fig. 17*). While the state has a unique and irreplaceable role to play in the provision of security and law enforcement, it is civil society actors who are often best positioned to prevent the growth of extremist ideology. Many community leaders, however, are not necessarily aware of the role they can play as part of a broader, more holistic effort to prevent radicalization and may not think that this role could be more indirect or subtle than explicitly challenging violent extremist organizations.

Thus, in order to cultivate an effective "whole-of-society" response to Jihadi-Salafism, it is necessary to demonstrate to local actors that they *can* and *should* take initiatives, without waiting for support or guidance from the government. It is also important to outline a range of secure and productive approaches that they can take, based on the resource and risk profile in their areas of influence. Of course, as appropriate and feasible, local government officials and councils should be involved in this process, as they are important local stakeholders and could eventually serve as a conduit to higher-level government support when the Yemeni state becomes more stable.

Recommendation 2: Support Engagement Across Civil Society Sectors and Ideological Divisions.

To build an effective community response, it is essential to empower a whole range of actors and institutions that can work to address radicalizing grievances and provide at-risk youth with positive guidance. In almost every community meeting, participants stressed the need to "activate" various local institutions – e.g., schools, mosques, media, CSOs. In the absence of substantial and sustainable financial and technical assistance from the state, it will be difficult to fully "activate" most public sector institutions. However, some progress can be made if local actors can work within and across sectors to share resources and knowledge and provide mutual support to one another, as outlined in Recommendation 5 below.

Such an effort would most likely depend on the coordination and initiative of certain CSOs or dedicated community leaders. However, it will be important for any such organizations or individuals to look beyond their insular networks and engage with new partners, including those who might potentially serve as spoilers. This would include certain exclusivist religious actors, like Salafis, so long as they are not directly supporting or endorsing Jihadi-Salafi organizations. While many Yemenis may be reluctant to collaborate with those religious actors who profess beliefs that conflict with their own, grounding such engagement in a shared rejection of violence will increase the chances that those differences do not undermine the mutual benefits of collaborative action.

While there is no simple or universal method for engaging with exclusivist religious communities, the insights from the religious actors summarized in this report offer good starting points, as outlined in Recommendations 3 and 4.

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[52] Notes from community meeting in Sana'a, September 1, 2016.

Recommendation 3: Increase Opportunities for Respectful Collaboration Between Religious and Non-religious Sectors

At present, according to a significant number of survey respondents, religious actors do not have many opportunities to interact with government officials or civil society organizations. The absence of such interaction can contribute to feelings of mutual suspicion, as reflected by the responses of respondents who expressed concern over the supposedly foreign motives of some Yemeni CSOs. This distrust is a crucial barrier to any efforts to positively transform the rhetoric in Salafi mosques or win buy-in for other activities from Salafi communities.

As such, it is important for community leaders – particularly leaders of non-religious CSOs – to demonstrate that their goals are not a threat and should not be viewed with suspicion. By understanding how to explain an issue or initiative in a religious framework or language, and treating religious actors as partners in a shared cause, it can be possible to win support from those who might otherwise act as spoilers.[53]

Additionally, despite significant ideological disagreements over who should be considered the main source of violent extremism, many Yemenis, including Salafis, share a common concern over the growth of militant movements, the structural deficiencies of the state, and other such issues that are fueling Jihadi-Salafism. Thus, it is not unreasonable to hope that community leaders and CSOs can carve out space to work alongside exclusivist religious actors and begin building relationships of trust. As suggested by some respondents, this may involve CSOs inviting more religious actors to participate in their existing programs or workshops as either participants or partners.

Recommendation 4: Identify Constructive and Appropriate Roles for Religious Actors and Strengthen their Ability to Fulfill those Roles

To engage and empower religious actors most effectively, it is important to recognize that many expect to function primarily as purveyors of religious knowledge. Many of the respondents clearly expressed their desire that government officials and CSOs treat religious actors as the experts on matters dealing with religion, and did not highlight any other specific contributions that religious actors might offer. In other words, engaging in more proactive community initiatives can be, for some, an unfamiliar or uncomfortable deviation from the norm.

While there are small, but significant, measures that religious actors can take that are scholarly or educational in nature – such as highlighting themes of peace and tolerance in Friday sermons – they also possess an underutilized potential to play a more expansive role. In addition to serving as a source of theological guidance – which is not always sought by those who are at risk of radicalization – religious actors can lend religious credibility to the efforts of other community actors or use their platform and social networks to help organize or facilitate local initiatives.

Based on the data gathered in this study, there is clearly a common desire to see religious actors step up in their role in addressing violent extremism. However, given the low level of professionalization in the

[53] This was the approach taken by USAID and their local Yemeni partners in promoting education on family planning. Though initially resisted by conservative religious actors, the local CSO leaders were able to secure buy-in by meeting extensively with skeptical religious actors and discussing the theological underpinnings of the issue. Interview with Muhammad Alshuwaiter, November 12, 2015.

religious sector, it is unrealistic to expect that religious actors will be prepared to undertake new responsibilities without some sort of external support. This could entail facilitating targeted capacity-building courses run by universities or trusted CSOs, or facilitating technical assistance to certain preachers or scholars who are struggling to cultivate a network of popular support.

Whatever the case may be, those who seek to partner with or support religious actors should keep in mind that gaining their buy-in may require carving out a function that plays to their perceived expertise and added-value as religious authorities.

Recommendation 5: Develop Non-governmental Mechanisms to Facilitate Coordination and Cooperation Within and Across Civil Society Sectors

In the absence of a strong, central government, there are few established and sustainable channels to organize and empower the multitude of civil society actors. As a result, it is difficult to implement a coordinated non-governmental response to Jihadi-Salafism, or even facilitate the dissemination of technical knowledge and expertise among relevant community actors.

Recognizing this challenge, participants in a Lahj community meeting advocated for the establishment of a new ministry focused on managing and empowering CSOs, to reign in the influence of those who are fueling extremism and empower those who are playing a positive role to assume greater leadership in the community. Similarly, participants in other meetings recommended strengthening the role of the MoEG in managing religious affairs.

While establishing or strengthening such government structures may be a strong asset in the future Yemeni state, the uncertain status of the national government makes such initiatives highly unlikely in the short- to medium-term. Instead, civil society actors and their supporters should seek to cultivate alternative forms of organization that can emerge more organically from the grassroots.

In Taiz, some community meeting participants raised the idea of forming committees to promote messages of tolerance, while in other meetings participants advocated for connecting with other civil society actors through existing social channels, such as qat-chewing sessions or informal gatherings in mosques.[54] Some civil society respondents have actually begun to facilitate the development of an association of imams that can serve to expose otherwise isolated and individualistic preachers to new ideas and coordinate Friday sermons focused on themes of peace.

These kinds of mechanisms can be a powerful tool to leverage the collective knowledge, skills, social influence, and other assets that exist within any community, even amongst those with limited resources.

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[54] A recommendation made by community meetings in Taiz and Abyan

Conclusion

While much of the guidance and recommendations outlined above pertain directly to Yemeni political and civil society leaders, the stability of Yemen still depends heavily on the involvement of international actors. Given the massive systemic deficit in security capacity, social services, and other fundamental pillars of governance, Yemen will continue to rely on external support for some time to come. As such, the United States and various Gulf powers maintain important influence over the policy priorities of the recognized national government of Yemen, and these policy priorities are now shaping the security landscape in the south. Military strategies – including the use of air strikes against AQAP targets – may play an important role in weakening militant forces, but a much more holistic approach is still needed.

International non-governmental actors can play a crucial role in helping to strengthen Yemeni civil society in the face of Jihadi-Salafi activity. This may appear in the form of direct financial aid, technical assistance and capacity-building, facilitating relationships, or addressing other important needs. Such work will only be possible with the ongoing and increased financial and technical support of various national governments and trans-national entities.

However, given the immense sensitivities and security risks associated with any effort to address violent extremism, it is critical that international actors approach this support with a keen eye toward minimizing backlash against local partners and not further exacerbating existing social polarization. In that vein, the data and recommendations outlined in this report should serve as a guidepost for anyone who seeks to reduce extremism and violence within Yemen.

About ICRD

Founded in 1999, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based non-profit organization whose mission is *to bridge religious considerations with international politics in support of peacemaking*. ICRD carries out its mission by practicing faith-based diplomacy and working to:

1. Decrease religion's role as a driver of conflict;
2. Increase the capacity and number of religious peacemakers;
3. Increase the role of religious clergy and laity in peacemaking; and
4. Increase policy-makers' awareness of and receptivity to the potential contributions of religious peacemakers.

While traditional diplomacy often includes religious actors in its deliberations regarding the management of violent conflict, the deeper spiritual convictions that compel people of faith toward understanding, respect, and cooperation in lieu of conflict are too often overlooked as tools for bridging differences between antagonists. ICRD adds measurable impact to the latter by intervening in conflicts where:

- US diplomacy has abandoned or has not yet engaged the area of conflict;
- Official diplomats cannot reach important conflict actors;
- Religious adherents are actively involved in the conflict or are ineffectively engaged in seeking peace; and
- ICRD has access to relationships of trust that can be brought to bear on the problems at hand.

Throughout its eighteen years of work, ICRD has been involved in some of the most intractable conflict spaces on the globe. Among its many accomplishments, ICRD has facilitated community support for the peace agreement ending the civil war in Sudan, pioneered faith-based reconciliation in Kashmir and Syria, trained Yemeni peacemakers in conflict resolution and addressing violent extremism, facilitated curriculum and pedagogy enhancement in the madrasas of Pakistan, helped secure the release of Korean missionaries held hostage by the Taliban, enhanced educational reform in Saudi Arabia, and supported reintegration and reconciliation efforts in Colombia.

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