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Mareike Transfeld
Maysaa Shuja al-Deen
Raiman al-Hamdani

Seizing the State:
Ibb’s Security Arrangement after Ansarallah’s Takeover
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The Yemen Polling Center

The Yemen Polling Center (YPC), an independent provider of social science research services, was established in 2004 as the first polling organization in Yemen, receiving registration certificate no. 147 from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in December 2005.

YPC designs and implements services to fulfill the research needs of and to inform national and international institutions, non-profit organizations, corporations and government agencies. It conducts public opinion surveys, focus groups, interviews, demographic studies and market research employing quantitative and qualitative methods for development projects, international organizations and foundations, publications, business groups and financial institutions.

YPC has repeatedly proved its quality research capabilities and consistency. In 2010 it won Gallup’s World Poll Partnership and Best Partner in the Middle East and North Africa Awards. This was followed in 2013 by receiving Gallup’s Most Valued Partner Award and in 2014 by being awarded the Gallup Award for Consistency.

As a member of the World Association for Public Opinion Research and the American Association for Public Opinion Research, YPC is committed to excellence in the social sciences. Since its inception, YPC has conducted dozens of research projects on issues ranging from satellite television and radio consumption to attitudes toward human rights and women’s rights to political reform, corruption, public health and other governance-related studies.

YPC’s dedicated and experienced team cooperates with experts, consultants and university professors in Yemen and abroad. Its personnel and technical resources allow the center to conduct surveys of varying sizes in Yemen while adhering to international standards for data quality. It has surveyed nearly 170,000 Yemeni citizens in face-to-face interviews. Yemen is a religious and conservative society, so male-female interactions are limited. YPC is able to interview female respondents because approximately half of its interviewers are women.

YPC has carried out numerous internationally funded projects and has cooperated with various national and international organizations, including the European External Action Service, the United Nations Development Programme, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. National Democratic Institute, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, London-based ORB International, the World Bank and the Yemeni Ministry of Local Administration.
About the Authors

**Mareike Transfeld** is head of research at the Yemen Polling Center—where she manages the research components of various projects in the fields of security, civil society and media—and an associate fellow at the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient in Bonn. She is a former co-editor of *Muftah’s* Yemen and Gulf sections, and until 2015 she was a research fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Berlin Graduate School, Muslim Cultures and Societies, Freie Universität Berlin.

Contact: mareike@yemenpolling.org

**Maysaa Shuja al-Deen** is a commentator on Yemeni politics. Her work focuses on tribal dynamics in northern Yemen, and she has also written about the development of Zaydi thought in Yemen, the topic of her master’s thesis in Islamic studies at the American University in Cairo.

Contact: mshujaaldeen@gmail.com

**Raiman al-Hamdani** is a researcher for the Yemen Polling Center. He focuses on issues of security and development in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Yemen, and is a visiting fellow at the European Council of Foreign Relations, London. Born in Sanaa, al-Hamdani spent his formative years in Yemen before studying for a master’s in international security and conflict management at the American University in Cairo followed by a master’s in development studies from SOAS, University of London.

Contact: r.alhamdani@yemenpolling.org
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About This Report

Seizing the State is part of a series published within the framework of Rebuilding Peace and Security, a project funded by the European Union’s Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace and implemented by the Yemen Polling Center between 2016 and 2019. The project builds on the premise that security in Yemen is both provided and spoiled by the competing diverse actors involved in the ongoing conflict there.¹ The actors’ varying numbers and deployments mean that measures to address security concerns cannot be standardized across the country. Instead, approaches to security sector reform must be adapted to meet individual local and regional challenges, including integrating non-state security actors into a broader, state-run framework for security provision. A broad set of actors—state and non-state security, civil society, media, neighborhood organizations and women and youth groups—needs to be considered when seeking to rebuild stability and security at the local level.

The series concentrates on different areas in Yemen with the aim of shedding light on local security providers, assessing the situation of local state and non-state structures, cooperation between security providers and challenges to security provision. Seizing the State focuses on Ibb governorate and the dynamic landscape of security providers there. In particular, it examines how Ansarallah rules there in the context of the province differing significantly from the group’s home base farther north, in Saada, in terms of social organization, religious composition and political and patronage networks. Ansarallah swiftly, and for the most part peacefully, took control of state institutions in Ibb in 2014. The governorate remains relatively safe, but Ansarallah’s presence has of course affected local security arrangements. In consolidating power in Ibb, Ansarallah not only infiltrated and took control of state institutions, it also marginalized local elites.

This report draws on information from different sources, including quantitative data collected as part of nationwide representative surveys conducted by YPC in November 2012, May 2017 and April–May 2019.² All the surveys were conducted face-to-face. Female interviewers questioned

² Due to the volatile political and security situation in Yemen and the high-risk surrounding data collection, especially on security institutions, YPC, as a seasoned data collection agency, has adopted measures and protocols to ensure staff safety and to mitigate risks to them. These risk management measures directly impact YPC’s
female respondents, and all the enumerators worked in the areas where they live, to guarantee that local dialects would be understood. Of the data collected during the nationwide surveys, only that from the governorate of Ibb was used in producing Seizing the State.\(^3\)

In February 2018, YPC conducted a focus group discussion with 11 youth activists in Ibb to gauge their perceptions on security in the governorate. Another set of data was collected between October 2018 and May 2019 through key-informant interviews with a total of 30 people consisting of military and police officers, state security officials, sheikhs, aqils, members of armed groups, landowners and journalists. YPC field researchers also collected data from observing security incidents and the responses of security providers to them between January and April 2019. Gaps in information were closed by drawing on the literature as well as the knowledge of the authors and the Ibb-based field researchers.

\(^3\) Interviewees nationwide were selected on the basis of a simple random sample from among 44,339 primary sampling units, i.e., villages in rural areas and neighborhoods in cities. Ten interviews—five of women and five of men—were conducted in each unit. The sample reflects the rural/urban population distribution, with 68 percent of the interviews conducted in rural areas, half of them with females, half of them with males. The nationwide survey in 2012 had a sample of 1,990, with Ibb represented by 220 respondents and a margin of error of 6.33. Both of the nationwide surveys from 2017 and 2019, each with a sample of 4,000, had a margin of error of 4.38. Both of the samples of data collected in Ibb during them consisted of 450 respondents and had a margin of error of 4.5.
Main Findings

- Ansarallah’s takeover of Ibb governorate in 2014 usurped power from the local elite. While state institutions became stronger through Ansarallah’s focus on controlling formal structures and personnel, the members of the elite who had previously held the reins of power in Ibb became increasingly marginalized, a process that has been repeated in other governorates that have fallen under Ansarallah’s control.

- Ibb’s social structure differs markedly from the northern regions where Ansarallah originated and remains firmly rooted, but Ibb has also hosted political networks connecting it to power centers in the north. These connections helped facilitate Ansarallah’s seizure of the governorate and the group’s consolidation of control over it. Prior to Ansarallah’s arrival, the elite in Ibb derived its power from a socioeconomic structure best characterized as feudalistic, with so-called sheikhs operating as landowners and with the farmers working the fields being paid in kind.

- While in a tacit alliance of convenience with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who continued to hold sway over most state institutions even after resigning in 2012, Ansarallah installed its members in key positions within state institutions and appointed allies as supervisors, who were ordered to learn state administration from incumbent officials. These supervisors would eventually come to wield control, but they did not immediately displace their predecessors.

- State institutions in Yemen, with their hierarchical nature and informal social extension in the form of aqils, community liaisons, are easier to control than sheikhs. To decrease the risk of sheikhs uniting against Ansarallah in Ibb, the group marginalized them while focusing on capturing state institutions, a fundamental element in the group’s larger political goal of being taken seriously as a state actor.

- By 2017 in Ansarallah-controlled Ibb, the police had emerged as the first security provider approached by residents to deal with problems, followed by Ansarallah itself. Residents viewed the police positively, with 60 percent considering them “well respected” in the city of Ibb.
- Ansarallah’s ongoing control of Ibb has stretched the police force beyond its capacity, with crucial work being ignored so its energies can be redirected toward the suppression of Ansarallah’s opponents.

- Policemen and activists interviewed believe that aqils in Ibb no longer act independently in representing the interest of their communities, but instead implement whatever orders Ansarallah issues or risk detention. Meanwhile, the aqils view their relationship with Ansarallah as one of merely coordinating with the state.
Introduction

As the conflict in Yemen drags on, developments in the governorate of Ibb have not received as much attention as those in the more politically important and strategically vital cities of Aden, al-Hodeida, Sanaa and Taiz. Ibb fell under the control of Ansarallah in October 2014, after the local ruling elite struck a deal with the armed group instead of organizing resistance to it. Since 2015 the Saudi-led coalition opposing Ansarallah’s power grab in the country has launched thousands of airstrikes against civilian and military infrastructure in Ibb, in central Yemen, as Ansarallah and local tribes opposing it engaged in intermittent armed conflict on the ground. Despite these and other security challenges, the governorate has remained a safe enough haven to attract internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially from neighboring Taiz and al-Hodeida. The security arrangement in the governorate, however, changed as a consequence of Ansarallah taking control of Ibb. The local leaders who facilitated Ansarallah’s relatively peaceful takeover may have done so with the hope of preserving their positions of authority through a deal, but the arrangement shifted power such that the traditional informal security actors lost their standing as Ansarallah-captured state institutions gained influence. Today, the governor of Ibb, Abdulwahid Salah—affiliated with the General People’s Congress (GPC), the party of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and Saleh’s successor, President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi—has been reduced to a cutout, an empty symbol of state authority who lacks control over the state institutions he supposedly oversees. To understand this outcome, it is important to consider Ansarallah’s alliances, strategies and interests.

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5 YPC nationwide representative surveys, May 2017 and April–July 2019. As of the 2017 survey, 19.3 percent of Ibb residents were themselves IDPs from another area, having fled airstrikes (58.3 percent) and clashes (31.1 percent). Three years later, in 2019, 67.6 percent of survey respondents from Ibb confirmed that IDPs were living in their area. Only 3.6 percent of the respondents said that people had fled from the area, and 8.7 percent asserted that the migrations had been in both directions.

6 According to YPC field researchers in Ibb, there is a considerable amount of tension between the governor and Ansarallah leaders in the governorate, as Ansarallah deliberately restricted Salah’s power by appointing deputies loyal to the group, among them Ashraf al-Mutuwakil, Abu Muhammad al-Yousifi and Abdel Fattah Ghallab.
Ansarallah’s consolidation of power in Ibb proceeded in three phases and involved actions at the local and national levels. In the first phase (2014–16), the group took control of state institutions in the country, including in Ibb through a secret alliance with Saleh supporters. In the second phase (2016–17), Ansarallah and Saleh’s loyalists went public with their alliance and took steps to formalize joint rule of Ibb by establishing a government in Sanaa in November 2016. In the third phase (2017–present), triggered by Saleh’s defection from the alliance and consequently his assassination in December 2017, Saleh’s supporters were purged and persecuted in Ibb, leading to Ansarallah assuming full control over state institutions there. Subsequently, power also shifted from the local elite.

While state institutions became stronger through Ansarallah’s focus on controlling formal structures and personnel, the local elite that had previously held the reins in the governorate became increasingly marginalized. This development is typical in territories that fall under Ansarallah’s control. Interviews conducted by YPC in 2018 and 2019 as well as survey data from 2012, 2017 and 2019 not only reveal this shift in power, but also shed light on the functioning of formal and informal security providers where Ansarallah rules.

The first section of this paper focuses on Ansarallah’s takeover of Ibb governorate, examining the alliances and the social and political structures that collectively enabled its seizure of power. This analysis is followed by an in-depth look at how power shifted away from the local elite as a consequence of the takeover, with particular attention paid to the police force.
Ansarallah Takes Ibb, Agricultural Heartland of Central Yemen

“Whoever rules Sanaa, rules Ibb.” One still hears this uttered among local elites in Ibb. Indeed, in October 2014, one month after Ansarallah captured Sanaa, Ibb fell swiftly and quietly under the group’s control. Ansarallah’s seizure of Sanaa in September was a major factor facilitating its subsequent takeover of Ibb, south of Sanaa, because holding the capital allowed the group access to state security institutions in the run-up to the latter campaign. Ibb’s social structure—with political networks connecting the governorate to power centers in the north, where Ansarallah has deep roots—was another factor contributing to Ansarallah’s successful takeover, despite it being markedly different from that in the northern region of Saada, where Ansarallah originated. Of particular note, Ibb local elites, many of them with tribal origins in the north and benefiting from Sanaa’s patronage politics, sought to avoid violence by entering into agreements with Ansarallah, a tradition that helped minimize armed resistance to the group throughout the governorate.

Ansarallah had emerged in the 1990s in Saada, in far northwestern Yemen, to defend the Zaydi religious community against the imposition of Sunni-Shafi’i practices being advanced by the central government and the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Between 2004 and 2010, after twenty years of political, economic and religious marginalization at the hands of the central government, Ansarallah fought six rounds of war in Saada against the Sanaa government, and in 2011, participated in the uprising against President Saleh. The Saada wars militarized Ansarallah. Although Ansarallah was a minor political and social force, the historical political marginalization of the Zaydis helps explain their tendency to look to military rather than political solutions.

As Yemen concluded its experiment with the Arab Spring in 2012, Saleh resigned under pressure, in February, and a one-candidate election was held to install Hadi as transitional president. In an attempt to overcome the divisions among the political and social factions, Hadi launched a reconciliation process with the goal of creating a strong federal government and a new constitution. After initially hesitating, Ansarallah eventually agreed to participate in the resulting 2012 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), while simultaneously exploiting the transitional government’s weakness by mobilizing fighters to expand militarily. The group legitimized its advances against the transitional government on the basis of an anti-corruption agenda that allowed it to be widely perceived as representing those excluded from power. Ansarallah forces seized Sanaa on September 21, 2014. Assisted by Saleh loyalists in the security sector, Ansarallah swiftly took control of state institutions and military infrastructure, looting weapon depots and acquiring heavy weapons. Although Ansarallah struck a deal with Hadi’s transitional government in September 2014 in the form of the National Peace and Partnership Agreement (NPPA)—which, as a response to Ansarallah’s demands, was
supposed to halt the group’s military push—the group continued its armed expansion, reinforced with newly acquired weaponry and ammunition. The advance toward other governorates began with al-Hodeidah, which fell on October 14, 2014, followed by Dhamar and Ibb in the subsequent days.

Under the terms of the NDC, part of a proposed transitional road map to divide the country into six regions, the central Yemeni governorates of Ibb and Taiz were to become a single federal region called Janad, a testament to the two governorates’ somewhat similar social structures and geography. Al-Janad, the geographical region connecting northern and southern Yemen, does not exactly mirror the north in terms of social structures, and though it shares a religious affinity with the south, it is not entirely of it culturally. In addition, whereas the Zaydi Islamic tradition and its related strong tribal structures dominate northern Yemen, in central and southern Yemen, Shafi’ism and other forms of social organization prevail.

It comes as no surprise that Taiz, being farther south than Ibb and overwhelmingly Shafi’i, put up fierce resistance against Ansarallah, in contrast to Ibb, where Ansarallah met only intermittent opposition, allowing it to seize control without resorting to significant violence. One factor for the relative ease of Ansarallah’s capture of Ibb is the governorate’s unique characteristic of being in predominantly Shafi’i central Yemen, but with a population that is in fact Zaydi and tribal. Since the seventeenth century, the fertile, agriculturally rich land of Ibb has attracted northern tribal families fleeing drought and famine. The migrant tribes, called naqa’il (movers) and asakir (soldiers), from the Hashid and Bakil tribal federations in the north, constitute the rural population of the governorate. Across Ibb, Zaydi and Shafi’i Yemenis exhibit a generally cohesive


9 Geographic cultural divisions existed in Yemen prior to the arrival of Islam. The Zaydis were initially only in Banu Hamdan, the ancestral land of the Hashid and Bakil tribes. See Andrej V. Korotaev, Pre-Islamic Yemen: Socio-
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regional identity and political ideology, with only slight differences. Thus, Ibb has functioned for centuries as a midpoint between Yemen’s two main urban centers, Sanaa and Taiz, with cultural, religious and familial-social connections to each.

Ibb’s connection to Sanaa today stems from northern families projecting power into central Yemen over the centuries. Influential families in the governorate have worked with northern Zaydi elites since the inception of the Zaydi imamate, the theocratic monarchy with its origins in tenth-century northern Yemen. The local elite that emerged in Ibb accumulated power due to a socioeconomic structure best described as feudalistic, with so-called sheikhs operating as landowners and with the farmers working the fields being paid in kind. While some of the sheikhs in Ibb were tribal leaders originally from northern tribal areas, others emerged as heads of influential land-owning families. An Ibb-based journalist interviewed by YPC described the group of local sheikhs as an extension of the Hashid and Bakil tribal federations in the north in terms of behaviors, but also noted that the social organization of the Ibb tribes differs due to the agricultural structure of the governorate’s economy. In the 1980s, Yemen’s economy began to rely increasingly on oil production and refining. Today, the government is the largest employer in the country.

In general, tracts of privately owned land in Ibb are large compared to those in other regions, and under Saleh, landowners in Ibb developed into a powerful elite supported financially by the central government in Sanaa. In exchange for their loyalty, they were rewarded with key positions and enjoyed access to the vast patronage networks emanating from the capital.

political Organization of the Sabaean Cultural Area in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries AD (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 139. The Hashids and Bakils have gone by their current names for millennia. The federations possessed great material and human resources, which helped them exert political power against the state. Traditionally Hashid lands, in northwestern Yemen, have been under Ansarallah’s control since 2014. See also Brinkley Morris Messick, Transactions in Ibb: Economy and Society in a Yemeni Highland Town. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Influential figures from Ibb with northern roots include Abdulrahman al-Eryani, North Yemen’s second president; Abdulkarim al-Zindani, a controversial Sunni scholar; Sadiq Amin Abu Ra’as, one of Yemen’s most notable statesmen under Saleh; and Sheikh Motei’ bin Abdullah Dammaj, considered the spiritual leader of the uprising against the imamate in 1962, when Yemenis backed by Egypt revolted in demanding a constitutional republic.

Messick, Transactions in Ibb, 32–76.

YPC interview with journalist, Ibb, May 20, 2019. See above, note 9, on learning more about the Hashid and Bakil.
Influential social figures in Ibb during the Saleh era were primarily affiliated with one of the two main northern political parties that jointly constituted the regime: the GPC and Islah. It is because of the patronage and party networks that Ibb came to be well represented in the upper echelons of the state security apparatus.

Neither elites nor the other peoples of Ibb shouldered heavy financial obligations to Sanaa. The majority of Ibb residents tended to work in the fields, meaning that few owed taxes to Sanaa or needed its approval for trade licenses, work permits and such. Saleh incorporated many members of these farming families into the political and military elite, and as a result, resentment toward the capital tended to be weaker in Ibb than in other central or southern regions. Given that Ansarallah allied with parts of the GPC, when the time came, many influential Ibb sheikhs shifted their support to Ansarallah to retain their networks to the center of power in Sanaa. In October 2014, Ansarallah took complete control of Ibb after the governor and the political parties there signed an agreement with the group in an attempt to avoid further violence. Although the terms of the agreement stated that Ansarallah would withdraw its armed elements from the city, the group did not do so, and in further violation of the agreement, continued its quiet takeover of state institutions across the governorate.

As Ansarallah gradually consolidated its control over Ibb, resistance became more difficult. In 2015, Ansarallah confronted an unexpected armed uprising organized by security forces under the command of Gen. Ameen al-Wa’ily, an ally of Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, current vice president of Hadi’s internationally recognized government, now in exile in Saudi Arabia, and one of the strongest figures in Islah. Al-Wa’ily’s forces managed to expel Ansarallah from eight districts as well as Ibb city in March 2015, but Ansarallah regrouped and retook the city by the end of August 2015. Al-Wa’ily’s forces had been poorly organized, lacked adequate munitions and arms, and did not receive support from the Saudi-led coalition. Ibb has little strategic value to the coalition, and given that the governorate is surrounded by Ansarallah-controlled territory, any attempt to take it would likely prove difficult. Eventually, Ansarallah rule severed the links sustaining the

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13 Saleh had founded the long-ruling GPC. Islah, an Islamist party, is composed of Muslim Brotherhood members, influential tribes and conservative businessmen.

14 In contrast, the economy in Taiz is based on industry, so although businessmen have their connections to the government, they also have been obliged to pay taxes and procure licenses.


16 YPC field researcher, January 25, 2019.
patronage network established by Saleh and maintained with Ibb throughout his thirty-three years in power, producing a foundational power shift away from the local elite.
Consolidating Control, Marginalizing Local Elites

Since taking control of Ibb in 2014, Ansarallah has managed to consolidate its power over the governorate, tightly controlling state institutions and diminishing the power of the local elite, with once-prominent social figures and sheikhs losing their positions of privilege. In doing so, Ansarallah relied primarily on two tactics: filling key positions in state institutions with its members and appointing loyalists as supervisors (mushrifeen; sing., mushrif) to shadow incumbent authorities at state institutions (i.e., ministries and administrative offices). This initially led to the strengthening of the state, but Ansarallah does not rule by “formal” means. Rather, the group inserts its informal system of supervisors into state institutions to impose its authority and control.

Ansarallah’s gradual entrenchment in Ibb occurred in three phases and involved actions it took at the national level as well as locally. The first phase (2014–16) saw the group exploit its alliance with Saleh to take control of the governorate’s security apparatus. During this period, Ansarallah introduced its supervisor systems, but the presence of Saleh loyalists in state institutions served to counter the supervisors’ effectiveness. In the second phase (2016–17), the Ansarallah-Saleh alliance became more formal, with the two sides publicly coming together to form a government in Sanaa in November 2016 and attempting to reactivate politics as usual. This led, however, to internal power struggles between the two sides. In the third phase (2017–present), Ansarallah assassinated Saleh, purged his supporters from institutions in Ibb and in other parts of the country and has generally persecuted those loyal to him.

Ansarallah strengthened its grip on the security apparatus by filling positions with loyalists. As a consequence, from the perspective of community members, state institutions appeared present and strong, as prominent local residents and sheikhs previously influential in security provision were sidelined. In the third phase, Ansarallah has established (and continues to extend) its absolute control over Ibb’s security institutions through increasingly aggressive personnel politics and corrupt conduct.

Ansarallah’s military successes in the first phase stemmed directly from the Yemeni security sector revolving around loyalty to Saleh, who had appointed members of his family and tribe, the Sanhan, to key positions within security institutions. The restructuring of the security sector mandated in 2012 by the NDC for a transitional road map had failed to loosen Saleh’s grip on the security sector.17 “Saleh’s army” therefore presented the most significant challenge to the

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security sector reforms attempted by Hadi after being elected president in 2012 as part of the
transition from Saleh.¹⁸ The countless rebellions within the military and police throughout
the country against newly appointed pro-Hadi officers demonstrated this, and it became all the more
obvious when in September and October 2014 and in early 2015, security institutions in western
Yemen, which remained loyal to Saleh, handed over their positions to Ansarallah.

As noted, Saleh’s networks in the security sector and the GPC had a strong presence in Ibb, where
Saleh controlled state institutions and administration, military and security forces and provincial
councils through influential sheikhs affiliated with the GPC.¹⁹ A journalist who had been in Ibb on
the day Ansarallah entered the city in October 2014 said that only a few Ansarallah
representatives were present at the time and revealed that many Ibb locals, including elites, had
marched with Ansarallah members, welcoming them into the city. The group entered with
military vehicles and carrying light and medium weapons.²⁰ After securing a tacit alliance with
Saleh, Ansarallah began filling key positions in state institutions with its members and appointing
supervisors, who were tasked with learning the job of state administration from the experienced
officials. While supervisors could exert control, they did not immediately replace the incumbent
officials. Of note in regard to Ibb, in December 2014 Interior Minister Jallal al-Rowaishan
appointed Mohamed Abduljalil al-Shami as chief of police after the previous chief, Fouad
Mohamed al-Attab, resigned in the face of Ansarallah’s incursion. In the interim, Abdo
Mohammed Farhan, al-Attab’s deputy and an Ansarallah loyalist, had served in a transitional
capacity.

Authority had remained somewhat fluid in the early stages of Ansarallah’s seizure of Yemeni
territory. As various groups, including Ansarallah, rejected the outcomes of the NDC, Ansarallah
moved to take control of the capital in September 2014 in protest of Hadi. In November 2014,
Hadi formed a technocratic government in Sanaa as part of the NPPA, which he had signed with
Ansarallah the same month the group captured the city.²¹ Ansarallah’s supervisor system became
publicly visible during the group’s first days in power. Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Ansarallah’s leader,
and Muhammad Ali al-Houthi, future head of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (which
Ansarallah would form in February 2015 as an executive body to govern the country), began
appointing supervisors to oversee ministers, governors, institutional directors, school

¹⁸ Adam C. Seitz, “The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen,” in
Addressing Security Sector Reform in Yemen: Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention During and Post-


²⁰ YPC interview with journalist, Ibb, May 22, 2019.

²¹ Transfeld, “Houthis on the Rise in Yemen.”
administrators and police and military forces. The appointees would ultimately come to possess real authority at the neighborhood, district and governorate levels. Their control over public and private institutions began by withholding official seals, controlling budgets and revenues, appointing or isolating the individuals responsible for the institutions and reporting to Ansarallah leaders on the progress of their work.\(^{22}\)

In general, Ansarallah supervisors have tended to hail from Hajjah governorate, southwest of Saada governorate, or from Saada itself, the home territory of the group's founder, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and his brother Abdul Malik, Ansarallah’s current leader.\(^{23}\) Most have clearly been plucked from Ansarallah’s ideological class, consisting of Hussein al-Houthi disciples, who are subjected to intensive courses in Saada. Some even fought in the six Saada wars. In selecting supervisors, Ansarallah prioritizes loyalty above specialization and competence.\(^{24}\) According to interviews with policemen, journalists, youths and focus group participants, many supervisors in critical institutions lack the appropriate qualifications, with many barely having completed an intermediary education. Unskilled supervisors in positions of power have resulted in complaints about their interference in the specialized work performed by essential institutions.\(^{25}\)

The second phase of Ansarallah’s consolidation of power nationally, and secondarily in Ibb, began in August 2016, when Ansarallah and Saleh supporters publicly formalized their alliance in the establishment of the Supreme Political Council, which assumed the executive role of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. They reaffirmed the alliance in November 2016 in forming the so-called national salvation government—composed of Ansarallah members and Saleh loyalists from the GPC—which nominally replaced the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. The national salvation government, although lacking international recognition, constituted the first cabinet formed in Sanaa after the earlier forced resignation of the Hadi government, in January 2015, and its replacement by the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. Hadi, whom Ansarallah had put

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\(^{23}\) YPC interview with a journalist, Ibb, May 20, 2019.


\(^{25}\) YPC interviews with police, aqils, youths and journalists, Ibb, 2018 and 2019.
under house arrest, ultimately escaped to Aden, where he rescinded his resignation and declared the southern city Yemen’s new temporary capital.26

Under the national salvation government, the Interior Ministry was given to the GPC, with Mohamed Abdullah al-Qawsi, who had previously served as deputy interior minister under Saleh, appointed to lead it in November 2016. The police were reorganized under Interior, with so-called Security Departments established as police headquarters in the governorates to oversee smaller police stations.27 With Shami as police chief in Ibb, that institution was already in the hands of the GPC.

After taking charge of Interior, Qawsi set about reenergizing the police, launching a campaign to raise awareness about the reestablishment of security and conducting lectures at police stations in the Ansarallah-held territories of Sanaa, al-Hodeidah, Dhammar and Ibb. YPC survey results from 2017, during this period of nominal power sharing between Ansarallah and the GPC, show that in Ibb perceptions of the police and their effectiveness improved dramatically. Before that, the police were mostly disregarded, according to survey results from 2012, most likely due to the chaotic fallout from the 2011 uprisings across the country, which led people to view them negatively. In 2012, prominent local figures and sheikhs were viewed as wielding more influence than the police.28

At the time the Ansarallah-Saleh alliance became public, Saleh wielded his power and influence behind the scenes and handed over much of the state’s military to Ansarallah. Although Ansarallah and Saleh’s loyalists managed as nominal allies to form a government in 2016, the process soon devolved into a power struggle over positions and control of entire institutions.29 In December 2017, Saleh’s alliance with Ansarallah ultimately collapsed due to his suspected communications with the Saudi-led coalition. Ansarallah’s killing of Saleh in December 2017 marked the start of the third phase of the group’s consolidation of power. In this phase, Ansarallah assumed complete control over Ibb, in October 2018, with the supervisor there, Salih

26 Hadi had raised fuel subsidies, which sparked protests, on which Ansarallah quickly capitalized. Ongoing general dissatisfaction with Hadi also contributed to Ansarallah’s move against him. He eventually went into exile in Saudi Arabia.


Hajib, de facto leading the governorate. The main characteristic of this phase is the persecution and purge of Saleh loyalists, who primarily formed Ibb’s elite, and their replacement by Ansarallah loyalists within institutions in Ibb. During this phase, Ibb was a “hotbed” of infighting, a violent manifestation of the resentment of local elites who had lost their privileges as a result of the takeover. After Saleh’s death, the influx of Ansarallah loyalists from Saada to Ibb accelerated. Ansarallah’s appointment of Hajib as deputy governor shifted the group’s supervisors from informal posts into official government jobs.

In July 2018, Ansarallah appointed Abdulhafiz al-Saqqaf as chief of police in Ibb in an attempt to placate Saleh’s former supporters and curb dissent. Saqqaf, a relative and close friend of Saleh, had previously served as police chief of Aden, during which time, ignoring Hadi, he had handed positions to Ansarallah, in early 2015. Saqqaf remained chief of police for a year, until some of his supporters among the Sufyan tribe clashed with members of the Babakar tribe, leading to the death of Ibb’s deputy governor, Hajib, in June 2019. Saqqaf was subsequently replaced by Abu Ali al-Ayani, an Ansarallah loyalist who had received a military rank after being appointed as a military supervisor in Hajjah, in the northwest. On December 13, 2019, General Abdulkarim al-Houthi, the Sanaa-based interior minister, appointed Abdullah al-Tawoos as police chief in Ibb. Both Saqqaf and Tawoos’s appointments testify to how Ansarallah reconfigured patronage networks to include its own people, marginalizing those not totally committed to it. This tactic brought Ansarallah’s strategic takeover of security institutions to fruition.

Ansarallah focused on positioning loyalists in state institutions for various reasons. First, establishing control over state institutions was fundamental to the group’s larger political goal of being considered a legitimate state actor. Its alliance with Saleh allowed the group to gain access to state institutions, especially the security services. Second, state institutions, with their hierarchical nature and informal social extensions in the form of aqils, community liaisons, were easier to control than the sheikhs, who, with their unique social standing and structures tied to place, were unfamiliar to the northerners in Ansarallah. The sheikhs of Ibb—either because of their political networks within Islah or the GPC or as a result of their rather independent nature and social position—would have been more difficult to subdue. To decrease the risk of the sheikhs uniting against Ansarallah, the group marginalized them.

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31 Carboni and Nevola, “Inside Ibb.”

32 Ansarallah appeared to manage security in Ibb more effectively than previous overseers. Under Saleh, police were easily bribed, and personal or familial connections determined personnel rankings. See Michael Horton, “An
Ansarallah’s effort to reduce the standing of traditional power holders among Ibb residents emerged as part of a systematic political strategy based on divide and rule. Ansarallah co-opted sheikhs by offering some of them high-ranking military positions, leading to divisions within the longstanding tribal confederations as well as among smaller tribes in Ibb. In addition, by accepting posts in the military, the sheikhs allowed Ansarallah to keep a close eye on them. The social status of others declined with Ansarallah representatives leveling accusations of “treason” at them for somehow benefitting economically from the Saudi-led coalition. Often, sheikhs who stood up to Ansarallah or refused to work with the group were punished in some way—such as having their property confiscated or being stripped of any power they might wield through government connections, depriving them of their access to state resources and thus gradually of the influence derived from distributing those resources. Harsh actions against individual sheikhs and tribes opposing or otherwise resisting Ansarallah, such as the killing of the pro-Saleh sheikh Ahmed al-Hadrami from the Mikhlaf al-‘Aoud tribe in October 2019, became common throughout the territories under Ansarallah control.

A conflict between a local sheikh in Yarim and Ansarallah in October 2014 exemplifies Ansarallah’s strategy for dealing with restive tribal figures and illustrates how its tactics furthered the group’s takeover of traditional avenues of security and provision of justice throughout Ibb. After advancing into the governorate, Ansarallah was met with resistance in the north by a sheikh said to be affiliated with Islah. A battle between Ansarallah and the sheikh’s allies in the town of Yarim took place October 16–18, until political and social figures mediated an agreement entailing the withdrawal of Ansarallah forces from military camps in the governorate and mandated the camps’ handover to the elite Republican Guard. Ahmed Ali Saleh, son of former president Saleh, informally remained in command of the Republican Guard, however, and he immediately returned the camps to Ansarallah.33 The group then proceeded to crush the opposition by destroying the sheikh’s residence and killing his son, accusing him of having links to jihadist organizations in al-Baydha governorate. A more recent example of the weakening of tribal influence is the 2019 killing of Sheikh Abduh Mohamed al-‘Wa’il in al-Nadirah district, for his refusal to allow Ansarallah to recruit members of his tribe.34


Thus, sheikhs and other influential figures in Ibb increasingly lost their traditional roles as security providers to the Ansarallah-controlled police. This process of delegitimizing sheikhs was ironically accelerated by the rapid economic expansion of the city of Ibb, fueled by the influx of IDPs from neighboring areas. In addition, economic growth driven by unquestionably large (but thus far unquantifiable) remittances from the United States and Saudi Arabia has led to an urban real estate boom in Ibb. The city’s expansion has come at the expense of the agricultural lands traditionally owned by the sheikhs and other local figures, further weakening their long-held positions as mediators and arbitrators of land and property disputes, and allowing Ansarallah and its supervisors, as well as the police, to assume security provision.
Symbiosis: Ansarallah and the Police

After Ansarallah took Ibb, the police continued to operate, albeit with obvious changes in their conduct. According to Ibb journalists and police officers interviewed by YPC, Ansarallah’s control of the police made the behavior of the two inseparable. The group created a parallel system of authority by installing supervisors in police stations, as it did in other institutions. Thus, a stronger police presence emerged along with seemingly stronger state institutions in general. Overall, Ansarallah’s preference for ruling informally through formal structures led to a shift in the mission of the police and the marginalization of community members with traditional roles in maintaining security. In addition, Ibb police have been stretched beyond capacity, while crucial police work is increasingly ignored to redirect the force’s attention toward the political suppression of residents.

Police officers who were sidelined attributed the ongoing weaknesses of the police force to Ansarallah. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those officers who remained on the force or were rewarded with more influential positions for their loyalty viewed Ansarallah as having strengthened the institution. According to residents of Ibb city, Ansarallah increased the police presence there.

The performance of the police in the city after Ansarallah’s arrival received mixed reviews from residents. From 2012 to 2019, the violent events taking place throughout the country and those specific to Ibb colored local opinion about the security arrangement. Certain trends and patterns are observable throughout the three phases of Ansarallah’s consolidation of power in Ibb, where war-related economic hardship continues, and among other things, fosters conditions for widespread criminality.

In 2012 locals said that in general aqils were the first to respond to security incidents, followed by tribal leaders and prominent social figures. The police were the fourth group. In fact, at that time, before Ansarallah’s incursion, 38 percent of Ibb residents said the police were not active at all, and 88 percent said that their area lacked a police station. The negative perceptions of the police indicated in 2012 were most likely influenced by the force’s relationship to the public and its general behavior during the nationwide protests the preceding year. Although Ibb had a relatively peaceful 2011 compared to Sanaa, Aden and Taiz, security forces there used violence against protesters as well.

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35 YPC interviews with police and journalists, Ibb, 2018 and 2019.
37 YPC representative survey, 2012.
Five years later, in 2017, during the second phase of Ansarallah’s takeover, the police in Ibb city emerged as the first to deal with security incidents, followed by Ansarallah itself. That year, 74 percent of Ibb respondents said the police were active, and 72 percent confirmed that there was a “mostly functioning” police station in their area. At the same time, 73 percent of respondents said people who did not belong to the police force were performing police work in their area, indicating that Ansarallah members had begun to assume police duties.38 The YPC survey results from 2017 reveal that under Ansarallah, the police in Ibb had developed a positive standing among the people, with 60 percent asserting that they were well respected.39

Despite the police becoming the first to respond to security issues in 2017, the negative attitudes held in 2012 about the police as security providers returned in 2019.40 This being the case, 2017 stands out, because it was the only time in recent years that the police in Ibb seemed to have been doing a better job than the other competing security providers, that is, aqils and sheikhs. It was in 2017, during phase two of Ansarallah’s takeover, that the group had coordinated with Saleh’s networks on security. Likely an attempt at winning hearts and minds, this balancing of responsibilities between the two groups paved the way for better security provision throughout the governorate. Of note, during this period of partnership, security directors still enjoyed relative autonomy compared to that in the third phase, by which time they would have to answer directly to Ansarallah.

As suggested above, data indicate that Ansarallah’s approach to security has involved expanding the police presence. One police officer explained that Ansarallah became an important supporter of the police because the group is less corrupt than Saleh’s apparatus had been.41 Officers interviewed who opposed Ansarallah said that the police now need Ansarallah’s backing to be effective because the force has lost its prestige, but the people continue to fear Ansarallah, which the police use as leverage.42 One officer noted that Ansarallah has a greater financial capacity than the police, implying that this allows Ansarallah to be a better security provider.43

Another factor in Ansarallah’s relatively successful approach in consolidating power involves two discursive strategies the group adopted to legitimate itself and its use of violence. First, the group framed its military expansion as a war against terrorism, specifically against al-Qaeda, and made

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41 YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, March 20, 2019.
43 YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, March 13, 2019.
it part of the police force’s narrative. After taking Ibb, the police force’s Facebook page began posting messages framing the ongoing conflict as an anti-terrorism campaign. Second, Ansarallah argued that the state’s weakened capacities and government corruption necessitated it taking security matters into its own hands. An interview in 2018 with a young man paid by Ansarallah to provide security revealed the group’s approach to security service provision and its attempts to appear less corrupt than its security predecessors. The man explained that he possessed a walkie-talkie, a pistol, bullets and a uniform, all of which Ansarallah owned but had entrusted to him.\(^44\) His description of the weapons as belonging to the security provider, rather than to himself, contrasts with the previous practices of security services, which often sold officers rifles belonging to the state or allowed loyal officers to keep them for personal use (a practice widespread, though technically illegal).

Interviews in 2018 and 2019 with police officers, aqils and youths revealed hindrances to adequate policing in Ibb and the reasons behind the public’s change in attitude toward the force. According to one officer, Ansarallah-appointed police “do not understand the law and do not want to implement the law as it was applied in the past.”\(^45\) A YPC researcher noted the lack of basic qualifications among the individuals appointed by Ansarallah and their supervisors; their experience had been limited to fighting on the frontlines. Many of these Ansarallah loyalists hail from Saada and therefore lack basic knowledge about Ibb’s local communities and their geographies. As a result, officers said, Ansarallah hinders “normal” police work, and in addition, the responsibility of the police has shifted from providing justice to pursuing political opponents and imprisoning anyone who opposes Ansarallah or speaks out against them. One officer remarked that people have lost trust and hope in the police because they cannot protect the community. In a reversal from 2017, in 2019 people were said to fear the police because of an increasing number of arbitrary arrests.\(^46\) In six interviews with police and youths in late 2017, 2018 and 2019, the respondents were in agreement that Ansarallah police were only interested in collecting money through bribes and recruiting children and youths to fight on the frontlines.\(^47\)

Indeed, it was after Ansarallah had purged Saleh supporters from their positions, between 2017 and 2019, that YPC surveys revealed that perceptions of the police in Ibb had worsened.\(^48\)

\(^44\) YPC interview with youth, Ibb, November 15, 2018.  
\(^45\) YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, March 13, 2019.  
\(^46\) YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, March 13, 2019.  
\(^48\) YPC representative survey, 2019.
confirmed a rather negative picture of the police. One aqil identified a lack of coordination within the force as the main problem with the Ansarallah police. “They push the responsibilities onto each other, so no one feels responsible in the end,” he said.49 Youth, police and focus group participants also referred to organizational problems within the police.50

Due to a lack of trust, Ansarallah prefers not to deal with NGOs or the media, and in the case of state institutions, works through its members embedded in them. This lack of contact hampers public scrutiny of Ansarallah’s actions within state and security institutions. In 2018 and 2019, impunity was a common complaint heard against Ansarallah. One policeman said that Ansarallah was keen to apprehend and punish criminals so long as they did not belong to the group. Ansarallah doesn’t punish its own, according to the officer.51 One of the most notorious incidents symbolizing Ansarallah’s impunity in Ibb occurred when a local boy threw his ball at an armed Ansarallah member, and the man responded with lethal force. Although many witnessed the killing, the boy’s death was never investigated, and no arrest was made.52 In another instance, a young man described how police savagely beat and then detained his neighbor without cause. The interviewee duly informed the police, telling them that he could provide twenty witnesses to testify to his neighbor’s innocence. The supervisor ignored what he had to say and threatened him with detention.53

A journalist and a police officer remarked in 2019 and 2020 that “the state” in Ibb no longer exists and that the rule of law there has been “decapitated” under Ansarallah’s supervisor system.54 Between February and April 2019, YPC field researchers noted that criminal acts had become a frequent occurrence. At the same time, land disputes became more common and deadly, quickly escalating into gunfights. This impulsive use of weapons in quarrels often ended in murder, with the assailants being sentenced to prison but later managing to escape. Ansarallah and the police, though able to respond to incidents, were either unable, uninterested or unwilling to act in terms of crime prevention due to a dearth of financial and material resources, the focus on crushing dissent and the lack of professional training in police ranks. Moreover, Ansarallah continues to bring in and elevate its members to positions of authority despite their often having no prior experience in security provision.

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49 YPC interview with aqil, Ibb, March 14, 2019.
50 YPC focus group interview with youth activists, Ibb, February 22, 2018.
51 YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, March 20, 2019.
52 YPC interview with aqil, Ibb, December 30, 2018.
53 YPC interview with youth, Ibb, November 11, 2018.
54 YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, November 22, 2019; interview with journalist, Ibb, February 2, 2020.
Most disputes in Ibb revolves around protecting property and personal security, in that order. One landowner said in 2019 that he avoids dealing with Ansarallah because the group doesn’t solve problems, but just causes more problems.\(^55\) Another interviewee remarked how Ansarallah applies tribal approaches to resolve problems.\(^56\) Two landowners and all the youths interviewed cited Ansarallah as the cause of the deterioration in security, having immobilized police work and thereby eliminating the sole deterrent against criminality.\(^57\) Although police stations remained open, the police lacked independence from Ansarallah. A businessman said that he felt more secure in terms of his livelihood before 2011, but that he can now only rely on himself to protect his business.\(^58\) Landowners who were asked about protecting their property also said that they had to rely on themselves, or on their tribes, noting that conflicts over property and resources were frequent in their areas. They blamed the sense of insecurity on a disorganized system that made reaching a settlement over land disputes difficult, inherently leading to heightened conflict that often resulted in death. The landowners collectively told YPC that owning land in Ibb is the biggest challenge, as tribes are the only groups able to adequately resolve related issues. As one landowner put it, in order to reach a settlement, “You must lose a member of your family.”\(^59\)

In recent years on the streets of Ibb, women have found themselves feeling more vulnerable than previously. One woman who was asked about personal safety in public spaces in 2018 said that she had to quit her two jobs because her family worried too much about her safety. She also mentioned the heavy presence of armed men on the streets as well as young boys, which made her feel unsafe.\(^60\) Moreover, all of the police and aqils interviewed by YPC in 2019, regardless of their position on Ansarallah, mentioned that sexual harassment had become more prevalent in Ibb and that they had to deal with it every day. The takeaway from the female respondents was that the atmosphere made them feel extremely insecure.\(^61\)

Despite the above, some of the officers, aqils and youths interviewed said they believe that Ansarallah is doing a good job in providing and maintaining security. One police officer noted that Ansarallah’s management of the security apparatus is completely different from the previous regime’s, asserting that Ansarallah has been less corrupt in its practices, and its members are not

\(^{55}\) YPC interview with landowner, Ibb, November 16, 2019.
\(^{56}\) YPC interview with landowner, Ibb, November 20, 2019.
\(^{57}\) YPC interview with landowners and youths, 2018–2019.
\(^{58}\) YPC interview with businessman, Ibb, September 11, 2019.
\(^{59}\) YPC interview with landowners, Ibb, 2018–2019.
\(^{60}\) YPC interview with young woman, Ibb, November 10, 2018.
susceptible to bribery. One aqil appeared to empathize with Ansarallah, asserting that it’s doing a good job under the circumstances, citing the daunting challenges it faces, primarily due to the Saudi-led coalition fighting against it.62

Co-opted by Ansarallah: Community Authorities Lose the People’s Trust

The arrival of Ansarallah in Ibb led to an observable shift in the traditional role and duties of aqils in the governorate. An aqil is the person selected by members of a neighborhood to be in charge in their community. The word aqil means “judicious.” Aqils are usually male, and prior to Ansarallah’s takeover, they came from varied political backgrounds. This changed, however, with Ansarallah control, as it sought to retain only aqils committed to implementing its orders. Aqils have since become estranged from their traditional roles or have been co-opted by Ansarallah. Although aqils have more work today, they are less trusted than before because of their association with Ansarallah.

Generally speaking, the aqil serves as the link between the community and state institutions. For example, the aqil liaises between residents and the local council, assessing the needs of the people and ensuring that government services are adequately provided. With regard to security, the aqil acts as the liaison between the community and the local police station. Traditionally, aqils took care of low-level disputes themselves, but their primary function was to communicate problems in the neighborhood to the police and to basically be aware of everything going on in the community. For example, if the police were looking for someone, an aqil would be expected to know his or her general whereabouts.

The communitarian aspect of the aqil—a key role in amplifying the voice of the neighborhood while facilitating state efforts to meet local needs—is an important participatory element of Yemeni governance. The aqil can be removed by the people, for example, through the collection of signatures or a meeting at which the community asks the local council to replace him. Under Ansarallah, however, this communitarian dimension has shifted from volunteering and community cooperation to vigilantism, retribution and blackmail grounded in the power to monitor and recruit residents.

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63 In late 2018 a woman gained the trust of her neighborhood in al-Dhamira district. She is believed to be the first woman in Ibb to serve as an aqil. “Intikhab awal imr’ah fi al-Yaman ‘aqil harah” [Election of the first woman in Yemen as neighborhood aqil], Al-Mashhad al-Yamani, November 6, 2018, https://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/121482.

64 In Ibb during the 1960s and 1970s, the traditional role of aqils included collecting tax, the provisioning of almsgiving, maintaining alleys and sewers, settling minor disputes and introducing rural arrivals to the quarters of the city.
Ansarallah has moved quickly to co-opt aqils throughout the territories it has seized. In Ibb, this accelerated in phase three after Ansarallah killed Saleh in December 2017. After that, all the aqils shifted their allegiance to Ansarallah, which broadened their power by extending them new authorities, which in turn expanded Ansarallah’s power to detain and disappear opponents. Ansarallah weaponized the aqils, politicizing their information-gathering potential in order to fight their political battles and ensure neighborhood loyalty. The distribution of cooking and heating gas and humanitarian aid to Yemeni households was one of the main functions Ansarallah entrusted to the aqils, some of whom withhold provisions meant for their neighbors for their own personal gain or for financing Ansarallah’s activities.

The expansion of the aqils’ authority was attested by all the aqils interviewed, who attributed the additional tasks they had accrued to the ongoing war. In interviews with five aqils, one of whom was not loyal to Ansarallah, all of them said that the military conflict had increased disputes among residents and that they are being dragged into situations that ideally should be, and previously were, handled by higher authorities. In addition to their traditional involvement in disputes concerning inheritance or house rentals and mediating between residents and the police, their responsibilities also now include tracking the arrival of IDPs to their neighborhoods.

The aqils all mentioned economic conditions and the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition as destabilizing factors leading people to commit more crimes due to the lack of resources. Locals are currently at the mercy of the aqils for procuring services monopolized by Ansarallah. A pro-Ansarallah aqil noted, however, that being in charge of the distribution of the critical and always insufficient resources of gas and aid does not particularly make a person popular. Rather, those in charge of distributing what limited resources exist are often unjustly blamed for their scarcity regardless of the larger structural challenges hampering delivery. In November 2019, an aqil, Yahya Sabrah, died in a gunfight sparked by a dispute among residents over gas tanks. One pro-Ansarallah aqil reported now having to coordinate with more parties as a result of his additional tasks due to Ansarallah’s emergence as de facto ruler. The surveyed aqils unanimously asserted

that they refer all criminal cases, including those involving land grabs, to the police or to Ansarallah if their own attempts at mediation fail.

According to one pro-Ansarallah aqil, people continue to approach aqils for assistance, but not necessarily because they are considered to be trustworthy.\(^7^0\) Rather, it is because aqils have the authority, capacity and legitimacy to get things done. This effectiveness could stem from aqils now being closer to the leadership, potentially simplifying the bureaucracy inherent in obtaining a judgement and generally hastening the process. Another positive aspect in regard to aqils today is that he or she has the power to resolve issues for people who for whatever reason seek to avoid dealing with “state” security.

In 2019, 39 percent of Ibb residents viewed aqils as being active in a positive way, while 38 percent expressed indifference.\(^7^1\) People’s confidence in aqils, however, was lower, with only 6 percent preferring to take a concern to an aqil. Twenty-two percent preferred the police and 17 percent the tribes.\(^7^2\) Although the effectiveness of aqils has improved under Ansarallah, they no longer offer fair solutions in the eyes of many. In addition, given the reliance of aqils on alternative sources of income due to the shattered wartime economy, some aqils have resorted to taking payments for their mediation efforts.\(^7^3\)

Some police officers believe that the aqils cannot be as independent as they once were because they now have to take orders from Ansarallah.\(^7^4\) All the aqils interviewed said they are obligated to coordinate with Ansarallah because the group represents the state. Only one of the aqils acknowledged that he provided Ansarallah information about his neighborhood or engaged in recruiting for the group. The same aqil also said that he organizes marches against the Saudi-led intervention and admitted that the families of Ansarallah fighters received priority in the distribution of critical aid.\(^7^5\)

The youths, women and anti-Ansarallah police officers interviewed were consistent in asserting that the aqils recruit youths on behalf of Ansarallah, despite the majority of aqils claiming

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\(^7^0\) YPC interview with aqil, Ibb, March 16, 2018.

\(^7^1\) YPC representative survey, 2019.

\(^7^2\) YPC representative survey, 2019.

\(^7^3\) YPC focus group interview with youth activists, Ibb, February 22, 2018.

\(^7^4\) YPC interview with police officer, Ibb, March 13, 2019.

\(^7^5\) YPC interview with aqil, Ibb, March 16, 2018.
otherwise. A journalist mentioned that aqils are now profiting from collaborating with Ansarallah by recruiting soldiers, withholding gas to sell personally, and assisting Ansarallah in identifying and tracking down its opponents. Some of the interviewees believe that the aqils are under tremendous pressure from Ansarallah. A police officer said that aqils are forced to recruit soldiers regardless of how they feel about it, and if they refuse, they risk detention or accusations of belonging to al-Qaeda.

In short, aqils appear to risk losing their positions if they do not accede to Ansarallah’s demands. Declining would be a difficult choice in a country beset by multiple economic crises and war. Given the pressures on them, aqils for the most part have decided to go along with Ansarallah, which reserves them a place in the patronage distribution network, unlike the local elites with tribal standing or official positions who were replaced by Ansarallah loyalists.

77 YPC interview with journalist, Ibb, February 2, 2020.
78 YPC interview with two youths, Ibb, November 15, 2018.
Conclusions

Ansarallah’s seizure of Ibb shattered the governorate’s traditional power structure and led to a reconfiguration of the patronage networks established by former president Saleh. Ansarallah’s subsequent consolidation of power in Ibb can broadly be divided in three phases. In the first phase, Ansarallah gained access to local security institutions through Saleh’s networks and began installing so-called supervisors in key positions within governing institutions. This access in combination with Ansarallah’s anti-corruption, pro-security and pro-state rhetoric allowed for a peaceful takeover of the city through an agreement with local elites. In the second phase, Ansarallah and Saleh supporters in 2016 made an attempt at shared governance. With Saleh’s GPC in charge of the Ministry of Interior, the police remained in Saleh’s hand, but they were increasingly undermined by Ansarallah’s embedded informal structures within the state apparatus. Nevertheless, the popularity of the police among residents peaked in 2017 due to the combined efforts of Saleh and Ansarallah in reestablishing security. In the third phase, the alliance between Ansarallah and Saleh came to an end, with Ansarallah killing Saleh in December 2017. During this last phase, Ansarallah completed its multistep capture of state institutions, a process grounded in Ansarallah’s underlying strategy of filling key positions in state institutions with loyalists, many of whom hailed from Saada.

Ansarallah’s seizure of Ibb and its institutions had the immediate effect of shifting security provision away from traditional figures to the police, over which Ansarallah took full control. When faced with a dispute, most Ibb residents began turning first to the police, rather than to aqils or sheikhs. This change in the security environment was accompanied by a shift in attitude toward the police, who had previously been broadly recognized as more powerful, but also more corrupt. Ansarallah focused its security efforts on state institutions, rather than traditional structures, as this was fundamental to the group’s broader political goal of being accepted as a state actor. Ansarallah’s alliance with Saleh, who retained influence even after his resignation, especially within the security forces, allowed the group to easily gain access to state institutions. Ansarallah also surely realized that state institutions, with their hierarchical natures and informal social extensions in the form of aqils, were easier to control than the sheikhs of Ibb, who, with their unique social standing and structures tied to place, were unfamiliar to the northern group. The sheikhs, due to their rather independent nature and stature, would have been more difficult to subdue. To decrease the risk of the sheikhs uniting against Ansarallah, the group marginalized them.

The result of Ansarallah’s takeover of Ibb has been a general decline in security. Criminality as well as land conflicts have increased while tensions between marginalized elites and the new rulers routinely erupt in violence. The marginalization of longstanding security guarantors, the
sheikhs and in particular the aqils, has had the secondary effect of undermining traditional sources and mechanisms of local Yemeni governance based on communitarian principles and participation. The impacts of this change could have a deleterious effect on local governance and security provision in the long term.

Ansarallah faces a lot of challenges in providing security in Ibb. The group’s appointees lack the necessary skills and qualifications, while the mission of the police has shifted to repressing the population and cracking down on dissent. This leaves women and children especially vulnerable, as their access to the security provided by the police was already restricted. Although Ansarallah consolidated its power in Ibb and seems to maintain a tight grip on the city, the security arrangement on which it relies is not sustainable given the infighting and competition among the traditional elite and Ansarallah loyalists.
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