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Yemen and the Houthi Rebellion in the Context of the Global War on Terror

By Tommi Pulkkinen

Abstract: The group Ansar Allah, commonly known as the Houthis, took over the Yemeni capital Sana'a in the Fall of 2014, and have been engaged in a conflict with the exiled government President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and a Saudi-led coalition of mostly Arab countries since March 2015. The Houthis originate from the north-western region of Saada, and represent a faction of Yemen's Zaydi minority, but neither the group nor the conflict in Yemen are primarily sectarian. The situation in Yemen is complicated by various regional, political, and tribal factions that form alliances of convenience for political purposes. The situation is further complicated by the U.S. led War on Terror and its local variations, and the Houthis, a socio-political movement, is a sworn enemy of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula which has been the target of U.S. and Yemeni counter-terrorism efforts in the country. This paper seeks to shed light on the origins and nature of the Houthi movement as well as the realities of the War on Terror in Yemen for a better understanding of the conflict in light of history.

Houthi fighters took over the Yemeni capital Sana'a and much of northwestern Yemen in September 2014, in the midst of demonstrations against the ruling Hadi regime,¹ as the moral guidance department of the Yemeni armed forces threw its support behind the "people's revolution,"² leaving the capital city unprotected. Meanwhile, President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his allies proved incapable of containing the growing crisis. Houthi

¹ Ian Black, "Yemen: Understanding Houthi Motives is Complicated but Essential," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/19/understanding-houthi-motives-complicated-essential-yemen-future>.

² 26 September Net, "منتسبوا التوجيه المعنوي يعلنون تأييدهم لثورة الشعب," September 21, 2014, accessed March 24, 2017, http://www.26sep.net/news_details.php?sid=107024.

forces subsequently seized the critical southern port of Aden as well, though they later lost it to pro-government forces in July 2015.³ According to the United Nations, the Houthis have agreed to a resolution to stop fighting, but a Saudi led coalition of Gulf and Arab countries has continued its bombing of Yemen, which has caused enormous loss of life in the region, including an unacceptable number of civilian casualties.⁴ The conflict between the Houthis and the government in Yemen has been ongoing for more than ten years, but there is no end in sight to the fighting that has devastated the country that ranks among the poorest in the world. The Houthis enjoy widespread popular support and continue to control large swaths of territory in western Yemen, despite the fact that the movement originated among the Zaydi religious minority from the northern provinces. April Longley Alley⁵ has observed that:

supporters of the movement see the Houthis as correcting the wrongs of the country's 2011 transition agreement, which preserved the power and corruption of old regime elites. They praise the movement's willingness to confront corruption, combat al-Qa'ida, and fill a security vacuum left by a feckless government.⁶

Despite their overtly anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric, the Houthi movement is a sworn enemy of al-Qaeda and other extremist Sunni groups in Yemen. Its operations are restricted to Yemen, as opposed to international terrorist groups that seek to extend the theater of war to other countries,

³ "Yemen's Houthis 'pushed from last Aden stronghold,'" *Al-Jazeera*, July 23, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/yemen-houthis-pushed-aden-stronghold-150723002942312.html>.

⁴ Associated Press in Sana'a, "Second Yemen Wedding Bombed as UN Says Houthi Rebels Accept Ceasefire," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/08/second-yemen-wedding-bombed-as-un-says-houthi-rebels-accept-ceasefire>.

⁵ April Longley Alley is a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, who has "conducted fieldwork in Yemen since 2004." "April Longley-Alley," *International Crisis Group*, accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/who-we-are/people/april-longley-alley>.

⁶ April Longley Alley, "Yemen's Houthi Takeover," *Middle East Institute*, December 22, 2014, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/yemens-houthi-takeover>.

particularly in the West. In order to see past the inflammatory slogans of the Houthi movement and to understand the nature of the group and its success in controlling territory in Yemen, one must consider various phenomena; such as the history of Yemen as a country, its social structure, the nature and roots of Zaydism, the origins of the Houthi movement, the concept of the Global War on Terror, the involvement of the United States in Yemen and in the Middle East in general, as well as the domestic politics of Yemen. The Houthi movement has not been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, and it may, in fact, be a potential ally in the fight against al-Qaeda as it has vowed to destroy the group.⁷ This may sound counterintuitive but the dearth of effective local allies, as well as the complex political and tribal environment of Yemen makes for strange alliances. Given the popularity of the group in parts of Yemen and its leadership role in the fight against an unresponsive and oppressive regime, as well as the local resistance to foreign interference in Yemeni politics, the prospect of defeating it by providing weapons and material support to the exiled president Hadi and the Saudi led coalition seems unlikely. The Saudi government's ideological opposition to the Zaydis is intimately connected to politics in the Arabian Peninsula, as the Zaydi religious ideology challenges the legitimacy of the al-Saud family. Zaydi presence and control of territory in northern Yemen, however, has roots that reach to a time thousand years before the establishment of Saudi Arabia - roots that are essential to understanding the underlying realities of the current crisis.

Historical Background

The Zaydi Shia presence in Yemen dates back to at least the late ninth century CE. A Zaydi Imamate independent of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad was founded in Yemen as early as 893 CE, and it ruled over territory of varying size in northern Yemen until 1962.⁸ The first Zaydi state in the region was founded by an Islamic scholar and a descendant of Prophet Muhammad by the

⁷ Khalil Harb, "Ansar Allah Vows to Defeat Al-Qaeda in Yemen," *Al-Monitor*, October 22, 2014, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/10/yemen-ansar-allah-clashes-al-qaeda.html#>.

⁸ Ira M. Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 487.

name of Yahya ibn Husayn (d. 911 CE). According to his biography, Yahya was invited to mediate between warring tribes of the Sa'ada region in the rugged highlands of northern Yemen. After settling the dispute between local tribes, Yahya proclaimed himself to be the *imam* (leader) of the Zaydi community, and adopted the honorific title *al-Hadi ila al-Haqq* (the guide to the truth) as their spiritual leader and head of state. With the military support of allied tribes, Yahya defeated other tribes in the area who opposed him, and established the rule of a Zaydi *dawlah* (state).⁹ The Ottoman Empire, which occupied southern Yemen from 1539 to 1636, was expelled from the area by the Qasimi branch of the Zaydi dynasty, but it re-established its suzerainty over Yemen in the nineteenth century. Ottoman suzerainty over Yemen was confirmed in 1911, by a treaty that granted administrative control of the highlands to the Zaydi *imam* and the control of the coastal areas to the Ottomans.¹⁰ In 1839, the delicate political balance in Yemen was complicated further by British occupation of the critical southern port of Aden, which was formally made a crown colony in 1937.¹¹ The control of different parts of the area by the British and the Ottomans ultimately resulted in the division of the country into North and South Yemen.

After the First World War, as the defeated Ottoman forces withdrew from northern Yemen, the area controlled by the Zaydi *imamate* was expanded by Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din (r. 1904 - 1948). The *imamate* would rule northern Yemen until 1962, when a revolution resulted in the overthrow of the *imam* and the new Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) was established. A civil war ensued, between Egyptian-backed republican forces and pro-*imamate* royalists backed by Saudi Arabia. The civil war in northern Yemen concluded in 1967, and the rival republican and royalist factions were subsequently reconciled. That same year, the British were driven out from the south of the country and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), a Marxist regime, was established there with its capital in Aden.¹² The YAR (North Yemen) and the PDRY (South Yemen) were unified in 1990, and

⁹ Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 229.

¹⁰ Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, 487.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mark Gasiorowski, David E. Long, and Bernard Reich, *Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 198-199.

the Republic of Yemen (ROY) was formed. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled the north with his General People's Congress (GPC) party, became the president of unified Yemen and Sana'a became its capital. The secretary-general of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) Ali Salim al-Baydh became the vice president, and the parliaments of the north and south were merged into a new parliamentary body called the Council of Deputies. The moderate Islamist Islah party was established by tribal *shaykhs* (elders) opposed to the YSP, and the leader of Islah, Shaykh Abdullah ibn Hussayn al-Ahmar, became the speaker of the new parliament.¹³

In 1994, a War of Secession erupted, which pitted the southern forces of the YSP against the forces of president Saleh and some militant Islamists, among them Afghani Arabs, who returned home to Yemen from Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet Union. That same year, Saleh was reelected as president and a southern general named Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi became the vice president. Saleh was reelected as president again in 1999.¹⁴ These same individuals have dominated the politics of the ROY since then.

Social Structure in Yemen

Yemeni society is tribal in nature and kinship groups play an important role in the lives of most Yemenis. Most tribes in Yemen are populations of settled farmers, not nomadic or transhumant, and most of Yemen is inhabited by sedentary tribes. The areas around Ibb and Ta'izz in Lower Yemen are the only major regions in the country that were never organized tribally. Although they do share a similar political culture, tribes "vary regionally in size, forms of identity, and modes of organization."¹⁵ The location of the different tribes and their relationship to the environment they inhabit varies depending on whether the area is arid or fertile, inaccessible or along well-established routes. In addition to these factors, its distance from major towns and trade routes affect the size and organization of the tribe and its relationship with central powers, be they local or colonial states.¹⁶ The southern and coastal

¹³ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁵ Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

areas of the country are inhabited mostly by Sunni Muslims who follow the Shafi'i *madhab* (school of Islamic law) as a result of Rasulid rule in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Zaydi Shi'a constitute little over 20 percent of the total population, and they live mostly in the mountainous regions of the north known as the Upper Yemen. They have historically been over-represented in the government and the armed forces. The people of the northern highlands are known for their especially strong tribal ties, which continue to function as a basis of identity, solidarity, and social organization more than in other areas, according to Khaled Fattah,¹⁷ in Yemen:

Tribes...make up the central nervous system of politics, and tribal sheikhs are the most influential pressure group in the political arena. This is because, in the pursuit of regime survival, all the modernizing agents—namely state institutions, political parties and the military—have been tribalized.¹⁸

Zaydism

The Zaydi Hadawi *madhab*, named after the founder of the first Zaydi state in Yemen Imam al-Hadi (d. 911 CE), is especially tolerant of *'urf* (customary tribal law), which, together with *shari'ah* (Islamic religious law), has always comprised “a composite system for solving problems and ordering relations.” In addition to the religious accommodation of tribal customs and law, cooperation between Zaydi state officials and tribal leaders has also been facilitated by the fact that they share, to a great extent, “the same cultural assumptions and values, and employ similar symbols and rituals of enforcement.”¹⁹ The basis of the Hadawi

¹⁷ Khaled Fattah has been “a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center, where his research focused on the political, economic, security, and cultural sectors in Yemen, and state-tribe relations in the Arab Middle East.” He is currently a guest lecturer at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University in Sweden. “Khaled Fattah,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/experts/810>.

¹⁸ Khaled Fattah, “Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs,” *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 3 (2011) 79-85.

¹⁹ Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 146.

madhab, followed by the Zaydis of northern Yemen, is formed by the theological and legal writings of Imam al-Hadi. That “the spiritual leader of the Muslim community should also be supreme ruler (*imam*) of the Muslim state,” is a central tenet of Hadawi Zaydism. The Hadawi doctrine also “upholds the principle of hereditary rule,” but without requiring an automatic succession from father to son. Instead, the head of the Zaydi state may be selected, based on merit, from among the descendants of Prophet Muhammad through either one of his two grandsons Hasan and Husayn. “The ideal imam, epitomized by al-Hadi, was both a warrior (*mujahid*) and an expert legal interpreter (*mujtahid*), ready and able to wield sword as well as pen.”²⁰ In Zaydi tradition, *imams* came to power by disseminating a written manifesto claiming the *imamate*, which had to be accepted by the prominent *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and *qadis* (judges) of the community, who would legitimize the claim by swearing allegiance to the *imam* in written form. This represented a “profound moral, religious, and political commitment.” Each northern Yemeni Zaydi *dawlah* “was constituted by the superimposition of this small ruling clique onto a broad base of largely self-governing tribes whose leaders also solemnly pledged their allegiance in written pacts.” This process provided the Zaydi states with legitimacy at the grassroots level.²¹ Understanding this process is important in that it can help elucidate the mechanisms that have allowed the Houthis to gain ground in Yemen despite the efforts on behalf of the regime to suppress them. Today the Houthis participate in national dialogue with other centers of power in Yemen, but remain in control of their territory and refuse to lay down their weapons. They have publicly rejected the legitimacy of the transitional government because they see it as betraying the revolution. The name “Houthis” refers to the family of the founder of the movement, but they prefer to call themselves *Ansar Allah* (Supporters of God). Due to their “opposition to Islah and the old regime, as well as their reputation for rejecting corruption and transparently administering justice, they have made inroads into traditionally Sunni areas of Yemen.”²²

²⁰ Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 230.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

²² April Longley Alley, “Yemen Changes Everything...and Nothing,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013) 74-85.

Roots of the Houthi Rebellion

In 1993, Husayn al-Houthi, a Zaydi *sayyid* and the son of a respected Zaydi scholar Badr al-Din al-Houthi, was elected to the Council of Deputies and served as a member of the Yemeni parliament until 1997. He initially enjoyed the support of president Saleh, who had previously allied himself also with Salafis to fight the YSP, but later Saleh withdrew his support and ordered the governor of Sa'ada to take action against Husayn al-Houthi's supporters. Saleh's crack down provoked a rebellion in the district which is a stronghold of the Houthi movement and part of the traditional homeland of the Zaydis.²³ In January 2003, president Saleh visited Sa'ada on his way to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and while visiting the city's mosque during Friday prayers, he attempted to give a speech but was greeted with chants of what has become the Houthi slogan: "God is Great. Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse the Jews. Victory to Islam." More than 600 people were subsequently arrested as the Yemeni government cracked down on those chanting the slogan. Attacks on government installations in the region that were attributed to the Believing Youth (BY) organization of the Zaydis exacerbated the situation, and some members of the Zaydi community felt that they were being unfairly targeted by the government. The chanting of the Houthi slogan subsequently spread to other parts of northern Yemen as well.

Husayn al-Houthi, who was the leader of the BY, was summoned to appear before the president but failed to comply.²⁴ On June 18, 2004, 604 people were arrested by Yemeni security forces for chanting the slogan after Friday prayers outside of the Grand Mosque of the capital city Sana'a. An arrest warrant was issued for Husayn al-Houthi, and government troops were dispatched to Sa'ada to capture him. Following the deaths of three Yemeni government soldiers in the outskirts of Sa'ada city, the regime launched a military campaign that included aerial bombardment of the region. Husayn al-Houthi sent an open letter to president Saleh in which he stated: "I do not work against you, I appreciate you and what you do tremendously, but what I do is my solemn national duty against the enemy of Islam and the community: America and Israel. I am by your side, so do not listen

²³ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 216.

²⁴ Lucas Winter, "Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances," *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 1 (2011) 102-120.

to hypocrites and provocateurs, and trust that I am more sincere and honest to you than they are.” But al-Houthi refused to turn himself in to the authorities. Fighting ensued between government forces and supporters of al-Houthi in Sa’ada City and the mountains of Marran in the Haydan district of the western Sa’ada governorate. Husayn al-Houthi was killed in September, which brought the fighting to a temporary halt.²⁵

Husayn al-Houthi was succeeded by his brother Abd al-Malik,²⁶ and clashes, said to have been led by Badr al-Din al-Houthi, broke out again a few months later. According to Lucas Winter,²⁷ “Government heavy-handedness had likely increased support for the Houthis, and their followers began carrying out attacks in some of Sa’ada province’s more populated areas, eliciting an even harsher military response.” The second round of the so-called Sa’ada Wars came to an end in April 2005, as the government claimed it had secured most of the rebel positions; but clashes continued until February 2006, after which the government released prisoners and appointed a new governor who would work to improve the relations between the Houthis and the regime.²⁸ In 2006, president Saleh was re-elected once more and demonstrations against the regime started in the south in 2007 – to which the regime responded with increasing violence.²⁹

New clashes with the Houthis broke out in early 2007 in the bloodiest round of fighting that the conflict had seen since its beginning, and the fighting persisted until February 2008, when a Qatari brokered peace agreement brought the struggle to a temporary halt. Both sides claimed that the other had failed to deliver on its promises, and the fighting resumed a few months later in the fifth round of the Sa’ada Wars, this time the fighting reached Bani Hushaysh, a mere 20 kilometers from the capital of Sana’a. Another inconclusive truce was declared, but in August 2009 the fighting resumed once more in what came to be known as

²⁵ Winter, “Conflict in Yemen.”

²⁶ Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010), 1.

²⁷ “Lucas Winter is an analyst on the Middle East for the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth, KS.” “Lucas Winter,” *Small Wars Journal*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/lucas-winter>.

²⁸ Winter, “Conflict in Yemen.”

²⁹ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 203.

the sixth round of the war. Yet another truce was agreed to in February 2010, but the conflict has not subsided, and the fighting continues.³⁰ Saudi Arabia also began airstrikes and ground operations against the Houthis in 2009, reportedly provoked by military actions across its southern border with Yemen.³¹ In a speech given on September 27, 2009, president Saleh stated that the “war against the Houthi rebels would continue until uprooting them even if it lasted ages.”³² As the fighting continues to escalate with no end in sight, despite the fact that Saleh has stepped down and president Hadi has been exiled to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, the implications of Saleh’s proclamation and the mind frame that generated it are becoming painfully clear to the people of Yemen.

The Yemeni government has portrayed the conflict in ideological and political terms, claiming that the Houthis are intent on seizing power and imposing their extreme and atavistic religio-political program on the whole country, while the Houthis claim to be fighting in self-defense against oppression on the part of the regime. As the “Arab Spring” swept through the region in 2011, and protests and demonstrations erupted throughout the country, the regime responded with escalating violence. But when part of the armed forces turned against president Saleh, in addition to tribal forces opposed to the regime, the president agreed to step down on November 23, and vice president Hadi assumed the presidency.³³ By signing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative and agreeing to a series of UN-backed implementation mechanisms, Saleh agreed to the transfer of executive power to the vice president in exchange for domestic immunity from prosecution.³⁴

Iran’s Role in Yemen

The role of Iran in the Yemeni Civil War has been fiercely contested during the conflict, and assessments of Iran’s links to the Houthis have often been hindered by decades of enmity and

³⁰ Winter, “Conflict in Yemen.”

³¹ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 205.

³² Winter, “Conflict in Yemen.”

³³ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 205.

³⁴ April Longley Alley, “Assessing (In)security After the Arab Spring: The Case of Yemen,” *PS-Political Science & Politics* 46, no. 4 (2013) 721-726.

distrust between Tehran and the West. Respected Canadian strategic analyst, Thomas Juneau argued in 2016 that the Houthis, despite receiving aid from Iran, “are not Iranian proxies,” and that “Tehran’s influence in Yemen is marginal.” According to Juneau, “the civil war in Yemen is driven first and foremost by local and political factors, and is neither an international proxy war nor a sectarian confrontation.”³⁵ Although there have been reports of Iranian weapons being imported to Yemen since at least 2009, the influx of military equipment from Iran has reportedly increased since the Saudi-led coalition commenced operations against the Houthis in March of 2015. Attacks across the border into Saudi Arabia by the Houthis and forces loyal to Saleh also started after the beginning of the offensive. In a sense, Saudi warnings about a proxy war have become self-fulfilling prophecies, but on a much smaller scale than suggested.

The sectarian dimension of the conflict has also been exaggerated. As Juneau points out, “Iran does not choose its partners on the basis of a common adherence to Shi’i Islam.” Rather, “it seeks to gain access to geographic areas that it can use as launching pads to protect its influence, to confront its main regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and to oppose the regional US presence.”³⁶ The accusation that the Houthis are an Iranian proxy was often used by Saleh when he was the president, a claim that has been perpetuated by the exiled president Hadi and his allies in Saudi Arabia. In reality, the Houthis constitute an indigenous socio-political movement that has its roots in the Zaydi heartland of north-western Yemen. The movement has also been able to forge alliances across sectarian lines, thus disproving the proposition that the conflict is essentially sectarian in nature.

Iran may have been supporting the Houthis in some capacity for many years, but the war in Yemen is not a priority for Iran. Juneau points out that the “high levels of instability in Yemen imply that a major commitment of resources would be required for Iran to gain the ability to shape events more than marginally,” and it is unlikely that such commitment is forthcoming since “Iran’s interests in Yemen are limited.” Moreover, given Yemen’s immediate proximity to Saudi Arabia and Iran’s extensive investments elsewhere, especially in Iraq and Syria, “stronger and

³⁵ Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 649.

more overt Iranian involvement would risk an uncontrolled escalation of tensions with Riyadh.”³⁷ An outcome Iran can ill afford. Juneau’s assertion that the Houthis are independent actors, supported by Iran but motivated by their own objectives is in line with statements made by representatives of the US government. As the spokesperson for the National Security Council Bernadette Meehan told *Huffington Post* in April 2015, “It remains our assessment that Iran does not exert command and control over the Houthis in Yemen,” and according to another U.S. intelligence official, “It is wrong to think of the Houthis as a proxy force for Iran.” However, the U.S. Navy increased its presence in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea due to reports that Iranian ships might be carrying weapons for the Houthis.³⁸

The Houthi takeover of much of the country was made possible by their own network of alliances amongst tribal groups and political power brokers in Yemen, including former president Saleh, who aligned himself with the Houthi revolution in 2014 despite his previous efforts to suppress them. This unlikely alliance with former president Saleh was brought about by common opposition to the Islah Party and his former ally General Ali Mohsen. Their network of alliances gave the Houthis the military power they needed to challenge the central government.

In light of the complexities of Yemeni politics, the conditions that created the Houthi revolution and Iran’s comparatively distant role in the Yemeni Civil War, Juneau concludes that the conflict in Yemen “is at its root a civil war, driven by local competition for power, and not a regional, sectarian or proxy war. The Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry has superimposed itself over this domestic conflict and has inflamed it but it does not drive it.”³⁹

³⁷ Juneau, “Iran’s Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen,” 659.

³⁸ Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, “Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover,” *The Huffington Post*, April 20, 2015, accessed March 24, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html.

³⁹ Juneau, “Iran’s Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen,” 659.

Global War on Terror

The rules of international politics were altered after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on multiple targets in the United States as the federal government adopted security policies that were unprecedented and likely illegal at the time, although they were retroactively legalized and enshrined into United States law with the passing of the Patriot Act. The president at the time made it clear to the world that in the so-called War on Terror, there would be no possibility to stay neutral or unaligned as he declared that every person, organization, and government would either be with the United States, or against it.

This ultimatum to the world presented many problems both morally and legally. First, it is not the responsibility of the President of the United States to declare war, which is an act that should be approved by the Congress. Second, wars have conventionally been declared against nation states, not tactics of asymmetric warfare. Even in the case of civil wars and insurgencies, the enemy is usually clearly defined as a faction or an organization that may, at least in theory, be defeated and the war can therefore come to a definitive end at some point in the future. Third, for the “leader of the free world” to issue an ultimatum to the whole world to render the United States, which had at this point become the lone superpower, its unquestioning cooperation in a global campaign against an ill-defined and elusive enemy, is not only unprecedented but morally dubious as well. Fourth, the intentionally ambiguous or nonexistent definitions of “terrorism” and “terrorist” gave the United States government practically free reign in choosing the targets of its global counterterrorism activities and provided it with a loophole that enabled it to ignore international law and rules of war. Many governments that jumped on the “War on Terror” bandwagon were quick to capitalize on this point and declare their own local rivals as terrorists to justify violent and repressive measures against political dissidents, as well as other potential foes.

Furthermore, by reacting to an act of terror by rolling back the rights and liberties of its citizens, the United States and the West in general recklessly jeopardized the very aspect of western democratic societies that set them apart from more authoritarian regimes, thus not only giving the terrorists exactly what they wanted to achieve by their actions, but also surrendering the moral

high ground that stems from maintaining a free and open society. This has resulted in stifling of dissenting voices and creation of an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship. The world is seen increasingly in black-and-white terms within an “us-versus-them” paradigm that is reminiscent of the Cold War era. Unfortunately, 16 years after the 9/11 attacks, government surveillance of its own citizens, indefinite detention of terror suspects, and assassinations that are extra-judicial or authorized by secret military courts continue as we supposedly fight those who hate our freedom and liberties, if we are to believe in the assessment of enemy motives made by president George W. Bush after the attacks. It is clearly a contradiction to defend freedom and liberty by compromising them, and this contradiction is not easily explained away. And herein lies the problem: repressive regimes the world over, including those of presidents Saleh and Hadi in Yemen, are taking advantage of the new rules of international politics to clamp down on their enemies domestically as well as internationally, to neutralize dissent and political opposition, and to move decisively toward an openly authoritarian model of government. These actions in themselves engender public resistance and compromise the legitimacy of the government. In the context of Yemen, these developments play in the hands of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Ansar al-Shari’ah, the southern separatist Hirak movement, and the Houthis as the discontented and often desperate masses look for alternatives to the regime that has become increasingly unresponsive to their needs. In many ways, fighting terrorism with aggressive and repressive methods only creates more resistance, and by stooping to new lows in their disregard for the well-being of their own citizens, regimes that resort to violence and oppression are effectively turning the tables against themselves – while making terrorists into martyrs and providing them with the false aura of freedom fighters.

The United States Involvement in Yemen

In 2000, an American guided missile destroyer *USS Cole* was bombed off the coast of Yemen, killing seventeen American sailors, in response to which the CIA conducted its first drone strike in Yemen on November 3, 2002, killing six al-Qaeda militants. Although the Yemeni government claimed that the

explosion was caused by a gas canister, the United States Deputy Secretary of State, Paul Wolfowitz, told CNN that the CIA strike in Yemen was “a very successful tactical operation,” thus effectively claiming the strike on behalf of the United States government. The Deputy Secretary-General of Yemen, General Yahya M. al-Mutawakel remarked in response to the statement that “This is why it is so difficult to make deals with the United States. This is why we are reluctant to work closely with them. They don’t consider the internal circumstances in Yemen. In security matters, you don’t want to alert the enemy.” Overt U.S. strikes would not take place in Yemen until 2010.⁴⁰

In 2008 and 2009, AQAP conducted a series of terrorist attacks in Yemen and declared war on the regime.⁴¹ In December 2009, according to Amnesty International, a US cruise missile killed 41 civilians in al-Ma’jalah in southern Yemen in an attack against al-Qaeda militants, enraging tribal leaders.⁴² The United States did not take responsibility for the attack. However, as the Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said in a statement that “I would refer you to the Yemeni government for any information on operations against al Qaeda in their country. . . . We strongly support actions against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and cooperate closely with Yemen and other countries on counterterrorism initiatives.”⁴³ In January 2010, president Saleh told CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus, according to diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, that the Yemenis would “continue saying the bombs are ours, not yours.”⁴⁴

In 2011, Ansar al-Shari’ah took control of territory in Abyan and Shabwa provinces,⁴⁵ and on September 30, 2011, Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen, was killed by a drone strike in

⁴⁰ Peter L. Bergen and Jennifer Rowland, “Decade of the Drone: Analyzing CIA Drone Attacks, Casualties, and Policy,” in *Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law, and Policy*, ed. Peter L. Bergen and Daniel Rothenberg. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 25.

⁴¹ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 203.

⁴² Christopher Swift, “The Boundaries of War? Assessing the Impact of Drone Strikes in Yemen,” in *Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law, and Policy*, ed. Peter L. Bergen and Daniel Rothenberg. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 78.

⁴³ CNN Wire Staff, “U.S. Missiles Killed Civilians in Yemen, Rights Group Says,” June 7, 2010, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/06/07/yemen.missiles/>.

⁴⁴ Bergen, “Decade of the Drone,” 27.

⁴⁵ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 205.

Yemen. According to William C. Banks, a professor of law at Syracuse University, “Yemen’s president Saleh secretly granted the United States permission for the mission... Two weeks later, al-Awlaki’s sixteen-year-old son was killed unintentionally when he was within a strike area where a suspected Egyptian terrorist was hit by a JSOC-fired drone.”⁴⁶ President Hadi was officially elected on February 21, 2012, and in April, he launched a campaign against Ansar al-Shari’ah recovering most of the lost territory, but suicide attacks in other parts of the country followed.⁴⁷ Between March and May of 2012, according to Peter Bergen,⁴⁸ “the United States launched an estimated thirty-one air and drone strikes in Yemen, as compared with just sixteen attacks in the previous two years.”⁴⁹ In April 2012, president Obama authorized “signature strikes” in Yemen that were given the name Terrorist Attack Disruption Strikes (TADS), reportedly governed by stricter rules than those authorized in Pakistan the previous year, according to Sarah Holewinski,⁵⁰

these strikes are especially significant in Yemen. In signature strikes, attacks are not directed against specific individuals identified as threats to US national security, but rather are based on a set of observed actions and indicators understood to be significant enough to warrant lethal action. The United States does not disclose what behaviors

⁴⁶ William C. Banks, “Regulating Drones: Are Targeted Killings by Drones Outside Traditional Battlefields Legal?” in *Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law, and Policy*, ed. Peter L. Bergen and Daniel Rothenberg. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 134.

⁴⁷ Gasiorowski, *Government and Politics*, 206.

⁴⁸ “Peter Bergen is a print and television journalist, author, documentary producer and vice president at New America where he directs the International Security and Fellows programs; a professor of practice at Arizona State University; a fellow at Fordham University’s Center on National Security and CNN’s national security analyst. He has held teaching positions at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.” *Peter Bergen*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://peterbergen.com/>.

⁴⁹ Bergen, “Decade of the Drone,” 27.

⁵⁰ Sarah Holewinski is Executive Director at the Center for Civilians in Conflict. “Sarah Holewinski,” *The Huffington Post*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/sarah-holewinski>.

justify a signature strike, nor does it provide any guidance on this issue.⁵¹

September 28, 2012, president Hadi told the UN General Assembly that “We invite our international partners in combating terrorism to provide more logistical and technical support to [Yemen’s] security forces and counter-terrorism units.” Two days later, at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC, he acknowledged publicly that the United States was using drones against terrorist targets in Yemen.⁵² President Hadi told the Washington Post that “Every operation, before taking place, they take permission from the president.”⁵³

Blowback

The reluctance of the Saleh regime to admit that it cooperated with the United States in its War on Terror in Yemen is understandable as most Yemenis do not easily accept foreign intervention and knowledge of such cooperation is likely to generate resistance against the regime. The perceived and often very real anti-Americanism that is so ubiquitous in Yemen, perhaps best exemplified by the Houthi slogan, does not necessarily stem from any profound and principled hatred toward the United States, the West, or democracy *per se*, however. It can often be a simple byproduct of the United States’ involvement in the region, the most visible dimension of which are Hellfire missiles fired from U.S. unmanned aircraft and other types of weapons made in the United States, whether used by the U.S. or its regional allies. Yemenis resent U.S. drone strikes for many reasons, but the most common reason is the fact that an outside power is seen to be interfering with the internal politics of the country. According to a

⁵¹ Sarah Holewinski, “Just Trust Us: The Need to Know More About the Civilian Impact of US Drone Strikes,” in *Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law, and Policy*, ed. Peter L. Bergen and Daniel Rothenberg. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 46.

⁵² Swift, “The Boundaries of War?” 71.

⁵³ Greg Miller, “Yemeni President Acknowledges Approving U.S. Drone Strikes,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012, accessed December 10, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/yemeni-president-acknowledges-approving-us-drone-strikes/2012/09/29/09bec2ae-0a56-11e2-aff-d6c7f20a83bf_story.html.

member of the Yemeni Socialist Party, “Drones remind us that we don’t have the ability to solve our problems by ourselves. If these were Yemeni drones, rather than American drones, there would be no issue at all.” This statement is corroborated by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who, in 2012, observed that “No one resents a drone strike if the target was a terrorist...What we resent is the fact that outsiders are involved.”⁵⁴

While the counterterrorism campaign of the Obama administration may have been well intentioned and proportional to the threat posed by AQAP and similar organizations to the United States, it undeniably continued to inflame an already tenuous situation in the region and across the globe. On the local level, terrorist organizations thrive when there are masses of desperate people whose only contact with the United States has been in the form of fire from the sky. In fact, organizations like AQAP do not find much support among the local population for ideological or religious reasons. The main reasons for joining extreme militant groups are almost always material. According to a local Salafi with ties to AQAP, “Those who fight do so because of the [economic] injustice in this country...A few in the north are driven by ideology, but in the south it is mostly about poverty and corruption.”⁵⁵ As April Longley Alley observes: “The organization is capitalizing on domestic grievances and instability for operations and recruitment” while “a U.S.-supported military approach to combating AQ is producing complications for the regime, as Yemenis resent civilian casualties and the violation of Yemeni sovereignty.”⁵⁶

Politics in Yemen

While the United States welcomes the participation of the Yemeni government in the Global War on Terror, its trust in the Saleh/Hadi regime may be misplaced. According to a former US intelligence official, “There were times when we were intentionally misled, presumably by [former president] Saleh, to get rid of people he

⁵⁴ Swift, “The Boundaries of War?,” 81.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁶ April Longley Alley, “Yemen’s Multiple Crises,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010): 72-86.

wanted to get rid of.”⁵⁷ For example, in May 2010, a US aircraft killed a local deputy governor who was a political rival of president Saleh, identified as a high-value target by the Yemeni security forces.⁵⁸ According to Nabeel Khoury,⁵⁹ “Yemen's collaboration against terrorism was also tinged from the start with former president Saleh's personal agenda.” The Deputy Governor of Maarib, Jabir al-Shabwani, had been given the task by Yemeni government to negotiate with AQAP militants for their surrender when he was killed alongside the militants in 2009. The AQAP militants targeted by the strike had visited local government offices without being captured earlier the same day, raising the question of who was the intended target of the strike. In 2010 it was reported that “Large numbers of civilians also died during Saudi air strikes against Houthi rebels in late 2009, apparently because the Yemenites, by all appearances, had purposely provided false target information.”⁶⁰ In another case in August of 2012, Selim Jaber, a religious scholar who had denounced al-Qaeda in his sermons at a local mosque, and his cousin Walid, were killed while meeting with three strangers, not known in the community, whom Yemen's ministry of defense had described as AQAP militants.⁶¹ According to Stephen Day,⁶² “President Saleh likes to portray his local opposition as a foreign-inspired threat to national security. This is the regime's standard playing card ... labeling political opponents as traitors and placing his confrontation with them in the same category as the U.S.-sponsored war on terrorism.”⁶³ Another example of misuse of United States material support for the regime is the case of Hisham Bashraheel, whose family owned the daily

⁵⁷ Alley, “Yemen's Multiple Crises.”

⁵⁸ Braun, “Predator Effect,” 274.

⁵⁹ Nabeel Khoury is a nonresident Senior Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. “Nabeel Khoury,” *Atlantic Council*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/experts/list/nabeel-khoury>.

⁶⁰ Juliane von Mittelstaedt, “Operation Scorched Earth: A US Hand in Yemen's Civil War,” *Spiegel Online*, December 3, 2010, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/operation-scorched-earth-a-us-hand-in-yemen-s-civil-war-a-732734.html>.

⁶¹ Nabeel A. Khoury, “Yemen: In Search of a Coherent U.S. Policy,” *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 2 (2014): 100-110.

⁶² Stephen Day is an adjunct professor at Rollins College. “Stephen W Day,” *Al-Jazeera*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/profile/stephen-w-day.html>.

⁶³ Khoury, “Yemen.”

newspaper *al-Ayam*. Bashraheel was arrested by a U.S. trained Counter Terrorism Unit on charges of aiding terrorists, after having simply published columns that were critical of the president's policies in south Yemen.⁶⁴ Fortunately, the question of potentially erroneous tactics in the War on Terror in Yemen has been raised in the United States by politicians at the highest level. Regarding the case of AQAP leader al-Qadhi who was killed on November 7, 2012, in a drone strike on his house, Gregory Johnsen⁶⁵ reported that "Senator McCain asks in a committee hearing, why, given that al-Qadhi was living openly in his house, did the U.S. not seek to capture him?"⁶⁶

Conclusion

The Houthi phenomenon in Yemen has its roots in popular resistance to the policies and corruption of the Yemeni government, to which the Zaydi Shi'ism of the al-Houthi family led movement gives a politico-religious dimension. Despite the religious rhetoric and the amalgamation of political and religious themes that drives the Houthi movement, history attests to the possibility of peaceful and civic incorporation of the Zaydis within a republican framework, provided that they are afforded some degree of autonomy and heard at the national level. To paint the Houthis with the same brush as al-Qaeda and other militant extremists involved in asymmetric warfare against the West would be a gross generalization and inaccurate in that the Houthis, like Zaydis in general, are not interested in a long-term battle for global domination but are instead locally oriented and see their struggle as one of self-defense and justice in a Yemeni political context. The attempts to portray the Houthis as terrorists by the Yemeni regime are, in fact, a deliberate campaign of misinformation conducted by the regime in order to justify increasingly oppressive and undemocratic domestic policies. The political elite of Yemen does whatever it can to hold on to power while the Yemeni society

⁶⁴ Khoury, "Yemen."

⁶⁵ "Gregory D. Johnsen, a former Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University." "Gregory D. Johnsen," *The Jamestown Foundation*, accessed March 24, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/analyst/gregory-d-johnsen/>.

⁶⁶ Khoury, "Yemen."

disintegrates into its constituent components, which have historically been tribes, clans, and other kinship groups.

The support for the regime by the Saudi led coalition and the United States as the sole source of stability needs to be reevaluated in the face of untold suffering inflicted upon the civilian population. The current situation in the country is simply untenable, and to continue to prop up a corrupt, ineffective regime will only result in further destruction of a nation that is already among the poorest in the world. The fact that the government of Yemen also operates chiefly on the basis of tribalism, and patronage is enough reason to question the degree of stability it will be able to provide if it were ever to overcome the deep-seated resistance of the population. Also, the methods employed by the militarily much stronger coalition backing president Hadi, and their humanitarian consequences must be taken into account while formulating foreign policies in the region. It is highly unlikely that devastating violence meted out on an innocent civilian population will increase the popularity of the United States in the region, and it can be argued that such actions can only create more desperation and hatred among the people bearing the brunt of suffering under the U.S. manufactured bombs. Even if those bombs are dropped by Saudi Arabia or other Muslim countries, the United States will be considered guilty by association as long as shrapnel of grenades, missiles, and unexploded cluster bombs are clearly “made in the U.S.A.” While the scorched-earth policy of the government and its foreign backers may be expedient in the eyes of the regime, it is unlikely to solve any problems in the region. According to a report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for human Rights (OHCHR), at least 4,773 civilians have been killed and another 8,272 have been injured in Yemen since March 26, 2015 (including only those casualties that have been confirmed as civilians). In addition, approximately 21 million Yemenis (representing 82 percent of the population) “are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.”⁶⁷ Continued bombing and other forms of military intervention are likely to produce more dead bodies, devastation, and ultimately, resistance. The resistance will be

⁶⁷ “Over 100 Civilians Killed in a Month, Including Fishermen, Refugees, as Yemen Conflict Reaches Two-Year Mark,” *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, March 24, 2017, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21444&LangID=E>.

Yemen and the Houthi Rebellion

directed at both the Hadi regime as well as its international supporters. Yemen burns, and the failure to re-evaluate US foreign policy and arms deals in the light of the reality on the ground makes a mockery of our democratic ideals of freedom and justice.

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