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DRIVERS OF THE ḤOUTHĪ CONFLICT IN YEMEN

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Introduction

The *Ḥouthī* conflict in Yemen evolved from a regional phenomenon to a multi-layered civil war along sectarian and tribalist lines¹. It began in the early 2000s with the *Ḥouthī* revivalist movement, named after their leader Husseyn Bin Badr al-Dīn al-Huthī (1956-2004 CE), a *Zaydī* (Fiver Shī'ī) *sheikh* from the *Ṣa'dah* province, challenging the perceived marginalisation of the *Zaydī*'s religious culture, addressing corruption and poverty^{2,3}. Husseyn al-Ḥouthī, from the *Hashemite* clan (traditional mediators "between local tribes" of Yemen), derived his role as the *Ḥouthī*'s leader from his "status as a *sayyid*", descending from imam Husseyn, grandson of the prophet Muḥammad^{4 5}.

An unclear incident between the nascent *Ḥouthī* movement and the *Ṣa'dah* governor led to an initial, armed escalation⁶. Today, the *Ḥouthīs*, with their "tens-of-thousand-strong militia", are driven by ideas setting them against state corruption, against *Salafī* challengers and portraying *Zaydī* Islam as the core constituent of Yemeni national identity⁷. The *Ḥouthīs*, relying on their militias, in 2014 took the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, with the support

¹ Al-Daba, 2013, ii; see Watson, 2016, 9-10; see Maktary & Smith, 2018b, 12-15

² see Maktary & Smith, 2018b, 12-15; see Al-Daba, 2013, ii; UN Sec. Council, 2017, 6-7; Maktary & Smith, 2018b, 12-15

³ *Zaidī Shī'ī* Islam is "doctrinally different" than "Twelver" *Shī'ī* Islam and close to Sunnism (Boucek, 2010, 3-4). However, *Zaidī* identity, according to the *Ḥouthīs*' interpretation, is to be saved from "*Sunni* oppression" (see Watson, 2016, 9-10; ICG, 2016, 7; see Boucek, 2010, 3-4).

⁴ ICG, 2009, 5-6; Glosemeyer, 2004, 45-46; Winter, 2012, 67-69

⁵ His father Badr al-Dīn, had already authored *Zaydī* "awakening literature", but Husseyn al-Ḥouthī was more zealous (Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010c, 114-115). He founded the group Believing Youth in the 1990s (Al-Akwaa, 2017, 119-120).

⁶ see Al-Daba, 2013, 1; see Glosemeyer, 2004, 44-45

⁷ see ICG, 2016, 5-7; ICG, 2016, i-ii; see Blecua, 2015, 5-7

of former president ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Sāleḥ’s network of allies⁸. A Saudi-led coalition is fighting the *Ḥouthīs*.

Zaidism: Between Sunnī and Shī‘ī Islam

The *Zaydī Shī‘īs* make up between 30 and 45 percent of the total Yemeni population, 99 percent of which is Muslim, with more than half *Shāfi‘ī Sunnīs*⁹. *Zaydī* scholars, after the 10th century CE, balanced their school of thought’s ideas with tribal custom (*‘urf qābīlī*) and came to use traditional hadith collections with regard to legal opinions (*fatawa*)¹⁰. The *Zaydī* school of law (*madhab*) became less speculative or rationalist and has been, overall, very close to *Shāfi‘ī* Islam¹¹ ¹². Both the *Sunnīs* and the *Zaydīyah* have been challenged by Salafists since the 1980s¹³. The latter have been equating the *Ḥouthīs* with *Ja‘farī Shī‘īs*¹⁴. In turn, the *Ḥouthīs* have been deploring “*Sunnification*”¹⁵. The *Zaydī*-majority *Ṣa’dah* province used to constitute the northern Yemeni “power centre”¹⁶. *Zaydīs* used to govern over Yemen for a millenium until the 1962 Yemeni revolution¹⁷.

Sectarian Polarisation as a Cause of the Conflict

The *Ḥouthīs* assume that state policy under the republican government was anti-*Zaydī*¹⁸. In fact, the government did promote an amount of religious change in view of a more harmonious citizen society¹⁹. This, however, led to “discontents” among *Zaydīs*, claiming “sectarian marginali[s]ation”, and this since the revolution of 1962 against the *Zaydī* imamate, after which, for instance, *Zaydī* schools were closed down²⁰. Since 2005,

⁸ see FPRI, 2012, 2-3; see SWP, 2015, 1 & 2-3

⁹ see ETH CSS, 2015, 2-3; see ITIC, 2009, 4; see Edwards, 2016, 39; see Hamidi, 2009, 166-67

¹⁰ King, 2012, 405-406 & 408-412

¹¹ see King, 2012, 408-12; see Al-Akwaa, 2017, 1; ICG, 2009, i

¹² According to *Zaydī* tradition, the *imam*, drawn from the *sayyid* families, is a more worldly figure than in *Ja‘farī Shī‘ī* Islam and has to fulfil a number of requirements (see Glosemeyer, 2004, 45; see Hamidi, 2009, 166-67)

¹³ see ETH CSS, 2015, 2-3; see ICG, 2009, 7).

¹⁴ see ICG, 2009, 7

¹⁵ ICG, 2009, 7

¹⁶ Amber, 1999, 24

¹⁷ ICG, 2009, 5-6

¹⁸ Al-Daba, 2013, ii

¹⁹ King, 2012, 408-12; Al-Daba, 2013, 5

²⁰ Al-Daba, 2013, 5, 6-7 & 9-10; Yousefpour, Masoumi e.a., 2017, 258

there were reports that *Zaydī* books had been seized, the state favoured *Zaydī* prayer leaders²¹.

What is more, the puritan Islamic way of *Wahhābism* was promulgated in the *Ṣa'dah* province since the late 1970s, a development which the *Houthīs* viewed as a “threat”²². As a response, Ḥusseyṇ al-Dīn al-Ḥouthī “advocated revivalism and published numerous treatises denouncing *Wahhābism*”²³ ²⁴. Many researchers see sectarian ideology as the driving force of the *Houthī* conflict²⁵.

The Truth Party as a *Houthī* Predecessor

In 1990, North and South Yemen were unified, political parties were permitted and *Zaydīs* founded the Truth Party (*Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq*)²⁶. But the party was divided into a mainstream wing, a moderate wing and one radical²⁷. Overall, it did not alleviate the grievances of the *Zaydīs*, in the eyes of the conservative as well as the more vehement factions²⁸. Especially contentious was the question of the re-institution of an *imam*²⁹. Ḥusseyṇ al-Ḥouthī left the party and, as the leader of the Believing Youth (*Shabāb al-Mu'mīn*), tried much to redefine the *Zaydī* political struggle³⁰ ³¹.

²¹ Novak, 2010, 15

²² ICG, 2009, 8-9; Al-Daba, 2013, 6-7

²³ ICG, 2009, 5-6

²⁴ Just like the *Wahhābī* had been backed, the *Houthī* movement was, at first, assisted by the government to “counter-balance the proliferation of” *Salafī* groups (see King, 2012, 412-14; see FPRI, 2012, 2-3; ICG, 2009, 5-6; see Hamidi, 2009, 166-167; see ITIC, 2009, 5: 10)

²⁵ Having stopped its support, the government began to accuse the *Houthīs* of rebellion and sedition (*fitna*) and by magnifying the perceived *Shi'a* element in the *Houthī* discourses (see Hamidi, 2009, 174; see King, 2012, 438-41). However, actors supporting the *Houthīs* have also been “motivated by multiple, mostly non-ideological factors” (ICG, 2009, 5).

²⁶ see ICG, 2009, 5-6

²⁷ see Al-Daba, 2013, 2

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ see Glosemeyer, 2004, 46

³⁰ see Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010b, 94-96; see Al-Daba, 2013, ii

³¹ The new movement organised “informal” student groups with “mundane ... after-school” projects and held summer camps where young *Zaydīs* could engage in religious and “cultural awareness programmes” which “cross[ed] social divides”. They “provided the intellectual basis for the [group’s] mobilizational activities”. The syllabi of these projects and programmes “provided the associational setting for a specifically *Zaydī* identity among *Ṣa'dah*’s adolescent and young adult males (see Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010b, 98-101; see Al-Daba, 2013, 7-8). New media technologies played a major role in the said mobilisation campaigns, such as “media interviews [and] chants, videos, web site[s] and web forums (see Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010d, 218). The propagational “output ... portrayed the group as [that of] religious warriors” (Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010d, 225-226).

Other Drivers of the Conflict

According to the UN Development Program (UNDP), a mere 54 percent of Yemenis are literate and 35 percent are unemployed³². This has led to poverty (55 percent) and food shortages “despite significant economic and development support”³³. The share of the young population is non-proportionally high, public service has suffered, and resources to compensate are scarce³⁴. “With a growing number of parties competing for a shrinking pool of assets, the incentives for dissension and armed insurrection show few signs of subsiding”³⁵. Under-development has hence contributed to the crisis leading to the *Houthi* conflict³⁶. Besides economic restraints, regionalism plays a major role. The Ṣa’dah region specifically had been marginalised since the revolution of 1962³⁷.

The conflict was then triggered by the arrest of Husseyn al-Ḥouthī and ensuing protests by followers among the Believing Youth³⁸. But the war became complex and gave “rise to a war economy” with “tribal leaders and senior officials” selling piles of weapons, and the conflict continued after al-Ḥouthī had been killed³⁹.

“Some [researchers] suggest that the war also reflects a power struggle within the ruling elite, with players “using one side or the other to bolster their position[s]”⁴⁰. Evidence that the *Houthi* conflict is mainly a proxy war between Saudi-Arabia and Iran is scarce⁴¹. Iranian support is difficult to evaluate and might well be a small factor in a complex setting, contrary to the impact the Ṣāleḥ network has had in the conflict⁴². “[The] primary drivers of tension and conflict in Yemen are local”^{43 44}.

³² Edwards, 2016, 39

³³ ECFR, 2015, 2-3; FPRI, 2012, 1-2

³⁴ FPRI, 2012, 1-2

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ see Al-Daba, 2013, 2; see Al-Daba, 2013, 10-11

³⁷ see ICG, 2009, i & 8

³⁸ ICG, 2009, i; ICG, 2009, 3

³⁹ see ICG, 2009, i; iii & 3

⁴⁰ ICG, 2009, 5

⁴¹ ICG, 2009, i; Maktary & Smith, 2018b, 17

⁴² see Blecua, 2015, 3-4; see ETH CSS, 2015, 2-3; Al-Akwaa, 2017, 124-125

⁴³ Salisbury, 2015, 1

⁴⁴ It seems indisputable that the *Houthi*s’ rhetoric, which stems from statements made and writings authored by Husseyn al-Ḥouthī, in many instances mirroring Iranian revolutionary principles, and the *Houthi*s established charity and health institutions similar to those of the Lebanese Hezbollah (see Salisbury, 2015, 1; Yousefpour, Masoumi e.a., 259; see ICG, 2009, 3 & 17). From the Saudi position in terms of realpolitik, the *Houthi*s’ arsenal of arms “constitutes an apparent threat to Yemen and its neighbouring countries’ stability” (see Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2014, 2-3; ICG, 2016, i-ii)

Topical Developments

Not long ago, talks “led to speculation about a ... federated state”⁴⁵. *Houthīs* as well as government representatives have led sharp, aggressive rhetoric⁴⁶. On the other hand, *Houthīs* demanded “the formation of an inclusive government” comprising the Southern *al-Hirak*⁴⁷. Any future option will require rebuilding and reconciliation⁴⁸. A previous proposition to reorganise Yemen into six main regions was opposed by both the South and the *Houthīs*⁴⁹. However, this agreement does not indicate that the suspicion of southern, Sunni populations against the *Houthīs* has faltered⁵⁰.

Conclusion

The *Houthī* conflict is one with many facets, ranging from tensions around Yemen’s resources, religious and military disputed to political quarrels between elites and the populations in the framework of tribal and contemporary social networks⁵¹. The conflict reflects a divide between the peripheral *Ṣa’dah* province and the central government, involving a multitude of power balances, as well as one between the *Zaydī* minority and the *Sunnī* majority, testifying of “failed management of religious pluralism”⁵². *Houthī* ideology has been a transmission belt, framing *Zaydī* disgruntlement and mobilising the movement’s adherents⁵³. In 2004, the conflict turned violent and, subsequently, destructive on Yemen’s populated areas, economy and infrastructure.

⁴⁵ SWP, 2015, 2-3; see Orkaby, 2015, 5-6

⁴⁶ Blecua, 2015, 1-2

⁴⁷ SWP, 2015, 2-3

⁴⁸ see ITIC, 2009, 5-6

⁴⁹ ETH CSS, 2015, 1-2; see ECFR, 2015, 2-3; see Maktary & Smith, 2018b, 12-15

⁵⁰ see SSI, 2015, 1

⁵¹ see ICG, 2009, i

⁵² *ibid*

⁵³ see Al-Daba, 2013, 7-8

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