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Fragile State: Yemen in Conflict

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Since 2004, the Yemeni government has unsuccessfully attempted to put down by force a growing rebellion in the country's northern highlands. The conflict initially pitted the government against a small group of religious revivalists, the Houthis, in the province of Saada. But it has since expanded to neighboring provinces and has drawn in previously uninvolved parties, including the Saudi Arabian military.

The conflict is often referred to as a “Shiite rebellion,” but this description misses the fact that Yemen's Shiites, who represent around 40 percent of the population, are in fact adherents of Zaydism, a small branch of Shiite Islam endemic to Yemen. Calling the conflict a “Zaydi rebellion” may be more accurate, but this label presumes a single, fixed Zaydi identity, and thus is misleading too: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and much of his inner circle, as well as many critics of the Houthis, are at least nominally Zaydi as well.

Other descriptions of the conflict emphasize regional politics, framing it as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis' direct involvement and their support for the Yemeni government give some credence to this explanation. Yemeni government accusations of Iranian involvement—though still unofficial—have become more forceful, boosting the odds that the conflict could develop into a true proxy war. However, while foreign influences play an important role in sustaining the conflict, they are not its main driver.

The conflict in fact is rooted primarily in domestic politics. It is a result of long-standing government policies aimed at keeping the tribal

areas weak and divided. The Houthis represent a real challenge to the way the center rules the periphery in northern Yemen and in the nation as a whole. This should not be taken to mean that the rebels seek to take over the country, but rather that the emergence and resilience of the violence are symptomatic of deeper problems in the way the central government has maintained control over Saada province and other tribal regions.

BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

The history of the modern Zaydi revivalist movement—which at first called itself the Believing Youth (*al-Shabab al-Mu'min*), and then came to be called the Houthis—can be organized around two major political events. One, Yemeni unification, was domestic; the other, the Iraq War that began in 2003, was regional.

The 1990 unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen, whose rule in the nineteenth century had been divided by imams and the Ottoman Empire) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen, which had once been under British control) resulted in a new constitution that guaranteed freedom of speech and association. This allowed groups such as the Believing Youth (BY) to arise.

By 2003, as war in Iraq began to appear inevitable, the BY was mirroring two trends that were also growing elsewhere in the region: opposition to US intervention, and Shiite assertiveness. Emboldened by popular hostility toward the Iraq War and by the reassertion of religious identity in Iraq, the BY refused to muzzle its anti-American sloganeering and began openly defying government authority in Saada province. In the summer of 2004, the Yemeni government, unable to co-opt the movement and wary of losing support from regional and international backers, attempted to put down the movement by force.

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Zaydism actually had been the state religion in Yemen for more than 1,000 years, until 1962. The government was organized as an imamate that limited rule to sayyids (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, through his grandchildren Hassan and Hussein) who fulfilled certain conditions. Yemen's longtime capital was in the northern province of Saada; the present capital of Sanaa only gained that status in the 1700s. The relocation of the capital was followed by a "Sunnification" trend that gave non-sayyids a greater voice in shaping Zaydi doctrine. Political power, however, remained centered around the sayyid imam.

In 1962, military leaders inspired by Egypt's Free Officers Movement seized power in North Yemen and declared an end to the imamate, replacing it with a constitutional republic. Supporters of the imamate (royalists) in Saada province rebelled, and with support from Saudi Arabia held out for a number of years against Egyptian troops (sent to support the Yemeni coup) and Egyptian-backed republican forces.

The rise to power of the current president, Saleh, in 1978 cemented the decline of sayyid influence, for although he is Zaydi he is not from a sayyid family. By the 1980s, Yemen's erstwhile cultural and political capital of Saada had become peripheral to the nation's political life and was largely excluded from the government's modest development and modernization program.

The influence of Zaydism was further eroded by the influx of Sunni Wahhabi ideas from neighboring Saudi Arabia that began in the 1980s and expanded in 1990. In that year, some three quarters of a million Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia were deported by that country as a result of tacit Yemeni government support for Iraq in the first Gulf war. Many of the returning Yemenis had acquired Wahhabi—or, more generally speaking, Salafi—sympathies or practices while living in Saudi Arabia.

Salafism advocates a return to the pure faith of early Islam. Clear and logical in its doctrine, it communicates an egalitarian message that was well received by many opposed to Zaydism's sayyid exceptionalism; meanwhile, its political quietism and obedience were appealing to the Yemeni government. The expansion of Salafism into the Zaydi heartland and its open hostility toward other forms of Islam (including Shiite Islam and Zaydism) were important factors in motivating and radicalizing the Zaydi revivalism of the 1990s.

The BY began as summer study sessions at which willing youths were taught various aspects of Zaydi doctrine. The group, initially operating from a small classroom on the outskirts of Saada city, within a few years had established centers in all districts of Saada as well as in neighboring provinces. As the group grew, it bolstered its religious and political credentials by bringing prominent Zaydi figures into its administrative council. Soon, however, internal disagreements arose regarding the study centers' curriculum and goals, eventually causing the group to split into a liberal and a conservative wing. The latter, aligned with the prominent sayyid scholar Badr al-Din al-Houthi, retained control over most centers.

By the end of the 1990s, Badr al-Din al-Houthi's son Hussein had become the main figure in the BY. He was elected in 1994 as one of only two members of parliament from the Zaydi party Hizb al-Haqq, but he quit politics a few years later and moved to Sudan to earn a master's degree in Koranic studies. Upon returning to Yemen in 2000, he began giving lectures that were delivered in plain language and disseminated in recorded and printed form at BY centers.

Hussein al-Houthi, described as charismatic, thoughtful, and able to connect with the marginalized residents of Saada province, acquired a loyal group of followers. His thought—a mix of nationalism, traditional Zaydism, and pan-Islamism—addressed local social and economic concerns with references both to the Koran and to current events. Although Houthi was critical of conditions in Yemen, he did not directly attack the government.

A SLOGAN TO LIVE BY

In 2002, the BY accepted Houthi's proposal to adopt as its official slogan "Allahu Akbar! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory for Islam!" In January 2003 President Saleh, en route to the Hajj in Mecca, made a stop-over in Saada for Friday prayers. There, chants of this slogan drowned out his attempts to address assembled worshippers. Despite the provincial government's prohibition of the slogan's use, Houthi's followers subsequently chanted it in the presence of the American ambassador, prompting him to raise the issue with the Yemeni authorities.

The sloganeering came at a time when the Yemeni government faced tense protests denouncing the impending war in Iraq. A March 2003 demonstration, at which some in the crowd were chanting "Death to America," resulted in two

deaths and various injuries. The Yemeni president himself criticized US policy in public, but he was reluctant to allow such opinions to be voiced by others—especially after April 2003, when individuals suspected of responsibility for the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole escaped from Yemeni custody.

When the slogan reached the capital, the central government reacted forcefully. On June 18, 2004, hundreds of people were detained for chanting the slogan outside the Great Mosque of Sanaa following Friday prayers. Houthi was ordered to appear before the president within 24 hours. When he failed to do so, security services were sent to Saada to arrest him—only to be ambushed when attempting to enter the province's Haydan district. On June 20, Saleh ordered airstrikes against purported Houthi strongholds in the district.

For nearly three months, Houthi and a group of his hard-core followers held out against overwhelming military force. Houthi, eventually isolated in the mountains of western Saada province, was killed in September of 2004, and this ended the first round of fighting. Major crackdowns on his sympathizers ensued, and Houthi's father (Badr al-Din al-Houthi) was summoned to the capital and placed under virtual house arrest. Some months later, the elderly Houthi left the capital, and a second round of clashes broke out in Saada soon thereafter.

The conflict has yet to be conclusively resolved; periodic cease-fires have been marred by intermittent skirmishes and mutual recriminations. The scope and intensity of the conflict have increased with each successive iteration, and various groups with grievances unrelated to the initial clashes have gotten involved.

The sixth, most recent round of fighting began in August 2009, when the government announced a scorched-earth policy and vowed to fight until the Houthi problem was definitively resolved. In February 2010, however, following Saudi military intervention—and with more than 150,000 Yemeni citizens having been displaced over six months of fighting—the government announced another cease-fire, without having achieved its stated goals.

RIYADH AND TEHRAN

From the outset, worries about foreign influence in Yemeni affairs have figured prominently

in the conflict. This can be seen, for example, in the BY slogan: Besides indicating admiration for the Iranian Revolution (a source of similar slogans), it also reflected concern about perceived external threats represented by America and Israel. The prominence that the slogan attained, as well as the government's crackdown against it, cannot be disassociated from regional events, particularly the Iraq War. The quick overthrow of the Iraqi government in 2003 and that country's ensuing sectarian tensions heightened the Saleh government's concerns about overt anti-Americanism and Shiite assertiveness.

Also, Hussein al-Houthi's lectures often mentioned foreign plots to take over Yemen and weaken the Muslim community. When the government first launched attacks against Houthi strongholds in 2004, Houthi saw this as part of a conspiracy originating from abroad, and sent the president a letter informing him of this belief.

As fighting expanded, the Yemeni government began losing control over parts of Saada. In 2009, heavy fighting erupted along the border with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh grew concerned about instability along its border, and also about the effect that Houthi control of this area might have on its own Shiite (though not Zaydi) population living not far from

Saada province.

The Houthis did not initially view Saudi Arabia as their main foreign threat, but as the conflict has evolved—and particularly following Saudi military intervention—the Houthis have increasingly highlighted the Saudi role. They have criticized the Saudi regime both for providing the cash-strapped Saleh government with aid to fight the rebellion and for what they see as the kingdom's sectarian agenda of spreading Wahhabism in the Zaydi heartland.

The Yemeni government, for its part, has from the beginning hinted that foreign Shiite groups were using the Houthis to spread their influence. These accusations, particularly those directed at Iran, became especially pointed once the Saudi government (a major rival of Tehran in the region) became more deeply involved. On November 3, 2009, on the eve of Saudi military intervention in Yemen, the Saudi-owned satellite ArabSat unexpectedly stopped transmitting the Iranian Arabic-language news channel Al Alam. ArabSat

Politics on the Arabian peninsula is becoming increasingly polarized between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

cited contractual breaches for the decision, but Al Alam's strong criticisms of Saudi policy, particularly regarding the conflict in Yemen, were more likely behind the decision.

For the most part, however, the Yemeni government has strived to maintain friendly relations with Iran, and has always qualified as unofficial the allegations of Iranian support for the Houthis. The government, whether out of genuine concern or because of Saudi pressure, claimed in October 2009 that it had intercepted an Iranian ship in Yemeni waters, laden with weapons destined for the Houthis. Iran and the Houthis were both quick to deny the allegation. A planned visit by the Iranian foreign minister was subsequently cancelled due to Saleh's "concerns." It is clear that Iran's political class and media support the Houthis, but charges of official material support have yet to be fully substantiated.

TENSIONS IN THE FAITH

The extent to which outside countries are involved in the Yemeni conflict is wrapped up with one of Zaydism's characteristic features—the tension between its doctrinal flexibility (it is often called "Shiite Sunnism" or "Sunni Shiism") and its historical origins as an armed resistance against injustice. Zayd bin Ali, the founder of Zaydism, took up arms against the ruling Umayyad dynasty and in the year 740 was killed in battle. His combination of religious erudition and battle skill would later develop into requirements of potential Zaydi imams. The uprising he led would also become codified in the Zaydi notion of *khuruj* (publicly rising up against an unjust ruler), a duty incumbent on all prospective imams.

The 1990s split within the Believing Youth was symptomatic of interpretive disagreement among some of Zaydism's most prominent voices. Conservative Zaydi doctrine, with the imamate as the chosen form of government and the requirement to rise up against injustice, does not square well with contemporary Yemen, which at least in theory is a democratic republic. Because of this, many Zaydi scholars sought ways to make some of the branch's more stringent tenets compatible with Yemen's post-1962 reality.

For instance, *khuruj*, which is to be carried out by force, was reinterpreted by some in the 1990s as something that takes place at the ballot box. Although some accepted that the doctrine of the imamate should be given up in favor of democracy, thinkers of a more traditional bent—

including Badr al-Din al-Houthi—held that the doctrine can be interpreted to fit into modernity instead of being abandoned. To them, fully renouncing the imamate would be tantamount to abandoning Zaydism. Their critics, however, regard this view as an indication that the Houthis oppose democracy and intend to restore the imamate.

Given the liberal form of Zaydism practiced by most Yemenis, some have characterized Houthi unwillingness to make concessions on certain conservative tenets as further indication of their subservience to a foreign agenda. These detractors emphasize the Houthis' connection to an early branch of Zaydism (*Jarudiyya*) that is historically linked to Imamism (the most prevalent branch of Shiite Islam—practiced in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and parts of the Arabian Gulf).

The critics also point to specific religious practices, carried out by Imamists and revived in Yemen by the Houthis, to suggest both intransigence and Imamist tendencies among the Houthis. In addition, they mention visits to Iran made by members of the BY, the Houthis' interest in Imami thought, and their sloganeering. As a result, the language of sectarianism and of Sunni-Shiite competition has become prevalent in explaining the conflict.

Many in the moderate branch that split from the BY in the mid-1990s have sided with the government against the Houthis. This, combined with the Houthi belief that the Saleh regime is complicit in spreading Wahhabism, lends support to the idea that some in their ranks believe that the future of Zaydism is at stake in this conflict. Although the violence has drawn in many actors who have no firm ideological commitment to either side, the Houthi hard core likely see their project as Zaydism's last stand. Moderate Zaydis fear for the future of Zaydism as well, but their fear is based on the possibility that the Houthis will drown out their voices and push Zaydism in a direction incongruous with contemporary Yemen.

THE WEAK CENTER

To some degree, the Yemeni government's overreaction to Hussein al-Houthi's defiance was caused by a real fear that the Houthis would consolidate power in Saada province and create a state within a state. In fact, one of the main sticking points regarding previous cease-fire agreements has been the government's insistence that the

Houthis lay down their weapons, lest they become an armed political party akin to Hezbollah.

It is not unheard of for armed groups to take over some state functions in Yemen's tribal areas, and residents often use forceful means—such as kidnapping—to extract concessions from the government. These actions, however, are generally organized around kinship and are not carried out on the basis of ideology. The state usually resolves grievances by purchasing loyalty rather than by exerting force, a delicate policy that has kept the regime in power for many years.

The Houthis themselves are in many ways a product of government policies in the tribal regions. Throughout the 1990s, the BY flourished in part because of its role in the indirect rule practiced by the government. Specifically, the BY became a tool to help the regime weaken tribal alliances, the Wahhabi movement, and other groups such as the Sunni party *Islah*, the Socialists, and even the Zaydi party *Hizb al-Haqq*.

Subsequently, for reasons such as the ruling party's success in reversing the opposition's electoral gains in 1997 elections, as well as the decline of Yemen's Salafi movement following the death of its main leader in 2001, the regime became less interested in using the BY as a counterbalance. Meanwhile, the failure of the moderate Zaydi revivalist camp to garner public support allowed the BY to grow stronger. By the time the Iraq War broke out, the government had lost control over the BY and no longer had an effective counterbalance in the north.

The government's former encouragement of the Houthis does not alone explain the group's strength. Hussein al-Houthi himself played a major role in the movement's growth. His loyal followers, even under torture, called out his name and refused to denounce him. His death on the battlefield while providing resistance despite insurmountable odds fits nicely in the Shiite and particularly the Zaydi canon of martyrdom.

When fighting expanded, particularly in 2007, the government attempted to enlist tribal groups to help fight the Houthis. New groups were drawn in by issues unrelated to the initial fighting, including long-standing tribal disputes, revenge killings, and self-protection. The war economy provided new opportunities for unemployed youths and gave some an incentive to perpetuate

the conflict. The expansion of the fighting, though not necessarily deliberate policy, cannot be dissociated from the way the central government has behaved in the region.

The conflict has also exposed inconsistencies in Yemen's form of democracy. The government, when it raises the issue of hereditary rule in the context of the imamate, is forced to contend with the fact that the president, who has been in power for over 30 years, is grooming his son to succeed him. The Saleh regime's claims that it is protecting democracy and the values of the republic are increasingly falling on deaf ears, and the government's inability to provide security in the area has further eroded its credibility. Jockeying for power within the ruling elite has also had an impact on the battlefield in Saada province, with different government factions accused of arming the rebels to undermine one another.

A strong form of federalism might help resolve both of Yemen's political crises—the Saada conflict and a conflict involving the Southern Movement, which is fighting for greater autonomy in the country's southern provinces. Federalism could also address to some extent Houthi concerns about minority rights. Yet the implementation of federalism seems highly unlikely, in part because Saudi Arabia

would strongly oppose granting institutionalized autonomy to the northern highlands. The Saudis would fear the establishment of a quasi-imamate in the region that could not be properly managed by an increasingly “tribalized” Yemeni government. Furthermore, it is unlikely the Houthis would lay down their arms except as part of a grand bargain that would also include the Southern Movement.

THE RISING RISKS

The Yemeni government, by working to strengthen state-sponsored Zaydism, forging stronger links with Saudi Arabia, and consolidating its power through force, is attempting to assert direct control over an area that so far it has only been able to manage through a delicate balance of patronage networks. Such a policy may succeed, provided that the government can co-opt enough Houthi backers, contain the ancillary fighting, and strengthen the central government. As things stand now, neither strong federalism nor a strong central government seems likely to develop.

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The fragile Yemeni government has been accused of keeping the Houthi conflict simmering in order to draw international support and financial assistance, a large part of which goes directly to members of the political and military elite. Also, as tribal factions with long-standing grievances have entered the fray for various reasons, it may be that the government is attempting to transform the violence into “tribal fighting” in the hope that the tribes can help end a conflict that the state has been unable to resolve on its own.

The effect so far, however, has been to broaden the fighting and make it more difficult to contain. And the conflict has wrought a humanitarian disaster that makes the government look negligent if not criminal. Since 2004, the fighting has displaced up to 300,000 Yemenis, more than half of them fleeing the most recent round of violence. Much of Saada province has been destroyed and reconstruction has been slow to take off. Meanwhile, the expansion of the conflict and increased accusations of Iranian intervention could well result in a greater internationalization of the violence.

The Houthis claim to be fighting primarily in self-defense and for the protection of their right to free speech and religious practice. For example, before fighting broke out, Hussein al-Houthi agreed to stop using the group’s slogan on the condition that a law be passed prohibiting its use; otherwise, he claimed, he and his followers were acting within their constitutional right to free speech.

Since the outbreak of violence, however, Houthi rhetoric has turned further against the government, particularly against its use of indiscriminate force and the region’s humanitarian crisis. At the same time, the internationalization of the conflict has been mirrored by an internationalization of Houthi rhetoric, which is now cast in the language of universal rights and includes appeals to international norms.

Fears that this seemingly intractable conflict may bring about a major transformation in Yemen may be overblown. The country and particularly its northern highlands have been a contested area for centuries, and the current conflict may be nothing but a new chapter in this long history.

However, with the future of Zaydism, the regional balance of power, and Yemen’s domestic politics all in flux, this conflict may prove to have more of an impact than past ones.

Zaydism, as mentioned, has been polarized by moderate voices that are seen as subservient to the government and conservative ones seen as radical and beholden to a wholly different branch of Shiite Islam. Politics on the Arabian peninsula is also becoming increasingly polarized between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with Yemen running the risk of becoming a theater for the two powers to undermine one another.

Over the short and medium term, the Yemeni government will be forced to confront various structural challenges, including resource constraints (oil and water) and socioeconomic pressures (population growth, illiteracy, and unemployment). More immediately, the government faces political and security pressures on three separate fronts: the Houthis in the north, the separatist movement in the south, and Al Qaeda in the country’s southern and eastern provinces.

The separatist movement has for the most part aired its grievances in a peaceful manner. The conflict with the Houthis, despite occasional clashes, has been contained since the February 2010 truce, and attempts are again under way to reach a negotiated settlement. Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, on the other hand, has increased its attacks against Yemeni security forces and on the country’s vital infrastructure. After years of unsuccessfully attempting to put down the Houthis by force, the government appears to be shifting its efforts toward rooting out Al Qaeda. That group’s recent attempt to deliver mail bombs to the United States has highlighted the government’s difficulties in preventing terrorists from using the country as a base for global activities.

Al Qaeda, however, is far from Yemen’s only problem, and although the Saada conflict is no longer the focus of attention, it runs the risk of reigniting at any moment. Given the other challenges facing the increasingly overstretched state, reaching a settlement in this long-standing conflict is as important as ever. ■

*The rebels’ official slogan is
“Allahu Akbar! Death to America!
Death to Israel! Curse the Jews!
Victory for Islam!”*
