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**The Houthi Insurrection in Yemen: Shedding light on the Problem of  
Minorities in the Middle East**

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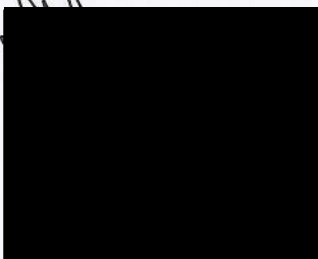
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It is worth mentioning that this thesis was written in Hamra street coffee shops.

The Houthi Insurrection in Yemen: Shedding light on the Problem of Minorities in the  
Middle East

Hani Anouti

Abstract

Despite growing academic interest in the subject, our current understanding of minorities' issues in the Middle East is far from satisfactory. This thesis sheds light on the principal minority group in Yemen: namely the Zaydi minority, with a special focus on the Houthi tribe (whose members by and large subscribe to the Zaydi sect). It more specifically addresses the Houthi insurrection against the Yemeni state. The relationship between the Yemeni state and the Zaydis/Houthis will be examined in the context of the political, tribal, religious, cultural and economic milieu of Yemen. The conflict's regional dimension will be also taken into account. The thesis will take the following factors into consideration: Yemen's fragile political system, the unification of Southern and Northern Yemen in 1990 and the recent emergence of the al-Qaeda threat along with the concomitant mobilization of discontented elements in former Southern Yemen. Finally, the thesis explores the significance of socio-economic grievances as a contributing factor to the current insurgency by a section of the Zaydi population, namely the Houthis.

Keywords: Yemen, Minority, Houthi, Zaydis, Conflict.

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## Introduction

After the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic in the north with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south, the Republic of Yemen emerged on the 22nd of May 1990. Since unification, Yemen's destiny seemed jaded from the start, marred by emerging significant political, economic and military events that threatened its survival. A plethora of events shaped Yemen's political future and military panorama, starting with the merge of two different political, social, religious and economical entities; followed by the impacts of the Gulf War in 1990; and ending with the repercussions of the 1994 Yemen civil war. The Houthi wars in the north in parallel with al-Qaeda's increasing bellicosity in the south indicate the main challenges of the emerging fragile state. But the war in Saada between the government and the Houthi rebels remains the most dangerous and significant threat to the central government.

Nowadays, Yemen faces political, religious, social and economic instability. It is also worth noting the low social development indicators such as child malnutrition, maternal mortality, gender disparities, and illiteracy – not to mention the lack of transparency, rule of law, corruption and grave environmental challenges<sup>1</sup>. Yemen is the poorest country in the region, ranked 133 on the Human Development Index<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, 59.5 percent of Yemenis live in poverty; low income rate is at a dismal 29 percent; and 45 percent of Yemenis live on less than two dollars per day. On the humanitarian front, undernourishment rates have hovered steadily at 38 percent; 20 percent of the population dies before reaching the age of 40; and 45.9 percent of

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations Development Programme. (2009). Country Information: Yemen. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Human Development Report. (2010). The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

the population is illiterate<sup>3</sup>. All the mentioned indicators undermine the ability of Yemen to survive peacefully.

Furthermore, similar to all Middle Eastern countries, Yemen's population of nearly 23 million includes a patchwork of minority groups. To some extent, these minorities can threaten the stability of Yemen as well as the surrounding states. In this regard, this thesis aims to deepen our understanding of minorities' issues in the Middle East. This thesis aims to shed light on minority groups in Yemen, namely the Zaydi minority, with a special focus on the Houthi tribe. In this study, the relationship between the Yemeni state and the Zaydis will be examined within the context of the political, tribal, religious, cultural and economic milieu of Yemen by taking into account its regional dimensions (i.e., the regional interferences in Yemen's fractured society). More specifically, this thesis particularly serves to address the Houthis insurrection against the Yemeni state. The Houthis are a tribal/political movement founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi (1956-2004). This study will take the following into consideration: Yemen's fragile political system, recent unification of Southern and Northern Yemen in 1990 and the recent emergence of the al-Qaeda threat with the concomitant mobilization of additional discontented elements in former Southern Yemen.

The significance of this topic stems from the following factors: First, it sheds light on the minority problem in the Middle East and its consequences, whereby minorities sometimes resort to violence as expressions of discontent begin to cascade.

Secondly, the study focuses on the connection between the local and regional perspectives in understanding the causes of the armed conflict between a specific minority and the state. There are important regional dimensions to this conflict as the Houthis are backed by

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States, (2009). Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Region. New York: United Nations Publications.

Iran while the Yemeni government also labors under the aegis of regional and international players, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Thirdly, this paper aims to investigate whether socio-economic grievances are contributing factors to the current insurgency by a section of the Zaydi population, namely the Houthis. In this regard, there is no avoidance of examining the studies on the socio-economic condition of the region inhabited by the Zaydis and the conflicting conclusions of these studies on how unification has augmented the problems of managing Yemen.

Fourth, by examining the reports by the relevant United Nations (UN) bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) about human rights violations, this study addresses the human rights implications of the ongoing conflict in Yemen. It goes without saying that as a result of this conflict, hundreds of Yemenis have lost their lives and thousands became internally-displaced people (IDP), living in adverse conditions.

Fifth, this paper serves to address the lack of national unity and equal opportunities that would otherwise allow minorities to feel part of the state as well as functioning members of society.

Lastly, this thesis sheds light on the international and regional dimensions of the conflict. It focuses on the role played by the United Nations and its specialized bodies in addressing the social repercussion of the conflict, as well as the roles of the United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran. As such, this thesis will be divided into four chapters:

- Chapter One addresses the concept of minorities and focuses on the issue of minorities at large in the Middle East;
- Chapter Two provides background information on the Zaydi faith and the Houthi tribe in Yemen. It will highlight the links between the Zaydis and Houthis and their history,

particularly with regard to their problematic relationship with the Yemeni state since Yemen shed the Imamate and became a republic in 1962;

- Chapter Three focuses on the latest crisis which began in 2004 as a consequence of accumulating problems, manifesting itself in violent conflict between the Zaydis/Houthis and the Yemeni state. This chapter also addresses this conflict from tribal, political and socio-economic standpoints. The fragile combination of a Yemeni state between regional dimensions and religious ethnic causes, as well as the repercussion of the tense Sunni-Shiite relations in the region, will also be examined in this chapter;
- Chapter Four, the final chapter, will focus on the consequences of the current violence in Yemen and its ability to survive as a unified state. This chapter will also address the conflict's prospects from the economic and political development perspectives in addition to the implications on the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

# **Chapter One:**

## **Minority Groups and Identity Conflict in the Arab Countries**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the significant and critical subject of minority groups in the Middle East. These minority groups affect the survival of both the people and the political entities which they belong to. The source of this threat is the politicisation of questions of minority identities by using ethnic, religious, sectarian, racial or confessional affiliations as a means of mobilisation in political conflicts. Such conflicts may escalate into extended social strife in the form of civil war, as with the cases of Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon and, to some extent, Yemen; these conflicts continued for decades during which tens of thousands of lives were lost and many more victims suffered injuries, harassment, displacement and the destruction of their social and economic livelihoods.

This chapter begins with a literature review and academic definitions of minority and identity differences. It affirms that minority groups and their identity differences in themselves are not a cause of conflict. The chapter then moves on to this thesis's main subject of minorities in the Middle East and, more specifically, in Yemen while differentiating between religious and tribal minorities. The following section of this chapter categorises three kinds of relations between minority and identity-based groups in the Arab nation: those that are predominantly cooperative, those that mix cooperation with tension and conflict, and those that are predominantly bellicose (i.e., the case study of the Zaydis minority in Yemen). This section also draws attention to the fact that other Arab states can also suffer from the minority conflicts underway in neighbouring Middle Eastern and non-Arab states (e.g., the Kurdish minority in

Turkey, the Jewish minority in the Arab region and the Arab minority in Iran). It would not be appropriate for this chapter to end without meditating on the means to prevent the transformation of ethnic and cultural diversity in the Arab world from being a prime catalyst of conflict.

## 1.2 Definitions of Minorities

Middle Eastern societies, like many other societies today, include minority groups. Yemen is no exception. For a proper definition of minority groups, we need to turn to the social science literature as well as the documents and reports of the UN bodies that deal with minority issues, specifically minority rights. Social science literature on minorities is quite voluminous; as such, only the relevant and succinct definitions offered by a selected number of authors will be considered below.

The term “minority” was first proposed by Louis Wirth, an American sociologist who said, “We may define a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination”<sup>4</sup>.

According to Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris in their book entitled *Minorities in the New World: Six Case Studies*, Wirth’s definition on minority is vague and needs some precision. Wagley and Harris state that “minority status is inherited according to the descents rules of a society, in such a way that an individual is assigned to the minority group even when he or she

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Wagley and Harris, Marvin, 1958. *Minorities in the new world; six case studies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

does not manifest the minority's visible traits...minority status is thus something one is born into, rather than something acquired later in life"<sup>5</sup>.

Joseph F. Healey, in *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change*, describes a minority group as "members of a group who experience a pattern of disadvantage or inequality; the members of the group share a visible trait or characteristic that differentiates them from other groups; the minority group is a self-conscious social unit; the membership in the group is usually determined at birth"<sup>6</sup>.

In *Minority Rights: A Comparative Analysis* by Jay Sliger, a minority is defined as "any group or category of people who can be identified by a sizeable segment of population as objects for prejudice or discrimination or who for reasons of deprivation require the positive assistance of the State"<sup>7</sup>. Victor Condé, in *A Handbook of International Human Rights Terminology*, notes that "a minority group is a term used to describe a group of human beings classified, among other things, by their race, language, religion, ethnicity, or nationality within the context of a larger society in which they are non-dominant"<sup>8</sup>. Whereas J. A. Laponce, in *The Protection of Minorities*, provides a definition which combines objective and subjective factors, he describes a minority as "a group of people who because of a common racial, linguistic or national heritage which singles them out from the politically dominant cultural group, fear that they may either be prevented from integrating themselves in the national community of their choice or be obliged to do so at the expense of their identity"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Healey. (2006). *Race, ethnicity, gender, and class: the sociology of group conflict and change*. California: Prince forge press.

<sup>7</sup> Jay Sliger. (1983). *Minority rights: a comparative analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Condé. (1999). *A Handbook of International Human Rights Terminology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Laponce. (1960). *The protection of minorities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



In his report entitled *Possible Ways and Means of Facilitating the Peaceful and Constructive Solution of Problems Involving Minorities*, Asbjorn Eide, senior fellow at the Norwegian Center for Human Rights at the University of Oslo, states that “a minority is any group of persons resident within a sovereign state which constitutes less than half of the population of the national society and whose members share common characteristics of an ethnic, religious or linguistic nature that distinguishes them from the rest of the population”<sup>10</sup>. Focusing specifically on the Arab case, Albert Hourani, in his book entitled *Minorities in the Arab World*, defines minorities as “those communities that differ from the Sunni Arab majority in their religious affiliation and/or in their ethno-cultural identity”<sup>11</sup>.

In a more general context, we have to differentiate between many types of minorities and their ethnic, religious, racial and linguistic differences. In his book entitled *Minorities in History*, Anthony Hepburn addresses the concept of distinguished minorities as follows: “In international law, [minorities are a] population group with a characteristic culture and sense of identity occupying a subordinated political status. Religious minorities were known from ancient times, but ethnic minorities did not become an issue in European politics until the rise of nationalism, political or social philosophy in which the welfare of the nation-state as an entity is considered paramount”<sup>12</sup>.

In the United Nations literature, minorities are usually defined as “indigenous people.” The concept of indigenous people has limited applicability in the Middle East, however, where most population groups perceive themselves, and are perceived as, indigenous people. Francesco Capotori, who served in 1979 as a special rapporteur for the United Nations Human Rights Commission, defines a minority as “a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Glassner. (ed). (1998). *The United Nations at Work*. London: Praeger Publisher.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Hourani (1947). *Minorities in the Arab World*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Hepburn. (ed). (1979). *Minorities in History*. London: Edward Arnold.

state, in a non-dominant position, whose members being nationals of the state, possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.”<sup>13</sup>

With regard to how a minority is defined, the 1953 UN Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities noted the following: “First, the term minority includes only those non-dominant groups in a population which possess and wish to preserve stable ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population; second, such minorities should properly include a number of persons sufficient by themselves to preserve such traditions or characteristics; and third, such minorities must be loyal to the State of which they are nationals.”<sup>14</sup>

In certain United Nations human rights bodies, the term “minorities” is defined in ways that are applicable to the Middle Eastern perspective. United Nations General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992, for example, views minorities as “national or ethnic, religious and linguistic groups as laid out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.” Moreover, the United Nations Development Programme/Arab Human Development Report 2009 describes minorities from the approach of Arab states, focusing on issues of identity and diversity. The report goes on to say, “The consolidation of the Arab state did not take into consideration the extent of kinship and ethnic ties among the human groups that formed the administrative units of countries which subsequently went on to become states. Their borders often appear contrived,

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<sup>13</sup> Deirdre Fottrell and Bill Bowring. (1999). *Minority and group rights in the new millennium*. Netherlands: Kluwer Law International

<sup>14</sup> Gaetano Pentassuglia . (2007). *Minorities in international law: an introductory study*. Strasbourg: Council for Europe publishing.

enclosing diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic groups that were incorporated as minorities in the postcolonial era.”<sup>15</sup>

According to the United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (A/RES/47/135), “One of the main purposes of the United Nations, as proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, is to achieve international cooperation in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.”<sup>16</sup>

In this regard, many international human rights instruments refer to national, ethnic, racial or religious groups, and some even include special rights for persons belonging to minorities. These include, but are not limited to, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime on Genocide (art. 2); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (arts. 2 and 4); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 13); the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 30); the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (art. 5); the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities; and the UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (art. 5).

The literature of political science has gone to great lengths in order to properly define identity. It does not restrict it to objective factors like difference in race, ethnicity, colour, religion, or language, but holds that considerations of gender or political belief form a basis for identity. Similarly, it does not necessarily link identity differences with different interests, but considers that differences over identity may sometimes be independent of any other bases for

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States ,(2009). Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Region. New York: United Nations Publications.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (1992). Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. New York: United Nations.

difference, and that the goal of those who defend a specific identity may not be to obtain a greater share of wealth or political power, but to simply have their particular identity taken into consideration and for its public expression to be legally recognised, just like those of other identities that enjoy acceptance.<sup>17</sup>

### **1.3 Identity Difference: Cause of Cooperation or Conflict?**

Is it possible for minority groups in a society to become a lightning rod for tensions and disputes, ultimately climaxing into full-fledged national strife? This thesis will shed light on the minority disputes in the Middle East and Arab world with a particular focus on the Zaydi minority and a sub-focus on the Houthi tribe in Yemen. In this regard, it is important to note that some trends in social science assert that religious, tribal and ethnic affiliations are the most common latent detonators of conflicts.

The purpose of this thesis is to dispel the despairing notion that the only path towards the realisation of national unity in countries in which minority conflicts have flared up (especially Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) is through the collapse of the nation state and its partition into petty states founded on separate ethnic or sectarian bases. The implications of such an option are bleak, for partition would only serve to catalyze further partitions or new internal conflicts, in view of the fact that it is rare for any region in these countries to have a uniform ethnic, tribal or sectarian composition.

In this regard, the proponents of the predominance of primordial loyalties do not hold a monopoly over the explanation of identity conflicts. There are other schools of thought in the social sciences, and these do not agree that identity differences, especially those founded upon a

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<sup>17</sup> Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. 2002. Identity Politics. Retrieved on 14 October 2009 from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>

single racial, cultural, or ethnic distinction, form a latent cause for the escalation of disputes to the level of aggressive tension and violent strife. These schools do not believe that the sense of kinship, which in these cases may often be literal blood kinship, is what sparks conflict. Instead, they find that disparity between these groups in the distribution of wealth or power is the chief enabler of conflict. They therefore suggest that when ethnic or sectarian affiliation is removed as a criteria for the attainment of wealth and power, the likelihood of conflict between such groups is far less. Perhaps the Iraqi, Lebanese, Somali, Sudanese, Egyptian and Yemeni cases may be regarded as witness to the fact that the conflict or tensions in the relations between their respective identity-based groups stem from the disparity between them in terms of political representation or socio-economic factors.

It is worse mentioning that political leaders play upon sectarian or ethnic passions for the purpose of building political capital. Thus, in order to rally the members of a particular group behind them, these leaders will assert that there is no scope for coexistence with the others and they will portray the differences between the groups as a zero-sum game in which there has to be a winner and a loser; this fallacy portends that there is no hope, therefore, of a settlement that will promise a net gain for all sides, avert conflict and maximise the benefits from mutual cooperation,<sup>18</sup> much like the case between the Yemeni government and the Zaydis that we will be studying in this thesis. These political leaders will further stress that the only way to be done with what appears to be political and economic domination is to break away from the joint political entity and create a new one on the geographical basis of religious or tribal uniformity.<sup>19</sup>

Undoubtedly, the desire to monopolise power or wealth and the disregard for the justice of the historical demands of minority groups paves the way for the exploitation of the sense of a

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard Binder. (ed.). (1999). *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Florida.

common identity in a manner that propels the affiliates of this identity towards confrontation and clashes with representatives of authority and with members of other groups that seem to benefit from the inequitable distribution of wealth and power. In the Middle East, it is not difficult to find a foreign power backing such demands not because that power necessarily believes in the altruistic justice of these demands, but because the opportunity to weaken a particular country may coincide with that power's interests and geopolitical strategy. This is clearly manifested in the Lebanese, Palestinian, Iraqi, Somali and Yemeni cases even today, where foreign intervention and support for some specific groups against the government (or vice versa) is the political core of states' regional foreign policies.

While there were incidents of tension or conflict in the relations between different religious, ethnic and tribal groups before the independence era in the Middle East (as in Lebanon in 1860; in Egypt, where the Coptic issue arose in 1911; and in Yemen between the various tribes), such incidents have become more frequent and intense in the post-independence era. There are numerous reasons for this. For one, the departure of the foreign occupier opened the door to the airing of differences between various groups while the priority of the commitment to national unity as a means for mobilising the ranks behind the demand for independence receded. Furthermore, it is undeniable that the policies of post-independence governments in the Arab world have fuelled the sense of relative deprivation among minorities in their countries. Behind the scenes of the call to Arab nationalism, or even the construction of the nation-state on the principles of equal citizenship and political representation, power in many Arab countries has tended to be concentrated in the hands of certain minorities. Thus, it came to be perceived that the Sunnis monopolised power in Iraq and that the Alawis hold the reins of government in Syria. Meanwhile in other parts of the Arab world, minorities are marginalised, such as the Amazight

(Berbers) in the Maghreb; Darfuris in Sudan; the Copts in Egypt; the Shiites in Saudi Arabia and the gulf region; and the Zaydis in Yemen.

Disagreements over identity/religious affiliation in the Middle East have also long been a cause of tension and conflict among minorities with different or similar identities yet different domestic and foreign agendas. The root of the conflicts between the government and numerous organisations claiming to represent the people of the south in Sudan, between Kurdish organisations and the Iraqi government, during the Lebanese civil war from 1976-1989, or between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, was undoubtedly the restructuring of the relationships between different identity-based groups. Moreover, while there may not be a major problem in relations between different minority and identity-based groups within one nation, the parties to a dispute may have different racial, tribal, religious or cultural backgrounds and may use kinship with those who share the same background as a basis to create political capital; the Houthis in Yemen are the clear case.

It is hard to accept the claim that identity differences alone can cause serious tensions among societies. Identity differences may lead to different appraisals of particular matters or the following of different customs, but it does not necessarily produce aggression, especially given that disagreements in economic or political interests are to be found between those of the same minority or identity group. Those who share the same minority or identity group do not necessarily occupy the same step on the social ladder as their counterparts, let alone possess the same level of political representation. On the basis of this broad explanation of minority groups and identity conflict, it is possible to give a more nuanced picture of minority groups and identities in the Arab nation. There are objectively-based identities that constitute either a majority or a minority, including racial (Blacks, Semites and Hamites), geographic, or tribal (i.e.,

vis-à-vis clans or blood kinships) affiliations. There are also inherited cultures with elements such as religion (e.g., Islam, Christianity and Judaism), language (e.g., Arabic, Kurdish and Amazight), sect (e.g., Coptic, Maronite, Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, Sunni and Shiite) and gender. All of these can produce primordial loyalties. The table below, illustrating ethnic and religious composition in the Arab region,<sup>19</sup> provides us with a clearer picture of the realities between the potential of conflict and co-existence of such groups.

**Table 1.1: Ethnic and religious composition in the Arab countries**

Typology of Identity Relations	Country	Ethnic composition	Religious composition
Conflict	<b>Iraq</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arab 64.7%</li> <li>• Kurd 23%</li> <li>• Azerbaijani 5.6%</li> <li>• Turkmen 1.2%</li> <li>• Persian 1.1%</li> <li>• Other 4.4%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 96% (62% Shiite and 34% Sunni)</li> <li>• Christians: 3.2% (Mostly Chaldean, Syrian Catholic, Nestorian)</li> <li>• Other: 0.8% (Mostly Yazidi syncretist)</li> </ul>
	<b>Lebanon</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arab: 84.5% (71.2% Lebanese, 12.1% Palestinian, 1.2% Other)</li> <li>• Armenian: 6.8%</li> <li>• Kurd: 6.1%</li> <li>• Other: 2.6%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 55.3 % (34% Shiite, 21.3% Sunni)</li> <li>• Christians: 37.6% (19 % Maronite Catholic, 6% Greek Orthodox, 5.2% Armenian Apostolic, 4.6% Greek Catholic or Melchite, 0.5% Protestant, 2.3% Other)</li> <li>• Druze: 7.1%</li> </ul>
	<b>Sudan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black 52%</li> <li>• Arab 39%</li> <li>• Beja 6%</li> <li>• Foreigners 2%</li> <li>• Other 1%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sunni Muslims: 70.3%</li> <li>• Christians: 16.7% (8% Roman Catholic, 6% Anglican, 2.7% Other)</li> <li>• Traditional beliefs: 11.9%;</li> <li>• Other: 1.1%</li> </ul>
	<b>Somalia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somali 92.4%</li> <li>• Arab 2.2%</li> <li>• Afar 1.3%</li> <li>• Other 4.1%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sunni Muslims: 98.3%</li> <li>• Christians: 1.4%, (1.3% Orthodox, 0.1% Other)</li> <li>• Other: 0.3%</li> </ul>
	<b>Yemen</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arab 92.8%</li> <li>• Somali 3.7%</li> <li>• black 1.1%</li> <li>• Indo-Pakistani 1%</li> <li>• Other 1.4%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 98.9% (59.4% Sunni, 39.5% Shiite)</li> <li>• Hindus: 0.7%</li> <li>• Christians: 0.2%</li> <li>• Other: 0.2%</li> </ul>
Co-existence – Conflict	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arab: 88.1% (74.2% Saudi Arab, 3.9% Bedouin, 3% Gulf Arab, 7% Other)</li> <li>• Indo-Pakistani: 5.5%</li> <li>• African Black: 1.5%</li> <li>• Filipino: 1%</li> <li>• Other: 3.9%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 94% (84% Sunni, 10% Shiite)</li> <li>• Christians: 3.5% (3% Roman Catholic, 0.5% Other)</li> <li>• Hindus: 1%</li> <li>• Nonreligious/Other: 1.5%</li> </ul>

<sup>19</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2000). Ethnic and Religious Composition of Arab Societies. Retrieved on 20 October 2009 from <http://www.britannica.com/>



Co-existence	<b>Kuwait</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arab: 74% (30% Kuwaiti, 17% Palestinian, 10% Jordanian, 9% Bedouin, 8% Other)</li> <li>• Kurd: 10%</li> <li>• Indo-Pakistani: 8%</li> <li>• Persian: 4%</li> <li>• Other: 4%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 83% (58% Sunni, 25% Shiite)</li> <li>• Christians: 13% (9% Eastern-rite Catholic 9%, 4% Other)</li> <li>• Hindus: 3%</li> <li>• Other: 1%</li> </ul>
	<b>Bahrain</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bahraini Arab 63.9%</li> <li>• Indo-Pakistani 14.8%</li> <li>• Persian 13%</li> <li>• Filipino 4.5%</li> <li>• British 2.1%</li> <li>• Other 1.7%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 82.4%, (58% Shiite, 24% Sunni, 0.4% Other)</li> <li>• Christians: 10.5%</li> <li>• Hindus: 6.3%</li> <li>• Other: 0.8%</li> </ul>
	<b>Algeria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Algerian Arab 59.1%</li> <li>• Berber 26.2%</li> <li>• Bedouin Arab 14.5%</li> <li>• Other 0.2%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 99.7% (99.1% Sunni, 0.6% Ibadiyah)</li> <li>• Christian: 0.3%</li> </ul>
	<b>Egypt</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Egyptian Arab 84.1%</li> <li>• Sudanese Arab 5.5%</li> <li>• Arabized Berber 2%</li> <li>• Bedouin 2%</li> <li>• Rom (Gypsy) 1.6%</li> <li>• Other 4.8%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslim: 84.4% (mostly Sunni)</li> <li>• Christians: 15.1% (13.6% Orthodox, 0.8% Protestant, 0.3% Roman Catholic, 0.4% Other)</li> <li>• Nonreligious: 0.5%</li> </ul>
	<b>Morocco</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Berber 45%</li> <li>• Arab 44%</li> <li>• Moors originally from Mauritania 10%</li> <li>• Other 1%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 98.3% (mostly Sunni)</li> <li>• Christians: 0.6%</li> <li>• Other: 1.1%</li> </ul>
	<b>Jordan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arab: 97.8% (32.4% Jordanian, 32.2% Palestinian, 14% Iraqi, 12.8% Bedouin, 6.4% Other)</li> <li>• Circassian: 1.2%</li> <li>• Other: 1%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sunni Muslim 93.5%</li> <li>• Christian 4.1%</li> <li>• Other 2.4%</li> </ul>
	<b>Syria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Syrian Arab 74.9%</li> <li>• Bedouin Arab 7.4%</li> <li>• Kurd 7.3%</li> <li>• Palestinian Arab 3.9%</li> <li>• Armenian 2.7%</li> <li>• Other 3.8%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 86% (74% Sunni, 11% Alawite/Shiite 11%, 1% Other)</li> <li>• Christians: 8% (5% Orthodox, 2% Roman Catholic, 1% Other)</li> <li>• Druze: 3%</li> <li>• Nonreligious/Atheists: 3%</li> </ul>
	<b>Oman</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Omani Arab 48.1%</li> <li>• Other Arab 7.2%</li> <li>• Indo-Pakistani 31.7%</li> <li>• Persian 2.8%</li> <li>• Zanzibari (blacks originally from Zanzibar) 2.5%</li> <li>• Other 7.7%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims: 87.4% (75% Ibadiyah Muslim; Other, mostly Sunni and Shiite Muslims, 12.4%)</li> <li>• Hindus: 5.7%</li> <li>• Christians: 4.9%</li> <li>• Buddhists: 0.8%</li> <li>• Other: 1.2%</li> </ul>

In this context, religion clearly plays a more important role in the Middle East's ethnic conflicts than elsewhere, especially given that more Arab states are characterised by a higher level of autocratic regimes than democratic ones. Jonathan Fox, in the *Middle East Quarterly*, noticed that "religious differences make conflict more likely and more intense. The more diverse a country's religious population, the more violent its domestic conflicts tend to be. Similarly, when religious issues are important in ethnic conflicts, political, economic and cultural

discrimination and rebellion all tend to increase. Religious differences also make international wars more likely...Religion shapes discrimination against ethnic minorities...religious minorities seeking autonomy [are therefore] more likely to suffer non-religious discrimination than ethnic minorities who are not distinguished by religion.”<sup>20</sup>

## **1.4 Forms of Interaction Between Minorities With Primordial Loyalties<sup>22</sup>**

Arab countries can be classified into three major categories in terms of the relations of primordial loyalties within them: mainly peaceful relation; predominantly conflictual; and alternating coexisting between peaceful and adversarial. Of course, it is understood that this categorisation is for analytical rather than actual descriptive purposes, as no Arab country can be strictly and unequivocally assigned to any one of the three categories. The advantage of this analytical tool is that it serves to identify general trends that can help strengthen positive experiences and counter negative ones.

Simultaneously, some interactions on the basis of primordial loyalties do not necessarily fall into any of these categories, for they cannot be described as peaceful, adversarial, or anything in between. An example is to be found in the situation that existed in Egypt before the recent Supreme Administrative Court ruling regarding the Bahais. Within Egypt, the Bahai faith did not exist officially and Bahais therefore had no right to list their religion on their identity cards. Through this ambiguity, the court established that Bahaism, as a religion, could not be stated on official documents.<sup>21</sup>

### **1.4.1. Diversity in the framework of peaceful coexistence**

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Fox. (2001). Are Middle East Conflicts More Religious? New York: Middle East Quarterly.

<sup>21</sup> Haytham Al-Jadawi. (2008). Administrative Court: Specification of Non-revealed Religion on National ID Card Not Permitted. Al-Ahram news, retrieved on 30 January 2009 retrieved from: <http://www.ahram.org.eg/archive/Index.asp?ADSLUser=1&id1=34073&id2=56990034&id3=3846&id4=56990034>

It is possible to illustrate this mode of interaction through a comparison between examples from Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Syria and Oman in the following respects. The ratios of the primordial loyalty groups under consideration in this comparison vary as follows: two groups of approximately the same size (e.g., Yemen's population of about 50 percent Sunni and 45 percent who follow the Zaydi doctrine); two groups, one of which has a relative majority (e.g., Morocco's population of 66 percent Arabs and 33 percent Amazighs); two groups, of which one has an absolute majority (e.g., Egypt's population of 90 percent Muslims and 8-10 percent Copts); several groups, of which one has an absolute majority (e.g., Jordan's population of 92 percent Sunni Arabs, 4.5 percent Christians, and 3 percent Sunni Circassians); and several groups, of which one has a relative majority (e.g., Syria's population of 65 percent Sunni Arabs, 12 percent Alawis, 8 percent Christians, 8 percent Kurds, and 3 percent Druze).<sup>22</sup>

As is clear, diversity can be religious (as in Egypt), sectarian/tribal (as in Yemen), linguistic (as in Morocco), and religious/linguistic/sectarian (as in Jordan and Syria). This large spectrum of diversity in its various forms, and the simultaneous ability of these populations to live with one another in relative calm, offers an opportunity to challenge the claim that primordial loyalty diversity is inevitably connected with conflict. Some of these groups may express reservations with regard to their level of political representation and to the opportunities open to them in public life, as is the case with Yemen and the Houthi rebellion which we will examine in the coming chapters.

While minority groups in the Middle East are divided between many identities, as the table above clearly illustrates, many short descriptions of different minority groups will be stated consequently. As an example, we shall consider the Amazighs, the indigenous inhabitants of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibrahim Saad al-Din. (1994). *Al-Milal wal-Nihal wal-A'raq: Humum al-Aqalliyat fi al-Watan al-'Arabi* [Faiths, Creeds, and Races: Minority Concerns in the Arab Nation]. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.

North Africa. When ‘Uqba Ibn Nafi’ conquered their territory in the seventh century, many supported him and fought alongside his army. Yet, while most converted to Islam, few adopted Arab culture. Therefore, the Amazight problem in Morocco remained one of culture par excellence. The Amazights of Morocco have criticised the country’s 1962 constitution and each of its amended versions up to, and including, the current 1996 constitution for failing to make any reference to the Amazight as a second component of Moroccan identity, even though the 1996 constitution refers to Morocco’s Islamic, Arab, African, and even international, affiliations. This has formed the environment for the growth of Amazight cultural movements since the 1970s. The Moroccan leadership has managed to deal intelligently with the Amazight question, demonstrating considerable flexibility towards many demands such as the implementation of a new educational curriculum, cultural institutions, media outlets, etc.

The Circassians of Jordan and the Kurds of Syria offer paradigms that contrast with the preceding. In the case of the Circassians, who migrated to Jordan from southern Russia and the Russian areas adjacent to Turkey, the question of cultural rights never arose. Among the many reasons for this are that they account for a relatively small percentage of the Jordanian population and that they are disproportionately overrepresented in politics – indeed, Jordan’s first female parliamentary representative was a Circassian. In addition, most Circassians have adopted the Arab language and culture. Moreover, many Circassians have adopted the great symbolic value of the king as a descendant from the Prophet (a unifying factor that also applies to Morocco which is ruled by a “Commander of the Faithful”). As for the Syrian Kurds, who are concentrated in the upper-Euphrates Valley along the borders of Turkey and Iraq, the heavy-handed nature of the Syrian system government has forestalled the emergence of their cultural question. The only time that any light was cast on this matter was shortly after the occupation of

Iraq when a fight between Arab and Kurdish football fans escalated to riots in the course of which Kurdish leaders lodged demands for the equitable development of their region and the naturalisation of 225,000 Kurds who did not have Syrian nationality (the 1962 census had deprived thousands of Kurds of Syrian nationality on the grounds that they were Turkish Kurds and had not resided in the country continuously since 1945). The Syrian government began to reconsider their case following the riots.<sup>23</sup>

As the foregoing indicates, diverse mechanisms have been brought to bear with varying degrees of success in the handling of the problem of minority groups, such as: political manipulation, political representation, social fusion and authoritarian control. Much of the literature on the political conflicts between the Sunnis and Alawis in Syria and between the Shafi'is and Zaydis in Yemen has treated these as primordial-loyalty conflicts. The antagonistic relationship in the 1980s and 1990s between Syria's Baathist regime, which has been dominated by the Alawis since 1963, and the Sunnis cannot be described as revolving around primordial loyalties, even if they indeed appear as such. In those two decades, the tensions between the Alawis and the Sunnis were connected with issues pertaining to the relationship between religion and the state, and these tensions reached their height in the confrontation with the Muslim Brothers in Hama in 1982.

In Yemen, well before the Houthis' first war in 1998, there were indeed conflicts; it would be remiss, however, to describe the nature of these conflicts as religious rather than tribal or separatist. It is wrong to describe the separatist bid led by Ali Salim al-Bayd against President Ali Abdullah Saleh's unity government as a flare-up between the Sunnis in the south and the Zaydis in the north. Rather, that bid took place against the backdrop of the results of the 1993

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<sup>23</sup> Nivine Masaad. (2008). *Al-Namudhaj al-Amriki lil-Dimuqratiyya: Dirasa lil-Hala al-'Iraqiyya* [The American Paradigm of Democracy. A Study of the Iraqi Case]. Cairo: Centre for Political Research and Studies, Faculty of Economics, University of Cairo.

parliamentary elections. In these polls, the popularity of the (southern-based) Socialist Party had declined in favour of the General People's Congress and the Reform Party (both northern-based). Accordingly, the parties' respective cabinet quotas had to be revised from three seats for the General People's Congress and two for the Socialist Party to two each for the General People's Congress and Reform Party and one for the Socialist Party. Subsequently, President Saleh's actions against the southern military leaders who had participated in the secession attempt and his ruse of filling posts intended to represent the south with individuals who did not express southern interests contributed to deepening the acrimony between the north and south.<sup>24</sup> In 2007, President Saleh, concerned about the possible effects of the lingering acrimony on national cohesion, announced that he would reconsider the case of the discharged military men and called upon southern leaders to return from their places of exile.

Nevertheless, the point to be stressed in this regard is that the many mechanisms for containing primordial-loyalty discord in Yemen have considerably reduced the impact of outside variables. Because the conflicts in Yemen were of a political, not identity-based, nature, and because it was customary for the Zaydi imams to turn to the Shafi'is to quell insurrectionist movements, the Egyptian and Saudi interventions during the Yemeni war in 1962 were shaped by purely political considerations. These compelled the Saudis to support the Zaydi Imamate and Egypt to back the revolutionary rebel forces, which were made up of a blend of Zaydis and Shafi'is.

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen Day. (2006). Barriers to Federal Democracy in Iraq: Lessons from Yemen in Middle East Policy, vol. xiii, Fall 2006, no. 9, pp. 121-39.

#### **1.4.2. Diversity and minority issues in a context between coexistence and conflict**

It is possible to illustrate this mode of interaction through examples from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Algeria, whereby we can register the following observations. Unlike the diversity in the forms of differences in primordial identities that characterises the countries in the first category, the countries in this category are divided along either sectarian or linguistic lines. The divide in primordial identities between the demographic components of the three Gulf countries is a sectarian one, primarily between Sunnis and Shiite. The population of Bahrain is made up of 50 to 60 percent Shiites and 40 to 50 percent Sunnis; the Kuwaitis are 80 percent Sunnis and 20 percent Shiites; and in Saudi Arabia, the vast majority, or 90 percent, of its population is Sunni and only 10 percent is Shiite. All the preceding figures, which date to the early 1990s, are approximations, as is the case with the majority of census figures in Arab countries, which incorporate various anxieties stemming from oil and demographic imbalances. In Algeria, the fundamental variation in primordial identities is between the Amazight (22 percent) and Arab (75 percent) populations.<sup>25</sup> The comparison between peaceful coexistence connected with highly ethnically-diversified countries and the likelihood of conflict in countries that are predominantly homogenous, or only have a single ethnic variance, renews the belief that ethnic plurality is not inevitably linked to conflict.<sup>26</sup> Due to the reality of the different systems of government applied in these four countries, each has handled the question of primordial identity diversity with varying degrees of political representation. This is logical, for one cannot expect a minority to be represented in a system in which the majority itself is not represented.

Neglect of the demands of primordial identity communities, or the gap between the demands and what had actually been fulfilled, propelled the radicalisation of their political

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

rhetoric and the erstwhile rise of militant groups. In the Saudi Arabian-Kuwait-Bahrain triangle, there occurred a series of violent incidents for which blame fell on radical Shiite organisations, notably Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad. This phenomenon of the radicalisation of primordial identity communities, along with the escalation of their demands in proportion to the degree to which they are disregarded, will manifest itself more pronouncedly in the third category of Arab countries.

With regard to the Gulf countries, the eruption of the Shiite question is associated with two historic moments, separated by nearly a quarter of a century. The first was the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979, which was followed by disturbances in the Gulf and an assassination attempt against the Emir of Kuwait. The second and most far-reaching was the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the death of Saddam Hussein. This development came charged with a range of significant revelations, notably that the largest identity-based community in Iraq had now been empowered in government, mechanisms of a democratic stamp were being used in the process of change, and the international climate (and part of the regional climate) was conducive to what was later referred to as the political rise of the Shiites. That rise has affected, and will continue to have an even greater effect on, the Shiites of the Arab world, particularly in light of the close bonds of kinship between the Iraqi Shiites and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as due to the centrality of the Shiite seminary in Najaf to Shiites outside Iraq.

It is also useful to mention the important shift in Saudi Arabia's attitude towards its Shiite population following the occupation of Iraq. In early 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz met with 18 of the 450 signatories of the "Partners in the Nation" petition, which contained a long list of demands that included the creation of a committee to probe anti-Shiite discrimination in the army and security agencies, the diplomatic corps, the cabinet, and the Shura



Council; the elimination of all attacks against the Shiites creed from the educational curricula and media; lifting of restrictions on the exercise of Shiite rites and rituals; and an end to the extra-legal detention of Shiites.<sup>27</sup>

The 2003 meeting is significant for having taken place against the backdrop of the occupation of Iraq, a fact to which the Shiites alluded in their petition, in which they expressed their “fears” of foreign intervention in the Kingdom by parties seeking to capitalise on the delicate circumstances in the region. The message was clear: variations of what was happening in Iraq could occur elsewhere. Thus, soon after Abdullah’s meeting, Saudi Arabia took a number of measures to express its “good intentions” towards the Shiites. It permitted the Shiites of Al-Qatif to build new mosques, to found a seminary, to commemorate the Day of Ashura, and to publish a magazine. The Shiites of the city were also granted a license to establish a large shrine commemorating the martyrdom of al-Husain.<sup>28</sup>

### **1.4.3. Diversity in a predominantly conflictual context**

This third category consists of five chief countries: Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Somalia and Yemen. These countries can be compared as follows. Three of these are the most diverse Arab states in terms of their communities. In two of these states, Lebanon and Iraq, the largest primordial identity-based group (the Shiites) does not exceed 25 and 68 percent of the population, respectively, according to figures from the 1970s. Among the smaller identity communities in Iraq, some, such as the Turkmen, Assyrians and Armenians, are less than 2 percent of the population. In Lebanon, the Armenians and Catholics each form 1 percent of the population, and other communities are even smaller, such as the Protestants and Latin Catholics.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Wali Nasr. (2007). *Sahwat al-Shi‘a* [The Shia Awakening]. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi.

In Sudan, apart from the majority Sunni Arabs, there are African Christians and animists, more than a hundred languages and dialects, and more than 500 tribes.<sup>29</sup> The demographics in Sudan are of a similar nature, to the extent that the results of the census that assigned relative weight to each constituency caused heated disagreement between the Sudanese government and the People's Front in the spring of 2008.

Somalia presents a different picture. In terms of primordial loyalties based on linguistic, religious, or sectarian plurality, Somalia is highly homogeneous. The overwhelming majority of its population is Sunni, there is considerable intermarriage between Arabs and Africans, and its two most commonly spoken languages, apart from local dialects, are Arab and Somali. On the other hand, the country's tribal map is very complex. In addition to its four major tribes (Darod, Hawiye, Dir, and Digil-Mirifle), there is an alliance of smaller tribes, and each tribe has many clans, branches, and other limbs, all of which make for an intricate weave of political conflict lines that stretch horizontally among and vertically within them.

In Yemen, the situation is one of a fragmented society due to tribal and religious plurality. Sunnis constitute the majority, while the Zaydi Shi'a compose a sizable minority group. Other minority groups, such as Jews, Christians, Bahais and Hindus, comprise a smaller portion of the population. The fragmentation in the Yemeni society is not strictly defined by its religious mosaic, but also by its tribal affiliations and identities. Every religious group is divided into many tribes and clans; these tribes and clans take precedence over the state or religion in terms of shaping identity. This is manifested by the fact that many clashes emerged inside the Yemeni society due to tribal reasons, more so than religious or political tensions. The main point

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<sup>29</sup> Ibrahim Saad al-Din. (1994). *Al-Milal wal-Nihal wal-A'raq: Humum al-Aqalliyyat fi al-Watan al-'Arabi* [Faiths, Creeds, and Races: Minority Concerns in the Arab Nation]. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.

of contention of the northern wars in Yemen can be summed up as tribal, and to some extent religious, identities.

While these five countries seem to furnish clear evidence of linkages between plurality in primordial identities and conflict in their respective cases, the cases of Somalia and Yemen reveal that tribal allegiances may neutralise the effect of religious homogeneity. The five countries here share a commonality in the fact that their conflicts, which revolve around the question of identity, are recurrent. In addition, the identity conflicts in these countries are deeply-rooted in history. In Lebanon, they can be traced back to the 1860s and the clashes between the Druze and the Maronites which ultimately led to the redrawing of the geographical map of the state. In Iraq, they date to the first Kurdish insurrection in 1930, or the pre-independence era. In Sudan, they coincide with the declaration of national independence in 1956. A third common denominator is that their identity conflicts have played themselves out as conflicts through much more frequent recourse to arms than to diplomacy.

In view of their adversarial relations, these five examples serve to have several hypotheses. Firstly, it can be seen that marginalisation surfaces prominently as a chief cause of strife between groups of primordial loyalties, or what the rebelling groups consider an unfair share in the distribution of wealth and political power. Marginalisation can be economic, as was the case with the Shiites in Lebanon on the eve of the outbreak of the civil war in 1975; or political, as was the case with the Isaaq tribe in Somalia following the Ogaden War in 1978; or it can be political-cultural, as was the case with the Kurds in Iraq before 1991; or political-economic, with respect to the southern Sudanese before 2005; or lack of development, as was the case with the Zaydis since the revolution in 1962. Naturally, the more multidimensional the marginalisation the greater is the complexity of the conflict.

On the question of Darfur, Abdul Ghaffar Muhammad and Laif Manqar attempted to calculate all the causes of the conflict in that province. They came up with 19, of which 10 could be traced to marginalisation, whether directly (as in the circumstances surrounding disputes over land and the fragile ecology) or indirectly (as in the circumstances surrounding tribal policy and water resources). The other nine variables were connected by cultural causes and interventions by neighbouring countries.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, the domino effect also applies to a considerable extent in the cases of Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq. In Sudan, strife had long been confined to the north-south conflict, but then suddenly spread westward and then to the east, although it should be borne in mind that there were harbingers of the political conflict in the west as early as the 1960s and that the first manifestations of armed conflict in both the west and east are traceable to the 1990s. Likewise, the conflicts in both Lebanon and Iraq, which began along a Christian-Muslim axis in the former and a Kurdish-Arab axis in the latter, evolved into Shiite-Sunni conflicts (with a palpable Druze dimension in the Lebanese case). It is important to note here that the simplification of these dichotomies is for analytical purposes, as there are also Kurdish-Kurdish, Christian-Christian, Sunni-Sunni, and Shiite-Shiite conflicts, among others.

Thirdly, as was suggested earlier, delays in resolving identity conflicts gave rise, over time, to the emergence of radical forces that benefitted from the perpetuation of the conflict, that objected to the method of settlement, or that demanded inclusion in whatever deal had been made. In Lebanon, Christian society split at the end of the 1980s between the Lebanese Forces and supporters of General Aoun, resulting in internecine conflict with each party claiming to be the apotheosis of Christian interests.

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<sup>30</sup> Abed al Ghaffar Ahmad and Laif Manqar (2002). *Dar Fur: Iqlim al-‘Adhab* [Darfur: Region of Agony]. Cairo: Centre for Human Rights Studies.

Lastly, we must look at the reasons for the length of these conflicts. In all these cases, given the multitude of possible answers, there are always those who benefit from their continuation; this tenet requires a study of the political economy of the civil wars driven by primordial affiliations. Some studies and papers have pointed to aspects of this with respect to the five states. George Qaram<sup>31</sup> and Salim Nasr have studied the social and economic transformations brought about by the Lebanese civil war. Nasr, in particular, explained how some of the militias caught up in the Lebanese Civil War possessed radio and television networks, private ports, short road transportation networks, and limited social welfare and pension systems. The sources of funding for these networks were the spoils plundered from the pre-civil war bourgeoisie; the seizure of property belonging to other sects who had left or were ready to leave the areas controlled by these militias; the illegal imposition of taxes on residents of these areas; and the imposition of a kind of poll tax on residents in return for “protection” and forcing them to appoint members of these militias in their local organisations on the pretext of guarding them.

## **1.5 Identity Conflicts and Human Security**

The above review of patterns of community relations between different minority groups and ethnic identities has made it clear that identity diversity in itself is not a cause of tension or conflict. On the contrary, it is a source of enrichment for human existence due to what members of each specific identity add by way of different skills, experiences, sensibilities, worldviews, and literary and artistic creativity.

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<sup>31</sup> George Qaram. (2004). (1st ed.) *Lubnan al-Mu‘asir: Tarikh wa-Mujtama‘* [Contemporary Lebanon: History and Society]. Beirut: Oriental Library.

Three Arab states, at least, have experienced protracted identity conflicts, some of which are the longest running civil wars in the world. The conflict between north and south in Sudan has lasted for more than half a century; the conflict between the Iraqi government and the Kurds has continued for nearly three decades; and the latest episode of the Lebanese civil war lasted 16 years.<sup>32</sup> Tensions at national and local levels have soured relations between different identity-based groups: in Mauritania between citizens of African stock and those of Arab stock; in Algeria between Amazight and the security forces; in Egypt between Copts and Muslims; in Somalia between various tribes; in Syria between Sunnis and the Baathist government in 1982, and between Kurds and the Baathist government in 2007; in Bahrain between Shiites and government forces; and in Yemen between the Shi'a followers of al-Houthi and the Yemeni government. The essence of these conflicts, however, should not simply be judged at face value. Wisdom dictates that with the roots of these tensions quelled, the plurality of identity in the Arab world could serve as a source of enrichment and reinforcing human security rather than as a threat to state security.

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<sup>32</sup> Moez Doraid. (2000). Human Development and Poverty in the Arab States. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **The Zaydi Religious Doctrine and the Houthi Ideology**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the Zaydi history, religious doctrine, thoughts, political beliefs as well as the state formation after the fall of the Imamate in 1962. The chapter then moves to discuss the most drastic outcome after the fall of the Imamate, which is the emergence the Houthi movement in the Zaydi religious and political spheres. This chapter will also serve to tackle the Houthi origin, theology, ambitions as well as their fears, especially after the formation of the Zaydi political party, “The Assembly of the Believing Youth” under the leadership of the al-Houthi tribe.

Yemen population is nearly 24 million divided between a majority Shafi Sunni Muslims and Zaydi Shiite Muslims, in addition to a small number of Jews, Christians, Bahais and Hindus<sup>33</sup>, the Zaydis in Yemen represent a minority group whose tribal members are followers of Shiism. The Zaydis are a Shiite movement which split from the main Imamates group in the ninth century after the death of the fourth Shiite Imam, Ali Zain al-Abidin. The Zaydis recognized his younger son Zayd as Imam rather than his older brother Muhammad al-Baqir who was acknowledged as Imam by the majority of Shiites. They accepted Zayd as their fifth Imam,

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<sup>33</sup> Central Intelligence Agency .(2009). Yemen Country Factbook. Retrieved on 12 January 2010 from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym/html>

which is why they are also called Fivers.<sup>34</sup> The Zaydis are the nearest to the Sunnis in their understanding and practice of the Islamic religion. In Yemen, Zaydis represent approximately 25 percent of the Yemeni population.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.2 History

The Zaydi branch of the Shiite school represents a split from the main Shiite group Jaafarism, or the Twelvers, and was formed by the followers of Imam Zayd bin Ali, the grandson of Imam Al Hussein and the half-brother of the fifth Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir, the son of the fourth Shiite Imam, Ali Zain al-Abidin.<sup>36</sup> Al-Abidin who died during an unsuccessful rebellion against the Umayyad Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik (724-743 AD) in 740,<sup>37</sup> saying: “I go out against those who sacked Medina on the day of al-Harah and then hurled stones at the Ka’bah with a catapult, or, alternately, I go out against those who killed my grandfather Husayn.”<sup>38</sup>

Followers of the Zaydi faith recognized only the first four Imams in addition to Imam Zayd (as shown in the table below), unlike the Twelvers who believe in the 12 Shiite Imamates.

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<sup>34</sup> Ali Saeed. (2010). Tribalism and Zaydism: Roots Of The Sa'ada Conflict. Reliefweb. Retrieved on 4 August 2010 from: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/SNAA-85J5UD?OpenDocument>

<sup>35</sup> Global Security. (2009). Zaydi Islam. Retrieved on 10 December 2010 from: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-zaydi.htm>

<sup>36</sup> Zaydiyyah. (2009). Retrieved on 3 January 2010 from: <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/islam/shia/zaydi.html>

<sup>37</sup> Global Security. (2009). Zaydi Islam. Retrieved on 10 December 2010 from: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-zaydi.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Abdullah Lux. (2009). Yemen’s last Zaydi Imam: the shabab al-mu’min, the Malazim and hizb Allah in the thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi. Beirut: Center for Arab Studies.



**Table 2.1: Zaydis recognized Shiite Imams**

#	Name	Title	Birth–Death
	Muhammad ibn Abdullah	Prophet	570-632
1	Alī ibn Abu Talib	Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful)	600–661
2	Hassan ibn Alī	Al-Hasan al-Mujtaba	624–680
3	Hussein ibn Alī	Sayed al-Shuhada	626–680
4	Alī ibn al-Hussein	Ali Zayn al-Abideen	658-9 – 712
<b>5</b>	<b>Zayd ibn Ali</b>	<b>Zayd ash-Shahīd (Zayd the Martyr)</b>	<b>695-740</b>

The Twelvers recognized the 12 Imams, excluding Zayd ibn Ali while recognizing his older brother Muhammad al-Baqir as the fifth Imam. Al-Baqir warned Zayd of any rebellion against the Umayyad dynasty by saying, “Do not go against the people of Kufah as, verily, they are people of trickery and machinations – they killed your great grandfather, and betrayed your uncle al-Hassan and they killed your grandfather al-Hussein...I fear for you my brother that you will tomorrow be crucified in the church of Kufha.”<sup>39</sup> In his rebellion against the Umayyad Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik, Zayd was backed first by 15,000 men who later decreased in number to 300 warriors. During the battle, Zayd and his remaining rebels were killed, after which “[the head of Zayd] was sent to Hisham and his body was crucified naked until spiders

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

wove a veil covering its nakedness where it remained for four years before being taken down, burned to ashes and cast into [the] Euphrates.”<sup>40</sup>

### **2.3 The Zaydi Religious Doctrine**

In theology, the Zaydis are close to the Mu'tazilite School. The Zaydis are different from other Shiite groups in their conception of the nature of the Imamate, unlike the Twelver, Jaafari and Ismailia schools of thought who believe that the Imamate is handed down through a specific line (from father to son ) of Ali's descendants. They believe that any Sayyed in the house of Ali (descendent from either Hassan ibn Ali or Hussein ibn Ali) is eligible for the Imamate.<sup>41</sup> “According to Zaydi political theory, Ali, Hassan and Hussein are the first three rightful imams; after them, the Imamate is open to whoever of their descendants establishes himself through armed rebellion.”<sup>42</sup> Personal value governs who should be made Imam. Any elected Imam is not considered to be sinless and infallible and should demonstrate "ability to rule by being an Islamic scholar and by actively claiming political power from the illegitimate rulers. Success in battle and the death of rival claimants is seen as a sign of God's election. Special emphasis is placed on the candidate's piety, moral integrity and courage. The Imam can lose his status by breaking any of the qualifying conditions.”<sup>43</sup>

Compared to all Shiite sects, Zaydis beliefs can be seen as moderate. The Zaydis reject the doctrine of the Hidden Imam or occultation (Ghayba) and the return of the Mahdi. According

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Zaydiyyah. (2009). Retrieved in 3 January 2010 from:

<http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/islam/shia/zaydi.html>

<sup>42</sup> Global Security. (2009).Zaydi Islam. Retrieved on 10 December 2010 from:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-zaydi.htm>

<sup>43</sup> The Zaydis of Yemen. Retrieved on 3 January 2010 from: <http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/mgcaydi.html>

to their beliefs, the Imam is regarded as neither perfect nor having the ability to achieve miracles and receive divine guidance: “Their imam is neither sinless nor infallible although he is chosen for his piety and knowledge, amongst other attributes; and the presence of an imam at any particular time is not deemed a necessity.”<sup>44</sup> In contrast, they believe in a living Imam. “The Zaydis do not believe in the infallibility of the imams, nor that do they receive divine guidance. Zaydis do not also believe that the Imamate must pass from father to son, but believe it can be held by any descendants of Ali. They also reject the Twelver notion of a hidden imam, and like the Ismailia believe in a living imam or even imams.”<sup>45</sup>

Unlike other Shiites, Zaydis recognize that Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman were rightful caliphs, yet they do not claim that Ali was explicitly appointed as caliph by the prophet. “Muhammad had secretly designated Ali as his successor, a fact hidden from many in the early community. This ignorance excused the community from the guilt of infidelity...Ali the most excellent candidate for the Caliphate (Imamate) had not claimed his rights by force of arms.”<sup>46</sup>

## **2.4 Zaydis’ Political Beliefs and Schools of Thought**

Because of the rebellion he declared against the corrupt Umayyad dynasty, Zaydis recognized Zayd as their fifth Imam. “Zaydis believe that Zayd was the rightful successor to the Imamate because he led a rebellion against the Umayyad, whom he believed were tyrannical and corrupt. Muhammad al-Baqir did not engage in political action and the followers of Zayd believed that a true Imam must fight against corrupt rulers.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gabriele Von Bruck. (2005). *Islam, Memory and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> The Zaydis of Yemen. Retrieved on 3 January 2010 from: <http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/mgcaydi.html>

<sup>47</sup> Encyclopedia. Zaidiyya, Zaidism or Zaydism. Retrieved on 3 December 2009 from <http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Zaidiyyah>

In this regard, Zaydis consider that it is their duty to revolt against unjust Imams and to establish right and justice by force; “a precedent for revolution against corrupt rulers had been set for the Zaydiyyah by their martyred progenitor, and it would continue down through the history of their imams – arguably to the present day. It might be said that Zaydis find it difficult to remain passive in unjust world.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, they feel that it is their obligation to revolt against unjust Imams and to establish right and justice by force. “A new Imam’s claims become legally binding on the community by two actions that also constitute his bid for the support of the tribes: the issue of a call to allegiance (da’wah), followed by uprising against the illegitimate ruler.”<sup>49</sup> The Zaydi sect was first introduced by Imam Zayd’s initial companions and followers (i.e., Abul Jarud Ziyad ibn Abi Ziyad, Sulayman ibn Jarir, Khathir an-Nawa al-Abtar and Hasan ibn Salih). The newly-emerged sect was later divided between three different schools. The first school, greatly active during the Umayyad and early Abbasid era, was known as *Jarudiyya* (named for Abul Jarud Ziyad ibn Abi Ziyad) and opposed the approval of certain companions of Prophet Muhammad. “They held that there was sufficient description given by the Prophet so that all should have recognized Imam Ali...they therefore consider the companions sinful in failing to recognize Imam Ali as the legitimate Caliph.”<sup>50</sup> The second school, *Sulaymaniyya* (deriving from Zayd’s companion Sulayman Ibn Jarir), called for consultations in dealing with the Zaydi Imamate selection: “They felt that the companions, including Abu Bakr and Omar, had been in error in failing to follow imam Ali but it did not amount to sin.”<sup>51</sup> As for the third school, the

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<sup>48</sup> Abdullah Lux. (2009). Yemen’s last Zaydi Imam: the shabab al-mu’min, the Malazim and hizb allah in the thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al houthi. Beirut: Center for Arab Studies.

<sup>49</sup> The houthi Zaydis of Yemen. Retrieved on 3 January 2010 from: <http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/mgczaydi.html>

<sup>50</sup> Encyclopedia. Zaidiyya, Zaidism or Zaydism. Retrieved on 3 December 2009 from <http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Zaidiyyah>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

*Tabiriyya*, *Butriyya* or *Salihyya* (named for Khathir an-Nawa al-Abtar and Hasan ibn Salih) were closer and combine both *Sulaimaniyya* than *Jarudiyya*.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.5 State Formation

“Kufa” hold the first base of the emerging Zaydi sect near the Abbasid capital of Baghdad. In the ninth century, however, two Zaydi states were founded in “remote mountainous regions which offered a refuge from the power of the central authorities.”<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, the leader of the Zaydi community took the title of Caliph.

In 864 in the mountains of Tabaristan (nowadays known as Mazandaran in northern Iran), the first Zaydi state emerged under the Alavids. The newly created state lasted until the death of its Imam at the hand of Samanids in 928 but was revived later and survived under Zaydi Hasanid leaders till the 12<sup>th</sup> century. “Roughly four years later the state was revived in Gilan (north-western Iran) and survived under Hasanid leaders until 1126 C.E. After which from the 12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> centuries the Zaydis of Dayiarman, Gilan and Tabaristan then acknowledge the Zaydi Imams of Yemen or rival Zaydi Imams within Iran.”<sup>54</sup>

In Yemen, the Zaydi faith first emerged in 894 B.C. when Imam al-Hadi Yahya bin al-Husayn (d. 911), born near Medina in Jabl al-Ras in 859 B.C. as one of the descendents of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib through his son Imam al-Hassan,<sup>55</sup> “was invited from Medina to the city of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Gabriele Von Bruck. (2005). *Islam, Memory and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>54</sup> Encyclopedia. Zaidiyya, Zaidism or Zaydism. Retrieved on 3 December 2009 from <http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Zaidiyyah>

<sup>55</sup> Abdullah Lux. (2009). *Yemen’s last Zaydi Imam: the shabab al-mu’min, the Malazim and hizb allah in the thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al houthi*. Beirut: Center for Arab Studies.

Saada by local tribal leaders to serve as arbiter in an ongoing dispute and blood feud.”<sup>56</sup> In his mediation effort, Imam al-Hadi failed to find supporters and returned to Medina. Yemeni tribes again insisted on his mediation efforts by guaranteeing their confidence in his faith and effort. “On his first trip he failed to find sufficient trustworthy support among the tribes and returned to Medina where again Yemeni delegations from the city approached him with guarantees of backing. The imam returned in 284 AH to make Saada the capital of Zaydi Imamate and center of influence throughout Yemen for over 1,000 years, for which reason the madhab is sometimes known as al-Hadawi.”<sup>57</sup> The Zaydi Imamate in northern Yemen survived until 1962 when Imam Ahmad died and was succeeded by his son Mohammad who was overthrown by a military coup.

By escaping internal conflicts, fighting, occupation and aggressions from the Mamluks, Ismaʿilis, Ottomans and the British, the Zaydi Imamate survived for more than 1,000 years in northern Yemen. “In spite of internal fighting over succession and attacks from Ismailis, the Yemeni state retained its independence until 1539 when it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks and became a province within the Ottoman Empire. In 1595 the Yemen Zaydis declared war on the Turks, which finally led to the departure of the last Ottoman governor in 1635...following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Imam Yahya was left in control of the Yemen. In 1948 Imam Yahya was assassinated in an attempted palace coup. The coup was defeated by Yahya’s son, Ahmad, who succeeded his father as Imam. When Imam Ahmad died in September 1962 he was succeeded by his son Muhammad. A week later an army coup deposed the Imam and established the Yemen Arab Republic. Since that time the Imamate had remained vacant.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Zaydiyyah. (2009). Retrieved on 3 January 2010 from:  
<http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/islam/shia/zaydi.html>

## 2.6 The Houthi Movement

There are approximately 400 Zaydi tribes with a combined population of 5 million who inhabit the mountains of Northern Yemen. In the mountainous provinces of Yemen, a powerful local Yemeni tribe in the northwest Yemeni province of Saada (Northern Sana'a), which borders Saudi Arabia, a Zaydi religious group known as the "Houthis" (derived from its leader's family name: "Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi") emerged. The roots of the story go back to 1986 when Badreddin al-Houthi joined the newly-established Zaydi school of thought known as "Ittihad al-Shabab." After the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south in May of 1990, many political parties began to emerge. The Ittihad al-Shabab became Hizb al-Haq (Party of Truth) which represents the Zaydi political ideology and thought. "In 1990, Yemen was united and the door was wide open before partisan pluralism. Therefore, Ittihad al-Shabab turned into Hizb al-Haq (Party of Truth) representing the Zaydi sect in Yemen. Hussein bin Badreddin al-Houthi rose to be a prominent political leader in the party, who was elected as a parliament member in 1993 and in 1997 AD."<sup>59</sup> Later in 1997, Hussein bin Badreddin al-Houthi left Hizb al-Haq and, along with his companions, founded Nadwat al-Shabab al-Mu'min (The Assembly of the Believing Youth).

The Houthis are fundamentalist Zaydis. They claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima. The current unrest goes back to 2004, when the cleric Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi started an armed rebellion against the central government. Al-Houthi, who had wide backing in the northern provinces, felt that the

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<sup>59</sup> Ragheb El Sergany. (2009). The Story of Houthis. Retrieved on 2 April 2010 from <http://english.islamstory.com/article.php?id-3796>

government was too closely allied with the United States. The Zaydi leader thus established a group known as al-Shabab al-Mou'men (The Believing Youth). Their commander, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, who was reportedly killed by Yemeni army forces in September of 2004, was followed by his brother Abdul Malik al-Houthi.<sup>60</sup>

## 2.7 Origins of the Houthi Schools of Thought, Ambitions and Fears

The Houthis are fundamentalist Zaydis, but not all Zaydis are Houthis. They claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima. The Houthis are Hashemites, “which means they do not derive affiliation with any particular tribe. Hashemites are said to have arrived in Yemen only after Islam’s advent, mediating between local tribes; as relative latecomers, their claim to authentic Yemeni identity is sometimes contested, though Zaydi Hashemites ruled parts or all of Yemen over 1,000 years until the September 1962 demise of the North Yemen Imamate.”<sup>61</sup>

The Houthis are followers of the extremist Jarodiah School, which was founded by Abul Jarud Ziyad ibn Abi Ziyad who believed Ali ibn Abi Taleb to be the only legitimate caliph. “al-Jarodiah sect differs from the Zaydi sect in not stipulating that the ruling Imam must be a descendant of al-Hassan or al-Hussein...al-Jarodiah sect contends that secret documents were provided to ensure that Ali ibn Abi Taleb became the first Caliph following the death of Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] but that Abu Bakr and Omar ibn al-Khattab covered this up.”<sup>62</sup> Some literature on the Zaydis and Houthis in Yemen refer to Badreddin al-Houthi and his followers as belonging to the Twelfth Imam’s strand of Shi’ism. In the article entitled *What it Means to be a*

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<sup>60</sup> Abdul Nishapuri. (2010). A war that remains unreported: The Saudi Arabian war against the Houthis of Yemen . Retrieved on the 7th of February 2010 from <http://criticalppp.org/lubp/archives/5502>

<sup>61</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>62</sup> Mshari Al-Zaydi. (2009). Don’t Confuse the Houthis with the Zaidis. Riyadh: Al Sharq Al Awsat.



*Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism*, Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer refer to Adel al-Ahmadi, a Yemeni specialist on terrorist groups in his article *The Flower and the Rock in Yemen's religious configuration*: “The Rock, or the hardliners, are the Houthis of Yemen who have shifted their religious alliances and positions to befit their political interests which coincide with Iran; the other Zaydis, the Flower, who are not Houthis, have remained allied with the government of Yemen and condemned the Houthis as a group of heretics who resourced the interests of Yemen to outside powers in return for political vetting.”<sup>63</sup>

Dr. Qasim Salam, a prominent Yemeni politician and intellectual, declared during a media interview that Badreddin al-Houthi is an ambitious figure who claimed many times his rights to the position of Imam during Yemen's Imamate era, as well as after the 1962 revolution: “Badreddin al-Houthi previously claimed the position of Imam during the reign of Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid ed-Din (assassinated in 1948). He received pledges of allegiance but was later imprisoned. Following the 26 September [1962] revolution, Badreddin al-Houthi claimed the position of Imam once again and fought against the Yemen Arab Republic in Saada but was defeated. What is happening now is a continuation of what happened before, but what is new is that this has entered a new phase with the [Houthi] leaders no longer claiming the title of Imam in the traditional sense, but rather they want to transform Saada into a base for the Safavid doctrine.”<sup>64</sup>

The Houthis believe that the Zaydi identity is threatened by the Sunni or even Wahhabi identity, as well as national and regional domination. The Houthis have been mobilized by the rejection of Salafi influence in Yemen through many writings and teachings from a series of booklets written by either Badreddin al-Houthi or his son Hussein, in which they advocated

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<sup>63</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – the Divided House of Zaydism. Retrieved on 3 December 2009 from [http://majalla.com/en/cover\\_story/article7320.ece](http://majalla.com/en/cover_story/article7320.ece)

<sup>64</sup> Mshari Al-Zaydi. (2009). Don't Confuse the Houthis with the Zaidis. Riyadh: Al Sharq Al Awsat.

revivalism by denouncing the adherents of Wahhabiism and the Sunni faith. In the booklet on the interpretation of Surat al-Maeda, Hussein al-Houthi argues, “It would be foolish to bind ourselves to them [Sunnis] or even think that it is possible to unite with them. If we wanted to unite with them, they would ask us to go under their banner. They would never accept anybody from Ahl al-Bayt.”<sup>65</sup>

## **2.8 Nadwat al-Shabab al-Mu'min (Assembly of the Believing Youth)**

Hussein al-Houthi was a member of the Zaydi sectarian al-Haq Party, which was an essential means for Zaydi political expression, especially after the 1962 revolution and the 1990 unification. The roots of the Believing Youth go back to the year 1982 in Saada, when Salah Ahmad Flaytih started preaching the philosophy of the Iranian Islamic Revolution under a group called Ittihad al-Shabab al-Mu'min (The Union of the Believing Youth). By 1988, Badreddin Al-Houthi emerged as an influential religious and political leader. With new legislation that allowed the establishment of political parties after the unification of the Yemeni Republic in May 1990 (i.e., the Law of Political Organizations and Parties) No 66 in 1991, the group was transformed into a basic political and religious assembly that represented the Zaydis under the name of Mountada al-Shabab al-Mu'min (Assembly of the Believing Youth). “In the words of Muhammad Badreddin al-Houthi as well as first General Secretary of the group Muhammad Yahya Azan, administration was rudimentary – consisting of six members and a single rented

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

room in Sana'a and it was devoted to cultural studies and publications, being bereft of both political experience and orientation.”<sup>66</sup>

A radical transformation emerged in the history of the Mountada al-Shabab al-Mu'min in 1997 when the assembly was transformed into the organization Tanzim al-Shabab al-Mu'min through the direct guidance and active involvement of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi who, “along with his brother Muhammad and future right hand man Abdullah al-Razami, was influential in fermenting the emergent internal schism that would come to head when Hussein returned from studying in the Sudan in 1999.”<sup>67</sup>

In 2001, however, an enormous split over the theology, ideology, teachings, goals and aims of the Tanzim al-Shabab al-Mu'min emerged. Differences arose between those seeking peaceful means and academic theological education supported by Muhammad Yahya Azan on the one hand, and the more traditional adherents of Zaydism supported by Hussein al-Houthi on the other. “The schism was between a new moderate orientation and a traditional one pursued by Hussein Badreddin, designed to include Zaydi youth or re-include them with the traditional Zaydi culture and madhab of his father Badreddin.”<sup>68</sup> During summer of 2001, all centres and followers of Hussein al-Houthi split off from the Shabab al-Mu'min in favour of more traditional Zaydism while Azan and his followers continued to work according to the original aims of the Muntada. According to Azan, “Hussein and his followers were not connected to the Ithna Ahsari madhab (the twelvers) but when pressed as to how they had changed the goals, he replied there were some thoughts especially the ideas about which the most recent events transpired, and these would confirm do not derive from the Zaydi usual, asserting that they were unrepresentative of

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<sup>66</sup> Abdulla Lux. (2009). Yemen's last Zaydi Imam: the shabab al-mu'min, the Malazim and hizb allah in the thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al houthi. Beirut: Center for Arab Studies.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

the madhab and were a mixture of everything; some of them have a stamp of Ja'fari thought and some are Salafi – you are not able to determine an identity [for them].”<sup>69</sup>

In the summer of 2004, Azan totally rejected Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi's theology concerning the Malazim (notes) that al Houthi wrote. Azan criticised, in an “excessive veneration”, the Malazim by saying, “We took a look at these Malazim and found in them much which we had never read and with which we did not agree which impelled us to issue a communiqué and to attempt a block and isolate him as he did not represent us and we did not support him or bear responsibility for him and his followers. Others besides us among the ulama did the same and we entered into disputes with them...up until the beginning of hostilities in 2004.”<sup>70</sup>

The Shabab al-Mu'min's agenda and demands were vague, defined mainly by popular anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans. In contrast, al-Houthi's major work has been comparable to the Lebanese party Hizbullah through collecting zakat (donations), preaching at mosques, supporting educational and health centres, founding charities, promoting youth military summer camps, etc. According to the Yemeni President Saleh, “The support does not come from Hizbullah as a Hizb or from its leadership, but from elements belonging to this [party]. And, what I understand is that the Houthiyun obtained their expertise in bomb, landmine and munitions manufactur[ing] from some experts and some elements belonging to Hizbullah and that some of the elements of the Houthiyun went to Lebanon.”<sup>71</sup>

According to Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer in their article entitled *What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism*, “The political ambitions of Hussein al-Houthi, the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

leader of the Houthi movement in Yemen, coincide with interests of Iran in the region.”<sup>72</sup> The name of the newly-created assembly symbolically reflects a Shiite origin that goes back to Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Taleb’s followers who used to organize themselves under the al-Shabab al-Mu’min organization. It also resembles the process of Hizbullah’s inception in Lebanon during the Israeli invasion in 1982 under al-Shabab al-Mu’min: “Later in 1982, in a meeting that took place in Ba’albek and some in al-Tufaylis house with al Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, various members of Lebanon’s Ulama and leadership elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, where resistance to the Israeli invasion was discussed, it was decided to begin military training for these so called al-Shabab al-Mu’min who could of course become later known as Hizbullah.”<sup>73</sup>

In this regard, we cannot ignore the Shiite/Twelve approach of the newly-created assembly, especially after Hussein bin Badreddin al-Houthi returned from Iran. According to Dr. Ragheb El Seragny, a professor in Islamic studies who sheds light on Badreddin al-Houthi’s theological approach towards the Twelver Shiite group in Iran, “Badreddin al-Houthi belongs to the Jarudiyah sect (a Zaydi branch which held beliefs close to those of Twelver Shiites). The situation aggravated when Badreddin al-Houthi started to publicly propagate the Twelver Shiite thought. In this regard he composed a book called *Zaidi in Yemen*, in which he highlighted points of resemblance between Zaydi and Twelver Shiites. Strongly opposed of his thought that is absolutely deviated from Zaydism, he had to immigrate to Tehran where he lived for a number of years.”<sup>74</sup> In his booklet on the interpretation of Surat al-Maeda, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi described the ideal qualities and characteristics of Islamic rulers by comparing them to the role

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<sup>72</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. Published 10 October 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Abdullah Lux. (2009). Yemen’s last Zaydi Imam: the shabab al-mu’min, the Malazim and hizb allah in the thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al houthi. Beirut: Center for Arab Studies.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

of Khomeini during and after the Shah's rule by saying, "Whoever holds these divine characteristics and qualities must be a man who can build a great nation. Those who possess such attributes...can build great nations. Today Iran is poles apart from the Iran of the pre-Islamic revolution era, although only a relatively short amount of time has passed since the revolution, an amount of time no longer than the reign of any of the kings who ruled the country prior to the revolution."<sup>75</sup>

In addition, the government explicitly accused the Houthis of being Twelvers. Ali al-Anissi, head of the Bureau of National Security, stated, "Hussein al-Houthi and Abdallah al-Ruzami imported a lot of festivals and practices coming from Twelver Shias, and this has provoked tension."<sup>76</sup>

## **2.9 Conclusion**

We cannot deny the Houthi ambition for a wider political role in Yemen, supported by regional powers through a religious perspective. This amalgamation of Houthi national political ambitions and concomitant regional intervention led to the first incident in 2002. By provoking popular demonstrations, the Yemeni regime was forced to react. In January of 2002, a mass of Hussein al-Houthi's followers stood outside the great mosque in Sana'a chanting, "Allah Akbar! Death to America! Death to Israel! Damn the Jews! Victory to Islam!" The "cry," as it came to be known, was an "outcry in the face of arrogance," according to Hussein al-Houthi. Having given a lecture to followers earlier that day on the perils of American tyranny, and the disgrace

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<sup>75</sup> Mshari Al-Zaydi.(2009). Don't Confuse the Houthis with the Zaidis. Riyadh: Al Sahreq Al Awasad.

<sup>76</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

from which the Arab and Islamic people suffer, al-Houthi urged his followers to present his message to the president.<sup>77</sup>

It took the Houthis two years to directly confront the president while he was praying the Friday prayer in the Imam al-Hadi mosque in Saada, after which he would give a brief speech (Khutbat al Joumaa). “As soon as people had finished praying, they burst in chanting their well-known slogan: ‘God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! May the Jews be cursed! Victory to Islam.’ The irritated president, unable to deliver his speech over the din, was compelled to return to his car and leave.”<sup>78</sup> And here the story began.

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<sup>77</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. Published on 10 October 2010.

<sup>78</sup> Abdullah Lux,. (2009). Yemen’s last Zaydi Imam: the shabab al-mu’min, the Malazim and hizb allah in the thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al houthi. Beirut: Center for Arab Studies.

## **Chapter Three: Causes of the Wars**

### **Introduction**

When exiting from Sana'a International Airport, the most prominent billboard written next to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's enormous portrait reads, "Welcome to the Happy Yemen." This title was earned by the Yemeni state and people due to Yemen's historical stability, peacefulness, its ability to reconcile differences and for the country's inter-sectarian harmony. These days however, due to conflict, violence, socio-economic disparities, political instability, tribal and religious tensions between all Yemeni fractions, the very title which the Yemenis are so proud of has been tarnished.

Within a wider context, the Yemeni state is on the edge of devastation due to the following internal reasons: the conflict in the north with the Houthis; the nationwide war on terrorism, particularly against al-Qaeda; the gulf between South-North relations; recent southern calls for separation; political instability; discrimination against religious minority groups such as the Jews, Christians and Bahai's; economic complexities; the lack of development; nutrition/food



crises; as well as Yemen's geographical significance in fighting pirates between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The International Crisis Group (ICG) clearly reflected this chaotic scene in its report *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb* noting, "Yemen currently confronts simultaneous political and social crises made all the more serious by the global financial meltdown. Increasing domestic repression under cover of an anti-terrorism campaign reflects growing state insecurity; meanwhile, massive protests are occurring in what once was South Yemen, where secessionist sentiment is on the rise."<sup>79</sup> Each of these developments is a cause for concern. The ICG report explicitly makes remarks on the Saada conflict, which the central government has been unable to end. It notes that the conflagration between the army and the Believing Youth is the most dangerous and deadly.<sup>80</sup>

Within this gloomy scene, the regional and international interventions in Yemen's internal affairs can be seen as catastrophic. Neither the direct role of Saudi Arabia, the United States and Iran in the Saada war nor the indirect involvement that originates from Syria, Libya, Pakistan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces that secure the international sea gate of "Bab el Mandib" can be ignored. The involvement of disconnected elements in the structural core of Yemen's tribal, social and religious aspects, such as al-Qaeda, poses a threat not only to Yemen but also to the region as a whole. According to Mejia and Alshaer, "The conflict is a reflection of not only the internal tensions that have been building up in Yemen over religious, socio-economic and political strains. Rather, the conflict also represents the greater geopolitical and historic context that has developed around and within Yemen."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. *Al Majalla* magazine. Published on 10 October 2010.

In 2004, while Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was praying Friday prayer in Sana'a Mosque, the Houthis (at that time known as Believing Youth) began shouting anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans "Death to America" and "Death to Israel". This behaviour worried the authorities and pushed the regime to arrest more than 800 of the Believing Youth supporters who refused to end the chanting while referring to Hussein al-Houthi as "Sidi" (my Lord). "Their insistence on chanting the slogans attracted the authorities' attention and increased government worries over the extent of the al-Houthi movement's influence,"<sup>82</sup> stated Hassan Zaid, a Yemeni intellectual. Shortly after the incident, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was called to Sana'a to explain himself, but the former parliamentarian refused. After prompt failure of reconciliation between the president and Hussein al-Houthi, as well as continued demonstrations in Sana'a, the government sent 18 trucks with more than 200 soldiers to arrest Hussein al-Houthi in his stronghold in Haydan District. Fighting erupted between the two parties, marking the emergence of a series of wars between the Yemeni army and what was to be known as the Houthis.

## **Causes**

Due to political, religious, social, economic, developmental and tribal causes, as well external interferences, a series of six wars erupted between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, with no serious determination or spirit to resolve the causes of these wars. Within this context, Abdul Malik al-Houthi emerged in 2004 as an outstanding opposition character, first tackling in his marginalized districts the weaknesses of the Yemeni political system with regards to its corruption, inequalities, lack of development, and the Salafi approach due to its alliance with Saudi Arabia (and its general objectives motivated by relations with the United States), as well as the repression of Zaydis.

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<sup>82</sup> Integrated Regional Information Networks. (2008). Yemen: The conflict in Saada Governorate – Analysis. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The International Crisis Group clearly illustrated those causes in one of its reports by stating, “It can be traced back to the decline of the social stratum led by Hashemites and legitimized by Zaydism, failed management of religious pluralism, lack of investment in Zaydi strongholds like Saada after 1962, permeability to external influences and the emergence of new political and religious actors, in particular Salafis. As a result, it has variously and at times simultaneously taken the shape of sectarian, political or tribal conflict, rooted in historical grievances and endemic under-development. It also has been shaped by a regional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.”<sup>83</sup>

### **3.2.1. Historical causes**

The fall of the Imamate had left the Zaydi community without a religious leadership or orientation. Neither Zaydi religious scholars nor the old tribesmen and judges could revive their theological and religious legitimacy in the absence of the Imam. Up until the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, and the emergence of a new generation of scholars and intellectuals, doctrinal adaptation and theological guidance were gradually integrated by the Zaydi community.

In addition to the above changes, the new republic of 1962 was viewed as anti-Hashemite and anti-Zaydi. Despite many public and military Zaydi figures (including the president) denouncing their Zaydi origins, many others remained loyal to their origins. The Houthi family indeed was a Hashemite social group that witnessed the decline of their status. Severe discrimination against the Zaydi Hashemites from the government’s end was a source of their ruling elite’s policies. In an interview with International Crisis Group a Zaydi scholar described the Hashemite situation critically, remarking, “The people now ruling Yemen continue to have a problem with the former Hashemite rulers. There is a kind of racism at play. They seem to

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<sup>83</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

consider that the preceding 1,200 years were all wrong and negative...It is impossible for a Hashemite to become a president or even prime minister.”<sup>84</sup>

In contrast, the government denounced many times the Zaydi Hashemite claims of racism and their counter policies. In 2007, President Ali Abdullah Saleh himself condemned those claims by stating that the state is neutral and respects all identities and sects.<sup>85</sup> It can be argued, however, that 1,200 years of Hashemite rule has led to discrimination of such sort, as a huge portion of the Zaydi population were marginalized dating back to the Imamate.

### **3.2.2 Political causes**

The conflict in Yemen has been shaped by political struggle over power-sharing. After the end of the Imamate rule in 1962, and the rise of republicans to power, the survival of Northern Yemen and the Republic of Yemen (after unification) was based on power-sharing and compromise. Regime stability was thus based on co-optation methods. However, repression and wars between the army and tribes continued to erupt quite frequently.

After the unification of Northern and Southern Yemen in May 1990, the Zaydis felt threatened by the amalgamation of the southern Sunni majority in the Yemeni society. During the 1994 civil war between the Sana’a government and the southern separatist movements, in order to achieve political gains especially after the Gulf War, Badreddin al-Houthi sided with the southern movements. According to Mshari al-Zaydi, “He did this not because he supported the socialists, but rather due to his hatred of the government in Sana’a which had broken away from Imamate rule and allied itself with the Salafis.”<sup>86</sup>

According to the United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS) report entitled *Towards Freedom in the Arab World*, “Yemeni law, for example, stipulates that parties must not undermine the people’s Islamic faith or engage in any activity opposed to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Mshari Al-Zaydi.(2009). Don’t Confuse the Houthis with the Zaidis. Riyadh: Al Sharq Al Awsat.

the aims of the Yemeni revolution.” The Houthis claimed that these were precisely the kinds of activities in which the government was engaged in with respect to their theological Twelver approach as well as their political ambitions.

### **3.2.3 Developmental causes**

Since the 1962 revolution, the region inhabited by Zaydis had undergone methodical economic and developmental marginalization. In a country where the poverty rate is approximately 59.5 percent, low income rate is 29 percent, 38 percent of the population is undernourished, 45 percent of the population live on less than two dollars a day, 45.9 percent of the entire population is illiterate and 20 percent of the population dies before reaching the age of 40,<sup>87</sup> it is clear that the issue of underdevelopment has taken a toll on much of Yemeni society. Within this context of underdevelopment, the Houthi movement grew increasingly powerful while the government was virtually absent. “Hussein wanted to create a self-sufficient economic system which will sustain his followers and force the Yemeni government to surrender to the Houthis’ demands. The impact of these measures was particularly important because of the lack of development.”<sup>88</sup>

In the northern governorates of Ma’rib, al-Jawf, Shabwa and Saada, the state is unable to provide infrastructure, basic public services and human development for the most part. The relationship between the government and the tribal population can be characterized as one based on mutual abuse. According to the International Crisis Group report entitled Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb, “Local tribes

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<sup>87</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS). (2009). Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries. New York: United Nations Publications.

<sup>88</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. Al Majalla magazine. Published on 10 October 2010.

routinely kidnap citizens and foreigners to press the government to release detained family members or build roads and hospitals.”<sup>89</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Zaydi rhetoric is marked by criticisms of the state for neglecting their localities; the Al Nidaa newspaper echoed the Zaydis’ sentiments by writing that people know the republic solely through its missiles and tanks.<sup>90</sup> The northern provinces, mainly Saada, remained marginalized and ignored by the developmental plans of the government. The only development measures were due either to the northern provinces’ relations with Saudi Arabia, such as commerce and assistantship, or due to their agricultural productivity in the northern fertile mountains. In his book entitled *Saada Limadha*, Muhammad al-Saidi notes that in the early 1990s, a Zaydi intellectual recalled that the only hospital in Saada at the time had been built with Saudi money and that the city had waited more than 20 years after the revolution to be visited by a Northern Yemeni president.<sup>91</sup>

As a parliamentarian and people’s representative between 1993 and 1997, Hussein al-Houthi attempted to deliver change to his district through the government and the established systems. Unfortunately, however, his efforts seemed to be an exercise in futility. In his own criticisms of the president concerning electrical development, Hussein al-Houthi said, “We see that, in the end, it is nothing more than a fish bait; not a single promise has been kept, as Ali Abdullah Saleh said when he visited, ‘God willing, in 1986 Saada will be on a single power grid.’ Then came 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990 and 1991 and nothing happened – we remained applying for electricity for seven years for a single region.”<sup>92</sup>

### **3.2.4 Religious causes**

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<sup>89</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>90</sup> Al Nidaa Newspaper.(2005). Sanaa independence weekly.

<sup>91</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>92</sup> Hussein Badreddin Al Houthi. (2002). Lecture al-Thaqafah al-Qur’aniyah. Saada.

In these words, Hussein al-Houthi addressed the discriminatory religious policies of the Yemeni government: “We are not in need of a culture that draws its legitimacy on the basis of its compatibility with unbelief (Kufr) or the domination of non-believers; we must be wary of this logic and know that if we do not educate ourselves according to the culture of the Qur’an, we will be victims of others, victims of other cultures.”<sup>93</sup>

Although the Yemeni government used to stress the importance of relations between the Zaydis and Sunnis, it made it a point to differentiate between the Zaydis and Houthis. Many governmental figures pointed to the similarities between the Zaydis and Sunnis by emphasizing the Zaydi origin of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Many Yemeni officials often capitalized on this fact when portraying the “warm” relationship between the Sunnis and Zaydis, when it comes to praying in each other’s mosques being the well known example used by the Yemeni officials. The head of the National Security Bureau, Ali al-Anissi, described the relationship as such: “Zaydism is a Shiite strain within Sunni Islam, and Shafeism is a Sunni strain within Shiite Islam.”<sup>94</sup>

According to Zaydis, the threat comes not from Sunnis as a sect, but from the emerging fundamental religious groups inside Sunni Islam, particularly with regards to the Saudi-rooted Salafi and Wahabi schools of thought. Salafism is a Sunni movement that seeks to revive “original” Islam, drawing on so-called pious ancestors (salaf al-salih),<sup>95</sup> while Wahabism is based on a strict interpretation of the Hanbali School of jurisprudence that emphasizes the unity of God (tawhid) and rejects the Hashemite claim to power.<sup>96</sup>

Around the mid-1980’s, Salafism (backed by Saudi elements) emerged in Yemen under a well-known cleric Muqbil al-Wadii. With this, the Zaydis felt their theology threatened as a result of Salafis labeling them with the Jaafari identity. Al-Wadii established his own religious school in Saada which attracted many Sunni youth. A clash of fundamentalisms emerged between Zaydism and Salafism,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>95</sup> International Crisis Group.(2005). Understanding Islamism. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>96</sup> Madawi Al-Rashid. (2008). Kingdom without borders: Saudi Expansion in the World. London: Colombia University Press.

erupting in fierce competition amongst the two. The Salafists launched their monthly magazine al-Muntada, which served as a platform to criticize Zaydism. “So that we do not forget the secret plan to spread the Iranian revolution,” Abdul Aziz al-Dubaii wrote, “if the armed forces have a great role to play in eradicating the Houthi sedition (fitna), the intellectual forces must eradicate its roots.”<sup>97</sup>

Contrastingly, the Houthis rejected these theological claims and the fierce Salafi media campaign. As such, the Salafi threat became integral to the Zaydi way of thinking. Many publications and reports were issued denouncing the Salafi invasion of the Zaydi structure. The most prominent publication is the *Al wahhabiyya wa khaturuha ala mustaqbal al Yaman al-siyasi* by the author Amin Abu Zayd. In a phone interview with Yahya al-Houthi in 2009 with International Crisis Group, al-Houthi clearly declared that the aim of his movement is to fight Wahabism. There has been a cultural and intellectual war between Zaydism and Wahabism ever since the fall of the Imamate. And ever since unification, the Yemeni government has sought financial assistance from Saudi Arabia in return for facilitating the spread of Wahabism.<sup>98</sup>

It is worth noting that during the early years of the emergence of Salafism in Yemen, the government used to fund Zaydi summer camps in order to counter the Saudi role in Northern Yemen with the emergence of new Sunni Islamist movements. According to a senior ruling party official, funding was designed to thwart the influence of other Islamist groups in the Saada region, particularly the Salafis and Wahabis who had connections with Saudi Arabia and called for a strict reform of Islam that many felt was alien to Yemeni history and culture. The government anticipated the danger of the spread of Wahabism, so in the 1980s, and through much of the 1990s, it supported the Zaydi groups, including the Houthis. However, it failed to control the wahabi and Salafi groups’ platforms.<sup>99</sup>

Due to religious reasons, the war in Yemen ultimately shifted the Zaydi public opinion from supporting the government to maintaining strong ties with the Houthis. According to the United Nations

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<sup>97</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>98</sup> International Crisis Group.(2009). Telephone interview with Yahya al-Houthi. Berlin: International Crisis Group.

<sup>99</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Bomb*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.



Human Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the Houthis constitute nearly 30 percent of the entire Zaydi population, which makes up approximately 45 percent of the Yemen's total population.<sup>100</sup>

The Zaydi opposition group in north Yemen described the war between the Houthis and the government as a religious/sectarian war between the Shiites and Sunnis. According to Hassan Zaid, head of the opposition alliance and Secretary General of the Zaydi al-Haq party, "The rebels are Zaydis and they are victims of the regime's policies and its internal conflicts. The war in north Yemen is a religious one targeting the Zaydis and Hashemites."<sup>101</sup> The head of the opposition continuously criticized the religious approach of the Yemeni military's operations against the Zaydis and, more specifically, the Houthis. Hassan Zaid stressed more on the Sunni domination of the political system of Yemen, which tends to eliminate Zaydi ideology and history. He stated that, "The war in Saada is initiated to obliterate the Zaydi ideology from Yemen and replace it with the Sunni ideology...the war in Saada began when the state insulted the Zaydis and Hashemites, kicked them out of their jobs, and took over their mosques...Zaydis in Yemen are treated as if they were foreigners or agents and as if they have no right to life and liberty."<sup>102</sup>

### **3.2.5 Tribal causes**

"O mankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. The most honored of you before God is the most righteous of you. Allah is most knowing" (Surat al-Hujurat 13).

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<sup>100</sup> United Nations Human Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). 2008. Yemen: The Conflict in Saada: analysis. Geneva: United Nations Human Commission for Refugees.

<sup>101</sup> Mohammed Al Amrani. (2009). Opposition Chief: Houthis are Victims of the States Policies. Retrieved on 3 December 2009 from: <http://yemenherald.com?p=900>

<sup>102</sup> Mohammed Al Amrani. (2009). Opposition Chief Says Yemen Seeking to Wipe out Zaydis. Retrieved on 3 December 2009 from: <http://yemenherald.com?p=720>

Like most Middle Eastern societies and Arab states, tribal ties control human interaction and behaviour. Yemen is no exception. The tribal system controls Yemen's political, social and developmental structure. Yemen consists of tribes, clans and sub-clans; this amalgamation portends a power balance between the different tribes. Historically, tribes have either supported or opposed the political system of their countries. Yemen is a vital example. The Yemeni tribal system is divided between supporters of the government and opposition; at the same, however, various tribes, respective of their sects, have been known to form alliances with either the Houthis or al-Qaeda.

With regards to the Zaydi case, there are approximately 400 Zaydi tribes with a combined population of 5 million who inhabit the mountains of northern Yemen. Two Zaydi tribes, the Hashids and Bakils, are the most prominent. The Houthis stem from the powerful local Yemeni Bakil sub-tribe, whereas the Hashids are generally pro-government due to familial and political reasons.

Historically, the Bakil tribe and sub-tribes have suffered from an ambivalent orientation, which permitted them to seize different positions pertaining to this conflict. The majority of the Bakil tribe and sub-tribes ally themselves with the Houthis not only for religious or political reasons, but also for tribal power balance purposes. The Hashid tribe, on the other hand, had always allied with the central government, especially under the authority of Sheik Abdullah al-Ahmar who died in December of 2007.<sup>103</sup> According to Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the al-Usaymat sub-tribe, which is one of the important Hashid tribes, imposed an embargo on Saada via checkpoints banning supplies and restricting free movement.<sup>104</sup> This situation led to a tribal conflict between the Hashids (pro-government) and the Bakils (pro-Houthis). It is worth

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<sup>103</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>104</sup> Al Ilaf, (2009); Independent Sanaa weekly; retrieved on 12 January 2010.

mentioning that the third round of war between the Houthis and the government was sparked due to clashes between tribes belonging to the parties in conflict. These tribal interferences flourished the vendettas (Thar) between the tribes, which amplified the violent nature of the conflicts.

In order to expand their powers and domination, the “tribalisation” of the Saada war and the spread of fighting beyond the tribes’ natural borders became the main characteristics of this dilemma. In exchange for participating in the fights, some tribes received governmental aid while others became increasingly marginalized. The size of the affected area, number of participating tribes and involvement of the army and other state agents distinguish this from the myriad of tribal conflicts that regularly occur and ordinarily would be resolved through traditional tribal law.<sup>105</sup>

### **3.2.6 Social causes**

After the 1962 revolution in Northern Yemen that ended more than 1,000 years of the Imamate rule, social disorder emerged within the northern society and specifically within the Zaydi community. The alteration of social order dominated the newly emerged state. During the Imamate rule, a Zaydi social division between its groups was the ruling regulatory factor of the society, as well as in social life. The division was asserted between the upper class which are Hashemite (judges), the middle class which are the tribesmen and the lower class which are the working people.

However, when the Republic emerged after 1962, equality was the core of its political and social rule. The well-known classifications were simply abolished. Like all societies, the social order in northern Yemen was redrawn once again, but this time based not on religious

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<sup>105</sup> Paul Dresch. (2006). Rules of Barat: Texts and translations of tribal documents from Yemen. Sanaa: Centre Francais d'Archeologie et de Sciences Sociales and Deutches Archeologisches Institut.

factors, but rather socio-economic and political reasons. In order to preserve their old social status, Zaydi judges and tribesmen allied themselves with the Shafi'i elites and intellectuals, eventually becoming the new ruling local groups.

### **3.2.7 The “charismatic effect”**

It would be remiss, however, to focus only on the political, social, tribal, religious, economic, and developmental causes, in addition to the regional circumstances, that increased popular support of the al-Houthi brothers. One of the most overlooked but fundamental causes of the wars between the Houthis and the Yemeni government can be found in the charismatic natures of both Hussein al-Houthi and his brother Abdul Malik al-Houthi. The Iranians and Saudis both wanted “Trojan horses” in order to counter each other. Since President Ali Abdullah Saleh had already established his charismatic image from his military background, the Houthi brothers, particularly Hussein, was portrayed as a key charismatic leader who delivered revolutionary discourse in a manner which resembled the Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. This made him the most popular Zaydi figure.

## **3.3 The Six Rounds of War**

“God is great...Death to America...Death to Israel...Curse upon the Jews...Victory to Islam...” These were the slogans yelled by the Houthi militants when President Ali Abdullah Saleh was praying Friday prayer in Saada's Imam al-Hadi great Mosque. After many failed compromise settlements and non-stop demonstrations in Saada and Sana'a between Hussein al-Houthi and the president, the government decided to arrest al-Houthi and some of his followers in Saada. In June of 2004, military forces were directed towards al-Houthi's stronghold in Saada, leading to the eruption of a fierce battle between the Houthis and government security forces. These skirmishes lasted for three months, ultimately resulting in the death of Hussein al-Houthi.

It can be argued that the president's motivation to arrest Hussein al-Houthi was underscored by two main reasons. The first reason is that he wanted to ensure the rule of law while portraying himself as the major arbiter and ultimate authority in Yemen. Secondly, the president was inarguably concerned that the Houthis were now courageous enough to chant vitriolic slogans during his presence. This could set a dangerous precedent for later slogans to be directed at him personally addressed by shouting "Death to the President", illustrating a possible main reason behind this fierce response to the demonstration.

Briefly, the six main rounds of war between the Houthis and the Yemeni government erupted from 2004 until 2010 as follows:

- The first round took place in the Marran Mountains from June to 10 September 2004, where Hussein al-Houthi had been hiding. After three months of severe battles, Hussein al-Houthi was eventually killed. Despite addressing the government in a letter in which he asserted loyalty to the president and the republic,<sup>106</sup> the decision to kill Hussein al-Houthi was taken nonetheless. Immediately after his death, the government declared a unilateral end of insurgencies, yet many critical and sensitive issues remained unresolved.
- Less than six months after the government's unilateral cessation of hostilities, accusations about recommencing the hostility between the government and Badreddin al-Houthi (Hussein's father) caused the eruption of the second round of war from March to May of 2005. The government began to portray the Houthi movement as a terrorist organization while the Houthis described the government's actions as anti-Islamic and anti-Shiite in nature. Again, the war erupted in the Houthi stronghold of Saada. At the end of May 2005, the government declared victory and ended its military operations.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

- No later than six months, insurgencies erupted once again from late 2005 to late 2006. However, this time the pro-governmental tribesmen (and some pro-Houthis tribal fighters) were the main triggers that drove the government to move its military forces against the Houthis. This war can be characterized by two major factors. First, Hussein's brothers Yahya and Abdul Malik emerged as new rebel leader. Secondly, the government wanted to settle the conflict before the presidential and local elections. In this regard, the government released the prisoners and named a new governor for Saada District.
- After the end of both presidential and local elections in late 2006, the Houthis pushed the Yemeni government to a fourth round of war from February to June 2007 by intimidating Al Salem Jewish community of Saada. This war was peculiar in that, for the first time, fighting had spread outside of Saada District. More peculiar was the direct regional intervention, through Qatari mediation efforts, towards reconstruction and development in Saada District. The Qatari mediation could be seen as the indirect reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- The fifth round of war erupted from May to July 2008 when the Qatari mediation did not hold as expected. The government accused the Houthis of violating the ceasefire through two violent episodes: the assassination of a member of parliament and the attack on a Sunni mosque in Saada District. This war could be characterized by both the spread of fighting to Northern Sana'a and the direct interference of the Republican Guard under the command of the president's son, Ahmad Ali Saleh. The fighting finally ended when the president, during his 30th anniversary in power, declared an end to fighting following various local and international pressures.

- After more than one year of peaceful relations between the Houthis and the government, war erupted once again from mid-August 2009 to 19 March 2010. Once again, the Houthis had broken the unilateral cease fire declared by the government in the summer of 2008. A significant factor during this war was the direct military intervention of the Saudi military against the Houthis. The Houthis prompted the Saudi forces to interfere when they invaded Saudi territories on the northern Yemeni-Saudi borders, leading to the death of many Saudi soldiers. In this war, direct and indirect criticism aimed at intervention between the Saudis and Iranians erupted. Each country claimed that the responsibility of deterioration of the North Yemen front lies with the other.

It is clear that these wars have had significant long-lasting impacts on Yemen's internal and regional dynamics. However, during these six rounds we can notice the following. First, neither the government nor the Houthis could proclaim a final and direct victory to putting a sustainable end to this conflict. Secondly, neither party could afford fighting for more than six months. Third, the unilateral ceasefire directly declared by the government was consistently acknowledged and abided by the Houthis. Fourth, both parties in the conflict denied receiving any regional support and intervention. Fifth, the wars have illustrated the weak military capabilities of the Yemeni forces since it could not end the fighting; contrastingly, the Houthi rebels' populism had flourished. Finally, the corrupt Yemeni military forces in addition to the high organizational ability of the Houthis are main features of this war.

# **Chapter Four:**

## **The Survival of Yemen**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the critical and significant consequences of the current violence in Yemen and the ability of this country to survive as a unified state, from the repercussions of the north-south relations, to the international terrorist activities of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which took from Yemen the new base instead of Pakistan and to some extent Afghanistan. This is, of course, not to mention the divide and rule strategy utilized by the Yemeni regime in order to rule and monopolize the tribal community, either during the war in Saada or throughout the initiation of the Southern Movement, “Al Hirak Al Jnaoubi”. Additionally, this chapter will address this conflict from the perspectives of economic and political development. Finally, this chapter will shed light on the humanitarian bill of this conflict and its implications on the Yemenis with regards to casualties, internally-displaced people and the destruction of the daily social and economic networks.

### **4.2 Repercussions of the Conflict in Saada**

The current conflict in Yemen portends serious and sweeping consequences not only in northern Yemen but also in the whole region of the Arabian Peninsula. It has affected the relations between the Zaydis themselves, Zaydis with the government, and Sunnis with Shiites. It has also amplified the tribal conflict, diminished the power of the central government, refreshed the Southern Movement’s “Al Hirak Al Jnaoubi” calls for independence and created a safe-haven for al-Qaeda. In addition, this conflict greatly affected Yemen’s poor, caused malnutrition



crises and economic instability, forced the internally-displaced people to search for new homes, and reduced the potential of rule of law within this tribal-based niche.

On the regional and international level, this conflict attracted some powerful states and actors, whether through direct or indirect interference, with a view to spread their influence and power (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Libya, Kuwait, Syria, Pakistan, the European Union, the United States, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Somali refugees, and Hezbollah<sup>107</sup>). On another front, the effects of al-Qaeda's newfound refuge in Yemen have been colossal, particularly as many recent terrorist attacks were found to have originated from the country (e.g., the "underwear bomber," the dissemination of mail bombs, etc.).

One of the most direct and cataclysmic outcomes of this conflict, however, has been the death of Hussein al-Houthi in 2004; much to the government's dismay, al-Houthi's death did not diminish his historical, political, religious and military heritage. The government dealt with this subject in a cruel way, which led to the rise of the Houthis inheritance supporters between the Zaydis: "By the fourth confrontation, support for the rebel movement [had] evolved. Today, very few supporters are genuinely in favor of the slogan that has been as close as the Houthis have gone to identifying an agenda. In addition, the participants in the fighting are no longer a homogenous group. They do not carry a specific ideology. Instead, the battle has extended to other members of the tribal community. People who never heard of Hussein Al Houthi are participating in the fighting."<sup>108</sup>

Due to the government's frequent use of indiscriminate aerial strikes, the destruction of entire villages, and mass violence carried out by the military and pro-government tribes in the

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<sup>107</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>108</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. Al Majalla magazine. Published on 10 October 2010.

northern districts, grievances eventually arose between not only the Houthis, Hashemites and Zaydis, but also between all the northern provinces' inhabitants. Many in the north have chosen to side with the Houthis not because they believe in their cause, but simply because of the mass destruction wrought by the government, whether through marginalisation with respect to development or vicious military campaigns. In an interview with International Crises Group a Yemeni parliamentarian noted, "The Houthis are getting stronger with each round. Renewed fighting will only increase the rebels' influence and broaden the combat zone."<sup>109</sup>

Clearly this conflict poses drastic consequences for Yemen's entire civilian population. Yemen remains one of the poorest countries in the region with excessively high unemployment rates.<sup>110</sup> The war in Saada has surely affected the poor population, particularly farmers, villagers and the middle class population. In addition to the global economic meltdown, climate change, drought, desertification and food crises, this conflict has severely limited the government's ability to deal with the aforementioned challenges.

### **4.3 The Ability of Yemen to Survive as a Unified State**

The political system in Yemen is arguably the most open in the Arabian Peninsula. Yet the many challenges that confront Yemen produce an environment of great uncertainty for this tiny country's survival. Since unification of Northern and Southern Yemen in 1990, the country "has not ceased to experience violent upheavals whether on its northern or its southern fronts."<sup>111</sup> However, in order for Yemen to restore its mythical title of the "happy Yemen," the country

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<sup>109</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>110</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2010). Yemen: Global Appeal 2010-2011. Geneva: UNHCR.

<sup>111</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. Al Majalla magazine. Published on 10 October 2010.

needs to confront and resolve the dilemmas that hinder its abilities to survive as a unified state from a state building approach.

The convergence of Yemen's political, socio-economic and external variables paints a very stark picture, as many newly-emerging elements are threatening not only the survival of Yemen as a unified state, but also the existence of the Yemeni state as an entity. President Ali Abdullah Saleh warned in April 2009, "If anything happens to unity, God forbid: the country won't be divided into two parts, as some might think, but into many...People would fight from house to house, and from window to window...They have to learn a lesson from what happened in Iraq and Somalia."<sup>112</sup> In this gloomy context, the below factors will serve to play pivotal roles in any future attempts that will challenge the survival of Yemen as a unified state.

#### **4.3.1 The Houthi movement in the north**

As detailed throughout this thesis, from describing the origins of the Houthi movement to the causes and consequences of the six rounds of wars, this insurgency can be seen as the most vital and direct threat to the Yemeni state since its unification in 1990 and its civil war in 1994. During the fifth war in 2008, the Houthi rebels fought the Republican Guard in the capital Sana'a. The Republican Guard ultimately pushed the fighters back, but this marked the first time in which the insurgency mounted such a brazen attack on the capital city and so close to the presidential palace. The bold symbolism of such an attack more than made up for its tactical ineffectiveness.

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<sup>112</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2009). In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government's Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Over the span of these numerous conflicts, the Houthis had increased their military capabilities and garnered greater political, social and religious clout. According to a ruling party Consultative Council member and former minister, “At one point, the Houthis felt they had enough power to rise up (Khuruj) against the central state and declare the president unfit for power...it is evident that the rebels are well organized and well trained and have the capacity to confront the military.”<sup>113</sup> However, the central government has been forced into a position whereby it needs to boldly exercise its authority in this fragmented state. As a result, if any group challenges the central state and confronts its legitimate authority, like the Houthis did, they will be met with a brutal response.

In addition, the Houthi conflict cannot be seen outside its normal context of fighting because some discontent element that threatens peace and stability destabilize also not only northern Yemen but Saudi Arabia and to some extent the red sea coastal zone that borders the Northern provinces of Yemen.

#### **4.3.2 The simmering South-North relationship**

The relationship between the north and south has remained a fundamental and critical factor in the survivability of the Yemeni state, particularly in light of the call for sedition by the Southern Movement, an umbrella group representing various anti-government factions in the south of Yemen. The history of the Southern Movement dates back to 1994, four years after the North-South unification, when President Ali Abdullah Saleh used his armed forces to quell an uprising in the south, formerly the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). However in 1989, with the decay of the Soviet Union, the PDRY in the South considered union with the

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<sup>113</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the North due to Soviet cuts in military, political and economic aid.<sup>114</sup>

After the 1993 elections, deep divisions between leaders and political parties emerged between North and South. “Relations between the [Yemen Socialist Party] and the [General People’s Congress], which had formed a coalition government after 1990, deteriorated over policy differences, not least the spread and extent of integration of the two separate armies, bureaucratic and judicial reform and measures against corruption and terrorism.”<sup>115</sup> This deterioration culminated in the 1994 Yemen civil war in which the northern coalitions emerged victorious under the command of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Since then, and due to the negative repercussions of the 1994 civil war on the southern population, the North-South relationship has remained calm yet tense, based on the ruling power of the regime in Sana’a. Due to southern defeat, the government in Sana’a began to force southern military personnel and officers to resign, as well as southern civil servants, replacing them with northerners without paying pensions.<sup>116</sup> The subsequent economic decline of the state and the marginalization of the south were caused by the north’s unfettered domination of Yemen. “There was a feeling that southerners were being excluded from the north’s patronage networks in business, politics and military.”<sup>117</sup> It is worth mentioning that the revenues from the oil fields in the south were being diverted to the central government in northern Yemen. “The damage from the war and the looting to factories and industries were never fully repaired and the

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<sup>114</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2009). In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government’s Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests. New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2008). Invisible Civilians: The Challenges of Humanitarian access in Yemen’s Forgotten War. Geneva: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>117</sup> Brian Whitaker.(2009). The Birth of Modern Yemen. E-book. Retrieved on the 29 January 2009 from <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/birthofmodernyemen/default.htm>

southerners claim that economic patronage and oil-based development has bypassed them in favor of northerners.”<sup>118</sup>

The story of the current unrest has been spurred by the Southern Movement, “Al Hirak Al Janoubi” which is “not a single well-organized organization with a clearly defined leadership, but rather a loose coalition of individuals and organizations...popularly known as the Southern movement both inside Yemen and abroad.”<sup>119</sup> The movement gained significant traction in 2007 when a series of small protests led by some forcibly-retired officers called for their reinstatements and an increase in pensions. It is estimated that 100,000 forcibly-retired officers and civil servants participated in the 2007 demonstrations throughout the southern provinces.<sup>120</sup> Slowly but surely, the range of protests were expanded to include nearly all the factions of southern society, including journalists, businessmen, students, tribal leaders, workers, and so on. In addition, many southern political parties and tribal sheikhs joined the Southern Movement and utilized their mass networks to mobilize support for the movement.

By early 2009, the movement was seen as a Trojan horse for southern demands. The movement’s platform was characterized by demands for greater employment opportunities, an end to corruption, equitable distribution of oil revenues for southern provinces, and the establishment of rule of law. At a later stage, these demands were transformed into calls for complete secession and the reestablishment of an independent state in the south. The response of the government in Sana’a was harsh, as the calls for independence were a proverbial slap in the face to the unity of the Yemeni state and population. According to an interview with Human Rights Watch, a prominent Yemeni human rights activist described the movement as follows:

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<sup>118</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2009). *In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government’s Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

“Now, by mid-2009, all the southern factions demand secession from the north. The government in Sana’a only looks on how to stop these groups, not on how to solve the problems that have created them. There are elites in south Yemen who feel marginalized, but the groups they head represent real grievances of the people. The people want lower prices, better services, and more employment.”<sup>121</sup>

The increasingly heated rhetoric over sedition cast a looming shadow over the prospects of Yemen’s unity; the ensuing episodes of violence and armed clashes were simply a function of the Southern Movement’s demands. As with many developing countries, the use of violence to end political demands has been the core strategy of the regimes. Yemen is no exception; in order to preserve unity, while preserving the power and the rule of the president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the regime has commonly resorted to extreme responses in the face of southern calls of sedition. The regime has justified these measures as a means to an end consisting of sustained peace and a unified Yemeni state. What is quite sure is that the regime does not wish to go back to the pre-unification era, especially after the political and economic gains they gathered from unification. The threat caused by the Southern Movement remains persistent, however, and it has more recently been accused of having terrorist ties by some Yemeni officials who claim that this movement is in direct relation with al-Qaeda. Moreover, for the success of any independent movement to secede, the movement must possess significant international and regional support. The Southern Movement certainly lacks this kind of support; it is also lacking in effective leadership, organization, coordination and centralization of the decision-making process.

### **4.3.3 The al-Qaeda threat**

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Yemen is the original homeland of al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden. This is the homeland of Bin Laden's fifth wife Amal al-Sadah<sup>122</sup> and his father. In addition, Yemen is the heartland of Arabs who fought in Afghanistan during the 1980s; more recently, however, it has been the homeland of AQAP and the base for its international terrorist activities. In his article, *War on Yemen*, Leupp notes, "Arabs who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan call themselves the Afghan Alumni. Thousands went to Yemen after the Soviets defeat and were welcomed as heroes. Many of them fought again side by side in southern Yemen during that country's civil war in 1994."<sup>123</sup> According to Joseph Lieberman, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Iraq was yesterday's war. Afghanistan is today's war. If we don't act pre-emptively, Yemen will be tomorrow's war. That's the danger we face."<sup>124</sup>

It is clear that Yemen has become al-Qaeda's base of activities for scheming terrorist attacks not only in the Arabian Peninsula but also in the whole world. From tribal systems and religious schools to harsh economic difficulties that are characterized by high unemployment rates, high illiteracy rates, low income rates and high poverty rates,<sup>125</sup> Yemen's geographical location can be seen as a warm niche for international terrorism. If we look at the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region on the map, we can notice a triangle that is now being shaped by al-Qaeda in order to exercise greater control over the region. Al-Qaeda is now active in Mauritania, and Mali, in Maghreb, on the edge of taking power in Somalia; it is embroiled in a

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<sup>122</sup> Jane Novak.(2010). Abu al Fida, Bin Laden's Match Maker, Yemeni Government Advisor. Retrieved on 2 February 2010 from <http://armiesofliberation.com/archives/2010/01/29/abu-al-fida-bin-ladens-match-maker-yemeni-govt-advisor/>

<sup>123</sup> Gary Leupp.(2010). War on Yemen. Retrieved on 2 February 2010 from <http://www.counterpunch.org/leupp01152010.html>

<sup>124</sup> Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. (2010). Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb. Washington: United States Senate.

<sup>125</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS). (2009).Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries. New York: United Nations Publications.



constant fight in Iraq in the Mashrek region; and has established itself as a force to be reckoned with throughout much of Yemen. This so-called “terrorist triangle” will serve to threaten not only the Arab states and regimes but also the United States, the European Union and the Far East community in terms of security, oil and trade policies. By controlling the weak state of Yemen and the failed state of Somalia, al-Qaeda will have an immediate power over Bab al-Mandab, the strait from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean “through which passes 3.5 million barrels of oil a day...A quarter of the world’s sea-borne trade passes through the area, including 80 percent of China’s oil and gas.”<sup>126</sup>

According to American intelligence sources, there are approximately 300 al-Qaeda fighters presently in Yemen<sup>127</sup> who have found safe-havens in training camps where they can organize, plan and launch terrorist activities worldwide. This has been due to the weak central state in Sana’a that is facing a concomitant rebel movement in the north and a separate movement in the south. According to a report issued to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations entitled *Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb*, “The weak central government and alarming socioeconomic changes in Yemen have provided opportunities for terrorist groups to build and maintain a presence. The government’s counter-terrorism efforts are further hobbled by the conflicts in the northern and southern parts of the country.”<sup>128</sup>

On one hand the domestic, regional and international players’ concerns are now focused on al-Qaeda, an entity which has expanded itself into an extremely dangerous dimension by taking advantage of the weak central government, erstwhile threatening the survival of the Yemen state. In addition, the social and tribal niches in Yemen can be seen as fertile soil for al-

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<sup>126</sup> Conn Hallinan. (2010). Terrorist Haven or Chess Piece? Something About Yemen. Retrieved on 2 February 2010 from <http://www.counterpunch.org/hallinan01222010.html>

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. (2010). *Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb*. Washington: United States Senate.

Qaeda to flourish (e.g., metastasizing through marriage and kinship has been one of the core strategies employed by AQAP in order to protect their vital existence). Similar to their leader Osama bin Laden, who married a Yemeni girl in order to cement his ties with Yemen,<sup>129</sup> al-Qaeda members who migrate to Yemen tend to marry Yemeni women to seek blood and tribal support. According to the same report issued to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “These experts said they are worried that training camps established in the remote parts of Yemen by [AQAP] are being run by former detainees and veteran fighters from Afghanistan and Iraq and used to instruct U.S. citizens who have immigrated to Yemen to marry local women.”<sup>130</sup> It is lucidly clear that Yemen has become a regional base and key battlefield for al-Qaeda operations all over the world through training, recruiting and facilitating terrorist acts. What is more striking, however, is the inability of the Yemeni government to control and contain al-Qaeda’s actions and members due to the aforementioned reasons. Within this context, the U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus has said, “The inability of the Yemeni government to secure and exercise control over all of its territory offers terrorist and insurgent groups in the region, particularly al-Qaeda, a safe-haven in which to plan, organize and support terrorist operations.”<sup>131</sup>

On the other hand, the attacks and operations against the Yemeni army, security forces and officials can be seen as one of the most dangerous factors that undermine not only the survival of Yemen, but also international peace and security. As such, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that, “The instability in Yemen is a threat to regional stability and even

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<sup>129</sup> Jane Novak.(2010). Abu al Fida, Bin Laden’s Match Maker, Yemeni Govt Advisor. Retrieved on the 2nd of February 2010 from <http://armiesofliberation.com/archives/2010/01/29/abu-al-fida-bin-ladens-match-maker-yemeni-govt-advisor/>

<sup>130</sup> Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. (2010). Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb. Washington: United States Senate.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

global security.”<sup>132</sup> After attacks on foreign targets starting in 2000 (i.e., the USS Cole, French oil tankers, etc.), the Yemeni government launched counter-terrorism offensives against al-Qaeda bases all over Yemen. In response, al-Qaeda declared war against the Yemeni regime with a view to topple President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime by attacking military officers, prisons, army checkpoints, judges and key civil servants – not to mention the constant planning of attacks against international targets, most recently the mailing of explosives to Western countries and the attempted Christmas day bombing of a Detroit-bound flight in 2010.

It is worth mentioning that there is no relationship between the Southern Movement and al-Qaeda, according to declarations from both sides. “We have no links to al-Qaeda and we do not accept any such talks or position,”<sup>133</sup> stated Salah Shanfra, a Southern Movement leader. From their side, al-Qaeda also denies governmental claims of supporting the separatist Southern Movement. In an indirect criticism to the Southern Movement, al-Qaeda made it clear that only Islamic governance will lead to justice and peace. According to Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, a member of al-Qaeda and former general chief of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, “The origin of our movement is the unification of the entire Islamic nation and the countries of Islam...we do not support the separation...Islamic governance will come and govern this great state.”<sup>134</sup>

#### **4.4 The Monopoly on Violence Through Military and Tribal Means**

The effect of monopolizing violence to counter or calm the insurgency will definitely help the government’s short-term policies, but it will ultimately prove catastrophic in the long run. One of the most brilliant examples nowadays about the negative effects of monopoly on

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<sup>132</sup> Conn Hallinan. (2010). Terrorist Haven or Chess Piece? Something About Yemen. Retrieved on 2 February 2010 from <http://www.counterpunch.org/hallinan01222010.html>

<sup>133</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2009). In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government’s Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests. New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

violence is the history of al-Qaeda and Hamas. As in Sudan, the regime created the Janjawid to fight in Darfur and the Iraqi regime created the Sahwa forces to fight against al-Qaeda and other Islamist factions. Since the central government in Sana'a is so weak, the Yemeni regime was forced to assemble internal non-state forces to assist in fighting against the three major fronts: the north, the south and al-Qaeda. Peculiar here is that the Yemeni regime also created separate forces to fight against each enemy of the state. Yemen is loaded with armed tribal groups in outlying areas of all over the country, so this task proved to be fairly easy. Patrick Cockburn, a reporter with *The Independent*, stated that amongst tribal confederations, tribes, clans, and powerful families, "Almost everybody has a gun, usually at least an AK-47 assault rifle, but tribesmen often own heavier armament."<sup>135</sup>

On the northern front of Saada, tribal conflicts have usually been the main catalysts of all-out war. As discussed in the previous chapter, the conflict between the two Zaydi tribes (the pro-government Hashid tribe and the pro-Houthi Bakil tribe) led to a third round of fighting. During the six rounds of war, the pro-government forces fought hand-in-hand with the Yemeni army against the Houthis. As a result, the tribes enforced their tribal laws, restoring checkpoints and mounting pressure on the government after each round of war. According to the International Crises Group "The war's tribalisation means it is spreading far beyond its original reach. Competing tribes and tribal leaders vie for new positions to expand their power. As some groups are marginalized, others receive government help in exchange for fighting the insurgents."<sup>136</sup> In addition to that, in July of 2008 the government declared the creation of a "popular army" to fight the Houthis; but after small-scale conflicts fuelled by revenge killings

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<sup>135</sup> Conn Hallinan. (2010). Terrorist Haven or Chess Piece? Something About Yemen. Retrieved 2 February 2010 from <http://www.counterpunch.org/hallinan01222010.html>

<sup>136</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

became the *modus operandi* of these groups, the idea of a popular army was immediately abandoned by the government.<sup>137</sup>

On the southern front, the regime also capitalizes on a monopoly of violence in order to counter southern calls for separation, utilizing pro-governmental forces, militias and out-of-uniform security forces. According to *Human Rights Watch*, “The increasing activities of these extra-legal militias and groups greatly impede the mechanisms for accountable law enforcement, thus raising the potential for further violations and intercommunal violence.”<sup>138</sup> In April of 2009, the president decided to create “Committees to Protect Unity” (CPU) in order to counter the Southern Movement. As such, the main objective of the CPU has been to organize counter-protests in favour of Yemen’s unity in the south and use brute force as needed. President Ali Abdullah Saleh clearly stated full support of CPU tribes in the south during a meeting with southern pro-governmental forces in May 2009, declaring, “I am sure you will stay faithful to the September and October revolutions,” promising full military, financial and logistical support in order to preserve Yemen’s unity.<sup>139</sup> In this regard, many direct confrontations between the CPU and southern protesters emerged in many southern governorates, resulting in the deaths, injuries and kidnappings of many civilians and non-armed protesters.

On the al-Qaeda front, the role of pro-government tribes in fighting against terrorists can be characterized on a an intelligent and logistical level. Until now, there have been no clear signs pointing to the creation of an army to fight al-Qaeda (e.g., the popular army in the north or the CPU in the south). It seems that the government in Saada does not recognize the domestic threat of al-Qaeda as the most pressing security issue (unlike the rebel movements in the north and

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<sup>137</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2008). *Invisible Civilians: The Challenges of Humanitarian access in Yemen’s Forgotten War*. Geneva: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>138</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2009). *In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government’s Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

south, which directly threaten the unity of Yemen and President Saleh's regime), choosing instead to categorize it as an international danger.

#### **4.5 Political, Economic and Developmental Repercussions**

In general, we cannot address a conflict without tackling its political, economic and developmental repercussions – albeit the negative social impacts on any conflict are usually quite difficult to measure. Yemen's conflict is a lucid example of this. While the political impacts on Yemen's domestic arena were tackled in previous chapters, this section will explicitly focus on the external political impacts of the conflict, regionally and internationally.

It is clear that the Houthis conflict has had many regional and international repercussions. On the regional level, we cannot ignore direct and indirect interferences by some powerful countries in the Middle East. There are important regional dimensions to this conflict, as the Houthis are supported by a regional player, namely Iran, while the Yemeni government cannot hide the support of other important, if not equal, regional and international players primarily Saudi Arabia and the United States. "In other words," according to Mejia and Alshaer, "the conflict in Yemen is also being presented by the parties involved in the fighting as a Saudi-Iranian proxy war."<sup>140</sup>

On the Iranian front, the Yemeni government has accused rebels of receiving Iranian-backing. It is important to note that Hussein al-Houthi studied in Iran during his exile and was influenced by Ayatollah Khomeini's teachings and philosophy. According to Yemeni Vice Prime Minister for Security and Defence Rashad al-Alimi, "The Believing Youth started their activities under different names in the 1980s in the context of the Iranian revolution. They were trained in

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<sup>140</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthi – The Divided House of Zaydism. Al Majalla magazine. Published on 10 October 2010.

Iran during Ayatollah Khomeini's era with the objective of spreading the revolution. Between that time and 2004, the Houthis prepared themselves to launch operations against the state."<sup>141</sup> Even until now, Iranian interference in this conflict has been based on political, military, religious, financial and logistical support. No direct or physical involvement has been traced back to Tehran; according to the ICG, "Despite their denial and the fact they say they are against foreign intervention, the Iranians fund the Houthis through hawzas and charities."<sup>142</sup> While both Iranians and Houthis rejected those allegations in a strict and direct manner, they countered the government for being pro-Western and pro-Saudi. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki has consistently denied the allegations that Tehran is supporting rebel groups in Yemen; he added that a country which seeks a role to establish peace and stability cannot have a role in creating tensions.<sup>143</sup> From his part, Yahya al-Houthi stated that Iran plays no role whatsoever and the only external intervention has come from the West and Saudi Arabia. Al-Houthi went as far as remarking that the Houthis do not need the Iranians, as Zaydis have their own references and reasons to fight.<sup>144</sup>

On the Saudi front, direct intervention is clear and unambiguous. During the sixth war in 2009, due to a Houthi cross-border assault on the Saudi army, the Saudis launched a military campaign against what they considered a Houthi and Iranian threat to the southern border of the Arabian Gulf. The Al-Watan newspaper (a paper traditionally close to the Saudi regime) noted, "The crime committed by this criminal group in violating Saudi territory by killing and wounding a number of Saudi soldiers is nothing but a proof of the bankruptcy of this group and

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<sup>141</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Reuters. (2009). Iran denies it is supporting Yemeni rebels. New York: Reuters.

<sup>144</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

its resignation that its goal to divide Yemen and create an entity in the services of Iran and its regional scheme has failed.”<sup>145</sup> In fact, neither the Saudis nor the Yemenis denied the Saudi government’s political, financial and military support of the Yemeni government, pro-government local tribes and the Wahabi religious schools.

Moreover, the Houthis accuse Riyadh and some Western countries of explicitly targeting the Zaydis because of what Saudis consider as a discontented element that threatens the Saudi regime in the Arabian Peninsula. Houthis claim that it is the vital strategy of the government in Sana’a not to achieve a sustainable peace; they believe that “the government wants the war to continue in order to continue receiving financial support from Saudi Arabia.”<sup>146</sup> It is worth noting that by laying out the conflict in northern Yemen from an internal to a regional one, the Saudis and some western countries will increase pressure on President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime in order to settle insurgencies in the Northern provinces. From an international political perspective, this conflict will be an asset for the Houthis in order to escape military operations.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the developmental consequences of this conflict. Like every war, the cost of development and reconstruction is high. We have to shed light that development is one of the main reasons of any conflict. Yemen is a clear example of this. However in the Houthi wars, as mentioned in the previous chapter, lack of development has been a catalyst for conflict. Destruction will lead to destruction and further deepening of this dilemma. Yemen suffers from a high poverty rate that patents itself in ideological movements such as the Houthis, the Southern Movement, and al-Qaeda. By addressing these critical factors, mainly the issue of development, the conflict can be at least partially resolved. In fact, sending soldiers and opening new fronts will only lead to further destabilization. A General People’s Congress

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<sup>145</sup> Arab News Online. (2009). Round-up of Saudi, London-based Press Reaction to Saudi Offensive against Houthis. Retrieved on 14 December 2009 from: [http://biyokulule.com/view\\_content.php?articleid=2311](http://biyokulule.com/view_content.php?articleid=2311)

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.



member of the Consultative Council recently noted, “Houthis seem to have a lot of followers, not for religious reasons but because the population feels discriminated against and excluded from development policies. Unfortunately, the destruction of villages has not helped fight that impression.”<sup>147</sup> It seems that Zaydis, and mainly Houthis, know the government only through tanks, bombardments and widespread destruction. Development is greatly lacking, which makes this conflict a corollary of the state’s inability to provide sufficient development for different social stratum.<sup>148</sup>

On the other hand, it goes without saying that post-war eras are considered developmental epochs by excellence. After each post-war reconstruction, a developmental committee will emerge. Destruction from the social, infrastructure and developmental approach will be the core policy of the international community (e.g., states, donors, local government, the UN, NGOs). D

uring a visit to Yemen, the Emir of Qatar, Prince Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, pledged his country’s financial support to the reconstruction of much of Saada if the parties ended the war.<sup>149</sup>

## **4.6 Humanitarian Repercussions**

Unfortunately in any conflict, fragile entities suffer the major repercussions of war. In a country where almost half of the populations live on less than two dollars a day,<sup>150</sup> war could

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<sup>147</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>148</sup> Paula Mejia and Atef Alshaer. (2010). What it Means to be a Houthis – The Divided House of Zaydism. Al Majalla magazine. Published on 10 October 2010.

<sup>149</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

<sup>150</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS). (2009). Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries. New York: United Nations Publications.

have catastrophic effects. It goes without saying that, as a result of this conflict, hundreds of Yemenis lost their lives, thousands were wounded and hundreds of thousands became internally displaced, forced to live in adverse conditions. In Yemen, women and children are the most vulnerable groups affected by this conflict. In fact, children, mothers and elderly people represent the majority of affected persons in Yemen. According to a UNICEF representative in Yemen, “There are many children who are traumatized because of the experience of bombing, shelling and fighting close by their villages. There are also women who are deprived of everything, even basic things like clothes.”<sup>151</sup> This statement clearly reflects one of the main repercussions of the conflict, whose effects in the short term and long term are immeasurable.

However, neither the government nor the Houthis respect human rights, war laws and the Geneva Convention. Both act in an offensive unethical manner against each other while endangering the lives of the civilian population<sup>152</sup> of the Saada governorate, as well as the populations of the northern provinces. Both parties blame each other for violating human rights and war laws. The state-run Saba News has criticized the Houthis for violating human rights in a war zone, claiming that “the Houthis continue to fight the troops, kill innocents and attack their properties, and commit banditry as well as derailing development projects.”<sup>153</sup> From its side, during each war the government has blocked the affected zones (mainly Saada and the northern governorates) from receiving, among other things, humanitarian aid in the form of medicine, food, potable water, hygiene and other humanitarian supplies.<sup>154</sup> It is also impossible to know the number of fatalities due to the government’s strict controls on media, a clear violation of human

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<sup>151</sup> United Nations Children's Fund.(2009). Humanitarian access still limited by conflict in Yemen. New York: UNICEF.

<sup>152</sup> United Nations Children's Fund.(2009). Humanitarian action. New York: UNICEF.

<sup>153</sup> Heather Murdock.(2009). Sa’da residents trapped between warring parties. Sana’a: Yemen Times.

<sup>154</sup> Reuters. (2009). Armed Conflict in Yemen. New York: Reuters.

rights – not to mention the extreme psychological effects of the conflict on civilians and armed personnel.

Another crucial humanitarian factor is the issue of IDPs. IDPs are a vulnerable segment of Yemeni society who have lost their livelihoods, status, families, roots and sometimes life itself. In Yemen, the UN estimates that about 175,000 people have been registered as IDPs.<sup>155</sup> These IDP camps hold the most vulnerable groups, such as women, the elderly and children. There are reports of victims as young as three months old. According to the UNDP, high-risk IDPs are women living in open and unprotected settlements.<sup>156</sup> Accordingly, UNICEF declared that 70% of the inhabitants of these IDPs camps are women and children.<sup>157</sup> In the face of such an ominous context, extensive support is needed in order to rebuild human, social and humanitarian welfare. Basic humanitarian assistance and essential services including food, water, medication, infrastructure, sanitation and healthcare are needed in order to escape war's most catastrophic effects. As it stands, opportunities for many livelihoods have been diminished and poverty levels have risen severely due to the conflict, especially affecting IDPs.

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<sup>155</sup> Reuters. (2009). Saudi Villages evacuated due to Yemen unrest. New York: Reuters.

<sup>156</sup> United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS). (2009). Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries. New York: United Nations Publications.

<sup>157</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2009). Humanitarian action. New York: UNICEF.

## Conclusion

Writing in the *Yemen Times*, Heather Murddock notes, “The Houthis say they are defending themselves against oppression because of their religious beliefs. The government says it is battling an armed insurgency. Residents say they just want it to stop.”<sup>158</sup> These words clearly reflect the dire situation in the northern provinces of Yemen, particularly in a country where the lack of arms controls represents a danger and radical threat not only to the country’s internal security but to regional stability as well. Nearly all Middle Eastern societies consider weapons to be a source of pride and power; Yemen is no exception. In fact, the uncontrolled use of weapons undermines the ability of the Yemeni government to maintain law and order in its sphere of power.

As discussed in this thesis, the relation between the Houthis and the government is tense and complicated. Based on what it is known as the minority-identity dilemma that governs the relations between Arab states and minority groups, this study affirmed the seriousness of the identity question when connected to the community relations within the Arab states, as well as when the claim to a different identity relies on what is known as primordial loyalties. In this perspective, according to Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal

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<sup>158</sup> Heather Murddock. (2009). Sa’da residents trapped between warring parties. Sanaa: Yemen Times.

protection of the law.”<sup>159</sup> In this respect, the Yemeni law shall prohibit any discrimination against the Zaydis and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any grounds, including race, sex, language, religion, political affiliations, national or social origin, property, or other statuses. In addition, Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights notes, “In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”<sup>160</sup> Those fundamental words clearly reflect the ideal way of life that all minority groups should live under, including the Zaydis. Unfortunately, the situation in Yemen has proven to be quite the opposite. The social tribal map in Yemen is so complicated that it can be a potential flashpoint endangering the lives of many Yemenis. It is quite clear that the insolence of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by the Yemeni regime towards all minority groups in Yemen has been a source of tension.

From a social standpoint, the Arab population can be painted by the religious, ethnic, linguistic and racial mosaic that is shaped by these minority groups. Unlike the Arab Sunni majority that is spread through much of the Arab world, each minority group is gathered in a defined geographical location. In this regard, nothing is required more than putting the state’s obligations into practice; since those specific minorities are concentrated in a defined geographic location, granting them a degree of local autonomy might be beneficial not only for minority interests but also for national and regional security – such measures could also serve to embolden the spirit of diversity in the region. As it stands, the case with the Houthis in Yemen has not met

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<sup>159</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (1992). Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. New York: United Nations.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

these benchmarks. Writing in the *Middle East Quarterly*, Fox notes that “religion is more important in Middle Eastern ethnic conflicts than elsewhere,”<sup>161</sup> playing a decisive role in governing the power-sharing game.

It is worth noting that the lack of a unifying Yemeni identity was a core central component in this conflict. However, this lack of national identity turns the function of the patrimonial issues of the Yemeni state and its identification, at least from Houthis’ perspective in relation to other non Zaydis components of the Yemeni society. This failure in establishing a unified Yemeni nationality pushed the majority group in Yemen to feel part of the huge Arab Sunni environment, whereas each minority groups felt unrepresented and unsecured yet belonging to their “normal” religious or ethnic non Arab and non Sunni sphere.

This thesis further argues that due to the collapse of the idea of nation state in some Arab countries, insurgencies between minority groups and the state erupted. Not to mention the policies of the colonial powers as well as the idea of the “Arab Sunni nation state” of the post colonial era, that pushed the issue of minority groups out of the box. Thus, Yemen is no exception. Yemen is a clear example of this dilemma between minorities and majority as well as the failure of establishing a clear well defined national identity on the one hand and the economic, political, social and developmental inequalities on the other.

Digging deeply within minority issues in Yemen, this thesis also shaded light on a specific minority group namely the Zaydi minority, with special focus on the Houthis tribe whose members by and large subscribe to the Zaydi sect. It addressed more specifically the Houthis insurrection against the Yemeni state from causes and consequences perspective.

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<sup>161</sup> Jonathan Fox, J. (2001). Are Middle East Conflicts More Religious?. Retrieved on 22 January 2010 from: <http://www.meforum.org/135/are-middle-east-conflicts-more-religious>

However, the relationship between the Yemeni state and the Zaydis/Houthis was clearly examined within the context of the political, religious, ethnic, economical and developmental approaches of Yemen and the region. This study also explored the significance of socio-economic grievances as a contributing factor to the current insurgency by the Zaydis in general and the Houthis in particular against the Yemeni state.

In addition, the study emphasized on the survival of Yemen as a unified state in the face of the political, economical, developmental and military storms that confronted this poor corrupt country. In this scene, many factors undermined the survival of Yemen as a unified state, first, Yemen's fragile political system; second, the implication and consequences of the unification of Southern and Northern Yemen in 1990; third, the recent emergence of Al Qaeda threat along with the mobilization of discontented element in the former Southern Yemen.

Yemen's political, social, religious, military, environmental and economic problems underscore this poor country's stability and security. The war in Saada can only be resolved by addressing the above-mentioned grievances and not by defeating or offending the rebels in the battlefield. "In fact, sending soldiers and opening new fronts would likely further destabilise Yemen, causing chaos that would be closely unfair for all: al-Qaeda would find fertile ground, and thousands of refugees would put pressure on the borders of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, risking a humanitarian disaster,"<sup>162</sup> according to Hiltermann. Additionally, Yemen suffers from a deep economic, developmental and humanitarian crisis which manifests itself in the ideological movement of the Houthis.

As has been observed and studied throughout this thesis, unfortunately, the fight between the Houthis rebels and the Yemeni government will not end or be settled peacefully. It seems

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<sup>162</sup> Joost Hiltermann. (2009). Disorder in the Border. Retrieved on the 18th of January 2010 from: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65730/joost-r-hiltermann/disorder-on-the-border>

that the use of force will be the only instrument that will claim this insurgency. The Houthis are small in number, weak and settled in the mountains; they do not have much power to confront neither the Yemeni forces nor the Saudi military for a long period of time. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the weakness of the Yemeni army, the corruption of the central government in Sana'a and regional interferences have only served to strengthen the Houthi position during war and in their demands from the government. In addition, the Houthis do not enjoy the full support of all Zaydis and Bakil tribes. So far the Houthi have been confronted with an ambivalent situation inside their community, country and region. Understanding the history of the Houthis, their demands, their needs and the importance of their economic and developmental constraints will be the only solution to reach a sustainable peace.

Throughout this study, we have observed the tremendous gaps (pending the availability of scientific materials on Yemen) as well as the lack of knowledge pertaining to the Zaydis, Houthis and the conflict in Saada. In this regard, we have an urge to expand our possibilities, research and knowledge; the only way we could make this possible is through exploring new diverse and creative thinking based on different waves of research methodologies, followed by the adequate experience functionality of theoretical research within real life grounds. For these reasons, a deep scientific theoretical research is needed in many fields not only in Yemen but also the region:

First, future research could be done on the influence of the Wahabi school on the relation between the government, Houthis and tribes. Second, future research must be composed on the creation of the "Imam" (whether through religious schools or through self-learning techniques), his role and the potential reach of his influence (e.g., Badreddin al-Houthi and the Ayatollah). Third, researchers could shed light also on some unknown peaceful minority groups in Yemen



that presently have no rights, such as the Jews, Christians and Baha'is. Fourth, it would be of high interest to study the relationship between the tribes and the government from a power-sharing perspective and compare it to the Lebanese case from a religious approach. Fifth, the future of democracy in Yemen could also be studied since Yemen is characterised as the only democratic presidential state in the Arabian Peninsula. Sixth, it is also beneficial to analyze why there are tensions and insurgencies in Yemen – the only democratic country in the Arabian Peninsula – while other kingdoms and sheikhdoms are relatively calm and peaceful.

Of equal significance, we must not overlook the impacts of what is being known as the “defining development challenge of our time” which is climate change, which poses a credible threat not only to Yemen but the entire MENA region, amplifying the challenges of desertification, rainfall shortages, increase in population and the subsequent decline in arable land and food production. Yemen is already facing many of the negative impacts of climate change, making this situation all the more urgent. What will be situation in 2020 when Sana'a is expected to be the first city in the world with no access to potable water? What will be the impact of climate change on the developmental approach of Yemen? What will be the economic costs of climate change on a country like Yemen, already ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world? In this gloomy scene at all levels, Yemen is facing a difficult challenge with the issue of climate – an issue poised to literally devastate its roots of life. Due to climate change, the relation between the government and the Houthis will face increasing challenges in the coming years, as the scramble for scarce resources intensifies Yemen's government is too weak, corrupt and ill-equipped to resolve the country's current developmental needs, in the face of challenges that climate change will bring along. The forecast for this patchwork of a nation portends an even gloomier shift in priorities for all the concerned parties – instead of fighting over religious

and political causes, the upcoming bloody conflicts will erupt over water, food resources and energy.

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Appendix I: Map of Yemen

