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Sectarianism in The Yemeni Political Field

By

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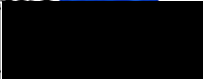
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Dedication

To Samira, who continues to inspire me every day with her courage, strength, resilience, and kindness and who opened a world of endless possibilities before me. 'All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother.'

To Abdullah, who encouraged me at every step I took.

To Ali, who has given me unconditional support through thick and thin.

To my family.

And to all the beautiful souls I have met during my journey in Lebanon whom I cherish dearly.

Sectarianism in the Yemeni Political Field

Nada Al-Qabili

ABSTRACT

The rise of the Houthi movement was met with a parallel rise of sectarian discourses and attitudes particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. However, these dynamics can be traced to earlier forces and reconfigurations that have shaped the Yemeni political field over the *longue durée*. By employing a Bourdieusian framework to study the rise of sectarian discourses and attitudes, this thesis seeks to explain the interplay within and between local and regional factors to understand the strategic employment of sectarianism, not only by Yemen's political elite, but also by Ansarullah. In so doing, this works details how the Salih regime and the Houthi leadership employed sectarian discourse as a form of symbolic capital in the competition to dominate the Yemeni political field. The thesis builds on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital/power, the political field, and the habitus to provide a more holistic understanding of the Houthi movement and the rise of sectarianism in Yemen. Moreover, instead of portraying Ansarullah as a mere proxy that has been caught amidst a rivalry of two greater regional hegemonies, this work aims to bring forward a local perspective by engaging with concepts and ideas which the Houthis have used to define and construct their identity and movement.

Keywords: Sectarianism, Houthi, Ansarullah, Yemen, Political Field, Symbolic Capital, Symbolic Power, Bourdieu, Discourse.

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List of Acronyms

IR: International Affairs

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

NDC: National Dialogue Conference

GPC: General People's Congress

MENA: Middle East North Africa

YAR: Yemen Arab Republic

PDRY: People's Democratic Republic of Yemen

CPA: Coalition Provision Authority

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Referencing Edward Said's classic take on Orientalism, Lila Abu-Lughod (1989) eloquently demonstrated how the field of Middle East anthropology has been fixated on limited notions or "zones of theory", through which the Orient – and the Arab world in particular – has been studied and understood. Among these zones is Islam, tribalism, and women or the harem. Years later, Seteney Shami and Nefissa Naguib outlined the modern zones of theory which represent an evolutionary transition from the old zones whilst retaining the same type of epistemological approach and academic curiosity vis-à-vis the Middle East. This, in turn, confines this part of the world within a "mosaic" that presupposes rigidity and inability "to accommodate changing, fluid, or multiple identities" (Shami & Naguib, 2013, p.24). The metaphor of the mosaic signifies an understanding of the region as stagnant and capable only of changing its external façade while adhering to a primordial essence. The new zones of theory for Shami and Naguib are gender, nationalism, and religion, which emerges in lieu of the narrower interest in Islam (2013). Shami and Naguib also refer to "the real world of realpolitik" as another field that has been captured by dispositions that draw on "age-old (and pathological) identities, enmities, and conflicts" (2013, p. 28) to construct oversimplified and at times misinformed narratives of issues, such as sectarianism.

Building on these notions, this thesis proposes that sectarianism can be viewed as a 'zone of theory' in the field of International Relations (IR), especially in the aftermath of the popular uprisings labelled the Arab Spring. Sectarianism is a topic that has attracted ample studies and media attention since 2011. Although the term is usually reserved for Middle Eastern geopolitics and Sunni-Shi'a dialectics specifically, as will be illustrated later in this thesis, many academics have been interested in the manifestations of sectarian rhetoric and behavior in non-Arab geographies, such as Scotland, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, and India. With regards to the Middle East, scholars have not shied away from using bold terminologies that indicate the extent to

which sectarianism has become the buzzword du jour in IR scholarship of the MENA region post-2011. For instance, Daniel Byman (2014) refers to a "wave" of sectarianism, Raymond Hinnebusch (2016b) talks about a "sectarian revolution" in the region, and Lasse Lykke Rørbæk (2019) unpacks the "unprecedent surge" of sectarianism in the aftermath of the popular uprisings and explores how identity-based political inequalities gave rise to sectarian conflicts in the region. In so doing, Rørbæk examines descriptive statistical data which reveal that religious association functions as a "predominant identity marker" in the Middle East, making it "the only region in the world" where sectarian signifiers determine group membership and identity (p.23).

The discussion on Arab politics after the popular uprisings sets out by recognizing sectarianism as a force that helped mold the politics of the region into what it is today. This notion has also been extended with regards to Yemen, which witnessed the rise of the Houthi (Ansarullah) movement in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. The rise of sectarian discourse, symbols, and attitudes in Yemen has been examined through various narratives and frameworks, including sectarian, institutional, instrumentalist, and socio-historical accounts, as will be discussed in detail in chapter two. The media, in particular, has helped advance the sectarian narrative with regard to the Yemeni case. However, it is problematic to interpret the current conflict and the rise of the Houthi movement in Yemen based on a presumed sectarian ethos. While sectarian discourse and symbols have been featured and employed by various actors inside and outside Yemen, the issue is more complex and cannot be confined within the narrow sectarian narrative. Not only does this line of thinking project and reinforce an essentialized illustration of Middle Eastern politics, it is also deficient because it glosses over a whole host of historic, socio-economic, and political nuances that have played an important role with regards to the strategic instrumentalization of sectarian discourse by the political elite in Yemen as well as the Houthis themselves.

Consequently, this thesis draws on the current literature on sectarianism in the region and Yemen specifically, and studies the context from which the Ansarullah movement has emerged, to illustrate how sectarian discourse was employed in a context marked by transformative political, social, and economic reconfigurations over the *longue durée*. In particular, this thesis unpacks the sectarian discourse that was produced

by the Salih regime and Ansarullah as a form of non-tangible symbolic capital which was woven together with coercive and material capital in the struggle over the Yemeni political field, which commenced with the six Saʿdah wars that erupted in 2004. As such, this thesis builds on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital/power, the political field, and the habitus to provide a more holistic understanding of the Houthi movement and the rise of sectarianism in Yemen. Moreover, instead of portraying Ansarullah as a mere proxy that has been caught amidst a rivalry of two greater regional hegemonies, this work aims to bring forward a local perspective by engaging with concepts and ideas which the Houthis have used to define and construct their identity and movement.

1.2. Historical Background

Yemen is a country that has been plunged into a humanitarian and political crisis in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. It also witnessed an explosion of sectarian discourse and symbols that were evoked by different parties to the conflict, according to Farea Al-Muslimi (2015). This discourse was circulated against the Houthis by state and non-state actors who oppose the movement, as will be demonstrated throughout subsequent chapters. The Houthis have also employed their own sectarian discourse to mobilize their support base and delegitimize their opponents (Valbjørn, 2018, p.70).

The current national unrest which Yemen is experiencing was ignited in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, when Yemenis took to the streets to demand the overthrow of the late President Ali Abdulah Saleh (d.2017) who ruled Yemen for over thirty years. In November 2011, Saleh finally agreed to hand over power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who was inaugurated president in February 2012. However, the new president failed to maintain control and the country slipped into further chaos. One of the deadliest attacks of 2012 resulted in over 90 causalities with another 200 wounded as a result of a suicide bombing that targeted a military parade near the presidential palace in Sana'a (Finn, 2012). Meanwhile, a secessionist movement that was gaining momentum in the south, coupled with a substantial fracturing among political factions, threatened efforts to restore peace in the country. To prevent the conflict from spiraling out of control, the political elite acceded to an initiative that was

proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and supported by the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The GCC proposed to establish a transitional government for a two-year period and create the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), with the aim of forming a new and more inclusive political system and launching a plan to elect a new government and constitution (Schmitz, 2014).

In accordance with the UN, the GCC formed a transition government headed by President Hadi. The new arrangement, however, did not meet the expectations of the revolutionaries because it failed to address a critical issue: the mechanisms influencing the distribution of power in the Yemeni state. Maria-Louise Clause (2015) describes the former Salih-led regime as "an informal and fluid web of power" that served and fed off "patronage networks" (p. 18). The principal agents in this web were the late Salih, General Ali Muhsin Al-Ahmar and the Sheikhs of Al-Ahmar clan, whose former leader, the late Abdullah Al-Ahmar (d. 2007), established the Islamist party known as the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, or the *Islah* Party. The GCC-proposed framework was no more than "an elite-led political bargain" that "reshuffled" the key figures in Yemen (Clausen, 2015, p. 19). Another outcome of the NDC was an agreement that was reached in February 2014 to change the Republic of Yemen to a federation of six regions as an alternative to the centralized concentration of power that fueled upheavals across the country. The new structure was to be accompanied by a new constitution that was supposed to be put to a referendum. The new government seemed optimistic about the new changes and began to reclaim its power and authority.

Few months later, however, President Hadi fired his cabinet and proposed – and later overturned – a fuel price rise which instigated anti-government protests by the Houthis, who took control of the capital in September 2014. Hadi's government had acted on recommendations by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank that instructed the government to stop subsidizing fuel as a means to resolve its economic hardships (Transfeld, 2015, p.163). In November of the same year, the formation of a new technocratic government was announced under an UN-brokered deal. Unfortunately, the Houthis rejected the new power-sharing agreement just days after it was announced by President Hadi, who ceased to be the leader of the General

People's Congress (GPC), after the party had rejected him in favor of Salih (Reuters, 2014).

The Houthis capitalized on the power vacuum and unstable security conditions which unfolded in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising and consolidated their influence by bolstering the image of an uncorrupt group different from the ancien régime (Transfeld, 2015, p.162). By February 2015, the Houthis took charge of government institutions in Sana'a and announced the formation of their own transitional five-member presidential council, replacing President Hadi and dissolving the parliament (Ghobari, 2015). Days later, Hadi escaped house arrest and fled to Aden and from there to Saudi Arabia (The Guardian, 2015). The Houthis' growing control over domestic affairs was met with discontent, both on local and international levels. Ultimately, a supra-national alliance led by Saudi Arabia was formed to fight the Houthis and air strikes were first launched on March 26, 2015. After an aerial attack that targeted Salih's home in Sana'a in May, he joined forces with his former foes the Houthis. They formed an alliance that was portrayed by both parties as an attempt to lift the enduring sufferings of Yemenis. Together with the GPC, the Ansarullah formed the Supreme Political Council, issued a new constitutional declaration, and formed the Supreme Revolutionary Committee that was tasked with governing the country's domestic and international affairs. The Supreme Political Council also announced the formation of a new government in November 2016, in total disregard of the international community. Nonetheless, the alliance between Salih and the Houthis was short lived, as the former was killed by the latter in December 2017.

The conflict that has ridden the nation in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising has been delineated along sectarian cleavages by various actors inside and outside Yemen. Many news outlets have reported on the war between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis by referencing the sectarian allegiances of both parties, positioning the conflict as part of the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry in the Middle East (Gopalakrishnan 2016). Reuters, for instance, reported that the group seeks to establish "a bigger say for the country's Zaydi Shi'ite Muslim sect" (Reuters, 2014). Leading policy researchers in the US have also employed this discourse, as for example in a presentation published by the Council on Foreign Relations titled "The Sunni-Shia Divide" (2014). The Houthis were first given the

"Iranian-backed Shiʻa" label by the late president Ali Abdullah Salih (Gordon & Parkinson 2018). Later, Salih's successor, President Hadi, employed the same discourse that Salih had used against his foes-then-turned-associates (Gordon & Parkinson 2018). Salih's classification of Ansarullah, which was coined in the early 2000s during his six wars in Saʻda, the birthplace of the Ansarullah movement, was actively advanced by Hadi's administration. For instance, during the first parliamentary session held in April 2019 after over four years of suspension, the Head of Parliament, Sultan Al-Barakani, described the Houthis as a project through which Iran seeks to establish its influence in the region spanning from Lebanon to Yemen (Alarabiya 2019). In addition, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Khalid Al-Yamani, has described the Houthis as a tool that serves Iran's expansionist project (Abdulghaffar 2019).

Although Iran has aided the Houthis, the extent of this support is debatable. Media outlets that support the Saudi-led Coalition have tended to emphasize the support that Houthis receive from Iran, while some scholars argue that Iran's assistance and role has been "limited" and "marginal" (Juneau, 2016). When speaking of the group, allies and opponents use very different labels and discourses, which reflects the "dialogical struggle" (Bryman 20102, p. 537) of competing discourses and meanings. Competing political agendas permeate the discourse on the Houthi movement and ultimately position the group in one way or another. By employing different discourses, these actors constitute different versions of the group which reflect diverging power dynamics and allegiances. For instance, Iranian and pro-Hezbollah media refer to Houthis as Ansarullah (e.g. Tasnim News Agency 2016 and Al-Manar News 2018), while pro-KSA and UAE media refer to the group as Iran-backed militants (e.g. Arab News 2019). By contrast, this thesis unpacks the sectarian discourse that was produced by the Salih regime and the Houthis in light of a contextualized understanding of the forces and dynamics that led to the conflict in order to realize several objectives which are discussed below.

1.3. Thesis Objectives

This thesis embraces several objectives. First, it aims to contribute to the understanding of the Ansarullah movement and the rise of sectarian discourse in Yemen,

which will be situated as part of the so called "sectarian surge" (Hinnebusch 2019) in the Middle East after the 2011 uprising. Nonetheless, in doing so, the thesis attempts to demonstrate that the Ansarullah case cannot be viewed as a mere gust of sectarianism in the Yemeni political arena. Nor is it possible to understand the rise of sectarian discourse by and vis-à-vis the Houthis without outlining the horizontal and vertical forces that have shaped the Yemeni political field. Yemen has been described as a late sectarian bloomer – compared to other Arab countries (e.g. Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria) – that was caught in the middle of a regional quarrel that provided Ansarullah and other local actors with "a sectarian vocabulary" that was used "to mobilise their own constituencies, delegitimise opponents and attract regional support" (Valbjørn 2018, p.70). Yet, a more nuanced examination of the conditions which eventually gave birth to the Ansarullah movement will demonstrate that the group has employed sectarian discourse years before the uprising took place. More importantly, this work elucidates how the movement employed sectarian discourse in addition to anti-Wester discourse and themes of Political Islamic thought and coupled them together with a growing social support base and military capital to achieve its ascendance to power.

This leads to the second objective of the thesis: to explicate the Ansarullah movement and show that its identity has not succumbed to some sort of sectarian ethos; rather, as will be argued, it emerged from a blend of different components and struggles that evolved throughout the history of the movement and its governorate. These dynamics begin with the first generation of revivalist Zaidi scholars in Saʿdah and the legacy they passed on to Hussein Al-Houthi (d.2004) and his successor and half-brother Abdulmalik (b.1980). In so doing, the thesis achieves its third objective: to present a dynamic and nuanced understanding of sectarianism in a specific context, and in Middle Eastern politics in general, by using the Ansarullah group as a case study of how sectarian discourse can be conceptualized as a form of capital that has been strategically deployed by the group along with other forms of capital in their local and regional medium to secure an incremental rise to power. Moreover, this thesis reveals the utility of combing instrumentalist accounts of sectarianism – which focus on the role of political elite in fostering sectarian discourses and overtones – with a Bourdieusian

framework that allows us to understand why and how different actors employed sectarian discourse to their advantage.

This discussion is inspired by Toby Dodge's (2018; 2020) seminal work on political identities in Iraq which employs Bourdieu's concepts of political field, capital, principle vision, and symbolic power and violence to explain the transformation in the Iraqi political field in the aftermath of the 2003 war, one that was restructured in accordance with sectarian and ethnic denominators. Though, in the case of Yemen, as chapter three will demonstrate, the Salih regime did not aim to organize the field according to sectarian or ideological allegiances. Rather, the regime structured and maintained the political field in a "permanent state of crisis" (Phillips, 2011). This principle furnished the underlying logic of Salih's neopatrimonial style of rule and together they were used by the regime to select the categories and actors that were dubbed as legitimate and worthy of participating in political life and benefitting from an expansive and remunerative patronage network. Hence, this thesis will employ a Bourdieusian framework to explain the process that led to the instrumentalization and rise of sectarianism in Yemen as part of a competition over the political field over the *longue durée* between the ruling regime and the Houthis. This is ultimately a distinguishing feature of the Yemeni case from the Iraqi system that Dodge examines which was organized after the 2003 war according to a sectarian principle of vision (Dodge, 2018, 2020). Ultimately, it is the aim of this work to demonstrate how a Bourdieusian framework can explain the "why" behind the rise of sectarianism in the Yemeni political field as a strategic tool, which is something that has not been captured by instrumentalist narratives. Moreover, it seeks to demystify what Morten Valbjørn has called a "puzzling case" of sectarianism in the Middle East (2018, p.72).

This thesis uses Bourdieu not with the aim of depicting the sectarianization of identity and discourse as a return to some sort of premordialist ethos, however. Rather, the Bourdieusian framework is employed to shed light on the dynamics and forces that cannot be captured by exclusively employing an instrumentalist theory that applies a top-down lens with a primary focus on regional powers and the role of local political elite. Consequently, it dismisses the role of Ansarullah in engaging with the discourses produced about them and producing their own discourse, not only as a strategy to

counter marginalization and delegitimization but also as a way to define and restructure the political field. The Bourdieusian vantage point, on the other hand, will help elucidate why the Houthi conflict with the regime began in 2004 and why this conflict, which paved the way for the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014, and the discourses surrounding it, have been sectarianized at that particular point in Yemen's history.

By realizing the aforementioned objectives, the thesis seeks to situate itself within the Montréal School of Middle Eastern politics. This body of knowledge long recognized the importance of understanding the interplay of various material and immaterial influences on local and transnational levels which afford to Middle Eastern IR and sectarianism in the MENA region its silhouette and dispositions (Salloukh, 2017, p. 660). Moreover, this thesis seeks to present a nuanced understanding of the Houthi movement and the dynamics that led to Houthi-regime conflict and the rise of sectarianism. This understanding may serve national and international policy making, as it has become clear by now that the Houthis are more than just the de-facto authority in northern Yemen; they are a political entity that is very likely to remain after the conflict is resolved. Judging by the peace-building efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen, the Houthis will be part of any political solution which Yemen will adopt. Therefore, it is necessary to formulate a critical understanding of the group by engaging with the Houthis' self-constructed identity and discourse and to comprehend the political, social, and religious factors which have been a driving force for the movement. In the past, the Yemeni government waged six wars on the Houthis because it failed to contain and control them (Raja 2013, p.1). Today, the same scenario is being repeated, albeit on a much larger scale. Although a deeper awareness of the conditions that led to the birth of the Houthi movement and conflict is not necessarily a determinant factor to ending the war, it is still a relevant and significant demand because it can contribute to reducing ethnocentric and misguided assumptions about the group in particular and Middle Eastern politics in general. Thus, it is the aim of this thesis to challenge assumptions that essentialize the politics of Yemen and the region which resulted in producing an alleged truth that is "a function of learned judgment, not of the material itself" (Said 2003, p. 67).

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1.4. Research Questions

This thesis attempts to answer two main questions. First, it aims to uncover how Houthi identity was sectarianized and explain why. In so doing, this work seeks to explain how the Houthi movement – and not just its opponents – used sectarian discourse in a strategic manner. In this regard, it is important to note that the sectarian element is not a primordial attribute; rather, it has been woven together with other social and political factors in a way that reflects the context from which the movement emerged and evolved. The inspiration behind this discussion, as aforementioned, is Dodge's work on political identities in Iraq using Bourdieusian insights on the employment of symbolic capital to "shape and legitimize perceptions of the social order" (2018, p. 30). Accordingly, Bourdieu's notions of political field as well as symbolic capital and violence are used in this thesis to examine how the Houthis fought for power in the political field and engaged with rival discourses and forces in the local level (i.e. the governorate of Saʿdah) and the national level. The insights gained by applying Bourdieu's framework serve to balance and compliment instrumentalist scholarship on sectarianism in Yemen. For instance, Valbjørn's understanding of the Houthi movement depicts them as proxies that are dominated by local political elite and regional powers that has internalized sectarian discourse to serve its own agenda in the context of a weak state (2018). Valbjørn, nonetheless, invites scholars to recognize the "utility of combining approaches rather than seeing them as competing" (2018, p. 72). Other instrumentalists, such as Anna Gordon and Sarah Parkinson (2018), also depict the Houthis as victims of the strategic calculations of the Salih regime which employed sectarian discourse to invite foreign interference in his local dispute. Seen from an instrumentalist perspective, however, the Houthis' specificity, agency, and role in forming and negotiating with the socio-political conditions around them are overlooked.

The second question examined in this thesis is whether and how the Ansarullah group has used sectarian discourse as a form of capital, along with other forms of capital (e.g. social networks), to realize the group's objectives and gain prominence in Saʿda and beyond. The thesis seeks to uncover how the Houthis capitalized on discourse in addition to material capital and varied sectarian and social networks, the foundation of which was laid out even prior to the first Saʿdah war which erupted in 2004. For this

purpose, accounts on the early history of the movement are of great importance. In the case of Iraq, Dodge warns against encapsulating the struggle over the Iraqi political field by reducing it to a matter of "class or economic interest" (2018, p. 29). In a similar vein, this thesis argues that the competition over Yemen's political field cannot be reduced exclusively to tribal, class, or sectarian rivalries. Rather, it is the complex amalgamation of political, tribal, and sectarian elements which gave way to turmoil, the ascendance of the Houthi movement, and the rise of sectarianism in Yemen.

1.5. Methodology

The research strategy for this thesis is qualitative. It is the optimal strategy that can help uncover the various nuances that formed and shaped the Houthi movement. Through qualitative research, this work will elucidate the meanings attached to the Houthi movement through the discourses produced by Hussein and Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and other relevant actors by "tak[ing] the role of the other" (Lofland and Lofland, 1995 as cited in Bryman 2012, p. 399) as a point of departure to acquire knowledge. By emphasizing the specificity of the Ansarullah case and the context from which it has emerged, this thesis critically engages with the discourse produced by the movement without reducing it to representations of some sort of "essence", to borrow Said's representation of orientalist scholarship (2003).

This research relies on secondary analysis of published literature on sectarianism in the Middle East and Yemen as well as literature that focuses on the history of the Houthi movement and other Zaydi groups in Yemen and the socio-political transformations that the state has experienced over the *longue durée*. Additionally, online documents and mass media outputs are employed as sources of data. Online outputs can be easily distorted to reflect certain interests and some scholars might view them as "a distinct level of reality in their own right" (Bryman 2012, p. 554). Therefore, this research strives to highlight "on the one hand, the context in which they were produced and, on the other hand, their implied readership" (Bryman 2012, p. 554), as well as the objectives that were attached to a given discourse or output. The sampling approach for selecting the outputs and documents is purposive. As a strategy, purposive

sampling highlights the selection of cases and documents in a strategic manner, such that they demonstrate relevance to the research questions (Bryman 2012, p. 418).

The research methodology adopted in this work is secondary analysis of qualitative work as well as qualitative discourse analysis of some of the most critical speeches and lectures given by the group's founder, Hussein Al-Houhti and his successor Abdulmalik. Hussein's lectures were delivered in Saʿdah between 2001 and 2004; they were recorded and later transcribed and published online at Ansarullah's webpages. The lectures cover different topics: corruption of leaders, US imperialism, and the social and political duties of Muslims. They represent the movement's intellectual and ideological foundation used by Houthi members until today for mobilization purposes. In addition, this thesis examines the discourse produced vis-à-vis the Houthis by the regime and its associates. Taking Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as a point of departure, this work examines the way in which the discourses used to depict the Houthis framed how others perceived their identity and objectives. Foucault's conceptualization of discourse links "language and its modes of use to the significance of power and social difference in society" (Bryman 2012, p.528). By analyzing the discourse of the Houthis and the regime, this work seeks to reveal the different versions of Ansarullah that have been produced, including the version that was formed by the group itself. The discourse analysis encompasses several elements: (a) how and why the discourse was constructed, (b) what meaning it gives to Houthis, and (c) how the discourse might have been used to justify certain attitudes and behavior (Bryman, 2012, p. 537). By drawing attention to the various discourses produced on the Houthi movement and the employment of these discourses in symbolic strategies in the competition over the political field, this thesis aims to reflect a constructivist orientation which emphasizes the need to recognize "the versions of reality propounded by members of the social setting being investigated and on the fashioning of that reality through their renditions of it" (Bryman 2012, p. 529). Hence, this work aims to explain the rise of sectarian discourse and symbols in a context shaped by political and social reconfigurations. Together, these interwoven forces have stimulated the instrumentalization and mobilization of sectarian identity and discourse for political gains.

1.6. Map of the Thesis

The next chapter surveys the literature on sectarianism in the Middle East in general and Yemen in specific. It outlines the key narratives and analytical frameworks that have been used to assess sectarian dynamics in various contexts. It also explores how politics and conflicts associated with the region have been encapsulated by political actors, scholars, and media outlets and reduced to reflect supposed age-old rivalries between sectarian group as part of what Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel call the "New Orientalism" (2017, p.1). This chapter then zooms in on the Yemeni case and explores how the media and academic scholarship have assessed the rise of the Houthi movement. In particular, it highlights the deficiencies of previous analyses and proposes a Bourdieusian framework to complement these narratives and overcome their shortcomings. This chapter concludes by explaining the key concepts that this thesis employs in its study of the rise of the Ansarullah movement. In particular, it highlights the concepts of political field, principle of vision, symbolic capital/power and violence, and habitus which are used to explain the political and social transformations in Yemen in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt against the Imamate rule that eventually led to the Houthi-regime conflict which began in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Chapter Three is concerned with the transformations and dynamics that shaped the Yemeni political field after the 1962 revolt. It explores the neopatrimonial strategy used by the Salih regime to rule and shape the politics of Yemen in accordance with the principle of "permanent chaos" (Phillips, 2011). This, in turn, has engendered a new elite structure comprised of tribal sheikhs, political Sunni actors, and Salafi figures that contributed, along with the regime, in the political, social, and religious peripheralization of Zaydis, particularly the Hashemites, of Saʿdah. These had a tremendous impact on many Zaydis in in Saʿdah, including the Houthi family, who initiated a resistance movement since the 90s that encompassed scholarly/religious, socio-cultural, and political efforts which chapter three explores. The chapter explains how the conditions and forces of marginalization initiated the politicization of banal sectarian identity, which became explicit with the regime's use of sectarian discourse during the six Saʿdah wars.

Chapter Four begins by elucidating the context of the early 2000s, which witnessed mounting tensions between the marginalized ordinary Zaydis from less prominent tribes and Hashemites, on the one hand, and local and national elite, on the other hand. These tensions eventually boiled over and gave room for violent clashes between the Salih regime and the Houthis. The onset of the conflict was caused by growing criticism of Salih's rapprochement with the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq invasion. Provoked by the regime's foreign policy and taking advantage of growing criticism of Yemen's alliance with the US in the war on terror, Hussein Al-Houthi began to deliver lectures and speeches in Saʿdah which eventually constituted the ideological foundation of the Ansarullah movement and the legacy that Abdulmalik Al-Houthi inherited and built upon. The chapter unpacks the political, tribal, and sectarian dimensions of the regime-Houthi conflict which turned into a violent war that was played out over the course of six rounds from 2004 till 2010. It also analyzes the discourses produced by the Salih regime and the Houthis as a form of symbolic capital that was used in symbolic/sectarian battles over influence and power in the Yemeni political field. The last chapter spells out the theoretical implications of the Houthi case. It suggests that sectarianism is a dynamic element with the capacity to grow, evolve, and become instrumentalized by opposing groups to achieve diverging political goals and to consolidate power and influence.

Chapter Two

Understanding the Rise of Sectarianism in the Middle East Through the Prism of Theory

2.1 Introduction

Sectarianism is a topic that has prompted ample studies since 2011. Although the term is usually reserved for Middle Eastern geopolitics and Sunni-Shiʿa schisms specifically, as will be illustrated later in this thesis, many academics have been interested in the manifestations of sectarian rhetoric and behavior in non-Arab geographies, such as Scotland, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, and India. With regards to the Middle East, scholars have not shied away from using bold terminologies that signify the extent to which sectarianism has become the buzzword du jour in IR scholarship of the MENA region post-2011. For instance, Daniel Byman (2014) refers to a "wave" of sectarianism, Raymond Hinnebusch (2016b) talks about a "sectarian revolution" in the region, and Lasse Lykke Rørbæk (2019) denotes a "surge" of sectarianism in the aftermath of the uprisings. Scholars of Middle Eastern IR have also introduced a more recent discussion of the influence of sectarianism and the implications of Sunni/Shiʿa dialectics on post-democratization dynamics and the resilience of authoritarianism or lack thereof (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019).

This chapter is organized as follows: the first section will highlight some of the key arguments pertaining to the so-called rise of sectarianism in the Middle East. It will do so by presenting discussions set forth by prominent scholars around this subject to illustrate that sectarianism has become a prism through which the geopolitical and social reconfigurations in the region have been understood post the uprisings of 2011. But more importantly, it will serve to demonstrate the plethora of angles and frameworks that have been used to conceptualize the rise of sect-based allegiances and discourse. Next, this thesis will turn its focus to studies of sectarianism in Yemen which have been engendered in light of the rise of the Ansarullah (Houthi) movement and the parallel increase in the use of sectarian discourse and values in the Yemeni sociopolitical landscape. In so doing, it will highlight the shortcomings and strengths of these studies.

More importantly, it will demonstrate the need for a more nuanced understanding of the Houthi case which underscores the interplay within and between local and regional factors that led to the strategic employment of sectarianism by Yemen's political elite as well as the Houthis. This will lead to the final section which explores an alternative avenue for studying sectarianism in Yemen using a Bourdieusian framework. This study is inspired by the Toby Dodge's use of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of political field, symbolic capital, and symbolic violence to examine sectarian identities in Iraq (Dodge 2018, 2020; Dodge and Mansour, 2020).

2.2 Sectarianism Ails the Middle East

The discussion on Arab politics after the popular uprisings sets out by recognizing sectarianism as a force that helped mold the politics of the region into what it is today. Therefore, scholarly interest is less directed at assessing whether sectarianism is relevant and significant and is more aimed at discerning "*where*, *why*, and *how* it matters, and what its *implications* are for a 'new Middle East'" (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019). For this purpose, as Morten Valbjørn and Raymond Hinnebusch (2019) explain, several guiding frameworks have been employed. These include primordialism (which supposes that religious and sectarian qualifiers and rivalries are preexisting and unyielding), instrumentalism (which assesses how political agents/elite or sectarian entrepreneurs employ sectarianism for their own ends), constructivism (which addresses sectarianism as part of its understanding of how identities contribute to forming the political space), and institutionalism (which focuses on the institutional structures that can give way to sectarianism).

Scholars have examined the various manifestations of sectarian dynamics in a multitude of contexts and using various frameworks. As an example, the SWAR (Sectarianism in the Wake of the Arab Revolts) project- which originated from Aarhus University and is funded by the Danish Social Science Research Council- has been based on "the recognition of the fact that a Shi'a/Sunni divide has become a significant factor in Middle East politics" ("SWAR – Sectarianism in the Wake of the Arab Revolts" 2019). Under the SWAR project, over forty publications were presented which deal with sectarianism in the Middle East using ontological and geo-political vantage

points. The SWAR project examines a plethora of issues. For instance, it inspects the nature of Sunni/Shi'a sectarianism and how sectarianism in general is conceptualized in the Middle East and elsewhere (Valbjørn 2019a). In addition, sectarianism has been recognized by different scholars of the SWAR project through a typology developed by Fanar Haddad (2011) delineating three types of sectarian manifestations in the MENA region: instrumental, radical, and banal or every-day sectarianism (Valbjørn 2019a). Raymond Hinnebusch (2016a), for instance, uses this classification to argue that banal sectarian identities were politicized in authoritarian settings and instrumentalized by regimes that felt threatened by the 2011 protests; and this, in turn, has instigated counter sectarian responses in certain countries like Iraq and Syria (p. 1).

Morten Valbjørn (2018) and Hinnebusch (2016b) analyze the factors which led to the instrumentalization of sectarian identity by political elites, on domestic and regional levels, transforming sectarianism from banal to highly visible and active. Hinnebusch (2016a), for example, steps away from premordialist understandings of identity by explaining the radicalization and politicization of sectarian identity in the post-2011 Arab order as a result of state failure, which in turn led to changing the permeability of Arab states and exacerbating power struggles within and between states (p. 1). According to Hinnebusch (2016a), states with multiple fragmented identities, such as Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, were susceptible to intensified confrontations or "identity wars" in which "sectarian discourse became the main currency" (p. 3). Here, the use of identity as a unit of analysis would be contested by Ewan Stein (2017) who argues that scholars are much more focused on using identity when discussing Middle Eastern politics than ideology. Stein focuses on the role of ideology which he views as a powerful tool in foreign policy, especially in the case of ideological compatibility or codependency between regimes.

Hinnebusch (2016a) analyzes the instrumentalization of sectarian identity by political elites which transformed sectarianism from banal to highly active as a result of the collapsing of states that was unleashed by the Iraq war in 2003 and subsequently by the so-called Arab Spring. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, formerly unpoliticized sectarian characters in "multi-communal" (p. 6) societies became sectarianized, and the emerging fragmented states in the new bi-polar Arab order invited foreign intervention

(Hinnebusch, 2016a). In a similar vein, Bassel Salloukh (2017) argues that the "return of the weak Arab state" in the aftermath of the Arab Spring has prompted the securitization of banal sectarian characters "as a result of the interplay between domestic and geopolitical battles" (p. 660). Salloukh also highlights the issue of state permeability. He argues that the collapse of states and the subsequent proliferation of sectarian non-state actors after 2003 induced "bottom-up state destroying permeability" (Salloukh, 2018, p. 8). He adds that regional geopolitical rivalries were sectarianized in light of local and regional dynamics that accompanied the collapse of Arab states (Salloukh 2017 & 2019). Hinnebusch (2016a), however, explains the instrumentalization of sectarian discourse in light of "existential" (p. 4) power struggles that emerged after 2011, when Arab states were faced with the danger of "subversion challenging their legitimacy in the names of norms derived from identity". Salloukh, on the other hand, is less interested in identity itself and is more focused on the process and dynamics which caused the politicization and securitization of previously latent sectarian identities and brought them to the fore as opposed to other markers of identity (2017 and 2018).

The surge of sectarianism in Middle Eastern political affairs and its effect on the regional power struggle has also been studied in light of grand theoretical frameworks. Hinnebusch (2019), for example, incorporates constructivism and realism in his analysis. Moreover, scholars of the SWAR project bring forth theories of identity politics to study how banal sectarianism was instrumentalized by authoritarian regimes and in regional proxy wars, positioning the region as a setting for a bi-polar geopolitical power struggle (Hinnebusch 2016a). In addition, academic inquiries were directed at mapping out the spatial and temporal occurrences of diverse sectarian dynamics in the Arab world. Country-specific studies of sectarianism include: studies of violent manifestations of sectarianism in Syria and Iraq (see Hinnebusch 2016c), the production and reproduction of sectarian cleavages and identities by citizens of Bahrain and Kuwait in everyday life (see Fibiger 2018), the instrumentalization of sectarianism by state elites in Lebanon to produce and maintain sectarian subjects and clients (see Salloukh et al. 2015), and the synthesis of sectarian and sexual differences as two mutually constitutive modes of political difference in Lebanon (Mikdashi 2018). This list is far from exhaustive; it

serves to illustrate the growing significance of sectarian dynamics in studying the post-2011 Arab world, however.

The focus on sectarianism was not met without criticism. Haddad (2017) completely dismisses the usefulness of sectarianism as a term. He explores the different meanings that the term carries in Arabic and English, as employed by various scholars, and contends that there is no clear and unified understanding of the term. This gives sectarianism elasticity and generalizability, which in turn allows the term to be employed to define and signify different things by different actors (Haddad, 2017, p. 379). As a result, the analysis of sect-related dynamics under the broad framework of sectarianism becomes unnuanced and scholars can speak of sectarian dynamics in the region as a "post-2003 phenomenon" (Haddad, 2017, p. 372). Accordingly, Haddad concludes that "the term is too politicized, overused, mired in negativity, and emotionally charged for it to be salvageable" (Haddad, 2017, p.364). Unlike Haddad's critique, which questions the utility of the term sectarianism, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (2017) do not reject the term altogether; nonetheless, they stress that current sect-related occurrences must be understood as a dynamic process. Therefore, they deal with 'sectarianization' - and not sectarianism - as a dynamic process and action, as opposed to a stagnant noun or phenomenon. Hashemi and Postel argue against primordialist delineations of the region by both politicians, such as Barack Obama who described the region as being overwhelmed by "ancient sectarian differences" (Goldberg, 2016), but also academics such as Richard Hass. These assessments are positioned as part of a "New Orientalism" because they connect the current turmoil and rise of sectarian discourse to historic rivalries in the Muslim community (2017, p.1). Even though Hashemi and Postel do not deny the existence of sectarian identities and discourses and their recent upsurge, they assert that these dynamics must be understood as a process that takes place in authoritarian polities, where regimes employ sectarianism to pacify the citizens' distrust with the state. This process of sectarianization is "shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p. 3). What distinguishes Hashemi and Postel's use of instrumentalist theory is that they complement it by providing a reason for the instrumentalization of

sectarianism by political elites. They hold that authoritarian regimes need to manipulate identity and discourse to deflect "demands for political change" and reinforce their authority (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p. 3).

Hashemi and Postel's understanding of sectarianization falls within the overarching geopolitical context of the region. Like Salloukh (2018), Bruce Riedel (2017), and Hinnebusch (2016a), Hashemi and Postel consider the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Arab uprisings to be significant events that have shaped the politics of sectarianization in the region. They also note an earlier development which is important to understand current Middle Eastern affairs: the 1979 revolution in Iran, which was framed as a Shia revolution by "Western-backed" monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, as a way to delegitimize it. The strategy of delegitimization was carried out again in 2011, when Iran and Saudi Arabia played the sectarian card to divert attention from the demands raised by the revolutionaries (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, pp. 6,7). Such use of sectarian discourse by political agents to delegitimize the "Other" in the geopolitical context of the region has been also noted by May Darwich and Tamirace Fakhoury (2017). Their work aims to forge an understanding of the instrumentalization of sectarianism in the post-2011 Arab order through insights gained from securitization theory. Darwich and Fakhoury explain how a group can become distinguished as a security threat through labeling or referencing it as such by assessing the discourses produced by Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict. They maintain that by calling a group Shia or Sunni, the political elite frame "the sectarian Other as a source of an existential threat" and consequently "move the issue from normal politics to the exceptional" (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2017, p. 713).

The scholarly gaze directed at sectarian dynamics in the Middle East did not always produce naïve or simplified accounts of sectarian discourses and identity, however. As Morten Valbjørn (2019b) maintains, there exists a consortium of "third ways" for studying sectarianism that seek to go beyond the traditional but binary interpretations of instrumentalism and primordialism. Pure primordialism, for instance, is only used in two academic studies according to Valbjørn (2019b, p.7). Moreover, Valbjørn holds that scholarly discussions of sectarianism often employ alternative frameworks such as constructivism and its various sub-categories like "constructivist

realism", "constructivist structuralism", and "thick constructivism", in addition to "post-structuralist" Foucauldian frameworks, institutionalism, and historical sociology (2019b, pp. 99, 100). Another trend that Valbjørn (2019b) has noted is the juxtaposition of different approaches to capture the different factors that influence and cause sectarian dynamics. The author himself has employed instrumentalism, institutionalism, and constructivism in his earlier work on sectarianism in Yemen (Valbjørn, 2018). Thus, Valbjørn invites scholars to recognize the "utility of combining approaches rather than seeing them as competing" (Valbjørn, 2018, p. 72). In the case of Yemen, this thesis employs a combination of political sociology, historical sociology, and instrumentalism to elucidate why the political elite and Ansarullah resorted to sectarian discourse as a strategic tool.

2.3 Sectarianism in Yemen

2.3.1 Who Are the Houthis?

"Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?" read the title of Bruce Riedel's (2017) analysis of the Ansarullah movement for the Brookings Institute. Since the US administration has supported the Saudi kingdom in its war against Ansarullah since 2015, it was a crucial question to ask, even though discerning this matter was somewhat overdue. Riedel contends that his government's involvement in the war was supported by two consecutive administrations without going through the trouble of explaining "why Americans should see them as our enemies" (2017). His analysis provides a brief account of the Houthis' theology and history before explaining how the US became involved in a war which ultimately contributed in linking "the Houthis and Iran and Hezbollah closer together" (Riedel, 2017). Riedel makes a clear distinction between the Zaydi Houthis and other denominations of Shiism which are observed in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. The Houthis follow the doctrine of *Zaydiyyah* (Zaydism), which is explained in further detail in Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells' work (2010). Their study of Ansarullah traces the social, political, and economic developments which took places since the revolution of 1962 against the Imamate rule. This thick description also sheds light on the origin of *Zaydiyyah* in Yemen which emerged in 893 AD with the arrival of Yahya Bin Al-Husayn, who was later referred to

as Imam Al-Hadi Ila Al-Haq (i.e. the one who guides to truth); Imam Hadi was a Hijazi sayyid (i.e. a descendant of Prophet Muhammed and Ali Bin Abi Talib) who became the ruler of the northern highlands of Yemen and formed the Zaydi Hadawiyya doctrine (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 286). Imam Al-Hadi's successors include the Qasimi and Hamid Al-Din dynasties that "ruled more or less continuously from the mid-17th century until the republican revolution in 1962" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 286).

Zaydism has been historically linked to two heartlands: north of Iran and Yemen's north-west territories, specifically Saʿdah (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 285). The Zaydis are named after Zayd Bin Ali Bin Husain Bin Ali Bin Abi Talib, whom they regard as the fifth Imam. As a doctrine, Zaydism was first adopted in the 8th century by Muslims who believed that Ali Bin Abi Talib was the rightful successor of Prophet Mohammed (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 285). The Hadawi Zaydis of Yemen are distinct from Twelver Shiites in Iran and Iraq in that they, among other considerations, "do not believe in ayatollahs…. nor do they practice the other Twelver doctrine of taqqiyah (dissimulation), which permits one to disguise his or her faith for self-protection" (Riedel, 2017). They also do not regard Imams after Hasan and Husain (Ali's sons) to be exempt from committing sins (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 287). Moreover, "Zaydis have not been traditionally interested in proselytizing or propagating their beliefs" and they think of their doctrine as a fifth distinct denomination and not as a branch under Shiism (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 290). The Hadawi Zaydiyyah stipulates that the Muslim community must be led/governed by a ruler who is a qualified Imam; this leader must be a sayyid (i.e. Hashemite) who possesses sufficient scholarly knowledge of Islam and can exercise *ijtihad* or the exercise of reason to deduce rulings (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 287). When the leader is found to be corrupt or unjust, the concept of *khuruj* allows, nay commands, the community to rebel against the ruler and replace him with someone who meets the necessary criteria (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p. 287).

After the 1962 rebellion against the Imamate rule that reigned over northern Yemen, or what was known then as the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, a civil war broke out between royalists backed by the Saudi Kingdom and the revolutionary supporters of

republican rule who were backed by Egypt's Jamal Abdul Naser. During this conflict, Saʿdah became "a refuge for partisans of the Zaydi imamate" who fought the supporters of the 1962 revolution until 1970, when Saʿdah was incorporated into the republic "following a treaty of reconciliation" (Dorlian, 2011, p.183). The September revolution of 1962 banished the rule of the Zaydi Imamate and Hamid Al-Din dynasty and established the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), which later united with its southern counterpart, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), and formed the modern Yemen Republic in 1990. After the 1962 revolution, Zaydiyyah witnessed a crisis which was brought about by several factors that will be addressed in this thesis, among which was the decline of Zaydi scholarly teaching as well as the parallel rise of Salafiyyah (Vom Bruck, 2010).

By the end of the 20th century and in the early 2000s, however, Hussein al-Houthis led the new generation of Zaydi followers and scholars and became vocal about his government's support of the United States' foreign policy. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Yemeni government entered into an agreement with the US, supporting it in the war on terror. Salih's rapprochement with the US was not met without criticism, especially by Hussein Al-Houthi who began to deliver a series of lectures that criticized the government and Sunni clerics for their alleged role in helping the US and Israel sustain their hegemony over the Muslim community in Yemen and at large. Hussein's criticism caused him to enter into a war with the ruling regime. After killing and injuring tens of his followers, the Yemeni government issued a USD75,500 reward for whoever manages to capture Al-Houthi (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2004). Hussein was later assassinated in Saʿdah by government forces in 2004 and was succeeded by his younger half-brother Abdulmalik. Gradually, the Houthis were able to reverse the status of political, economic, and social marginalization that has been ascribed upon them during Salih's era. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising and the chaos that Yemen slipped into after Salih was overthrown from rule, the Houthis eventually took control over the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014.

Since then, the Houthis managed to gain control of the northern and north-western territories of Yemen, with the exception of a few enclaves. While the Houthis were part of the National Dialogue that was assembled to address the grievances and

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demands raised during the 2011 protests, their influence in shaping the post-Salih era was not fully felt until they took control over Sana'a. This took place after the Houthis denounced a fuel price rise that was proposed and later overturned by President Hadi in 2014. In November of the same year, the formation of a new technocratic government led by then Prime Minister Khaled Bahhah was announced under an UN-brokered agreement (Aljazeera 2014); however, the Houthis rejected the new power-sharing deal just days after it was announced (Reuters 2014). By February 2015, the Houthis were able to take charge of the government and announce the formation of their own transitional five-member presidential council, replacing President Hadi, dissolving the parliament, and positioning themselves as the de facto authority in the capital and neighboring governorates (Ghobari 2015).

The Houthis capitalized on the power vacuum and unstable security conditions which unfolded in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising and managed to strengthen their popularity by presenting themselves as an uncorrupt group and a new actor that was not involved with the former inner circle of the political elite (Mareike Transfeld 2015). This strategy was effective because the GCC-proposed framework for the post-2011 government was no more than "an elite-led political bargain" that "reshuffled" the key figures in Yemen (Clausen 2015, p. 19). The new agreement, which did not meet the revolutionaries' expectations, redistributed power among the "competing elements of the first and second circles of the politically relevant elite (PRE)" (Transfeld, 2015, p. 151). Before the protests broke out in February 2011, Ali Abdullah Salih, his cronies and members of his Sanhan tribe, as well as the Ahmar clan which leads the Hashid tribal confederation, dominated Yemen's politics and economy (Transfeld, 2015, p. 152). Until the Houthis' rise to power, Salih's party, the General People's Congress (GPC) which was established in 1982 was largely uncontested. Even the GPS's rival, *Hizb Al-Islah*, (otherwise known as the Yemeni Congregation for Reform) was created by the former head of the Ahmar clan, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar (d. 2007) in 1990 "in coordination with Saleh" (Transfeld, 2015, p. 153) as a means to stage opposition to the GPS. *Al-Islah* brought together "the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis as well as conservative tribesmen and businessmen" (Transfeld, 2015, p. 153) who

contributed to the marginalization of Zaydis in Saʿdah as will be discussed later in this thesis.

2.3.2 Sectarianism Afflicts Yemen: Examining Ansarullah and the Yemeni Conflict

Yemen has been framed as a late sectarian bloomer - compared to other Arab countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria - that was caught in the middle of a regional quarrel that provided Ansarullah and other local actors with "a sectarian vocabulary useful to mobilise their own constituencies, delegitimise opponents and attract regional support by linking domestic interests to a broader regional struggle" (Valbjørn 2018, p.70). Rivalries driven exclusively by religious affiliations were not observed in Yemen's history; instead, local disputes were primarily "driven by political, economic, tribal, or regional disparities" (Al-Muslimi, 2015). However, in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, the country was subjected to an unprecedented outpouring of sectarian discourse and concepts that were evoked by different parties to the conflict (Al-Muslimi, 2015). The sectarian discourse has been circulated vis-à-vis the Houthis by state and non-state actors and media. For example, pro-Saudi and UAE media refer to the group as Iran-backed militants (e.g. Arab News 2019). Hadi's administration has also engaged in this discourse. For instance, during the first parliamentary session held in April 2019 after over four years of suspension, the Head of Parliament, Sultan Al-Barakani, described the Houthis as a project through which Iran seeks to establish its influence in the region spanning from Lebanon to Yemen (Alarabiya 2019). In addition, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Khalid Al-Yamani, has described the Houthis as a tool that serves Iran's expansionist project (Abdulghaffar 2019).

The Houthis have also produced their own sectarian discourse to mobilize their support base and delegitimize their opponents (Valbjørn, 2018, p.70). Al-Muslimi details that the Houthis have named one of their brigades after Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Taleb and used terms such as "*takfiris* or *daeshites*" in reference to their adversaries (2015). The protracted political and military conflict has fed this dual practice of othering rivals on sectarian terms. Al-Muslimi argues that the advent of sectarianism in Yemen "is clearly linked to the wider regional sectarian conflict provoked by Saudi Arabia and Iran" (2015). However, this thesis will later demonstrate that the sectarian

discourse produced vis-à-vis the Houthis and by the Houthis themselves is rooted in local dynamics. In other words, one must grasp the interplay within and between local and regional factors and nuances to understand the localized and strategic employment of sectarianism, not only by Yemen's political elite, but also by Ansarullah themselves.

In the field of international affairs, several frameworks were employed to assess the emergence of sectarian dynamics in a country where sectarian qualifiers were not significant, at least not prior to the 2011 uprising and the subsequent rise of the Houthis. Seen through the primordialist lens, for instance, the sectarianization of the Houthis and the conflict in Yemen is explained by referencing the Houthis' Shi'a background and connecting them, by default, to Iran and the regional rivalry between the Shi'a state and the Sunni Saudi Arabia. Even though most members of the Houthi group belong to the Zaydi denomination of Shiism, they are, as aforementioned, distinct from the Twelver Shi'a of Iran and Iraq (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). The "Iranian-backed Shi'a" label was first coined and instrumentalized by the late president Salih during his six wars in Saʿdah in the early 2000s; later, it was taken up by his successor, President Hadi, who employed the same discourse vis-à-vis the Houthis that Salih had used against his foes/associates (Gordon & Parkinson 2018).

Anna Gordon and Sarah Parkinson explain that the "Iranian-backed Shi'a" label was used as a strategy; they assert that the Ansarullah were made to be Shi'a through the "political entrepreneurship" of the ruling regime and that doctrinal or ideological links between the Houthis and Shiism simply do not hold to be convincing, especially considering the Houthis' doctrinal tradition which is distinct from the Shiism of Iran (2018). Yet, this overtly sectarian delineation that was produced by the regime was fully embraced by media outlets. "Nearly every *New York Times* article covering the rebels since 2008 contains a mention of Iranian support" (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). But the *New York Times* is not the only outlet that has been projecting such simplistic understandings of the region in which identarian and ideological undercurrents are woven with political affairs. More recently, Reuters published a news story regarding clashes between Ansarullah and Saudi-aligned forces in the Red Sea in which the following sentence appears: "…the Houthi movement which has been battling the Sunni Muslim military coalition since 2015 in a conflict that is largely seen in the region as a

proxy war between Saudi Arabia and arch-foe Shi'ite Iran" (Ghantous, 2020). These accounts essentialize the Houthi identity and the conflict in Yemen; thus, they reflect reverberations of Orientalist scholarship which are present in several academic disciplines and non-academic forums, according to Seteney Shami and Nefissa Naguib (2013, p.28). Shami and Naguib argue that "the real world of realpolitik" is among the fields where one can find literature that draws on "age-old (and pathological) identities, enmities, and conflicts" to construct oversimplified and at times misinformed narratives of issues such as "sectarian conflict" (2013, p. 28). Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel have named this form of essentialization of Middle Eastern politics the "New Orientalism" (2017, p.1).

Gordon and Parkinson reject the sectarian narrative and assert that the Houthis-are-Shia label was weaponized by Salih to invite the interference of foreign powers, particularly the US and Saudi, to support him in his conflict with the group by framing it as a war against terrorism and as an attempt to curb Iranian influence (2018). Maria-Louise Clausen's analysis of the Yemeni crisis and the Houthi identity also rejects the sectarian narrative which is produced vis-à-vis the Houthis. Clausen (2015) maintains that the conflict should be explained in light of local and regional dynamics: Saudi's employment of sectarianism as a policy strategy and a tool to project its power (p. 22), coupled with the regime's economic and political marginalization of the Houthis (p.23). She maintains that the Salih and Saudi regimes have employed sectarian discourse to delegitimize Ansarullah (p.20) and asserts that the conflict is actually rooted in "a complex power struggle for the state" (p. 27). Thus, she rejects narratives that situate the turmoil as part of regionalized Sunni-Shi'a schisms and argues that this oversimplified understanding "misidentifies all of the Huthis adversaries as 'Sunni' and all Zaydis as Huthis" (Clausen, 2015, p. 22).

Clausen maintains that the state of political turbulence which took place along with the Houthis' rise to power "should be understood against the backdrop of the Yemeni uprising in 2011" (2015, p. 17). The events which unfolded in the aftermath of the uprising further exposed Yemen as a weak state (Clausen, 2015, p.16,17). In this regard, Daniel Byman explains the "collapse of governments" in the region and the parallel rise of sectarianism as a "by-product of the Arab Spring" (2014, p.79). Hence,

Byman traces the upsurge of sectarianism to the emergence of weak states: first in the aftermath of the Iraq war in 2003 and later as a side-effect of the 2011 uprisings. The impact of the Iraq invasion was not lost on other scholars. Salloukh also argues that the collapse of the Iraqi state has been a critical incident which gave rise to armed non-state actors (2018). The Bush administration's "Iraq adventures" were also recognized by Bruce Riedel as a key factor which contributed to the radicalization of the Houthis (2017).

Riedel (2017) and Salloukh (2018) argue that the Houthis have become Iran's ally and were propelled into a regional rivalry in which they have benefited from Hezbollah's military experience. However, unlike Riedel, Salloukh (2018) stresses the importance of understanding the Houthis not simply as a proxy but also as an actor that is driven by domestic objectives. Similarly, Clausen (2015) also emphasizes the need to discern the local factors and power struggles to explain the Yemeni conflict. She argues that the Houthi movement cannot be explained using the sectarian narrative nor can it be assessed by framing it as part of a regional battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran (2015, p. 20). Saudi's policy vis-à-vis Yemen has not been designed to stage Yemen as a playground for geopolitical rivalries; rather, it has sought to "contain Yemen's chaos" and minimize the cross-border impact of migrants and Al-Qaeda (Clausen, 2015, p.20). However, this soon changed when Iran encouraged "Saudi concerns by rhetorically appropriating the Huthis' increased influence in Yemen"; thus, a local struggle for power quickly became framed as a "regional rivalry", even though Iran's influence was still limited at the time (Clausen, 2015, p.20). Clausen asserts that the Ansarullah movement has fought against economic and political disenfranchisement and that the Yemeni conflict is caused by a deep-rooted and an internal "power struggle" which has been exacerbated by regional interference and the use of "sectarian overtones" (2015, p.27). Samy Dorlian also compliments Salloukh (2018) and Clausen's (2015) analyses, arguing that the group is part of a local struggle that has garnered local and regional attention through the use of sectarian discourse (Dorlian, 2011). Dorlian explains that although references to Iran and Hizbullah have been made by Husain Al-Houthi, "aid from Iran to the Zaydi 'rebels' was never demonstrated to exist" (2011, p. 191), at least not during its early stages of development and not to the extent that some media has

claimed. Dorlian (2011) maintains that Ansarullah have been part of a complex confessionalized conflict, in which sectarian differences and rhetoric have been strategically promoted by the Houthis when it was best to do so and downplayed- by emphasizing a united Muslim front- when standing in opposition to US imperialism and its foreign policy calamities. Salih's regime has also sought to depoliticize and delegitimize its conflict with Ansarullah by depicting it as a confessional issue (Dorlian, 2011, p. 190).

2.4 Using Bourdieu to Explain the Puzzle

Several frameworks have been employed to explain the Houthi identity as well as the ongoing political conflict and the rise of sectarianism in Yemen. The media has highlighted the sectarian narrative which draws on age-old rivalries between Sunnis and Shiʻa. Whereas most scholarly assessments have tended to reject this simplistic approach by examining the local dynamics which helped mold the Houthis and the conflict into what they are. As argued by Gabriele Vom Bruck (2010):

> 'categories such as Zaydī, Salafī and Shāfiʻī, however meaningful and real they might appear to local actors, cannot be conceived as analytic ones. Thus, the multiple ways of representing or enacting Zaydī identity require contextualisation within specific historical and political configurations.' (p.221)

In rejecting the sectarian narrative, some assessments have been focused on the instrumentalization of sectarianism by Yemeni political elite (e.g. Gordon and Parkinson, 2018), while others have examined the wider context from which the Houthi movement has emerged, by drawing attention to the socio-political and economic developments that Saʻdah and Zaydiyyah have underwent since 1962. Such assessments allowed Clausen (2015), for instance, to highlight the climate in which weak institutions, corruption, and cronyism ultimately allowed the Houthis to present themselves as an alternative actor by demanding and vowing to bring about serious reforms (p. 26). Similarly, Valbjørn has also used the institutionalist lens to compliment instrumentalist explanations of "how and why elites- to a large extent driven by non-sectarian motives- began to 'play the sectarian card'" (2018, p. 70). He argues that the failed Yemeni state has allowed the country to be susceptible to sectarian discourse and made citizens rely on communal and sectarian allegiances (Valbjørn, 2018, p. 72). Valbjørn also brings the

constructivist approach through which he asserts that sectarianism "can become internalized by people and affect their preferences and views on various issues", after having been promoted by "identity entrepreneurs" (2018, p. 71).

2.4.1 Seeing through a Bourdieusian Lens

Valbjørn's (2018) attempt to fill the gaps posed by applying a purely instrumentalist framework to understand the rise of sectarianism in Yemen assumes that sectarian discourse did not play a great role prior to the 2011 uprising (p.71), which became a catalyst force that helped regionalize a local conflict and provide its actors "with a sectarian vocabulary useful to mobilise their own constituencies" (p. 70). This narrative is centered around the role of geopolitics and weak intuitions, thus dismissing the socio-political dynamics that have been at play over several decades and overlooking foreign influence in the government's dispute with the Houthis which began the early 2000s. More importantly, it overlooks the strategic use of sectarian discourse by the local actors who were in pursuit of their own political interests. And even though other accounts (e.g. Dorlian, 2011; Clausen, 2015; Vom Bruck, 2010) provide further contextual information to understand the Houthi case, they all fail to answer the following question: why did the Yemeni regime and the Houthis resort to sectarianism, in particular, in their contest over the political field? Moreover, accounts on the rise of Ansarullah often fail to capture is the Houthis' agency with regards to employing sectarian discourse which evolved from banal in the twentieth century to radical in the twenty first century. To resolves these two issues, this thesis will employ insights gained from Toby Dodge's seminal work on sectarianism and political identities in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion (see Dodge, 2018; Dodge 2020; Dodge and Mansour, 2020). Dodge's work on sectarianism in Iraq offers an inspiration on how a Bourdieusian lens can help to bridge the gap in the literature covering the Houthis and sectarianism in Yemen. Of particular relevance for this thesis is Dodge's use of Bourdieusian concepts such as political field, capital, and symbolic power and violence.

Dodge does not reject the insights afforded by the instrumentalist approach, or "sectarianization theory" (2020, p. 119), which highlight the role of political elites in advancing sectarian discourse and narratives; nonetheless he points to their inability to

explain why this strategy of sectarian entrepreneurship was particularly effective. In the case of Yemen, Gordon and Parkinson (2018) rightfully identify the sectarian discourse produced about the Houthis as a political strategy employed by the regime. Salih instrumentalized sectarian identity during his six wars in Saʿdah in the early 2000s "to reinforce the false image of a war between those who identify as Sunni versus those who identify as Shia, and to encourage foreign- and particularly US- military intervention in Yemen" (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). This explanation also fulfills the conditions posed by securitization theory which is used by Darwich and Fakhoury to assess the sectarian discourses of political elites in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon (2016). Seen through the securitization lens, Salih's discourse vis-à-vis the Houthis was indeed a strategic "speech act" that transformed his local dispute with Ansarullah into an exceptional security threat and has been embraced by an audience on the local, regional, and even international level (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2018, p.716). Nonetheless, to borrow from Dodge (2020), applying the instrumentalist lens to the case of Ansarullah overstresses the role of political elites and, more importantly, it positions "a strategic rational, instrumental, and destructive ruling elite against a gullible mass population" (p. 110) or in this case against the Houthis.

This thesis argues that a Bourdieusian framework can explain the process that led to the instrumentalization and rise of sectarianism in Yemen as part of a competition over the political field over the *longue durée* between the ruling regime and the Houthis. Dodge resorts to Politicl and Historical Sociology, and the work of Pierre Bourdieu in particular, to counter the "ahistorical analysis and political primordialisation of Iraq" (Dodoge, 2018, p. 35). This "primordialisation", which has been further polished and developed into ethno-symbolic studies of sectarian identities is not restricted to narratives covering Iraq, as Dodge explains; it can also be noted with regards to the journalistic and academic coverage of sectarianism in the Middle East that make it seem as though Shi'a/Sunni schisms are inevitable to manifest in the politics of the Arab world. For Dodge, the key to understanding the systemization of sectarian cleavages in Iraq through consociational power-sharing is by examining the transformation of interlinked dynamics in the competition over the Iraqi political field as well as the competing and relational narratives of Iraq that have been produced in the field (2020).

This Bourdieusian framework rests on the concepts of political field, principles of vision, and symbolic capital and violence. Accordingly, what follows is a brief overview of the concepts which are of relevance to this thesis.

2.4.2 Political Field and the Principle of Vision

Dodge and Renad Mansour view sectarianism as a category or resource through which the ordering of a society is possible "by those in the competition with each other for the allegiance of a population contained within a given political field" (2020, p.59). Hence, Bourdieu's concept of field is presented as central to the understanding of the transformation of sectarian discourse and identity in Iraq "over the longue durée" (Dodge, 2018, p.29). For Bourdieu, the political field is one of several autonomous but interlinked "spaces of power relations" which is marked by fluidity and competition (Dodge, 2018, p.29). All fields represent "networks of relations" between consumers and producers of different forms of capital and a space where competition over capital takes place; accordingly, the ability of an individual or a group to amass a certain amount of capital ultimately determines their position in the field (Rey, 2014, p.44). In any given field, "each of us—by second nature because we have internalized this entire system—develops strategies to either maintain or improve our positions" (Rey, 2014, p.44).

The political field, in particular, is a space where "people and groups amass symbolic capital in the competition to impose their own vision as the dominant common sense" (Dodge, 2020, p.112). Put differently, the political field is an arena where "competition for the domination and subjugation of a population largely takes place" (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60). Thus, different actors produce their own narratives and definitions of the field and what categories can be considered as legitimate and they promote them using various forms of capital; these competing narratives are the principles of vision which interact with one another in a transformative relationship (Dodge, 2018, p.29). Dodge and Mansour assert that the prevalence of sectarianism over other categories in the political field is attributed to the ability of "those seeking to impose their vision" of the field to accumulate certain capital or resources (2020, p. 59). Accordingly, the "common sense" in a political field is a principle vision which has been enforced through symbolic capital or power (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60).

In the case of Iraq, the principle of vision of a sect-based political system which emerged in the aftermath of the 2003 war was not a return to primordial identities and rivalries; rather, it was a vision that was first established by Iraqi activists whilst living in exile "in the early 1990s" who "conceived Iraqi society exclusively through the sectarian lens of the religious and ethnic identity of its population, marginalizing other possible categories" (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p. 60, p.61). After the toppling of the Saddam regime, these figures occupied prominent positions in the political system and cemented the principle vision of "*Muhasasa Ta'ifia*" and restructured the Iraqi political field along ethno-sectarian lines (Dodge, 2020, p.114). This principle of vision was also shared by US politicians and authority figures, particularly the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA), which instigated a policy of "de-Ba'athification" (Dodge, 2018, p.115). Together with the exiled parties who formed the "Salah al-Din quotas", the CPA restructured the post-Saddam political space based on ethnic and religious categories of belonging (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p. 61).

Referencing Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000), Dodge stresses that the principles of vision or the narratives produced inside and about the political field must be understood as "a category of practice" and not as "sociological categories" (Dodge, 2020, p.30). Categories of practice are defined as "categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts" (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, p. 4). Principles of vision, thus, start as hypothetical scenarios or ideas that later "harden into powerful positions through their ability to be adopted by and hence mobilise people" (Dodge, 2020, p.112). The prevalence of sectarianism over other categories or narratives in the political field is attributed to the ability of "those seeking to impose their vision" of the field to amass "the largest amount of ideational, institutional, and coercive resources" (Dodge and Mansour , 2020, p. 59).

Another important concept that Dodge notes is Bourdieu's habitus, which is a "sense of self" that is formed and molded within the political field (Dodge, 2020, p.113). Referencing the work of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.127), Terry Rey explains that a person's habitus is "the filter of all that one perceives" which is connected to the filed by a "double relation" through which the field shapes the habitus and the habitus shapes

and gives meaning to the field (Rey, 2014, p.46). The habitus or one's "internalization of the social world" affects how one engages with capital in the field and which type of capital is deemed "as worthy of pursuit" (Rey, 2014, p.51, p.56). In the case of Iraq, for instance, the Baʻathist regime imposed the principle vision of "Iraqi nationalism" using coercive, economic, and symbolic capitals to form "the habitus of the majority of Arab Iraqis"; however, in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, this habitus was reshaped by new actors in the competition over the Iraqi political field, who formed a new principle vision that accentuated ethno-religious differences (Dodge, 2020, p.112). In the case of Yemen, the concept of habitus serves to explain the diverging Zaydi responses to marginalization and the practices of local elite (i.e. tribal sheikhs) vis-à-vis the Zaydis and *sada* in Saʿdah, as will be discussed in chapter four.

Although this thesis's research objective is not concerned with the complexities of the religious field, it is important to highlight a few understandings in this regard since it is interlaced with the political field. The significance of religious capital lies in that "it is transferable into forms of political capital, which is only possible because fields, for Bourdieu, are only 'relatively autonomous' and thus interrelated" (Rey, 2014, p.97). Thus, religious capital:

> 'enables elite agents or institutions to enhance or augment their holdings of economic and political capital and thereby solidify or improve their position in the economic and political fields, and thus to dominate in the meta-field of power' (Rey, 2014, pp.45-46)

Religious capital encompasses religious practices, knowledge, objects, and the authority to regulate them in the religious field; this capital is produced by "religious specialists" while "the laity" or the general public consume or buy into it (Rey, 2014, p. 155). And while scholars have suggested the need to introduce modifications to Bourdieu's understanding of capital production and consumption in the religious field, they still found usefulness in his ideas which they worked out to better suit their research needs (Rey, 2014, p. 129). For instance, Michele Dillon (2001) recognizes "the many insights Bourdieu provides for the understanding of social life" while challenging Bourdieu's rigid distinction between the producers and consumers of religious capital (p.412). What is essential to highlight, nonetheless, is that religious capital also falls under symbolic capital which is defined as "any form of capital…that is not material" (Rey, 2014,

p.156). Thus, it can also be used to inflict symbolic violence to impose a certain understanding of a given field or the social world (Rey, 2014, p.53). Accordingly, this thesis will consider religious and sectarian discourse as a form of symbolic capital that was produced as part of the competition over the Yemeni political field.

2.4.3 Symbolic Capital and Symbolic Violence

In any field, capital is "an instrument of both domination and its reproduction" (Rey, 2014, p.52). For Bourdieu, there exists different forms of capital including economic, social, religious, and cultural capital, but what is of relevance to this thesis is Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and symbolic violence. Symbolic capital is essentially a form of power and a resource through which memberships and positions are credited and defined; it resembles other forms of capital in that they are all "instruments of power and stakes in the struggle for power" (Rey, 2014, p.52). Symbolic power, nonetheless, is unique in that it represents "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (Bourdieu, 1991). This "invisible" power is "both the object and instrument of social struggle" which allows actors who possess it to introduce new "cognitive categories" and enforce them as legitimate (Swartz, 2013, p.83). Through their possession of symbolic capital, political actors can "impose a vision of how society is to be ordered and have that vision inculcated into the habitus of the population" (Dodge, 2020, p.113). Thus, symbolic power represents a power that emanates "from symbolic capital" (Rey, 2014, p.156). This power "legitimates other capitals though it can assume objectified forms" (Swartz, 2013, p.79). Symbolic violence, on the other hand, is the use of symbolic power "to impose or inculcate into people the acceptance of a particular worldview or of the social order as natural and/or legitimate" (Rey, 2014, p.156). In other words, symbolic violence occurs when symbolic power is misrecognized and upheld "as legitimate rather than as an arbitrary imposition" (Swartz, 2013, p.83). Accordingly, Dodge uses these insights to argue that by enforcing a new sectarian framing of the Iraqi political field via the "*Muhasasa Ta'ifia*" principle, opposition groups that participated in the "Salah al-Din" conference of 1992 inflicted

symbolic violence which "shaped the whole post-2003 political field" (Dodge, 2020, p.114, p.118).

Symbolic power or capital is a "diffused" power that legitimizes domination, which is something that cannot be fully achieved through "brute force or money" (Swartz, 2013, p.79, p.81). This power is found "in places where it is least visible, where it is most completely misrecognized- and thus, in fact, recognized" (Bourdieu, 1991, pp.163-164). This explains why actors struggling to capture and mold the Iraqi political field resorted to symbolic capital in addition to coercive and economic means (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60). Moreover, symbolic capital operates together "with material capital" and it affords "an aura of legitimacy to the hording of various forms of capital by society's dominant individuals and groups or classes" (Rey, 2014, p.42). That is why symbolic capital - or the power to uphold a given principle vision of the social or political order - "is the most valuable resource in the competition to dominate a country's political field and hence shape the way its population perceives of their world" (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60). If sectarian discourse is recognized as a form of symbolic capital and, by extension, power, then the exceptional ability that symbolic power affords to agents can also serve to explain why, in the case of Yemen, the Houthis and the ruling regime chose to employ or instrumentalize sectarianism as opposed to any other category to pursue their interests. Thus, a Bourdieusian framework can explain the "why" behind the rise of sectarianism in the Yemeni political field as a strategic tool which is something that has not been captured by instrumentalist narratives (e.g. Gordon and Parkinson, 2018; Valbjørn, 2018). Moreover, it can serve to demystify what Valbjørn calls the Yemeni "puzzling case" of sectarianism in the "'new Middle East.'" (2018, p.72).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter identifies some of the key arguments and discussions pertaining to the rise of sectarian discourses, values, and tensions in the Middle East in general, and Yemen specifically. As aforementioned, the politics and conflicts that have afflicted this region have been encapsulated by political actors, scholars, and media outlets and reduced to reflect age-old rivalries between sectarian identities as part of what Nader

Hashemi and Danny Postel (2017) call the "New Orientalism" (p.1). To overcome this, the two scholars argue that even though "sectarian differences have long existed in the Middle East", the rise of sectarianism should be analyzed not as a phenomenon but as "an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p.3). Accordingly, to explain the rise of sectarianism in Yemen, which is often linked to the rise of the Ansarullah movement, this thesis sets off by recognizing these dynamics as a process and seeks to assess the political and social transformations in Yemen, specifically in Saʿdah, and the interplay between local and regional factors over the *longue durée*. In so doing, this thesis applies a Bourdieusian framework to elucidate the process that shaped the Yemeni political field which led to the marginalization then rise of the Houthis. The following chapter will trace the transformations in the Yemeni political field in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt which took place according to a new arrangement that was instilled by President Salih. These changes caused several socio-political and economic reconfigurations and had a tremendous impact on many Zaydis in in Saʿdah, including the Houthi family.

Chapter Three

The Build-up: Nurturing Banal Sectarianism in Saʿdah while Pushing against Marginalization

3.1 Introduction

Zaydi teaching and Zaydi groups in Saʿdah were in a state of crisis after the 1962 revolution and the rise of Ali Abdullah Salih (d. 2017) to power when he became President of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1978 and later the unified Yemen Republic in 1990. During this era, Saʿdah (the heartland of Zaydiyyah and the birthplace of the Houthi family) and Zaydis from the governorate were politically, economically, socially, and culturally marginalized. These dynamics took place in conjunction with the rise of the Salfiyyah current in Yemen, nurtured by both the Salih ruling regime and Saudi Arabia. President Salih controlled the political field, closely linked to the economic field through patronage, and enjoyed symbolic capital which he used, along with other forms of capital, to inflict a state of dual marginalization upon the Zaydis of Saʿdah. This was accomplished by structuring the political field in a way that afforded many privileges to prominent sheikhs from the Hashid tribal confederation, Salafi groups, and leaders of the Sunni *Islah* party. In this regard, Salih's symbolic capital was manifested in his ability to pit local groups against each other, define who the enemy is, dictate who can participate in the political field, and marginalize and delegitimize the Hashemites of Saʿdah while emboldening sheikhs and Salafi groups in the governorate and beyond.

The Zaydis of Yemen are divided into several groups: sayyids or *sada* (i.e. Hashemites who are descendants of Prophet Muhammed and his cousin and son-in-law Ali Bin Abi Talib) and non-*sada* Zaydi scholars and tribesmen. Under the rule of the Hashemite Imams, the *sada* were "the most powerful socio-religious stratum", while non-*sada* scholars and judges enjoyed less prominence; nonetheless, they were all incorporated into the elite structure of the Imamate era (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p. 67). The *sada* formed "a protected class outside of the tribal system" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.68). They represented the political, social, and religious elite

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of the Imamate era who eventually became largely left out of the remunerative patronage network that was formed by President Salih. Having once occupied prominent ranks in the Imamate army, the *sada*'s status was subverted in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt when the new elite, particularly tribal sheikhs loyal to the government, were promoted to high ranks in the state's military apparatus and given seats in the Yemeni parliament (Brandt, 2014, p.108, 110).

It should be noted that this thesis is concerned with the marginalization of Zaydis in Saʿdah specifically for a number of reasons. First, the Houthi family represents a prominent Zaydi family of Hashemite origin from Saʿdah that has experienced the events that this chapter will elucidate. Second, and more importantly, it was the Zaydis from Saʿdah, and particularly the *sada*, who were ascribed a lower status and were subjected to various forms of disenfranchisement by the Salih regime due to their homeland's political legacy as a pro-Royalist area. After the 1962 revolt, Saʿdah became home to many sayyids who lost their privileges and "ascriptive position of power" that was offered to them under the Imamate rule (Brandt, 2017, p.52). This, however, does not mean that all sayyids were anti-Republican, as there are many *sada* who took part in the 1962 revolt (Brandt, 2017, p.44). In fact, not all Sunni Shafiʿis supported the Republic and not all Zaydis were supporters of the Imamate system (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.73).

Following from this, it should also be noted that the Zaydis of Saʿdah and the Houthis were not marginalized and delegitimized by the regime based on their sectarian identity. Salih, a Zaydi himself, targeted many groups during his rule "which based its survival policy on the formation of crises" (Brandt, 2017, p.61); he pitted different groups against each other using different strategies. This tactic was described by Sarah Phillips (2011) as "the politics of permanent crisis" which "has kept the system running" for many decades (p.12). While juggling crises in the political field, Salih also managed a "fluid web of power with the president at its centre" (Clausen, 2015, p.18) in which patron-client relations were held on par with or even more significant than formal institutions. Phillips describes this form of rule as "neopatrimonialism": a system in which Salih was able to secure and uphold his power "through patron–client relations as opposed to law or ideology," wherein clients of the political center were rewarded for

their loyalty to the ruling regime (Phillips, 2011, p.55). Consequently, Salih structured the political field according to the "permanent state of crisis" as a principle of vision that was used to select the categories and actors that were dubbed as legitimate and worthy of participating in and benefitting from the regime's patronage network. This principle of vision was promoted using various forms of capital, including symbolic capital/power and violence. This is ultimately a distinguishing feature of the Yemeni case from the Iraqi system that Dodge examines which was organized after the 2003 war according to a sectarian principle of vision (Dodge, 2018, 2020).

This chapter provides an overview of the political and social transformations which took place in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt. It traces the changes in the elite structure which affected Zaydis, particularly the *sada*, and gave rise to new local and national elites, including tribal sheikhs, the *Islah* party, and Salafi groups. The cooption of Yemen's new elite was part of the regime's politics of exclusion and inclusion that relied on material and symbolic capital to organize the political field according to the state of perpetual chaos. This chapter reveals how sheikhs and Salafi groups were able to capitalize on anti-*sada* attitudes that emerged in the new Republic to pursue their interests. They also benefited from their ties to the regime to accumulate symbolic as well as material and social capital. These new elite became complicit in the regime's efforts to impose arbitrary systems and meanings in the political field such that they would be "experienced as legitimate" (Jenkins, 1992, p.66). Hence, the neopatrimonial arrangement according to which elites were coopted acted as an "indirect" (Jenkins, 1992, p.65) mechanism which was coupled with material resources to inflict symbolic violence upon the Zaydis and *sada* of Saʿdah. This violence, nonetheless, was not met without resistance; accordingly, this chapter also discusses the Zaydis' response to their disenfranchisement through scholarly, socio-cultural, and political resistance. It concludes by arguing that even though the Zaydi response was no match to the radical Sunni influence – which was supported by local sheikhs, the regime, and foreign powers – it proved to be valuable for Hussein Al-Houthi who used Zaydi social networks as his initial support base.

3.2. The Yemeni Political Field: A Patrimonial Network Built on "Permanent Crisis"

When Salih became president of the YAR in 1978, he organized the political field in a state of "permanent crisis" (Phillips, 2011) and created an overarching patrimonial structure through which tribal sheikhs and certain Sunni and Salafi figures could gain political and economic power and create their own meso- and micro-patronage structures "in which political power was bound not to state institutions, but to people" (Brandt, 2017, p.50). The Yemeni patronage system was comprised of an exclusive inner circle from the President's family and Sanhan tribe, and an expansive outer circle to which "all politically, economically, and socially relevant elite" were coopted on the basis of their relevance and ability to uphold Salih's style of rule (Phillips, 2011, p.51, p. 58). The *Islah* party, for instance, was coopted by the regime not because of its Sunni inclinations but because of its link to the late Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hussein Al-Ahmar (d. 2007) who bore the title of Sheikh of all Yemeni Sheikhs and was the head of Hashid, the largest and most influential tribal confederation in Yemen, which includes Salih's tribe of Sanhan (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p. 74).

The Salih regime, which ruled Yemen for thirty-three years, represented a "fluid web of power with the president at the center" (Clausen, 2015, p.18). By capturing the Yemeni political field, the regime was able to gain access to various forms of capital and uphold the "permanent state of crisis" (Phillips, 2011) as a principle of vision. Dodge explains that the political field is a space where "people and groups amass symbolic capital in the competition to impose their own vision as the dominant common sense" (2020, p.112). Salih used his symbolic capital/power, which was translated into the ability to structure and shape the political field, to produce and sustain his vision of the field and to determine the categories and actors which were considered legitimate or relevant to the regime's survival. The regime promoted his vision of the political field by employing non-symbolic and symbolic forms of capital which presented Salih with the "ability to co-opt, divide, reward and punish" (Phillips, 2011, p.57). Thus, in exchange for their loyalty, Salih's kin and members of his Sanhan tribe, who comprised the exclusive circle of elites, occupied high ranks in the military and security apparatus (Transfeld, 2016, p.152). Moreover, they were able to accumulate "vast fortunes through

the Yemen Economic Corporation (YECO), a military conglomerate with business interests in many sectors" (Transfeld, 2016, p.152). One such figure is Ali Mohsin Al-Ahmar who is a member of the Sanhan tribe that became commander of the First Armored Division under Salih's rule. Yet, when Ali Mohsin lost his relevance and importance to Salih in the 2000s, Salih worked on "restricting US military aid to divisions of the military" that were under Mohsin's command (Transfeld, 2016, p.153).

Salih himself often proclaimed that "ruling Yemen is as delicate and dangerous as dancing on the heads of snakes" (Clark, 2010, p.5). The regime's maneuvers to maintain the state of crisis in the political field required him to use symbolic capital/power as well as material capital. The regime regularly fostered local disagreements then financed or armed "both parties to a dispute as a means of playing both sides against the middle and maintaining its own position of dominance" (Phillips, 2011, p.64). Symbolic capital (i.e. Salih's status and influence) is of particular importance in this regard because it afforded to Salih a "diffused" power that legitimized his domination, which is something that cannot be fully achieved through "brute force or money" (Swartz, 2013, p.79, p.81). Through symbolic capital, the regime was able to define and organize categories and positions in the field and present them as legitimate (Swartz, 2013, p.83). The regime consolidated and upheld his status by offering relevant elite military aid as well as financial incentives and access to a remunerative patronage network (Phillips, 2008, p.7) which, in turn, were used to uphold the political field's principle of vision. As a sheikh from the Jawf governorate noted:

> The government plays divide and rule with us… If one tribe will not do what he wants, he gets the neighbors to pressure it. Sometimes it's money, sometimes it's weapons, sometimes it's employment for the tribesmen. (Worth, 2010)

To create different counterforces, Salih used "a mixture of legitimization, co-optation, and coercion", with cooption being part of a more subtle and "suggestive" form of "soft power" to make others want what he wants (Phillips, 2008, p.7). Salih's position at the center of the political field provided him with symbolic capital, as the main elite actor responsible for managing the overarching patrimonial system and enabled him to bestow the elite status to the inner and outer elite circles. These elite, in turn, used their newfound status to acquire material and social capital. Powerful sheikhs, for instance, demanded percentages from the state's oil revenues, acting as though "they have the

right to rent out the land to the oil companies when, of course, it doesn't belong to them at all" (Clark, 2010, p.184). Hence, as Rey explains, symbolic capital was coupled with material capital to offer "an aura of legitimacy to the hording of various forms of capital by society's dominant individuals and groups" (2014, p.42). In this regard, Dodge also maintains "that it was those who managed to control the most symbolic and material power who dictated which social categories came to dominate at any given moment" (Dodge, 2020. P. 111). Since the Yemeni state and its head were not able to monopolize "the legitimate use of force" (Phillips, 2011, 52), Salih used symbolic capital that was afforded to him by his position in the political field to embolden tribal sheikhs and certain Sunni figures, thus changing the elite structure of the Imamate rule and inflicting symbolic and non-symbolic violence on many Zaydis in Saʿdah. Symbolic violence occurs when symbolic capital is used to create and uphold a given perception and arrangement in society (Dodge, 2020, p.111). This happens when symbolic power is misrecognized and upheld "as legitimate rather than as an arbitrary imposition" (Swartz, 2013, p.83). In addition to creating and sustaining a remunerative patronage network and marking it as legitimate, the regime managed this arrangement by determining the elite that would be allowed to acquire symbolic capital in the form of prestige and status as well as material and social capital in the form of wealth and connections. These dynamics had direct implications for the Zaydis in in Saʿdah, as will be discussed below.

3.3 Yemen's New Elite

Zaydis form around one third of the Yemeni population (Clausen, 2015, p.22), while Sunni Shafiʿis make up the rest of the population. And although the north has been more populated by Zaydis – while Shafiʿis inhabited the southern and coastal areas – this does not mean that the two sects could be divided along geopolitical lines. Saʿdah, for instance, has always hosted both Zaydis and Sunni Shafiʿis (Brandt, 2017, p.100). Hence, the divide between the two sects has been "more latent than explicit and is described by Yemenis as more an issue of lineage than of religion" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.73). After the 1962 revolt, Saʿdah, which "was the historical birthplace of Zaydism," hosted the royalists (i.e. supporters of the Imamate rule) until it was formerly incorporated into the YAR in 1970 (Dorlian, 2011, p. 183). Since then,

Zaydis, particularly *sada,* in Saʿdah, experienced significant political, economic, and socio-cultural marginalization that was inflicted upon them by the political regimes of the YAR and later the Yemen Republic, especially by Salih (Von Bruck, 2010; Clausen, 2015; Valbjørn, 2018; Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010). In addition to the ruling regime, tribal sheikhs and Salafi groups became complicit in the marginalization of Saʿdah's Zaydis, who were unable to tap into the regime's patronage network and were left to witness the rise of radical Sunni networks and the parallel decline of Zaydi teaching.

3.3.1 The Rise of Sheiks

After the 1962 revolt, the influence of *sada* quickly subsided as they were replaced by new actors, mainly sheikhs, whose influence "began to assume additional, supra-tribal forms" (Brandt, 2017, p.57). As the influence of Sheikhs grew further, they received both internal and foreign support in the form of funding from Saudi Arabia; this foreign patronage was extended to figures such as sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar in order to grant the tribes more "autonomy" from the regime and "give the Saudi government a mechanism with which to weigh in on Yemen's political decision making" (Phillips, 2008, p.99). Sheikhs were previously marginalized under the rule of the *sada* dynasties of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom who claimed moral and political authority through "genealogies of blood" (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.190). The rising influence of Sheikhs actually took place before Salih's era, with President Abdulrahman Al-Iryani (d.1998) who was the second president of the YAR. Al-Iryani "began to recruit shaykhs, who rarely if ever held office under the imams, into the formal and ruling establishment" thus setting the precedence for the inclusion of sheikhs into the innerworkings of the state apparatus (Brandt, 2017, p.57). His successor, President Ibrahim Al-Hamdi, tried to reverse this policy and instill a formal rule of law but was assassinated in 1977. When Salih became president in 1978, he created an elite circle with family and kin from his tribe (i.e. Sanhan) at the center of power (Brandt, 2017, p. 58); moreover, he picked up on Al-Iryani's tactic by recruiting sheiks from Sanhan and Hashid into prominent political and military positions and favoring them "over the business, technocratic and pollical party elites" (Phillips, 2011, pp.58-59). The patronage system provided the elites

in the outer circle with a status that was as prestigious as it was lucrative. Marieke Brandt (2017) uses the term "tribal clout" (p.69) to refer to the special influence and status enjoyed by tribal sheikhs that were part of Salih's network. The esteem or clout that sheikhs enjoyed is a form of symbolic capital which allowed them to have "publically recognized authority- from which symbolic power can be exercised" (Swartz, 2013, p.84). Consequently, some sheikhs were even able to from "personal militia" that were used to confiscate property, collect taxes, and punish those who refused to cooperate (Clark, 2010, p.187). Thus, the sheiks used tribal clout as "an expression of domination" and an instrument to shape social order (Swartz, 2013, p.83).

The elite status essentially enabled its bearers to accumulate symbolic power which represented "an expression of domination" that was "exchanged with other forms of capital (Swartz, 2013, p.85, p.84). Clout or status provided sheikhs with the power to amass local authority, gain connections, and accumulate material wealth. They were largely in pursuit of political and economic interests, not religious or ideological goals (Brandt, 2017, p.110). Similar dynamics of cooption were taking place in Saʿdah. However, Saʿdah's sheikhs did not enjoy "direct and stable access to the upper echelons of the political executive and military command" which were reserved for the sheikhs of Hashid and to a less extent the sheikhs of the Bakil confederation (Brandt, 2017, p.59; Brandt, 2014, p.120). In fact, Hussein Al-Houthi's father, Badr Al-Din (d.2010), who was a prominent sayyid scholar, married the daughter of a local sheikh (Hussein's mother) and the daughter of a non-sayyid tribesman to benefit from tribal networks (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.104). Yet, his family was never able to enjoy the influence reserved to more relevant and prominent Yemeni tribes. As Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells explain, "northwest Yemen constitutes the edge of Hashidi presence and exhibits a sizable Bakili population" in addition to the Khawlan Bin 'Amr tribe which is the least prominent confederation of the three (2010, p.51). Essentially, the governorate was politically and economically marginalized by the Salih regime as if it "was no part of Yemen'" (Brandt, 2017, p.62), and the *sada* were hit the most. Local shaykhs and other actors who benefited from the patronage system began to express resentment towards *sada* families which was further exacerbated by the regime's "portrayal of Hashimis as backwards, anti-republican, and atavistic" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells,

2010, p.86). Accordingly, the beneficiaries of the regime's patronage network were complicit in the exercise of symbolic violence, in the form of delegitimization, on Saʿdah's *sada*.

3.3.2. The Rise of Sunni and Salafi Figures and the Crisis of Zaydiyyah

As aforementioned, the rise of the Salih regime restructured the Yemeni political field according to the "permanent crisis" principle of vision. Accordingly, Salih pitted different groups against each other to deflect criticism and conflict away from his regime and to construct a popular narrative that he is indispensable for the survival of the state and "that that the country will collapse into anarchy without him" (Phillips, 2011, p.13). In the new field, religious and sectarian identity did not translate to political calculations (Valbjørn, 2018, p.67); what mattered, instead, was the allegiance to the regime and "the maintenance of the political status quo" (Phillips, 2011, p.58). Nonetheless, the prominence of Zaydism declined, even though Salih and many of his kin were Zaydis. This transformation was caused by several factors. The first factor is linked to a new national "project of non-madhhab identity [that] was taken up by republican ideologues" who sought to defuse the influence of Zaydiyyah "by 'submerging' it with other *madhāhib* in an effort to create a 'unified' Islam based primarily on the Qur'ān and the Sunna" (Brandt, 2017, p.103; Vom Bruck, 2010, p.187). Republican regimes "agreed on vilifying the ancien régime and the Hādawī-Zaydi school on which its legitimacy was based" (Brandt, 2017, p. 103). The symbolic violence on Zaydiyyah was caused by government policies that sought to promote the convergence of Zaydism and Shafiʿism and create a unified religion through reforms to laws and educational policies which introduced textbooks that reflected Sunni views (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.196). As a result, the new policies accentuated sectarian differences instead of "producing a homogenizing effect" (Vom Bruck, 2010, pp.197-198) by elevating Sunni teachings and obscuring the Zaydi doctrine.

These reforms were largely based on the jurisprudential legacy of a prominent scholar and judge, Mohammed Al-Shawkani (d.1834), who sought to overcome the differences between Zaydism and Shafiʿism by introducing modifications to the Zaydi Hadawi doctrine and denouncing some of its key principles such as *khuruj* (i.e.

rebellion against the unjust ruler) and promoting loyalty to rulers, even if they were tyrants (Vom Bruck, 2010, p. 193). In fact, Al-Shawkani adopted "Sunni positions on most matters of contention between the two schools of law" (Haykel, 1993, p.63). Paradoxically, his ideas appealed to the Qasimi dynastic rulers and their Shafiʿi subjects, and later to the Republican rulers (Haykel, 1993, p.53). After the 1962 revolt, presidents, such as Abdulrahman Al-Eryani, found utility in Al-Shawkani's ideas and used them as "a means of ridding Yemen of the Imāmate's ideological foundations which were Zaydī" (Haykel, 1993, p.62). Al-Shawkani's scholarly legacy also appealed to Salafi groups in Saʿdah as well as to the local Zaydi converts who changed their allegiance to the Wahhabi faith (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.72).

Second, the Salih regime coopted the *Islah* party as part of its "patronage machine" that worked in tandem with Hashidi sheikhs to sustain the principle of permanent crisis and the grievances of Zaydis in Saʿdah which eventually caused the Houthi conflict to erupt (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.75). *Hizb Al-Islah*, otherwise known as the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, brought together "the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis as well as conservative tribesmen and businessmen" (Transfeld, 2015, p. 153). The party was created by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar who was a Zaydi by origin (Dorlian, 2011, p.183). It was initially formed in 1990 "in coordination with Saleh" (Transfel, 2015, p. 153) as a means to stage opposition to Salih's party, the General People's Congress, and present the Yemeni political field as a plural and democratic one. As argued by Phillips (2011), the party did not employ religion as a "a framework for decision-making or policy formation" but rather as "a vocabulary" in its pursuit of political gains (p.106). Thus, for the religious and tribal figures of *Al-Islah* "ideological politics takes a clear second place to patronage networks" (Phillips, 2008, p. 149). These networks enabled the party to become a "tribal-Islamist force" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.74) that enjoyed many privileges of which the Houthis and Zaydis in Saʿdah were denied. This is illustrated by the marginal role that the Zaydi party, *Hizb Al-Haq*, was able to play in the Yemeni political field.

Finally, Salafi ideology and institutes began to take root in Saʿdah as of the 1980s. This was partly the result of the regime's tactic to counter the socialist influence

in the south of Yemen; later though, Zaydi revivalists from Saʿdah received occasional support by Salih as a way to counter the growth of Salafism in the 1990s (Brandt, 2017, p.117). The spread of Salfiyyah began with the return of migrant workers from the Gulf, mainly Saudi Arabia, in the 1970s and 1980s (Brandt, 2017, p.105). By the 1990s, "the first post-imamate generation" of Zaydis from Saʿdah who left Yemen to work in the Gulf became exposed to "anti-Zaydi sentiment with a racist tinge or a Sunni presumption of their Shiʿites' Iranian leanings" and were familiarized with "Salafi thinking and practice". (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.89). Witnessing the marginalization of their governorate by the regime, these men became "inclined to challenge Zaydism as a *madhhab* and social hierarchy" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.89). Many converted to Salafism, which appealed to ordinary Zaydis of non-*sada* origins who grew frustrated of the *sada* claims to moral and political superiority on the basis of their genealogy (Brandt, 2017, p.108). These Zaydi converts were drawn to Salafism because it challenged *sada*'s claims to be the righteous rulers on the basis of their decent (Vom Bruck, 2010, pp. 189-190). Salafism emphasized "the equality of all Muslims" and criticized the "excessive veneration of ʿAli and his descendents" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.89). Thus, Salafism was a tool for these ordinary Zaydis to reverse the Imamate social hierarchy which prioritized *sada* and positioned them as "the most powerful socio-religious stratum" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p. 67). These converts also received foreign support from Saudi clerics who preached "against Zaydism from within the kingdom" and from Saudi businessmen who "would funnel money to Salafism- propagating Saudi clerics or local Yemenis" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.90). These dynamics contributed to the "Sunnification" of Zaydi groups in the north of Yemen who either rejected Zaydism altogether or maintained a passive attitude vis-à-vis key Zaydi principles (King, 2012, p.406).

The Salafi encroachment was particularly felt in the pedagogic field, in which radical Sunnism retained a monopoly over "legitimate knowledge" (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.200). Salafi schools and institutions, such as Dar Al-Hadith and the Dammaj Institute, flourished in Saʿdah because they were financially supported by the regime (Salmoni Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.91,92). These institutions were also financially sponsored and supported by Saudi Arabia (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.196; Clausen, 2015, p.20; Brandt,

2017, p.112). Moreover, Salafi institutes were coopted by sheikhs to advance their political and economic interests and cement their local influence (Brandt, 2017, p.111). The Sheikhs' support of Salafi groups was not provoked by sectarian allegiances; rather, it was a kind of "power politics" that mostly represented "an anti-*sayyid,* rather than an anti-Zaydi, disposition" (Brandt, 2017, p.110). In fact, the sheiks' position vis-à-vis Salafi groups changed from "tacit" to active once they "recognized the political power dimension of the anti-sayyid thrust of radical Sunnism, especially that of the Salafi doctrine" which frequently questioned the *sada*'s claims to political and moral authority (Brandt, 2017, p.109). Accordingly, the sheikhs attempted to capitalize on the anti-*sada* sentiment "in order to reinforce their own leadership claims" against the Hashemites on the local level, and to "increase the likelihood of patronage from Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Ahmar" who was the head of the *Islah* party, on the national level (Brandt, 2017, p.109; Salmoni Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.93).

In essence, Salafism was empowered by Sheikhs on the local level, the regime – which coopted Salafi and Sunni establishments – on the national level, and Saudi Arabia, albeit to a less extent, on a regional level. The rise of Salafism in Saʿdah provided Salafi networks with symbolic capital that was transformed "into weapons of symbolic violence" (Rey, 2014, p.53). This violence was manifested in the "Sunnization of the Zaydi *madhab* and the spread of various types of radical Sunnism in the heartland of Zaydism" which gradually led to the accentuation of sectarian cleavages in the governorate (Brandt, 2017, p.111). As Salafi groups acquired more capital, they inflicted symbolic violence on Zaydis by discrediting them via labels including "'penniless Shia' (*al-fuqarāʾ al- shīʿa*)" and "*kuffār* (unbelievers)" or "al-rāfiḍah (heretics)" (Brandt, 2017, p.112, p.107). Nonetheless, the rise of Salafism also led to the emergence of a Zaydi revivalist response since the 1980s that took on socio-cultural, religious/scholarly, and political dimensions. The religious and sociocultural response was aimed at challenging the rise of Salafi institutes and teaching, while the political response represented an attempt to acquire political capital and recognition, as will be discussed below.

3.4. Resisting Marginalization

The disenfranchisement of Zaydis in Saʿdah by coopted sheikhs and Salafi figures was not met without resistance. Economic and political marginalization as well as "the tolerance or patronage of virulent anti-Shīʿī regimes of piety by both local and foreign rulers" led to a Zaydi "revival movement" (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.198). The movement sought to reverse the state of "intellectual defeat" of Zaydism (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.198) and address the grievances of Zaydis in Saʿdah. The revivalist movement included scholarly, socio-cultural, and political efforts that were made by prominent Zaydi scholars and figures in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, the regime's direct use of coercive capital and violence against its rivals was rare; instead, it employed soft or symbolic violence that was practiced through the politics of exclusion which served "a more communicative than punitive function" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.75). The Zaydi resistance also began as a soft quest for symbolic capital in the form of political and religious influence and recognition. It was not until the six wars of Saʿdah, which first broke out in 2004, that the conflict took on a militant dimension, as will be detailed in chapter four.

The rise of Salfiyyah in the 1980s and early 1990s in Saʿdah was in part due to the absence of "an opposing Zaydi message" or response which was finally formed in the mid-nineties (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.94). An initial form of resistance, however, came through attempts at Zaydi revivalism by prominent scholars of the older generation in the 1980s, including Hussein Al-Houthi's father, Badr Al-Din (Brandt, 2017, pp.114-115). Badr Al-Din, for instance, wrote against "anti-Shia literature produced by Wahhabis and Salafis" such as the writings of Muqbil Al-Wadiʿi, a renowned Salafi scholar that served as the director of the Dar Al-Hadith Institute in Saʿdah, (Brandt, 2017, p.115). Al-Wadiʿi was a non-sayyid Zaydi who converted to Salafism while studying in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s "in part because of the stratum-based discrimination he found in the Saʻda of the 1960s and in part because of the proselytizing nature of the Salafism he found abroad" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.92). After his return to Saʻda, Al-Wadiʿi was eventually coopted by the regime to help counter the influence of Marxists in the south and Zaydis in the north (Brandt, 2017, p.107). Later in 1990, Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi joined a group of "older-generation

Hashimi grandees" and the sons of Zaydi judges who established *Hizb Al-Haq* or the Party of Truth (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.94). The founders of the party adopted a manifesto rejecting the Zaydi tenant of *khuruj* and the Hadawi-Zaydi principle that ascribed *sada* with the right to political rule (Brandt, 2017, p.119).

 Hizb Al-Haq's attempt to appease the regime's concerns about its political ambitions by rejecting key principles of Hadawi Zaydiyyah was "an effort to obtain political recognition and largesse" and partake in the regime's network of elites (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.95). Badr-Al-Din refused to sign the party's manifesto even though he was the vice president of *Hizb Al-Haq* (Brandt, 2017, p.119). The Hadawi doctrine, which emphasizes the *sayyid* descent of the political and spiritual leader/ruler, was actually "responsible for much of the frustration felt by many non-Hashemite Zaydis" (Brandt, 2017, p.147). Even though Badr Al-Din and his son Hussein did not openly call for reinstalling the Imamate political format, they maintained an ambiguous position concerning their degree of adherence to the Hadawi principle; Bad Al-Din, in particular, emphasized the supremacy of *sada* on different occasions (Brandt, 2017, p.170). But despite *Hizb Al-Haq*'s attempts to steer a middle way and present itself as a moderate entity whose religious identity was apolitical, the party failed to establish a broad base of support among the younger generation of non-*sada* Zaydis due to its elite and elder leadership (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.95). Moreover, it was difficult for the party to compete with the two heavyweights that dominated the Yemeni political field: Salih's GPC and the *Islah* party. During the parliamentary elections of 1993, for instance, *Al-Haq* only won two seats even though it fielded over seventy candidates (one of the seats, however, went to Hussein Al-Houthi), while the majority of the seats went to representatives of the GPC and *Islah* (Brandt, 2017, p.121). In the 1997 elections the *Haq* party failed to secure any seats as they all went to prominent sheikhs from Saʿdah (Brandt, 2017, p.128).

 By the middle 1990s, the new post-Imamate generation of Zaydis also took part in the revival movement by attempting to appeal to younger Zaydi audiences and form a base for popular mobilization. In 1995, Badr-Al-Din's son, Mohammed Al-Houthi along with another prominent Zaydi scholar of tribal origins, Muḥammad ʿIzzān, created the Assembly of Believing Youth (Brandt, 2017, p. 115. 116). The Believing Youth (*al-*

shabab al-moʾmin) assembly organized a series of summer camps and quasi schools in Saʿdah that brought together youth from the governorate and neighboring areas to study the Quran and Zaydi doctrine (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.99). The *shabab* assemblies were meant to curb the rise of Salafi schools which promoted understandings of "Islam and the social order explicitly at odds with Zaydism" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.90). When these camps began to garner momentum and appeal to thousands of students, the regime tried to coopt the Believing Youth to balance the growing influence of Salfiyyah which it had a role in creating (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.99).

Despite the growing popularity of the Believing Youth, however, both the old and new generations of Zaydi revivalists were largely left out from the regime's elite circle due to their governorate's legacy as a refuge for the *sada* and their inability to demonstrate themselves as relevant or indispensable to the regime. As a result, Zaydi schools and assemblies did not possess the same resources which were afforded to Salafi groups and schools that became beneficiaries of the regime's patronage system (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.91). Moreover, the regime developed suspicions concerning the objectives of Zaydi revivalists, particularly after Hussein Al-Houthi began to deliver lectures in Saʿdah after his return from Sudan in 2000. Consequently, the government appointed a new governor in 2001 whose objective was to impose loyalty to the regime and consolidate the state's sovereignty in the governorate "at all costs" (Brandt, 2017, p.155). To do so, the governor's administration rejected applications to civil service that were submitted by *sada* who were affiliated with the Zaydi revivalist movement (Brandt, 2017, p.156).

By the turn of the new century, there existed various Zaydi groups whose responses to their marginalization were drastically different. These ranged from explicit revivalism of the Zaydi doctrine through multiple mediums, the rejection of the political aspect of Zaydi revivalism, and the call to embrace Zaydism as a doctrine whilst retaining the republican principles of rule (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.198, p.206; King, 2012, p.407). The revivalist movement, nonetheless, engendered a valuable network which Hussein Al-Houthi was able to tap into in the beginning of the 2000s. The Believing Youth assemblies, for instance, "reacquainted adolescent and young adult Zaydis with

doctrines of the faith, interpreted in the light of contemporary conditions" (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.100). Moreover, the Believing Youth constituted a preliminary network of support for Al-Houthi (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.114), whose lectures and advocacy efforts in the new millennium eventually led to the birth of the Ansarullah movement. However, as Hussein's discourse became increasingly revolutionary, he experienced serious disagreements with some members of the Believing Youth and local Zaydi scholars who questioned whether Al-Houthi's discourse can be regarded as representing the true Zaydi faith (Brandt, 2017, p.145, 146).

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter traces the political and social transformations that followed the revolt of 1962 against the Imamate rule which introduced a new network of elites that was managed by the political center represented by the late President Salih. The new era also witnessed the emergence of "sectarian categories such as 'Salafi' or 'Zaydi'" which were eventually translated into "political solidarities" (Brandt, 2017, p.120) by the turn of the century. Nonetheless, Zaydism and Shafiʿism remained largely banal until the regime declared a war on the Houthis in 2004, which is to say that Zaydism existed as "an un-politicized identity marker" in a "multi-communal" setting (Hinnebusch, 2016a, p.1). Political loyalties during and after the 1962 revolt were not predetermined based on sectarian identity; being a Zaydi or Shafiʿi did not determine allegiance to the royalist or republican system of rule (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.73). Moreover, loyalties to the Houthi movement and the Salih regime have not been predetermined based on sectarian allegiance and are not fixed; these loyalties have cut "across both kin networks and geographical lines" and have changed over time (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.92, p.93). Hence, as aforementioned in this chapter, the political, material, and symbolic peripheralization of Zaydis in in Saʿdah and the parallel rise of Salafi groups in the governorate was not the result of top-down sectarian projections. Rather, it was the result of a complex set of reconfigurations and the regime's use of symbolic power-manifested through the politics of cooption, exclusion, and inclusion- in order to sustain the principle of permanent crisis in the Yemeni political field.

By excluding Zaydis from less prominent tribes and *sada* from patronage networks and labelling them as backward, nonbelievers, and heretics, they were marginalized on political, economic, social, and symbolic levels. This instigated a resistance movement which failed to alleviate Zaydi grievances for several reasons including lack of funding and inability to tap into the regime's patronage network. The Zaydi revivalists' social, economic, and political capital was no match to the capital acquired by Salafi groups, the *Islah* party, and tribal sheikhs. Hence, the regime's efforts to maintain the political status-quo eventually led to the accentuation of latent sectarian identities. The regime's survival strategy rested on pitting the new elite against the former elite of the Imamate era and enlisting the former in a fluid and remunerative patrimonial network. Thus, the Salafi groups in in Saʿdah, the *Islah* party, and the sheikhs bore the imprimatur of the regime, while the Zaydis and Hashemites increasingly lost their former influence. By empowering one group and marginalizing another, sectarian differences were highlighted and provoked. This initiated the politicization of sectarian identity, which became explicit with the regime's use of sectarian discourse during the six Saʿdah wars. After the return of Hussein Al-Houthi from Sudan in 2000, sectarian discourse was employed as a form of symbolic capital both by the regime and Al-Houthi. Accordingly, this era witnessed the transformation of sectarian discourse from banal and unpoliticized to radical. The next chapter explores this new phase, during which the regime used direct and unhinged military force against its adversary.

Chapter Four

The Turning Point: Politicizing Sectarian Identity and Discourse in the Competition over the Political Field

4.1. Introduction

By the end of the 1990s, the regime's neopatrimonial policies engendered a weak state and a powerful network of post-Imamate elites who were coopted and dropped on the basis of their relevance and ability to uphold the principle of vision prescribed by Salih. Accordingly, the governorate of Saʿdah became home to competing actors with various social and religious backgrounds. Sheikhs and radical Sunni groups ascended to power while the Zaydis, and particularly the *sada*, were politically, economically, and socially marginalized. The new elite of Saʿdah and Yemen managed to capitalize on anti-*sada* attitudes that emerged in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt to pursue their interests and benefit from their ties to the regime to accumulate symbolic as well as material and social capital. These reconfigurations in the Yemeni political field were introduced and legitimized by the regime which used its symbolic capital to create rivalries then act as the supreme arbiter to diverge conflict and criticism away from the political center, thus sustaining the political field in a perpetual state of chaos (Phillips, 2011). This "divide-and-rule" tactic was pursued to ensure the survival of the regime and was based on the exploitation of "social and political cleavages" which significantly undermined social cohesion in Saʿdah and Yemen at large (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p.6). Salih's neopatrimonial arrangement acted as an "indirect" (Jenkins, 1992, p.65) mechanism which was coupled with material incentives to inflict symbolic violence upon the Zaydis of Saʿda and the *sada* in general. This violence eventually "overturned the *madhab*'s position of ascendancy, replacing it with one of marginalization and relative inconsequence" (King, 2012, p.405).

The violence inflicted by the regime and its associates was met with a revivalist movement in the 1990s that pursued religious, socio-cultural, and political objectives. Nonetheless, the revivalists could not compete with the capital accumulated by radical Sunni groups and sheikhs who were supported by the regime and foreign actors.

Therefore, "status-quo candidates among Saʿdah's wealthier and Sunni-friendly families" were in charge of managing and representing Saʿdah's political affairs (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.113). Moreover, the 1962 revolt and Saʿdah's political legacy casted a recurrent shadow on Zaydis and particularly the *sada*, whose criticism of the regime's policies would call into question "their loyalty to the Republic" (Brandt, 2017, p.149). As these grievances were mounting, tensions were boiling in the governorate and the government could no longer maintain order with its weak institutions (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.111). While Salafi institutions were on the rise, local sheikhs used their undisputed symbolic capital to organize affairs in Saʿdah and jail citizens over various disputes. WikiLeaks cables from Sana'a, for instance, reveal an incident in which 14 citizens were arrested by a sheikh over a water disagreement (US Diplomatic Mission to Yemen, 2007). These tensions were further exacerbated after Hussein Al-Houthi's return from Sudan where he earned his graduate degree in Islamic studies in 2001. The new millennium also witnessed tumultuous reconfigurations and conflicts on a global and regional level in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Dissatisfied with the state of affairs in Saʿdah, Hussein began to gather support and funds for new school curricula as well as educational and social facilities with "a Zaydi-revivalist direction" with the help of the Believing Youth network (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p114). His efforts, along with his previous experience as a member of parliament, his scholarly qualifications, and his father's status as a prominent Zaydi scholar helped to solidify Hussein's local reputation. After 9/11, however, Al-Houthi's efforts became more concentrated at criticizing the government/regime which entered into an alliance with the US in the so-called 'war on terror'. Salih's rapprochement with the US was unsavory for many Yemenis, especially after the eruption of the 2003 Iraq war (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p114). It also prompted Hussein Al-Houthi to deliver lectures and speeches that criticized the government and Sunni clerics for their alleged role in helping the US and Israel sustain their hegemony over the Muslim community in Yemen and beyond.

Hussein was able to capitalize on the widespread dissatisfaction with the regime's alliance with the US to cultivate a wide-ranging audience with diverging "tribal

and socioeconomic" backgrounds (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p115). Through his discourse, Hussein targeted different audiences, addressed different grievances, and spoke against several perpetrators. His discourse, therefore, incorporated several themes including anti-Western and sectarian discourse in addition to a more general political Islamic thought, as will be discussed in this chapter. Consequently, as Dorlian (2011) maintains, the Houthi movement strategically promoted sectarian discourse when it was best to do so and downplayed it- by emphasizing a united Muslim front- when standing in opposition to US imperialism and its foreign policy calamities. Hussein's lectures were recorded and distributed using cassette tapes inside and beyond Saʿdah; as a result, his influence grew substantially and he was viewed as a "hero" by many tribesmen, Zaydis, and *sada* who had been marginalized under the regime's rule (Brandt, 2017, p.150). Consequently, by the time the first Saʿdah war erupted in June 2004, Hussein was able to amass a significant degree of symbolic capital and influence, to the extent that he became regarded "as a challenge" and "danger" threatening the Salih regime (Brandt, 2017, p.150). Therefore, it was Hussein's ability to position himself as a significant threat - not as a relevant member of the elite - to the regime which caused the latter to explicitly use coercive and militant force and enter a direct and violent confrontation with an adversary.

This chapter seeks to explain the various elements that furnished the regime-Houthi conflict, including the political, tribal, and sectarian dimensions. The latter will be discussed in further detail by assessing the discourses employed by the regime and the Houthi leadership, starting with Hussein then Abdulmalik. It will also assess how the conflict witnessed the rise of sectarian discourse which has been used as a form of symbolic and non-tangible capital and the deployment of symbolic tactics by the warring parties. Finally, this chapter will conclude by explaining the diverging responses of Zaydis in Saʿdah to their marginalization using Bourdieu' concept of the habitus.

4.2. The Saʿdah Wars: Political Strife with Tribal and Sectarian Overtones

4.2.1. The Houthi-Regime Conflict

The six Saʿdah wars began in June 2004 and ended in February 2010. The conflict was interrupted by a series of ceasefires during which mediation attempts were explored to put an end to the turmoil. However, these mediations failed, and the conflict was split to six rounds of war with the interim periods in between each round being akin to an "undeclared state of war" than peaceful interludes (Brandt, 2017, p.276). The first war erupted as a result of the mounting tensions between the regime and Hussein Al-Houthi, who used his platform and religious discourse "to catalyze already-simmering dissent in the governorate" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.115). Hussein was able to capitalize on growing popular discontent against the regime's alliance with the US in its war on terror, which many citizens denounced in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion in 2003 (Brandt, 2017, p.133). Moreover, he was able to harness local "anti-government sentiment" among those who have witnessed the systemic peripheralization of their governorate by the regime that promoted Sanhani and Hashidi tribes (Brandt, 2014, p.114). In light of the widespread disapproval of Salih's policy, Hussein was able to bolster his discourse without it being received by his audience as an attempt to dismantle the republic in favor of Imamate rule. Between 2001 and 2004, Hussein delivered a series of lectures and speeches through which he addressed several themes, as will be examined later in this chapter. Hussein's discourse "mainly centred on anti-imperialism, Zaydi revivalism, and the marginalization of the Saʿdah region and adjacent areas" (Brandt, 2017, p.134). A particular turning point in Hussein's discourse came in January 2002, when he gave a lecture in Saʿdah, entitled "Shouting in the Face of the Arrogant", where he instructed his supporters to chant the slogan 'Allah is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Damn the Jews, Victory for Islam' (Brandt, 2017, p.134). The slogan was regarded as "an open provocation" by the regime (Dorlian, 2011, p.185). Yet, as will be discussed below, the slogan also presented the regime with the opportunity to discursively regionalize and internationalize his local dispute with the Houthis by presenting them as threats to regional security, thus securing foreign financial and military assistance (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.124).

By 2004, Hussein's discourse spilled over from Saʿdah and eventually reached the capital, where Houthi supporters chanted the slogan in the Grand Mosque in old Sana'a. After this incident, the regime arrested nearly 800 persons who took part in

chanting the Houthi slogan over the course of several Friday prayers (US Diplomatic Mission to Yemen, 2007). Moreover, the government banned the slogan and suspended the salaries of dozens of teachers in Saʿdah who were accused of chanting it (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.123). Al-Houthi's followers, who were yet to be organized into a coherent body, became known as the "movement of the slogan" or *Harakat al-Shiʿār* (US Diplomatic Mission to Yemen, 2007). The fact that Al-Houthi was a *sayyid* who came from a region populated by members of the less prominent tribal confederations of Khawlan Bin ʿAmr and Bakil enabled him to tap into a wide network of support that "could be incited to greater anti-regime activity" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.127). In turn, the regime was alarmed by the rapid spread of the slogan and the dissemination of Hussein's discourse which symbolized the growing influence and capabilities of Al-Houthi. For the regime, Hussein and his supporters "had overstepped the boundaries of permissive discourse and behavior in Yemen" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.132). These tensions eventually set the stage for the first war which erupted in June 2004.

Later in 2014, Abdulmalik Al-Ijry, a member of the Political Bureau of Ansarullah, argued that the Houthis were not provoked to use coercive force against the regime due to Zaydi ideological commitments, as has been alleged; rather, as he maintains, the tensions in Saʿdah had boiled over and created the context for warfare (Al-Ijry, 2014a, 2014b). Al-Ijry explains that by 2004, his governorate was suffering from the following conditions: the decline of Zaydiyyah in terms of teaching and as a doctrine in general in light of the regime's policies in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt, the absence of the rule of law, which positioned Zaydi groups as a vulnerable category, the arousal of sectarian strife by the regime, and the political marginalization of Zaydi figures (Al-Ijry, 2014b). Moreover, Al-Ijry maintains that the Houthis believed that the war against them was planned in coordination with the US which was cautious of any religious discourses arising in the region in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Al-Ijry, 2014b). Hence, Al-Ijry stresses that not ideology but rather "politics has been the driving force for war par excellence", and that the Houthis were pushed into a direct confrontation with the regime to realize "salvation and emancipation from the state of oppression" to which they were subjected (Al-Ijry, 2014b). Nevertheless, the conflict

between the regime and the Houthis was not exclusively political. The struggle included, inter alia, sectarian and tribal overtones which were manifested with the recruitment of tribal and radical Sunni fighters. These actors, however, were not necessarily driven by ideological commitments as many fought for the survival of the Salih-constructed elite arrangement that positioned them as local political and religious influencers, as noted in chapter three, which would have been significantly undermined by the Houthi ascendance to power. In essence, the Saʿdah wars represented a constellation of various participants with varying "political, sectarian, strategic and economic" calculations and interests (Brandt, 2014, p.113). The post-1962 elite who benefited from the regime's patronage network joined the government forces in the war, while those that have been marginalized by the regime and local sheikhs, including *sada* and non-*sada* tribesmen, joined the Houthi fighters (Brandt, 2014, p.114). Nonetheless, as the conflict became increasingly violent, some sheikhs and tribe members were propelled to join the Houthis because they became displeased with the regime's use of excessive force and deployment of irregular tribal fighters as will be discussed below (Brandt, 2017, p. 162; Brandt, 2104, p.115).

4.2.2. The Tribal Dimension of the Houthi-Regime Conflict

The Saʿdah wars represented a struggle over the political field by two actors. On the one hand, the regime was threatened by Al-Houthi's growing influence which further jeopardized its capacity to control the peripheralized governorate and preserve the political status quo. On the other hand, the Houthis fought to acquire greater influence and subvert the conditions which led to their marginalization. However, the conflict soon acquired additional tribal and sectarian dimensions with the instrumentalization of sectarian discourse and the inclusion of auxiliary tribal and radical Sunni forces in the war (Brandt, 2017; Brandt, 2014). The tribal dimension was revealed as of the second round of war which began in March 2005. The regime enlisted thousands of irregular fighters from the Hashid confederation whose wages were paid via sheikhs (Brandt, 2017, p.200). The recruitment of tribal fighters eventually became systematic which engendered the "Popular Army" that was led by Husain Al-Ahmar, son of the Hashidi sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar (Brandt, 2017, p.230). The government also attempted to

recruit local tribes from Saʿdah by persuading sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar to write a letter urging these tribes to join the Hashidi informal fighters; however, this attempt was unsuccessful and even the local sheikhs who disapproved of the Houthis perceived Al-Ahmar's call as an encroachment on their sovereignty (Brandt, 2017, p.234).

The recruitment of Hashidi fighters infuriated the local tribes of the Khawlan Bin ʿAmr and Bakil confederations that deemed the involvement of Hashidi fighters to be an intrusion on their lands and affairs; as a result, many joined the Houthi forces (Brandt, 2017, p.177, 200). Other tribesmen joined the Houthi fighters due to personal disputes with the government or local sheikhs (Brandt, 2017, p.199). Thus, the government was not the sole beneficiary of the involvement of tribes. As more groups became drawn into the conflict, the Houthis' capabilities grew substantially as a result of having additional tribal fighters on their side along with Zaydis and *sada* from other governorates (Brandt, 2017, p. 154). The tribal fighters, nonetheless, did not always share similar ideological and political motives as the Houthis. Often, tribes were driven by inter- and intra-tribal rivalries and disputes predating the war or those that had developed throughout the six rounds of hostilities and were played out in parallel with the original conflict (Brandt, 2017, p.174, 187). The Saʿdah wars represented a two-tiered dispute over "leadership, power and influence" (Brandt, 2014, p.113); this struggle over symbolic capital was played out on a local level between post-Imamate elite and marginalized groups led by the Houthi family as well as in the big political filed between the regime and the Houthis. The Saʿdah wars also featured a sectarian dimension which became explicit with the recruitment of radical Sunni groups that, together with tribal fighters, constituted the irregular force deployed by the regime.

4.2.3. The Sectarian Dimension of the Houthi-Regime Conflict

By the time the first Saʿdah war was rolled out, the state's military apparatus included Salafi sympathizers who occupied prominent positions such as Ali Mohsin Al-Ahmar, commander of the First Armored Division, and other senior officers at the Political Security Organization and Central Security Organization (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.126). Ali Mohsin, who led the war against the Houthis, held "anti-Hashemite views" and was backed by Saudi Arabia (Dorlian, 2011, p.187; Brandt, 2017,

p.213). The war took on an additional sectarian dimension with the informal recruitment of certain tribal groups, beginning with the fourth round of war, who were either affiliated with the *Islah* party or were Salafi sympathizers who were enlisted by Ali Muhsin or recruited as part of Husain Al-Ahmar's Popular Army (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.161-162; Brandt, 2017, p.230). These recruitments also included Southern Yemeni Islamist jihadists sent to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight against the Soviet Union (Dorlian, 2011, p.187). Moreover, the government enlisted the help of scholars from Shafiʿi and Salafi backgrounds to denounce the Houthis and legitimize the fight against them (Brandt, 2017, p.230).

For their part, the Houthis targeted Salafi groups who were able to gain significant influence under the neopatrimonial arrangement of the political field. During a particular incident in 2008, the Houthis targeted a mosque in Saʿdah whose Imam was a Salafi acquaintance of Ali Mohsin, killing over 15 people (Dorlian, 2011, p.188). However, it is important to note that allegiance to the government or the Houthis was not uniform. Those fighting on the side of the government, for example, belonged to different political and social backgrounds that cut across tribal and religious lines, including sheikhs, ordinary tribe members, Salafis, and *Islah*-affiliates; this informal base was enlisted by the regime through financial incentives and coercion (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.162,163). As one Yemeni observer noted, the Saʿdah wars resembled a market where "everyone deals with what is in his hands and what his interests require" (Brandt, 2017, p.214). Hence, the regime-Houthi conflict can be conceptualized as a "multilayered" (Brandt, 2017, p.154) political struggle, during which warring parties utilized sectarian discourse as a form of symbolic capital that was coupled with military and material resources, as the next sections explain.

4.3. The Sectarian Discourse of the Regime

Hashemi and Postel (2017) note that the manipulation of sectarian identity is a common survival strategy of authoritarian regimes that is used to deflect the call for change (p.3). In the case of Yemen, the discourses produced by the regime and its affiliates vis-à-vis the Houthis during the Saʿdah wars allude to "the regime's concern to counter the Huthis' ideological as well as political challenge to its own legitimacy"

(Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.180). The regime utilized a multitude of mediums through which it sought to discredit the Houthi movement. The anti-Houthi propaganda was disseminated via newspapers, TV channels, Friday sermons, and leaflets that were distributed in Saʿdah (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, pp. 168-169). These leaflets included quotes by religious scholars that condemned Ansarullah by claiming that the Houthis seek to establish "an apostate [Shiʿite; *rafidi*] order", thereby authorizing the fight against them as "legitimate" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p. 175). By depicting the Houthis as sectarian insurgents, the regime delegitimized the Houthis' grievances and depoliticized the war against them (Dorlian, 2011, pp.190-191). The government also made several attempts to have the Houthis enlisted as a terrorist group "by the U.S. and EU governments" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p. 181). Both the Iran-backed Shiʿa and terrorist labels served an additional purpose of discursively staging the regime's local conflict as part of the global war on terror, thus enabling Salih to tap into foreign military aid. Salih's strategy proved successful and US foreign military financing increased from zero in 2001 to USD20 million the following year, after which it decreased but only to rise again from USD1.9 million in 2003 to over USD14.5 million in 2004 when the first Saʿdah war broke out (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.125). In the following years, Yemen received close to USD31.5 million in total US foreign aid between 2006 and 2007, as revealed in a report written by the Acting Section Research Manager at the Congressional Research Service that was leaked by WikiLeaks (Sharp, 2008, p.14). Hence, Salih's discourse was strategically bolstered such that it elevated a local problem into an "exceptional" and regional issue to appeal to a wider international audience (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2017, p.713, 716).

In the course of the regime-Houthi conflict, Iran's involvement was "rhetorically established" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.170) through the discourse of the regime and allied media, but Tehran's actual support remained close to non-existent until 2009, when Saudi Arabia entered the sixth and final round of war (Brandt, 2017, p.203). Between 2009 and 2011, Iran's contribution was limited to "diplomatic and political support" of the Houthis and it was not until the aftermath of the 2011 uprising when Iranian support took the form of military and financial aid (Brandt, 2017, p.204). A confidential cable released by WikiLeaks reveals that prior to 2011, Iran's support

was confined to "Iranian media's proxy battle with Saudi and Yemeni outlets" (US Diplomatic Mission to Yemen, 2009a). Furthermore, when Iran finally extended military and financial support to the Houthis, which was especially noted after the Houthis took over the capital in 2014, it was not based on sectarian sympathies; rather, it was based on geopolitical calculations that took into account the reginal context and national tensions in Iran in the aftermath of 2011 uprisings (Brandt, 2017, p.208; Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p.5). Having bolstered "mantra-like warnings since 2004" of a potential alliance of regional Shiʿi forces that spanned from Iraq and the Levant to Yemen, the regime finally secured the support of the Saudi Kingdom in 2009, even though several Saudi officials "were privately skeptical of Salih's claims" (Brandt, 2017, p.204). A classified cable produced by the US embassy in Yemen in 2009 revealed that Salih benefitted from the protraction of the conflict because it kept "the tap of Saudi budget support open" (US Diplomatic Mission to Yemen, 2009b).

In addition to framing the Houthis as a sectarian militant proxy, the regime's propaganda machine depicted the Houthis as "foreign" elements by discrediting their loyalty to the republic, bolstering claims of Iranian support and desires of reverting the Imamate model, and even attempting to represent the Houthis as estranged from the true tenants of their Zaydi doctrine (Salmoni, , Loidolt and Wells, 2010, pp. 169-172). These accusations were highlighted by officials on numerous occasions. For instance, the Yemeni Minister of Pious Endowments, Hamoud Abbad, expressed that "the rebellion led by the Houthi terrorist insurgents in Saʿdah represents an extension of a wider scheme that is threatening the unity of Islam"; Abbad also added that "the Houthi insurgency … has changed its mindset and ideas to target Islam and destroy its ideological doctrines, with the foremost among these being the Zaydi doctrine" (26 September, 2007). He also accused other countries with meddling in Yemen's affairs in cooperation with local "Shiite institutions" that have played a role "in this strife" (26 September, 2007). Abbad's statements appeared in the official newspaper of the army, *26 September*. Through the discursive tactic of devaluing and alienating the Houthis, the Yemeni regime was engaged in highlighting "in-group similarities and out-group differences" to stimulate mobilization and pursue political objectives (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, p.4).

The regime's discourse vis-à-vis the Houthis was not meant to organize the Yemeni political field according to sectarian categories. Rather, the discourse was used to inflict symbolic violence upon the Houthis by delegitimizing the grievances and demands evoked by the group and eliminate the Houthi's chances of becoming contenders for the control of the political field. Moreover, the conflict itself presented the regime with the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, Salih could deflect Western pressures for democratization by presenting himself as a reliable ally through his efforts to squash alleged terrorists; in addition, he could deflect internal criticism from Salafi figures in the military apparatus and elite circles - who were dissatisfied with the regime's rapprochement with the US and Salih's grooming of his son for succession - by shifting their attention to the war in Saʿdah (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.124, p. 126; Brandt, 2017, p.213). In so doing, the regime employed discursive tactics to ensure that "the players accepted the existing hierarchies of distinction" (Cushion and Jones, 2006, p.150) which positioned the regime and a handpicked elite at the top of the political hierarchy. The discourse of the regime also provided it with the symbolic power "to present a rationale for the existence and exercise of coercive power" against the Houthis (Price, 2010, p.11). This "coercive power" is not limited to physical manifestations of violence; it also encompasses an "unspoken threat" which represents a given actor's ability or right "to apply force" (Price, 2010, p.190). The regime certainly possessed this ability by virtue of its symbolic and non-symbolic capital and status in the Yemeni political field. Yet, the regime was not the only actor to employ sectarian discourse in a strategic manner. Hussein al-Houthi and his successor Abdulmalik also employed sectarian discourse, inter alia, to mobilize their support base and to advance their understanding of the political field and their vision of the national and international actors competing to control it.

4.4. The Sectarian Discourse of the Houthis

When Hussein Al-Houthi returned to Saʿdah in 2001, he began to deliver lectures and speeches for local audiences which included anti-Western, sectarian, and general Islamic themes that addressed several issues. Hussein frequently presented the causes of Muslim grievances in sectarian terms; his prescribed solution, nonetheless, was a return

to general Islamic values in what he called the Quranic Culture (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.118). After his death, his lectures - which combined sectarian and general themes from Islamic thought - continued to be publicized by Ansarullah as part of a wider Quaranic Culture that is derived from Quranic principles and lessons, to which his brother Abdulmalik also has contributed (see thaqafaqurainia.com). Hussein's efforts, along with his previous experience as a member of parliament, his scholarly qualifications, and father's status as a prominent Zaydi scholar helped to solidify Hussein's local reputation. After 9/11, however, Al-Houthi's efforts became more concentrated at criticizing the government/regime which entered into an alliance with the US in the global war on terror. Hussein's discourse took on an additional revolutionary tone in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. During a lecture in 2002, he urged his supporters to adopt the 'Death to America, Death to Israel' slogan, which would eventually become a key symbol for the Ansarullah movement. The slogan served several purposes. First, it was presented as an act of condemnation of the regional policies of Western hegemonies, mainly those of the USA, which brought about the "humiliation" of the Muslim community; moreover, the slogan was presented as a way of protecting oneself against "psychological defeat" and feelings of frustration and despair (Al-Houthi, 2002a, p.4). Accordingly, for Houthi supporters, the slogan represented "a kind of psychological preventive war and an immunization against any Western penetration" (Al-Ijry, 2014a). In addition, the slogan was meant to "politically attack President Saleh" in an indirect manner over his alliance with the US as well as highlight Hussein's growing influence, as noted in a confidential document produced by US diplomatic communications in 2007 for several US agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (US Diplomatic Mission to Yemen, 2007).

By the time the first Saʿdah war erupted in June 2004, Hussein was able to amass a significant degree of symbolic capital and influence to the extent that he became regarded "as a challenge" and "danger" threatening the Salih regime (Brandt, 2017, p.150). Hussein's discourse was meant to resonate with a wider Yemeni audience whilst highlighting the unique grievances experienced by the Zaydis, thus targeting local groups who have been marginalized and delegitimized by the regime's circle of elite. This discursive strategy eventually gave birth to "a loosely defined group with multiple,

sometimes autonomous, elements" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.235). Even after his death, Hussein's lectures and discourse were preserved and remained in circulation. They can be accessed via Ansarullah websites (such as thagafaqurania.com, ansarollah.com, and other affiliated YouTube channels) to this day. Hussein's religious discourse can be conceptualized as symbolic capital, through which he was able to highlight "sociopolitical grievances" on local and international levels and "galvanize supporters" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.116). Any form of capital - which includes religious capital and discourse - can be transformed into symbolic capital (Rey, 2014, p.53). Hussein used discourse as a capital to achieve several objectives on multiple levels. First, on a local level, he used his discourse to denounce the regime's policies which resulted in the peripheralization of Saʿdah and inflicted symbolic violence upon Zaydi teaching and Zaydi groups in the governorate. As noted in chapter three of this thesis, the Zaydis from Saʿda, particularly the *sada*, were subjected to various forms of disenfranchisement by the Salih regime and his associates who imposed arbitrary systems and meanings in the political field and fostered the encroachment of Salfiyyah, so that these dynamics would be "experienced as legitimate" (Jenkins, 1992, p.66). This symbolic violence produced and reproduced local and national "structures of domination" (Rey, 2014, p.40) that had a negative impact on different Zaydi groups, including the Houthis.

Second, the discourse of Hussein Al-Houthi was produced and used as a form symbolic capital in the context of a larger power struggle over the political field. In the political filed, actors compete "to amass symbolic capital" which grants them the ability "to define the common sense that shapes thought and behavior in any given society" (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60). From this perspective, Al-Houthi's discourse can be conceptualized as a powerful resource through which he sought to introduce an alternative 'common sense' which would subvert the marginalization of his group on a local level as well as address and mobilize the Yemeni Muslim community on a national level. In his lectures, Hussein Al-Houthi dedicates a great deal of attention to the decline of the Muslim community in Yemen and the region which has suffered from humiliation at the hands of Sunni clerics, scholars, and rulers who "domesticated" and subjugated the Muslim community and made it subservient to the West (Al-Houthi, 2002a, p.6). Al-

Houthi did not explicitly criticize or refer to the Salih regime; doing so would have called into question his commitment to republican rule. Instead, he criticized the government by referring to its alliances with Western powers. For instance, when he instructed his audience to chant the slogan in 2002, he asked:

> 'What are you afraid of? When you speak of America, when you speak of Israel… If deep down, we feel that we are afraid of the government, then we actually confirm that they [the government] are what? They are allies to the Jews and Christians' (Al-Houthi, 2002a, p.3).

Hussein's discourse was largely built on an us-versus-them dialectic: the "us" being the Muslim community in his governorate, Yemen, and the Muslim world in general that has been suffering from humiliation and disenfranchisement, while "them" refers to Western powers - mainly US and Israel - and those complicit in helping them sustain their hegemony. Hence, Hussein's discourse, which acted as a from of symbolic capital, enabled him to provide an alternative perspective on the elite members of the political and religious fields. Moreover, Al-Houthi regarded the modern influence of international hegemonic powers and their national associates as "the new colonialism" through which the US was able to invade communities, assign the "terrorist" label in an arbitrary manner, and use the war on terror agenda as a pretext to "silence and steer the Arabs" (Al-Houthi, 2002b, p.2, p.3). For Al-Houthi, "combating terrorism" was simply a "malicious title" that masked colonialist and imperialist Western pursuits of power (Al-Houthi, 2002b, 2). Hussein's anti-Western discourse was meant to counter the symbolic and coercive violence brought about by dominant actors on the local and international level that legitimized and upheld arbitrary categories and policies. Interestingly, when referring to the victims of neo-colonialism, Hussein used a broad Muslim identity, which ensured he could address various groups. On the other hand, when referring to the local culprits responsible for the woes inflicted upon Muslims, Hussein's discourse included sectarian references to Sunni rulers and Wahhabis. In fact, he accused Wahhabis of being "the true terrorists" and argued that even though the US has targeted all Muslims, its policies have been particularly directed at Shiʿa who represent a "true threat" to the US (Al-Houthi, 2002a, p.7, p.5).

After Hussein was killed in the first war, his half-brother Abdulmalik took over the leadership of the movement and became "the ideological font" (Salmoni, Loidolt and

Wells, 2010, p.191) of Ansarullah with a discourse that built on the legacy of his brother and father. All the while, Hussein's lectures continued to furnish the new discourse of Ansarullah "with its pedigree and aura of religio-ideological authenticity" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.216). Like Hussein, Abdulmalik continued to deliver speeches during national occasions, such as Friday sermons, Shiʿa occasions such as *Eid Al-Ghadir* (the day Prophet Mohammed was said to have selected Ali Bin Abi Talib to be his successor), and other occasions such as *Yawm Al-Quds Al-ʿalami* (The International Day of Jerusalem), which is said to have been inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini (Dorlian, 2011, p.196). Later when the Houthis ascended to power, they developed their own occasions such as the Day of the Martyr and the commemoration of the Saudi-led war which began in 2015. Abdulmalik's discourse and the Houthi propaganda also presented the Yemeni regime and government as "foreign" actors who were implicated in advancing Western interests (Salmoni Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.222). In a speech delivered by Abdulmalik on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday in 2008- a commemoration proscribed by the Wahhabis (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.116)- he asserted that "the Islamic nation lives in division, humiliation, and disgrace" and suffers a "loss of wisdom" in addition to injustice and corruption because it is ruled by "fools", and dominated by "enemies"; and to resolve this problem, Abdulmalik urged people to return to the teachings of the Prophet and Quran (Huda Live, 2014). Hence, like his brother Hussein, Abdulmalik avoided advocating solutions that would call into question his allegiance to the republican system and label his movement as an attempt to revert to the Imamate. Nevertheless, at other times, Abdulmalik employed an explicitly sectarian discourse. During a speech on the occasion of Ashura in 2014, Abdulmalik stated that Ali's son Hussein "represents the true extension of authentic Mohammedan Islam" and argued that Hussein's struggle is not a passing issue that was bound by time; moreover, he warned against contemporary threats and "those who are like *Yazid* [*bin Maʿawiya*], who are always seeking to maintain their control over the nation, in its political decision and in all its affairs" (AlhothiOffice, 2014).

Both Hussain and Abdulmalik sought to "cultivate loyalty and obedience through influence and persuasion" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.195). This was

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achieved, in part, via discourse which acted as a symbolic capital through which the group's symbolic power emanated. This power is manifested in the ability of the Houthi movement to ultimately legitimize its own categories and meanings and impose their vision of the political order. The Houthi leadership's sectarian discourse represented a non-tangible capital which not only represented the group's identity, but also symbolized a noteworthy denominator that signified the group's political views. Moreover, it was used to affirm the movement's "superiority" and "distinctiveness" (Harrison, 1995, p.261) from other religious and political figures operating in the Yemeni political field as will be discussed in the next section.

4.5. Unpacking the Sectarian/Symbolic Dimension of the Conflict

The sectarian discourse produced in the context of the regime-Houthi conflict since the first Saʿdah war has been adopted and reproduced by local and Western media which have perpetuated overgeneralized or essentialist accounts of the conflict and the Ansarullah movement (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). As for academic literature, the rise of sectarian discourse and attitudes in Yemen in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising has often been explored through an instrumentalist prism with a focus on regional geopolitical rivalries and the role of the Yemeni political elite in capitalizing on the regional context and instrumentalizing sectarianism to serve their interests (Valbjørn, 2018; Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). These assessments provide valuable insights that expose the regime's role in advancing the sectarian narrative. Nevertheless, they dismiss the interplay within and between local and regional factors and fail to grasp the rationale behind the strategic employment of sectarianism, not only by the Yemeni regime, but also by Ansarullah. Moreover, they dedicate most of their attention to the dynamics that unfolded during and after the 2011 uprising and overlook the process that caused these very dynamics to erupt as a result of several reconfigurations that took place over the *longue durée*. And while other literature (Clausen, 2015; Vom Bruck, 2010; Dorlian, 2011) provide further contextual information to understand the rise of the Houthi movement, they do not explain why actors engaged in the struggle over the political field have chosen to employ sectarian discourse, inter alia. Hence, as noted by Brandt, our perception of the conflict has often overlooked the forces "pushing forward the

battles on the ground" (2017, p.154). To overcome these shortcomings, this thesis applies Bourdieu's concepts of the political field, symbolic capital/power, and habitus, to help explain why sectarian discourse was employed as a strategic tool in the competition over the Yemeni political field. This section seeks to explain the sectarian discourse that was produced by the Houthis as a form of symbolic capital that was used to counter the regime's symbolic violence and produce an alternative vision of the political field. It also discusses the symbolic tactics that were used by both parties to the conflict to advance their interests and solidify their status in the field. Finally, this section employs Bourdieu's concept of the habitus to explain the variation in Zaydi practices with regards to their marginalization as well as the practices of sheikhs vis-à-vis the *sada* and Houthis.

4.5.1. Sectarian Discourse as a Symbolic Capital

Any given field is a site "of struggle over symbolic capital" (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p.11 as cited in Rey, 2014, p.40). The political field, in particular, is one such example where symbolic power is "both the object and instrument of social struggle" (Swartz, 201, p.83). Symbolic capital, thus, represents "the most valuable resource in the competition to dominate the country's political field" (Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60). In the case of Yemen, the regime was able to acquire symbolic power by virtue of Salih's position in the political field. This power has enabled him to sustain a perpetual state of crisis as a principle of vision and mange a large and fluid patronage network; these, in turn, have fed into and helped sustain the symbolic power and influence of the regime. The Houthis, on the other hand, have lacked the capacity to amass a significant degree of symbolic capital in the national political field for a number of considerations that were explored in chapter three. However, in the new millennium, their anti-Western and sectarian discourse became an invaluable symbolic resource, which allowed the movement to construct alternative "perceptions of social reality" (Swartz, 2013, p.83) that challenged the structure and meanings imposed by the regime for several decades. The Houthis' discourse helped the movement acquire further influence; hence, their newly acquired symbolic power (i.e. influence) also became an instrument and a desired end. The Houthis paired their symbolic capital with coercive and economic capitals and

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eventually became the de facto authority of Sana'a, restructured the political field in the northern territories of Yemen, and formed an independent governing body.

It is also possible to conceive of the Houthi-regime conflict as a struggle wherein each actor sought to impose a certain definition of the field and leverage their set of meanings and categories as legitimate. In so doing, both parties to the conflict produced discourses that served as "practical interventions in social life" (Jenkins, 1992, p.101). The regime and the Houthis have used discourse, among other resources, in the battle over the control of the political field to further acquire symbolic and other non-symbolic forms of capital through which they sought "to impose dominant categories of practice on society, to tell society how it is to be structured, who can be a member, and what their permitted identities are" (Bourdieu, 1991; 2005 as cited in Dodge and Mansour, 2020, p.60). As Jonathan Matusitz suggests, "symbolic power may be exerted through a multitude of symbolic methods" including those that are "linguistic" (Matusitz, 2015, p.38). Accordingly, it is possible to understand the discourse produced in the struggle over the Yemeni political field as a powerful resource which enabled the regime and the Houthis to "impose" their own "symbolic meanings" (Swartz, 2013, p.83) regarding the nature and purpose of the conflict between them. Since the power of words or discourses "to *do* things is a function of the authority and appropriateness of their speaker, not to mention the appropriateness of audience and context" (Jenkins, 1992, p.101), the setting which preceded and accompanied the Saʿdah wars helps to further explain why Al-Houthi and the regime's discourses were powerful, each in their own right. On the one hand, the regime realized the potential and rewards of exploiting regional and international geopolitical concerns in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. It thus intentionally stirred "Saudi anxieties over a Shia political revival in Yemen" and spoke to the US's war on terror agenda (Brandt, 2017, p.204). In this regard, Salih's violence against the Houthis took on a symbolic dimension through his discourse of delegitimization which entailed labeling Ansarullah as Iran-backed Shiʿa (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018) and calling Hussein's discourse "hallucinations" (Brandt, 2017, p.170). On the other hand, Hussein Al-Houthi and his successor recognized the opportunity to build on the widespread disapproval of the government's alliance with the US as well as capitalize on local frustrations concerning the regime's policies in Saʿdah; accordingly,

the Houthis used their discourse to mobilize their supporters and provide the movement's propaganda "with its pedigree and aura of religio-ideological authenticity" (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.216). By employing sectarian symbols and discourses, both parties to the conflict have also been engaged in symbolic tactics through which they sought to validate and augment their status in the political field and reduce the influence of their opponent concurrently.

4.5.2. Symbolic Battles and Tactics

Not only did the Salih regime and the Houthi movement employ sectarian discourse as a symbolic resource during the wars in Saʿdah, but they have also been engaged in what Simon Harrison (1995) calls "symbolic conflict" which is a dimension to political conflict in which symbolic capital or symbolism are used in the struggle over "power, wealth, prestige, legitimacy, or other political resources" (p.255). To do so, as Harrison argues, actors employ various strategies that ultimately affect the Other's assets or ratio of symbolic capital in the field; accordingly, an increase in the symbolic capital or influence of one party is simultaneously met with the decrease in the symbolic capital of the rival group (1995, p.269). This explains why the mounting influence of Hussein and the Houthi movement, which was symbolized by the spread of Al-Houthi's discourse and slogan, was perceived as a threat by the regime. To counter the rise of the Houthis, the regime pursued a "valuation" strategy through which it delegitimized the Houthi's discourse and slogan on sectarian and republican terms to reduce "the ratios of symbolic capital" which Al-Houthi's discourse signified (Harrison, 1995, p.269). Similarly, the Houthi leadership, represented by Hussein then Abdulmalik, pursued the strategy of devaluation against the regime and Salafi establishments. Hussein, for instance, denounced the Sunni Arab rulers and religious scholars who have aided the West in their efforts to "humiliate, shame, dishonor" the Muslim community (2002a, p.5, 6). In this regard, Al-Houthi asked his supporters:

> 'Aren't the leaders of the Islamic world today Sunni? Was it not they who agreed on, who rushed to validate America's efforts in leading the global coalition against the so-called terrorism?' (Al-Houthi, 2002a, p.5)

To devalue their political and religious foes on sectarian terms, it was also necessary for the Houthi leadership to pursue the strategy of "innovation" which entailed "the

production of successively more elaborate versions of the 'same' symbolic object" (Harrison, 1995, p.261). Hence, Hussein built on the scholarly legacy of his father, Badr Al-Din, while Abdulmalik built on the works of his father and brother (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 2010, p.116, 216). The Houthis expanded their discursive base to assert the group's "distinctiveness" and "superiority" which eventually helped increase their "share of the total pool of symbolic capital" in the Yemeni political field (Harrison, 1995, p.261, 262, 269).

In addition, both parties to the conflict were engaged in an "expansionary" battle through which each side sought to dismantle the Other's "identity symbols" (Harrison, 1995, p.253) that signified the degree of influence and political clout that a given party was able to amass. This battle involved the use of discursive and other symbolic tactics in the competition over local and national political loyalties. The regime presented itself as the guardian of republican values, whereas the Houthis presented themselves as guardians of the Yemeni Muslim community and advocates of justice and equity. While the regime used republican identity symbols, the Houthis adopted the slogan as one of their key identity symbols. This was demonstrated during one of the armed confrontations between pro-regime tribal fighters and Houthi fighters in Saʿdah. Using information collected via interviews in 2012, Brandt details that during a particular battle, "the Houthis were shouting their slogan from their positions" while the tribal fighters "responded with the Yemeni Republic's national anthem" (2017, p.306). Ultimately, the expansionary tactics of the Houthis and the regime presented the public with two "alternative identity-symbols" with whom they could choose to be affiliated (Harrison, 1995, p.265). The next section employs Bourdieu's concept of the habitus to explain the diverging Zaydi practices with regards to their marginalization.

4.5.3. The Impact of the Habitus

Bourdieu's notion of the habitus is another concept that adds to our understanding of the practices of the Houthi movement. The habitus represents the individual's "sense of self" and "understanding of the social world" that is formed and molded within the political field (Dodge, 2020, p.113, p.111). Thus, it represents "the filter of all that one perceives" which is connected to the filed by a "double relation"

through which the field shapes the habitus and the habitus shapes and gives meaning to the field (Rey, 2014, p.46). The significance of the habitus lies in that it affects how the individual engages with the field and determines the type of capital that is deemed "as worthy of pursuit" (Rey, 2014, p.51, p.56). Since the habitus is affected by the position that the individual holds and represents a product of "the internalization" of the social world with all its various fields (Rey, 2014, p.51), the habitus varies from one person to another, even among individuals with a similar position in the field (Cushion and Jones, 2006, p.145). This explains why the revivalist and resistance practices of the Houthi family- including Badr Al-Din and his sons Hussein and Abdulmalik- differed from other Zaydi revivalists who were active in Saʿdah since the 1990s. As aforementioned in chapter three, there existed various Zaydi groups in Yemen with diverging responses to their marginalization. These ranged from explicit revivalism of the Zaydi doctrine through multiple mediums, the rejection of the political aspect of Zaydi revivalism, and the call to embrace Zaydism as a doctrine whilst retaining the republican principles of rule (Vom Bruck, 2010, p.198, p.206; King, 2012, p.407). Given that the habitus is "inculcated as much, if not more, by *experience* as by explicit *teaching*" (Jenkins, 1992, p.46) it is also possible to understand why the two sons of a prominent sayyid revivalist scholar, Hussein and Abdulmalik, adopted a discourse that embraced Zaydi motifs which became sectarianized in relation to othered actors who enjoyed a prominent position in the Yemeni political and religious fields.

Moreover, the distinctiveness of each habitus even among members of a similar group explains why Hussein's practices took on a different revolutionary and political direction compared to his father. The particularity of the habitus based on the person's "hierarchical" position (Cushion and Jones, 2006, p.154) also serves to clarify why certain Zaydi figures chose to convert to Salafism. Their experience of the Hadawi Zaydi doctrine under the Imamate rule was not the same as the experience of the *sada* who had enjoyed a great degree of influence prior to the 1962 revolt. Seen from this perspective, it is also possible to understand the practices of sheikhs and their contribution to the marginalization of Zaydis and *sada* in Saʿdah as a product of their post-Imamate hierarchical position as the new elite of the social and political field and a reflection of their habitus which was shaped by the "dominant principle vision" (Dodge,

2020, p.112) that was imposed by Salih, and not as a reproduction of some sort of sectarian sympathies or calculations. Furthermore, the marginalized position of the Houthis and their experience of symbolic violence, to which Salafi groups and local sheiks contributed, also explains the group's dispositions towards its foes during and after the six Saʿdah wars.

At times, the Houthis' practices vis-à-vis their opponents reached violent levels. In the period between the end of the sixth war in February 2010 and the 2011 uprising, the Houthis displaced and killed several sheikhs from Saʿdah who formed an alliance that was independent from the regime to continue fighting the Houthi movement (Brandt, 2017, p.332). They also killed and displaced prominent sheikhs who were affiliated with the regime (Brandt, 2014, p.118). This practice persisted well after the Houthis took over Sana'a, as reports claim that the Houthis have killed several sheikhs who ceased to be of value to movement or whose loyalties have been questioned (Abdulmalik, 2019). Through these efforts, the Houthis have sought to subvert the elite structure that has been prescribed by the regime, thereby appealing to many *sada* groups in Saʿdah and neighboring governorates who supported Houthi attempts at reinterpreting "tribal leadership" and positioning Ansarullah as "an alternative to the state patronage system of previous decades" (Brandt, 2014, p.119). Accordingly, the Houthis capitalized on their growing symbolic capital and status and coupled it with other non-symbolic resources which eventually enabled them to construct a new elite structure and control the political field in the northern territories of Yemen.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter analyzes the rise of sectarian discourse in Yemen in the aftermath of the regime-Houthi conflict which began with the dissemination of Hussein Al-Houthi's anti-Western discourse in opposition to the US's foreign policy after the 9/11 attacks. This conflict eventually gave rise to the Saʿdah wars during which sectarian discourse was strategically employed by the regime and the Houthi leadership to address wider national and reginal audiences and achieve various objectives. Hence, this chapter seeks to elucidate what has been perceived by scholars like Valbjørn as a "puzzling case" (2018) of sectarianism. Valbjørn argues that Yemen is a relatively late sectarian bloomer

- compared to other Arab countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria - that was caught in the middle of a regional conflict that provided local actors with "a sectarian vocabulary useful to mobilise their own constituencies, delegitimize opponents and attract regional support" (2018, p.70). This view, however, dismisses the reconfigurations and struggles that shaped Saʿdah and the Yemeni political field over the *longue durée* and contributed to the politicization of sectarian discourse and identity as part of a multifaceted conflict which erupted years before the 2011 uprising took place.

Accordingly, this chapter serves to explain why and how sectarian discourse has been employed by the regime and the Houthis in the battle to control the political field. Both parties to the conflict resorted to several tactics including sectarian or symbolic strategies, inter alia, to advance their interests and grow their influence. The chapter examines sectarian discourse as a form of symbolic capital, which grants actors the power to shape perceptions and meanings about and within the political field. Hence, sectarian discourse can be perceived an instrument that was used, on the one hand, by the regime in an attempt to preserve its symbolic capital and status and by the Houthis, on the other hand, who sought to introduce alternative categories and build their relevance and political clout. By emphasizing the strategic employment of sectarian discourse in the battle over the political field and the fluid nature of the regime and Al-Houthi's support base, this chapter also challenges primordialist explanations of the regime-Houthi conflict which essentialize political actors and affairs in the Yemeni context and misrecognize them as sectarian rather than political. By spelling out the theoretical implications of the Houthi case, this chapter suggests that sectarianism is a dynamic element with the capacity to grow, evolve, and become instrumentalized by opposing groups to achieve diverging political goals and to consolidate power and influence.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

'One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its
shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are
repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is
still very much alive.' (Adorno, 1998)

5.1 Summing Up

This thesis sought to unpack the rise of the Houthi movement and the parallel
rise of sectarian discourse and attitudes by employing a Bourdieusian framework to
complement instrumentalist accounts that have focused on the role of Yemeni political
elite in advancing a sectarian narrative in light of a larger regional context. By utilizing
the concepts of political field, principle of vision, symbolic capital/power and violence,
and the habitus, this thesis examined the interplay within and between local and regional
factors to understand the localized and strategic employment of sectarianism, not only
by Yemen's political elite, but also by Ansarullah themselves. As noted in chapter four,
the Salih regime and the Houthi leadership produced othering discourses about each
other and were engaged in symbolic/sectarian tactics in the competition to dominate the
political field through which each party sought to consolidate their influence and power.
Hence, it is possible to conceive of the Houthi-regime conflict as a struggle wherein
each actor sought to impose a certain definition of the field and leverage their set of
meanings and categories as legitimate. In so doing, both parties to the conflict produced
discourses that served as "practical interventions in social life" (Jenkins, 1992, p.101). In
other words, the discourse produced in the struggle over the Yemeni political field acted
as a powerful resource which enabled the regime and the Houthis to "impose" their own
"symbolic meanings" (Swartz, 2013, p.83) regarding the nature and purpose of the
conflict between them. The power of their discourses to create such an impact can be
explained in light of the local and regional context that preceded and accompanied the
Saʿdah wars and the audiences which each party targeted.

By unpacking the symbolic and sectarian dimensions of the Houthi-regime conflict, this thesis delivered a more contextualized narrative by outlining the horizontal and vertical forces that have shaped the Yemeni political field over the *longue durée*. These dynamics have acted as transformative forces that engendered a new fluid elite structure in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt. Moreover, they contributed to the mounting tensions between political Zaydi revivalists in Saʿdah, on the one hand, and the regime and its associates (i.e. prominent sheikhs, The *Islah* party, and Salafi groups), on the other hand. They also led to the incremental politicization of the sectarian identity and discourse of the Houthis, which eventually reached its peak in the early 2000s when Hussein Al-Houthi began to deliver his speeches and lectures in Saʿdah, where the Houthi slogan was first adopted. Accordingly, the rise of the Houthi movement cannot be confined within a sectarian narrative; rather, as this work has sought to demonstrate, the movement has emerged from a blend of different components and struggles that have evolved throughout the history of the movement and their governorate. Hussein Al-Houthi's growing influence in the early 2000s was symbolized by the popularity of his lectures and slogan which eventually reached the capital, Sana'a, and prompted the regime to use coercive force against its adversary. During the violent conflict, both warring parties employed sectarian symbols and discourse as part of symbolic tactics through which they sought to validate and augment their status in the political field and reduce the influence of their opponent concurrently. In this regard, the Houthis produced their sectarian and anti-western discourse not only as a strategy to counter the marginalization and delegitimization that was afflicted by the regime and its associates, but also as a way to define and restructure the political field and assert the movement's "superiority" and "distinctiveness" (Harrison, 1995, p.261) from other religious and political figures operating in the Yemeni political field.

By explicating the aforementioned dynamics, this thesis advanced a nuanced understanding of sectarianism in specific, and Middle Eastern politics in general, by using the Ansarullah group as a case study on how sectarian discourse can be conceptualized as a form of capital that has been strategically used by the group along with other forms of capital to secure an incremental rise to power. In so doing, this demonstrated the utility of employing a Bourdieusian framework to unpack the reasons

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which led to the rise of sectarianism in the Yemeni context. This framework was used to compliment and overcome the shortcomings of instrumentalist narratives by elucidating why the political elite and Ansarullah resorted to sectarian discourse as a strategic tool. For this purpose, this work approached discourse as a form of symbolic capital through which each party advanced its specific meanings pertaining to the political field and the war to capture it. Thus, this thesis argues that a Bourdieusian framework can explain the "why" behind the rise of sectarian discourse in the Yemeni political field, which is something that cannot been captured by an exclusively instrumentalist thesis.

The Bourdieusian vantage point was used in this work to explain why and how the Houthi conflict with the regime erupted in 2004 and why this conflict, which paved the way for the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014, and the discourses surrounding it have been sectarianized at that particular point in Yemen's history. To do so, this work traced how banal sectarianism was nurtured in Saʿdah in the aftermath of the 1962 revolt against the Imamate rule and highlighted the conditions of peripheralization and delegitimization that were particularly detrimental for the Hashemites of Saʿdah as well as Zaydis from non-prominent tribal confederations. This process gave room to the politicization of sectarian identity and discourse which was exacerbated amidst a violent political struggle which adopted tribal and sectarian layers. By presenting a more contextualized understanding of the rise of sectarianism in Yemen, this thesis situated itself within the Montréal School of Middle Eastern politics as a body of knowledge that recognizes the importance of understanding the interplay of various material and immaterial influences on local and transnational levels which afford to Middle Eastern IR and sectarianism in the MENA region its silhouette and dispositions (Salloukh, 2017, p. 660). Moreover, this thesis called for a deeper awareness of the conditions and structures that led to the politicization of the Zaydi and Hashemite identity and led to the rise of the Ansarullah movement which can help national and international policy makers recognize the dynamic and fluid constellation of forces that have shaped the Yemeni political field in the past few decades.

5.2 Looking Ahead

The principle of vision upheld by the Salih regime shaped the political field such that it was built on the extension of patronage to sheikhs and Sunni actors. As discussed in chapter three, this constituted a symbolic violence in that the categories and structure that were introduced have been "accepted as legitimate rather than as an arbitrary imposition" (Swartz, 2013, p.83). Because this imposition is internalized "as a taken-for-granted reality" (Swartz, 2013, p.85), it is possible to understand why the Ansarullah political leadership has pursued similar tactics of cooption as their former foe after their ascendance to power. The Houthis were able to capitalize on the political and security disruption in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising to finally capture the political field by building on their resources and use sectarian and anti-western discourses to cement their alliance with co-sectarian partners in the region. Since the end of the Saʿdah wars in 2010 and particularly after the rise of Ansarullah to power in 2014, the Houthis sought to reinterpret "tribal leadership" and positioned themselves as "an alternative to the state patronage system of previous decades" (Brandt, 2014, p.119). Hence, while the actors who control the political field in the northern part of Yemen have changed, the underlying mechanisms and politics of cooption, exclusion, and inclusion have remained. In other words, the Houthis' new status as the de facto authority of northern territories, with the exception of a few enclaves, has positioned them at the top of the political hierarchy and elite structure, after a long struggle to partake in the political field which began with the formation of *Hizb Al-Haq* in 1990 and Hussein Al-Houthi's political endeavors as member of parliament in 1993-1997 (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 2010, p.98). Having once been subordinate to Saʿdah's powerful sheiks that were loyal to the regime, the Hashemite Houthi family became the new administrator of both public and informal institutions and affairs. They elevated new sheikhs to power on the basis of their demonstrated loyalty and willingness to sustain the newly introduced values and categories. The Ahmar clan was forced into exile and the new sheikh of sheikhs of Yemen was proclaimed to be Daif-Allah Rassam, a sheikh from the small Haidan province in Saʿdah who was appointed as the head of the Houthi-formed Tribal Alliance Council (*Majlis Altalāḥum Alqabalī*).

The Tribal Alliance Council ensured the continuance of the informal politics of cooption and tribal cooperation of the Salih era. Hence, even though the Houthis displaced and killed several sheikhs who were loyal to the Salih regime (Brandt, 2014, p.118), they did not terminate the political role of sheikhs altogether. They simply reshuffled the elite structure to their favor and maintained cooperation with those who demonstrated their loyalty to the new de facto authority. The Houthis have reinstated the role of tribes in the political field through a covenant titled the Document of Tribal Honor (*Wathīqat Alsharaf Alqabaliyya*). By signing the document, tribes proclaimed their loyalty to Ansarullah against all those who were believed to aid or support the Saudi-led collation and whose citizenship rights were to be stripped under the stipulations of the Document (Al-Kamali, 2015). All the while, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi has continued to build upon the discursive legacy left by his brother Hussein, whose death in the first Saʿdah war "became a mise en scène of unfinished Shia history" as his martyrdom was portrayed as "the new Karbala" by a Houthi commander (Brandt, 2017, p.168). In addition to sectarian discourse, the new spiritual leader of Ansarullah continued to employ anti-Western themes against local and regional enemies that aid the US and Israel, namely Saudi Arabia.

Today, the country continues to suffer from a protracted political conflict with severe security and humanitarian implications. In the past, the Salih regime waged six wars on the Houthis because it failed to contain and control their growing influence (Raja 2013, p.1). The same scenario is currently being repeated, albeit on a much larger scale. The dynamic and fluid nature of the political field has allowed for a multi-layered competition to take place between political, social, and religious actors seeking to expand their symbolic power and influence. In this competition, as this thesis has demonstrated, actors have access to an array of tangible and abstract resources or capitals, among which is sectarian discourse. This understanding provides a more critical outlook of sectarianism as a dynamic element with the capacity to grow, evolve, and become an invaluable resource used by competing political groups to achieve opposing ends. This challenges essentialized understandings of the conflict which reference the Zaydi and Hashemite identity of the Houthis and the sectarian identity of their opponents. By highlighting the transformative structures and forces that have

accompanied the rise of sectarianism in Yemen, it is possible to conceive of warring parties as political actors engaged in material and symbolic battles. In these battles, the Houthis sectarian discourse has served as a form of symbolic capital that was coupled with material and coercive capital to achieve the status of de facto authority through which the Houthis restructured the political filed according to categories that were introduced and legitimized as the new norm. All the while, sectarian discourse continued to be perpetuated for mobilization and assertion of the distinctiveness of the Houthis and their eligibility to manage and control the political field. Hence, the newly introduced structure of the political field post 2014 has served to sustain and solidify the status of Ansarullah through a symbiotic relationship.

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