ISLAM IN THE HOUTHI INSURGENCY:

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF REBELLION IN YEMEN

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**Abstract**

This research attempts to blend theories of insurgent politics and constructivist looks at Yemen's nationalist and religious movements. The result is a case study providing insight into the way religious identity has impacted the Islamist rebellion on one side of the ongoing Yemeni Civil War. By paying particular attention to the historical discourse and interaction between identities and institutions, the study will show both how religion serves as a source of motivation and utility for the insurgency.

**Introduction**

In the 1960s, a religion associated with regional governance for roughly a millennium began a steep decline into political irrelevance in northern Yemen.  The efforts of a coalition of republican authorities and scholars from a variety of sects felt threatened by the ideology of former rulers and diminished the prominence of Zaydism in the North.  Roughly 30 years later, the faith saw a revival. In addition to scholars advocating for controversial Zaydi worship, social groups formed to ensure the religion's survival in the region. From the ashes of one of these groups, Shabab al-Moumineen (Believing Youth) became the Houthi insurgency, a military campaign currently at war with a Saudi-led coalition of states.

The Houthi militant group that captured the Yemeni capital in January 2015 brands itself as Zaydi, a lesser-known sect of Shia Islam. Zaydism is one of the older Shi'a schools of thought, having originated in the 8th century A.D.[1] Zaydi Imams were mediators in social and religious matters in North Yemen for over a millennium, starting around 900 A.D.[2] The *'madhab'* (Arabic for religious school of thought)  was named for Zayd ibn Ali, great grandson of first Shi'a Imam

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[1] The first Zaydi groups formed within roughly two decades of Zayd b. Ali's revolt in 740. Najam Haider, "*The Contested Life of Isa b. Zayd: Notes on the Construction of Zaydi Narratives*," Journal of Near Eastern Studies 72 (2013):169

[2] Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen*, (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 35

Ali ibn abi Talib, after Zayd's revolt against the Ummayad Caliphate around 740 A.D.[3] While Zaydism's influence in Upper Yemen did not wholly dominate the authorities of other religious and tribal systems throughout those centuries, the aspirations of Zaydi imam Yahya bin al-Husayn al-Qasimi al-Rassi, an outsider from the Arabian peninsula, and political discord in Yemen led to the founding of the first Zaydi dynasty in Yemeni territory, which ruled intermittently until the republican revolution in 1962.[4] Yahya, later labeled al-Imam al-Hadi l'al-Haqq, encountered resistance to his initial attempt to spread his brand of Shia Islam from the Hejaz to Sanaa in 893.[5] Within five years, though, tribal leaders from provinces in North Yemen came to the imam seeking his management of the war and instability that had characterized the region in recent years. Until his death in 911, al-Hadi integrated his Islamic interpretations into policy within his sphere of influence, which he sought to expand from the Sa'ada province to the key city of Sanaa. Al-Hadi's reforms, centering around the imam's involvement in tribal affairs, formed the basis for the Zaydi imamate that would be continued by his descendents and imams from other branches claiming legitimacy.[6] Al-Hadi's local reception was aided by local aversion in Yemen's upper territories to tribes from both within and outside Yemen. Al-Hadi and his successors consistently held varying degrees of power in the Northern highlands, but were less successful in Yemen's Tihama lowlands (Red Sea coast) and its Southern coastal territories, due

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[3] Haider, "*Zaydi Narratives,*" 170
[4] Chase Robinson, *The New Cambridge History of Islam Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Seventh Centuries,* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 424
[5] Ibid
[6] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 33

in part to the local loyalty of Yemenis in those lands and the economic success there of competing dynasties.[7]



Figure 1.1    This political map of Yemen, produced by the Central Intelligence Agency and housed at the University of Texas Library, depicts Yemen's 18 provinces.

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[7] Ella Landau-Tasseron, "*Zaydi Imams as Restorers of Religion; Ihya and Tajdid in Zaydi Literatur*e", Journal of Near Eastern Studies 49 (1990): 257

In 1635, roughly 100 years after the Ottoman Empire began exercising control over the Yemeni Tihama, Imam al-Mu'ayyad Muhammad completed a rebellion against the Ottomans that began with his father's rule. Al-Mu'ayyad's expulsion of Ottoman forces brought territories along Yemen's coastlines under Zaydi control for a short time and re-established a firm hold in Sa'ada through remote rule. Ottoman presence resurged in following centuries as the Zaydi imamate collapsed due to infighting, culminating in the Ottoman re-capturing of Sanaa in 1872.[8] Zaydi Imam Yahya ibn Muhammad led a second Yemeni revolt against Ottoman control in 1904, which aided by World War I, led to an Ottoman withdrawal in 1918. That same year, Yahya proclaimed himself king of the Mutawakkalite Kingdom of Yemen, an internationally recognized Zaydi state.[9]The aspirations of the Sanaa-based kingdom (Taiz was later named the capital) to create a greater, unified Yemen put the state at odds with British interests in Aden and led to alliances with Arab nationalists like Nasser in the 1950s. When Ahmad ibn Yahya died in 1962, Nasser supported a coup led by Yemeni officers. Following an eight-year civil war,  the Zaydi imamate gave way to a democratic republic.[10]

Since the creation of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962, the formerly politically and socially dominant Zaydi *'madhab'*  (Arabic for religious school of thought)  has been treated as a primary adversary to republican authorities. Following the republican revolution, the authorities of the newly formed YAR sought to dissolve the threat of former Zaydi authority throughout the 1970s and subsequent decades.[11] The Saleh regime made it an active goal to not only replace any Zaydi legal authority, but to also marginalize the Zaydi identity within North Yemeni societies.

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[8] Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen,* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 212-215
[9] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 34
[10] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 50
[11] Jason Robin King, "*Zaydi Revival in a Hostile Republic,"* (Arabica 59-2012): 405-406

The divide-and-rule strategy that characterized the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh and his

predecessor, Abdullah al-Sallal, appropriated other potential adversaries into its power structure.

The alliance of the government in North Yemen with Sunni groups helped to quell any threat of

Zaydi political opposition. The regime expanded the power of Sunni fundamentalists and allied

with them to institute Islamic reforms that reduced the prominence of Zaydism in Yemen's

religious sphere[12]. As a result, the names of prominent Yemeni Sunni thinkers began to appear

on public buildings and streets. Leaders like Mohammad al-Shawkani served the Zaydi imamate

when the Shi'a entity had itself allied with Sunni factions within Yemen to secure local power.[13]

Along with this power-sharing came reforms within Zaydi practice that pushed the *madhhab*

closer to Sunni Islam. The republican government established by the North Yemen Civil War

played upon this existing current within Zaydism, exaggerating the least threatening aspects of

Zaydism and creating polarity between *madhhab* adherents that vocalized more political,

revolutionary Zaydism and the more "Sunnified" version propagated throughout the latter half of

the 20th century.[14] Prior to this "sunnification", Zaydi identity was fraught with internal conflict.

These conflicts, largely political in nature, reveal a longstanding precedent for Zaydism's place in

politics. This sociopolitical aspect of the religion is not necessarily unique to Zaydism, however.

This paper aims to test a hypothesis founded upon the idea that religious identity inherently

contains sociopolitical elements.

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[12] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 51
[13] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 409
[14] Ibid

In the 1990s, various forms of 'Zaydi revival' developed in former North Yemen.[15] In its renewed forms, though, Zaydism's popular interpretation was largely affected by two added issues. Firstly, the attenuation of Zaydism allowed for especially wide-reaching interpretations attached to the label of 'Zaydi'. Secondly, the ongoing pressure to repress the tenets of Zaydism that most overtly oppose the republican-Sunni alliance put these new competing 'Zaydisms' at conflict with one another. Despite the efforts in promoting a more nationally digestible, pacified Zaydism, groups like Shabab al-Moumineen advocated a more radical, politically active Zaydi tradition. These Zaydis were radicalized in the 1990s by the growing presence of Saudi proselytizers in Yemen's northern provinces. Zaydis frustrated by Wahhabi activity in Yemen began to blame Saudi Arabia, claiming the kingdom supported these fundamentalist preachers.[16]

The Houthi insurgency formally began in 2004 when the Yemeni government killed Zaydi religious leader and "Believing Youth" founder Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi after his capture at a demonstration. Since that time, the self-proclaimed Houthis have skirmished with the Yemeni government based in Sanaa and their Saudi neighbors to the north under the banner of Zaydism.[17] In the wake of Saleh's ouster, the Houthis' ability to project power within Yemen expanded. In 2015, the group seized Sanaa, prompting escalated involvement on the part of Saudi Arabia.[18]

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[15] Gabrielle vom Bruck, "Regimes of Piety Revisited: Zaydi Political Moralities in Republican Yemen," (Die Welt Des Islams-2010): 191
[16] Shelagh Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen," (Middle East Report 204-1997): 22-23
[17] Jack Freeman, "The al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen: an Analysis of Shabab al Moumineen," (Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 32-2009):1008
[18] Jeremy Sharp, "*Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*," (Congressional Research Service-2015): 2

This research examines Houthi Zaydism as a product of identity politics. In order to fit Zaydism into a context of modern political Islam, the paper must first place the Houthi ideology within a context of Zaydi identity. This project seeks to answer the question  of what role religion plays in the development of the Houthi ideology and the pursuit of the group's goals. The hypothesis is that the Houthi insurgents employ the Zaydi identity as a political tool to advance what is largely a campaign for political upheaval in Yemen. To examine the hypothesis, this project relies on two main segments of research. By combining political theories of insurgency operations and their relations to groups' initial conditions with constructivist ideas of identity politics in Yemen, this paper explores whether Zaydi identity has served as a utility in the Houthi insurgency and explore the mechanisms by which that may have occurred.

What role(s) does the Houthi insurgency's Zaydi identity play in its military campaign? By examining the viability of this religious affiliation as a motivation and a utility in the group's conflict against the government, this paper develops a nuanced, sophisticated analysis of the Zaydism in the Houthi rebellion conducted in a constructivist manner, emphasizing the relation of discourse and action, of categories and groups, and of religious and political identities.

How well does the Houthi insurgency fit existing conceptions of nationalist movements? Though current literature tends to view the movement as a religious one, the insurgency has made increasingly political moves. Following the lead of constructivist literature on Yemeni nationalism, this paper thoroughly explores the politicization of the movement's religious aspects, as well as political activity separate from Islam.

How have the initial conditions from which the Houthi movement originated impacted its strategy for insurgency? This paper employs various theories regarding the onset and

development of rebel groups to answer this question. Applying the existing literature's
conclusions on the issue, this project will conduct its own analysis of the Houthi insurgency's
initial conditions using primary and academic sources.

How has the involvement of the Saudi coalition in Yemen's civil war affected the
discourse of religious identity surrounding the Houthi insurgency? In exploring this question, the
project maintains its focus on the interaction between discourse and institutions. This question
also allows the project to continue the work of dialectical narratives of identity in Yemen into the
ongoing civil war in the country.

# Literature Review

## Abstract

The literature on groups such as the Houthi insurgency can be divided into two views. The first focuses on how the groups operate politically and military, while the second is concerned primarily with the group's ideology and how this is interpreted by its members and opponents. This project applies a broader model of insurgency to the Houthi case and uses in-depth study of Zaydism in Yemen to better examine the mechanisms of religious identity in the insurgency.

Using the above mentioned theory of Jeremy Weinstein regarding rebel groups and the impact of their environments on their use of violence, this project analyzes the initial conditions in Yemen that gave rise to the Houthi insurgency and assess the fit of the rebel group within Weinstein's concept of activist and opportunist rebellions. The above literature presents specific instances of Houthi activation of Zaydi identity and existing social networks in Saada, and this research unpacks these examples to better understand the mechanisms by which the Houthi group would operate within this model.

This project derives in large part the methods for analyzing the Houthi insurgency's endowments from Weinstein's broader analysis of the initial hypothesis. In expanding his research, the author finds the proposed relationship between initial conditions and resulting violence levels seems to apply to any rebel groups fighting for some sort of political control over territory. As aforementioned, Houthi activity and escalation of the conflict in recent years suggests an endgame applicable to Weinstein's study.

In substitution of a deep understanding of violence patterns in conflicts outside his core sample, Weinstein examines proxies to key variables, performing a regression analysis with qualitative proxy variables like contraband sales and refugee outflow to substitute factors like

material endowments and civilian violence, respectively.[19] In other words, Weinstein looks at symptoms of violence against noncombatants and resource wealth of rebel groups to get a general picture of the correlation between economic endowments and violence in varying conflicts.

Jeremy Weinstein constructs, in "Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence", a detailed theoretical and empirical analysis of the character and magnitude of violence employed by rebel groups in civil wars. Definitions of civil wars vary, but Weinstein assumes they involve violence between state and non-state actors over regional or national political influence, at least 1,000 casualties over its course (and an average of 100 per year), as well as at least 100 casualties on both sides of the conflict.[20] In order to apply Weinstein's logic regarding insurgent violence to the Houthi insurgency in this project, the conflict in Yemen needs to squarely fit the author's definition of a civil war, as civil wars can be defined by varying metrics and benchmarks In other words, it is imperative to assess the relevant history of the Yemeni civil war and check the compatibility of this case with Weinstein's sampling limitations.

When Houthi forces began a campaign into Yemen's southern provinces in March 2015 against interim president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, the escalation led to bouts of violence resulting in 5,000 deaths by October of that year, according to a report from the Congressional Research Service.[21] Hadi's legitimacy in Yemen is supported by the United States and a Saudi-led coalition. Both sides of the conflict have carved out relatively stable areas of influence within Yemen and while the exact political aims of the Houthi insurgency are, their maintenance of

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[19] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 306-307
[20] Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence,* Cambridge University Press, 2007, 16
[21] Sharp, "Yemen: Civil War," 2

regional bases and territorial expansion suggest something between secession and complete

governmental overthrow.
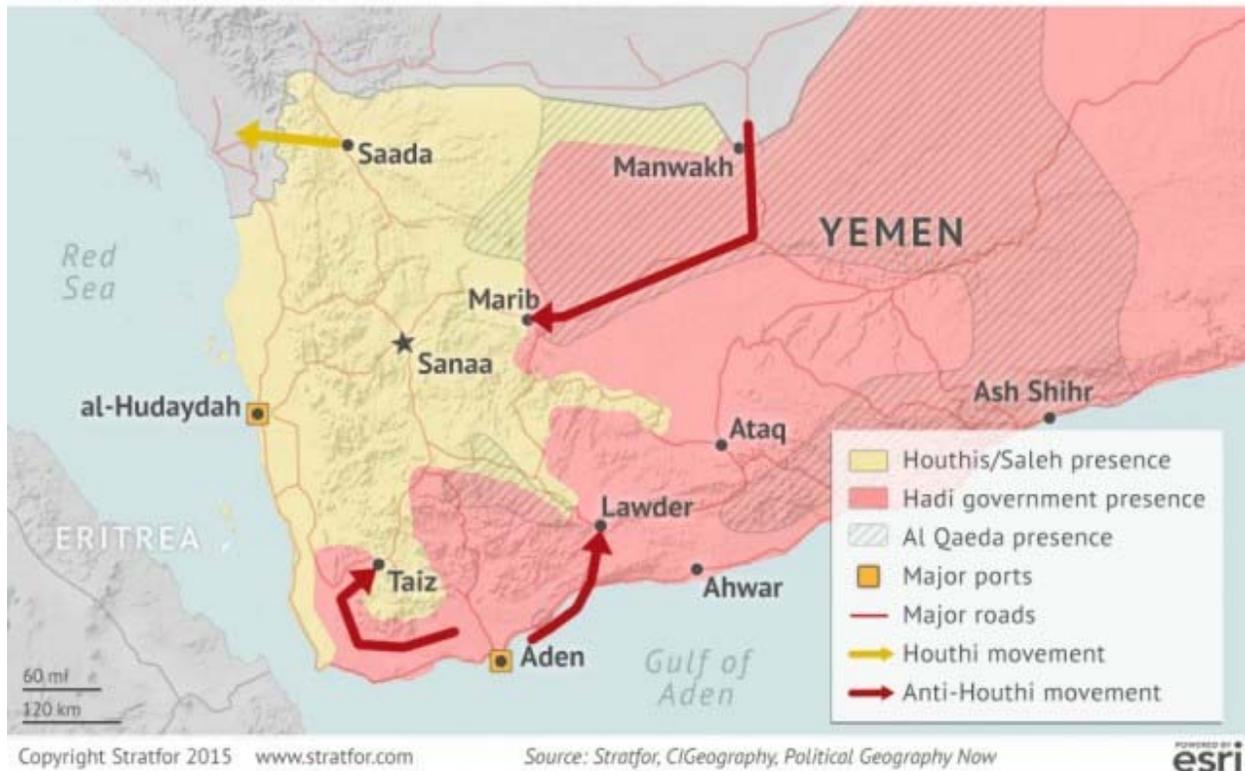


Figure 2.1    This map from Stratfor, a geopolitical intelligence firm, depicts trends in combat between the Saudi-led coalition and the allied Houthi and pro-Saleh forces in Yemen as of Aug. 2015.

Weinstein posits that the way rebel groups use violence in civil wars can vary from

indiscriminate killing to strategic use of deadly force. The author argues that the conditions out

of which an insurgency is formed, such as the availability of resources and the bureaucratic and

military reach of the established government, shape the rebellion's organizational structure and

determine the nature of participants in ways that affect how the group uses violence in its

campaign. For example, Weinstein divides insurgencies into general categories of activist and

opportunist rebellions, the former being higher-risk with lower chance for short-term rewards

and the latter being lower-risk with a higher chance for immediate gains. While opportunist

rebellions tend to use their material resources as incentives in recruiting individuals, their activist

counterparts are can merely employ the promise of wealth. In these cases, though, Weinstein

argues such groups use social and ideological institutions to make such claims credible and

effective. The author asserts that these groups differ in both magnitudes of violence used and the

manners in which it is employed.[22] While variations in magnitude are fairly straightforward, he

establishes basic criteria for separating selective violence from the indiscriminate. Selective

violence occurs when targeted individuals consist largely of those who threaten to undermine the

perpetrating group, Weinstein argues. Indiscriminate violence, in the same argument,

distinguishes little between victims and is less concerned with protecting supporters or punishing

defectors.

For this paper, Weinstein's theory of insurgent violence serves as a tool to examine the

utility of religious identity to the Houthi insurgency. Weinstein's approach analyzes the factors

that shape rebel groups' use of violence in civil wars, presenting an alternative theory to those

based on territorial control or competition.[23] Theories revolving around territorial control

generally argue that insurgent violence is higher in areas where rebel groups are present, but not

in control. Those centered around competition attribute this kind of violence to weak groups

attempting to signal their resolve to their competitors and target audience. Though Weinstein's

argument is principally concerned with overall patterns of insurgent violence, the author's

explanation of activist rebellions proposes interesting mechanisms of social construction and

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[22] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 46-50
[23] Weinstein*, Inside Rebellion*, 34

identity. This paper looks at Zaydi identity in the Houthi insurgency in a manner that fits

Weinstein's general mechanisms for an activist rebellion and better explain the ways in which the

Houthi group may utilize what Weinstein refers to as social endowments.

It is important to note here that the constructivist approach of this project greatly limits

the applicability outside the Houthi case of any particular results obtained by this method.

Rather, it provides a thorough alternative explanation of the Houthi rebellion and seeks to

encourage further study of this case and similar situation-specific research into other cases. The

emphasis on discourse and identity performance in area-specific theaters makes for a more

nuanced study, but at the cost of wider utility and applicability.

Weinstein links social and economic endowments to insurgents' use of violence through a

detailed theoretical model of organizational challenges. In this model, the way an insurgency

handles these challenges has direct implications for its use of violence.[24] The approach to these

challenges is largely determined by a group's organization, which is largely determined by that

group's initial conditions. Weinstein conducts in-depth mixed methods analyses of four

insurgencies; the National Resistance Army in Uganda, the Mozambican National Resistance

(Renamo), and the national and Upper Huallaga Valley regional committees of the Shining Path

in Peru as two separate entities.[25] The author acknowledges that many aspects of the

environment from which a rebellion originates can impact its organization and behavioral

tendencies, but opts to thoroughly explore the relation between groups' available resources and

the strategies they pursue. Weinstein analyzes the way the four groups in question recruit,

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[24] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 42-45
[25] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 22-23

control and govern territory, and maintain membership over time. These processes do not occur

simultaneously (though not in mutual exclusion either). Weinstein assumes, however, that

groups tend to maintain patterns of behavior and organization established early on in insurgency.

He bases this argument on theories of path dependence applied to political groups in mostly

economic contexts. Path dependence in the context of political science refers to a perspective

which assigns virtually irreversible influence to initial decisions on subsequent actions.

Expressed in a rational choice model, this would be interpreted as reversal coming at

unjustifiable costs.[26] Weinstein's basic assumptions about insurgent organizations assume

similarly that fledgling insurgencies choose options that afford them the greatest chance of

success due to their disadvantaged position . The author also argues, though, that rebellions face

added logistical challenges in changing course. Opportunist rebellions are granted little

flexibility by cyclical violence between undisciplined group members and resisting civilians and

a need to maintain ranks in the face of higher battlefield losses, according to Weinstein. Activist

rebellions, he argues, are held together by social norms and expectations, but these sources of

cohesion are vulnerable to changes in membership, leadership, or organization. In these cases,

the author argues the movements trend toward opportunism.[27] Weinstein's assumption of path

dependence leads the author to focus on the organization of groups, which he describes as its

membership, structures, policies and cultures. The author attempts to reflect this organization in

the aforementioned processes of recruiting and maintaining members, as well as controlling and

governing territory. Rather than focus on the influence of leaders or ideologies, Weinstein

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[26] "A User's Guide to Political Science," Wesleyan University, accessed February 26, 2016,
http://govthesis.site.wesleyan.edu/research/methods-and-analysis/analyzing-qualitative-data/path-dependence/
[27] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 11

subsumes these factors under the broader umbrella of organization. Weinstein argues that any theory explaining the behavior of rebel groups should explain why leaders and ideologies are prominent in some insurgencies and not in others, treating them as indications rather than as independent variables[28].

Weinstein's theory attempts to explain variations in violence and brutality by examining the initial economic and social conditions of groups and attempting to establish a link to uses of violence via those groups' organizational methods. Within that explanation, Weinstein assumes that groups use social endowments in some cases to overcome organizational challenges, and he argues that this approach has a specific and lasting effect on the group's strategies. Chief among these impacts are the selective and restrained use of violence. By using Weinstein's correlation and essentially reversing his study, this paper utilizes the expected results of applying Weinstein's theory to the Houthi insurgency to determine where the group's organizational characteristics fall within the author's spectrum of opportunist and activist rebellions. Then, using theories of identity and historiography that has put these ideas to work on the specific case of Yemen, this paper will examine more closely in the context of this case the mechanisms of social endowments that Weinstein proposes.

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[28] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 21-22

**Key Players**

There are numerous parties inevitably connected to the Houthi insurgency. Hopefully, taking the time to rationalize the prioritizing of certain categories and parties, as well as the altogether exclusion of others, will help explain choices that would have been otherwise largely implied.

Much has been made of the relationship between Iran and the Houthi insurgency, particularly in Western media. While evidence of any significant ties between the two are scarce, the more dangerous misconception is the notion that the Houthis are somehow naturally allied with Iran on a sectarian basis.[29] This relationship will be more closely examined later because of the study's need to investigate any potential outside aid or interference. It is important to separate this analysis, though, from simplistic discussions of religious affiliation and identity. This is not to say that Houthi-Iranian interactions have no implications for the identity of the rebel group. In fact, roughly speaking, how Houthi fighters politically and ideologically interpret the very idea of Iranian assistance could be a telling action for the group's identity, engaging the region with a scope atypical to this case. But any analysis of those interactions will be conducted dialectically, cognizant of the actors and institutions at work, and with consideration of the endowments perspective presented by Weinstein.

Similarly to the relationship with Iran, any Houthi interaction with Saudi Arabia or those originating from the neighboring kingdom take on simplified sectarian undertones in mainstream media. To better understand the relationship between the Houthi movement and its varying

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[29] Sharp, "*Yemen: Civil War,*"

Sunni opponents, this paper keeps these groups separate while bearing in mind that categories

will likely cross group lines occasionally within the research. In other words, this project takes

care to differentiate between groups and categories, as well as discourse and institutions, in

dealing with relevant Sunni groups, as there are pragmatically different Sunni groups that play

significant roles throughout the narrative of Zaydism in Saada and the Houthi insurgency. These

groups, or individuals within them, may espouse similar ideologies. Still, conflating these

categories into groups like "Sunnis" or "Wahhabis" misunderstands the groups with which the

Houthi insurgency and its Zaydi predecessors in Saada have interacted with and which have

shaped the identity of the Houthis (Wedeen). In establishing basic history of Zaydi and Houthi

interaction with Sunni groups as understood by the theoretical framework of the project, this

paper draws on literature pertaining to specific events or phenomena related to the Zaydi and

Houthi cases, focusing on works with similar theoretical foundations or that at least attach

primacy to the evolving nature of the involved parties.

Lastly, this study takes utmost caution with how it deals with Zaydism in Yemen as a

categorical entity. As previously mentioned in this literature review, the analysis of identity and

how it is expressed and utilized necessitates stark differentiation between categories and groups.

The latter implies a unity and cohesion that would skew observations on any identity category,

and this phenomenon can be plainly seen in the case of Yemeni Zaydism. The Houthi insurgency

fought against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh for roughly 8 years. In 2014, after being

supplanted by his vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, Saleh and forces loyal to him

began backing the Houthi insurgency in its ongoing fight against Hadi and the Saudi-led

coalition (Sharp). Saleh is nominally Zaydi, but actively pursued Sunni allies in the early years

of the unified republic to contain the power of Zaydi influence in North Yemen. While Saleh has

not publicly indicated any reversal on key ideological tenets of Zaydism on which he disagreed

with Houthi leaders, the former president has become a key ally for the insurgency. Though both

nominally Zaydi, Saleh and the Houthi leadership have had vastly different histories of

interaction with Shafi'i Yemeni groups and Saudi Wahhabi proselytizers in the region, as well as

a dynamic relationship with one another (Wedeen). This example illustrates the importance of

treating Zaydism as a category containing multiple groups. The categories and groups in

question are subject to sometimes drastic change with time. In order to understand Zaydi

identity, this project must trace the relations of nominal Zaydi groups amongst themselves, as

well as their relations with groups and actors belonging to separate but relevant categories.

**Religion in politics**

Examining the effects of religious movements and ideas on the political sphere requires careful consideration of entities which intertwine piety and politics. The Houthi insurgency is traditionally considered an Islamist movement. While this label accurately depicts its direct involvement with both politics and Islam on one hand,  Wedeen cautions readers "not to assume it implies a monolith or that it suffices to capture the wide variety of organizations, debates, and political commitments to which conflicts such as the al-Huthi one refer".[30]  In discussion of the similarities between national belonging and religious belonging, Wedeen assumes both to be traditions that evolve historically through discourse, debate, invoking existing concepts of faith or nation, and challenging and developing new ideas therein. Just as there is not one understanding of Islam, or Zaydism for that matter, neither of those discursive traditions have established any universally agreed upon role for the ideology in political affairs.[31]  Wedeen points out that the Yemeni regime has used the label of "Islamist" to denote dangerous opposition groups, but groups on either side of the Houthi conflict fall under the umbrella of that term. Followers of al-Houthi and the Salafi proselytizers they have actively campaigned against are both traditionally Islamist, but occupy entirely separate communities of argument and are in direct political opposition to one another.

Even within the discourse of Islamism, however, political faults are artificially drawn along sectarian lines. Wedeen cites sectarian identity as a prime example of the aforementioned

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[30] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 179
[31] Ibid.

way scholars contribute to the legitimacy and understanding of these groups. She argues that observers assume and exaggerate cohesive group identities among Sunni and Shi'i communities.

In the context of this project, Wedeen's approach allows the research to trace the relation between Zaydi identity and the governing authorities' use of power from Zaydism's marginalization through the current span of the Houthi movement. Wedeen's selection of artifacts and instances in "Peripheral Visions" is conducted to allow her research to analyze the nature of power in Yemen. By Wedeen's own Foucaldian understanding of power, this can be seen as the relationship between rulers and subjects. This project narrows the focus to Zaydi subjects in an effort to understand the evolution of Zaydi identity and the role of Yemen's political structure and rulers in this progression.

This narrowed focus places a prominence on previously mentioned groups and identities that have interacted with Zaydi groups and their identities in influential ways. Wahhabism grew in Yemen's northern provinces when men returned from Saudi Arabia in search of higher wages or Afghanistan to fight with the mujahideen in the 1970s and '80s.[32] The 1973 oil crisis and resulting wage spikes in Saudi Arabia drew Yemenis across the border, and the war in Afghanistan against Soviet influence inspired Yemenis to fight alongside Arabs from across the peninsula alongside what would later become the Taliban.[33] The conservative Sunni ideologies

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[32] Weir, *"A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen,"* 22-23
[33] Ibid.

prevalent in these areas found a hold in Saada, where Zaydism had been the dominant religion

for hundreds of years.[34]
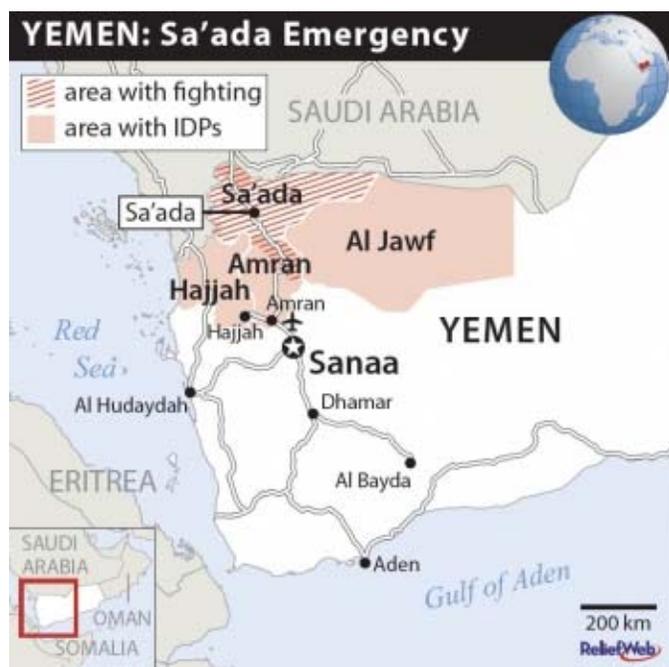


Figure 2.2   This map, from *Wars in the World,*  a daily news site, depicts Saada and
Yemen's other northwestern provinces.

Weir places little stock in traditional arguments from Houthi leaders and others that

attribute the success of Wahhabism in Saada to foreign financing. He argues that regardless of its

origins, the social status of Zaydism in the province was critical in facilitating the growth of

Wahhabism.[35] Specifically, the author asserts that latent pockets of resentment toward certain

elitist practices among Zaydi clerics rendered parts of Saada's population a disenfranchised

audience for Wahhabi proselytizing, focusing on conflicts during *Eid al-Ghadir* in 1991 and

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[34] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 159
[35] Weir, *"A Clash of Fundamentalisms,"* 23

1992.[36] This Wahhabi evangelism in Saada, which has continued since those early years of unified Yemen, is often cited as a reason for Houthi grievances with the Yemeni government. While Weir maintains a fairly sectarian perspective of the conflict in Saada, the author does recognize tribal and socioeconomic forces at work in the situation. The author also highlights the significance of political organizations like al-Islah and Hizb al-Haqq, differentiating between these groups and the larger "wahhabi" and "Zaydi" populations they represent, respectively.[37] He assigns these groups significance in the clash of ideologies in Saada because of their perceived significance. According to Weir, many of the individuals caught between these ideologies equated such groups with the religious sects of their affiliation. Some of the other factors Weir mentions, such as low income and the welfare advocated by the Wahhabi al-Islah party, reveal concentric circles within the Wahhabi group he assumes into existence in his analysis.[38] Each of these circles represents a category under-represented in the sectarian viewpoint of the conflict. Still, this approach illustrates the role of local institutions in religious and political conflict in Yemen's northern provinces.

While "A Clash of Fundamentalisms" features prominent events in the early history of this religious border skirmish and mention shifts like the introduction of non-sayyid "ulema" because of Wahhabi opposition, the article lacks in-depth analysis of these shifts and their implicit consequences in terms of Zaydi identity on the individual and local levels. This paper seeks to fill that literature gap by analyzing the implications of accounts like Weir's using a framework like that from "Peripheral Visions". Interactions between Zaydis and the Yemeni

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Weir, "*A Clash of Fundamentalisms,*" 22
[38] Weir, *"A Clash of Fundamentalisms,"* 22-23

government in these conflicts and their later iterations constitute important expressions of Zaydi

identity within the framework of this project. The accounts in "A Clash of Fundamentalisms"

detail confrontations in Saada mosques over religious rituals and customs, noting the peculiarity

of the extent to which some rites became political. Wedeen analyzes this issue in detail,

attempting to account for the various actors at work in the politicization of prayer along with the

changing meanings of actions in the manner of classificatory language.[39] Wedeen's dialectical

approach can be extended to the narrative of clashes Weir outlines in his work, facilitating an

analysis that more thoroughly explores the institutions and discourse at work in the clashes in

Saada of which Wahhabi and Zaydi ideals have repeated been brought to the forefront. This

language is not meant to be cumbersome for no greater sake, but to avoid the simplifying,

sectarian lens of previous literature. Even Wedeen's account of this issue focuses heavily on the

religiously and socially integrated institutions of Zaydi clergy. Weir's narrative, however, sheds

light on some basic happenings that indicate consistent but dynamic influence from Wahhabi

actors and institutions in Saada. Among these events are the mobilization of an active non-sayyid

Zaydi class in response to Wahhabi prozelytizing and the killing of religious leaders from the

sects in question. Interestingly, Weir suggests the latter phenomenon brought an end to

previously mounting tension and levels of violence. Analysis of this narrative is useful in

understanding the limits of discursive influence in the communities and social structures of

North Yemen.  Even if one cannot answer why these assassinations did not continue the cyclical

politicization of actions the way other actions did, Weir's assertion that clashing groups mutually

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[39] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 168

decided conflict had crossed lines of social appropriateness has serious implications for the effects of actions or discourse.

To complement this analyis, the project draws on additional accounts of the Zaydi-Wahhabi conflict from sources like Gabriele vom Bruck's "Regimes of Piety Revisited: Zaydi Political Moralities in Republican Yemen". In terms of overall goals, vom Bruck's research closely mirrors that of this project. Vom Bruck looks at Yemeni history from the fall of the Zaydi imamate, and includes the "sunnification" of the *madhab* and the interference of Wahhabi clerics in Norhtwestern Yemen. Vom Bruck posits that these histories comprise a two-part explanation for the Zaydi revival and the expressions identity therein.

In "Regimes of Piety Revisited", vom Bruck suggests, similarly to Weir, that the Wahhabi-Zaydi interactions transcended solely religious matters, entwining tribal politics and economics. The author notes the subjecting of primarily Shafi'i Sunni areas in Yemen to similar Wahhabi expansion, devaluing purely sectarian views of the matter. Vom Bruck  also takes into consideration Zaydi scholars' differentiation between Shafi'i and Salafi influence in the region.[40] These scholars decried the government's endorsement of Salafi activities in the 1990s, arguing that their pretense of de-emphasizing "madhhab-specific" Islam nationally would have been better pursued through Shafi'i institutions. These scholars, however, based their preference for Shafi'i influence not on ideological tenets, but in the amicable history of Shafi'i and Zaydi populations.[41] Their complaints, then, are expressed as a result of social incompatibility, rather than irreconcilable religious differences. Vom Bruck also describes in detail the isolating

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[40] vom Bruck, *"Regimes of Piety Revisited,"* 198-200
[41] Ibid.

practices of Zaydi sayyids and how these processes alienated more nominally Zaydi individuals in the local populations.[42] Citing the perspective of a Saada native with familial ties to Zaydi clergy, the author explains a prevalent viewpoint that Wahhabism offered a more grassroots connection to the older Islamic traditions while the Zaydi sayyids derived their *madhhab's* connection to the origins of Islam through the leaders' descent from the prophet Mohammed through Ali. Furthermore, the reluctance of many sayyids to marry their daughters to non-sayyids was used by Wahhabi clerics denouncing the Zaydi leaders' "perpetuation of their exclusive social status.[43] Vom Bruck observes an interesting response in Zaydi sayyids' responses to these criticisms. The sayyids, who in previous decades portrayed themselves as immigrants from the North, further separating them from the general population, began to identify strongly as simply Yemeni.[44] This emphasis on unified nationalism came at a contrast to the portrayal of Wahhabism as a foreign religion and one less suited to Yemen. The topics of religious unity among Yemenis, whether Zaydis and Shafi'is or just Muslims more generally, are polarizing among the sayyid class. According to vom Bruck, some sayyids saw this unity, accompanied by the decreasing prevalence of doctrines that kept Zaydi and Shafi'i families separate, as a product with the republican-sponsored campaign to dissolve the Zaydi "madhhab".[45]

Ultimately, Vom Bruck's analysis of interviews and firsthand documents from participants in the Zaydi revival of the 1990s reflects key elements of this project's

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[42] vom Bruck, *"Regimes of Piety Revisited,"* 202-204
[43] Ibid.
[44] vom Bruck, *"Regimes of Piety Revisited,"* 204-205
[45] Ibid.

methodological approach. However, vom Bruck focuses chiefly on how these processes

dismantled the Zaydi identity and principles in Yemen, even through the Zaydi revival. This

project aims to expand this largely political view of Zaydi activity in Sa'dah and use it to form an

understanding of Houthi objectives and operations based on comprehensive Zaydi history in

Yemen.  J.R. King's research in "Zaydi Revival in a Hostile Republic: Competing identities,

loyalties and visions of state in Republican Yemen" calls for an answer to whether the Zaydi

Revival constitutes a continuity or break with centuries-old Zaydi traditions. This project seeks

to indirectly answer that question by explaining the circumstances of Zaydi history and how they

serve as the rhetorical foundation for the Houthi rebellion.

King's approach depicts "Zaydi" as an ambiguous term, indicative of an identity fractured

by internal schism, the process of Yemeni nationalization, and divide-and-rule politics. King

argues that national Islamic interpretation unaffiliated with any "madhhab" was integral to

republican state-makers in the early years of the YAR.[46] Transcending the classic jurisprudences

was an official project of the revolutionary government founded in 1962. Zaydism's as the

dominant school of religious thought in what became the YAR made the dissolution of the

"madhhab" an essential part of any such plans. King asserts republican lawmakers utilized what

he calls Traditionist thought, centuries-old ideological discourse which focuses on original

sources of divinity, such as the Qur'an and the Hadith.[47] In this way and on many other

ideological issues, scholars have suggested the Islamic identity invoked by republican politicians

to be Sunni, but King is wary of attaching this label because of the origins and status of many of

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[46] J.R. King, *"Zaydi Revival in a Hostile Republic: Competing Identities, Loyalties and Visions of State in Republican Yemen,"* Arabica No. 59, 412
[47] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 414-415

the scholars in question within Zaydi religious communities.[48] Furthermore, King asserts that the ideological tenets and political aims of the Zaydi imamate propagated this thought within the "madhhab", establishing a heritage the republican government would later draw upon to legitimize its anti-"madhhab" design.[49] According to King, Islamic heritage grounded heavily in Sunni ideology was allowed and even encouraged under the Zaydi imamate because of the jurisprudence's principle of *haqq al-mujtahid,* which indoctrinated the freedom of capable, properly trained scholars of Zaydism to interpret and contradict previous interpretations made by *ulama*, particularly on matters of jurisprudence.[50] The author also argues the imamate encouraged from a political standpoint in hopes it would reduce some of the revolutionary potential of Zaydi doctrine, similarly to the republican authorities later on. King views the Houthi insurgency from a classical Zaydi perspective, noting with some air of disturbance the backseat Islamic jurisprudence has taken in the movement.[51] He does, however, link them to a class of Zaydi ulama who mixed key tenets of the madhhab's teachings and nationalist sentiment. Of all the incarnations of Zaydism that occurred in the wake of the YAR, this is the one King refers to as the Zaydi revival. [52]

The conflicts between Zaydi elite and Wahhabi preachers in Saada have numerous implications for the role of religious identity in the Houthi insurgency. In addition to the Houthi invocation of grievances against these events, branding them Wahhabi intrusions, the interaction of multiple identities throughout the course of these clashes has significantly impacted the way

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[48] Ibid.
[49] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 409
[50] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 410
[51] Ibid.
[52] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 425-427

local populations and scholars alike perceive institutions and interpret language relevant to this project. The various above sources on this subject approach the issue of Zaydi conflict and identity transition from a variety of angles, emphasizing different factors and examining separate processes. Weir's account of clashes in Saada reveals political and economic forces at work, even from a largely sectarian viewpoint of the conflict.Vom Bruck's take on the issue de-emphasizes the sectarian element of the conflict, exploring with more detail the interactions within and between the groups Weir specifies.  King's research reveals the intricacies of Zaydi identity, emphasizing the issues associated with conflating Zaydi "group-ness" in Yemen. The author's detailed account of differing, even opposed institutions and individuals within the madhhab encourage and facilitate more nuanced analysis of interactions between Zaydi, Wahhabi, Shafi'i and Yemeni identities. While none conform perfectly to the theoretical foundation of this project, each provides meaningful analysis of the events and relations that have shaped Zaydi identity and the Houthi rebellion concurrently.

**Identity**

Islam's role in Middle Eastern politics is well-documented and oft-analyzed, but is largely viewed through a wide lens, encompassing diverse jurisprudences, practices and self-identifications. Yemen's Zaydi minority presents an interesting intersection of Islamic identities with politics and with one another. Furthermore, the case of the Houthis and current iterations of Zaydism provide an opportunity to stretch the traditional application of foundational political ideas like Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism and Michel Foucault's interpretation of the power-subject relationship. In Lisa Wedeen's "Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen," the author stresses the constructed nature of both national and religious identity. More specifically, Wedeen pays meticulous attention to the impact of individuals and organizations on how communities are divided and how those resulting group identities are interpreted. By analyzing Houthi Zaydism in this manner, drawing on Zaydi history in Yemen to explain the movement's origins and relations with political authority in the area, this project constructs a more nuanced perspective on movements like the Houthi insurgency, whose actions and outwardly portrayed identities are complex and, at times, contradictory.

Wedeen's "Peripheral Visions" roots its anthropological studies of Yemeni politics deeply in the country's specific history. Using Anderson's concept of "Imagined Communities" and Foucault's understanding of modern power and subjects, Wedeen analyzes key moments and cultural practices and explains their implications for national identity in Yemen[53].

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[53] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*

Generally, Anderson's understanding of nationalism is founded on the idea of "imagined communities". According to Anderson, the members of such a community "will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". Anderson uses pre-existing understandings of nationalism that focus on self-identity of a state's citizens or nationalists, but does so with a different interpretation of the consequences of constructed national communities. While previous literature implied that nations were somehow fabricated, false, or insignificant, Anderson asserts that any community larger than a small village is imagined. Rather than trying to glean knowledge from comparison of communities imagined and otherwise, Anderson focuses on what one can learn from the way a particular community is imagined. Wedeen's application of this approach to national identity specifically in Yemen attempts to more accurately describe the mechanisms of national belonging. Wedeen argues that the sentiment and its activation works differently in Yemen, due in large part to its weak political infrastructure.

Historically, Anderson's theory of nationalism and its rise rests upon the decline of "sacred imagined communities", aided by the growth of print and publishing. Anderson argues that this previously dominant cultural imaginings are replaced by the modern imagined communities of states. In other words, individuals could not meaningfully associate themselves with nations until their religious identities became less prominent. Anderson argues that the declining significance of sacred languages and rule by divine right led to a sort of tectonic shift in the way individuals segmented the world and placed themselves within it.[54] Foucault suggests

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[54] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* Verso, 11-12

a similar narrative in "The Subject and Power", contending that states filled a vacuum left by the

absence of  "pastoral power". Anderson sees the state as not only a competitor of religion in

vying for individuals' primary sources of identity, but as a strictly secular alternative. Foucault

similarly posits that state power and its brand of subjection occupied a space formerly filled by

holders of clerical power, but his analysis refrains from generalizing this interaction into the very

nature of the relationship between political power/subjectivity and its religious counterpart[55].

Wedeen challenges assertions that Andersonian versions of nationalism are inherently

secular, allowing room within her theoretical framework to observe recent Zaydi revivals as a

nationalist movement as well a religious one. She argues that national and religious loyalty

interact on the same plane, both competitively and cooperatively. Furthermore, she contends the

two oft-separated forms of identity share a number of traits[56]. Wedeen's nationalistic look at

piety demands a more constructivist approach. She argues that, just as people experience

national loyalty and interpret national interest differently, there is no consensus, even among

mutually amicable Zaydis, or Muslims for that matter.[57] Similaraly,  J.R. King argues in "Zaydi

Revival in a Hostile Republic: Competing Identities, Loyalties, and Visions of State in

Republican Yemen", that to understand Zaydism in Yemen, one must study the various

connotations of "Zaydi" and the ways in which groups and individuals activate that identity and

defend its legitimacy.[58] While King's research focuses on the "Sunnification" of Zaydi ideology

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[55] Michel Foucault, *The Subject and Power,* Chicago University Press, 782-783
[56] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 14
[57] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions, 156-157*
[58] King, *Zaydi Revival,* 407

throughout North Yemen's republican era, his approach to identity closely resembles Wedeen's and facilitates a constructivist look at Houthi politics.

The Zaydi category, then, like any other political association, is one that has taken on many meanings to different groups and individuals in many different contexts (both spatial and temporal). Wedeen refers to her approach as dialectical because of its assumption that political actors and the terms used to describe them are defined in reference to one another, yet sometimes exist in contradiction.[59] In "Peripheral Visions", Wedeen maintains this dialectical approach throughout analyses of political situations that both do and do not contain religious elements, deepening the comparisons drawn between religious movements in politics and their more secular counterparts.

Wedeen's view of secularization in the '70s and '80s in the Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen exemplifies this dialectical relationship. She supposes that the actions of the PDRY as an institution facilitated secularization in South Yemen. secularization project redefined religion and its public-sector opposite, in the case of the PDRY.[60]

[59] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 49
[60] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 52-53

Figure 2.3    This political map from Tariq Ali's London Review of Books essay, "Unhappy Yemen", depicts the pre-1990 border between North and South Yemen

While this cycle of influence may seem needlessly dizzying, the goal is not to render a detailed flowchart of discourse and institution.  Rather, by paying attention to the two-way between groups and how they are described, one can develop a more sophisticated view of a community's political mechanisms . This approach attempts to account for the role of the audience of those actions in any resulting nationalism or "group-ness". In terms of Zaydism in Saada, the dialectical relationship between discourses and institutions is exemplified in everyday expressions of piety. Wedeen argues that everyday actions are parts of the same regular social discourse occupied by categorical speech and can define institutions and actors in the same way. Asserting that certain religious practices (i.e. praying with one's hands at their side) only signify Zaydi affiliation in and around Saada because of Zaydi organizations there had the mechanisms to distribute the message that this act was inherently Zaydi. Whether deliberately to politicize

this act or simply by example, this act became a symbol of religious identity in the region. In turn, Zaydism becomes defined by this form of prayer, as if the act were a word synonymous with "Zaydi".[61] A dialectical approach emphasizes the role of those who engage in the politicized prayer, as well as the distributive capabilities of Zaydi organizations in Saada.

These nuanced approaches to Zaydi identity in Yemen are a chief source of inspiration for this project. There are many brands of Islamist politics and the regionally and culturally specific nature of this study attempts to cleave any blanket use of such labels that, consciously or otherwise, ignore the sociopolitical contexts and secular elements of Islamist movements. Wedeen's book establishes that the unification of two distinctly separate states in Yemen 1990 was facilitated by existing notions of Yemeni identity, despite no such polity having existed to that point. Given the assumption of like behavior between nationalist and pious identifiers, this project proposes a similar narrative for the origins of the Houthi insurgency. In this narrative, the Houthi ideology benefits from strong existing associations locally between Zaydism and political authority and upheaval to make political power more realizable, much as the project of Yemeni unification depended on previously expressed notions of "Yemeni-ness". Furthermore, much as Wedeen assumes to be the case in the previous examples, this consequence is reached dialectically, as a result of both the Houthi organization and the individuals contributing to the meanings of Houthi actions. In a way, this resembles the mechanisms Weinstein subsumes under the category of social endowments to insurgency. So, applying nationalist characteristics to Zaydi identity in Yemen allows this project to closer examine social endowments of the Houthi

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[61] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 169

insurgency. Additionally, it facilitates broader engagement with the question of the role of religious identity in the insurgency.

Theories of imagined communities and dialectical abstractions do not alone facilitate meaningful understandings of identity in any particular time or place. Wedeen frames these interactions within the  context of Michel Foucault's understanding of power. Wedeen draws heavily on Foucault's "The Subject and Power" to derive a framework through which to conduct her analysis of political power in Yemen, emphasizing the determinant nature of the relationship between governing and governed.[62] Wedeen takes the concept of what Foucault calls "dividing practices" and applies the idea to power relations between Yemen's governing authorities and its citizens.  Foucault argues, without regard for intent, that states' organizational and classificatory activities have the impact of setting the range of potential identities and demarcating the categories in question. [63]

The implications of power's ability to define its subjects are the primary basis for the focus on actors' constant effects on identities within the same arena of interaction and this project's goal of better understanding  Zaydi identity in Yemen. Wedeen does not suppose a strict Foucaldian fit in Yemen, but does suggest that each governing authority from the time of the Zaydi imamate to the republican government drew upon existing systems of categories and created new such systems.[64] This research seeks to apply Wedeen's approach to analyzing unified Yemeni nationalism more narrowly to the Zaydi *madhhab* and its revival in the followers of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi.

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[62] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 24

[63] Foucault, *"The Subject and Power,"* 777

[64] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 176-177

Studies of power and identity are bound by a common interest in opposition. In fact, much of the literature contributing to this study emphasize the ways in which states deal with resistances to their sovereignty. The relationship between Yemeni Zaydism and the Yemeni government is complex, but fraught with opposition. How that opposition is interpreted is crucial to the findings on Zaydi identity in Yemen and this project in its entirety. In other words, these categories are defined by their interaction with one another and opposition, being perhaps the most pertinent aspect of that interaction to this research, must be coded in such a way that conforms to the theoretical foundations of the study. Anthony Marx argues in "Faith in Nation" that "states are often not faced with a dyadic issue of imposing their rule over an already unified society but instead face more complex challenges, with "the sovereign" facing competing or antagonistic groups" .[65] Marx argues that states seek coalitions that are inherently competitive and exclusionary to solidify power in such situations, propagating categorical divisions among subjects, much as Foucault suggests. Wedeen argues that Ali Abdullah Saleh, president of Yemen from unification in 1990 to 2012, engaged in such "divide and rule" governing extensively, "helping to reproduce spaces of disorder that are a form of rule in their own right".[66] Like Marx, Wedeen stresses that the categories involved in any given "divide and rule" scenario are anything but static and at times, newly created.

The process of state formation in Yemen, then, has direct influence on the identity discourse in Yemen and places opposition at its heart. Foucault provides a general framework for studying power and identity in such contexts, emphasizing the divisive and classificatory aspects

[65] Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism*, 22
[66] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 174

of state power and the effects on political resistance. He argues that the emergence of states as

the primary holders of regional power has directed opposition toward forms of subjectivity,

rather than against individuals in power. Foucault divides resistance into struggles against

domination of ethnic, social or religious groups, economic exploitation of individuals, or the way

individuals are made subjects, adding that conflict with holders of power often involves more

than one.[67] Houthi cries for greater representation of Saada province at the national level suggest

their resistance to the authority of the Yemeni government represents an example of struggle

against domination (either  religious, social, or both). However, given the government's history

of overtly affecting and manipulating what it means to be Zaydi in Yemen, a case could certainly

be made for the role of identity in Houthi opposition to government power. Wedeen herself

refers to the conflict as a "contest over the meaning of unjust authority, of one's political

obligations in relation to it, and the ways in which piety and politics are enmeshed through the

sort that the al-Huthi conflict both exemplifies and reproduces".[68] Foucault notes that his

proposed forms of opposition commonly overlap, and this paper examines these concurrent

shapes of resistance in the Houthi movement as expressions of political and religious identity. In

doing so, the project extends Wedeen's research beyond the origins of the Yemeni state and the

shaping of discourse and institutions therein.

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[67] Foucault, *The Subject and Power,* 781-782
[68] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visisons,* 178

## Case Study

**Methods**

With respect to violence in Yemen, examining refugee migration in Yemen may be worthwhile in efforts to better understand violence in the ongoing conflict and its effects. Comparing the outflow to medians of post-Cold War civil wars, as Weinstein does in his large-n study may aid in grasping the applicability of the author's idea of activist rebellions to the Houthi insurgency.[69] In particular, Weinstein's use of high refugee outflow of brutal or indiscriminate violence against civilians, drawing on precedents set by previous research, provides an example for this project. Yemen's refugee situation is complicated by poor infrastructure (high barriers to egress) and the presence of significant numbers of Somali refugees both in transit and residing permanently in Yemen.[70] Still, a more in-depth look at the country's refugee profile and its changes throughout the Houthi conflict could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the rebels' use of violence therein. Additionally, varying but numerically clustered totals exist for combat-related deaths in Yemen's ongoing civil war thus far. While this model is far more interested in civilian casualties, Weinstein uses combat-related deaths (which include military and civilian deaths) from World Bank Data, arguing that a strong enough correlation exists between civilian deaths and total deaths in a given conflict to argue that high totals of combat-

[69] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 309-311
[70] 2015 UNHCR Country Profile and Statistical Snapshot- Yemen. *United Nations High   Commissioner for Refugees (2016)*

related deaths yield high amounts of civilian deaths.[71] Still, it is worth noting here the rough

nature of any estimates of civilian deaths and, by extension, any measures of the correlation

between civilian deaths and all combat-related deaths. Furthermore, combat-related deaths

include casualties caused by both rebels and governments, but this project uses them to measure

rebel-perpetrated violence. So, special attention is paid to excessive government-caused deaths to

ensure the sample reflect patterns of Houthi violence.[72] While refugee outflow is used in

Weinstein's large-n analysis to suggest indiscriminate violence, combat-related deaths serve as a

proxy for simply high levels of violence. Since both these dependent variables are separate but

related, some kind of study by proxy or abstract of each is necessary for a complete analysis of

the theory's fit to this particular case.

Similarly, this project examines the Houthis' material endowments by use of proxy

variables and analysis. Analysis of Houthi resource wealth facilitates a more thorough critique of

the case's fit within Weinstein's model of rebel groups and their use of violence. Establishing a

general picture of each variable's status within the Yemeni conflict (Material wealth v. Levels of

violence) allows the study to estimate how this case supports are contradicts the basic direct

correlation Weinstein establishes between resource wealth and violence levels.     In the proxy

analysis of Houthi material endowment, this analysis again follows in the footsteps of

Weinstein's large-n analysis, but deviates slightly from the metrics the author uses out of

necessity. Weinstein employs a numerical value assigned by a relevant study to levels of outsider

interference on behalf of a given rebel group. Weinstein identifies outside interference as one of

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[71] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 306

[72] Weinstein excludes any civil wars from his large sample in which government-sponsored mass killing accounted
for at least fifty thousand deaths. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 306

two key mechanisms by which fledgling rebel groups either counter high barriers to insurgency

financially by offering materially rewards to recruits or by lowering those barriers via military

aid.[73] While such numerical data does not extend to the Houthi insurgency, one much-talked-

about aspect of the ongoing rebellion in Yemen is the alleged Iranian support it receives.

Officially, Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has expressed support for the cause of the Houthi

insurgency, extending a kind of sectarian solidarity that greatly overstates the relationship

between Iranian and Houthi religious thought.[74] Still, reports of Iranian attempts to ship arms via

the Arabian Sea are bolstered by U.S. naval presence in the area and apparent American concern

about the possibility of patronage from Tehran.[75] Furthermore, despite any assessments that

Iran's sectarian rationales for supporting groups throughout the Middle East is disingenuous, the

Islamic republic has extended support to groups even across sectarian lines in the past.[76]

Therefore, this argument cannot rule out the potential of Iranian outside interference in the

ongoing Yemeni civil war. While the degree of ascertainable certainty in any analysis of Iranian

interference may be low, recognition of the possibility of Iranian support fortifies the resulting

picture of Houthi material endowments.

While this paper loosely adopts one of Weinstein's material endowment proxies (outside

interference), it diverges on the case of more domestic material wealth. Weinstein measures this

aspect of a group's material holdings by using a dataset of numerical values based on the amount

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[73] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 307

[74] Maria Abi-Habib, *Iran's Supreme Leader Lashes Out at Saudi Arabia's Intervention in Yemen*, Wall Street Journal, April 9, 2015.

[75] Sam LaGrone, *U.S. Navy Seizes Suspected Iranian Arms Shipment Bound for Yemen,* United States Naval Institute News, April 4, 2016.

[76] F. Gregory Gause, III, "*Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War",* Brookings Institute, 4

of contraband rebel groups sell or exchange for benefit.[77] Measures of this in the Houthi case are virtually non-existent, but this paper provides a rough assessment of the material wealth available to the Houthi rebellion at its onset. While the group may have had access to material wealth in some form not accounted for by this analysis, this project looks at Houthi initial conditions in a manner that facilitates comparison with similar cases. This paper tests the most available and profitable commodities (e.g. oil and natural gas) and explore how the Houthi insurgency could exploit them to fuel their rebellion.

The data Weinstein uses is borrowed from a study exploring the impact of various independent variables on the incidence and length of civil conflict. The findings from this paper, "Why Some Civil Wars Last Longer", by James Fearon, have been applied to various other studies focusing on the affects of natural resources more generally on civil wars. Oil and natural gas are commonly included in definitions of impactful resources among these works. Research by Michael Ross, though, in a paper titled "A Closer Look at Oil, Diamonds, and Civil War", finds that the correlation between civil war incidence and contraband availability (a definition including gemstones, timber, and narcotics) is much stronger than that between conflict incidence and the presence of other profitable resources.[78] While studies of this nature pursue very different hypotheses than Weinstein's research, they rely on similar causal mechanisms. In both cases, the proposed role of natural resources in civil conflict depends upon its ability to lower the barriers to insurgency. In other words, the findings of Ross' study are relevant to this

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[77] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 307

[78] Michael L. Ross, *"A Closer Look at Oil, Diamonds, and Civil War,"* Annual Review of Political Science Vol. 9: 275

analysis because they imply that resources like oil and natural gas are less effective than contraband when it comes to enabling insurgency. This qualification is essential when using the availability of those resources available to the Houthi rebellion and the group's resulting level of material endowment. Still, Ross references a variety of studies that have found vastly differing degrees of significance in primary commodity exports when determining the likelihood and length of civil wars. Collier and Hoeffler's "Greed and Grievance in Civil War", for example, finds a strong relationship between oil and civil conflict incidence. The authors attribute the inability of scholars to replicate these results to overbroad definitions of natural resources or primary commodities.[79] Ross argues, however, that further uncertainty is cast on the role of natural resources in civil conflict by vagueness in causality. Cross-national studies, Ross asserts, offer vague causal mechanisms that become different to interpret on a country-by-country basis for purposes of replication. Case studies, while establishing thorough, specific causal mechanisms, often do so with a particularity that makes the proposed mechanisms difficult to apply and test in other contexts. Ross also contends that statistical issues plague established correlations between the presence of natural resources and the incidence of civil wars. The author suggests the causal relationship between these two variables could feasibly be the reverse of the above proposed mechanisms. This issue is particularly relevant to the use of reliance of a country's economy on natural resources as an indicator, which is common in studies of this type. Ross argues that even in years preceding a civil war's formal beginning, early conflict and tension could drive out labor forces of manufacturing sectors and those for which relocation is

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[79] Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "*Greed and Grievance in Civil War,"* Center for the Study of African Economies, 577

relatively easy, leaving a disproportionate amount of the country's GDP to the more geographically anchored resource sectors.[80] Lastly, Ross proposes a lurking variable, such as rule of law may latently drive trends in both resource dependence and civil war incidence, while being difficult to measure persistently and cross-nationally for any sort of statistical analysis to address the possibility.

Lastly, this project identifies the social endowments at work in the Houthi insurgency. Weinstein describes social endowments as the particular position of a group within social structures which it can manipulate to make claims and promises more credible. These advantages, when activated, put the rebel group in a position of authority or believability within its community and range from ideological to ethnic and beyond. Weinstein describes the relationship of social endowments to their material alternatives as a purely auxiliary one. According to Weinstein's theory, a group only relies primarily on social endowments when its material endowments are insufficient to support its political ambitions.[81] This research presents a secondary opportunity to challenge that assumption and entertain that perhaps, to a movement like the Houthi insurgency, social endowments are of equal or greater value than material endowments not because of a deficiency in the latter, but the unique circumstances of that group's social structure and its endowments therein. Entertaining this notion, this paper seeks to encourage future constructivist research exploring the value of social endowments in varying circumstances.

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[80] Michael L. Ross, *"How do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases,"* International Organization, Vol. 58, No. 1, (Winter, 2004), 45
[81] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 9-10

To fully explore Weinstein's model and its implications in the Houthi case, this project seeks to explain the mechanisms by which social endowments would benefit the Houthi insurgency in the ways which fit the descriptions of social endowments and opportunist rebellions. This analysis of Houthi social endowments, however, is not only valid or worthwhile in the eventuality that the insurgency were a decidedly activist one within the spectrum Weinstein advances in his theory about the role of resource wealth in determining characteristics of violence in insurgency.

Using the approach of "Peripheral Visions" and the supporting literature, this project analyzes examples of social endowments in the case of the Houthi insurgency. The paper will address several key examples of interactions between the insurgency and the local non-combatant population. Similarly to the way Wedeen analyzes how specific moments in Yemeni illustrate the mechanisms by which nationalist sentiments are transmitted, this project will use these examples to highlight the network of identities the Houthi insurgency occupies and how this could be used advantageously. There is room for interpretation of these examples in ways that both adopt and reject Weinstein's assumption that material endowments are inherently preferable and more efficient to aspiring rebellions.

This case study represents the early "Zaydi revival" in 1990s unified Yemen and the establishment of the Houthi rebellion, as well as spans of time within these periods. In addition to examining how Weinstein's theory would play out in the Houthi case, such examples test the practicality and compatibility of religious and political lenses to the case of Yemeni Zaydism. The literature provides meaningful analyses of some significant actions, as mentioned in the case

of early conflicts between Wahhabis and Zaydis in North Yemen. Existing accounts are used in

these cases to construct an analysis based on the theoretical framework of this paper and

organize the information into a compact, useful interpretation of Zaydi identity in Yemen as of

the start of the Houthi insurgency. The emphasis with this approach is identifying themes or

concepts that could be transportable to other cases, the details of which would look drastically

different when analyzed in a constructivist manner.

**Background**

The ongoing conflict between the Houthi rebel group in northern Yemen and the country's government began in 2004, following the killing of Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi in a clash between protestors and Yemeni military[82]. Al-Houthi was a prominent religious leader in the Yemeni province of Saada whose preaching began to take on an anti-governmental tone when he founded the "Believing Youth", a group dedicated to reviving Zaydi ideology in North Yemen[83].

By March 2015, the ongoing Houthi conflict had evolved into civil war in Yemen. A Saudi-led coalition of states[84] in the region began a military campaign to restore U.S.-backed president Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi to power after the Houthi insurgency forced him out of Sanaa and into exile in Saudi Arabia. The coalition campaign began as a primarily aerial one, but limited efficacy and growing humanitarian concerns have since prompted a full-scale conventional ground assault, deploying thousands of coalition troops on the ground in Yemen.[85] Since Ali Abdullah Saleh yielded his power in the face of national protests in 2011, the former president and forces loyal to him have begun backing the Houthi insurgency, whom the group fought against for roughly a decade[86].

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[82] Freeman, J. (2009). The al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen: An Analysis of the Shabab al Moumineen. *Studies In Conflict & Terrorism*, *32*(11), 1008-1019.

[83] Ibid.

[84] UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and Morocco have each contributed 10-30 planes to Saudi's anti-Houthi effort, The United States has provided logistical support.

[85] Sharp, Jeremy M. (October 2015). Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention. *Congressional Research Service, R43960.*

[86] In Yemen, Anti-Houthi Operations Confront Forceful Opposition. (2015). *Stratfor Analysis,* 1.

**Characteristics of Violence**

When compared to particularly violent civil wars, the Yemeni Civil War has produced fairly little casualties. However, trends in increases over a short period of time and high amounts of Internally Displaced Persons could be signs of a violent future in the Gulf nation. The Congressional Research Service estimated 5,000 combat-related deaths in the conflict between March and October 2015, including over 2,300 civilian deaths.[87] UN reports in January 2016 indicated approximately 5,300 wounded civilians and 2,795 civilian deaths since March 2015. The same reports indicate a significant amount of casualties caused by coalition airstrikes. Perhaps more significant for the outlook of casualties in the conflict, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights observed opposing trends in Houthi-related in coalition-related casualties from month to month. While casualties attributed to the Houthi insurgency and groups supporting it were decreasing, injuries and deaths among civilians associated with the Saudi-led coalition were rising.[88]

Given that the metric of combat-related deaths is intended to indicate the level of violence used by the Houthi rebel group, the significant numbers of civilian casualties reported in association with the Saudi-led campaign calls for hesitance in attributing high levels of violence to the Houthi insurgency. For example, the CRS estimate of 5,000 combat-related deaths over seven months is higher than the annual averages of some conflicts where Weinstein coded the insurgency as resource-rich, which are expected to yield high levels of violence. If the

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[87] Sharp, *"Yemen: Civil War"*, 1
[88] *UN chief 'deeply concerned' about intensification of airstrikes and ground fighting in Yemen*, UN News Centre

Saudi-led coalition is responsible for an asymmetrical amount of those deaths, though, the number becomes an inaccurate measure of Houthi violence.

Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated 5,832 refugees originating from Yemen as of June 2015.[89] When compared to the refugees from other civil wars, this number is relatively small.[90] The number being presented as a snapshot of Yemen's refugee situation makes it difficult to compare with outflows over time as a result of civil conflict. However, the total amount of Yemeni refugees in June 2015 resembles the low end of refugees produced by other civil wars in just one month.  In Weinstein's extended sample, outflow ranges from roughly 4,990 refugees (in Sierra Leone from 1991-1999) to approximately 13,900 refugees per month (in Angola from 1997-1999).[91] The Yemeni snapshot of less than 6,000 total refugees originating from the country is not suggestive of outflow that could approach these magnitudes.

Despite the starkly different implications of the data on these conflicts and that pertaining to Yemen, the scarcity and lack of specificity of the latter poses a problem for comparison. Given the sharp increase in the total population of refugees originating from Yemen in the first half of 2015, future outflow is difficult to predict using data from conflict years that predate its designation as a civil war. World Bank data ranging from 2006-2014 indicates a steady increase in the total population of refugees originating from Yemen from 1,362 to

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[89] 2015 UNHCR Country Profile and Statistical Snapshot- Yemen. *United Nations High   Commissioner for Refugees (2016)*

[90] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion,* 310

[91] Ibid.

2,628.[92] This data relies on UNHCR reports, meaning the UNHCR datasets mentioned so far

indicate an egress of roughly 2,700 refugees from the end of 2014 to June 2015. This departure

from the annual average of 158 refugees in the 2006-2014 data suggests the refugee outflow

generated by the ongoing civil war may be noticeably different from the outflow from Yemen in

the earlier years of the Houthi conflict. For such a new conflict, the data is incomplete and

encompasses a small window of time. Furthermore, the previous data on Yemen's refugee

outflow shows no similarity or common trend with the country's civil war data. While Yemeni

refugees roughly doubled from 2006 to 2014, they doubled again by June 2015. In other words,

while the refugee outflow generated by the Yemeni civil war thus far does not suggest

indiscriminate violence, the relevant sample size is small. Furthermore, the increase is a bucking

of previous trends and above average for the country's recent history.

In addition to the statistical issues in comparison, there are aspects of Yemen's overall

refugee situation that suggest deficiencies in the available data's ability to accurately capture the

impact of violence emanating from the country's civil war on its local populations. Refugee

outflow is used in this study as a proxy variable for the indiscriminate nature of a rebel group's

use of violence in civil war. So, examining the factors at work in Yemen which affect that proxy

variable are essential to understanding the phenomenon it seeks to emulate. The large number of

Internally Displaced Persons in Yemen, for example, depicts a much greater impact of the

conflict's violence on civilian life than the outflow of refugees. The same UNHCR statistical

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[92] *Data: Refugee Population by Territory or Country of Origin*, The World Bank

snapshot from June 2015 used in the refugee estimation reported 1,267,590 IDPs in Yemen.[93]

According to UNHCR reports, most of these IDPs are in the country's northern provinces, where

conflict has persisted for over a decade.
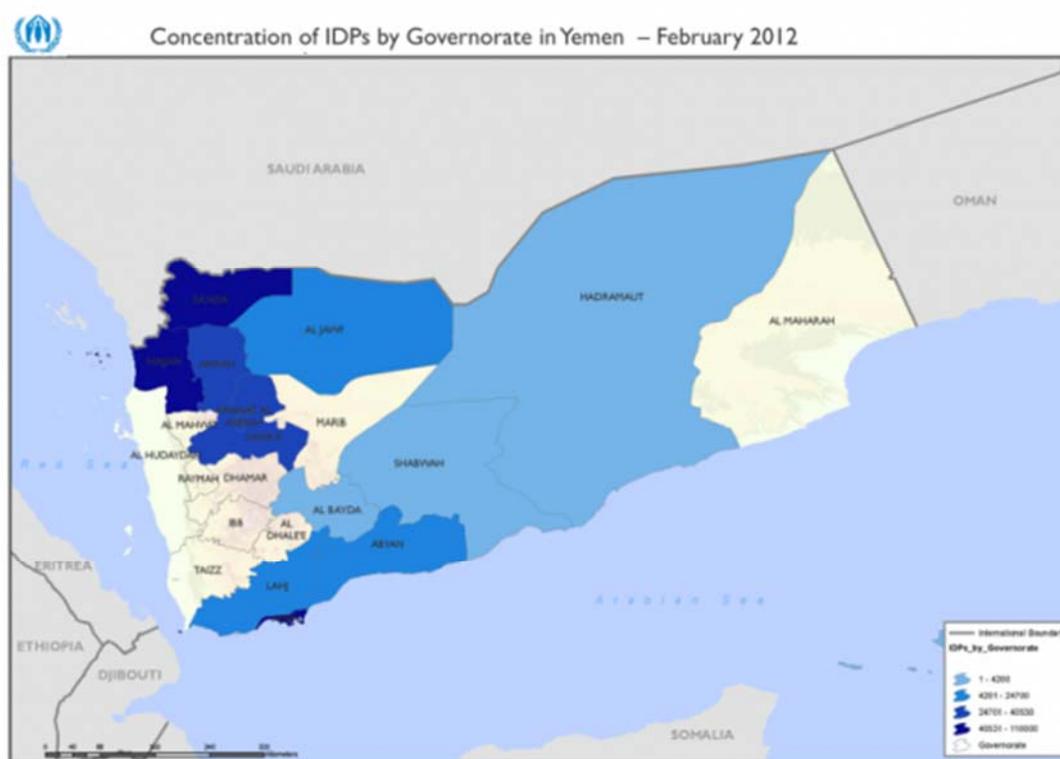


Figure 3.1         This map from UNHCR shows the concentration of Yemeni Internally Displaced
Persons by province

IDP totals are generally higher in states involved in civil conflict and the 2011 totals in

each category were 26.4 million IDPs and 17.5 million refugees, according to UNHCR. Still, the

discrepancy between roughly 5,000 refugees and over 1.2 million IDPs is atypical. This gap

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[93] 2015 UNHCR Country Profile and Statistical Snapshot- Yemen. *United Nations High   Commissioner for Refugees (2016)*

suggests high barriers to evacuation. These would likely include infrastructural and geographical challenges in the Yemeni case. Displaced persons in the northern areas of the country at the heart of the Houthi insurgency are separated from the country's major ports on the southern coast, and even those along the western coast on the Red Sea.

In a similar vein, the most accessible border crossing for IDPs in the North is into Saudi Arabia. As Saudi Arabia continues to crack down on the flow of illegal migrant workers through its Yemeni border, though, the Saudi government has turned away tens of thousands attempting to enter the kingdom through Yemen.[94] Additionally, the United Nations expressed growing concerns in 2015 about the decline of Yemen's already weak infrastructure and the danger it presented to the country's aid-reliant population. With telecommunications failures and fuel shortages compounding the difficulties to travel imposed by armed conflict, displaced persons may be forced to take refuge within the country under circumstances that would normally cause them to flee. Yemen hosts around 246,000 refugees registered with UNHCR, the vast majority of which have originated from Somalia. This total increased throughout 2015, despite conflicts within Yemen. Historically, migrants of various types have used Yemen as a transit country, straining the routes out of the country, such as the Saudi border.[95]

It is important to note, however, that the precise causes for Yemen's high IDP totals and their relative prevalence are unknown. While the UNHCR attributes the country's steadily rising displacement since 2011 on armed conflict, the specific link between displacement and violence

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[94] Jadalliya Reports, *Ethiopian and Yemeni Migrants under the Saudi Crackdown,* Jadaliyya
[95] 2015 UNHCR Country Profile and Statistical Snapshot- Yemen. *United Nations High   Commissioner for Refugees (2016)*

in Yemen is harder to establish. For instance, the World Food Programme ranks Yemen as the

11th most food insecure country in the world.[96] This lack of access to food and water could

conceivably cause significant migration toward areas with greater access to natural resources or

aid among the country's population of over 23 million, which has been growing at a rate of over

3 percent in recent years.[97] In 2015, several NGOs and human rights organizations expressed

concern over the conflict in Yemen and its potential to exacerbate the country's food insecurity

by stopping the flow of aid. UN reports indicate Saada province and territories along the

country's western Red Sea coast have suffered some of the most acute water shortages. These

shortages of water, food and fuel have been exacerbated by the Saudi-led coalition's attempts to

isolate the Houthi insurgency from external support. The coalition's blockade, including naval

and aerial shipping routes, has slowed the arrival of aid throughout the country.[98] While Yemen's

growing food insecurity is reasonably linked to the ongoing civil war, any resulting displacement

would not be a consequence of brutal or indiscriminate violence. While this same resource-based

mechanism is feasible for the case of refugee outflow, the lower costs of internal migration could

make it a more likely solution to food insecurity than national egress, leading to more instances

of resource-based internal displacement. The implications of Yemen's high IDP totals, in

summation, are largely uncertain. But they do cast further doubt on the initially apparent low

impact of violence on civilian migration. To better define the role of violence in Yemen's recent

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[96] *Yemen Emergency*, World Food Programme
[97] Ibid.
[98] In Yemen, Anti-Houthi Operations Confront Forceful Opposition. (2015). *Stratfor Analysis*, 1.

migration patterns and high population of IDPs, evidence of brutality or indiscriminate violence is needed.

**Material Endowments**

The Houthi insurgency's material endowments, in the form of contraband sales and external patronage, have been of utmost concern to the Saudi-led coalition behind Operation Decisive Storm. Consequently, the coalition's blockade of Yemen have seemingly stifled any significant flow of resources through either mechanism. [99] The intervention of Saudi forces, then, prevented the Houthis from taking advantage of Yemen's resource-driven economy. However, the insurgency operated for over a decade before the Saudi government took aim at its resource channels. So, did the insurgency have the material endowments, prior to 2015, to fund an opportunist rebellion?

Prior to the escalation of the conflict, Yemen's economy was already poor and highly reliant on oil and natural gas, with revenues from those two sectors accounting for 25 percent of the country's GDP and 65 percent of government revenue. In 2014, Yemen's GDP (Purchasing Power Parity) was $105 billion with a GDP per capita of $3,800. The country ranked 92nd worldwide in the first category and 194th in the second.[100] Government efforts to diversify Yemen's economy have been halted by the conflict's escalation and the outbreak of civil war. The natural gas revenues are themselves a result of previous efforts. The Saleh government expanded the extraction and refinement capabilities of the country as part of reforms attempting to bolster non-oil sectors of the Yemeni economy.[101]

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[99] In Yemen, Anti-Houthi Operations Confront Forceful Opposition. (2015). *Stratfor Analysis*, 1.
[100] The World Factbook: Middle East: Yemen. *CIA (2016)*.

[101] Ibid.

One of Yemen's two oil pipelines runs from oil fields in Marib to Ra's Isa on its western

coast. Houthi forces have controlled the pipeline and its surrounding areas since March 2015.[102]

The utility of this pipeline, though, is limited by regular damage from armed conflict and the

aforementioned Saudi blockade. Still, the Houthi insurgency has found ways to benefit from

captured oil infrastructure.



Figure 3.2     This map is a section of Theodora's Middle East Pipelines map showing
crude oil and natural gas pipelines in the region.

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[102] *Middle East Pipelines map - Crude Oil (petroleum) pipelines - Natural Gas pipelines - Products pipelines,*
Theodora

Taxes on internal fuel sales, while exacerbating an already severe shortage in Yemen, have allowed the group to profit from the oil they could not sell internationally. Similarly, Houthi advances into Sanaa and other governmentally significant parts of Yemen yielded caches of weaponry and former government assets. So, while the Houthi rebellion does not fit Weinstein or Fearon's basic definition of a group benefitting from contraband or domestic material endowments, there are aspects of its campaign that suggest low barriers to insurgency.

Iran is the most likely supplier of foreign intervention in the form of military aid to the Houthi insurgency. In September 2015, coalition naval forces claimed to intercept 18 anti-armored concourse shell, 54 anti-tank shells, shell-battery kits, firing guidance systems, launchers and binoculars' batteries from an Iranian fishing boat off the southern coast of Oman bound for Houthi rebels. In early 2015, the Saudi-led coalition began a naval blockade of Yemen in attempts to quell funneling of arms to the Houthi insurgency. The coalition has accused Iran several times of arming the insurgency. Reports on Iranian support for the Houthi insurgency have been mixed, but the main body of publicly available evidence on the matter consists of isolated accounts of the Saudi naval blockade intercepting small arms shipments. Additionally, contested reports from various media outlets of larger shipments have surfaced occasionally since roughly 2009. Numerous U.S. Department of State officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, have indicated the government agency possesses multiple reports detailing Iranian monetary and military support for the insurgency in Yemen.[103]

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[103] Oren Dorell, *Iranian support for Yemen's Houthis goes back years,* USA Today, April 2015

**Social Endowments**

The Houthi insurgency did not develop in a social vacuum. The organization evolved from decades-old religious and social institutions and communities in northern Yemen. These existing entities impacted the insurgency in two primary ways. Firstly, the networks and infrastructure for disseminating Zaydi thought allowed the group to spread its ideology in the northern provinces. Furthermore, they contributed to a longstanding discourse within the madhhab, generating renewed interest in Zaydism in the northern provinces. The madhhab's increased relevance amplified the effectiveness of Houthi appeals to piety, lending credence to promises of improving conditions and the legitimacy of the insurgency.

The core of the Houthi insurgency at its official beginning in 2004 consisted of members of a Zaydi religious group based in Saada, Shabab al-Moumineen. Throughout the 1990s, Shabab al-Moumineen sponsored youth programs dedicated to Zaydi teachings.[104] Prior to starting the Shabab al-Moumineen movement, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was an active member of the Yemeni Zaydi political party, al-Haqq. Al-Houthi held a seat in parliament on behalf of the al-Haqq party for several years in the early 1990s.[105] The party's other seat at the time was occupied by a future leader within the Houthi insurgency.[106] However, al-Houthi eventually became frustrated with the party's willingness to work with Saleh's ruling General People's Congress party. In the years leading up to 2004, even after al-Houthi's departure,  al-Haqq made evident the political potential of Zaydism throughout Yemen.[107] Despite disagreements, the al-Haqq party was often connected with the Houthi insurgency. For instance,

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[104] Freeman, *"The al Houthi insurgency in the north of Yemen,"* 1008-1009
[105] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 158-159
[106] Ibid.
[107] Farea al-Muslimi,  *How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism is Poisoning Yemen,* Carnegie Endowment for Peace, December 2015.

the Saleh government arrested multiple al-Haqq members on multiple occasions for conspiring

with Houthi traitors. Al-Haqq's prior and continued work made a Zaydi platform more viable for

a Saada-based insurgency. Given the connections of several key founders of Shabab al-

Moumineen, the al-Haqq party also served as a pool from which to recruit politically active and

experienced members.

The Zaydi discourse re-emerging in North Yemen in the 1990s was as political as it was

religious, but nevertheless solidified the Houthi ideological platform. Furthermore, the

politicization of conservative Zaydism granted the movement a parallel legitimacy in its anti-

government ambitions. The work of Zaydi scholars, many with no affiliation to the Houthi

rebellion or Shabab al-Moumineen, began advocating in the '90s for more stringent

interpretations of Islam within the madhhab.[108] This schism among prominent Zaydis originated

in part as a confluence of the growing Wahhabi presence in Zaydi heartlands and the uniting of

the YAR and the PDRY.[109] As some Zaydis began preaching more conservative interpretations,

government and popular discourse branded their efforts as sowing discontent. Some of these

resurging thoughts were particularly beneficial to the Houthi insurgency. *Kharuj,* for example, is

a Zaydi belief that political upheaval is to be carried out against unjust, unfit rulers. Stemming

from the madhhab's origins in the aforementioned revolt (of Zayd bin Ali), interpretations of

*Kharuj* in the '90s split into those who believed in *Kharuj* by force and those who felt it best

accomplished within the republic's democratic system.[110] This and other such debated matters of

Zaydi law serve as a primary example of the madhhab affiliation as a social endowment of the

Houthis. The discourse established, in large part by the republican governments over the course

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[108] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 413-414
[109] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 159
[110] King, *"Zaydi Revival,"* 426-429

of several decades, would have feasibly radicalized civilians by defining them as anti-government. When Shabab al-Moumineen became more political in the 1990s, the organization was an outlet for those made subjects in this way by state power.[111] Moreover, the dovetailing of piety and political insurrection lends credibility to the Houthi campaign against the government, reinforcing the promises necessary to recruit members to an insurgency without immediate material rewards.

In the politicization of these beliefs, the relevant discourse and institutions follow a pattern similar to the previously cited example of prayer in mosques. By advocating controversial stances on concepts like *kharuj,* Houthi leaders altered the discourse surrounding that concept. A controversial view, once associated with overtly anti-government voices, becomes more seditious. Popular discourse begins to conflate advocates of such fundamental beliefs into a group that shares identity, as well as characteristics like culpability. In this way, popular and opposition discourse pushes non-combatant civilians toward violent insurgencies like the Houthis through the classification and division of Yemeni individuals.

When protests in Sanaa led to unproductive talks in 2004 between Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi and then-President Saleh, the Yemeni government began military raids on Shabab al-Moumineen strongholds in Saada. Within months, al-Houthi was captured and killed.[112] Surviving relatives of al-Houthi rallied Shabab al-Moumineen members under the banner of the al-Houthi name. The death of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi has become a significant part of the insurgency's rhetoric. The circumstances around his death were portrayed by Houthi insurgents in such a way that could appeal to a broader section of the Zaydi population in Saada and

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[111] This is an example of Foucault's notion of "dividing practices." Foucault, *"The Subject and Power,"* 777

[112] Freeman, *"The al Houthi insurgency,"* 1012-1013

surrounding provinces.[113] Al-Houthi's death and the government's display of his body were politicized by Houthi leadership, drawing on comparisons to the death of Zayd bin Ali, the namesake "saintly" figure of Zaydism. Zayd's failed revolt against the Umayyad caliphate is considered to be the origins of Zaydism. The politicization of al-Houthi's killing emphasized that perpetrators in both Zayd and al-Houthi's deaths displayed the body with pride.[114] The portrayal of al-Houthi as a martyr and comparing the religious leader to Zayd bin Ali only strengthens the religious legitimacy of the insurgency and the social endowments available to the Houthis as a Zaydi movement.

In this case, if the discourse offers any advantage to the Houthi insurgency in recruiting new members, it is not immediately apparent. Insurgent groups, however, rely on similar mechanisms to overcome various challenges of organization (e.g. retaining recruits). By presenting the Hussein Badredden al-Houthi as a martyr, let alone comparing the late leader to a saintly figure conceivably strengthens the dedication of individuals to whom the group's Zaydi authority validated promises of social or economic betterment. Moreover, this type of rhetoric paints the Yemeni government as unfit rulers in Zaydi eyes, akin to the Umayyads, and solidifies the logic behind revolt in the name of Zaydism (*Kharuj).*

Resisting the influence of Wahhabism in North Yemen was one of the Houthi insurgency's primary initial grievances and mobilizing forces. When Yemenis returned from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan in the early 1980s, the individuals and institutions they established in Saada and surrounding provinces brought Wahhabism to the region in a greater capacity than ever before. The insurgency has consistently opposed Wahhabism and what it views as Saudi-

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Freeman, *"The al Houthi insurgency,"* 1014

sponsored incursion into the Zaydi heartland.[115] When Saudi Arabia responded to border skirmishes by leading a small-scale military campaign into Saada, though, the group increased its anti-Saudi rhetoric.[116] Insurgency leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi's words became even more inflammatory toward Saudi Arabia on the eve of Operation Decisive Storm in 2015.[117]

Social endowments are portraying the movement in a way that lends credence to your cause and legitimacy to promises of rewards. While a group that initially relies on social endowments is likely to continue operating that way, what social endowments are invoked and how may change. Rhetoric regarding Saudi Arabia, or more generally, choosing an enemy, is a kind of social appeal. Another example of this in the Houthi case can be seen in the Iraq War. In the early days of the insurgency, Shabab al-Moumineen (Houthi predecessors) organized demonstrations protesting U.S. intervention in Iraq. The group even incorporated vigorous anti-American sentiment into its motto after the rebranding as the Houthi movement, or Ansar Allah.[118] Since then, though, the group has been more occupied with its Saudi neighbors and has expressed concern primarily for greater regional autonomy for Saada and an end to Saudi proselytizing in Yemen. The oscillation of Houthi rhetoric, the changing face of its enemy, exemplifies the multiple identities the group projects. These political and religious identities are not competitive, Houthi leaders can oppose U.S. politics and Wahhabi ideology simultaneously. This assumption is rather simple on its surface, but the implication here is that the group has political initiative (i.e. opposition to U.S. intervention in the Middle East) removed from its espoused ideology. That is not to say politics and religion are somehow separate, parallel aspects

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[115] Freeman, *"The al Houthi insurgency,"* 1009-1010

[116] Lucas Winter, *"Fragile State: Yemen in Conflict,"* Current History, December 2010, 397

[117] Storify: Abd al-Malik al-Houthi Speech (Hisham al-Omeisy) https://storify.com/pleuck/abd-al-malik-al-houthi-speech

[118] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 153

of the insurgency. Houthi opposition to Wahhabism began in the early years of insurgency as a ideological qualm with fundamentalist newcomers to a religious community in a precarious situation. As Saudi political interests clashed with Houthi ambitions, the group's ideological and political motivation became inexorably bound in its opposition to Saudi Arabian intervention in secular and religious aspects of Yemeni society.

**Conclusions**

The result of this study's look into the origins of the Houthi insurgency in Yemen and the impact its initial conditions had on its organization and strategy are mixed. The Houthi insurgency seems to lack the level of material endowments consistent through Weinstein's sampled insurgencies to qualify as an opportunist rebellion relying on material endowments. Conversely, Yemen's pre-war economic reliance on oil and natural gas suggests potential material endowment that would allow the Houthi insurgency to operate as an opportunist rebellion, thriving mainly off sales and recruiting with short-term tradeoffs and material payments. While the evidence indicates limited Houthi benefit from illicit oil sales, the possibility is an important one to consider.

The levels of violence observed also fall short of Weinstein's threshold for exceptionally violent conflicts. The sharp increase in violence in a short period is noteworthy, though. If recent casualty rates are sustained for long periods of time, that assessment may no longer be valid. One further complication to labeling the Houthi insurgency an activist rebellion is the group's low barriers to insurgency. Yemen's weakened central government and the group's ability to self-supply by looting government caches provides material wealth outside a rigid scope of material endowments but in a way that facilitates a more material-based relation with recruits and enables continued fighting.

Another major issue in trying to fit this case into Weinstein's model was the lack of uniformity in data, reducing the robustness of the analysis. The ongoing nature of the Yemeni civil war compounds this problem and presents issues of its own. While somewhat reduced by the study's emphasis on initial conditions, the shortage of data, especially since the formal

beginning of the civil war in March 2015, makes meaningful data analysis difficult. This problem is especially present in analyses of the Houthi insurgency's use of violence, as these sections rely on more recent data and information.

The analysis of social endowments in the Houthi insurgency reveals religious and secular sources of social or ideological advantage in the rebellion's origins that seemingly influenced the organizational characteristics of the rebel group. The analyses in this section revealed endowments in institutional, individual and group contexts using the dialectical approach to identity and its changes in relation to discourse. The existing political infrastructure and ties of groups like al-Haqq to North Yemen's Zaydi communities facilitated more effective appeals to piety. The group's shifting rhetoric, though, shows an adaptability in its use of social endowments. This trend fits with Weinstein's argument that activist rebellions continually use social endowments out of necessity. To interpret the Houthi case using that logic, the insurgents modified their projected identity and the resulting social endowments in an opportunistic manner to ensure survival.

Weinstein's model simplifies insurgent operations into relying heavily on either social endowments or material endowments to recruit, manage and generally interact with local populations. This case study and its number of uncertainties indicate the need for greater research into the exclusivity of these operational patterns. Assuming the Houthi insurgency falls somewhere within a spectrum of these insurgent patterns, the group could have viably utilized any combination of social and material endowments to function, leaving its resulting organization somewhere between the polar alternatives Weinstein depicts. Additionally, this study calls for greater research into the causal mechanisms behind material endowments' impact on the Houthi insurgency, namely the Houthi benefit from and access to Yemen's profitable

natural resources and the viability of claims as to foreign involvement in the insurgency. The variety of mechanisms explored by this study for the formation of the Houthi insurgency present opportunities for further multi-disciplinary exploration that could lead to more nuanced, constructivist understandings of civil conflict and religion in politics.

Glossary

*Hejaz-* A region of the Arabian Peninsula in what is now western Saudi Arabia.

*Imam-* A term for a leader in a Muslim community. For Sunni Muslims, imams are worship leaders at mosques. In Shi'a tradition, imams hold a more central importance. Most Shi'a doctrine believes considers only the descendents of Mohammed through Ali to be imams and considers them to be infallible in matters of righteous interpretation. Zaydi imams ruled North Yemen for nearly a millennium . Popular modern currents of Zaydi thought differ from more conservative Shi'a tradition on the infallibility of imams.

*Madhhab-* Arabic word meaning doctrine or school of thought. A madhhab refers to any widely adapted interpretation of Islamic law. Examples include Zaydi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Ibadi.

*People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)-* A country in southern Yemen formed after the British withdrawal from the Aden Protectorate in 1967. Sometimes referred to as South Yemen, the PDRY merged with North Yemen in 1990.

*Tihama-* The western coast of the Arabian peninsula extending from the Gulf of Aqaba to Yemen's Bab al-Mandab Strait.

*Shabab al-Moumineen-* Arabic phrase meaning "Believing Youth", a Zaydi activist organization founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi in Saada in 1997. When al-Houthi died in 2004, many of the group's members became participants in the Houthi movement.

*Shafi'ism-* One of four schools of Sunni thought and by far the most common in Yemen. Shafi'ism is based upon the teachings of an 8th-century Muslim jurist, "al-Shafi'i". According to

U.S. Department of State data from 2011, Shafi'is accounted for roughly 55 percent of Yemen's population.

*Yemen Arab Republic (YAR)-* A country in northwestern Yemen founded out of civil war with the Zaydi imamate in 1962. The YAR, sometimes referred to as North Yemen, merged with South Yemen in 1990.

*Zaydism-* A small school of Shi'a thought based upon the revolt of Zayd bin Ali in 740 against the Umayyad Caliphate. Zaydis are sometimes referred to as "Fiver Shi'as" because of their recognition of Zayd bin Ali as the fifth imam. According to U.S. Department of State data from 2011, Zaydis made up 40-45 percent of Yemen's population.

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