

## Ancient Yemen, Iran, Cairo, Saudi Arabia and the Struggle for Modernity in the Arabian Peninsula

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### Abstract

War in Yemen involves old enemies yet has roots in contemporary global tensions. The focus is on a tribal group, the Houthis and news media have distorted the history and motives of this group. Considerable cultural understanding and background are necessary to have a clear picture of the war and the local as well as international players. History of the Saudis rise to power and their religious association with the Wahhabi movement and Saudi support for its proselytizing activities abroad and especially is a central element to understand the conflict. Also important is the history of imperialism in the area, especially the Ottoman and British invasions.

**Keywords:** Houthis; Saudi Arabia; Wahhabism; Iran; Sunni; Shia; Water; Oil

### Introduction

While we hear much today about the Silk Road and its importance in the past to trade and cultural exchange, we find little reference to the Spice Road that blossomed across Africa and Asia more than 3,000 years ago [1]. This means of exchange of products and ideas had significant effects on the civilizations and peoples it connected. For Korotayev [2] it was largely maintained and originated by the autonomous communities of the Sabaeans. The descendants of these democratic communities can be found in contemporary Yemen. While western philosophers worship the idea of the brief democracy of Athenian slaveowners, few recognize the role or the achievements of the Sabaeans, whose efforts touched worlds far and beyond those of the Greeks and resonate today in the conflict between the old colonial powers of Europe and the peoples of the Middle East.

Today the news is focused on the war in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and the idea of an opposition of geographic frontlines between Shia and Sunni populations. This ignores the fact that these populations are spread out over the Middle East and the north of Africa and southern parts of Eurasia unevenly and in most areas are intermixed. A simple view of this distribution (leaving out immigration to Europe and the Americas) is shown in Figure 1. Arguments of Saudi and Iranian confrontations take place outside of reality as the Shia are already in Saudi Arabia as there are Sunni in Iran. The threat from Yemen is not that the Houthi might drive from Sana'a to Mecca (about the distance from Los Angeles to Portland, given an indirect road system) but that the Saudi regime might collapse both due to outside pressure and internal stress. Thomas Hegghammer [3] has given a concise analysis why this is unlikely though possible, yet past threats were blunted by the Saudis calling in the Egyptian military as they have done now. Hegghammer [3] reviews the history of Saudi repression and it is chilling how the kingdom has maintained a brutal silence over the past near 100 years. Nevertheless, while a moderately secular Iraq became a substantial threat to Saudi rule under the Baathist Party as it did Iran [4,5], revolutionary Iran posed a combined threat of Shia sect and

democratic change. Saudi continuity and hegemony depend substantially on western power and the implication that no change to its existence or authority will be tolerated by the west.



**Figure 1:** Dark green nominal Shia, light green basically Sunni.

The continued resistance of the Houthis to Saudi hegemony is seen by the west in almost black and white Sunni-Shia opposition, mixing the Iranian threat with fundamentalism. A more wrong-headed conception is hard to imagine, yet western fantasies about the Middle East have been so consistently devoid of fact, as Edward Said noted [6,7], one should not be surprised. The way the Saudis and other Sunni governments see this threat in Yemen can be gauged not only by the amount of resources the Saudis are allocating to crushing the Houthis [8,9], but by the involvement of other Sunni state forces and recently Columbian mercenaries hired by the United Arab Emirates [10].

But an opposite trend has also occurred within this readjustment. For example, in the case of Saudi Arabia, where its internal tensions from the process of modernization were defused at home (which peaked with the repression of the November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1979 attacks on Mecca and Medina by Juhaiman) [11]. But they were successfully projected onto other points of the region by geopolitical events as in the creation of the jihadis for resistance of the Soviets in Afghanistan and the struggle against ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia [3]. The success of the Saudis in this projection continues today in Syria, Libya, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia and Central Africa, India, Pakistan and Indonesia and the Philippines. The uprisings against Saudi rule, as in the Arab Spring, were quickly repressed and redirected. This genius of

Wahhabism is behind both the export of jihadism as well as the repression at home and is a remarkable development.

## Origins

Saudi Wahhabism was brought to power by the British in their support of Abd al-Aziz or Ibn Saud with arms and advice before the First World War to undermine Ottoman attempts to suppress the violent fanaticism of Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud that followed their uprisings after 1746, see i.e., Al-Yassini in 1982 and Wilson and Freeth in 1983 [11,12]. What is contradictory is that while the west concentrates on militant groups in various Islamic countries that are fighting for Sharia law and an Islamic state, this is what Saudi Arabia has now and has promoted abroad through its donations, foreign aid and educational foundation activity. But as Doran [13] notes, the Saudi government has a long history of promoting conservative Islam, trying to balance its role in a secular and Christian dominated world and yet attempt to limit the role of Shia Islam.

The consequences of this support have stemmed from the creation of the totalitarian state of the Saudis and the spread of fanatic Wahhabism by the use of oil money. In the past two decades increasing international confrontations and competition for resources have escalated. Current assaults on national territories from Yemen to Columbia in search of a pacification of activities that are seen as "terrorist" and inconsistent with global capitalism often reflect a process of repression of local political resistance to development [14-16]. Actors are frequently left little recourse to peacefully resist after corrupt legal processes deny their standing to block development. These pressures are bound together as in the case of Saudi based Wahhabi proselytizing and regional (e.g. Egyptian bombardment of Sa'da) and international intervention (Soviet and American client support) [17]. Yemen was divided into north and south portions between the British (south) and Ottoman (north) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Main resistance to outside control, whether Ottoman in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries or British has been from the Zaydi. Yet Zaydi influence has been contested by Sunni Wahhabi from Saudi Arabia and that conflict has continued to the present [18]. The present Houthi rising can be seen as a continuation of this conflict.

## Houthi History and Identity

Yemen's history is tied with the migration of peoples across the Horn of Africa and the invasions and attempts at consolidation have entered the history of surrounding empires for millennia. Himyarite Kingdom or Himyar was well established in the southern tip from about 110 B.C.E. to 520 C.E. It had incorporated the northern Sabaean kingdom in 280 C.E. [19]. Trade and conflict between Yemen and the Horn were intermittent. Roman and Greek influences and trade were also significant especially as the route to India as noted in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea written over 2,000 years ago [20].

The Sabaean are likely to be a more ancient group, their language represents an ancient Arabian dialect. They are represented in historical documents and archaeological materials dating to 1,200 B.C.E. until about 280 B.C.E. when they were conquered by the Himyarites after a long civil war contesting kingship [19]. Spread of Judaism and Christianity and the arrival of Persian and other armed groups from the north destabilized the area further and led to the collapse of the Himyarites in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

One should keep in mind the Houthis have legitimate issues and these date back to the British and Ottoman period, the Cold War

contest of north and south as well as the role the people of the Marran were to play in the time of Badr al-Din al-Huthi. Al-Huthi was both a Zaydi religious leader and member of the Yemeni parliament at one time and gave voice to the aspirations of the people of the interior. The people of the Marran and other interior areas had long pressed for a voice in government and complained of the corruption in the capital. Yemen's historic north and south divisions created tensions along this regional line between the British (south) and Ottoman (north) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Main resistance to outside control, whether Ottoman in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries or British has been from the Zaydi. Yet Zaydi influence has been contested by Sunni Wahhabi from Saudi Arabia and that ideological conflict has continued to the present (King, 2012) [18]. The present Houthi rising can be seen as a continuation of this conflict. Al-Huthi led a regional movement for self-government and the government put a bounty on this head of \$55,000. He was hunted down and murdered sometime between June of 2004 and the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2004 as reported by Hamidi [17]. Numerous claims concern al-Huthi's intentions, separate state, revolution, etc. and claims of his assassination have been rejected by the government.

Aside from the Western and Soviet support for different elements in Yemen's history period, Soviet (Russian) involvement goes back to 1928 and an agreement followed shortly after 1926, when Imam Yahya declared himself king of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, becoming a temporal as well as a spiritual leader as a Zaydi. It is possible that the Zaidiyya originate in the 8<sup>th</sup> century schism of Islam, but it is more likely that the foundation for Zaidiyya was a fertile culture of independence and separate identity long present in Yemen. Yemen is a land of tribes and its relation to the Saudis has been tenuous or hostile, not only in the loss of territory as in 1934, but in the presence of separate Yemeni tribes that dominate routes into the Saudi peninsula or the water resources along the border. Water has been a substantial problem in recent years as pressure for farmed products has changed needs and destabilized water rights and usage [21].

The Houthis come from the Marran region of Sa'da district and Hashimi scholars. The Saudis (Sunnis) have pressured the Zaydis in northern Yemen ever since producing war in 1934. Saudi and Egyptian forces invaded the country sparking a war in the 1960s. After the national reconciliation of 1970; in 1990 a unification of north and south took place more than two decades after liberation of the south from the British. Saudi intervention continued resulting in civil war and has continued its interference with money and the infiltration of proselytizing. Houthis are opposed to al-Qaeda and ISIS yet neither they nor Saudi elements have sufficient support to rule the country.

## Saudi Destabilizing Influence and Fragility

Saudi influence has been historically destabilizing and corrosive. The bombing and death toll of civilians parallels that of the past. While the world condemns ISIS and the Taliban for destroying and defacing artifacts there is hardly a squeak at the damage Saudi bombs are doing today (Figure 2).

From 1962 to 1970 Egypt invaded Yemen at the bequest of the Saudis. The war did not go well and the losses to the 70,000 troops in men and material were telling and have been noted as a factor in the poor showing of Egyptian troops in the 1967 war with Israel. Today Egypt is faced with internal unrest as well as involvement in a minor war in Libya and ISIS in the Sinai. A draining war in Yemen could collapse the Egyptian government and open the Saudis to a greater



- There has been no cut back Saudi oil production to allow the price of oil to rise to stop losses in oil sales (given the drop in oil price has created huge losses where producers have sold futures or leveraged sales over time), or those who have losses or potential losses in oil derivatives and other contracts, as well as the fracking industry that is taking punishing losses and the storage oil and gas people. They all have an interest in forcing the Saudis to act and the Houthi are certainly an opportunity for these people to use (perhaps not actively) and their support of Houthi rebels (in a propagandist sense perhaps) is as a means of putting pressure on the Saudis.
- They might want to punish the Saudis for their intransigence in not cutting production in the first place to balance production to keep prices high. So support of the Houthis could easily come from other sources (including Russia a supporter of Shia regime of al-Assad in Syria) not just Iran. The USA pushes in Ukraine and the Russians in the Middle East, while it smacks of the Cold War the potential for resolution seems remote, yet the people of both regions have few possibilities to stop either conflict. But the creation of ISIS, whether a part of a distinct plan by US authorities [27], has changed the focus of the jihadist war of bin Laden's al-Qaeda to a religious/ethnic war of Sunni vs Shia vs Christian, Kurd, etc. [28] that looks more like the ethnic cleansing of the Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s. al-Qaeda in Yemen has been attempting to gain territory and support of local populace and the Houthi have been opposed to their presence [29].

Certainly the Houthis do not appear to be either well-funded, armed or represented in the media. Some Middle Eastern experts come close to describing them as anti-state nihilists [30]. The nuclear negotiations with Iran have ended and there is no action on Iran's part. Neither of these scenarios seems likely, the Houthis appear to be on their own which makes their rebellion all the more remarkable, but historically consistent.

## Conclusion

The war and the oil price collapse are costing the Saudis their fortune; reports from a number of asset managers demonstrate large withdrawals of investments [8]. As the Russians fuel Assad in Syria, the pressure builds on the Iranians, they are unlikely to be capable of supplying Assad and Shiite forces in Iraq with the same levels and Russian involvement has relieved them to a certain extent.

With the Saudi overlords gone the entire Middle East would be open to tremendous change, not just in terms of the Sunni-Shia conflict but in terms of the distribution of wealth and power. Borders would immediately come under crushing pressure and might evaporate, they are only barely holding today across Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Iran. Minor political entities ruled by rich families like Kuwait and Bahrain would likely disappear completely. Yemen seems, however, likely to continue to suffer the attentions of regional powers and international intrigues. The effects on the Saudis may be greater in the long, as al-Rasheed, [31] has noted, faced with increased economic pressures from within and without and challenges at its borders, a brittle and isolated minority ruling the country will have great difficulties dealing with the future.

But the bombing continues, the Saudis have enlisted a number of other Sunni states in the area and have spent billions to kill as many Houthis as possible. While exact numbers are lacking, a Reuters study by Mcdowall, Stewart and Rohde [32] found the cost is having

significant effects on the Saudi economy and the refugees and fighting is spreading more violent and instability across the area. A \$60bn weapons deal in 2011 with the USA has provided the Saudis with F-16s and attack helicopters as well as a host of other weaponry. Saudi air strikes are responsible for an estimated 2,000 Yemeni deaths and there is no end in sight. The United Nations reports food shortages for more than half of Yemen's population due to the war and especially the Saudi blockade.

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