

The Project on Shi'ism & Global Affairs  
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A Genealogy of Conflict:

# An Interior View of the War in Yemen

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# A Genealogy of Conflict: An Interior View of the War in Yemen

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## **Abstract:**

Over the past years, the war in Yemen developed many internal and external dynamics. The focus of international observers and the media is often more on its regional political contexts, thereby largely disregarding the local dynamics of this conflict whose roots go back far into the history of Yemen. This lecture gives an insight into the local history of this conflict, with a special focus on the roots of Zaydi revivalism in highland Yemen and the emergence of the Zaydi “Ḥūthīs” (also called Ansar Allah), as well as interlinked tribal, socio-historical, and political dynamics in Yemen that explain the Ḥūthī conflict’s onset persistence and expansion.

## **Speaker:**

Marieke Brandt is a senior researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna. Her research focuses on tribalism, tribal genealogy and history, and tribal-state relations in Yemen. She was PhD fellow of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, DAAD fellow in Sana’a, Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) fellow of the European Research Council, and project leader of the New Frontiers Groups Programme (NFG) project, “Deciphering Local Power Politics in Northern Yemen” funded by the Austrian National Foundation for Research, Technology, and Development. She is the author of award-winning *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Ḥūthī Conflict* (Hurst/OUP 2017).

## **Moderator:**

Payam Mohseni, Director of the Project on Shi’ism and Global Affairs.

## Introduction

It is a great honor for me to welcome you to my lecture on the roots and history of the war in Yemen. I am very happy to be here, even if it is only online, and to see so many people who care about Yemen. To the Yemenis and all Arabic-speaking people here, *salām ‘alaykum*. Thank you for attending.

My talk is based on my book “Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Ḥūthī Conflict” that was published in 2017. This book was the outcome of several years’ of ethnographic fieldwork in Yemen, as well as digital anthropology. What is special is the social, anthropological “bottom-up” approach: the focus on local details, small communities, and villages. My special focus is on the social stratum of the highland tribes in Yemen and their role in the genesis of this conflict. This also means that I am not a specialist on the regional and global impact and relations of the conflict, but rather on its very local roots and driving forces.

My book deals with the history of the Ḥūthī conflict since the time of the Yemeni-Saudi War in 1934, and the course of the six so-called Ḥūthī wars (also called the Ṣa’dah wars) that took place between 2004 and 2010. The conquest of Sana’a in 2014 is the landmark event in which my book concludes. My talk therefore mainly refers to this time that by now has already become a historical period, so to say. Since 2017, I am working on other subjects, writing a new book on biography in memory in highland Yemen in the 1980s and 1990s.

## The Social Fabric of Yemen

Let us begin with looking at the social fabric of northern highland Yemen. This part of Yemen is still very much dominated by tribal traditions and customs. Broadly speaking, tribes are defined as groups that claim to be descendants of a common ancestor whose names these tribes often bear. They distinguish themselves from non-tribal groups by a specific set of ethics and conduct that is called *qabyalah*.

When talking about the tribes in Yemen’s north, we must bear in mind that in the central and southern areas of Yemen, as well as the cities and the peri-urban areas surrounding the capital, tribalism is not nearly as strong as in the north. In the very north, there are groups that do not consider themselves “tribal,” such as city dwellers and other social groups outside the tribal universe. These non-tribal groups also include the *ahl al-bayt*, in Yemen called the *sādah*, singular *sayyid*, who claim descent from the Prophet. Their ancestors came to Yemen in the ninth century of our era with the first Zaydi Imam, Yaḥyā ibn al-Ḥusayn (called *al-Hādī*

*ilā al-Haqq*) who introduced Zaydism into the area. The social stratum of the *ahl al-bayt* is important in this context, because the al-Ḥūthī family, the leaders of the homonymous Ḥūthī movement, belongs to the *ahl al-bayt*.

Zaydi doctrine ascribes the *ahl al-bayt* a leadership role in both religious and secular affairs. During the imamate, the time from the ninth century to the revolution in 1962, the *ahl al-bayt* occupied the position of the Imam (the spiritual and secular leader of the Zaydi community) as well as leading positions in the government administration and military apparatus. From the vantage point of the tribes, the *ahl al-bayt* are attributed a superior status while simultaneously considered as being “weak,” according to the honor code of *qabyalah*. The tribes are obliged to protect the *ahl al-bayt* because they are considered vulnerable. Hence, the *ahl al-bayt* usually enjoy the protection of the tribe on whose territory they live in. In exchange, many members of the *ahl al-bayt* exercise important religious and legal functions for the benefit of the community.

### The Emergence of the Conflict

The area of origin of the Ḥūthī conflict is the north of Yemen, more precisely the province of Ṣa’dah, on the border with Saudi Arabia. We need to look back at the history of Yemen to understand how the Ḥūthī movement came into being, and why a considerable part of the northern tribes, sooner or later, sided with the Ḥūthīs. One can of course go back to infinite depths to explain the roots of this conflict, but for our purpose, the Revolution of 1962 serves as a good starting point.

In 1962, the September Revolution led to the overthrow of the last of the Zaydi Imam, who ruled parts of Yemen for a millennium. The revolution pledged to the Yemeni people the abolition of social inequality and birth right privilege, and a more equitable distribution of political participation, economic resources, and development. We recall that before 1962, political power and leadership were mainly ascribed to the social stratum of the *ahl al-bayt*. Yet in the decades after the revolution, the Republic of Yemen was not able to keep many of these promises. In many areas of northern Yemen, the hegemony of the *ahl al-bayt* was more or less substituted by a hegemony of the shaykhs (the tribal leaders). The shaykhs had shaken off their former *sayyid* overlords, and for the first time in Yemen’s history, the shaykhs became part of the government itself. The shaykhs and particularly those backing the Republic during the civil war in the 1960s have never been more powerful than in the

republican period. In conjunction with the weakness or even absence of state institutions in many rural areas and after Yemeni unification in 1990, a patrimonial structure emerged where political power was bound to persons, here the tribal shaykhs, rather than to institutions.

At this point, and for understanding the causes of the Ḥuthī conflict, it is important to understand that the empowerment of tribal leaders in national politics did not lead to an empowerment of their tribes. The politics of shaykhly empowerment and patronage was a double-edged sword. Rather than strengthening the tribal system, governmental patronage has driven a wedge between many shaykhs and their tribes, and has generated discontent among ordinary tribespeople, whose economic situation and living conditions were and remained dire. The [occasional] glaring differences in wealth and influence between the tribes and their shaykhs was a particularly dangerous development. Shaykhs were the point of co-optation and major interface, which gave the opportunity to the Yemeni Republic to implement its agenda in peripheral tribal areas without carrying out any serious efforts at state-building. The alienation between shaykhs and tribes, therefore, left parts of the population virtually detached from state influence. As a rule of thumb, it can be observed that wherever shaykhs began to neglect their tribal duties, or a tribe did not benefit economically from the empowerment of its shaykh, government patronage favored one tribal group or shaykh at the expense of another rivalling tribe. The Ḥuthī movement found particularly favorable conditions to grow and flourish.

### The Zaydi Revival

The situation in the northern highlands was already characterized by economic imbalances, social discontent, and the struggle over resources and political participation. When a religious element eventually triggered the emergence of a resistance movement, that later developed into the Ḥuthī rebellion. The prevailing grievances among the citizens were aggravated by the marginalization of the locally prevalent Shia-Zaydi doctrine and the spread of radical Sunnism, sponsored by Saudi Arabia and, at times, the government in Sana'a. The picture shows the so-called "Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Khayriyyah" in Dammāj near Ṣa'dah, one of the Salafi teaching centers. In the 1980s, it was placed in like an alien fortress into Ṣa'dah's predominantly Zaydi environment.

After the Revolution of 1962, the republican government gradually marginalized

Zaydism and began to promote Sunnism instead, mainly because of the strong role of Saudi Arabia in Yemeni domestic politics. Of course, Salafi teaching has been much more acceptable to political elites and the leadership of the Yemeni state, not least because it represents much of what Zaydi Islam is not – above all – the Salafi credo that obedience to the ruler is mandatory. Ever since then in this delicate environment, the Salafis worked towards provoking the Zaydis by destroying their graves, *takfir*, and other offensive actions and talks.

From the late 1980s, a Zaydi revival movement began to take shape which aimed at countering the Wahhabi-Salafi onslaught and the government's policy of neglect vis-à-vis its northern tribe and Zaydi-dominated areas. The Zaydi revival movement embraced a wide range of activities, including educational work and the reinvigoration of Zaydi religious rituals that were banned by the republican government, such as *ʿīd al-mawlid al-nabawī* and *ʿīd alghadīr*. The Zaydi scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī emerged as one of the movement's early proponents. He wrote and edited numerous books, presenting the Zaydi case against its opponents from the ranks of the Wahhabis and Salafis on issues of ritual practice, theology, and politics.

In the 1990s, one of Badr al-Dīn's sons, Muḥammad al-Ḥūthī, was instrumental in establishing the *Muntadā al-Shabāb al-Mu'min*, (The Believing Youth). The Believing Youth managed to transform the formerly mainly theological discourse of Zaydi revivalism into religious revival and social activism at a grass roots level, but without political ambitions and programmes, which were only later added to the Believing Youth's agenda by Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī. Ḥusayn was Badr al-Dīn's firstborn son. At the turn of the millennium, and after having failed in the arena of party politics, Ḥusayn started to influence the Zaydi revival by giving lectures in mosques in northern Yemen by using the structures of the Believing Youth. Ḥusayn's evocative blend of Zaydi revivalism, social justice, and anti-imperialist narratives in combination with the religious and economic deprivation of the local population, and popular anger at the regime's cooperation with the United States in the "war-on-terror," soon gained him a following.

This was the time in around 2003 when the public shouting of the Ḥūthī slogan became popular—that is, "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam." Ḥusayn's followers henceforth called themselves the Ḥūthīs. Only in 2013 or 2014, they adopted the name "Anṣār Allāh," that is however, only used in official contexts. Because of their veneration for Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, the name "the Ḥūthīs" [doesn't have] any derogatory overtones for them.

## The Ṣa'dah Wars

Around the year 2003, the Ḥūthīs became more active, visible, and audible because of the slogan shouting and slogan graffiti that spread throughout the highlands, including the capital. This is when the government began to regard the Ḥūthīs as a threat. In the summer of 2004, a police deployment to the remote mountains of Marrān, where Ḥusayn al-Ḥuthī was based, led to an armed conflict. [This] then evolved into the first of six rounds of war between the Ḥūthīs and the government in Sana'a-- the so-called "Ṣa'dah wars" (*ḥurūb Ṣa'dah*).

This picture shows the cave in the Marrān mountains where Ḥusayn al-Ḥuthī sought refuge and was killed by the Yemeni army in the first Ṣa'dah war in 2004. Only few months later the second round of war followed, in which Ḥusayn's half-brother, 'Abd al-Malik, rose to power. Albeit 'Abd al-Malik is not as charismatic as Ḥusayn, in the years to come, he managed to lead the movement through an increasingly violent and complex row of conflicts with the regime.

During the six Ṣa'dah wars that lasted from 2004 to 2010, the government's military campaigns eventually proved unable to put down the rebellion, but rather triggered cycles of violence and counter-violence in the tribal environment of northernmost Yemen. [This] led to a deterioration of the crisis rather than to its solution and made the Ḥūthī rebellion expand continuously.

During the Ṣa'dah wars, it became evident that a significant number of people joining the Ḥūthīs were not religiously or ideologically motivated, but were drawn into the conflict for other reasons. The first group of Ḥūthī warriors consisted of supporters, relatives, friends, and students of Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī. The second growing group of Ḥūthī supporters consisted of tribespeople who did not always join the movement for ideological or religious reasons. Many had been drawn into the conflict after members of their family or tribe had been killed by the army. Others had lost their homes or farms. By 2006, already thousands of men were fighting for the Ḥūthīs, but not all of them sharing the Ḥūthī ideology.

There is another factor that led to the enormous, local expansion of the conflict. Ever since the outbreak of the first round of war in 2004, the government deployed radical Sunni tribal mercenaries to the Ṣa'dah region to fight alongside the regular army. In Ṣa'dah's tribal environment, dominated by Zaydi tribes, the incursion of external radical Sunni tribes was a particularly sensitive and momentous issue. Many tribes of the conflict area considered these

armed incursions as an infringement of their sovereignty and their territorial integrity, and defended themselves against the presence of these Sunni radicals. In the overheated context of the Ḥūthī wars, however, taking up arms against the Sunni tribal mercenaries was tantamount to joining the Ḥūthīs.

The Ṣa'dah wars led to an increase of intra-tribal conflict, as disagreements between tribal groups became wrapped up in the larger Ḥūthī conflict. Before the outbreak of the Ṣa'dah wars, there were a plethora of small-scale feuds and ancient tribal antagonisms, some of them dating back decades, and even centuries. During the Ṣa'dah wars, many of these tribal feuds merged with the Ḥūthī conflict, as those involved sought the assistance of either the government or the Ḥūthīs.

Both the Ḥūthīs and the Yemeni government deliberately worked at recruiting local tribes to capitalize on their combat experience, local knowledge, and manpower. Despite the important role of the tribes, the Ḥūthī conflict was never a purely tribal conflict. By the heterogeneity of its stakeholders and their numerous, often diverging objectives and motivations, the conflict rather became a kind of “hybrid” war whose political, ideological, military, tribal, sectarian, and personal motivations kept fluctuating.

By the outbreak of the sixth and last “official” round of war between the Ḥūthīs and the Salih government in 2009, called Operation Scorched Earth, the Ḥūthīs already become so strong that the Yemeni army averted its final defeat only thanks to Saudi intervention. The Ḥūthīs used the phase between the end of the sixth war and the beginning of Yemen’s “Change Revolution” in the spring of 2011 to consolidate their power and eliminate their last adversaries. Since the beginning of the Change Revolution in 2011 and the National Dialogue Conference of 2013, they embarked on a dual strategy of both political participation in Yemen’s transition process and further military expansion, which enabled them to seize the capital in September 2014.

## Outlook

Like many other conflicts, the roots of the Ḥūthī conflict reach back to infinite historical depths. Likewise, there is the future dimension of this conflict: The conquest of Sana'a in 2014 was far from being the end of the story, but only the beginning of a new, even more prominent chain of events. This led in 2014 to the beginning of the Saudi-Emirati military intervention, and the havoc and destruction that it has caused in Yemen. The current war in Yemen, or for Yemen,



is so to say, is the third stage of the conflict: it began as a very local conflict in the northern highlands, then it became a national conflict, and in 2014 there was another “register shift”, as linguists would say, when it became a regional conflict. I would like to add that my own focus remains on the local history and the historical roots of this conflict.

Nevertheless, I wish to add, from my anthropological and historical perspective, it is unlikely that the aerial war and the territorial advances of the Saudi-Emirati Coalition are capable of bringing Yemen under foreign control. As far as the Ḥūthī heartland is concerned, the Coalition has failed on all fronts. The Coalition found allies in parts of the population of the former Southern and eastern Yemen, that are Sunni-dominated areas that have legitimate fears and concerns regarding the Ḥuthī expansions. Without these local allies, the Saudi-led Coalition would not have achieved anything on the ground, except for starving out the Yemeni people. Even together with its southern and eastern allies, the Saudi-led Coalition is not strong enough nor effective enough to defeat the tribes of the north that are aligned with the Ḥūthīs. Likewise, the territorial advances of the Saudis on central highland Yemen (the fronts in Ṣa’dah, al-Jawf, and Nihm) have long stalled and stagnated.

What ultimately counts for all rulers and would-be rulers in northern Yemen, be it a millennium ago or today, is the military support of the local tribes. The connection between the Ḥūthī leadership and the military strength of the tribes in the north, especially the Zaydi parts of Bakīl, is still close due to the external aggression by the Coalition. The humanitarian crisis, the famine, and the result of the Saudi embargo policy did not break their resistance, but rather strengthened it and drove even more tribes into the arms of the Ḥūthīs. If there is cooperation between the Ḥūthīs and the core of the northern tribes, no one will be able to conquer their territories on the ground.

That is to say, it is unlikely that there is a military solution to this conflict. Ḥūthī leaders and Zaydi tribes will cooperate as long as there is a common, external enemy. The common enemy welds them together. That does not mean that there are no differences in opinion between the Ḥūthī leaders and their tribal allies. It is quite the contrary – the frustration on the tribal side with the Ḥūthī leadership is high because the northern tribes already started to realize that the Ḥūthī leaders have long abandoned their agenda of anti-corruption and social equality. This agenda was shaped by Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, that he promoted in the beginning of the movement which attracted so many people who were frustrated with the status quo in Yemen. The settlement of these differences, the time of reckoning between them so to say, is

postponed to the day when the war with the common enemy is over. When the war is over, Ḥūthī leaders and tribes will begin to sort out their internal problems, and this will be a difficult, presumably violent process. Throughout the last century, we have seen numerous, dramatic turns of events in Yemen, and Yemen and its people will certainly continue to surprise us in the future.

Thank you very much