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IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Yemen: Treatment of Sunni Muslims by Houthis in areas under Houthi control (2014-September 2017) [YEM105985.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

According to sources, the Houthi [Huthi] movement is also known as Ansar Allah (Al Jazeera 29 Mar. 2015; Adaki Spring/Summer 2015). Sources indicate that the Houthis belong to the Zaydi [Zaidi] sect of Shi'a Islam (BBC 17 Mar. 2015; Clausen Sept. 2015, 20; US 15 Aug. 2017, 1). According to sources, the Houthis are allied with forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (ibid.; Amnesty International n.d.).

According to a 2015 article by Roland Popp [1] in *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, published by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, ETH Zurich), 99 percent of Yemen's population is Muslim, of which 35 to 45 per cent are Zaydi Shi'as, while the remainder are Sunni Muslims (Popp June 2015, 3). Maria-Louise Clausen, a postdoctoral researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) whose research focuses on the Islamic State (DIIS n.d.), notes in an article published in *The International Spectator* [2] that "[t]he Zaydis make up approximately one third of the Yemeni population whereas the majority, especially in southern Yemen and the coastal areas, belong to the Shafi'i branch of Sunni Islam" (Clausen Sept. 2015, 22).

Sources indicate that the conflict in Yemen is political rather than sectarian (SAM for Rights and Liberties 26 Sept. 2017; Research Associate 19 Sept. 2017). Sources indicate that sectarianism in Yemen has not been a significant issue (ibid.; ECFR n.d.b). Sources indicate that Yemenis of different sects have been known to pray in the same mosques (ibid.; Adaki Spring/Summer 2015). The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), an international think-tank that conducts "independent research" and promotes "informed debate about Europe's role in the world" (ECFR n.d.a), reports that "[i]nter-marriage between Sunnis and Zaidis is considered routine" (ibid. n.d.b).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of SAM for Rights and Liberties, a Geneva-based non-profit organization founded in 2015 by "a group of Human Rights activists, academics and professionals in Europe seeking to

monitor human rights in [the] Middle East and aim to put violations offenses under the radar of [i]nternational decision-making institutions" (SAM for Rights and Liberties n.d.), noted that the terms "Sunni Muslims" and "Houthis" is not a differentiation that is used on the ground, stating that the Houthis have identified themselves as Zaydis struggling in a country of Sunnis, but this rights struggle is really a political issue (ibid. 26 Sept. 2017). Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, an executive director at Mwatana Organization for Human Rights (Mwatana), "an independent Yemeni organization involved in defending and protecting human rights" (Mwatana n.d.), also noted that "the conflict in Yemen has never been Sunni vs Shiite ... [i]t has always been a conflict between political parties/ groups/ armed groups/ regional countries, etc., for political reasons" (ibid. 24 Sept. 2017).

However, a report by Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that, "[i]n the context of rising religious extremism [in Yemen], the threat of targeted violence between Sunni and Zaidi Shi'a Muslims" has increased (Jan. 2016). Reuters reports that, on 17 October 2014, "Yemeni Shi'ite Houthi fighters and supporters of the Sunni Muslim party Islah clashed in central Yemen" in what it characterized as a "sign of sectarian warfare" (18 Oct. 2014).

Clausen notes that "[a]lthough the Huthis have widespread support among the Zaydi community, the movement also contains Sunni Muslims, [which is why] some Zaydis have denounced the Huthi movement" (Sept. 2015, 22). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director at SAM for Rights and Liberties also noted that many Zaydis oppose the Houthi movement (SAM for Rights and Liberties 26 Sept. 2017).

For further information on the Houthis in Yemen, see Response to Information Request YEM105787 of April 2017 and YEM105341 of November 2015.

1.1 Territory Controlled by the Houthis

According to sources, in September 2014 the Houthis took control of the capital Sana'a (BBC 17 Mar. 2015; US 14 Oct. 2015, 1), along with large portions of the country (ibid.). A 2014 report by Al Jazeera indicates that the Houthis control the provinces of Saada and Amran, which are located north of the capital, and captured the cities of al-Hudaydah and Dhamar (15 Oct. 2014). In March 2015, Reuters reported that Houthi fighters took over the city of Taiz [Taizz] and that the "Houthi expansion into mostly Sunni areas in the center and west has led to months of clashes with local tribes and al Qaeda" (22 March 2015). In April 2017, *Gulf News*, a Dubai-based English-language regional newspaper, reported that the Houthis controlled Sana'a and "most northern provinces including Hodeidah, Ibb, Mahweet, Yareem, Amran, Baydha and Hajja" (2 April 2017). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a Research Associate at the London Middle East Institute at the University of London, who has been involved in Yemen research for decades and whose publications focus on crisis in Yemen, noted that most of the area controlled by the Houthis is

inhabited by Zaydis. But they also have many Sunni supporters in the areas they control south of Dhamar, particularly in Taiz. Al Baidha governorate, which they control is almost entirely populated by Shafi'i (the local Sunni group throughout Yemen). (Research Associate 19 Sept. 2017)

2. Treatment of Opposition

The Executive Director at SAM for Rights and Liberties noted that people who oppose the Houthis, including journalists, human rights defenders, or activists of "any [kind]," "are arrested and affected by other kinds of serious human rights violations, including torture, kidnapping, disappearing, and killing" (SAM for Rights and Liberties 26 Sept. 2017). The same source notes that a "normal" person will not be very affected by the Houthis, unless they oppose or confront the Houthis or speak out against Houthi control of education or religious practices (ibid. 26 Sept. 2017). Similarly, the Executive Director at Mwatana stated that

[the] Houthis have arbitrarily arrested many people from different areas in Yemen, and one of the reasons was that either these people disagree with the Houthis' discourse or because of their political background and [if they are] considered as opponents. (Mwatana 24 Sept. 2017)

A report by Amnesty International on the conflict in Yemen states that

[t]he Huthi armed group, supported by state security forces, has carried out a wave of arrests of its opponents, including human rights defenders, journalists, and academics arbitrarily seizing critics at gunpoint and subjecting some to enforced disappearance as part of a chilling campaign to quash dissent in areas of Yemen under its control. (Amnesty International n.d.)

The executive director at SAM for Rights and Liberties noted that the Houthis "use police forces to control the community" and that "people are put in jail without following any proper legal procedures" (SAM for Rights and Liberties 26 Sept. 2017).

2.1 Treatment of Sunni Muslims

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a Research Fellow specializing in Arab and Islamic Affairs at the New America Foundation, a Washington, DC based think tank, provided the following:

Since the Huthis have effectively taken over the country, they have been suspicious of Sunnis. The group believes that those who do not swear allegiance to it are working with the Saudi-led coalition. As a result, Sunnis have been discriminated against. Though this has impacted their economic well-being, it has not resulted in a significant downturn in the services they have received vis-à-vis other groups in the country.

Sunnis face discrimination that those of the Zaydi persuasion to which the Huthis belong do not experience. This includes women. (Research Fellow 21 Sept. 2017)

The same source further explained that

[a]ccording to Yemenis I have spoken with, the Huthis are recruiting Yemenis of all faiths to fight for them. Those who have sought asylum in the United States claim that Sunnis who refuse to do so are tarred as spies for the Saudis. Those coming from Saudi Arabia are suspected of being spies if only because they have come from the kingdom. With government institutions not functioning, discriminated Yemenis have few places they can turn to for protection and recourse. (ibid. 21 Sept. 2017)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. For further information on Yemenis returning from Saudi Arabia, see Response to Information Request YEM105787 of April 2017.

The BBC reports that "[t]here are rumours that the Houthis are targeting Sunni mosques in the capital and changing their imams," while noting that the call to prayer was changed from the Sunni to the Zaydi version (BBC 17 Mar. 2015). The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016* indicates the following:

In northern areas traditionally under Zaydi control, there were reports of continued Houthi efforts to impose their religious customs on non-Zaydi residents, including by banning music and requiring women to wear full veils.

During [2016], there were reports of Houthi rebels pressuring imams at Sunni mosques to deliver prescribed sermons; compliance was reportedly mixed. In addition, Houthi minders reportedly pressed worshipers at Sunni mosques to sign political petitions protesting the Arab-led coalition campaign against Houthi-Saleh rebels. (US 15 Aug. 2017, 6)

The Executive Director at SAM for Rights and Liberties noted that the involvement of women is not like it was before the Houthis seized power, when there was "more openness of political parties to women and an increase in women's rights and involvement" (SAM for Rights and Liberties 26 Sept. 2017). Since the Houthi takeover, the participation of women in areas under their control has been framed as a "religious commitment" (ibid.). The same source also noted that the

suffering of the feminist movement has returned and tribal control has returned to women, reducing their freedom and rights. The Houthis used their power to recruit women in the conflicts through building women security forces that participate in the break-up of women demonstrations. Also, it was recorded that forced marriage was committed by several Houthis leaders in multiple places. (ibid.).

The same source further indicated that in issues such as education, the curriculum has been changed by the Houthis to be "more sectarian and [intolerant]" and that

[s]chools are not functioning well and a large number of teachers were expelled from their schools are replaced with Houthi teachers who are loyal to the group. The Houthis also converted many schools into camps and army training centers, and other schools were converted into prisons and detention centers. (ibid.)

Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2 Al-Islah

Al Jazeera describes Al-Islah as a "Sunni Islamist" party and the "Houthis' political rivals" (29 Mar. 2015). Human Rights Watch reports that "Houthi and other Sanaa-based authorities ... have arbitrarily detained, tortured, and forcibly disappeared numerous opponents," including those suspected of having links to Islah (17 Nov. 2016). A report by Amnesty International on detention and forced disappearance in Yemeni areas controlled by the Houthis also notes that, according to lists compiled by Yemeni organizations and activists, the "vast majority" of the "hundreds of people who have been detained and are being held in prisons controlled by the Huthis and allied authorities, without facing charges or trials," are members Al-Islah (Amnesty International May 2016, 6). The same source also reports that armed Houthis

carried out detentions in homes, in front of family members, at security checkpoints, at workplaces, or in public venues such as mosques, without arrest warrants and with no explanation of the reasons or grounds for detention, and without providing any information about where the detained were being taken. (ibid.)

The Executive Director at SAM for Rights and Liberties stated that the Houthis target Sunnis that work with political parties, noting that in the Houthi takeover of Amran, rather than targeting all Sunnis, the Houthis targeted those involved with Sunni political parties, including Al-Islah, the Yemeni Congress, and Nasseris (SAM for Rights and Liberties 26 Sept. 2017).

2.3 Freedom of Movement

The Research Fellow stated that although "Sunnis are able to move freely throughout the country given that the Huthis are a militia and not a state," once they are in Houthi controlled areas, "Sunnis are subject to arbitrary conduct including random detentions" (Research Fellow 21 Sept. 2017). The Executive Director at Mwatana stated that "people in Yemen are categorized socially and geographically but not religiously or by sects" (Mwatana 24 Sept. 2017). The same source provided the following:

[For example], if a person (man) from the north wants to travel to the south, and his ID shows that he's from the north, he will not probably be allowed to pass checkpoints and asked to return; unless he has evidence that he wouldn't stay, like a ticket out to leave from Aden airport. We, at Mwatana, have heard about incidents from the north [of people] being deported from the south to the north, leaving their properties, businesses, etc. (ibid.)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a Yemen Researcher at Human Rights Watch indicated that Sunnis are not able to move freely between Houthi and government controlled areas, noting that

[t]here is still movement between government controlled areas and Houthi-Saleh controlled areas, but it is increasingly difficult for a variety of reasons. Both because you have to cross active front lines, but also as families/particularly men have been targeted, pushed back if they have northern or southern names. For example, in May 2016, hundreds of people from Taizz were reportedly forcibly displaced from Aden by the security forces. We've heard reports of people with Taizzi backgrounds still have trouble traveling to Aden. This is all exacerbated by the fact that the only functioning airports are now in government territory. (Researcher 22 Sept. 2017)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] Roland Popp is a senior researcher at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich; his publications and research interests include "the international politics and history of the Middle East" (ETH Zurich n.d.).

[2] *The International Spectator* is a peer-reviewed academic journal on foreign policy issues (Taylor & Francis Group n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; Gulf Center for Human Rights; Researchers specializing in Yemen and/or the conflict in Yemen; Yemen Peace Project.

Internet sites, including: Associated Press; ecoi.net; *The Economist*; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; Freedom House; *The Guardian*; Gulf Center for Human Rights; *Haaretz*; *Human Rights Quarterly*; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Committee of the Red Cross; International Crisis Group; IRIN; *Jane's Intelligence Review*; *The Muslim World*; Radio France internationale; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; UK – Home Office; UN – High Commissioner for Refugees, Human Rights Council, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld.

ecoi.net summary:

Query response on treatment of Sunni Muslims by Houthis in areas under Houthi control (2014 - September 2017)



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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

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