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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Yemen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution declares Islam the state religion. It provides for freedom of thought and expression “within the limits of the law” but does not mention freedom of religion, belief, or conscience. The constitution states sharia is the source of all legislation, although it coexists with secular common law and civil code models of law in a hybrid legal system. The law prohibits denunciation of Islam, conversion from Islam to another religion, and proselytizing directed at Muslims. Apostasy is a capital offense, and blasphemy is punishable by fines or imprisonment.

The conflict that began in 2014 between the government and the Iran-backed Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, whose revolutionary ideology is grounded in its interpretation of Zaydi Shi'ism, continued throughout the year. Government control was limited in much of the country's territory, which constrained its ability to address abuses of religious freedom, including those that security personnel, tribal leaders, or local military commanders committed in areas under its nominal control. In 2022, the then UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief reported prominent Christian figures were subjected to intimidation or threats of being charged with apostasy, which carried the death penalty.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House stated that assassinations and other violent attacks on clerics had increased since the war began in 2015, and that combatants from all sides of the conflict had destroyed many religious buildings across the country. The Aden Office of Religious Endowments reportedly issued directives requiring sermons not to open political, sectarian, or partisan divisions, while a Ministry of Endowments and Guidance October 9 directive instructed imams to devote Friday sermons to supporting the Palestinians in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict. Authorities took actions against clerics who violated these directives. The Houthis and some tribal authorities in Abyan, Lahij, and Ma'rib continued to enforce a religiously based requirement that a male relative accompany women in public (known as a *mahram* requirement), which critics such as Amnesty International criticized as a violation of women's rights. Government-affiliated media broadcast antisemitic content in numerous instances.

During the year, the Houthis continued to control approximately one-third of the country's territory, including 70 to 80 percent of the population. The NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported 90 percent of the 1,100 recorded religious repression events that occurred in the country from January 2020 to March 2022 took place in Houthi-controlled areas. ACLED stated most Houthi repression involved "moral policing," imposing Houthi ideology on the religious and educational sectors, and extracting religious "taxes." The Houthis disproportionately targeted non-Muslim religious minorities but also suppressed Sunni-leaning rituals.

As of year's end, the Houthis continued to detain Jewish Yemeni citizen Levi Salem Musa Marhabi, believed to be the last Jew left in the country, whom they have held since 2016 and despite a 2019 order by a Houthi "court" for his release. According to the Yemeni NGO Insaf Center for Defending Freedoms & Minorities, Houthi forces tortured Marhabi during his detention, leaving him partially paralyzed. International NGOs reported that on May 25, Houthi forces raided a Baha'i religious meeting and detained and disappeared 17 Baha'is as part of what Human Rights Watch (HRW) called a systematic effort by the Houthis to persecute Baha'is and force them into exile. Houthi forces eventually released 12 of the 17 individuals. According to ACLED, the Houthis targeted Christian converts through "judicial harassment on charges of apostasy" as well as other extrajudicial means such as threats and assaults. They imposed ideologically driven constraints on women's dress, freedom of movement, and access to employment, education, and health care. The UN and NGOs said mahram requirements that female aid workers be accompanied by a male relative negatively impacted the delivery of humanitarian aid.

In January, a Yemeni politician and activist said Houthis used the employment code to indoctrinate the approximately one million “public-sector employees” under their control. One social media news source reported on June 25 that Houthi militia members allegedly closed four mosques in Utmah District, west of Dhamar Governorate, and prevented citizens from performing prayers in them in retaliation for the residents’ refusal to accept pro-Houthi preachers in those mosques. Sources reported elementary school curriculum and textbooks in Houthi-controlled areas continued to reflect solely the Houthi understanding of Islam and to contain antisemitic and anti-Israel slogans and rhetoric. Media, NGOs, and a UN panel of experts reported Houthi members again organized summer camps to indoctrinate students in Houthi ideology and recruit child soldiers. Multiple media outlets throughout the year reported the Houthi leaders continued to use antisemitic rhetoric and Houthi-controlled media continued to broadcast antisemitic statements and sermons.

According to the NGO Open Doors, Christians and other religious minorities were the most vulnerable in Houthi-controlled areas in the north and in rural areas in the south, where al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) maintained a strong presence and ISIS-Yemen (ISIS-Y) also targeted Christians. According to Freedom House, AQAP posed a threat to non-Sunni Muslim residents, particularly in the southeast.

Open Doors said pressure on Christians in all spheres of life, including education, employment, family life, and the ability to observe religious practices, was “at extreme levels.” Converts faced death threats and risked banishment from their tribes if they did not return to Islam. Open Doors reported Muslim humanitarian aid providers denied assistance to members of religious minority groups. Multiple Yemenis posted antisemitic statements to social media during the year.

The Department of State suspended U.S. embassy operations in Sana’a in 2015, and U.S. diplomatic operations regarding the country have since been coordinated by the U.S. Mission to Yemen, based in Saudi Arabia. Due to security concerns arising from the conflict, the U.S. government had limited to no direct access to religious communities in the country during the year. The U.S. Mission to Yemen continued to monitor closely the conditions of religious minority detainees and to press for their release, maintain communication with religious contacts among the Yemeni diaspora communities, and promote freedom of religion or belief through social media. The U.S. Ambassador to Yemen and the U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen spoke with foreign government officials, civil society organizations, and religious leaders during the year regarding Marhabi’s years long detention and of Baha’is detained in Sana’a after the May 25 raid.

On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State designated the Houthis as an “entity of particular concern” under section 301 of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-281) for having engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31.6 million (midyear 2023). More than 99 percent of the population is Muslim (2020 estimate, the latest available), associating their beliefs with either the Shafi’i school of Sunni Islam or Zaydi Islam, a branch of Shia Islam. ACLED estimated in 2022 that 55 percent of Muslims is Shafi’i Sunni and 45 percent is Zaydi Shia. There are also significant numbers of Sunni followers of the Maliki and Hanbali schools, and others who are followers of the Ismaili and Twelver branches of Shia Islam. While there are no official statistics, the U.S. government estimates 65 percent of the population is Sunni and 35 percent Zaydi. Hindus, Baha’is, Christians (many of whom are economic migrants to the country), and Jews together make up less than 1 percent of the population.

There is no firm estimate of the number of persons of Indian origin or of those who practice Hinduism, Sikhism, or the Dawoodi Bohra variant of Ismaili Shia Islam residing in the country. The preconflict Hindu population was 150,000 (2010 estimate), concentrated in Aden, Mukalla, Shihr, Lahaj, Mokha, and Hudaydah. Many members of the Indian-origin community have resided in the country for generations and hold Yemeni citizenship. According to one source, the number of Indian nationals is 3,000-5,000.

According to a Baha’i Faith spokesperson, the Baha’i Faith community has as many as 2,000 members (2016 estimate, the latest available), while Boston University’s 2020 World Religion Database estimates the number is 1,600. The database indicates there are 16,500 Christians, but the NGO Open Doors believes the number is only a few thousand, most of whom are converts from Islam. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Ethiopian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants. According to the UN Group of Experts, many Christian economic migrants from Horn of Africa countries transit the country on their way to find work in Saudi Arabia, causing the total number of Christians in the country at any given time to fluctuate.

The Jewish community is an indigenous minority religious group. Levi Salem Musa Marhabi, held since 2016 in Houthi-controlled detention, is believed to be the last Jew left in the

country, after the Houthis expelled 13 individuals from three Jewish families in early 2021.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion. It provides for freedom of thought and expression “within the limits of the law” but does not mention freedom of religion, belief, or conscience. The constitution states sharia is the source of all legislation.

Sharia serves as the basis of the legal system, although it coexists with secular common law and civil code models of law in a hybrid legal system. The courts of the first instance address civil, criminal, commercial, and personal status cases. Informal tribunals, operating mostly in rural areas, administer customary law in addition to sharia to resolve disputes.

The constitution states the president must be a Muslim who “practices his Islamic duties”; however, it allows non-Muslims to run for parliament as long as they “fulfill their religious duties.” The law does not prohibit political parties based on religion, but it states parties may not claim to be the sole representative of any religion, oppose Islam, or restrict membership to a particular religious group.

The criminal code states that “deliberate” and “insistent” denunciation of Islam or conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy, a capital offense. The law allows those charged with apostasy three opportunities and 30 days to repent; upon repentance, they are spared the death penalty.

Blasphemy laws prohibit the “ridicule” of religions, punishable with up to three years’ imprisonment or a fine of unspecified amount. If Islam is the religion subject to ridicule, the punishment is up to five years or a fine of unspecified amount. The criminal code prescribes five years’ imprisonment or a fine to anyone who “distorts willfully the Holy Quran in a manner that changes its meaning with the purpose of harming the natural religion.”

Family law prohibits marriage between a Muslim and an individual whom the law defines as an apostate. Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men and Muslim men may not marry women who do not practice one of the three Abrahamic religions recognized by law (Islam,

Christianity, or Judaism). By law, a woman seeking custody of a child “ought not” be an apostate; a man “ought” to be of the same faith as the child.

The law prohibits proselytizing directed at Muslims.

There is no provision for the registration of religious groups. The law prohibits NGO involvement in political or religious activities.

By law, the government must authorize construction of new buildings. The law, however, does not mention places of worship specifically. The law criminalizes “assaulting the sanctity of faith” and prescribes up to one year’s imprisonment or a fine of up to 2,000 rials (\$4) to a person who “destroys or misrepresents or profanes a mosque” or other government-authorized religious site or disrupts religious rituals.

Public schools must provide instruction on Islam but not on other religions. The law states primary school classes must include knowledge of Islamic rituals and the country’s history and culture within the context of Islamic civilization. The law also specifies knowledge of Islamic beliefs as an objective of secondary education. Public schools are required to teach Sunni and Shia students the same curriculum, but the government is unable to enforce this requirement in Houthi-controlled areas, where NGO analysis of instructional materials indicates schools are teaching Zaydi principles only and that the Houthis have been systematically changing the curriculum to reflect their ideology.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

The conflict that began in 2014 between the government, led by then President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the Houthis, an armed movement whose revolutionary ideology is grounded in interpretations of Zaydi Shi’ism, continued throughout the year. Although expired, the main terms of the UN-brokered truce agreement between the parties, originally reached in April 2022, remained in place through year’s end, including a halt in Saudi Arabia-led coalition airstrikes and greatly reduced fighting inside the country. The government exercised limited legal or administrative control in much of the country’s territory throughout the year, which constrained its ability to enforce laws or address abuses of religious liberty

committed in the country, including those committed by security personnel, tribal leaders, or local military commanders in areas under its nominal control.

Most analysts continued to state that political and economic issues were more significant drivers of the conflict than religion. While the Houthis' ideology (and that of some of their opponents) is expressed in religious terms, not all Yemeni Zaydis are Houthi, and not all Houthi supporters are Zaydi. Some analysts, however, believed that, in addition to regional and political divisions, rising sectarianism was a facet of the fragmentation of the country – although sectarianism historically was insignificant as a socially divisive factor, largely due to the very few theological and ritual differences between Zaydi Shi'a and Shafi'i Sunni Islam.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

Government authorities reportedly permitted prisoners and detainees to engage in Islamic religious observances but prevented religious minorities from practicing their faiths.

In March, the NGO Freedom House released the *Freedom in the World 2023* report. In it, the NGO stated that assassinations and other violent attacks on clerics had increased since regional powers escalated the civil war in 2015 and that combatants from all sides of the conflict had destroyed many religious buildings across the country. Freedom House stated there were reports that government-affiliated forces allegedly seized or destroyed Shia religious sites.

On October 14, local media reported authorities arrested Imam Munir al-Saadi of the al-Shafi'i Mosque in government-controlled Aden for "inciting sedition" for allegedly criticizing the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Hamas during an October 13 Friday sermon. According to media outlets, worshippers physically removed al-Saadi from the pulpit after he called Hamas a "malignant movement." The Aden Office of Religious Endowments said Saadi violated directives requiring sermons not to open political, sectarian, or partisan divisions as well as a Ministry of Endowments and Guidance directive issued on October 9 instructing imams to devote Friday sermons to supporting the Palestinians and emphasizing the brotherhood of faith. The Aden Office of Religious Endowments called Hamas "one of the Palestinian factions fighting the Zionist enemy."

On October 27, Abdullah al-Aulaqi, a social media activist affiliated with the governing Southern Transitional Council (STC), alleged in a posting that Aden Office of Religious

Endowments director Mohammed al-Wali ordered STC-affiliated militia members to arrest the imam of Al-Rahman Mosque, Ali al-Mahouthi, for praising Hamas' attack on "the Zionist state," but worshippers successfully impeded the arrest. Al-Aulaqi included a video of the imam's sermon that allegedly precipitated the attempted arrest.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Members of the Jewish community were not eligible to serve in the military or national government. Authorities forbade them from carrying the ceremonial national dagger.

On May 5, the humanitarian data analysis NGO ACAPS issued its *Yemen: Social Impact Overview 2022*. ACAPS stated that in government-controlled Abyan, Lahj, and Ad Dali' governorates, there were documented cases of tribal leaders enforcing mahram requirements.

On January 25, Amnesty International issued a statement opposing the religiously based requirement, which both government authorities and the Houthis imposed, that women released from prison must have a male guardian or enter a woman's shelter if their families refuse to receive them. Local legal experts told Amnesty the guardianship requirement had no basis in law but was rooted in social norms. In the absence of a male guardian, the women often remained incarcerated despite completing their sentences. Amnesty cited one case in which a woman was detained for five years after completing her sentence due to the absence of an available male guardian. In another case, a son had to return from abroad to take custody of his mother. Amnesty's deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa said authorities in the country "still view and treat women as incomplete individuals, with no agency and who need to be accompanied by male guardians in day-to-day lives," in violation of their human rights and dignity.

ABUSES BY FOREIGN FORCES OR NONSTATE ACTORS

At year's end, the Houthis continued to control approximately one-third of the country's territory, containing 70 to 80 percent of the population. Media sources reported that in areas the Houthis controlled, they enforced a strict interpretation of Zaydism, which many Zaydi Shia Muslims in the country did not share, and discriminated against individuals who did not follow their interpretation of those practices and doctrines, particularly religious minorities and women.

The Houthis established a “Supreme Political Council” in 2016. The Supreme Political Council is a 10-member entity that purports to establish and determine a governing structure for the country under the purported Houthi-led regime in Sana’a. The international community deems the Supreme Political Council unconstitutional and illegitimate, and the international community continued to recognize the authority of the Presidential Leadership Council based in Aden.

According to ACLED’s 2022 report *Coding Religious Repression and Disorder*, 90 percent of the 1,100 recorded religious repression events occurring in the country from January 2020 to March 2022 took place in Houthi-controlled areas. ACLED stated most Houthi repression involved “moral policing,” imposing Houthi ideology on the religious and educational sectors and extracting religious “taxes.” The Houthis disproportionately targeted non-Muslim religious minorities but also suppressed Sunni-leaning rituals.

In its May 5 report, ACAPS stated Houthi leaders used the absence of active conflict following the April 2022 truce to strengthen adherence to behaviors related to Houthi ideology, including mahram restrictions, dress codes, and changes to the education system. According to ACAPS, Houthi leaders also attempted to formalize and coordinate how some Islamic celebrations were marked, “such as by directing the funds dispersed at Eid by private companies and wealthy individuals through the de facto authorities.”

On September 25, Amnesty International reported the Houthi-controlled “Specialized Criminal Court” (SCC) had since 2015 brought more than 60 cases against individuals, including journalists, human rights defenders, political opponents, and members of religious minorities, “on spurious or trumped-up charges” and subjected them to unfair “trials.”

On a November 17 program on Beirut-based, Houthi-owned al-Masirah TV, journalist Yayha Abu Zakariya promoted the blood libel falsehood and said that Jews would kidnap and slaughter European children and use their blood for the “Matzah of Zion.” He also said Jews were “pigs, murderers, filthy, criminals, violent, and the destroyers of state institutions.”

In September, a *Jerusalem Post* columnist renewed the call to release Levi Salem Musa Marhabi, a Jewish Yemeni whom the Houthis illegally detained in 2016. The columnist described Marhabi as “the last heir to the 2,000-year-old history of Yemen’s Jews.” According to the NGO Insaf, Houthis tortured Marhabi during his detention, leaving him partially paralyzed. Houthi figures accused Marhabi of helping to remove an ancient Torah scroll from the country, but a 2019 Houthi “court” decision ordered his release. The Houthis reportedly continued to demand the return of the scroll from Israel.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Baha'i International Community (BIC) reported that on May 25, Houthi forces detained and disappeared 17 Baha'is after forcibly entering a private residence in Sana'a where they were meeting to elect the Baha'i community's national governing body. Additional Baha'i participants observed the raid remotely via Zoom. Another member of the local Baha'i community said the Houthi security forces also confiscated books, laptops, and personal belongings. HRW said, "Houthi authorities' flagrant targeting of Baha'is solely on the basis of their religious beliefs is a clear violation of their human rights." In a May 30 report, HRW described the May 25 Houthi raid and arrests of Baha'i members as part of a systematic effort by the Houthis to persecute Baha'is and force them into exile.

On June 9, following the release of one individual who the BIC said was "gravely ailing" and who had a "life-threatening" condition, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called for the immediate release of the remaining 16 detained Baha'is. The statement expressed "serious concern" that Shamseddin Sharafeddin, the Houthi-appointed Mufti in Sana'a, gave a sermon on June 2 inciting hatred against Baha'i adherents and other religious groups. Sharafeddin said that anyone who converted from Islam should be killed.

On June 19, a UN experts panel that included UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea issued a statement expressing concern that the remaining 16 detained individuals were "at serious risk of torture and other human rights violations and, given the past record, may even face death sentences in connection with the legitimate exercise of their rights." The statement said Houthi hate speech and incitement to hatred "threaten the life and integrity of the Baha'i community, as well as those of other religious or belief minorities present in the country." It condemned Mufti Sharafeddin's June 2 sermon as "a violent verbal attack against Baha'is in Yemen, accusing them of seeking to harm the country and calling on society and militias to unite against the beliefs that Baha'is uphold."

Subsequent to the UN expert panel's statement, the Houthis released seven of the 16 individuals remaining in custody. On October 10, a BIC representative told the 54th Session of the UN Human Rights Council that the Houthis continued to unlawfully detain nine Baha'is from the May 25 raid, in violation of their right to gather peacefully. The representative said the raid was an assault designed "to terrorize Yemeni Baha'is and plant fears of reprisals that could threaten the Baha'i community's [continued] existence." The Houthis subsequently released an additional four Baha'is, leaving five in unlawful detention at year's end.

ACLEd stated Houthis targeted Christian converts through threats, assaults, and "judicial harassment on charges of apostasy." The NGO said that in some cases, the Houthis pressured Christian converts to surrender by detaining their relatives or raiding and vandalizing their

homes. According to ACLED, “Muslim civilians [were] also threatened with trumped up accusations of conversion to Christianity.”

In December, Open Doors released its most recent findings on the country, saying Christians and other religious minorities were the most vulnerable in Houthi-controlled areas in the north and rural areas in the government-controlled south, where there was a strong AQAP presence. The report also stated that because Houthi-controlled areas were heavily policed and characterized by an atmosphere of spying and fear, religious dissent was more likely to lead to detention, physical abuse, or death than in government-controlled territory.

UN agencies and NGOs reported the Houthis continued to impose what they interpreted as “Islamic” requirements that restricted women’s dress and freedom of movement and association. On March 15, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Joyce Msuya addressed the UN Security Council Office regarding the “staggering” humanitarian emergency in the country. She stated that requirements in Houthi-controlled areas that Yemeni women aid workers travel with male guardians (i.e., mahram requirements) were causing serious disruptions in relief agencies’ ability to “assist women and girls safely and reliably.” She called on Houthi leaders to lift those requirements.

On January 31, the Carnegie Middle East Center reported the Houthis were compelling stores selling *abayas*, a type of woman’s cloak, to only offer them long and in black, contrary to Yemeni women’s tradition of wearing colorful abayas. They justified this and mahram restrictions as necessary to protect the country’s “Islamic identity” and women’s “Islamic modesty.” The report stated, however, that abayas, including ones in diverse colors and styles, were actually not a form of traditional local dress but were introduced as recently as the 1980s from other Arab countries where Wahhabi cultural influences were strong.

According to a report by the Carnegie Endowment, at the end of July, the University Student Forum, a body created by the Houthis to control all academic decisions, announced a new policy of gender segregation in universities. After the head of Sana’a University’s Department of Journalism and Publishing criticized the decision, school authorities dismissed her from her position. Despite protests by students, lawyers, and human rights activists, the Houthi “Minister of Higher Education” praised the new policy as a way to prevent the infiltration of Western ideas and “to strengthen the [Islamic] faith identity that some have abandoned.” Mohammad al-Houthi, head of the Houthi “Supreme Political Council,” suggested in a tweet that fathers of women students sign a consent form specifying whom their daughters could talk to and where on campus those conversations could take place.

In October, the NGO Mwatana for Human Rights issued a report titled *Tragedy until Further Notice: The Human Rights Situation in Yemen 2022*, containing interviews with 20 women whom Houthi forces detained for hours and subjected to intrusive searches, interrogations, and humiliation. Forces confiscated their passports to prevent them from traveling. The women stated the Houthis deliberately sought to tarnish the reputation of women aid workers. According to the report, “requiring the presence of a mahram during a woman’s travel also has negative effects and repercussions on other rights of women, such as their rights to work, equal opportunities, access health care, education and training, and family reunification.”

On April 18, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that gunfire from armed Houthis attempting to intervene in charitable handouts during end of Ramadan prompted a stampede that resulted in 85 dead and 322 injured. The Houthi “interior ministry” blamed the stampede on businessmen distributing *zakat* (required almsgiving that is one of Islam’s five pillars, required of all Muslims) in the old quarter of Sana’a without Houthi leaders’ prior approval. The businessmen accused the Houthis of trying to control all zakat distributions directly. (Zakat is often distributed during the month of Ramadan.)

On January 15, Arab Hope Party assistant secretary-general Laila Lutf al-Thawr published an analysis of the Houthi employment code of conduct for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Al-Thawr stated the Houthis used the code to indoctrinate the approximately one million “public-sector employees” under their control, forcing them to attend mandatory cultural courses and pledge loyalty to the movement’s leader, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, or lose their jobs. Al-Thawr said the code “continually distorted religious concepts” and required employees to celebrate Houthi religious events “regardless of their personal perspective.” According to al-Thawr, the loyalty pledge “denies the existence of any diversity in perspective, political affiliation, religion, or sect.”

Social media news source Al Yemen Now reported on June 25 that Houthi militia members allegedly closed four mosques in Utmah District, west of Dhamar Governorate, and prevented citizens from performing prayers in them in retaliation for the residents’ refusal to accept pro-Houthi preachers in those mosques.

For the first time since 2015, direct flights between Sana’a and Jeddah carrying Hajj pilgrims took place in June. In the intervening years, Yemeni pilgrims took buses, requiring two to three days of travel. Twenty-four thousand Yemenis, including members of the Houthi leadership, performed the Hajj.

Sources reported that elementary school curriculum and textbooks continued to reflect solely the Houthi interpretation of Islamic doctrine and practice, and to contain antisemitic and anti-Israel slogans and rhetoric. The Hudson Institute, in a September 20 report titled *Yemen's Truce: The Calm Before the Storm*, estimated the Houthis made nearly 500 modifications to school curriculum to reinforce their ideology and their claim to a divine right to rule by linking the family lineage of the group's leader, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, to the Prophet Muhammad. They also set a goal for the year to recruit 1.5 million children into their summer camps, under the banner of "Learning and Jihad." The camps allegedly provided religious indoctrination as well as combat training for child soldiers whom the Houthis recruited.

In May, media outlet *al Mashareq* reported that Houthi authorities again organized summer camps for 1.5 million male and female students in 9,100 locations with 20,000 staff, some of whom were allegedly from Iran and Lebanese Hizballah. Some students also participated in two-month, residential summer camps that provided food and lodging. Authorities in Hudaydah Province suspended private technical and vocational institutes during the summer in an effort to divert children into Houthi summer camps.

Freedom House criticized the situation in the country, based on the Houthis' "growing assertion of ideological control over education in recent years, including through replacement of staff, suppression of dissent, and political indoctrination."

In a November report to the UN Security Council, a UN panel of experts reported an increase in the number of children subjected to military propaganda and training in Houthi-controlled areas despite the group having signed an action plan with the UN in April 2022 to end and prevent the practice. The report documented children as young as age 10 receiving military training and that Houthi militia leaders used monetary incentives to promote higher attendance. According to the report, authorities retaliated against families that refused to send their children to join Houthi forces, including by removing them from the list of beneficiaries entitled to humanitarian assistance. Retribution could also entail the abduction or detention of the children, whom the Houthis then subjected to mistreatment, including sexual violence. The panel said, "In other cases, children are forcibly taken to the closed summer camps and subsequently sent to the front lines."

Multiple media outlets throughout the year reported the Houthis continued to use and promote antisemitic slogans, especially among school-age children attending Houthi indoctrination camps. The Middle East Institute noted the Houthi slogan remained, "God is the greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam." The UN expert panel's November report contained a photograph of children wearing headbands with this

slogan during a religious festival in Hajjah Governorate. Houthi-controlled media also continued to broadcast antisemitic statements and sermons.

On September 4, Houthi-affiliated al-Masirah Television broadcast a music video threatening Israel, with captions in both Arabic and Hebrew. The lyrics included the words, “Tell the Zionists that they will be disgraced.... Israel will come to an end.... We will disfigure their faces [and] let them taste our might and the heat of the piercing swords.... Tomorrow we will see Jerusalem cleansed of the filth of the Jews.”

On October 19, Houthi representative Abdulmalik Alejri described Israel in a social media post as a “new, artificial entity” that was alien in every way to its surroundings and that, like any foreign object in the human body, cannot be accepted in the Middle East.

On November 2, senior Houthi representative Mohammed Ali al-Houthi gave an interview on Russian television during which he called on Arab states to support Hamas, and he accused Jews of “continuously working to eradicate humanity in its entirety.” He said the Houthis had mobilized on behalf of Palestinians as “jihad for the sake of Allah.”

The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reported that in a June 16 sermon from Dhamar, broadcast on al-Masirah TV, Houthi “Islamic scholar” Mohammad al-Mu’ayyad said the “Jewish Zionist lobby” controlled the United States, and through it, sought to spread corruption throughout the world. Al-Mu’ayyad said, “They want to corrupt everything. They want their corruption to reach every soul as well as every home, every family, every society, and every nation.” He stated Jews used the cause of women’s rights to drive Muslim women from their homes, depriving them of their modesty and chastity. According to al-Mu’ayyad, “America, the Jews, and the Jewish lobby” created Wahhabism and spread it in the Muslim world. MEMRI later posted a video on social media of al-Mu’ayyad’s July 14 Friday sermon, also given in Dhamar. During the sermon, al-Mu’ayyad said Jews led the U.S., controlled the media, spread Wahhabism to undermine Islam, spread moral corruption on earth, promoted homosexuality, and sought to destroy Muslim women’s chastity in the name of women’s rights.

According to July press reports, the Houthi movement banned Swedish imports to protest the June 28 burning of the Quran by an Iraqi refugee in Stockholm.

In its annual report on the country, published in December, Open Doors stated radical Islamic groups such as AQAP and ISIS-Y continued to actively target and kill local Christians, including Christian converts, whom they viewed as apostates. Open Doors said these groups operated

with considerable impunity, especially in government-aligned areas. According to the Global Conflict Tracker, AQAP's political violence surged in May and June, with most of the violence centered in Abyan and Shawba Governates, while ISIS-Y's presence declined in the country.

According to Freedom House's March report, AQAP posed a threat to non-Sunni Muslim residents, particularly in the southeast.

According to analysis published in September 2022 by the Carnegie Middle East Center, local groups identified as Salafi (Sunni Muslims who strictly pattern their doctrine and practice according to the Prophet Muhammad's saying and deeds, as upheld by the first three generations of his followers) comprised a significant force in the Saudi-led coalition. The Carnegie report stated the Saudi forces had three reasons for strengthening ties with Salafi groups in the country: enmity between the Salafis and Houthis, the Salafis' lack of a specific political agenda, and the continuation of Saudi religious influence in the country.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the NGO International Christian Concern, most Christians were converts from Islam and practiced their faith in secret, meeting in small groups in homes or outdoors. The NGO said they had access to the Bible and other Christian resources online and through Christian media.

Open Doors said pressure on Christians in all spheres of life, including education, employment, family life, and the ability to observe religious practices, was "at extreme levels." According to the NGO, Houthi internal security forces "operate an intelligence unit that roots out apostates." Converts married to Muslims were at risk of losing custody of their children, and managers denied promotions to employees they suspected of being Christian. Christians were often presumed to be associated with the West and were therefore expected to have access to substantial funds, rendering them "especially prone to become victims of crime." The organization also reported hospitals refused care to Christians. It further stated Muslims who converted to Christianity were considered to have brought dishonor upon their families and faced death threats and risked banishment from their tribes if they did not return to Islam. It said Christian women experienced sexual harassment, rape, or forced marriages to Muslim men.

According to relief organizations, most local NGO employees were Muslims and international NGOs also depended on Muslim workers and local tribal leaders for distributing humanitarian aid. Open Doors reported that Christians, including Christian converts, and other religious minorities frequently experienced discrimination when attempting to access humanitarian aid, which Open Doors said was distributed preferentially through mosques to local Muslims. An Open Doors analyst stated in 2022, "Their names can be removed from distribution lists, especially if help is being given out through local mosques where it can be checked whether someone is a good Muslim or not, based on mosque attendance."

Multiple Yemenis posted antisemitic statements to social media during the year. Yemeni Facebook user Muhammad al-Ahmady published a post on January 15 praising an imam at Cairo's al-Azhar for saying in a Friday sermon that "part of the objectives of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is establishing media outlets to attack scholars who played a role in defending the Muslim community." According to al-Ahmady, the imam, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hudhud, noted that "the campaign against Muslim scholars comes within the context of the war against Islam and Muslims, which is an extension of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*."

On February 3, Yemeni Facebook user Rashad al-'Ammari shared a TikTok video titled "One of the Plots of *The Protocols of the Elders of the Zion*." The video stated, "New diseases will appear; there will be no cure. The purpose of new diseases will be to reduce population. Religion will be destroyed, the Bible will be rewritten, ... not everyone will be allowed to own books. Music will become worse, changing the thoughts of the listeners... Food consumption reduced; distribution will be controlled."

Due to the conflict, there was no way to ascertain the status of the country's minority Ismaili Muslim community.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Department of State suspended embassy operations in Sana'a in 2015, and diplomatic operations related to the country have since been coordinated by the U.S. Mission to Yemen, based in Saudi Arabia. Due to security concerns arising from the conflict, the U.S. government had limited to no access to religious communities in the country during the year. The U.S. government continued to engage with representatives of religious communities in the Yemeni diaspora and to closely monitor the conditions of religious minority detainees and to press for their release. It also condemned attacks impacting civilian targets and infrastructure. The U.S.

Ambassador to Yemen and the U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen spoke with foreign government officials, civil society organizations, and religious leaders during the year regarding the detention of Marhabi and of Baha'is detained in Sana'a after the May 25 raid.

The Department of State also promoted religious freedom through social media. The U.S. Mission to Yemen, for example, in posts on X (formerly known as Twitter), condemned the Houthis' detention of the Baha'is on May 31 and reaffirmed the right of Yemenis to freedom of religion, expression, and association on August 22 (the International Day of Commemoration of Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief).

In a June 18 press release, the Department of State spokesman welcomed the launch of Hajj flights between Sana'a and Jeddah for Yemeni pilgrims, describing the resumption of flights as a positive step. The statement also noted the United States was committed to helping bring an end to the country's conflict as soon as possible.

On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State designated the Houthis as an "entity of particular concern" under section 301 of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-281) for having engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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