



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Yemen

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Events of 2015

Yemen's conflict escalated further during 2015, with devastating consequences for its civilian population. In the wake of significant advances during 2014 by rebel Houthi forces, culminating in the capture of the capital Sana'a in September, President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi resigned in January 2015 before fleeing south in February to Aden. An international coalition led by Saudi Arabia subsequently launched 'Operation Decisive Storm' at the end of March in support of Hadi, including aerial bombings and an extended blockade that prevented essential food, medicine and fuel supplies from entering the country. Amid widespread allegations of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict, Yemen has been consumed by a major humanitarian crisis. Between March and the end of the year there were over 6,000 deaths and 28,000 injuries, with more than 2.5 million people internally displaced and an estimated 21.2 million Yemenis – more than four-fifths of the population – in need of humanitarian assistance.

The Houthi movement, rooted in long-standing grievances about the perceived socio-economic marginalization of Yemen's underdeveloped north, is named after the late Hussein Al Houthi, a former member of parliament who subsequently led the insurgency against the government at the beginning of what became known as the Saada war before his death in 2004. While conflict has been ongoing, the group's activities escalated in 2011 and in ensuing years forces gained control over large swathes of the country. While the Houthi rebellion has presented its grievances as primarily political rather than religious, the fact that the large majority of its members are Zaidi Shi'a, fighting against a Sunni-dominated government, has meant the conflict has taken on increasingly sectarian dimensions. This has been exacerbated by the military involvement of Saudi Arabia, and its hostility towards Iran. As a result, in areas such as Sana'a where different Muslim

groups previously coexisted with relatively little friction, sectarian tensions within communities have reportedly become more common.

The conflict has also resulted in the damage and destruction of significant cultural sites and heritage in Yemen, including those connected to minority communities, such as the 1,200-year-old Al-Hadi mosque in Saada, the oldest Shi'a centre of learning on the Arabian Peninsula, which was struck by coalition airstrikes in May. In June the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, condemned coalition airstrikes for repeatedly striking cultural heritage sites, and on 22 July UNESCO announced an emergency plan to safeguard the country's unique cultural heritage from damage caused by fighting, shelling and bombing.

Extremist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State (IS) in Yemen have also exploited rising insecurity to expand their influence in the south, where, alongside other acts of destruction, AQAP militants reportedly left the 800-year-old tomb of Sufi scholar Sufyan bin Abdullah in Lahij in ruins. Mosques in Sana'a frequented by Houthi supporters were also targeted by IS bomb attacks throughout the year, including an attack on 20 March in which at least 137 people were killed in a series of coordinated attacks on Shi'a mosques in the capital. This incident was followed by similar attacks throughout the year, including a suicide bombing in September that reportedly left at least 25 people dead. In July IS also claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Sana'a striking a Dawoodi Ismaili mosque, in reprisal for what the group claimed was Ismaili support for the Houthis. Similar incidents have occurred in the south of the country, including the demolition of an empty Catholic church in Aden by suspected militants in December.

The conflict has also placed increasing pressure on Yemen's Jewish community. The ancient community, numbering as many as 50,000 in the 1940s, has now shrunk to a few dozen, who face widespread hostility from large sections of Yemeni society, due in part to the conflation of the Jewish faith with Zionism. For many within the community, fears of attack have also intensified since the Houthi takeover. Due to fear of harassment, Jews have tended to conceal visible markers of their identity in public, such as sidelocks, and have been confined to practising religious rituals in the privacy of their homes. The unique cultural traditions for which the community has historically been renowned in Yemen and further afield, such as metalworking and, in particular, the handcrafting of silver jewellery, are close to disappearing. In this context, many of those remaining now wish to leave the country. In March 2016, reports emerged that the Israeli government had secretly airlifted 17 Yemeni Jews out of the country, leaving just 50 community members in Yemen.

Anti-Israeli sentiment has also driven the persecution of Bahá'í, who number around 1,000 people in Yemen. On January 2015, a formal indictment was issued against Hamed Kamal bin Haydara, a Bahá'í Yemeni, accusing him of being an Iranian citizen working on behalf of the Israeli government – a common accusation levelled at members of the community due to the location of the Bahá'í World Centre in the cities of 'Akká and Haifa in Israel. The charges come following more than a year in detention without trial following Haydara's arrest in December 2013, during which he has reportedly been subjected to sustained torture by prison guards.

Ethnic discrimination is also entrenched within Yemeni society. As the conflict has intensified, the situation of Yemen's Muhamasheen – 'marginalized ones' in Arabic – has become even more precarious. A visible minority commonly believed to be of African descent and also known pejoratively as *Akhdam* ('servants'), their lives have long been characterized by deep-seated poverty

and exclusion. Having largely made their homes in shantytowns on the outskirts of urban centres, many Muhamasheen were concentrated in the cities worst affected by the conflict. Aden, Saada and Taiz had especially large numbers of Muhamasheen, who became internally displaced when coalition airstrikes began pounding their neighbourhoods in those cities in March and April.

In the absence of access to tribal or other informal networks of patronage, with the deepening humanitarian crisis Muhamasheen have struggled to access basic services or other support mechanisms. While the risk for all civilians is high, the experience of displacement for Muhamasheen has differed considerably from that of other Yemenis, with community members facing discrimination and in some cases even denial of access to aid distribution. Displaced Muhamasheen have been forced to find shelter on open ground or in disused buildings. Activists and community members have also reported young girls being coerced into early marriages to support their families, as well as the forcible recruitment of boys to fight for various armed groups.

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