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The Impact of the Religious Phenomenon on the Political Crisis in Yemen from 2011 to 2020: The Houthi Movement as a Case

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Abstract

The religious phenomenon represented a factor that has contributed to complicating the political crisis in Yemen, since the outbreak of the youth revolution in February 2011, within the Arab Spring Uprisings that swept a number of Arab countries, and demanded the departure of President Saleh's regime and handover of power. The Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) has emerged as a clear example of the effect of the religious phenomenon on the paths of the political crisis in Yemen. The Houthi movement, although it has political goals represented in controlling power and wealth, has relied on a religious ideology, adopted religious slogans and presented a religious discourse through which it was able to collect huge funds and recruits thousands for its favor and benefits from them in its battles, prolonging the crisis, and consequently improving the conditions of negotiation with the parties fighting it. This article aims to understand the extent of the influence of the Houthi movement, as a model for the religious phenomenon, on the course of the crisis in Yemen, starting with the youth uprising in 2011 and then the coup against the legitimate government and control of the state institutions until today.

Keywords: Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Houthis, Yemeni Crisis, Arab Spring.

1. Introduction

The Houthi movement led an armed coup on September 21, 2014, taking advantage of the military support provided by the former President Saleh, and also exploiting the weakness of state institutions in Yemen, and was able to control state institutions, and its activities were based on religious ideologies, including their religious theory that states that power is a divine right limited to the children and grandchildren of Ali bin Abi Talib, according to religious texts that granted them this right. Moreover, the Houthis relied on religious slogans to pass their political goals, including the slogan (The Scream), which is their famous slogan which says ("God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam"), in an attempt to convince their followers that the war against them is a war on Islam. In addition, the group was able to collect funds and recruit young men in its battles, under religious pretexts called (Jihad), defending Islamic sanctities, and fighting Allah's enemies (America And Israel) and their allies in Yemen, means the other parties fighting the Houthi group.

This religious discourse had a clear effect on complicating and prolonging the Yemeni crisis, and therefore the article is an attempt to understand the extent of the influence of the Houthi movement, as a model for the religious phenomenon, on the course of the crisis in Yemen, starting

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with the youth uprising in 2011 and then the coup against the legitimate government and control of the state institutions until today.

2. Methodology

The article relies on the historical approach to recognize the beginning of the emergence of the Houthi movement and the activities it practiced before its coup against the legitimate government, and the extent of these activities' impact on the political situation today, as well as the descriptive and analytical approach as a main tool to describe the Houthi phenomenon as it is in reality, then analyze its activities and find out the extent of its impact on the political crisis in Yemen.

3. Results and discussion

Religious Sects in Yemen

Religion strongly affects the nature of political action, as it is a set of values on which institutions are based, and although the religion of each particular individual indicates his non-political behavior, such as his work style, his life, his ambition, and his judgment on things, yet the different religious groups have different political identities as well. There is no doubt that religious backgrounds contribute to policymaking, through the religious political party, as is the case with the Christian democracies. Whatever the case, many European countries are still largely affected by religion despite the absence of religious parties in them, as is the case in some Arab countries that is still influenced by religion (Mousa, 2019).

In Yemen, religious sects and schools have played a clear role in the political movement at the official and popular levels, and have been present in the Yemeni political scene since the outbreak of the revolutionary movement in Yemen in 2011, so it is important to understand the sectarian religious map in Yemen. In fact, there are two main schools in Yemen, namely the Shafi'i school, which is one of the four Sunni schools, and it spreads in the regions in the center of Yemen down to the south, and the other is the Zaidi school, which is close in its literature to the Shiite thought (Twelver), and it spreads in Central Yemen and up to the north, in addition to religious minorities of the Ismaili sect distributed in several regions.

There is no accurate study on the percentage that these schools represent in Yemen, but the prevalence of the Shafi'i school is estimated about 60 % to 65 %, while the percentage of Zaydis is estimated about 35 % to 40 %, while the sectarian minorities, led by the Ismailis and the Sufi Ash'aris, represent less than 1 % (Al-Moghalis, 2013).

The Zaidi Sect

Zaydism was the first sect of the Houthi movement, before it adopted the Shiite theories, nevertheless, some consider Zaidism a branch of Shiism, while others consider it an independent school close to the Shiite sect. Zaydism is attributed to its first founder, Imam Zaid bin Ali, grandson of Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Talib, and the sect is based on a basic idea of departing from the oppressive ruler and rejecting the political system. Zaydism is divided into several groups, the most important of which is Al-Jarudiyya after Abu Al-Jaroud Al-Kharfi, which is the group that existed and ruled parts of Yemen. This group agrees with the Imami Shiites (Twelver Shiites) in the need for the ruler to be a descendant of Ali and Fatima, it is called the "theory of Albatinin|", this theory makes ruling as an exclusive right of the offspring of Hassan and Hussein, the sons of Ali bin Abi Talib (Alasha'ari, 1990).

Imam Yahya Al-Rassi, known as Al-Hadi, was the first to introduce the Zaidi doctrine to Yemen, at the end of the ninth century AD, and he was a descendant of Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Talib, and he came from Jabal Al-Rass in Medina, and Al-Hadi was able to establish a state in Saada, north of Yemen and governed it. He was the first founder of the Zaydi state in Yemen, which was ruled after that by his children and grandchildren, and it continued intermittently in parts of the Yemeni regions, until 1962, that is, until the Yemeni revolution and the establishment of the Republic of Yemen (Al-Saqaf, 2019). Currently, Zaydism spreads in the areas that were subject to the Zaidi state from the era of the Hadi state, until the era of Mutawakkiliya in 1962, from the Dhamar governorate in central Yemen, to the governor of Saada in the far north (Al-Moghalis, 2013).

Zaydism differs from the Shiite (Twelver Shiite), which Iran considers its current stronghold in that Zaydism does not believe in the idea of the Hidden Imam whom the Twelver Shiites believe in, and on which the theory of "Wilayat al-Faqih " or (guardian Islamic jurist) was based, which

makes the jurist as a ruler on behalf of the Hidden Imam who will come at the end of time. However, it agrees with it that the ruler must be a descendant of Ali and Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and one of the sons of Hassan and Hussein, and they call it the theory of "Albatnain", which is similar, in its content, to the theory of divine right that appeared in medieval Europe (Moghnia, 1979).

The Emergence of the Houthi Movement

The Houthi group is an armed religious political movement, which embraces the Zaidi sect, and later converted to the Twelver Shiite sect. It took the city of (Saada) in northern Yemen, on the border with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as a main center for it. The Yemenis called them "the Houthis" , The name came from the surname of the early leader of the movement" Badr Aldeen Al-Houthis, while they call themselves "Ansar Allah." (Benfoua, Alzabidi, 2017). It is a religious description similar to the name of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is consistent with the Houthi group in being a Shiite group and has a good relationship with Iran.

The movement began its educational and cultural activities in 1986, about 7 years after the outbreak of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, as part of a union that was called the "Youth Union" to teach the youth of the Zaydi sect by one of the sheikhs of the Zaidi sect called Salah Ahmad Fellitah. The Youth Forum turned into a political party, called " Party of Truth", but the group established another forum called" the Believing Youth, and it was the core of the Houthi movement, and the Forum "Believing Youth" organized cultural and educational activities that teach the Zaidi sect. It was founded in 1992, By Muhammad Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi, the group's religious theoretician, and in 1997, the doctrine was transformed into a political movement named (Organization of the Believing Youth), and splits occurred in it, as Salah Felitah and Majd Al-Din Al-Mu'aydi left, accusing it of violating the Zaidi sect (Aljazeera Encyclopedia, 2014).

In 2002, the group began to carry out its activities and make it public, and launched the slogan " "God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam" " and repeated it after each prayer, which is the same slogan that the Shiites repeated in Iran, and in 2004 armed confrontations began between The government and the organization, accused of turning the organization into an armed movement, threatening the republican system of the state. The state launched six rounds of wars against the Houthi movement, from 2004 until 2009 (Encyclopedia, 2014). The leader of the movement, Hussein Al-Houthi, was killed in the first round of the war, in 2004, and his father Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi, one of the references of the Zaidi sect, assumed the leadership of the movement until his death in 2010, after which his son AbdulMalik Al-Houthi assumed leadership until now.

The Houthis and the Youth Uprising

The Houthi movement had classified former President Ali Abdullah Saleh as one of its foes, because he launched six rounds of wars against it, so the movement participated in the youth uprising that broke out on February 12, 2011, but its presence was weak during that period, and the presence was proportional to its size, where It had not reached a great size of power, and yet it tried to benefit from the uprising in an attempt to present itself as a movement that believes in change. It staged a sit-in in its own camps in Change Square in the center of the capital, Sana'a, and carried out awareness-raising activities by distributing its publications in Change Square. But it quickly left a few months after the outbreak of the uprising, in late August 2011, a time when Saleh regime's intention to storm the Change Square was repeated from all directions, and some attributed the withdrawal of the Houthi movement to its realization of the impossibility of controlling the square, and in all cases the existence Al-Houthi was weak during the uprising, and thus this presence did not produce significant results (Al-Daghshi, 2013).

The Houthis and the Gulf Initiative

After the political situation complicated , following the outbreak of the uprising, Saudi Arabia submitted a draft initiative to solve the crisis in Yemen, on April 3, 2011, in order to arrange a democratic transition through the transfer of power in Yemen and the formation of a national unity government, and this was called the Gulf initiative, and international and regional pressures were applied in order to reach a political settlement in Yemen, in addition to international pressure, there was local pressure to persuade President Saleh to accept the handover of power to his deputy, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi (Aljabarat, 2018).

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia submitted on April 3, 2011, less than a month after the outbreak of the uprising, with a political settlement called the Gulf Initiative, and it was signed in Riyadh, the capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on November 23, 2011, between the ruling party and the opposition parties. The Gulf Initiative, that was amended several times, included several items, the most important of which is Saleh's handing over of power to his deputy, Hadi, granting Saleh and the pillars of his regime immunity from any legal prosecution, and ratifying it by the Parliament. The Houthis participated in the National Dialogue Conference alongside the political forces and parties, although they did not agree to the Gulf initiative presented by Saudi Arabia, (Aljabarat, 2018), they were represented by 35 of the total 565 seats in the National Dialogue Conference (Al-Shargabi, 2014), and the conference almost ended with outputs that would about to solve the existing political problems and crises, but it was thwarted after the Houthi movement led an armed coup against state's institutions, backed by a number of military brigades that were loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and they occupied the Capital Sana'a, with the support of the Republican Guard and President Saleh's Special Guard in September 21, 2014, and the democratic transformation that Yemen was witnessing during that period was thwarted (Aljabarat, 2018).

An armed coup

The coup of the armed Houthi group against the political system and its control of state's institutions is the most important event in this decade since the outbreak of the youth uprising in Yemen, and it represented the most important turning point in the political path and the democratic transition in Yemen. It can be said that the Houthi movement passed through its formation through four main stages, the stage of building and establishment, then the stage of expansion and spread, then the stage of armed confrontation, which is the stage of the actual transformation of the movement, and it fought six wars from 2004 until 2010 with the Yemeni political system during the era of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, then the state of the coup and their capture of power in 2014 (Al-Nouri, 2016).

The Houthis were not able to carry out the coup, or to control Sana'a if they had not received armed support from several sides, including Iran and former President Saleh. According to Yemeni official sources, the Houthis received armed support from Iran. The Yemeni government accused Tehran of interfering in Yemeni affairs. The head of the National Security Agency, Ali Al-Ansi, stated, in December 2009, on the sidelines of the Manama Dialogue Forum that "Iran has a role in Yemen, and they know this, and their role is based on material, political and media support for a rebel group, and if they do not have a role and do not interfere, As they claim, they should condemn the acts of this terrorist rebel group as the whole world condemned it. After the uprising, Major General Ali Al-Ahmadi, head of the National Security Agency, confirmed, in a press conference in Sana'a, held on January 8, 2013, that Iran was financially and morally involved in supporting the Houthi (Al-Daghshi, 2013).

It is worth noting that Iranian support for the Houthi movement had preceded its coup by years, that is, while the Houthi movement was fighting battles with the Yemeni forces, ships were coming loaded with weapons to the coasts of the city of Midi in western Yemen, which is the closest port to the city of Saada, the stronghold of the Houthis, and the Yemeni authorities were able to arrest two Iranian ships carrying weapons, Jihan 1, which was captured on January 23, 2013, loaded with weapons on its way to the port of Midi, which was controlled by the Houthis at the time, and the ship was carrying 48 tons of weapons, missiles and explosives, according to a statement by the Yemeni Interior Ministry (Aljazeera Net, 2013). While the Iranian ship Jihan 2 was captured on March 7, 2013, near Bab Al-Mandab, while it was carrying weapons on its way to the Houthis (Al-Thawra NP, 2013).

Regarding the support received by the movement from the former President Saleh, it was through supplying it with arms and soldiers who belonged to the Republican Guard and the Special Forces, the two camps that were loyal to Saleh and were subject to the leadership of Saleh's sons and nephews for a long time. Saleh provided support to the Houthi group in order to get rid of the revolutionary forces that caused his step down, headed by the Islah Party, which is a common traditional enemy for both Saleh and the Houthi movement, and Saleh's party announced its alliance with the Houthi group later after Saudi Arabia launched a military operation in Yemen under the pretext of supporting legitimacy and ending the Houthi Coup (Al-Nouri, 2016).

Operation "Decisive Storm"

After the Houthi movement's coup against the political system in Yemen, it expanded and the road remained open in front of them, and cities were falling in their hands one by one, until they were able to control 20 % of the Yemeni geography, from northern Yemen in Saada, and even Taiz in the south, but About 80 % of Yemen's population lives in this geography ([Sputnik News, 2019](#)) and the Houthis did not find resistance until they decided to go to Aden in March 2015, and there the coalition decided to launch a military operation called Decisive Storm on March 26, 2015, more than 6 months after the Houthi coup. The military operation was led by Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and nine other countries: Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Sudan, ([Shabana, 2015](#)) and that process marked the beginning of the internationalization of the Yemeni crisis, as it became a regional crisis in which several parties participated after it was a local crisis between the conflicting Yemeni parties. Although Iran used to support the Houthis before the start of "Decisive Storm" and conducted an air bridge via Iranian Mahan Airlines, with two flights per day, its support was not declared, and therefore its description remained as a local crisis, not a proxy war ([Knights, 2018](#)).

Saudi Arabia announced that the aim of launching the military operation was to eliminate the Houthi coup and help the Yemenis to restore the legitimate authority, and it moved under the umbrella of Yemeni legitimacy, which earned it legal force and gave it the legal basis that kept it going until today ([Shabana, 2015](#)). The Islah Party, which is the most important component of legitimacy and the most prominent enemy of the Houthi movement, had backed the military operation launched by the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia, and issued a statement as one of the components of the legitimacy ([Al-Daghashi, 2017](#)), calling on the coalition to help end the Houthi coup and restore legitimacy, this pushed the Houthis to double their campaign against members of the Islah Party, the party that represents a common enemy for both the Houthis and Saleh, so the party and its headquarters, leaderships and members were the first target of the Houthi group after they control Sana'a ([Al-Daghashi, 2017](#)), and the Houthis did not find any resistance during the coup from the official state institutions, and the Al-Houthi group imposed house arrest on President Hadi, and when Hadi managed to flee to Aden and resume political work, the Houthi decided to follow him to Aden, so Hadi fled to Oman and then to Saudi Arabia, and there the coalition intervened with a military operation launched on March 26, 2015 and the southern resistance, with the support of the coalition, was able to expel the Houthis from Aden ([Baron, 2013](#)).

Houthi Resistance

The Houthis were able to resist the military operation launched by Saudi Arabia, despite the tremendous losses they faced, and they were able to fight the legitimacy and the Islah party in particular in a number of provinces, and they relied on religious discourse in considering their battles are with America and Israel and their tools that are Saudi Arabia and the legitimacy, which is evident in the Houthi slogan which is: ("God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam"). The Houthi movement used that discourse to mobilize and recruit tribes to fight legitimacy and Islah under the pretext that what is happening is aggression and that legitimacy supports aggression, and they have established educational courses for fighters for psychological mobilization ([Knights, 2018](#)).

Indeed, the Houthis were able, with their military power that they obtained as a result of Iranian support, the support of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and as a result of their alliance with former President Saleh, to recruit many tribes in their favor and benefit from the huge human reserve, and from the material support provided by the tribal sheikhs, especially the so-called the tribes of the Sana'a Ring, which are the armed tribes that surround the city of Sana'a. They benefited from those tribes in making them at the forefront of the battles and controlling through them the Yemeni cities. Through their alliance with former President Saleh, they were able to recruit tribes, whether those that were loyal to them or Those that joined them later after they took control of Sana'a to fight other tribes hostile to the Houthis, such as Hashid tribes, Arhab tribes and Hamadan surrounding Sana'a ([AL-Mandab Press, 2016](#)).

Killing of Saleh

The Houthi movement strength had increased, benefiting from Iranian support with weapons, and also benefiting from the coalition of former President Saleh, who has a great influence over the military institution and he has a strong relations and loyalties networks with the

military leaders, but the Houthis viewed after that that they no longer needed Saleh, meaning that Saleh was a card for Houthis, but he became useless, especially after the Houthi's controlled area increased in conjunction with the decline of Saleh's power, so the Houthis worked to exclude Saleh and the members of the Congress Party, which ultimately led to tensions between the two parties, and mutual accusations, as Saleh accused the Houthis of leading a coup, while Saleh was accused by the Houthis as a traitor for them, by concluding secret agreements with the coalition, which ultimately led to military confrontations in the vicinity of Saleh's house in the center of Sana'a, during which Saleh called on his supporters to fight the Houthis, but no one came and those confrontations led to his death on the hands of the Houthis on December 4, 2017, (Jarallah, 2020) ending the page of Saleh, who ruled Yemen for more than 33 years, and the members of the Congress Party are divided into several wings, a wing that is under the control of the Houthis and works under the command of the Houthis, and a wing leaves for Cairo and owes allegiance to the Emirates and a third wing leaves for Saudi Arabia and joins President Hadi and owes allegiance to Saudi Arabia.

The time was in favor of Houthis, as their power doubled, and they were able to impose his power on society with their weapons, and the killing of ex-President Saleh was reflected in their favor, as they were able to spread fear and terror in society, and sent a clear message to eliminate their opponents. Houthis benefited from the contradictions in the legitimacy camp in their favor, as the legitimacy includes left and right wings, and other wings from parties that were once politically competing, and that the legitimacy remaining in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia for more than five years, has been reflected in the Houthi's favor, and they had become a de facto authority. Reality, who does not find a competitor in ruling the provinces under his control.

4. Conclusion

The Houthis were not able to launch the coup d'etat and seize state's institutions, as they were weak compared to the capabilities of the state, but the Houthis benefited from several things, including that the military institution was not neutral, as a large part of it was loyal to ex-president Saleh, even after he was handed over the power, and therefore the military institution was not a guarantor of the democratic transformation that Yemen should have witnessed after the revolution, meaning that the military institution did not play its role in protecting the democratic process and protecting state institutions, but rather stood with the Houthi movement. Regional parties have given the Houthi movement a space to move, ignoring its danger.

Islah party, which is an affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, was a priority for Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, which enrolled them on the list of terrorism, so they thought that they would benefit from the Houthi movement in eliminating and striking this party, but the Houthi had Political goals that go beyond the idea of striking Islah Party. Moreover, the United States had thought that it would employ the Houthi group in its war against terrorist organizations (Al-Qaeda and ISIS) in Yemen, and the United States had stated that the Houthis were its allies in the war on terror. All of these factors gave Houthis reasons of strength, and provided them with support until they transformed from an armed coup group into a de-facto authority that controls the northern part of Yemen and tightens their grip on it, leading to the biggest political crisis Yemen has witnessed in recent years.

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